Crossover Kingdom: Narration, Gamification, and the Platform Unconscious of Kingdom Hearts and Disney Parks

Luna Loganayagam, University of California, Davis
Samuel Pizelo, University of Toronto, Mississauga

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INTRODUCTION

What happens to Disney theme park rides like "Splash Mountain" or the "Mad Tea Party" when they become military-grade weapons of mass destruction? The "Attraction Flow Attack" mechanic in *Kingdom Hearts III* represents exactly that; weaponized, denarrativized, and spatially-abstracted amusement park rides. As an ambitious JRPG crossover between Disney's intellectual properties and Square Enix's Final Fantasy series, the Kingdom Hearts series (hereafter KH) is no stranger to experimental game mechanics. Indeed, the series has become synonymous with gameplay innovations in every title–from "flowmotion" world navigation to 3DS touchscreen attacks or TCG-style combinatorial world construction. These continual mechanical innovations help to synthesize the complex entanglement of Japanese and Euroamerican cultural, creative, and commercial identities across transnational legal frameworks, corporate strategies, and platforms. So it might come as a surprise that the Attraction Flow attacks were viciously ridiculed by the KH fanbase, with many calling it the single worst element of the entire game. The most iconic feature of Disney's historical influence on storytelling practices, the theme park ride, is not at home in the KH media mix.

In this talk, we argue that the *KHIII* Attraction Flow controversy is symptomatic of a platformized approach to storytelling and the unique constraints and tensions it produces. We suggest that the Kingdom Hearts "superfranchise" (Birdsall 2021), and other emergent modes of platform storytelling, necessitate a new hermeneutic approach beyond influential frameworks of "transmedia storytelling" and the "media mix" (Jenkins 2006; Steinberg 2012). Following Fredric Jameson's influential characterization of the political unconscious and James Malazita's recent approach to platforms as enacted sociotechnical objects (Jameson 1981; Malazita 2024), we describe the "platform unconscious" as the way in which nonpublic conflicts between platforms and creators over the control of intellectual property manifest within the worlds of the properties themselves, from technical affordances and narrative arcs to marketing campaigns and merchandising. Through an examination of narrative and ludic worldbuilding in *KHIII* within the context of broader struggles over IP between Square-Enix and Disney, we hope to demonstrate that the worlds of

the KH franchise themselves disclose global postcapitalist struggles over creative expression (Huber & Mandiberg 2009; Kunzelman 2019; Nguyen 2022).

As an attempted reconciliation of two influential approaches to storytelling–Square Enix's characteristic anime-inspired JRPG model and Disney's iconic storybook modernism–the worlds of KH from their very beginning had to negotiate the frictions between different national traditions. Disney's three-dimensional approach to cinematography, which incorporated parallax techniques and multiplane cameras (Gottwald 2021), helped to resuscitate the flagging amusement park industry in the 1950s by infusing fantasy narratives into the spatial logics of the attractions themselves. By the 1970s, Disneyland and Disney World's closed-circuit narratives epitomized American consumerist nationalism–theme park design homogenized the experience of park visitors, with rides designed to insert them into the space of Disney worlds and vendors positioned strategically to smoothly supply the ongoing fantasy of participation in those worlds through commodity consumption (Baudrillard 1994, 12-14; Eco 1986; Wilson 2013). Tokyo Disney first opened in 1983 as an ambivalent symbol of Japanese postmodern nationalism (Yoshimoto 2013), and the very next year, Akira Toriyama released the first manga issue in the influential Dragon Ball Z franchise–a relentless pastiche of Japanese post-war nationalist values propagated through Sports Anime and Shōnen Jump (Suvilay 2018). Disney's formula for "environmental storytelling" exerted a profound influence on game design and criticism–from Don Carson to Henry Jenkins to Scott Rogers (Carson 2000; Jenkins 2004; Rogers 2009). At the same time, Toriyama's epic anime aesthetics, themselves inspired by his earlier work on *Dragon Quest*, set the template for the nascent JRPG genre, for which Square-Enix remains the exemplar. From games to stories and back again.

These two approaches to storytelling are reflected in two *KHIII* worlds: Arendelle (from *Frozen*) and Toy Box (from *Toy Story*). Arendelle's linear labyrinths, closely following the movie narrative, mimic the pathways of Disneyland theme parks by triggering cutscenes at specific points on the map (Nguyen 2022). At the time of release, fans lamented the lack of originality this world afforded and agonized over the egregious reproduction of the "Let it Go" song number in totality. All events pertinent to the overarching storyline take place in moments where Sora, Donald and Goofy are separated from Elsa, using the hypermobility features to scale mountains and evade avalanches while tracking down enemies outside the fiction of *Frozen*. In contrast, Toy Box includes an entirely original narrative arc that encapsulates not just the *Toy Story* universe, but the universe of a repurposed and previously cancelled work of Tetsuya Nomura's: *Final Fantasy XIII-Versus* (in game: *Verum Rex*). Unlike Arendelle, Disney characters undergo unique narratives with Sora and Co., commenting on the overarching antagonist's (Young Xehanort) plans and fighting alongside them. In a moment of dramatic support for Sora, Woody roasts Young Xehanort, "My guess is no one's ever loved you before. Because you know nothing about hearts and love." This moment is famous among KH fans for showcasing the dynamic that is most revered between IPs: genuine creative originality. Pixar requested an original storyline to be developed by the Japanese team, which became a "piecemeal trust-building exercise" for both parties (Denison 2022). The collaborative nature of this world-building process opened doors for Nomura to re-introduce *Verum Rex*, a non-Pixar property, into the Pixar universe to build foundations for *KHIV*. The fan reception to these worlds and their confusion about the spectrum of these narrative choices reflect the inaccessibility of the

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platform unconscious and, as a consequence, inspires their conspiratorial analysis (Bowman 2022).

In addition to KH, Disney has increasingly focused on platformized multiverse narratives, as evidenced through their recent acquisitions of Marvel and LucasArts along with the creation of many crossover properties—*Disney Infinity*, *Lorcana*, *Dreamlight Valley*, and a recently announced collaboration with Epic Games' *Fortnite*. Moreover, the very engine that has enabled the new hypermobile gameplay of *KHIII*, Epic's Unreal Engine, has been used in the design, modeling, and hybrid interactivity of over fifteen Disney Park attractions (Walt Disney Company 2024). Disneyland has fully transitioned from Hyperreality to Unreal Reality. This platform convergence and its attendant subjectivities demand both new forms of hermeneutics and new ethical responsibilities. The platform unconscious validates and empowers fandom discourses connecting narratives within properties to the backroom struggles over IP control, marketing synergies, and technical design waged in today's postcapitalist landscape. It invites us to think differently about the capacities of aesthetic production and critical reception for resistance to the new world order.

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