Video Game Characters and Transmedia Storytelling

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Video Game Characters and Transmedia Storytelling

The Dynamic Game Character

Joleen Blom

Amsterdam University Press

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A brief note on Japanese names and words

Japanese names in this book appear according to the Western European and North American convention, with the given names first and the family names second. For example, Ōtsuka Eiji (Japanese convention) will appear as Eiji Ōtsuka.

Likewise, Japanese and other non-English words that appear in this book are written in italics. The exceptions are words commonly used in Anglophone popular culture, such as "manga" and "anime".

Finally, the Japanese language does not explicitly distinguish between plural and singular nouns. Japanese words in this book are therefore sometimes used in their singular form and sometimes in their plural form, only distinguishable through the English grammar of the sentence. I.e., the sentences "a *kyara* is a visual icon," or "*kyara* are visual icons," are both correct.

1. Introducing the dynamic game character

Abstract: Fictional characters are everywhere in current popular culture. In this introduction chapter, I provide a brief explanation on the state of the art on characters in contemporary transmedia practices. I critique the ideal of narrative continuity across different works in popular franchises to create a single-story world, which also affects how we understand characters as human-like beings. Characters are often thought as having the same identity across works, but, in practice, they are often different persons. Finally, I introduce the dynamic game character, whose identity changes depending on how the player plays the game. I propose that this character clashes with the ideal of narrative continuity because video games promise player agency and transmedia practices cannot follow through on this.

Keywords: characters, transmedia storytelling, video games, cross-media, Japanese popular culture

Characters in contemporary transmedia practices

I still remember the moment I realised the consequences of my choice in *Tales of Symphonia* (Namco Tales Studio 2003). My decision led the swordsman Zelos to betray his friends and suffer an agonising death. This Japanese role-playing game mostly leads players on a rigid path of predefined outcomes. However, it gives them one choice that changes the fate of two major characters: will the player choose Kratos to join the player's party of game characters, or will they choose Zelos? In my early teens, I had little knowledge that a choice could decide the fate of these fictional beings. I chose Kratos to join my party because he was the protagonist's father, and I hoped he would reunite the family. The one who suffered the consequences, however, was Zelos; my choice sentenced him to death. After this emotionally

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devastating event, I tried to figure out how to prevent his death. The only way I could have saved him was to choose him to join my party instead of Kratos—meaning that father and son would never reunite. This was the first time I had encountered game characters that I came to call *dynamic game characters*—a type of character whose identity changes depending on how the player plays the game.

We live in a character-driven culture. Characters have pulled us in to consuming popular culture. Characters are why we were so invested in Wanda's grief of Vision in *WandaVision* (Schaeffer 2021) within the Marvel Cinematic Universe franchise. They are the outcomes of famous fairy tale characters becoming intellectual property owned by Disney, who in turn are reiterated in new adaptations and stories, such as *Beauty and the Beast* (Trousdale and Wise 1991; Condon 2017) or *Mulan* (Cook and Bancroft 1998; Caro 2020). Characters are why the free-to-play game *Genshin Impact* (HoYoverse 2020), which mostly earns money by selling game characters through gambling-like mechanics, made three billion dollars worldwide in revenue through the App Store and Google Play within two years of its release (Chapple 2022). Entire player market economies have arisen around characters, as seen in the trading of cute villagers in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo 2020). They explain the appeal of virtual YouTubers (also known as "VTubers") disguised as Japanese anime-inspired characters, and why we are invested in which actor will become the new James Bond after *No Time to Die* (Fukunaga 2021). Characters are more than just figments of the imagination, they are, in some sense, real. They are the mythological beings we grew up with, the heroes we read about in comics, and the virtual friends who keep us company. They also drive the business models that popular media franchises nowadays use to attach audiences to their products.

Fictional characters travel from one medium to another. They are part of a global transmedia ecology that proliferates them across media, products, and stories. Characters do not exclusively appear in novels or films; they migrate between different media. They are independent from any one medium, but still need representational material to exist. If we want to engage with a character, it first needs to manifest somewhere. There are many media through which a character can potentially materialise, each with their own specific modalities and affordances. So it comes as no surprise that characters too exist in different shapes, modalities, and sizes, which affect how players may interact with them. New technologies have further expanded the possibilities of interacting with them. Virtual realities, artificial intelligence, and voice assistants have become sophisticated enough

to give us the impression that characters have become so real we can even marry them (see Galbraith 2019; Lamerichs 2019).

Video games are just one way a character can come into existence, as they have a plurality of functions (Schröter and Thon 2014). We can use characters as virtual representations of ourselves to interact with others in online environments such as *Second Life* (Linden Lab 2003) or online multi-player role-playing games such as *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn* (Square Enix 2013). We use them as game pieces to compete in games such as *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment 2016) or experience them as fictional beings in story-driven games like in *The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel III* (Nihon Falcom 2017). More unusually, game characters have become virtual companions with whom we create intimate connections. We rely on them for friendship, such as in the pet simulator *Tamagotchi* (Bandai 1996) or games such as *Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu* and *Eevee!* (Game Freak 2018), or romance in dating simulator games like *Dream Daddy* (Game Grumps 2017) and *Persona 5* (P-Studio 2016). They are also collectibles that connote status; players use the characters in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* to trade so that they can decorate their virtual islands with them, and *Overwatch* offers character skins that players can use to customise their avatars.

Most of the Euro-American contemporary game culture (and popular culture in general) derives from and is influenced by Japanese popular culture. Historically, video games have contributed to the global success of major popular entertainment franchises, including those from Japan (Nakamura and Tosca 2021). As Japan dominates the global video game industry, Japanese video games carry ideologies, visual expressions and representations, mechanics and consumer strategies into the world (see Hutchinson 2019). Despite the globalisation of Japanese games, the Japanese video game industry has developed differently than the Euro-American industry. Just as the Euro-American game industry consists of different submarkets and practices, so does the Japanese . As Martin Picard (2021) explains, Japanese game culture consists of different subcultures tied to different markets (the arcade market, the console market, the PC market, and the mobile market) with various cultural practices and fan activities within the larger context of their cross-media market. For example, subcultures include the *bishōjo* game culture, associated with erotic games aimed at straight men (Taylor 2007), but also the *otome* game culture, that consists of games typically associated with dating simulators for straight women (Ganzon 2018). Activities range from reading about games from specialised gaming press or gaming guides, to participating on gaming websites, forums, or video streaming services (like the video platform *Nico Nico Dōga*), to

attending specific game-related events (Picard 2021, 16). The Japanese game industry is closely tied to the cross-media strategies of anime, manga, and other video game franchises (Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015), in which characters are the glue that unites different products (Steinberg 2012). The role of the character in game company marketing strategies also carried over from Japanese culture to the global game market. Within these marketing strategies, characters jump not only from comics to animation to games, but also from game to game (Blom 2021).

As a result of the successful *Cool Japan* scheme, which deployed the notion of "Japaneseness" to sell cultural products including games (see Navarro-Remesal & Loriguillo-López 2015; Consalvo 2016a; 2016b),[1] Japanese characters have become a foothold in the Westernised global game culture. Cloud, Aerith, Link, Zelda, Mario, and Pikachu are all household characters that resonate with players worldwide. Even games that do not originate from Japan use visual expressions, mechanics, or genres that derive from Japanese roots. For example, *Doki Doki Literature Club* (Team Salvato 2017) is a parody of Japanese *bishōjo* games, in which players date cute girl characters. *Ghost of Tsushima* (Sucker Punch Productions 2020) was made by a North American developer, yet was praised by the Japanese government for spreading the history of Japan's Tsushima island of the *Genkō* period (1331–1333 AD) (Lugris 2021). The globally successful *Genshin Impact* features typical cute characters found in Japanese popular culture but was produced by the Chinese developer HoYoverse. In other words, we cannot talk about a character-driven culture without talking about Japan's influence.

Characters are so prevalent in our contemporary media culture that I have often found myself wondering why they are not emphasised in academic fields that study popular culture, such as games, transmedia storytelling, fandom, and literature. Surely, they are discussed, but those discussions are fragmented over Euro-American-centric fields dominated by a concern with the character's relation to stories or world building. Stories and fictional worlds can be interesting, but they still require agents to make events unfold. Usually, those agents are characters. On the other hand, I argue that

1 Cool Japan is explained by Koichi Iwabuchi (2010) as a set of discourses which "euphorically refer to a passionate reception of Japanese media culture outside Japan, superficial and nationalistic observations that people outside Japan are rejoicing in Japanese media culture are automatically made to testify to the rise of Japanese cool culture in the world" (89). It is part of the country's increase in soft power, which, according to Marco Pellitteri (2020), can be understood as "a set of strategies/policies by a nation-state's government meant to enable international interactions with other countries. Its objective is to encourage favorable policies to be made by foreign governments, as well as sentiments of congeniality among foreign populations."

characters do not necessarily need worlds or stories. They are not bound to a specific world or a story, nor are they bound to a specific platform.

When we look at studies from and about Japan, characters are discussed in terms of proliferation across media (Steinberg 2012) rather than in terms of their role in a franchise's overall narrative or world. Theorists of Japanese media have focused particularly on the affective and emotional investment in characters. They have developed a shared language for consumers' affection for them (Galbraith 2019), not in terms of how users engage with characters in a story, but they approach them as separate individual entities. Such scholarly work provides a useful counter-perspective to the dominant Euro-American-centric idea that characters are merely *part of a story*. There is a need to study characters as their own separate domain. The seeds are there. That is why I started this project and why I wrote this book.

This book has three goals. First, it offers a concrete study of characters in our contemporary media ecology. I argue for the importance of studying characters on their own, instead of treating them as parts of another domain or a story. While an official field of transmedia characters does not yet exist, this book will contribute to the growing study of transmedia characters, on which we increasingly see academic works being written, such as the recently published *Transmedia Character Studies* by Tobias Kunz and Lukas Wilde (2023). As such, this book is highly interdisciplinary, because characters cannot be confined to the constraints of a single field. Specifically, this book positions itself at the intersection of the fields of Game Studies, Transmedia Storytelling, and Japan Studies. I apply theories on Japanese characters and Japanese scholarly work to explain the characters that we encounter in our Euro-American-centric popular culture. I treat games as one of the ways that characters come to be. Consumers engage with characters through games, situated within a larger media ecology of popular culture. By looking at video games, we can understand how games shape characters and influence our understanding of them, and why game characters have a powerful role within contemporary media practices.

Second, this book critiques the ideal of narrative continuity across different works that is so dominant in the field of Transmedia Storytelling. Nowadays, it is the rule rather than the exception for a character to be transmedial. Characters are a pinnacle of meaning-making. With their fluid identities, they jump between media and stories, as audiences and authors write and re-write them. A character in one work is not necessarily the same in another, making their actual identity hard to unpack. I argue that Euro-American-centric convergence culture has imposed a lens of narrative continuity—an underlying tendency for explaining character identities

through an ideal of sameness. By contrast, my notion of a dynamic game character clashes with that ideal, as characters' different identities, even within a single product, depend on a player's decisions.

Over the years I have been writing this book, the ideal of narrative continuity has been noticed by several scholars (Bertetti 2014; Pearson 2019; Thon 2019). In scholarship on characters from and about Japan, they are treated as entities that can exist beyond stories, and their multiplicity is taken as a given. Wilde (2019) explains that characters present contradictory information across different versions. Rather than attempting to make sense of their different identities by uniting them, these works embrace their multiplicity. In turn, Japan's cross-media strategies have seized on characters' multiplicity to increase revenue. This book offers a framework for understanding how a character's complex identity emerges over different works, while rejecting the ideal of narrative continuity.

Third, this book relocates the focus on avatars and player characters within Game Studies to a web of characters. Game Studies has focused almost exclusively on the characters that players can directly control. However, there is a striking lack of academic works about game characters that the player only partially controls or influences, with only a few exceptions (e.g., Jørgensen 2010; Christensen and Jørgensen 2022). The field's interest has mostly been directed towards the player's relation to the player character or avatar (e.g., Aarseth 1997; Klevjer 2006; Calleja 2011; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 2008; Vella 2015), even when non-playable characters are discussed (see for example Pinchbeck 2009). In other words, there has been a lack of interest in how the player's agency can affect characters beyond the one that the player directly controls. This book's focus on dynamic game characters whose development outcomes depend on the player shows that the figures over which players can have agency are not player characters, per se. Rather, they show that there are different forms of agency possible over a myriad of game characters.

These three goals come together in my discussion of the dynamic game character. It promises creative agency over the development of a character in a video game and is a phenomenon of our character-driven culture. Yet, this character is currently constrained, forced to operate according to the ideal of narrative consistency of transmedia storytelling. It appears as a consistent person-like entity throughout its multiple appearances, while promising players agency over their development. However, once it becomes transmedial and starts appearing in different media, that promise is shattered. The nature of the dynamic game character partially consists of the player, and this cannot be transferred to other non-cybermedia without

the structure to support such a complex figure.[2] Next, I will outline the background and my main argument about transmedia storytelling and the pursuit of narrative continuity, the contradictory nature of transmedia characters' identities, video game's connection to participatory culture, and finally the role of dynamic game characters.

The imbalance of transmedia storytelling

We live in a time when media convergence lies at the heart of our media practices. Henry Jenkins describes media convergence as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (2006a, 2). In popular culture, our media practices involve the flow of content across multiple media; content does not stay within a single medium but disperses over multiple media. It is the norm for a franchise to not only include films or television series, but also video games, novels, and figurines. For example, the Marvel Universe franchise does not consist solely of movies, but also television series and video games. The Pokémon franchise includes video games on mobile phones and game consoles, and animated movies, television series, play cards, toys, and figurines. Christy Dena described *trans*media practice as "the employment of multiple media platforms for expressing a fictional world" (2009, i).

Within today's media practices, Jens Eder (2015, 67–68) distinguishes between four different academic discourses: 1) adaptation studies (e.g., Hutcheon 2006); 2) intermediality, transfictionality, and intertextuality/transtextuality (e.g., Ryan 2013); 3) the structures and the production of transmedial multitexts; and, 4) communication studies and economics. All these terms describe the different transmedia practices that we see today, in which content flows across media platforms such as stories, worlds, and indeed, characters. This book situates itself in an academic lineage of "transmedia storytelling" (Jenkins 2006a; 2007), "transmedia world-building," and "transmedial worlds" (Klastrup and Tosca 2004; 2011; 2014; Tosca and Klastrup 2019; Wolf 2012). In these discourses, the most common term used is "transmedia storytelling." The term may have been coined by Jenkins,

2 I understand games as cybermedia, derived from the notion of a "cybertext," in which users must exert effort to traverse the text and construct meaning from it (Aarseth 1997). For a full description, see this chapter's section "A few notes on method."

but he borrowed it from Marsha Kinder's *transmedial intertextuality* in her book *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games* (1991). Jenkins deployed the term to refer to the aesthetic response to the media convergence he saw emerge in the USA and North-Western Europe in the late 1990s and early 2000s. He refers to transmedia storytelling as:

> a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. (Jenkins 2007)

Jenkins emphasises two aspects of transmedia storytelling: stories and worlds. As his quote above shows, stories are the focal point of content that is dispersed across multiple media channels. Related terms such as world-building or transmedia worlds emphasise the creation of fictional worlds (see Klastrup and Tosca 2004; Wolf 2012; Harvey 2015), in which stories are considered the most important means of creation. Indeed, in his initial description, Jenkins states transmedia storytelling to be "the art of world making" (2006a, 21)—the creation of worlds through stories. An emphasis on stories and worlds generates the problem of *narrative continuity* as an ideal towards which transmedia storytelling strives. Jenkins emphasises the contribution of multiple media to the unfolding of a story as a unified, coordinated, and coherent experience. However, as I will explain more thoroughly in the next chapter, scholars have noted that both the industry and academic analyses suffer from the ideal of a single-story world model. Transmedia storytelling tends to weigh all texts equally (see Mittel 2015; Thon 2015), whereas in reality, industry practices demand that the core texts of a franchise are privileged over supporting, peripheral extensions (Mittel 2015, 294).

This ideal of a single-story world affects characters as well. Characters have a particularly difficult status within transmedia storytelling due to the term's conceptualisation of stories and worlds as unified experiences. First, a character's history needs to be downsized to function in a story or a structure of the text (Heidbrink 2010). This tendency is perpetuated in transmedia storytelling. Nieves Rosendo (2016) notes that one of Jenkins's earliest publications on the topic of transmedia storytelling in 2003 was called "Transmedia Storytelling. Moving Characters from Books to Films to Video Games Can Make Them Stronger and More Compelling." She points out that Jenkins prioritised worlds over characters, because worlds could sustain more characters and therefore lead to a successful *transmedia* franchise,

whereas characters would only lead to a successful *movie* franchise (2016, 22). Unfortunately, the legacy of characters as mere parts of a story continued uncritically from there. Early writings on characters tend to discuss them as "stock characters that re-occur" (Jenkins 2006a, 123), part of the world's mythos that presents the world's background stories (Klastrup & Tosca 2004) or inhabitants of the world (Wolf 2012). Since the beginning of transmedia storytelling, characters have been underemphasised and underappreciated.

Second, the transmedia ideal affects characters and their identities. When a franchise disperses its story across different media, the story becomes transmedial, meaning its characters become transmedial as well. Such migrations cause these types of characters to suffer from a problem of identity: if the character appears across a set of different texts, would it still be the same person? Mark J.P. Wolf states that the presence of a transnarrative character in multiple stories suggests they are set in the same world (2012, 382). However, this assumes that there are no inconsistencies in the character's manifestations, as if it were an actual person. Yet, for characters in transmedia franchises, where consistency is an ideal, this is a question of, as Brian Richardson eloquently puts it, determining if there are "essential criteria for establishing the persistence of an individual identity across texts" (2010, 528). This question involves more than just a single franchise, as characters that are transmedial or transtextual do not appear only in a single franchise. They might be completely different persons, albeit with some overlapping aspects. As such, it can be said that the contradiction between a character's appearances has two layers: one in which franchises are obsessed with narrative continuity between stories, worlds, and its characters; and a second one in which transmedia characters appear outside single franchises, either in individual works or in other franchises. Fuelled by a focus on stories and worlds, a Euro-American-centric focus on transmedia characters still dominates discussions of convergence culture and media practices.

As characters appear across different media, we repeatedly see figures that look like the "same" character while not being the same person. They may have different contradictory identities. A famous example would be Sherlock Holmes. He is not exclusively the protagonist of Sir Conan Doyle's books, despite originating there. Holmes also appears in other texts in which he takes on different names, genders, clothes, personalities, and nationalities. For example, BBC's *Sherlock* (Gatiss & Moffat 2010) is set in modern times, while in the 1980s animated series *Sherlock Hound*, Holmes is an anthropomorphic dog (Miyazaki and Mikuriya 1984). In *Miss Sherlock* (Mori, Yusuke, and Matsuo 2018), the character is a modern Japanese woman

named Sara Shelly "Sherlock" Futaba. Surely these are not the same person with the same identity as the Sherlock Holmes in Conan Doyle's books. So we may ask ourselves, how many established aspects does a famous character like Holmes need to retain for us to still recognise the figure? How important is the author in promoting that recognition?

Sherlock Holmes is a famous example of a transmedia character with a contradictory nature—a conflicting identity that sprawls across multiple media and stories, but there are plenty of other examples. In our character-driven culture, the contradictory nature of a character leads to conflicting identities. Is Hermione Black or white? Is Spider-Man played by actor Tom Holland more authentic than the one played by actor Andrew Garfield?

The contradictory nature of a character is a question that has puzzled scholars for decades before Jenkins spoke of transmedia storytelling. In the early 1970s, Umberto Eco (1972) saw Superman as paradoxical, because he had to have an emblematic and fixed nature in order to be recognised by the masses, yet had to be person-like to align with audiences' expectations. Eco's work shows an underlying flaw of the logics of capitalism, to which all transmedia characters as we know them are subjected; that is, the character must be consumed by an audience, and in order for that consumption to be constant, the character cannot consume itself. It cannot develop as if it were an actual human, but grows by appearing across different media and stories. Some twenty years later, William Uricchio and Roberta Pearson (1991) discussed another comic book character, Batman, whose identity they defined by key components that set his appearance apart from other characters. These kinds of discussions are still ongoing, as scholars attempt to identify the core identity of transmedia characters, which I will explain more thoroughly in chapter 2. It is only recently that scholars have lessened their academic commitment to explaining characters through a single identity. They have discussed characters through semiotics (Bertetti 2014), as serial characters (Denson 2011), or as part of a character network (Thon 2019). It is becoming increasingly acceptable to embrace the multiple identities of transmedia characters. And one only has to shift one's focus to the culture of Japan to notice a different way of thinking about characters.

Convergence culture in Japan has its own history, having been connected to the rise of anime since the 1960s after its peak in the 1990s and 2000s (Steinberg 2012, viii). In the Japanese media mix, characters are used as a cross-media marketing strategy to sell media franchises and products. Franchise companies use them to connect different media and attract consumers to their products (Nakamura and Tosca 2021). The identity of Japanese transmedia characters is less of an issue because their proliferation

is fuelled by the audiences' desire for characters, also known as *moe* (Azuma [2001] 2009). Characters can be consumed without a story, and they are allowed to travel widely and develop desirable elements that audiences want to consume. That said, according to Wilde (2019, 5–6), the lack of story in the Japanese media mix is not because there is a lack of narrative information on the transmedia characters, but because there is an overabundance of competing information on their different appearances. To make up for these inconsistencies, the term *kyara* is commonly used, which refers to the visual representation of a character, detached from a story world, that can be recontextualised as a different person-like being in a different story world setting (Itō 2005; Wilde 2019).

Such different approaches to creating and developing characters show that it is important to incorporate the Japanese media mix strategy into our understanding of a character-driven culture. Japan has driven how we currently consume media culture, also because it provides an alternative perspective, a counter-narrative to the singular Euro-American-centric perspective of stories and world-building so dominant within convergence culture. Drawing on Japanese transmedia theory throughout this book, my goal is not to make characters' identities narratively coherent. Rather, I approach their identities as being driven by logics of capitalistic consumption. We consume franchises not only because we are interested in the story or world, but also because we are interested in the characters. The Japanese approach to characters helps us reflect on the media practices and consumption we see in popular culture. Such an approach helps to explain why characters in video games have become such important objects to study within a transmedia context, which I will discuss in detail in the next section.

Transmedia, games, and participatory culture

Video games are one of the means through which franchises expand. When video games become part of a larger franchise, we usually see one of two trends: video games become a peripheral platform or the focal point of the franchise. The former is relatively common in franchises of the late 1980s to early 2000s, coinciding with the emergence of Game Studies and Transmedia Storytelling as fields. Video games within larger franchises tended to be ancillary to a film or television series. For example, Kinder reports that by the end of the 1980s, the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle* franchise had promoted a successful movie-video game tie-in. The franchise's transmedial malleability

drew consumers familiar with the movie to the Nintendo home video game (1991, 132). The intertextual connections between movie and games then provided a sense of participation in the story, but did not necessarily expand the story world, as it mostly drew on the audience's intertextual knowledge of the franchise. Such creative connections allowed the different platforms to function as each other's primers.

For example, Chris Kohler ([2005] 2016) recalls that when the cross-platform *Pokémon* franchise was distributed in the USA in the mid-1990s after its success in Japan, it was first introduced through the televised animated series (230), despite having initially been created in Japan as two video games *Pokémon Red* and *Pokémon Green* (Game Freak 1996). The animated series primed Euro-American audiences for the video games, giving the impression it was the most important platform through which to consume the *Pokémon* franchise. Whereas in Japan, the video games primed the audience for the animated series, implying that video games were the primary platforms to consume the franchise. Since then, there has been a rise in video games driving distribution and consumption models of convergence culture. Increasingly, they function as the mothership through which the rest of the franchise expands. *Pokémon* is an early example of such a franchise, as it has been growing since its beginning. But we see the same tendency in game franchises such as the *Assassin's Creed* series or *Tomb Raider* as well. In other words, games have become a staple medium for transmedia storytelling.

However, the swift move of games from franchise periphery to centre has opened the door to new complications caused by the ideal of narrative continuity of transmedia storytelling. Game characters, which have become transmedial as they moved back and forth between different platforms, are afflicted by this ideal. I believe the cause is that video games, as cybermedia (Aarseth and Calleja 2015) which allow for different outcomes depending on who plays, structurally differ from non-cybermedia like novels or films (see Aarseth 2006) because players participate in creating the game and its characters. Such creative agency is sold to potential players, per strategy of the franchise, with the promise that players will experience their own unique adventure. However, the promise is simultaneously a beautiful falsehood because the ideal of narrative continuity demands that the stories and characters in a video game remain logically consistent with their transmedia counterparts—other games or non-cybermedia that do not support the player's agency—even within the same franchise.

This friction between cybermedia video games and non-cybermedia often has the effect of relegating games to peripheral and ancillary elements of

a story world, as was common in the 1980s to early 2000s. However, since the video games industry has started to boom, more games have become the anchor on which a transmedia franchise expands, and as a result, the narrative inconsistency they create cannot be concealed. This friction results in practices in which players make a set of choices in a video game only to see that when its characters, stories, and other content move transmedially to other platforms, their choices are overridden by the developer or other authority figures.

The problem is ultimately that authority figures working at large franchises and corporations now control how, where, and when characters proliferate across official games and media platforms. While audiences may make derivative works such as fan fiction writings, art, or cosplay (Lamerichs 2018), these are usually not officially acknowledged by the authority figures. They may even conflict with the intellectual property rights of the official works. The practice to keep striving for narrative continuity between character appearances is quite at odds with Jenkins's (1992) initial idea of participatory culture, a term he coined to refer to the involvement of audiences in creating culture and content. Participatory culture promises audiences a form of agency over the creation of content, promising that their contribution matters. As Jenkins describes, the circulation of media "depends heavily on consumers' active participation" (2006, 3). He later gave the term a fuller definition, describing participatory culture as:

> a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created). (Jenkins *et al.* 2009)

The way participatory culture is described above sketches a utopian scenery in which media consumers feature as active participants interacting with authority figures. It describes a picture that refutes the practice of mass media associated with the twentieth century, when producers told consumers what to consume and how. Instead, participatory culture promises that consumers can talk back and shape media and its content in collaboration with producers. In this utopia, consumers are not passive recipients, but become active creators of culture. Yet, this optimistic perspective has been heavily scrutinised over the past years.

In his critique of participatory culture, Christian Fuchs (2017) points out that scholars tend to highlight the positive aspects of Jenkins's participatory culture, claiming that society has become more democratic because participants can themselves create culture (53). Fuchs debunks these claims by noting that creating media is not exactly democracy, and instead draws attention to unpaid labour exploitation and Jenkins's conflation of fandom and political protest (66). This book draws from Fuchs's argument of who holds the ownership and governance within participatory culture's logistics of capitalism. He explains that Jenkins only has a cultural understanding of participation, rather than a political and economic one. Jenkins's participatory culture, Fuchs argues, "ignores questions about the ownership of platforms/companies, collective decision-making, profit, class and the distribution of material benefits" (55). All of which are connected to the power of the authority figures over the distribution and circulation of content.

Fuchs is certainly not the only scholar who has criticised Jenkins's lack of critical engagement with audience participation. Scholars have been leery of large corporations that use fans' creative labour for their own productions in which participants may create content themselves, but end up being exploited by receiving little to no earnings for their labour. Among those scholars, Adrienne C. Massanari (2015) wonders if the end of participatory culture is drawing near because there is now an understanding that such actions "do not necessarily encourage greater engagement with the world at large or are inherently more democratic or ensure a more peaceful and just future" (168). It seems even Jenkins has been retreating from his earlier enthusiasm:

> people have more capacity—collectively and individually—to produce and share media, but there are also important struggles being waged around the terms of their participation, especially over how much control participants have over governance, how much ownership they have over shared resources, and who profits from their activities. Such limitations matter as we think about, for example, the ways fans are lobbying for a more diverse and inclusive model of popular culture. (Jenkins 2018, 24)

As one of the many platforms through which content circulates, video games belong to the participatory culture of today's transmedia practices. While that seems obvious now, in the early stages of participatory culture, participation was still a question of how players created culture games by interpretating, reconfiguring, and constructing games (Raessens 2005, 383).

However, we are quite far removed from those early years of Game Studies. It is no longer a question whether video games belong to participatory culture. In comparison to twenty years ago, video games have become a mainstream phenomenon. The game industry is a rapidly growing segment of the creative industries in both Europe and the USA (ISFE 2020; ERA 2021; ESA 2021). Joost Raessens's article (2005) aimed to create space for video games within participatory culture, but we can now say games are vital to this culture. Video games are played, watched, shared, and created daily all over the globe by different people. We carry games on our smart phones, and play them on the train, during lunch breaks, or before we go to bed.

The current way the game industry operates has major consequences for how we engage with characters, make sense of them, invest in them, and control them. This meaning-making process starts at the onset of the design and marketing structure of the game product. We cannot understand characters independently from the design and marketing practices by authority figures, since those practices determine not only what the game and its characters look like, but also where and how the characters are distributed. Most contemporary games are constantly connected to the internet. Such constant connection is part of a general trend where companies carefully control and adjust their intellectual property (IP). Modifications may come in the form of remakes of old games, such as the *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (Square Enix 2020), or downloadable content, such as *The Extended Cut* (2012) or *Citadel* (2013) in *Mass Effect 3* (Bioware 2012), or massive overhauls of entire games like *Overwatch* becoming *Overwatch 2* (Blizzard Entertainment 2022). These strategies impact how players engage with and make sense of a game's characters. Whenever players become familiar with one version of a character, companies can adjust the game directly to have characters and other content fit their perspective. They force players to adopt a different mental understanding of and engagement with the figure, as was the case with the overhaul of the healer Mercy in *Overwatch* (PlayOverwatch 2017). The options that remain for players are to either accept the change or stop playing. Which begs the question: if a product does not stay the same, what does that say about the identity of the character?

How characters function and look, and how we interpret and engage with them, is at the basis of who controls the meaning-making of a text. This issue of control has been at the heart of participatory culture ever since Jenkins described it as utopian and democratic. While Fuchs criticises the political and economic aspects of participatory culture, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2019) further questions its textual aspects. In her book on participatory culture in the digital age, Thomas argues that Jenkins does not adequately

address the discrepancy in equality between media conglomerates and consumers, particularly how large conglomerates shape how we interpret a text. This power differential leads to a constant struggle for interpretative authority over who get to decide what the ultimate meaning of a text is. Thomas writes:

> [s]hifting cultural attitudes toward texts—and the contemporary struggle for interpretive authority over them—characterize meaning-making. While theorists from Roland Barthes to Michel Foucault would point out the historical nature of this struggle (and the longtime absence of the author), the question of the reader-author struggle must be revisited, given that in this digital age, more people than ever before are writing for work and during leisure, readers connect with one another in powerful networks, lines between readers and writers blur, definitions of what counts as text are negotiated and reconfigured in hybrid multimodal and multilingual constellations, and texts and people circulate across asymmetrical trajectories. (2019, 154)

Thomas's book mostly deals with non-cybermedia texts of large popular franchises like television series, novels, or films, for which users do not have to make non-trivial effort. The negotiation and tension between producers and consumers over a character's identity is a general struggle within participatory culture. Video games amplify an existing tension, because even if we do not have a developer's capacity to modify existing video games, they are designed to structurally capture a player's agency to traverse the product, in which players can influence how a story plays out or how a dynamic game character develops within a game.

Dynamic game characters become a problem when video games promise players creative agency over the figure's identity inside the game, while developers struggle to follow through on that promise, as the dynamic game characters move to other media platforms and products. Jenkins noted early on that game designers struggle with the balancing act of "trying to determine how much plot will create a compelling framework and how much freedom players can enjoy at a local level without totally derailing the larger narrative trajectory" (Jenkins 2006b, 126). Game designers and developers must make decisions that may not satisfy players. My own experience with Zelos and Kratos in *Tales of Symphonia* became disappointing when Namco released the official sequel *Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World* (Namco Tales Studio 2008). As the former game forced players to choose between Kratos or Zelos, one of the decisions Namco had to make for the

sequel was how to support the player's decision in the second game. Their answer was to ignore the player's agency; in the sequel, Zelos is alive, having supported the protagonist in their quest of saving the world, whereas Kratos has left the protagonist's party, only watching them from afar. Zelos's survival became the canonical choice recognised by the author-developer, which in turn retroactively annulled the players' agency over the vital decision they had to make over the fate of a character in *Tales of Symphonia*.

By adopting a transmedia perspective on characters, we can learn about the structural mechanisms in a text that result in friction between the meaning-making of audiences and control of authority figures. Video games promise creative agency in which players are allowed to create their own characters and stories. At the same time, however, video games are subject to the transmedia trend where content must expand across media platforms and stories, which challenges the Euro-American-centric desire for narrative continuity across works. These two ideals clash; a player's creative agency does not mingle well with the pursuit of narrative continuity when content disperses over multiple media platforms.

Dynamic game characters are placed right in the middle of this clash, as they promise players control, participation, and ownership over the character's identity. Simultaneously, once the figure moves to another platform—another game, novel, comic, or film—the authority figure has to sacrifice that creative agency. What is ultimately at stake when dynamic game characters move between media platforms is that the player's creative agency becomes of secondary value to the characters' identities, which are mostly determined by an authority figure. This book therefore scrutinises the promises of agency and the pursuit of narrative continuity across works as two ideals of participatory culture merge and clash in the shape of the dynamic game character.

A few notes on method

This book applies reader-response-aware close readings and close playings of different texts and their characters. I have selected texts that best illustrate the core qualities of the dynamic game character and the clash of ideals in which it emerges. I draw methodological inspiration from reader-response approaches that scholars have used to identify a reader to construct meaning from a 'text', which I understand in this book as any kind of interpreted cultural product, ranging from bibles or databases to visual art pieces, comics, or video games. Historically, the reader-response approach belongs

to a school of literary theory that favours the reader over the structure of the text. It is an approach that emerged in the late 1960s from its predecessor of structuralism. The reader-response approach downplays the work as a single product by favouring the process of meaning-making, as it focuses on reading and untangling the work in the larger context of the text (Freed-Thall 2018, 63). The recipient is so central to the reader-response approach that one of the first researchers to use the approach, Louise Rosenblatt ([1938] 1995), initially used empirical readers for the textual analyses of literature in the late 1930s.

A recipient model was formed by Wayne C. Booth's (1961) "implied reader"—the image an author makes of the recipient of the work for the most successful reading of their work (138). Booth's concept of the implied reader was then deepened by Wolfgang Iser (1978), who considers his *impliziter Leser* a structure in the text (Iser 1978, 60; Schmid 2013). The research in this book follows Iser's implied reader and uses it as a model that "embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect—predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself" (Iser 1978, 34). The structure of the work itself anticipates a specific reader, but never explicitly defines it (1978, 34). In other words, in the close readings throughout this book, I emphasise the role of the recipient—who could be a reader of a text, a player of games, a user of media platforms, or a watcher of movies, or all of these at once—as an integral structure of a text. While this book does not research media consumers empirically, my methodology enables close, detailed analyses of texts.

This book is not the first to apply a reader-response-aware model reader in the field of Game Studies. This approach has been applied to video games since the field's early days (Aarseth 1997; Murray 1997; Mortensen 2003), and is also known as 'player response' (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020). Within this approach, we can distinguish two strands: one strand considers players as model players based on the implied reader, showing how a game text is open to multiple readings by any number of individual players (see for example Aarseth 2012; Farca 2018; Hutchinson 2021). The other strand approaches players empirically, and employs a variety of methods to discover different game interpretations (Jørgensen 2012; Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020; Aarseth and Mortensen 2021). Both strands, as Torill Mortensen (in Aarseth and Mortensen 2021) points out, use multiple methods to discover what players experience. The most important thing is that "as researchers, we are always aware that games are about a variety of experiences, which is just not only the researcher's understanding of a game. A game's many possible interpretations consist of many different experiences" (2021, 4,

my own translation).[3] In this book, I apply the former strand to video games by using the recipient as a model to explore how video games are open to multiple readings to create a variety of experiences. I realise that my conceptualisation of players as a structure of the text may encounter resistance from those that favour the experiences of empirical players. However, my approach will point out where, at the level of text structure, the player's agency over dynamic game characters supports the variety of experiences different players will have—which inevitably affects the recipient's understanding of a character in another medium or story. In doing so, I discuss how the underlying mechanisms and sometimes archaic forces encourage different ways of playing a game. These ways of playing influence a recipient's interpretation of a dynamic game character, its other versions in other texts, and how they clash.

Since this book researches video games and non-cybermedia, like novels and films, I apply a game analysis (Aarseth 2003) of the close playings of games that require a player's effort to complete. The player's agency within a video game, the medium of departure for this book, plays a vital role in my close playings. Within the field of Game Studies, scholars have long debated the player's creative agency as expressed in the designed play in a game system versus players' actual gameplay (e.g., Jenkins 2006b; Sicart 2014). The player's agency partly determines how a recipient interprets the text that they are playing. The structure of video games leads different players to experience events that other players do not even notice. Video games, as cybermedia objects, are thus similar to other media that demand that users traverse and interpret them to end up with customised interpretations. For example, interactive television series such as *The Adventures of Puss in Boots* (Langdale 2015) or *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Slade 2018) differ from video games in name only. According to Espen Aarseth and Gordon Calleja, a "cybermedium" has a processual nature with a:

> potential for change in every engagement with the game and favours a dynamic and recursive view of games. A processual perspective thus presents games as ever evolving and socially contingent in a manner consistent with other domains of social experience. The processual nature of games also presupposes a ludic perspective from the part of the player towards the game object. (2015)

3 Original text: "men det viktigste er at du som forsker hele tiden er oppmerksom på at spill handler om en variasjon av opplevelser, ikke bare den ene – forskerens – forståelse av spillet. Spillets mange mulige meninger blir skapt av manges opplevelser." (Aarseth and Mortensen 2021, 4)

In this book, I treat games as artefacts with the potential to change depending on who plays them. Their malleability is unlike non-cybermedia such as a typical novel, which does not have the potential to change in response to the reader. Games can have very different outcomes depending on how a player plays them. As Astrid Ensslin describes:

> [d]ifferent playings of a game, conversely, tend to result in entirely different games, with outcomes as varied as winning or losing, gaining and/or losing lives, credits, and other countable units, radically different navigation options, and as a result, a large diversity of the gameworld per se. (2014, 28)

The changeability of video games means that two players will never play the same game even if it is the same game product. Nor will the same player play the same game product in the same manner multiple times. Multiple playthroughs are similar to reading the same novel twice, as a reader will likely not interpret it identically during a second reading. However, the main difference between the two is that with novels, the difference in multiple reads stems from interpretation, whereas games will vary in interpretation *and* structure, due to the player exerting agency in the game. Since the different playings of a game expand the game world, as Ensslin states, it also diversifies potential identities for dynamic game characters. The multitude of possible outcomes depends on how players traverse the game and what choices they make. This book thus explains how video games manifest dynamic game characters, and how the player's agency over them leads to a clash with the character's iteration in another text.

Structure of the book

This book is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the theoretical and historical backgrounds of characters in franchises and transmedia landscapes, and how games and the idea of a dynamic game character relate to these ecologies. Chapter 1, the chapter you are currently reading, has provided a brief state of the art on characters in contemporary transmedia practices. I have critiqued the ideal of narrative continuity across different works in popular franchises and introduced the dynamic game character who clashes with this ideal.

Chapter 2 delves deeper into theory; it provides a theoretical background on fictional characters. It gives a historical overview of game characters

and how they are informed by our perception of characters across different media. The chapter further provides a state of the art of game characters and their role as transmedia characters in larger contemporary media practices. It shows that theory on characters from Europe and North America focuses predominantly on an ideal of narrative continuity between character appearances across works, whereas Japanese theory on character focuses instead on character proliferation as a solution to opposing information on a character across different works.

Chapter 3 explains how dynamic game characters structurally develop in video games. It explains their development structure with multiple outcomes, which players activate depending on how they play, and the requirements to consider a game character dynamic. It also explains the three types of agents in which dynamic game characters appear (as ludic, narrative, and performative agents). Depending on the type, they predominantly develop as game pieces, through the game's story, or through the game's pre-coded scripts. The chapter will illustrate this through close analyses of the *Mass Effect* trilogy (BioWare 2007–2012), *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2017), and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*.

The second part of this book focuses on a variety of sample cases for how dynamic game characters move across different works and what kind of issues they amplify. As industry practices and academic theories strive for narrative continuity across different works, chapter 4 delves into how dynamic game characters upset this ideal. It explains that authoritative institutions use three top-down strategies of control to police the multiple transtextual identities of a character: authorship, ownership, and canonisation. The chapter's second part demonstrates how those authoritative institutions attempt to maintain an illusion of continuity with regard to the dynamic game character as it appears across different sets of works.

Chapters 5 and 6 provide sample cases for how dynamic game characters appear and move across different works. In chapter 5, I relocate the focus from Game Studies' preference to discuss player characters and avatars to a focus on non-playable characters (NPCs). Certain games stimulate players to create a parasocial relationship with NPCs that function as dynamic game characters. The first section of the chapter presents the common design elements that facilitate such relationships. The second performs two close analyses of *Persona 5* and *Hades* (Supergiant Games 2020) and related texts to demonstrate how these relationships are built, but also how they challenge and perpetuate heteronormative frameworks of romance.

Since narrative continuity across works is such a dominant ideal even for game characters, it is interesting to ask what a game franchise would look

like without such an ideal. To suggest an answer, chapter 6 looks at how game characters are transmedially constructed when narrative continuity is not dominant. It therefore presents close analyses of three fighting games, *Soulcalibur VI* (Bandai Namco 2018), *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (Bandai Namco Studios & Sora Ltd. 2018), and *Marvel vs. Capcom Infinite* (Capcom 2017), which rely less on linear storytelling. The chapter will first discuss the ambiguity of how media in general and video games in particular construct characters, before moving to the close analyses that will explain how their use of transmedia techniques to construct the characters across different works is contingent on the players' knowledge of these characters.

This book concludes with chapter 7 by briefly charting a vision of how dynamic game characters will be depicted in future transmedia landscapes. Since I foresee an increase in affective economics within transmedia franchises that influence our purchasing decisions, the chapter suggests three topics of which we will see more: first, I predict an increase in the diversity of romances between dynamic game characters that break with heteronormative standards, although this is not without its challenges and hiccups. Second, dynamic game characters will become popular fuel to monetise free-to-play games, as game developers stimulate players' desires for certain characters. Finally, dynamic game characters will appear increasingly beyond video games, in the hybrid realities of fiction, real, and the virtual. We will see these characters more in settings like social media and online streaming platforms, but also in supporting technologies like voice assistants where they interact and adapt to the users' idiosyncrasies.

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2. Characters in contemporary media

Abstract: This chapter provides an historical overview of game characters and their role in larger contemporary media practices. Characters have been studied throughout several fields, ranging from Literary Studies to Transmedia Storytelling to Game Studies. Game Studies focuses almost exclusively on the playable figure, neglecting characters that are not avatars and/or player characters. This chapter offers an explanation on how game characters are also transmedia characters, and examines the tension between transmedia and medium-specific perspectives on characters. Since transmedia storytelling highlights the ideal of narrative continuity across works, the chapter offers various theoretical approaches from Japan Studies and Media Studies to complement and counterpoint this ideal.

Keywords: Transmedia characters, transmedia storytelling, Japanese media mix, game characters

Game characters in transmedia storytelling

Understanding game characters[1]

In our character-driven culture, multiple character versions across different works exist that appear identical only on a superficial level. To name just one example: Pikachu. There are many different versions of Pikachu, a small mouse-like character. Pikachu was first introduced to Euro-American audiences in the late 1990s through the Japanese animated series (anime) known as *Pokémon Adventures* (Yuyama 1997–present). It had a prominent spot in this series as the cheerful mascot of Satoshi, also known as Ash Ketchum, a young Pokémon trainer who dreams of becoming a Pokémon master. In Japan, where the creature first originated, Japanese audiences

1 A prior version of this chapter has been partially published as an entry on "game character" in *The Encyclopedia of Ludic Terms* (Blom 2022).

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came to know Pikachu in the video games *Pokémon Red* and *Pokémon Green* (Game Freak 1996). The animated series was created after the games, and then inspired another game, *Pokémon Yellow* (Game Freak 1998). It was the same game as *Pokémon Red, Green* and *Blue*, but the Pikachu that replaced the player's starter Pokémon cried like Satoshi's Pikachu in the anime.

Pikachu has since proliferated across so many different media and products that it has become impossible to give a complete overview. Jan-Noël Thon (2019) defines a transmedia character network as the relations between various work-specific instances of a figure that together represent a single transmedia character. Pikachu's transmedia character network is extensive. The little creature appears in all official Pokémon games, such as *Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu!* and *Let's Go, Eevee!* (Game Freak 2018), *Pokémon Sword* and *Shield* (Game Freak 2019), and the most recent instalments, *Pokémon Scarlet* and *Violet* (Game Freak 2022). We also see the character voiced by actor Ryan Reynolds in *Detective Pikachu* (Letterman 2019). This Pikachu originally derives from the game *Detective Pikachu* (Creatures 2016), in which Pikachu helps Tim Goodman find his father. Pikachu also appears as decoration, adorning mobile phone cases and keychains, and as stuffed toys and figurines. I have even seen a live version walking across the streets of Shibuya in Tokyo to meet a group of children shopping in the Kiddyland toy store.

There is a tension between transmedial and medium-specific perspectives on characters. These tensions can be traced back to Literary Studies, arguably the field that has most contributed to how we understand characters now as both pieces of writing and human-like figures that are part of a story world. Because of this dual understanding of characters, I will use the term *quasi-person* for characters throughout this book. I borrow the term from John Frow (2014) who uses it to refer to characters as both pieces of writing and person-like entities (2). That is, quasi-persons are simultaneously a figure of speech and a figural representation (8) to which we ascribe human-like qualities and intention (see also this book's glossary).

While it may seem obvious now, this dual understanding of characters is the result of a long debate between two positions. The structuralist position saw characters exclusively as signs or structures of the text (Propp 1928; Greimas 1966; Barthes [1966] 1995; Cixous 1974; Genette [1979] 1980). The humanistic position approached characters in terms of resembling a human-like inner life (Forster 1927; Chatman 1978; Bal [1978] 1999; Rimmon-Kenan 1983; Frow 1986). Characters were seen as *either* signs embedded within a text *or* figures interpreted by audiences as human-like, but when the debate was settled in the 1980s, they came to be understood as both. Scholarship

on characters nowadays focuses more on the historical development of how we understand characters (Jannidis 2004; 2012; Heidbrink 2010; Reicher 2010), or on the different disciplinary perspectives from which characters can be understood (Margolin 1986; Palmer 2004; Phelan 1989; 2005; Eder 2008; 2010; Smith 2011). Both the historical and the perspective schools of thought implicitly assume that characters are entities inside a story world, as exemplified by Fotis Jannidis' description of characters as "participants in story worlds created by various media" (2012).

Game Studies initially derived its understanding of game characters from Literary Studies, but it has since mostly been concerned with a medium-specific understanding of characters. Game Studies has been interested mostly in the playable figure, an entity like the avatar and/or the player character (see Aarseth 1997; Calleja 2011; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 2008; Klevjer 2006; Vella 2015) that players directly control. The terms *avatar* and *character* have distinct meanings that are often conflated in video games. Game scholars were initially interested in whether the playable figure was a tool for players to manipulate the game world, a puppet, a representation of the player, or perhaps a person-like being with its own characteristics and traits (see Aarseth 1997; Bartle n.d.; Linderoth 2005; Newman 2002; Salen and Zimmerman 2004). The tension was resolved by Rune Klevjer's book *What is the Avatar* (2006), in which he argues that the avatar mediates agency and control between the player and the world of the game (62). He defines it as "an instrument or mechanism that defines for the participant a fictional body and mediates fictional agency; it is an embodied incarnation of the acting subject" (87). In other words, the avatar is the extension of the player in the game environment, which allows players to interact with the world.

On the basis of Klevjer's explanation, the avatar may be a vehicle, a mouse (arrow), or even a human-like figure. It differs from a character because he considers characters to be independent subjects, related to persons with their own goals and intentions (16). However, Klevjer's explanation did not entirely explain the dual nature of player characters—human-like figures with their own goals and intentions but controlled by the player. Daniel Vella (2015) defined the playable figure as an entity that simultaneously consists of the player and belongs to the game world. The playable figure becomes a character when players can deduce the figure's attributes and traits based on a game's textual cues. In this way, although player characters are directly controlled by the player, their personality is independent from them.

The almost exclusive focus in Game Studies on the playable figure neglected characters other than the avatar and the player character. Several

scholars have developed typologies to classify game characters (Isbister 2006; 2016; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 2008; Calleja 2011; Aarseth 2012; Schröter and Thon 2014; Schröter 2016). However, these typologies still mostly set the playable character apart from other types of game characters. The playable figure is considered such an essential part of game characters that Felix Schröter and Jan-Noël Thon (2014), in their analysis of video game characters, identify three different dimensions of experiencing game characters: as a fictional entity, as a game piece and as a representation of the player (49–50). The latter category defined the avatar as a means of communication between different players.

Early works on game characters mostly approached them as computer-based agents different from literary characters, and borrowed notions of characters from Theatre Studies (see Laurel 1991; Murray 1997). However, they paid little attention to understanding non-playable characters since they were solely concerned with playable figures. Later works recognised the meaningfulness of characters for the empathic and emotional responses they solicited from players. But even these emphasise player characters (Morrison and Ziemke 2005; Perron 2009; Lankoski 2010; 2012). Pinchbeck (2009) acknowledges non-player characters as being significant in the world of the game and its plot. But Kristine Jørgensen (2010) most notably draws attention to the importance of supporting characters as narrative devices that create a coherent narrative experience in the game. She argues that companions carry the narrative progression through the activities performed by the player (328). In other words, what Jørgensen describes is a dynamic game character, whose essential elements I will explain in more detail in the following chapters.

Can game characters be transmedial?

At the time of writing this book, interest in the medium-specificity of game characters has diminished because the boundaries between characters across different media have become increasingly blurred. More than before, characters are part of a media ecology, in which popular entertainment franchises try to generate as much profit as possible by creating large transmedia worlds and stories for consumers. It is the rule rather than the exception for characters—including game characters—to have become transmedial.

Characters were initially underemphasised in early academic discussions on transmedia storytelling. These discussions mainly approached characters as "stock characters that re-occur" (Jenkins 2006, 123), part of the world's

mythos or background stories (Klastrup & Tosca 2004), or merely inhabitants of the world (Wolf 2012). As mentioned in the first chapter of this book, this underemphasis of characters stems from Henry Jenkins's bias towards stories and worlds. He described transmedia storytelling as "the art of world making" (2006, 21), in which worlds are created through stories, which means that characters exist only in service to the world.

Attention to stories and worlds in Transmedia Storytelling increased as Game Studies became interested in the medium-specificity of the avatar and the player character, which reflects the general attitude of the time towards characters. The general idea was that game characters could not transfer to other media. Narrative affinities and affordances shared by books and films were not shared by games, and so transfers between media with strong structural differences were seen as complex at best (Aarseth 2006). Game characters inherited such problems. Characters failed to be cross-medially adapted to movies from games (and vice versa) because the player's avatar required affordances the new medium did not have (Pearce 2004). Player characters and avatars were the favoured focus of Game Studies. Jessica Aldred (2012) states that game characters are forced to be "digital doubles" of their filmic incarnations. To her, game characters are bound to the expectations and constraints of their film versions in the same way as an actor's image is carried into the role they play (101). They must simultaneously serve as the player's avatar *and* as the fictional entity advancing the story. As Aldred explains, due to the clash between a game character being its own individual and its role as the representative of the player in the game world, the character's own personality must be carefully managed in advertisement campaigns to manage player expectations (99). However, Game Studies gradually shifted its attitude towards the acceptance of game characters that transfer to other media platforms. For example, only a few years after her initial statement, Aldred (2014) explained that characters have become the symbols of larger game franchises which can extend to other media.

The ideal of narrative continuity across works

As the reliance on medium-specificity decreased, game characters started to be discussed as part of a global network of transmedia characters. One of the main challenges is cohesion of their various contradictory identities (Rosendo 2016), as they proliferate across different stories and media. The tension arising from the imbalance between a character's different identities

has prompted scholars to explain how various incarnations of a character across multiple works relate to the character as if it were a single entity. This tension is nothing new, as the different incarnations of American comic book characters intrigued scholars even before Jenkins officially coined the term "transmedia storytelling." In the early 1970s, Umberto Eco (1972) described the comic book hero Superman as a mythical character, because so many contradictory versions of him already at that time existed that the character became a fixed archetype. According to Eco, this meant that the character would not extensively develop as is common for characters in novels to remain recognisable to broad groups of audiences. In the early 1990s, William Uricchio and Roberta Pearson (1991) discussed Batman, another comic book character. They did not consider his contradictory appearances from a perspective of continuity, defined by a primary work or text. Instead, they argued that Batman's construction as a character is defined by a set of patterned character traits across all the different works in which the character appears.

After Jenkins's description of transmedia storytelling as a unified and coherent experience (2007) there has been a rise in the ideal of *narrative continuity* that informed both academic and industry practices in North America. In an attempt to successfully create coherent transmedia worlds, producers use so-called bibles or world-databases (Harvey 2015; Rosendo 2015). This practice is not exclusively limited to stories, as the bibles can come in the shape of character profiles, art, sound, and references to improve communication between different teams working on a franchise (Francis 2019). However, the reality of this practice is a stark contrast with the ideal. As I observed in chapter 1, according to Thon (2015), the reality is that the industry mostly fails to realise this ideal. The results are felt in academic studies of this practice. For example, Thon argues that academic analyses of the practices of transmedia storytelling suffer "from a largely unexamined commitment to what one could call the model of the 'single world'" (2015, 23–24).

Thon's point highlights the contradictory nature of transmedia storytelling: narrative continuity is an ideal that is rarely attained. Jason Mittell (2015) has highlighted a useful distinction between the ideal of transmedia storytelling and the actual practices Thon describes:

> [i]t is useful to distinguish between Jenkins's proposed ideal of balanced transmedia, with no one medium or text serving a primary role over others, with the more commonplace model of unbalanced transmedia, with a clearly identifiable core text and a number of peripheral transmedia

> extensions that might be more or less integrated into the narrative whole, acknowledging that most examples fall somewhere on a spectrum between balanced and unbalanced. (294)

Addressing the imbalance and countering the approach of the ideal of a single-story world, Thon (2015) distinguishes between a "local medium-specific story world of single narrative worlds, the glocal but noncontradictory transmedial [...] story worlds that may be contrasted out of local work-specific story worlds, and the global and often quite contradictory transmedial story world compounds that may, for the lack of a better term, be called transmedial universes" (32). He proposes that this distinction between types of converging content retains the notion of story worlds without perpetuating the idea of a *single*-story world, and thus better reflects the imbalanced and contradictory practices of the industry.

The ideal of narrative continuity applies to transmedia characters as well. When a single-story world is imbalanced, that is, when it has a clearly identifiable core text and a number of peripheral transmedia extensions (Mittel 2015, 294), so too are its characters. For example, Marvel's *Wandavision*'s finale shocked viewers when it revealed that the television series' heroine, Wanda, had been enslaving hundreds of people to physically play in a sitcom fantasy (Robinson 2022). However, it was not until the movie *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (Raimi 2022) that Wanda's lack of remorse was explained as coming from a place of despair when it portrayed Wanda as its ultimate villain (Robinson 2022). The Marvel Cinematic Universe uses films as its identifiable core text, with extensions like *Wandavision* integrated in the narrative whole. Without this television series, Wanda's transition from heroine to villain in the movies would not have made any narrative sense. One needs to be a dedicated consumer of the entire Marvel franchise to understand her behaviour. In this sense, she is an imbalanced character. This example complies with Mark J.P. Wolf's (2012) understanding of characters as tools whose presence in multiple stories suggests the existence of the same world (382). However, due to the reality of imbalanced transmedia, characters like Lara Croft, Pikachu, or Batman that proliferate across different media, cannot be understood as consistent entities within a single-story world. They often have various contradictory identities, which could be caused by different character versions across different franchises but also by inconsistent writing within the same franchise, where a character is supposed to be the same individual –as is the case for Wanda.

Scholars have discussed characters' contradictory identities from a set of different perspectives. Shane Denson (2011), for example, distinguishes

between the "series character" and "serial figure" to describe the tension arising from different types of seriality. The series character develops within a continuing narrative with increasing psychological depth and complex social involvements (Denson 2011, 536). That is, they exist *inside* a series (546). The serial character is a "flat" character, a stock character that appears in different forms across adaptations, contexts, and media (536). They exist *as* a series (546). Another perspective comes from Will Brooker (2012), who presents Batman as an amalgam of three models. First, Batman is a myth or a metatext in the sense that the character is a summation of all texts in which it appears, and belongs to everyone, that is, to the public, to popular memory, and to modern folk culture (152). Second, Batman is a brand, and exists as a product carefully controlled by the intellectual property owner. Third, Batman is canon, the "strict sense of what counts and what happened, what is true and what is not, in the mainstream Batman comic book universe" (153). Batman is carefully controlled as a single entity, as only officially approved stories enter the official canon (ibid.). That said, there exist various Batman canons alongside each other, such as the Batman canon by film producer Christopher Nolan, the canon by film producer Zack Snyder, or the one by film producer Matt Reeves. In these canons, Batman is presented as a character with a single and stable identity, while at the same time, the existence of these multiple canons actually denotes the opposite: that he has multiple identities that are far from stable. I will explain the process of canonisation in further detail in chapter 4.

Paolo Bertetti (2014) has presented one of the most elaborate typologies of transmedia characters. Defining them as fictional heroes "whose adventures are told across different media platforms, each one giving more details on the life of that character" (2345), he breaks with the convention of mutual correspondence between transmedia worlds and characters. That is, the same figure may appear in a different world (2346). He distinguishes between characters based on a single course of events (narrative continuity) and characters based on multiple courses of events (no narrative continuity). The former refers to the character based on a temporal order of stories within the same world. The latter refers to a figure with recurring properties, but events happening to them may contradict each other.

Despite all these differences and an increasing focus on character proliferation outside narrative continuity, the question of canonicity and identity remains an important focus of contemporary character theories. Many scholars have also pointed out that, even within a single work, characters are necessarily incomplete (Eder 2010, 11; Reicher 2010, 119; Vella 2014, 15; Wilde 2019b, 5). Their identities are hard to define even when making sense

of them based on the ideal of narrative continuity. Theoretical approaches from the intersection of Japan Studies and Media Studies complement and offer a counterpoint to this ideal. Japanese culture embraces the idea that characters are not necessarily connected to stories and worlds. In the section below, I will present an overview of theories from Japanese media cultures so as to trouble the Euro-American-centric assumption of narrative continuity.

Characters in the Japanese media mix

What is the media mix?

In Japan, strategies similar to transmedia storytelling have been discussed, for even longer, under the concept known as the *media mix*. It has its own history and developed since the 1980s before it was discussed alongside the term *media convergence* (since 2006) in North America and North-Western Europe (Steinberg 2012, viii). In his well-known work *Anime's Media Mix* (2012), Marc Steinberg explains that characters in the media mix are a "device that simultaneously allows audiovisual media and objects to connect and forces their proliferation" (83). Unlike transmedia storytelling or transmedia world-building, characters are how transmedia franchises connect their entertainment media and objects. These media and objects do not necessarily tell stories with characters with the same continuous identity, as if they are the same character. Rather, a character functions as a *kyara* or "recognisable archetype" (Nakamura and Tosca 2019) that can be placed within different series and media entertainment products without requiring narrative continuity (see for example Odagiri 2010; Hirohito 2011).

Although the terminology and theory surrounding the media mix appeared in the 1980s, the practices of the media mix can be traced back to World War II, having roots in fascism. The practices first arose as a set of techniques for producing audience-participatory propaganda during World War II by the Taisei Yokusankai (Imperial Rule Assistance Association), a special governmental organisation established in 1940 to promote Japanese nationalism in order to create a monolithic nation (Ōtsuka 2018; 2019). Although this was gruesome, Japan was far from the only country where the ruling state used the circulation of media and characters to propagate its ideologies. For example, comics have also been used to shape the societal, political, and cultural development of the Nordic countries (e.g., Denmark, Sweden, and Finland) between the 1930s and 1950s (see Rikke Platz Cortsen *et al.* 2014). The current shape of the media mix was created by Haruki

Kadokawa in 1976, who turned it into a cross-media strategy to stimulate the consumption of mass media (Steinberg 2012, 150). Steinberg (2017) has explained in a later piece that Kadokawa's original ideas of the media mix were inspired by Hitler's media strategy. The goal of a successful media mix is to advance total social mobilisation of words, images, and sounds so as to drive the consumption (instead of production) of a particular product family (248).

It was not until Steinberg's *Anime's Media Mix* (2012) that the media mix became widely known in English-speaking academic circles, primarily the fields of Media Studies and Japan Studies. The media mix was implicitly discussed in the early 2000s by Japanologists whose works rarely appeared on the radar of scholars in Game Studies. They mostly discussed the media mix by discussing anime franchises and not games. Such works include, for example, Susan J. Napier's *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke* (2001), Anne Allison's *Millennial Monsters* (2006), and Thomas Lamarre's *The Anime Machine* (2009). Together they demonstrate that Japanese popular culture is an important phenomenon to understand the circulation and interpretation of Japanese society and culture both in- and outside Japan. However, their general lack of interest in video games unfortunately prioritises anime and manga as the fundamental texts to study–despite the fact that Japanese video games are intertwined with the creation and circulation of these texts and have had a strong global presence since the late 1970s, with games such as *Space Invaders* (Taito 1978), *Pacman* (Namco 1980) and *Mario Bros.* (Nintendo 1983).

The field of Game Studies has shown a more explicit interest in the Japanese media mix since the 2010s. Martin Picard and Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon (2015) have explained the lack of earlier interest by pointing to the field's Euro-American-centric understanding of games (1–2). They attribute this gap of understanding of Japanese games to the language barrier and a lack of knowledge of Japan Studies (1). As a result, the Euro-American-centric field of Game Studies created a tunnel vision. It positioned itself as the centre of academic research, focusing on phenomena game scholars identified using theoretical knowledge that game scholars themselves created without the awareness of non-Western areas of the field. Thankfully, works on the role of games in Japanese contemporary transmedia practices are slowly becoming available in English, produced by scholars who locate their work at the junction of Game Studies and Japan Studies (e.g., Steinberg 2015; Hutchinson 2019; Roth, Yoshida, and Picard 2021). This recent interdisciplinary development is also visible in academic conference themes in the field. For example, the Digital Games Research Association's (DiGRA) 2019 conference in Kyoto had

the ludo/media mix as its theme, acknowledging the relevance of Japanese media and the contribution of Japanese scholars (see Wirman 2021).

The Japanese game industry is tightly connected to the media mix. Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon (2015, 3) explain that the Japanese video game industry is specifically characterised by the media mix. Unlike North-Western Europe and North America, where we tend to think of the game industry as a separate (albeit connected) industry of film or comics, the Japanese video game industry works in tandem with other industries. This fusion is shaped on a local scale by marketing strategies, on a national scale by industrial transformations, and by global creative and technological developments (3). Picard (2013) puts it thus:

> [t]he Japanese video game industry is at the intersection of local innovations in marketing strategies—in part in a context commonly called the *media mix*, which is itself linked to a broader context of a consumption culture that has risen from contemporary, and some would say postmodern (Azuma, 2007, 2009), Japan—national industrial transformations—whereas the Japanese video game industry is at the crossing of electronics, computer, amusement and content industries in Japan—and technological and artistic developments—from the hardware to the software—in which some aspects were, subsequently or synchronously, established globally and under an increasingly transnational mode, all forming a particular media ecology or system, that I name "*geemu*". (ibid.)

Characters in the media mix

Steinberg (2012) provides a cross-media argument to understanding characters in a media mix. He considers characters as devices whose nature is to travel across different media, and materialise in each medium in a distinct way (85). They are abstract entities that cannot entirely be captured within any one medium, although each medium foregrounds aspects of the character according to the capabilities of that medium (85). The synergy between media is actualised within the media mix through different manifestations of the character, which have distinct properties within each medium (85). However, as each medium shares modalities with another to mediate any form of expression (Elleström 2010), some media materialise characters in ways that are similar to other media, while having their own distinct properties and conventions for expression of these figures. While each medium can express characters in their own way, characters in one medium may still share similarities with their counterparts in other

media, so that the boundaries between distinct types of characters are in fact blurred.

Steinberg's work has put the Japanese media mix on the Anglophone map over the last decade, but characters have been playing a prominent role in Japanese scholarship on the media mix since the late 1980s. The Japanese media theorist Eiji Ōtsuka in 1989 formulated the concept of "narrative consumption" (Ōtsuka 1989; [1989] 2010), a marketing theory that explains how the individual narratives of characters allow users to gradually learn about the world in which a character lives. Ōtsuka assumes the ideal for narrative continuity through a distribution strategy through non-narrative media, from which Japanese theory on characters later deviated in Hiroki Azuma's work (more on that in the next section). To develop his theory of narrative consumption, Ōtsuka used Bikkuriman Chocolates, a chocolate bar with stickers inside the wrap that became a hit among Japanese children in 1988 and 1989. He linked the "grand narrative" to the term "world view" commonly used in the field of anime (106). In every anime episode, animators show a "small narrative" focusing on the central character of the series. Only the accumulation of the series' episodes allows for a complete "worldview" so that the audience understands what is happening in the world. In other words, the theory of narrative consumption considers characters to be the elements through which we come to understand a fictional world.

With characters at its heart, the media mix pushes storytelling to the background, depending on it to a lesser degree (Condry 2013). A media mix approach enables audiences to understand a world through characters rather than the other way around. Ōtsuka's theory of narrative consumption presents a larger world the reader can understand through different characters and their individual stories. Douglas Schules (2015), for example, summarises the relationship between characters, stories, and worlds within narrative consumption: "narrative consumption [...] focuses on the role stories play in driving the consumption of discrete media. Motivating this consumption is the character-world relationship, where a grand narrative (or worldview) structures how smaller ones known as narrative fragments fit together" (57).

Thomas Lamarre (2018) pushes stories and worlds to the background even further. He understands characters in a media mix as platforms capable of simultaneously serving as sites of continuity and discontinuity (210–18). The former happens through a character's code switching. Within the same medium, a character appears in a variety of segments with different codes. He uses the example of an anime episode in which a character appears in the fictional world of the episode, as well as in its opening sequence, ending

sequence, and commercials (215). The character must meet different expectations within each of these segments and it unites these different segments. Discontinuity occurs through media switching—when a character becomes a transmedia character that moves between different media platforms. According to Lamarre, this is a switch between capabilities of the screen (217), which we may understand as a medium-specific switch between different affordances and limitations of media platforms.

The *kyara* and *kyarakutā* distinction

The nature of characters has been extensively debated in Japanese theory, even if only little of this discussion has yet reached the Anglophone academic world. Ōtsuka's perspective on characters has been critiqued. The deviation from narrative continuity came to be highly influential when the Japanese cultural critic Hiroki Azuma wrote a response translated as *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* ([2001] 2009). According to Steinberg's introduction to his translation of Ōtsuka's narrative consumption theory, Azuma could not have written his response without engaging with Ōtsuka's work (Ōtsuka [1989] 2010, 102). Azuma argues that before postmodernity, i.e., the cultural world since the 1970s (7), Ōtsuka's narrative consumption was the way consumers entered into a world. This kind of consumption collapsed during the rise of postmodernity. Rather than stories, characters have become the most important objects for consumption in a work (31). The consumers Azuma specifically refers to are *otaku*— (male) fans who consume the aggregated elements of characters and settings, but not the grand narrative in which these elements appear (54).[2] In contrast to Ōtsuka's narrative consumption, Azuma names the consumption behaviour of the *otaku* "database consumption", which discards the grand narrative.

Azuma's work ignited a debate on the nature of characters within the cross-media settings of anime, manga, and other media. Lukas Wilde (2019b) explains that Japanese scholars made a helpful conceptual distinction between the *kyarakutā* (character) and the *kyara*: the character as a fictional being in a story (*kyarakutā*) and the visual figuration that "can easily be reproduced and consumed outside of its original narrative context" (*kyara*) (5). He points out that the term *kyara* has many contradictory meanings but is used by cultural critic Gō Itō as a technical term to refer to the "proto-character-state" of fictional entities (5). *Kyara* have a pre-narrative state,

2 An *otaku* can generally be described as a man between 18 and 40 years old who obsessively consumes media such as anime, manga, games and other related Japanese products.

in that they circulate between character goods and products that do not necessarily tell a story and lack diegetic context. The *kyara*'s pre-narrative state is based on the overabundance of competing and incoherent information between the appearances of the figure (5–6).

With the term "proto-character-state", Wilde refers to Itō's book *Tetsuka izu Deddo* [Tezuka is Dead] (Itō 2005; 2011).[3] Itō distinguishes between the *kyara* and the *kyarakutā* based on famous manga artist Osamu Tezuka's understanding of characters. Tezuka, who is known as the "father of the (modern) manga", considers a body made from simple lines a *kigō shintai* ("symbolic body"), only the visual representation of a body and not yet a character (Itō 2005, 116). Using Ōtsuka's idea of the character as human-like (who can therefore die) (see Itō 2006), Itō regards a *kyarakutā* as a *tōjō jinbutsu*, who convinces its readers that it is an "appealing dramatis persona" (Itō 2005, 120). The dramatis persona must: give a sense of *seikatsukan* (the feeling of having a daily life of a person), *ikigata* (a way of life), *hanashikata* (a speaking style), and *jinseikan* (a certain stance in life). These aspects combined give a being *sonzaikan*, a feeling of existence—the sense that the character is born, grows up, gets old, and dies (2005, 120). In other words, Itō explains the character as the representation of a body with a personality (121). In contrast, the *kyara* is an easy icon that only looks like a character. It is a "proto-character" that precedes the *kyarakutā* before readers perceive it as a character. It can therefore be considered to be a visual cliché.

Itō follows Ōtsuka's idea that the *tōjō jinbutsu* (the character) must be akin to a "real" person. That is, it needs to have a corporeal element (2005, 131). This is not the case for the *kyara.* In his English piece on Itō's and Azuma's response on Ōtsuka, Zoltan Kascuk (2016, 279) points out that the *kyara* is purely the semiotic aspect in Ōtsuka's duality of the character's nature. That is, the *kyara*'s body functions as a sign but is not the *kyarakutā.* The *kyarakutā* uses the body as a sign and employs the medium to evoke "human-like" behaviour, turning it into a quasi-person.

3 Unfortunately, the book is mostly untranslated; there is only an abridged translation of the book's foreword and its opening chapter: "Manga in Transformation and Its Dysfunctional Discourse" by the translator Miri Nakamura (2011). In the introduction to the translation, Miri Nakamura reveals that Itō's goal is to come up with a theoretical tool to analyse manga as a distinctive representational form, contrasting those that conflate manga with anime and film. She states that Itō argues in the book that "realism of modern manga originated from the suppression and effacement of its postmodern elements – epitomised by what he defines as *kyara*, a "proto-character" entity that turns into a complete *kyarakutā* (character) once the reader identifies it as human-like" (2011, 69).

Azuma, in turn, responds to the distinction between the *kyara* and the *kyarakutā* in the still untranslated work *Gēmuteki Riarizumu no Tanjō* [The Birth of Game-like Realism] (2007). He uses Ōtsuka's term "narrative consumption" ([1989] 2010) and Itō's distinction between the *kyara* and the *kyarakutā* (2005) to explain the nature of the character. Azuma positions himself in contrast to Ōtsuka, referring to the media form the latter favours. He argues that Ōtsuka distinguishes between three different forms of "light novels,"[4] which are common media in most media mixes. Some example of light novels include pre-1970s *jyubunairu shōsetsu* ("'juvenile novels"), 1970s *joshi shōsetsu* ("girl novels"), and *tēburutāku rōrupureingugēmu shōsetsu* ("table-talk role-playing game novels" or TRPG novels) (2007, 111).[5] Azuma believes that Ōtsuka considers the TRPG novels inferior to the other novel forms, because the TRPG novels do "not contain the inevitability of death—due to the possibility of resets, replays, and alternative endings" (Kascuk 2016, 278; Azuma 2007, 118–120). Ōtsuka's concept of the character relies on their mortality (Kascuk 2016, 278). From Ōtsuka's perspective, a character cannot maintain multiple lives, because it needs to die to give the impression of a person with a life.

On the other hand, Azuma argues that characters function like nodes and enable the possibility of *meta monogatariteki na sōzōryoku no kakusan* ("the proliferation of the power of meta-narrative imagination").[6] This phrase refers to the phenomenon when *otaku* read about a character in one story and they can easily imagine it appearing in other distinct derivative works or products (2007, 125). These characters have a meta-story-like quality in the sense that they can be "freely extracted from stories and relocated, and new story endings can be created, [...] irrespective of whether the original work from which the character comes is a game or not" (Kascuk 2016, 279). Characters move from story to story, outside the author's control (Azuma 2007, 125). Azuma's argument is that characters that are used in anime, manga, or light novels and that appear in game novels (such as the TRPG

4 Young adult novels usually aimed at middle and high school students.

5 In Japan, "tabletop role-playing games" are known as "*tēburutōku* RPGs", that is, "table-talk role-playing games".

6 Kaskuck translates *meta monogatariteki na sōzōryoku* as "metafictional imagination". This term can be understood across disciplines as having the same meaning as Marie-Laure Ryan's "transfictionality" (2013), which refers to the migration of fictional entities across different texts that may belong to the same medium and usually in narrative fiction (365–366). Another way to translate *meta monogatariteki* is proposed by Wilde (2019b) who translates the term as "meta-narrative" to account for the different worlds and texts across which *kyara* live (5). According to him, characters with meta-narrative qualities (*kyara*) must be transfictional by definition (ibid.).

novels) have a *gēmuteki na* ("game-like") existence (125). Their meta-story quality enables them to migrate from story to story without requiring narrative continuity.

Azuma uses Itō's distinction between the *kyara* and the *kyarakutā* to demonstrate that the circulation of the *kyara* is inherent to its nature. Azuma shifts Itō's focus on the visual aspect of the *kyara* to its game-like existence and its repetitive nature, which he believes are essential elements to modern manga as drawn by Osamu Tezuka (2007, 138). The concept of a character's game-like existence was then picked up by Tamaki Saitō (2014) who uses it to differentiate between characters and human beings. The former are persona who lead many different lives and die many different deaths, unlike human persons (2014, 108–9). Saitō therefore concludes that the essential element of the *kyarakutā* is its *tensō kanō/fukusei fukanō*—its ability to transfer to other works without reproducing itself (109). The term refers to characters being able to move from one work to another but never being entirely the same person, something we also see in Bertetti's work (2014) as characters based on multiple courses of events. The *kyara*'s essential element is the exact opposite: *fukusei kanō/tensō fukanō*—the ability to consistently reproduce itself over different works without transferring (Saitō 2014, 109). This statement refers to the idea that *kyara*, as visual clichés, are not embedded in a diegetic story world and so do not develop as persons. *Kyara* dwell in a network where they constantly move between different works, circulating while reproducing their own image, never growing as if they are quasi-persons (110).

The distinction between *kyara* and *kyarakutā* is not necessarily clear-cut. Rather, the two concepts lie on a spectrum in which the person-like figure can function more akin to a visual cliché or like a fully-fledged quasi-person. Such a distinction can be hard to understand from a Euro-American perspective which is used to looking at characters as quasi-persons embedded in a story world. Whereas the Japanese perception of a *kyarakutā* might still fit the Euro-American lens of characters, the proto-narrative state of the *kyara* causes confusion. Wilde (2019b) gives the clearest explanation of when a human-like figure is a *kyara* or a *kyarakutā*. He explains that *kyara* require recontextualisation. Basically, a *kyara* can easily be placed in narrative contexts where it turns into a *kyarakutā,* a quasi-person that develops, but it can also appear in other aesthetic, medial, and social forms. The *kyara* can appear in completely incompatible contexts, varying from a story in the manga to cosplay and fan fiction, without necessarily being the same character (*kyarakutā*). Even parameters such as race, gender, and ethnicity can be contingently changed (7). From this perspective, the *kyara* consists fundamentally of contradictory identities.

We can apply the distinction between the *kyara* and the *kyarakutā* to Pikachu, for example. As a visual cliché, Pikachu is primarily characterised by its yellow body, cute features, and a tail shaped like a lightning bolt. It appears in different contexts such as on mugs, cell phones, and colouring books. It also appears in more narrative contexts, such as Ash Ketchum's Pikachu in the animated series, the player's pet in the games, or as a detective in *Detective Pikachu*. None of these appearances are exactly the same character, or the same quasi-person. Pikachu is thus constantly recontextualised, oscillating between functioning as a *kyara* and as a *kyarakutā* in a story world.

Changing approaches

The idea of the *kyara* is very different from how most Euro-American theories look at transmedia characters. The *kyara* does not imply the ideal of narrative continuity across works but instead focuses on the circulation of the character. Yet, the *kyara* is not a concept unique to Japanese culture and there are a few exceptions that defy the ideal. The most notable exception would be Shane Denson and Ruth Mayer's (2018) conceptualisation of the serial figure, a stock character of the popular-cultural imagination of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Serial figures such as Sherlock Holmes, Dracula or Batman have been shaped across a range of different media (65). Uricchio and Pearson (1991) distinguish characters such as Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse from Batman because they "function as actors/celebrities rather than characters" (1991, 185). Wilde (2019b) mentions, for example, that they act as fictious actors that can take on any role (13). Susana Tosca (2003) and Aldred (2014) both locate a game character's ability to hop from one game to the next (or from one medium to the next) in the characters' iconicity.

The distinction between the serial figure and the serial character (Denson and Mayer 2018) resembles the Japanese distinction between the *kyara* and *kyarakutā*. Denson and Mayer's understanding of serial characters reflects the Euro-American ideal for characters to be part of an on-going and consistent narrative set in a fictional world within a series (67), but they describe the stock character as independent from any set world:

> [t]he iterability of flat, serial figures implies not only their episodic existence (like that of cartoon figures), but also their ability to extract themselves fully from the diegetic construct of a narrative world, from its attendant demands for continuity, and even from the medium itself

> through which a fictional world is otherwise invisibly constructed. (2018, 69)

There has been a small increase in scholars addressing characters from the nineteenth century in North America and Europe. Their work shows how older forms of transmedia franchises were created based on the principle of character sharing rather than on the logics of a story world (Scolari, Bertetti, and Freeman 2014; Freeman 2017; Meyer 2019; Wilde and Denson 2022). Throughout, narrative continuity across different works emerges as an assumption of *contemporary* media practices, not as an inherent trait of all characters.

We can also see an increase in academic works on contemporary transmedia practices that shed the ideal of narrative continuity. Instead, they explain how different manifestations of a character relate. Pearson (2019), for example, uses Denson's concept of "traces between previous incarnations" (2011, 536) to capture cohesion between different character appearances. She argues that the cohesion between appearances is invoked through "points of contact" that link different texts. As I briefly mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Thon's work (2019) on the theory and analysis of transmedia characters uses the term *global transmedia character network* to avoid the general assumption of what he calls the "model of the single character" (2019, 187). Inspired by Japanese theory mentioned above, Thon's character network is *the sum of all* contradictory character versions of a transmedia character. His work stresses that recipients draw on their prior knowledge or expectations of the characteristics of a transmedia character—such as Sherlock Holmes, Batman, or Lara Croft—to understand the character represented in front of them, which he calls the "transmedia character template".[7] Recipients understand the transmedia character as the same person, even if "the fact that two characters may *share the same name* is arguably not sufficient for assuming that they *are the same character*" (183, original emphasis). Returning to the Pikachu example, as recipients, we come to understand Pikachu as a character based on our prior knowledge of the creature's distinguishing features across different works.

Based on their previous works, Pearson and Thon published a collaborative piece on the complexity of the normative discourses of character-like phenomena in different media, histories, and cultures. The identity of a

7 Thon explains that the term can understood as somewhat similar to Klastrup and Tosca's (2004) concept of "worldness" to describe a number of distinguishing features of the universe of transmedia worlds. We may come to understand it here as the intersection of distinguishing features of the transmedia character across different works.

transmedia character is constantly negotiated and re-established over time, as distinct local instances of the character proliferate across a variety of texts (Thon and Pearson 2022). Their call for more local and medium-specific understandings of characters' nature is shared by other scholars, particularly in the realm of semiotics. The dialogue between Paolo Bertetti and Mattia Thibault (2022) shows how semiotics can contribute to a theory on transmedia characters. They argue that semiotics can provide a powerful tool to explain how different media produce characters, and deconstruct the idea of "character" as a unique concept. An example of their suggestion can be found in another work by Wilde (2019a), where he approaches the *kyara* as a semiotic object resulting from a series of texts. He applies Charles S. Peirce's semiotic grammar to explain the cultural functions and uses of the *kyara*. Specifically, he explains that *kyara* oscillate between the semiotic modes of firstness, secondness, and thirdness, or potentiality, factuality, and regularity, so that their identity is constantly negotiated by participatory cultural communities. Stephan Packard (2019) offers another semiotic approach that uses Peirce's insight, discussing how readers cope with the varying and often conflicting identities of transmedia characters by interpreting decontextualised characters, like *kyara*.

Finally, the topic of the reception and negotiation of characters by audiences has come to the forefront. Susana Tosca and Elizabeth Evans (2022) show how fan fiction writers recreate instances of transmedia characters, understood as networks of recognisable traits and relations built across media incarnations. Nicolle Lamerichs and Nieves Rosendo (2022), on the other hand, demonstrate how recipients' affective responses lead to controversies surrounding a character's perceived identity. They refer to the case of Kassandra, a dynamic game character in *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft 2018). Initially players could choose to play Kassandra as a queer character. Ubisoft's downloadable sequel (DLC) forced players to engage in a heterosexual relationship, retroactively annulling players' agency to choose the figure's sexuality. Forced heteronormativity led to players feeling cheated and deceived—a consequence that has much to do with the promise of players having the agency to decide the identity of their dynamic game character, which I will discuss in more detail in chapter 4.

Conclusion

With the increase of academic works on characters, assumptions about a character's nature and its contradicting versions are gradually changing,

and are no longer forced to conform to Jenkins's ideal of narrative continuity across different works. We may therefore expect that future academic works will increasingly come to embrace character multiplicity, which allows for closer inspection of actual industry practices rather than conform to an ideal that cannot be upheld. Another promise, however, that should be scrutinised, is that of the player's creative agency over dynamic game characters in video games, since developers, who follow the ideal of narrative continuity, often fail to follow through on the promise of creative agency when the figure is transported to other media platforms and products. In the following chapters, I will demonstrate how the dynamic game character draws from this ideal while at the same time, the promise of creative agency cannot be upheld.

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3. How the dynamic game character develops

Abstract: This chapter explains how dynamic game characters structurally develop in video games. First, I explain that dynamic game characters have a development structure with multiple outcomes that the player can activate, because a game is a cybermedium, which has the potential to change depending on how one plays. In the second part, I describe the different requirements for a game character to be considered dynamic. The final part focuses on the three types of dynamic game characters over which players have creative agency: as *ludic agents*, as *narrative agents*, and as *performative agents*. These agents develop predominantly as game pieces, through the game's story, or through pre-coded scripts respectively.

Keywords: Ludic agents, narrative agents, performative agents, development structure, possibility space

Dynamic game characters

On a warm evening in April 2018, I started playing *Mass Effect 2* (*ME2*) (BioWare 2010) on my laptop. I usually prefer to play on game consoles, but I was on a research exchange in Japan and did not have the luxury of a console in my temporary apartment at the time. *ME2* had been recommended to me by a colleague a few months before. But when I initially started playing, I struggled to stay interested, and put it away after a mere four hours of gameplay. I was determined to figure out in Japan what was supposed to be so interesting about this game. Before I knew it, it was the middle of the night, and I had played for several hours straight—an exception for me, since I rarely "binge" games.

ME2 is the second instalment in a series of three action role-playing games also known as the *Mass Effect* series (BioWare 2007–2012). The

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original trilogy started with *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007), then *Mass Effect 2* (BioWare 2010), and ended with *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare 2012).[1] The series covers the adventures of Commander Shepard, an elite soldier who guides a crew tasked with stopping enemies known as the Collectors in the Milky Way galaxy of the twenty-second century. The series has the player choose Shepard's gender, appearance, background, fighting class, and first name at the start of the game. It allows players to make meaningful choices during the game, which not only impact how other characters perceive Shepard, but also determine the story's progression. The player's choices determine the fate of other characters and, eventually, the ending of the series. Decisions effectively turn Shepard, and the many characters whose fate is also determined by the player, into dynamic game characters. Additionally, players can transfer data from one game to another in the series so that their choices affect the story and characters throughout the whole series. This creates narrative continuity between different works, which is an important ideal, as I discussed in the previous chapters.

Every night I played this game, making choices that impacted the futures of my player character commander Shepard and their crew on the spaceship the Normandy. At one point in the story, I was confronted with a dilemma; before the events of the game, the Turian species used a biological weapon known as the "genophage" to kill off the Krogan species during a rebellion. In the aftermath, female Krogans were unable to reproduce. Over the course of the game, Shepard runs into one of the few doctors who could potentially cure the Krogans' infertility. The dilemma was presented to me as the following choice: will Shepard destroy doctor Maelon's data to cure the genophage's effect of infertility, or will they keep the data? In my naivety I chose to destroy the data, because I convinced myself it was corrupted by the doctor's inhumane experiments on female test subjects of the Krogan species. Little did I realise that this choice would have consequences for Shepard and another character, Eve. In *Mass Effect 3* (*ME3*) (BioWare 2012), Shepard is tasked with retrieving the female test subjects from Maelon's project. During the mission, Shepard discovers that only one subject, Eve, has survived. Eve is taken aboard Shepard's ship, but she is weak and coughs. The crew's doctor, Mordin, explains that he needs Eve's body to cure the Krogan's infertility, but he also warns that because of her ill health, Eve might not survive the procedures to create the cure. Despite these warnings,

1 The release of *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (BioWare 2017) marks the fourth entry in the *Mass Effect* series, but contains different protagonists and is set in different worlds than the original trilogy, and I am therefore omitting it from my analysis.

Eve insists she will undergo the procedures, and, indeed, she dies due to complications not long after.

I wondered whether there was any way to save Eve? Was it possible for her to survive the procedures, or had the game set this event in stone? My search for an alternative led me to discover that I had already determined Eve's future in *ME2* by choosing to destroy Maelon's data instead of keeping it. Without it, Mordin's knowledge was incomplete, and he had no way of keeping Eve alive. Had I chosen to retain Maleon's data, Mordin could have used the data to save Eve. My choice resulted in the weakening of the Krogan faction's support, which in turn meant that Shepard would have to battle the final enemy without their help. Since I am not particularly good at fighting in games, my decision made fighting the final battle more difficult.

As the series allows players to determine the fate of many of its dynamic game characters, Eve has a development structure that is undetermined until players make decisions that affect future events. In turn, these decisions steer a dynamic game character's development structure in a certain path that determines their identity. When I chose to destroy Maelon's data in *ME2*, I did not realise that this choice would affect Eve, as she did not make an appearance until *ME3*. The choice closed off the path to survival for her, and left open only the path to death. I was surprised by this. This outcome was not what I wanted, but nor was I prepared to replay *ME2* and *ME3* just to change Eve's fate. I had to live with the consequences of my actions; the version of Eve I had created died.

Dynamic game characters exist because of the mechanical system of cybermedia, a genre of media to which games belong. As explained briefly in chapter 1, games are ergodic cybermedia, that is, games require non-trivial effort to traverse (Aarseth 1997, 1–2), which means they enable players to change the state of the game by playing the product (see Aarseth and Calleja 2015). By extension, players can also change the state of characters in the game. Dynamic game characters are a special type of character, as players change not only their state, but also the direction in which the character will develop. These characters' development structures lead to different outcomes depending on the player's choices and actions throughout the game. The dynamic game character functions as a quasi-person with a development structure that branches into different outcomes that are activated by the player. A dynamic game character is inherently ergodic, because the player has to exert non-trivial effort to affect the character's development. The actualisation of these possibilities has structural consequences for how the player continues to traverse the game. The game will indicate that the player is placing the development of the character on a certain path, thereby

closing another path. However, the outcome does not necessarily have to be clear to the player until they have made their decision.

The possibility space of games

The mechanical system of a cybermedium creates a possibility space, which Aarseth (1997) describes as the situation in which choices in a cybertext make a part of it more accessible to its users. With each decision, players actualise one possibility and close another (1997). A possibility space can be understood as the potential that the player can actualise, which structures the processes within the game and allows the game to change from one state to another. The scope of this space depends on the game; it could be infinite for some and finite for others. Consider games with a procedurally generated open world. In these games, players can traverse an endless game world because the *procedural content generation* (PCG) method automatically generates new (and partially random) content. For example, open world games like *Minecraft* (Mojang 2009) and *No Man's Sky* (Hello Games 2016) have infinite possibility spaces, as new content is generated in a continuous loop. Nevertheless, not every possibility has to be constantly available, nor do certain rules always have to be in effect. The game's processual nature causes the state of the game to change regularly so that players traverse different segments, such as exploration, battle, or narrative development, or even entirely different games. Kristine Jørgensen (2010), who has written one of the few works about dynamic game characters, describes the growth and development of characters in *ME2* and *Dragon Age: Origins* (*DAO*) (BioWare 2009) through segments such as personal quests and loyalty missions of the companion characters that accompany the player characters in both games. Her description demonstrates how the procedures the player performs are constrained within segments that allow the player to affect the final outcome of the character.

To provide an example, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (*BotW*) (Nintendo 2017) is an open world game where players take on the role of the protagonist Link to save the world Hyrule. The game allows the player to explore and navigate its world and regularly generate new content (every "full blood moon") so that defeated enemies will respawn. The game has a main story but is designed so that players can decide where they want to go in that world, which is divided into different areas.

The most delineated area is called The Great Plateau, which functions as a tutorial area that familiarises players with the game's structure, mechanics,

and rules. Players can only leave it once they have solved puzzles in four shrines, scattered across the plateau. Yet, even this area is divided into segments where different rules and mechanic apply. Players are required to reach the Keh Namut shrine at the top of the mountain, so they have to climb a mountain covered in snow. They discover that to reach the top, they have to keep Link's body warm or else he will die. The character can be protected from the cold by finding warm clothes or by cooking spicy dishes that warm him up. Once Link is inside the shrine, the player has to solve puzzles to obtain the Cryonis ability, which allows players to create pillars of ice from a water's surface. As players move through the different segments in the open world they are met with different challenges, rules, and mechanics so that the possibilities of how players go through these segments differ as well. Simply put, different segments allow for different possibilities.

Possibility spaces like *BotW* create potential for character development in games that are actualised when players make choices and perform actions. The shape of the space can be described and visualised by Brenda Laurel's ([1991] 2014) *flying wedge* model of human-computer interaction (HCI). Laurel explains that in a dramatic play, the play's potential opens a set of possibilities as it progresses, and every enactment makes some possibilities more or less probable ([1991] 2014, 84). At the climax of the play, all possibilities are eliminated except for one—the final outcome. This is when probability turns into necessity (84) (Fig. 3.1).

Unlike scripted plays, however, gameplay is affected by the player's role within the game's mechanical system. The shape of potential for computer-human interaction is similar to the flying wedge for dramatic plays, but the number of possibilities changes (it may increase or decrease depending on the choice and game) as the player acts and makes choices ([1991] 2014, 85). As a result, the flying wedge for computer-human interaction creates multiple outcomes ([1991] 2014, 85) (Fig. 3.2). This means that each player can have a different outcome depending on their choices and actions.

The possibility space facilitates the development structure of all game characters. At a minimum, the character must have the potential to appear in the game so that the player engages with it. When a character appears in a game, it presents a development structure with a certain number of possibilities for how it can develop, even if that potential is severely limited. For instance, the role-playing game *Octopath Traveler* (Square Enix 2018) allows the player to choose one main character from eight possible protagonists at the start of the game. The player can then choose to encounter the seven protagonists whom they did *not* pick as their player

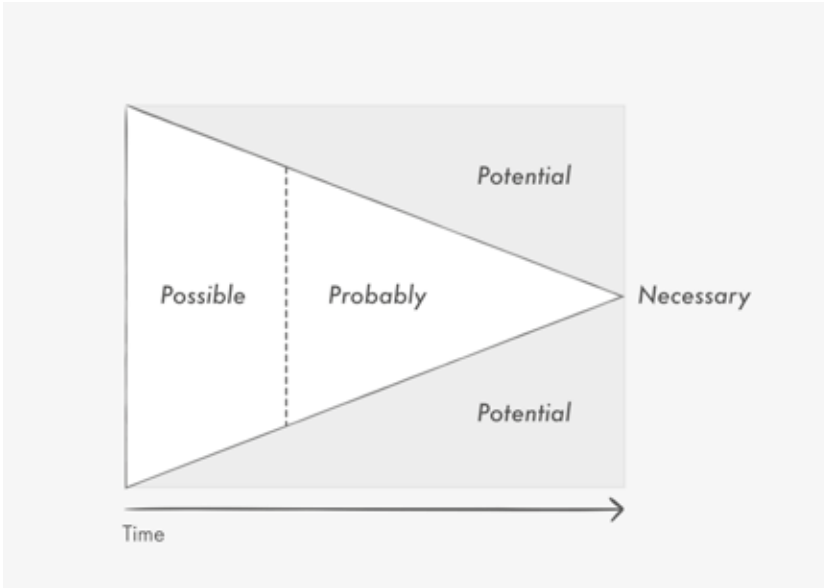


Fig. 3.1: Illustration of Brenda Laurel's flying wedge ([1991] 2014). Illustration by Marianne Krist.

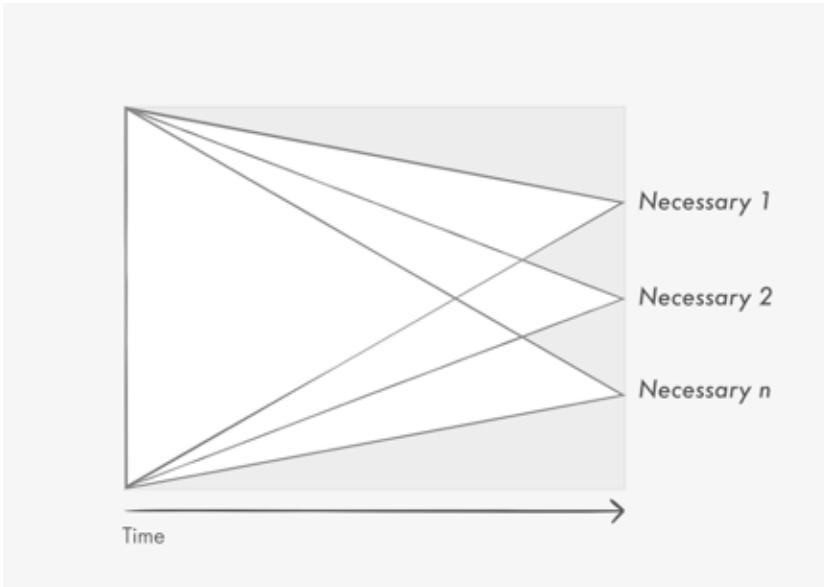


Fig. 3.2: Illustration of Brenda Laurel's flying wedge for human-computer interaction ([1991] 2014). Illustration by Marianne Krist.

character while traversing the world, and recruit them into a party of two or more protagonists. The player can also choose to completely ignore the protagonists except for the one they choose at the beginning. That means that a player could decide not to recruit a protagonist such as the scholar Cyrus, and so Cyrus's potential development will never be actualised over the course of the game. Another player might choose Cyrus at the start of the game, creating an opportunity to develop the character of the scholar. The player can choose to fully pursue the character's range of narrative development, advance its abilities, up its levels, and get it jobs, which helps reach the end state of the game.

At their broadest, games give the player the impression that the character's development structure contains a plurality of potentials and outcomes. For example, the action role-playing game *Nier: Automata* (PlatinumGames 2017) has twenty-six different endings. Each is an actualised possibility of the development structure of all the characters involved. The majority of the endings result from the player failing or fleeing a mandatory quest, after which the player restarts the quest to continue the game. Four out of the twenty-six endings provide alternative end states, which are influenced by the decisions the player has made over the course of the game by completing the main story quests. However, it is impossible for the player to achieve all outcomes in a single play through. For some endings, the player needs to obtain a certain combination of the other endings; in other endings, a change in decision near the end is enough to change the end state. The dynamic game character lives in this broad possibility space.

The development structure of dynamic game characters

As I stated before, a dynamic game character's development structure is shaped like Laurel's flying wedge for human-computer interaction. The player makes choices and performs actions that, in turn, make certain outcomes of the development of the character more or less likely. The game's possibility space includes the development structure of all its dynamic game characters. The development structure of a single dynamic game character is assigned solely to that individual character and could potentially end before the game reaches its end state.

The dynamic game character's development progresses slowly throughout the game. Changes of state in games cause characters to continuously switch back and forth between different game segments. *ME2* provides a good example of how this back-and-forth movement between segments works. The

loyalty missions in *ME2* are separate, contained segments. The player needs to complete each segment while playing as one of Shepard's crew members, such as Garrus, to become loyal to the commander and unlock their special abilities. The completion of this mission also provides the opportunity to romance Garrus (on the condition that Shepard is female and not male), which highly improves Garrus's chances to survive the game's final mission.

The player cannot perform all of these procedures at the same time, nor are all rules, mechanics, and affordances simultaneously available. Rather, the player operates inside different segments, each of which contain its own combination of mechanics and rules. By doing so, they advance the overall development of the character, opening up certain possibilities in the process. Sometimes, the player makes a choice that closes off another path; romancing Garrus means that they will not be able to romance other characters later in the game. In short, a game's possibility space gives dynamic game characters the opportunity to develop as beings with an inner life, while they also develop as a game piece. The development may be divided into different segments, but these merge in the game's possibility space as the character's development advances towards a specific outcome.

As such, the player has become a vital part of the dynamic game character's development process. While the player always remains bound to the choices and consequences that have been laid out for them by the game, it becomes impossible to think of the dynamic game character's identity without considering the player. The player does not just imagine the identity of the character, but effectively shapes the figure's identity. This means that digital games accelerate a dynamic game character's identity within a single work, unlike more "traditional" non-cybermedia, in which a character's identity is constructed over multiple works. Instead of having multiple versions configured over multiple works, which determine the continuity of their identity within a transmedia ecology, the dynamic game character's possible different versions all gather within a single work. In other words, the dynamic game character contains a plurality of identities of which only one is manifested through the player.

The requirements for dynamic game characters

For a game character to be *dynamic*, player input is required. This does not necessarily mean that the player needs to have an avatar-like relationship with the fictional person. Instead of talking about characters in terms of their relationship to the player—through terms like avatar, player character,

protagonist, or cast characters—the term dynamic game character relocates the player's agency from being confined to a single entity to a web of characters which do not exclusively have to be player characters, but may also be supporting characters or even more minor characters like merchants. It changes the assumption that when the player controls a player character, their agency is limited to that figure. Rather, the dynamic game character shows how the player affects different kinds of characters. An example of a dynamic non-player character would be Eve, who was discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Eve is just one of the many beings involved in Shepard's journey to save the galaxy. My decision to destroy Maelon's data was attributed by the game to Shepard (the player character) but resulted in Eve's death (not a player character), and consequently weakened the Krogan's support in the final battle. Eve's death could have been avoided. She could have lived and had children, and she could have gained the support of the Krogan to help Shepard's mission. But my choice to destroy Maelon's data set her on a path towards a different outcome.

Although player input can be very important for how a player perceives a character, that does not mean a game structurally acknowledges the player's input as actions that change the development of the figure. Vella's (2014) distinction between character actions and player actions explains the difference; character actions refer to actions the character performs independently of player input, and player actions refer to actions that the player makes the player character do (Vella 2014, 12–13). Because I can choose to have Arthur from *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Studios 2018) (*RDR2*) continuously eat steak, I could think of him as someone who eats meat. However, whether or not he eats meat changes nothing on the structural level of the game. Indeed, the steak keeps Arthur's health bar filled, but so do most other foods in the game. These actions do not encourage the player to steer the character's development in a structurally different direction.

On the other hand, actions that do affect Arthur's development and outcomes include killing innocent persons on the street. Stealing, killing, or refusing to help non-playable characters (NPCs) lower Arthur's reputation bar, which makes NPCs flee if they see him. Killing innocents registers as negative actions, causing people in that world to become afraid of Arthur. Actions that the game registers as positive prompt NPCs to give him rewards—prices in stores are lowered and more outfits are unlocked. The character's dynamicity is measured by a reputation bar that affects how Arthur dies (spoiler: he will die regardless of what the player does). If he has a good reputation, Arthur dies in peace while looking at the sunset. With a

bad reputation, he will be shot dead by his former gang mate. The reputation bar is merely a visual measurement of Arthur's characterisation process, the character's development that shapes who they become. Characters who flee at the sight of him and Arthur being shot dead rather than dying peacefully—these are structural consequences, showing that the game encourages the character to develop in a certain direction.

Despite the choices and actions that can affect a character, most games only account for a certain set of outcomes. The ways a character can develop, and the possible outcomes of the character's development structure, are limited. This means that it differs for every game what outcomes are possible and what actions or choices will lead to a different outcome. In other words, the element that dynamic game characters all share is that it is always up to the player to realise what outcome they will experience. In *RDR2,* Arthur does not survive his tuberculosis, and no medicine appears regardless of what the player does. His death is unavoidable. However, the player can influence *how* he dies, although there are only four outcomes. But Eve from *ME2* can be saved by the player if they choose not to destroy Maelon's data.

A dynamic game character's development structure can be pictured as a tree with forking branches that differ per character and game. They contain all the different outcomes the figure can experience. A caveat with regard to the development structure is that it only works if the forking branches have been placed in the game by the developer. It is not something that "just happens", but is designed specifically for a game. The player then simply advances from the trunk of the tree to different branches through each choice and action facilitated by the game's possibility space. Whenever the player makes a choice that pushes a character's development in a certain direction, the branch opens other branches that they can pursue. When the player makes a choice, they actualise a possibility that directs the development of one or more characters towards a certain outcome. In doing so, they can steer the development to alternatives with other outcomes, but also close off possibilities.

This prompts me to list the requirements for characters to be defined as dynamic game characters. Overall, for a character to be considered dynamic, it must meet three conditions:

– The player directs the character's development onto certain paths by their choices and/or actions in the game.
– The player's choices and actions have at least one non-trivial consequence for either the development of the character and/or the state of the game.

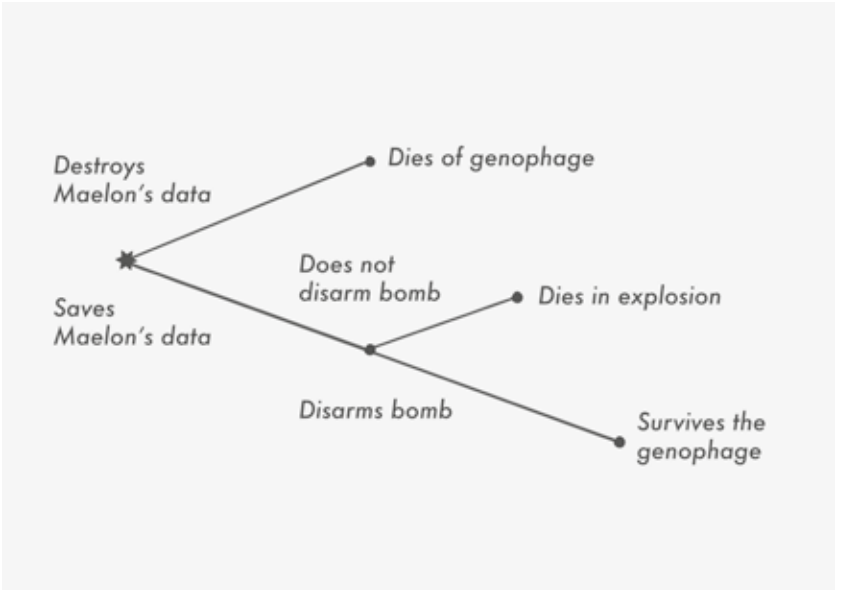


Fig. 3.3: Diagram of Eve's development structure. Illustration by Marianne Krist.

– The outcome of the character's development is undetermined until the player directs it towards a single possible outcome.

Returning to Eve, we can create a simplified tree diagram to visualise her development structure (Fig. 3.3). As can be seen, Eve's death in *ME3* is just one direction in which she could have developed. Fig. 3.3 also shows that she could have survived if the player had saved Maelon's data. Alternatively, yet another direction is that she survives, but dies later in the game if the player is unable to dismantle an enemy bomb. The player steers Eve's development structure in a certain direction by making choices and performing actions that determine her eventual fate. Although Fig. 3.3 shows her overall development structure, Fig. 3.4 depicts her development and fate when I played the game. Fig. 3.4 combines Eve's development structure with Laurel's flying wedge for human-computer interaction. It visualises how my choice to destroy Maelon's data turned a possible outcome into a probable outcome: Eve dies due to complications of the genophage. Had I chosen to save the data, I would have stayed longer in the realm of the probable, until I either failed or succeeded in disposing of the bomb. Two out of three outcomes would have resulted in Eve's death, albeit in different situations and due to different choices. Which outcome eventually becomes necessary depends on the player. Before the choice

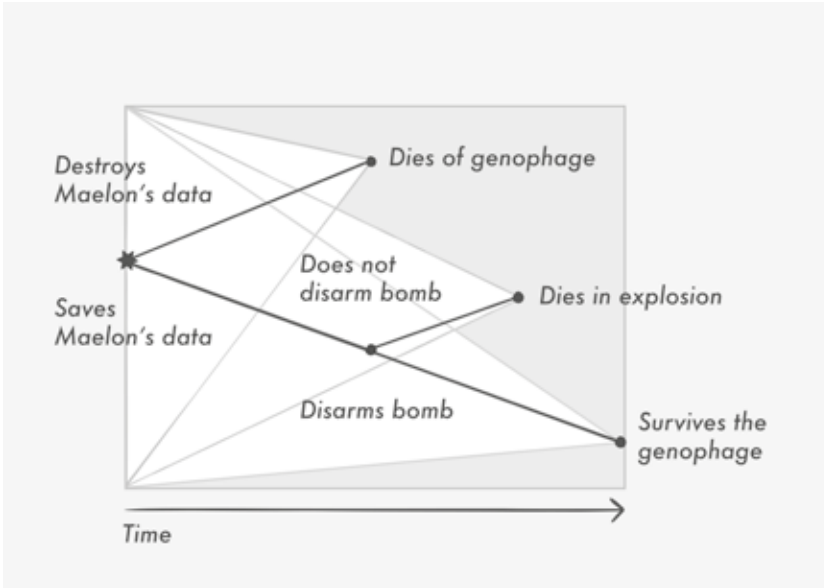


Fig. 3.4: Diagram of the path in which I influenced Eve's fate with Laurel's flying wedge for human-computer interaction ([1991] 2014). Illustration by Marianne Krist.

is made, each outcome and path are just possible, written into the game's possibility space before the player takes up the task of influencing the character's characterisation process.

The three types of dynamic game characters

Dynamic game characters can be divided into three different types over which players have creative agency to develop the character's identity: *ludic agents*, *narrative agents*, and *performative agents*. According to Felix Schröter and Jan-Noël Thon (2014), players experience game characters in three different frames: as fictional beings with an inner life, as game pieces that are part of game mechanics, and as avatars—the representations of other players. I exclude the avatar as the representation of the player and make the following distinction: dynamic game characters are ludic agents if they are developed predominantly as game pieces, narrative agents if they are developed mostly as fictional characters, and performative agents if they are developed primarily based on scripts—encoded patterns that determine their behaviour. Dynamic game characters may consist of all three agents at

once within a single game. This differs per game. In the following sections I will provide three examples of how each agent's development process works.

Ludic agents

The development of some dynamic game characters is dominated by their function as ludic agents in a game. These agents operate primarily as game pieces. Developing Schröter and Thon's frames of experience in a later article, Schröter (2016) explains that as game pieces, characters are experienced through gamer-related features and abilities, and character-related goals and rules that serve the player during gameplay (42). Although these characters are primarily experienced as game pieces, Schröter explains that they are not represented in simple abstract means. Rather, they are what he considers "fictionalized"—represented as actions of fictional beings. For example, combative engagement against an enemy, exploring labyrinths, or trading with NPCs are fictionalised capabilities (43). These features, abilities, goals and aims include numerical ludic attributes (such as the agent's health and defence), or game mechanics (like moving, firing a weapon, or throwing a grenade) (2016, 43). So, rather than "game pieces", I call this type of dynamic game character "ludic agents" to acknowledge that they are a quasi-person.

As ludic agents, game characters become dynamic through abilities and features that let the player move around in the game space. By choosing specific features or abilities of their agents, the player will create a specific version of that character. For example, at the beginning of *Mass Effect*, the player has the possibility to define the gender of commander Shepard as either male or female. This choice influences what romantic options are successively available to Shepard during gameplay. Other choices might include skills that the player chooses for their characters. For example, in *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerilla Games 2017), the protagonist Aloy gathers more (numerical) experience with every skill point. Skill points let the player choose which skills to unlock for Aloy to grow as a traveller, forager, prowler, or combatant, thereby changing the dynamic of specific parts of the gameplay. If Aloy grows as a prowler—a category that develops her stealth skills—she will be able to fall or jump without alerting enemies. If she grows as a combatant, a category that focuses on combat, she can add additional arrows to her quiver. Thus, it is specifically as ludic agents that many game characters are dynamic.

Link in *Breath of the Wild* as a ludic agent

Dynamic game characters commonly appear as ludic agents in open-world games. *BotW* provides a good example of how players can choose different paths in open game worlds. Unlike the previous games in *The Legend of Zelda* (*LoZ*) game series, with the exception of the first instalment *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo 1986), *BotW* belongs to the open-world gaming genre. *BotW* iterates the *topoi* or "stock patterns" (see Eco 1979, 119) of the *LoZ* series to repeatedly present Link, the *LoZ* series' main protagonist, with the same goal: to save Hyrule one more time. However, this time, players can ignore the game's overarching narrative, and instead explore the world of Hyrule, moving freely wherever they want. Before the player sets out to save Hyrule, they must complete a few tasks. First, the player must finish the game's tutorial segment, which rewards Link with objects and abilities he needs to travel the rest of the world. Once the player manages to leave the tutorial space, Link can save Hyrule by going to Ganon's castle and defeat him. Little else is necessary, but to defeat Ganon while Link is at his weakest is extremely difficult and will likely provide little pleasure for the player interested in exploring the world of Hyrule.

BotW's open landscape (Aarseth 2005) has a hierarchical structure that contains one main goal, fifteen main quests (excluding the main goal), and seventy-six side quests. The main goal is to defeat Ganon to save Hyrule. Then there are the main quests, which are important to move the game forward and reach the game's main goal. The most important main quests are the *Divine Beast Quests*; Link can free the deceased champions Daruk, Mipha, Urbosa and Revali from the influence of Ganon, since their Divine Beasts (the machines they used prior to their death) now wreak havoc on Hyrule. These four quests comprise the game's cardinal functions (Barthes [1966] 1995); they constitute the skeletal framework of the quests of the game with events set in stone and allow the player to change Link and Hyrule as they complete the main goal. The side quests do not cause any structural changes in Hyrule's world, and mainly provide Link with additional items, such as protective clothing, weapons, and food. Despite the hierarchical structure, the player does not have to fulfil any particular quest. The open-world structure of the game allows the player to ignore all quests, even the main goal. However, every event and mechanic support the main goal and the main quests, so the game will constantly remind the player what they want from the player: save Hyrule!

The most potent way to weaken Ganon in the final battle is to find and free the Divine Beasts through the game's Divine Beast Quests. Each Divine

Beast has a former champion—a deceased owner who helped Link in their first attempt to defeat the antagonist, but failed and paid for it with their life. As the player sets out to free these beasts, they gradually learn what happened to the champions prior to the events of the game via cut scenes, dialogue with characters, and items such as letters or diaries. The order in which the player takes on these quests does not matter, as the only requirement of the open landscape (Aarseth 2005) is that the player travels to the specific places in the game world where the quests are located.

One Divine Beast Quest is found in Zora's Domain, a kingdom of water that is home to the Zora species. Here, Divine Beast Vah Ruta causes chaos amongst the Zora people, threatening to flood their home they depend on. After Link frees the beast and its former champion Mipha's spirit, Mipha grants him a new power called *Mipha's Grace.* For Link as a ludic agent, Mipha's Grace adds dynamicity; the power is incredibly convenient, since it allows Link's health to refill when he runs out of hearts. For example, if Link were to fall to his death or takes a critical hit, he would be immediately revived so that the player could continue without having to start from their previous save point. Abilities that Link receives in the game's Divine Beast Quests allow the player to play with more ease and take on greater challenges. The hierarchy of the game's quest structure in the game aligns with the development of Link as a ludic agent: as the player chooses to unfold the game's secondary quests, they obtain greater rewards to develop Link further.

The side quests can be considered "catalysers"—the fillers, so to speak (see Barthes [1966] 1995)—that enhance the development of Link as a ludic agent. At the start of the game, Link's health bar contains three hearts, and the stamina orb is only a single green circle. This circle depletes when Link runs or climbs. With less stamina, Link might not be unable to outrun an enemy like a Silver Lynel who could defeat him with a single hit. More stamina and hearts make it much more likely that the player will evade or defeat such a powerful enemy. The player mostly obtains hearts and stamina by obtaining spirit orbs. These spirit orbs lie in shrines, spread across the game world for the player to discover. Inside the shrines there are challenges to complete. Upon completion, the player is rewarded with a single orb. At the so-called Goddess Statues, the player can trade four spirit orbs for an additional heart or additional stamina. By completing these challenges, Link's ludic agent evolves and becomes stronger so that challenges like the Silver Lynel or defeating Ganon become more likely. Furthermore, the player can obtain clothing that grant Link extra abilities via other side quests. Link's clothing, in contrast to weapons, is permanently in Link's possession

and cannot be destroyed. The Zora's armour, for example, gives Link the ability to swim up waterfalls. The feminine Gerudo clothing makes him resistant to desert heat and grants him passage to Gerudo Town—a town that only allows women inside.

Each power, spirit orb, and outfit expands what Link can do in the game. When the player has completed all main quests, there is only the main goal to undertake: defeat Ganon and save Hyrule. However, the irony is that the final goal will never actually be reached. Once the player manages to defeat Ganon, save Princess Zelda, and save Hyrule, the game returns Link to the front of Ganon's castle. A star on the player's save file is the only indication that the player has managed to defeat Ganon, since the open landscape of the game never acknowledges the victory. The game world stays in a state of openness, never reaching an end state. Link is doomed to roam a world that is never free of Ganon's wrath.

Narrative agents

If a dynamic game character is dominated by its function in a narrative structure as a fictional person, its development primarily unfolds in a game's story. The game presents its dynamic game characters primarily as narrative agents and sets certain events in stone. These events must happen for a story's narrative structure to exist, regardless of how the player performs. They are the narrative structure's cardinal functions (see Barthes 1966), they constitute the skeletal framework of the story. In linear stories such as scripted plays or most novels, cardinal functions only provide a single outcome as presented in Laurel's flying wedge (Fig. 3.1), but non-linear stories have multiple paths, like those displayed in Laurel's flying wedge for human-computer interaction, where players have agency to influence the outcome (Fig. 3.2). As Hans-Joachim Backe puts it in his article on non-linearity in games:

> [i]n any text that is supposed to produce a coherent story, there has to be the deep structure of Barthes' cardinal functions. Even in a nonlinear campaign, a skeletal structure of narrative exists in the form of predetermined key points of the story [...]. Nonlinearity in games manifests itself, structurally speaking, in allowing the player agency over the outcome of a cardinal function, in determining one of several possible paths. (2012, 248)

As players determine the outcome of a cardinal function in the game's story, they gradually create an overarching narrative structure, a macrostructure

(see Backe 2012), that connects all these different events together to create a coherent story. In doing so, they develop the dynamic game character as a narrative agent in that story; by determining the narrative agent's path in the story, they create a particular identity for the dynamic game character.

Shepard in the *Mass Effect* series as a narrative agent

The *Mass Effect* series is an ambitious trilogy where many characters' functions as narrative agents is more dominant than their function as ludic agents. Earlier in this chapter, I explained how my choices within *ME2* led to the death of Eve, a support character in the series' story. This section will discuss the series' player character, Commander Shepard, as a narrative agent, whose development, as well as the outcome of the overarching narrative structure, are affected by the player's choices in the story.

To repeat briefly the series' story here, the *Mass Effect* series follows the journey of Commander Shepard, who travels through the galaxy. Their crew includes species such as the Drell, Hanar, Krogan, Salarian, and Turian. Shepard is a soldier in the service of the Systems Alliance, the representation of humankind on Earth and its colonies on other planets. The character initially works on the Alliance's starship Normandy as an executive officer, but after they become the first human to join the Spectres—an elite group of agents—they become the Normandy's captain. Over the course of the series, Shepard discovers the goal of the Reapers, a secretive machine race that is attempting to eliminate sentient life in the galaxy. This discovery prompts Shepard's mission to save humankind and the other races that populate the galaxy.

The player creates parts of Shepard's identity even before the start of the story. In the character-creation mode, the player chooses Shepard's non-ludic attributes: their gender (male/female), first name, physical appearance, background, psychological profile, and military specialisation. These attributes will not change over the course of the game, but some of them influence available opportunities throughout the story. For example, Shepard's gender determines their romantic options. In *ME2* and *ME3*, the player is offered an additional choice at the start of the character-creation mode: they can choose to import data from the previous game instalments to the new game, or the player can choose not to use this data and instead obtain choices from the previous game determined by the game developer. This data is primarily expressed in Shepard's identity. When I chose to import my Shepard from *ME2* to *ME3,* the game transferred their appearance, skills, level, reputation, and previous plot choices to *ME3*.

Unbeknownst to me, by importing this data, the choices I made in *ME2* had major consequences in *ME3*. Destroying Maelon's data in *ME2* resulted in Eve's death in *ME3*. Creating a romance between Shepard and Garrus in *ME2* and rekindling that romance in *ME3* created a Shepard that hoped to start a family with Garrus once the war against the Reapers was over. As the choices I made affected Shepard's development, Shepard's identity became gradually less ambiguous and more determined. As a result, as the player, I not only determined the game's overall story, but also became a structural part of Shepard's identity.

Shepard's development as a ludic agent feeds their development as a narrative agent, the latter of which dominates the game. Players can affect Shepard's reputation in the overall story. In the *ME* series, Shepard's reputation is measured along a "morality system" that measures Shepard's paragon reputation on one end, and the character's renegade reputation on another. Paragon tends to involve benevolent dialogue and actions, while renegade dialogue choices and actions are ruthless and cold-blooded. Basically, a Shepard with a paragon reputation is perceived as honourable and heroic by other characters. In contrast, a Shepard with a renegade reputation is regarded as intimidating and fearsome.

The player accumulates reputation points primarily through the game's dialogue system in segments in which the player alternates between scripted scenes and dialogue trees. A common dialogue tree usually consists of three replies: a paragon reply, a renegade reply, and an investigative reply. The latter does not advance the scene but allows the player to obtain more information about the topic of discussion. The replies decide Shepard's action within the scene, by giving them the reputation of either a paragon or a renegade. If the player chooses a paragon reply, Shepard might deflect a crisis, while a renegade reply has Shepard intimidate another character. Each reply adds to Shepard's paragon or renegade points which affect their reputation.

Shepard's reputation also opens paths that do not involve paragon, renegade, or investigative replies but that do advance the game. When Shepard's friend Aria asks in *ME2* Shepard to protect her prisoner, called "the Patriarch," Shepard can make the Patriarch go into hiding, much to the latter's dismay. If the player has accumulated enough reputation points (either paragon or renegade, it does not matter which in this case), the player is given another possibility. Because my Shepard had enough paragon points, I chose an alternative option where Shepard offers to defeat the assassins that threaten the Patriarch in his name so that the Patriarch retains his fearsome reputation. Too few points on either scale does not mean that the

player cannot progress in the game. Rather, the event might not play out in as beneficial a way to the player as it would otherwise have.

Despite the players' agency over Shepard's actions, the cardinal functions remain rigid. The player can only influence how the events unfold, but they might not have the result the player wants. According to Laurel ([1991] 2014, 112), the authorship of interactions with the computer is typically constrained, because the designers of the game determine branching possibilities. In the case of the *ME* series, no event is arbitrary, and every choice has a consequence. In some cases, the player's choice has massive consequences, as with Eve's death. In other cases, certain events become particularly hilarious because the player's choice causes the game's structure to unfold in an unintended way. When I played *ME3*, I was set on having my Shepard romance Garrus, but I almost failed to achieve my goal during an event between Shepard and the ship's communication specialist Samantha. When Shepard was in their own cabin, I chose to have them call over Samantha to play chess. In the dialogue tree I chose to have Shepard offer Samantha a shower, but I did not understand what that offer implied. During Samantha's shower, Shepard asks if Samantha was planning on going on a hot date with someone, to which Samantha responds that it depends if *she* is interested, referring to my Shepard who was a woman. By that point had I figured out that this scene could lead to Shepard romancing Samantha—far from what I had intended. Shepard can only have one romantic partner in *ME3* (see also chapter 5 for monogamy and polyamory dating in games), and a romance with Samantha would therefore close off the path to romancing Garrus. The dialogue tree showed up: does Shepard join Samantha in the shower or decline the invitation? I chose to decline the invitation. My Shepard gave Samantha a quick reply: "Good luck with that date!" Samantha looked a bit disappointed, but at least my original goal was still attainable.

Players make many individual choices throughout the series that determine how Shepard develops, but it is a set of different factors that determines Shepard's (and other characters') eventual fate. *ME3* has five different core endings: 1) destroy the Reapers (Destroy); 2) bring the Reapers under Shepard's control (Control); 3) merge all organic and synthetic life in the galaxy (Synthesis); 4) refuse to make a decision (Refuse); 5) destroy the Reapers and ensure Shepard's survival (Perfect Ending). The availability of these endings depends mostly on the number of Effective Military Strength (EMS) points that players have accumulated through *ME3*. The more points, the better the outcome and the less the collateral damage that will occur. When the EMS is low, players can only choose between the Destroy and

Control options. If players choose the destroy option, the choice to destroy the Reapers will destroy most life—including that of Shepard and their crew. One choice in *ME2* is also relevant: had the player chosen to destroy the Collector base in *ME2*, only the Destroy option would have been available with low EMS. While Shepard's reputation is less significant for the ending, it still has some influence over this; when players choose the Control ending, Shepard becomes an artificial intelligence (AI) system that watches over the galaxy, but their reputation as either renegade or paragon determines if they become a watchful protector or a tyrant.

Finally, Shepard dies in almost all endings of *ME3*, except in the Perfect Ending, an alternative to the Destroy ending. Having accumulated enough EMS, players will be able to destroy the Reapers but have the crew and Shepard survive with little collateral damage to the galaxy. If the player has then romanced any of the characters, the love interest refuses to put Shepard's name on the Normandy Memorial Wall, as they are convinced that Shepard is still alive somewhere in the galaxy. I only became aware of the Perfect Ending after I had already completed *ME3*, having chosen to destroy the Reapers but with the devastating death of my Shepard. Learning of this option, I replayed the entire game to accumulate enough EMS. Once I approached the ending, I chose Destroy again, but this time, Shepard survived as Garrus watched over the memory wall refusing to put her name there.

Performative agents

The final category of agents consists of performative agents. This kind of agent is embedded in simulated game environments by a flexible structure. Narrative environments rigidly enforce inescapable events, the cardinal functions, as we saw with the *ME* series. Characters perform as game pieces in open-world environments like in *BotW*. By contrast, performative agents operate through scripts, which we can understand here as "potential manifestations previously encoded in manifestations of doing" (Schechner 1988, 69). In other words, scripts are actions and behaviours that are possible, because their potential has been carved out by previous behaviours and actions. Prior to our current understanding of scripts as written words on which film or television actors base their acting, scripts were generally seen as patterns of doing. Richard Schechner considers them to be "something that pre-exist any given enactment" (1988, 68), whereas drama is a specialised form of scripting (1988, 69). Scripts guide not only theatre, but also play, games, sports, and ritual (Schechner 1988).

Digital games always-already operate on a script because they have been programmed to function in a certain way. Specifically, *artificial intelligence* (AI), the simulation of human intelligence in machines, scripts behaviour. Some AIs are personified, modelled as figures in human form akin to characters. Personification is how AI assistants like Siri or Google Assistant give the impression that they are human. They give the impression that the line between humans and machines is blurring as they gradually take up social roles occupied by humans, such as that of a therapist, a secretary or even a housewife (see Turkle [2011] 2016; Strengers and Kennedy 2020). However, these technologies are also like characters, adapting to the template we have initially constructed for such quasi-persons. Some of these machines will look more like characters and some may look more like software-in-action with no human-likeness at all (Blom and Mikkonen 2022). The dynamic game character is such a technology that operates on the basis of its human-like impression.

Scripts that give AI a human-like impression have existed since as early as the 1960s. One of the first man-machine communication programs developed to permit humans to understand the computer was Joseph Weizenbaum's ELIZA. This experimental computer program for natural language processing was created in 1966. The persona of this computer program became Eliza, a virtual therapist. Apparently, discussions that users held with Eliza were so persuasive, that some users feared he was creating an actual person (Weizenbaum 1976, 189; Murray 1997, 70). In reality, ELIZA did not have a contextual framework to understand the world. Instead, the program was supplied by what Weizenbaum called a "script"—"a set of rules which permitted the actor (ELIZA) to improvise on whatever sources it provided" (1976, 188). According to Weizenbaum, ELIZA functioned as an "actress who commanded a set of techniques but had nothing of her own to say" (188). ELIZA mainly responded, but never acted on her own. She was never programmed to do so; her script was only to reply to the user in a manner that corresponded to a woman therapist.

Weizenbaum's script can be understood as a specialised form of "script"—a pattern of action, as proposed by Schechner (1988). Unlike dramatic scripts, AI scripts are not written words to be acted out by human actors. Instead, they function as pre-written rules that shape the behaviour and actions of the computer-based agent they perform. When applied to dynamic game characters, scripts function as a set of rules encoded in the game's possibility space. They provide a set of potential actions and behaviours for the dynamic game character to use according to how they develop. The player has agency

to make the occurrence of these scripts possible or not and, in doing so, influences the direction in which the dynamic game character develops.

We can distinguish between two kinds of structures in which performative agents exist: characters coded by a developer with a game structure that the developer limits to account for the player's agency, and characters that the player makes themselves in a much more flexible structure. The following sections will show how *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo 2020) engages with performative agents.

Performative agents in Animal Crossing: New Horizons

Performative agents with identities fully coded by a developer are less likely to prominently appear as dynamic game characters. These agents must be written so they can adapt to the flexibility required from them within a single work, while simultaneously having to maintain an established identity that evolves. This puts an incredible strain on game designers. Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern, the designers of the "first-person, real-time, one-act, interactive drama" *Façade* (Procedural Arts 2005) state the following:

> [Agency is] the most challenging to implement, exactly because it requires the system to dynamically assemble a story structure that incorporates the unpredictable actions of the player. This suggests that stories with *looser*, *sparser* event structures (plots) will be easier to implement in an interactive medium (require less generativity). (2005)

To deal with the player's unpredictable actions, designers take two routes to manage loose event structures. Either they can create a short game experience that contains a great deal of scripted dialogue for the agents, or they create an infinite game and restrict the unpredictable actions the player can take. The latter has been chosen in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (from here on: *New Horizons*), the latest instalment of Nintendo's popular game series *Animal Crossing* (*AC*). It was released at the beginning of the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020. The game sold twenty million units worldwide within only three months after its release (Nintendo Co., Ltd. 2020), exceeding the sales of its predecessor *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (hereafter: *New Leaf*) (Nintendo 2012). Nintendo's delaying of *New Horizons* from 2019 to March 2020 was, in hindsight, a master stroke; with so many of us stuck at home having barely anything to do, *New Horizons* provided the perfect desert island escape to another world where players could socialise with cute, anthropomorphised animal characters.

New Horizons is perhaps the most popular instalment of the *AC* media mix. This media mix series, with the games at its core, was first launched in 2001 with the release of *Dōbutsu no Mori* (2001).[2] In these games, the player always inhabits an avatar in a *furusato* (old village),[3] living an idealistic rustic lifestyle. They can fish, catch bugs, shop on a small street, visit a museum, and celebrate events such as Halloween or Christmas together with the villagers as if they were actually living in a small town. There is nothing that the player must do; they have the freedom to just roam around and do what they want. The games simulate the idea of continuous real life, mimicking the player's "real-time." If it is eleven o'clock in the morning in the player's world, it is also eleven o'clock in the world of *AC*, so the world changes depending on the month and season. This mirroring of time and season influences when certain events happen, when bugs or fish appear, stores are open, and certain characters are awake. For example, if the Nintendo Switch console is set to 28 October 2020 at 10:00 a.m. in the Northern hemisphere, the game will show autumn and celebrate Halloween the whole month. If the player changes the time and date on the console, the time and date in *New Horizons* will change as well, allowing players to "time-travel" to obtain special items. However, there is the risk that the player's island becomes infested with weeds, the villagers become less friendly, or the player loses items.

The villagers belong to a series of *topoi*—recurrent textual stock situations (see Eco 1979, 119) that every *AC* instalment uses. Each new *AC* game creates versions of characters such as Tom Nook, Sable, Mable, and Pompom, although the animals do not address the existence of their manifestations in the other games. In every game it is as if the player has never met them before. These characters are recognisable from previous instalments in the series not only by their visual design and their names, but also because the characters perform a similar function as before. For example, until *New Leaf,* the *tanuki* (raccoon) Tom Nook was a shop owner in the town the player lived in. Then he became a real estate agent in *New Leaf*, while his nephews Timmy and Tommy ran the shop. In *New Horizons*, Tom Nook became a travel agent and owner of Nook. Inc., letting the player travel to a deserted island to start a new life. On the island, he runs the Resident Services for the player to upgrade the island, provided they have enough in-game currency to pay for upgrades, while Timmy and Tommy are again in charge of the island's shop.

2 *Dōbutsu no Mori* is the official Japanese title of *Animal Crossing*.

3 *Furusato* is the idealistic notion of an old village where one lives a rustic lifestyle, completely opposite to busy cosmopolitan cities, that summons feelings of nostalgia (Robertson 1988).

The player has no agency over Tom Nook, Timmy, Tommy, and several other characters like Mabel and Redd, because they are not dynamic game characters. The performative agents over which the player does have some creative agency, however, include the island's inhabitants, also known as the villagers. Each town—or in this case, island—has villagers that inhabit the area where the player's avatar lives. At the moment of writing, there are 460 individual villagers accumulated over the different instalments. Whereas there were 335 different villagers who could spawn in the player's town in *New Leaf*, Nintendo created an additional 125 new villagers who live on the player's island in *New Horizons*. Which villager actually ends up living on the player's island is entirely arbitrary; the player has no influence over who comes to live on their island. Because of this random selection, the player might end up with characters they dislike. In my case, among the first villagers to inhabit my island was Rocket, a sisterly type of gorilla villager, who—to put it mildly—annoyed me from the beginning. She would constantly tell me to work out and give me tips to relax. I did not much enjoy her advice during a pandemic. While I might not have enjoyed my villagers, others became so popular that they had become such valuable goods by the time *New Horizon* came out that entire economies sprung up so players could obtain the villagers of their dreams. Players willing to pay the right price were able to have popular villagers like Raymond, Flick, or Judy walk on their beach, and some even risked being scammed by others to obtaining these characters (Blom 2022).

As pre-made performative agents, the villagers operate entirely according to scripts. Like all its predecessors, *New Horizons*' open structure does not have an ending nor does it let the characters develop. The script according to which the villagers operate is embedded in them as a personality type that determines their behaviour. Personality types for male characters include cranky, lazy, jock, and smug. The personality types for female characters include: snooty, normal, peppy, *uchi* (blunt and tomboyish) (Nintendo 2012). Together with the time-based mechanism of the game, these personality types give the player the impression that the villagers have a life independent of the player. For example, characters with the *uchi* personality type are scripted to wake up at eleven o'clock. Before that time, the player will not be able to engage with them, whereas, surprisingly, a lazy personality type will wake up at nine. Villagers will each have their preferred conversation topics, and will initiate conversations with the player or send them letters. Even when the player is not directly near them, these performative agents will act according to their

script when interacting with each other. Characters who have a snooty personality type find it hard to get along with jock characters, due to the latter's indifference to fashion and love of physical activities. If the player encounters two of these villagers talking to each other, they will most likely see a quarrel. Each character only has one personality type, and they will not deviate from their behaviour regardless of what the player does. If the player does not like a villager, they must either wait until the villager decides to leave (which is arbitrary) and encourage them to set sail, or just ignore them.

Agency over performative agents is one of the hardest ways to account for the player's unpredictable actions. *New Horizons* and its predecessors show that although pre-made performative agents can operate in an open, infinite structure, giving the impression that they are independent of the player, this independence sacrifices the player's creative agency over these dynamic game characters. That is, the player can only influence the character's development outcome in their scripted responses to the player and each other, but other than that, they cannot offer much as dynamic game characters.

Conclusion

Dynamic game characters come in different shapes; some dynamic game characters offer players creative agency over them when the characters function as ludic agents, whereas other characters function more as narrative agents in a story or as performative agents in an open game structure. Not all game characters offer players the same degree of agency as others; at the time of writing, performative agents provide the least agency. They put an incredible strain on the developers to account for all different types of behaviour, so it is easier for a developer to limit the scripts on which these characters operate than account for all the unpredictable actions of the player.

However, one of the most important aspects of dynamic game characters is that during their development process, the player, by influencing the process, becomes part of the character's identity. This is the part that challenges the ideal of narrative continuity most, because the player cannot be included in any transmedia transfers to another media; such a transfer clashes with how characters in our transmedia ecology are controlled and policed from the top down to create narrative continuity. I will explain how this works in the next chapters.

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4. Strategies to control a character's transtextual identities

Abstract: A character's transtextual identity clashes with the ideal of narrative continuity. This chapter argues that characters' transtextual identities are controlled through archaic strategies of control —authorship ownership, and canonisation—to create the impression that their identities are coherent across different works. These strategies serve no one but the institutions that employ them. By analysing the dynamic game character's configuration in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, the *Mass Effect* series, and *Animal Crossing: New Horizon* and their related texts, this chapter argues that once dynamic game characters move across different media, the player's agency is sacrificed in favour of a dominant reading by authorititative institutions.

Keywords: Authorship, ownership, canonisation, transtextual identities

The challenge to character identities

Industry practices and academic theories that strive for narrative continuity across different works attempt to "repair" the inconsistencies between the different versions of a character. These theories fall back on the idea that the appearance of the character shares the same identity with its other versions, which is caused by the problem that transmedia storytelling tends to weigh all texts equally (Mittel 2015; Thon 2015). This perspective reinforces the fallacy that characters ontologically adhere to personhood, whereas in practice they are ontologically different from actual human beings (Frow 2014). We assume that the identity of human beings is somehow continuous and consistent; when I show you my passport, you are likely to assume that the picture on the passport is of the same person as the one in front of you, because we share a name and appearance. Characters—simplified models of human beings (Frow 2014)—share a similar mode of existence. Seeking

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consistency is one of the main causes of the friction between characters' different transtextual identities.

The fallacy of narrative continuity often considers a certain character version to be truthful, while dismissing others as heresies. Recipients can discern between different versions of a character even if these versions are to some degree the "same" character. However, even if recipients recognise the link, they might reject the assumption that a certain version is as much linked to the same character as another version, because it misaligns with the image of the figure recipients have. Recognising and accepting distinct versions of the same character are two different actions. Even when characters are adjusted, twisted, and changed in the process of reconstructing them in another work, recipients are often able to recognise two different character versions as the same character (although they do not share the same identity), which overrides their resolve to accept one version as truthful and the other as heresy.

The transtextual identity of a character is complex and does not include core traits, because every version has unique traits. As I explained in chapter 2, academic works on characters tend to use narrative continuity to explain a character's transtextual identity. Narrative continuity is a way for producers and institutions to manage the multiplicity of fictional worlds across works (Johnson 2017). This point of view extends to characters as well; the configuration of a character's transtextual identity is an expression of power: Who creates the discourse in which these character versions appear? Who determines the configuration of these identities? These are inherently questions of control over contemporary transmedia practices. Therefore, in order to understand how different character versions relate to each other, and how recipients come to interpret certain versions as specific identities, it is crucial to investigate the dynamics of power, that is, the process of how character identities are controlled and policed.

In this chapter, I will explain how the effort to give the impression that a character's transtextual identity is coherent across different work is causing a struggle over control that unfolds across archaic, top-down strategies such as authorship, ownership of intellectual property, and canonisation. These strategies constantly negotiate to determine a supposedly fixed identity of the character. In the first part of this chapter, I will explain that these strategies operate on the Foucauldian idea of power and authorship, the Marxian idea of commodity capitalism, and a misleading understanding of canon as a monolithic, static phenomenon. In doing so, I will argue that these strategies are not only outdated, but also create paradoxes in a character's transtextual identity that serve no one but the authorities that employ them.

The dynamic game character implies that it has no official identity, since it promises players the possibility to influence the character's development in the game. However, this promise clashes with the ideal of narrative continuity, which wants characters to have a fixed identity, meaning that dynamic game characters too are constantly negotiated by the three strategies of control across different works. In the second part of this chapter, I will therefore offer three analyses of the games and related texts from the prior chapter, namely *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2017), the *Mass Effect* series (BioWare 2007–2012), and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo 2020). The analyses will show how the strategies of control negotiate the identity of a dynamic game character, since each franchise has its own tailored strategy and individual idiosyncrasies to deal with the player's creative agency over the character on the one hand and the movement of the character across works on the other hand. I will do so by analysing how each type of dynamic game character introduced in the prior chapter (ludic, narrative, and performative) is configurated in the larger franchise beyond the games in which they originally appeared. I will argue that there is a hidden danger in the movement of transmedia characters across works; that is, once the dynamic game character transfers between different media, the player's creative agency is sacrificed in favour of a dominant reading determined by authoritative institutions, which have the potential to contribute to harmful discourses simply to generate additional revenue.

Authorship: The return of a God

Authorship is one of the most important strategies to control the identity of a character; authorship tells audiences whose interpretation of a text and its characters they should follow and believe because of the author's status as the creator of the text. This idea may sound obsolete, because since the rise of reader-response discourse in literary theory during the late 1960s and 1970s, the reader has become the most important figure for the creation of meaning from a text. Before that, the meaning of a text was distilled from the author who endowed their works with a single truth that a reader had to decipher (Barthes 1967). Deciphering the authorial intent of a work became an out-dated practice, yet we may have to ask: is the author still obsolete? The importance of the author may be considered an antiquated notion, but to me, the author has reappeared as an essential figure in contemporary transmedia practices, because of participatory culture in which readers are portrayed as active participants interacting with authority figures. Ebony

Elizabeth Thomas (2019) points out that in the current digital age, more people than before are writing for their work and for leisure, so that the meanings of a text are constantly negotiated and reconfigured (2019, 154).

Thomas refers specifically to the writer J. K. Rowling's tweet in which she commented on the backlash to the announcement that the character Hermione in the theatre play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (Thorne 2016) would be played by a Black actress: "Canon: brown eyes, frizzy hair and very clever. White skin was never specified. Rowling loves black Hermione" (Rowling 2015). Rowling has a history of revealing details about the identity of her characters outside of the original *Harry Potter* book series in paratexts. She has stated that Dumbledore is gay, and expressed doubts about having Ron and Hermione marry instead of Hermione and Harry. According to Thomas (2019, 155), Rowling's statements and the backlash from fans shows how much ownership fans felt they had over the *Harry Potter* narrative landscape. However, Rowling's statement also reveals the ownership Rowling seems to grant herself over the reader's interpretative agency. While the tweet above shows that Rowling is happy with any kind of racial interpretation of Hermione by the reader, she assumes that she determines the core of Hermione ("Canon: brown eyes, frizzy hair, and very clever"). For Rowling, the reader only has the agency to interpret what the author does *not* claim to be canon.

To understand Rowling's sense of ownership over the readers' interpretative agency, it serves well to understand how the role of the author was previously understood. During the rise of reader-response theory, the dynamics of power that the author holds were identified by Michel Foucault (1969), who describes the author as a function that shapes a specific discourse in which a set of works are united, implying "homogeneity, filiation, reciprocal explanation, authentication, or of common utilization" (19). The author function serves to grant the author's works the truth-value of "original," which gives the author an almost holy status. However, at the same time, it creates a fallacy, namely that of authorial intent as a way to derive meaning from the author's work; because the author is seen as the creator of the work, and therefore of the character, they are the character's "author-god" (Barthes 1967). This means that the reader puts the author's claim above their own understanding of the character.

Although reader-response theory made the author obsolete *in theory* by relocating meaning from the author to the reader, in practice, the author's status as a god has become prominent again in current transmedia practices. The author is often used to create narrative continuity by unifying multiple worlds to create a unified whole. This also extends to a company's oeuvre

instead of a single author (Pearson 2017). However, the effectiveness of the author to create narrative continuity should be scrutinised, as it also creates conflict; despite the fact that more than one person usually works on producing big franchise products, many authors often go uncredited as they have less power of authority (Hills 2013, 201).

Rowling's sense of ownership of character interpretation to the detriment of the recipient can be partially explained within this setting. In the strategy of authorship as a form of control, the Foucauldian author function ascribes authority to a single person or a company to create discourses in which different versions of a character that span a series of works form a single coherent identity. The author allows their versions of a character to be differentiated from those of other discourses created by different authors.

From this perspective, Rowling's authorial intent serves to unify a Black and white Hermione as the same character. But, despite the return of the author, the fallacy of authorial intent does no more than create a paradox when an author tries to use their authoritative powers to unify a character's multiple identities. Rowling's role as the author-God only works as long as audiences assume she is the only one who can determine the identity of characters in her works—even if multiple persons have worked on different Harry Potter productions.[1] Rowling's status as the one and only author grants both a Black and a white Hermione a sense of authenticity. That is, both versions receive a mythical "seal of approval" by the author. However, when the authenticity of a character's identity depends on the author, and more than one version bears this seal, the author fails to deliver a sense of truth to both discourses in which the character appears. As such, the author function might offer a comfortable means to interpret the truth value of a text, but issues arise once authorial intent is assigned causal significance (Hermione can be both Black and white because Rowling says so). A character's different identities across works can then, even when they are unified as a single discourse by the same author, only exist in multiplicity without one necessarily being "truer" than another. As such, using the fallacy of authorial intent to make sense of a character's multiple identities serves little purpose other than glorifying an author's power over their own works.

1 There is currently strong opposition from the LGBTQIA+ communities and their respective allies against consuming Rowling's works due to her transphobic stance against transgender women (Tamburro 2022). Many audiences have since boycotted her work, including the game *Hogwarts Legacy* (Avalanche Software 2023). Her financial and social profiting from this game demonstrates that she is still seen as this work's author despite having no involvement in its production.

Ownership: An institutional paradox

Ownership is another strategy through which authorities create and control different character identities in which characters are treated as little more than commodities to be passed around. The ownership of a work initially belonged to an author (Foucault 1969). However, the rise of a capitalistic mode of production in the nineteenth century created a commodity capitalism, in which, from a Marxian perspective, commodities gained an exchange value (Marx [1867] 2000). This form of capitalism enabled mass-produced consumption in both North America and Japan in the early twentieth century (Freeman 2017). A distinction arose between the author and the owner of a work: the author might be the creator of the work but the owner of the work as a commodity was another entity. This distinction has continued into today's transmedia practices. In larger entertainment franchises, there is usually an author (or more authors), and distinct from them, a media company that holds ownership over their employees' creations (Pearson 2017, 115).

When a company has ownership over a character, the character becomes intellectual property (IP) similarly to other media properties that are owned by a copyright holder, such as film or television series (Wasko 2001, 40). This is important, because franchises rely on IP as the foundation for their right to disperse their content and create large fictional worlds. In the case of characters, this allows a company to license them to other companies to gain income and create partnerships with different companies (Steinberg 2012, 41).

The problem with character licensing is that it creates an institutional paradox that only serves the IP owner. By licensing characters, multiple versions of a character arise, because its identity is coordinated by multiple parties. Technically, the IP owner controls the identity of a character through veto power, but by selling the rights to use the character to other parties so that the character will appear in several comics, movies, television series, and more, these other parties obtain a hand in how the character develops. This may initially seem as if the IP owner loses control, but as I will show below, IP owners can make use of multiple solutions to gain as much profit from different character versions as possible.

We can very clearly see how this problem plays out when we consider the ideal of narrative continuity. For a character to be recognisable across different works and in the hands of different parties, it must have an emblematic and fixed nature (Eco 1972; 1979). However, media producers must simultaneously give the impression that a character is a person that

naturally develops like a human being; it must convey the impression that it is developing across these media as if it were an actual person (Eco 1979, 19). This causes the problem that as the character develops, it consumes itself and comes closer to its own death. The character may fall in love, which may produce good drama, but once the characters settle into their relationship, the drama is over (I discuss the issue of romantic relationships in chapter 5 in more detail). Or the character may actually die in the story. Whatever happens, the character cannot appear in other productions without violating the ideal of narrative continuity, and therefore risks becoming useless to be licensed to other parties.

One way for IP holders to solve this problem of narrative continuity is to dispose of previous versions of the character and replace them with newer versions (Brooker 2012, 154). This is the case for example with BBC's *Doctor Who* (Newman, Webber, and Wilson 1963–present). Each new version provides a new discourse, implying a fixed and stable identity that develops in a different way than previous ones. Once a particular character discourse has been exhausted, IP holders will create a new discourse with a new version of the character. The downside is that it becomes difficult for consumers to keep track of all the different manifestations and their identities, so that only a niche market is likely remain (Johnson 2013, 79)—and this might be completely against the goals of the IP holder.

By erasing previous versions of a character, IP holders gain the holy power to assign the status of "truthful" character to the newest version of a character, in a similar way to the author. A current example that both uses and overturns the exclusion of previous character versions is the newest Spider-Man played by the actor Tom Holland. Holland's Spider-Man is part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), a franchise that to date consists of twenty-eight different movies, and is still growing. They are all set in the same universe and rely on narrative continuity. Holland is far from the first Spider-Man owned by Marvel Entertainment. Previous Spider-Men, such as those played by the actors Toby Maguire and Andrew Garfield, were not included in this universe until *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (Watts 2021). In this movie, the narrative device of the multiverse, another solution to maintain narrative continuity,[2] allows the three different Spider-Men to meet, thereby putting them into a unified discourse so that they all become "truthful." These versions attract both old and new fans, which allows IP

2 A multiverse is another solution used by franchises that attempts to create narrative continuity between different conflicting storylines. It operates on the idea that multiple universes exist with slightly different versions of a character in other universes.

holders to generate profit from both old and new versions without rendering them useless. However, the multiverse is nothing but a cheap device to create continuity between different character versions. It has become an overused trend to solve the problem of multiple identities as exemplified by the parody *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (Kwan and Scheinert 2022) that shows the absurdity of the multiverse's infinite possibilities to create a unified concept. And so, solutions like these may work to combat the multiplicity of a character's identity, but they only work because the problem has been created by the institutions themselves—who are clearly profiting from the confusion they create.

Canonisation: A paradox in the digital age

The third strategy to control character identities is through canonisation. We can understand canonisation as a process of creating a single official discourse in which a character has a stable identity, in other words, a canon. A canon is perhaps the most important strategy of control, because the pursuit of narrative continuity leads inevitably to a canon that determines which events "actually" happened. A canon controls what a character's identity "actually" is within a complex of discourses (Brooker 2012), to give the character a sense of a stable identity. However, so I will argue below, a canon is ultimately a struggle for control over the formation of a character's identity.

Canons tend to be treated in popular cultural media as a monolithic phenomenon, but this is rather misleading, since canons are processes that are constantly in flux. According to Hans-Joachim Backe, the term "canon" historically has had several meanings, with the most influential definition being a religious one: "the set of sacred texts a particular religious group accepts as permanently recording truths revealed to it by God" (Gorak 1991 quoted in Backe 2015, 6). As a result, the modern idea of a canon "came to be associated with unquestionable authority and the totality of knowledge on a subject, outside which only heresy remains" (Backe 2015, 6). From this point, canon emerges as a monolithic, static phenomenon that authoritatively determines which interpretation of a selected set of works is "official".

The problem with the canonisation of a character's identity is that it is never entirely determined or finished. Rather, multiple parties—ranging from individuals to larger institutions—usually attempt to create an official version of a character for their own agenda. These actions together effectively form invisible hands of control (Winko 2002). That is, uncoordinated actions, which make it difficult to distinguish how exactly a canon came to be. These

different groups cause multiple canons to appear at the same time, and therefore, multiple identities of a character. Each group defends its canon as the normative, singular canon (Backe 2015), so that characters within that canon obtain the status of "true" versions.

Canons reflect the choices of a group and reinforce their identity (ibid.). For characters of big transmedia franchises, this usually means the character adapts to the company's in-house style (Evans 2012), effectively becoming that group's brand (Brooker 2012). Although non-canonical versions of a character can become inspirations for a company's content creation (Geraghty 2018), Nicolle Lamerichs (2018) points out that creative industries tend to favour particular content loyal to their narrative while transformative expressions are ignored and further marginalised (29). The character that represents the group also conforms to the ideals these groups wish to express. For example, given Disney's appeal to large audiences, the company will likely not produce overly violent, pornographic or queer characters. If it does, it could spark controversy among audiences, as demonstrated by the kissing scene (which is really more of a brief peck) between a same-sex couple in the recent movie *Lightyear* (Dodge 2022; Maclane 2022).

Because of the rigidness of these canons, fans often counter them through the creation of derivative works, such as fan fiction writings, art or cosplay, that subvert the source of the work to provide oppositional readings (Lamerichs 2018, 17). Derivative works might include certain "ships," that is, relationships between (often) non-heterosexual characters that fans would like to write into the canon, also known as "slash" (Jenkins 1992). The depiction of non-heterosexual relationships appears not only in the works of fiction by fans in Europe or North America, but also emerges in the *dōjinshi* ("fan magazines") subculture in Japan, where they are often drawn by female fans (Okabe and Ishida 2012).[3] Such rewrites by fans counter the dominant heteronormative scripts in the official canons and challenge how we think about gender, sexuality and sex (Popova 2021). However, as non-canonical works, fan fictions are often not officially acknowledged by the franchise conglomerates in their carefully constructed canons, or, at worst, companies may sue fans for violating their IP rights.

3 Women in Japan who are fans of manga and anime that portray gay relationships (known as *yaoi* or Boy's Love) are known as *fujoshi* ("rotten women"). Okabe and Ishida (2012) explain that because a stigma is attached to liking these genres, which are deviant with regard to mainstream manga and anime content, *fujoshi* generally conceal their fan identities to outsiders to manage their self-presentation as normal women, while still making their fan identity visible to other *fujoshi*.

Digital media has further strengthened the idea of a canon as a monolith due to the influence that consumers have over these media. Countless digital works, such as games, are constantly being re-written by recipients, bringing author and reader closer together (Aarseth 1997; Backe 2015; Thomas 2019). In response, IP owners, authors, and producers of these digital works enforce their canons. One concept that is popular in the building of (transmedia) worlds is that of a "Bible" used to preserve narrative consistency (Wolf 2012, 201). It is used by major franchises to endorse a set of works to represent the official world of those franchises (Rosendo 2015, 60). Everything outside of the franchise's authority is dismissed as unofficial.

That said, the idea of a canon as monolithic is ultimately ironic and potentially abusive, because it needs to be constantly updated and fixed to maintain its power. Game producers may constantly tweak a game's mythology and canon by including and excluding different works (Harvey, 2015, 114), even when the story world has already been established. This is especially prevalent in many newer games due to their constant connection to the internet, which gives producers the God-like power to directly intervene in the work itself instead of adding and removing works. This kind of power is problematic because it allows game studios to meddle directly with players' interpretative agency over the games they play. For example, Blizzard Entertainment had already shown it is not afraid of completely redesigning the background stories and skills of its characters, such as Mercy, in the game *Overwatch* (2016) (Blom 2022; Välisalo and Ruotsalainen 2022). However, with the release of *Overwatch 2* (2022), Blizzard Entertainment showed it was even less afraid of abusing its power as the author-God further, as it directly removed players' ability to play the game's predecessor *Overwatch* by updating the latter with the former (Winslow 2022). As games with an internet connection have become the norm rather than the exception, with free-to-play game monetisation models currently dominating the game industry,[4] we can expect an influx in canonisation processes where game studios directly intervene to adjust the work itself. In the end, what occurs in this strategy of control for characters' transtextual identities is

4 According to Alexander Bernevega and Alex Gekker (2021), in the early-to-mid 2000s, video games were sold as stand-alone products. Game companies generated value by selling boxed units, but nowadays the model dominating the industry is known as the *games as a service* (GaaS) model, where games are sold as assets that generate income without a sale. We see this in "free-to-play" games. The games themselves can be played for free, but as Kati Alha (2020, 79) explains, they are designed as never-ending experiences, constantly being updated with new content and hampering progression for as long as they remain profitable.

a paradox, because a canon creates what it promises to avoid: a character identity without a core.

How (not) to control a dynamic game character's identity

The strategies of control (authorship, ownership, and canonisation) in different ways all come down to the question of how the identities of dynamic game characters are policed, since their identities are hard to control across different works due players' creative agency over their development within a game. The different types of agent (ludic, narrative, and performative), over which players have creative agency to develop the character's identity (as explained in chapter 3), force companies and other invisible hands to employ different sets of strategies to control the dynamic game characters' development across transmedia works to preserve the characters' identities. These strategies of control give the impression that there is a sense of continuity in the character across works, as consumers approach them as if these figures were real persons, because in a transmedia ecology like ours, driven by the ideal of narrative continuity across works, even dynamic game characters are subjected to this ideal; that is, even they must give the impression that they are a coherent figure with a single straightforward identity when they move transmedially between different works.

Normally, companies organise a character's identity over multiple works which each manifests its own version of the character. Each version is then structured in a specific discourse across different works based on the strategies of control as discussed in the sections above, which thus promises that there is continuity between these different versions. This configuration process usually happens across multiple non-cybermedia works, although video games are also involved.

Additional friction arises once dynamic game characters come into play. These figures trifle with the construction of a character's transtextual identity; multiple parties structurally create multiple identities within the game and only give the player creative agency to actualise one of them. As I explained in chapter 3, the identity of the dynamic game character becomes infused with the player's influence over the game. From this perspective, the dynamic game character enters the transmedia ecology with the promise of flexibility and creative agency for the player, but subject to the "permission" of authoritative institutions as they have set out the actions and consequences of the players' choices in the game.

I would have preferred to be able to claim merely that dynamic game characters can open our current transmedia ecology to more equal influences of authoritative institutions (such as game developers or large conglomerates) and players. But my research shows otherwise—the player's agency over dynamic game characters suffers once dynamic game characters become transmedial. Since the player produces a concrete manifestation of the dynamic game character, there is an idealistic implication that the dynamic game character lacks a definitive version. They have no official identity. After all, the work itself allows for multiple identities and grants the player the agency to operate within the development process of the character. However, as I will show in the following analyses in this chapter, multiple parties tend to create and maintain the illusion of continuity in a dynamic game character's identity. They try to structure the configuration of the dynamic game character over the course of multiple cybermedia and non-cybermedia works.

So, why does it matter? Is it such a bad thing that authoritative institutions exclusively control the identity of their dynamic game characters? My answer is: yes, it is; it matters because at best the archaic strategies of control are a way for a franchise to continue under a capitalistic logic that retroactively annuls players' creative agency in favour of narrative continuity between works. For example, as I have mentioned in prior chapters, the sequel *Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of a New World* (Namco Tales Studio 2008) eliminates the player's single main choice between Kratos and Zelos just to create a sequel. For some this annulment might just be bothersome. But, at worst, we see the erasure of diversity and representation that groups of fans desire so much.

Lamerichs's (Lamerichs and Rosendo 2022) description of the controversy concerning the player character Kassandra in *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft 2018) demonstrates the control developers enforce over dynamic game characters to create artificial continuity, sending a harmful message by doing so. In *Odyssey*, players are able to choose between a male (Alexios) or a female (Kassandra) player character, much like in the *Mass Effect* series. Players also have the option to pursue romances, a popular mechanic for dynamic game characters, which I will explore in the next chapter. The romance in *Odyssey* also includes the possibility of same-sex relationships. Lamerichs reports that while the same-sex relationships were celebrated much by queer players, the release of the downloadable sequel (DLC) *Legacy of the First Blade* (2018) disappointed many of them: the DLC forces players into a heterosexual relationship, annulling their previous choices, so as to conceive a child. Developers imposed this narrative upon players to create narrative continuity between different *Assassin's Creed* instalments within

the series, contributing to queer erasure and harmful discourses around sexual identities. As Lamerichs convincingly states: "homosexuality is now presented as a choice that can be undone" (2022, 201).

Many attempts to control a dynamic game character's identity across works thankfully do not come close to the level of harmful discourse demonstrated by *Odyssey*. What they do show, however, is a struggle for how game developers engage with the players' creative agency on the one hand, and the capitalistic logic of transferring the character from its game to another media platform while maintaining some sense of narrative continuity to generate as much revenue as possible on the other. Each franchise has a tailored strategy with its own individual idiosyncrasies to deal in top-down fashion with the struggle between a players' agency and the movement of the character. The following three analyses show how developers juggle the three types of dynamic game character (ludic, narrative, and performative) between different works.

Ludic agents: Link from *Breath of the Wild*

Dynamic game characters that operate predominantly as ludic agents develop mostly as game pieces. These agents are the most common form of dynamic game character, and they are almost impossible to adapt to non-ludic media. They resist adaptation because non-ludic media lack the mechanical system to support game pieces (Aldred 2012; Aarseth 2006; Aarseth and Calleja 2015). Yet, the challenge does not stop developers from attempting to create ludic agents across different media platforms, including games of different genres. Nintendo especially has a tendency to proliferate its dynamic game characters in and across many of its major franchises. This also applies to Link from *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2017) (*BotW*) whose function as a ludic agent I explained in the previous chapter. During the writing of this book, Nintendo expanded the story of *BotW* with the release of *Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity* (Omega Force 2020)[5], a "hack-and-slash" style game that takes place a century before the events of *BotW*, when the champions died to defeat Ganon.

This game was developed by Omega Force and published by Koei Tecmo in Japan, known for its *Dynasty Warrior* game series, also of the "hack-and-slash" genre. Years prior, Nintendo collaborated with Koei Tecmo to release *Hyrule Warriors* (Omega Force and Team Ninja 2014), a spin-off game set

5 Nintendo released the sequel to *BotW*, titled *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* in May 2023.

in the world of Hyrule. *Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity* initially seems like a prequel to *BotW*, but instead shows an alternate timeline in which the champions of the Divine Beast do *not* die (they are dead in *BotW*). By not giving *Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity* the *The Legend of Zelda* title, Nintendo has cleverly avoided inconsistencies with the *The Legend of Zelda* (*LoZ*) series, thereby enforcing narrative continuity across works.

Nintendo has been enforcing narrative continuity across games within the *LoZ* series for a while now. In the past couple of years, Nintendo, as the author-God, has attempted to order all previous *LoZ* instalments into a canonical chronology, to construct Link's identity in a coherent matter over their game series. They approached Link as a narrative agent by imposing a linear form of narrative continuity on the character as it appears over multiple game works. Before the twenty-fifth anniversary of the *LoZ* series in 2011, most *LoZ* games lacked a sequential connection. Nintendo relied on a formula and *topoi* that it established over the course of the series before it imposed the chronology to create a sense of narrative continuity between each game work. The formula of the series generally proceeded as follows: Link functions as the player character who must save the world, usually by rescuing the games' other main character Princess Zelda from the games' antagonist Ganon (also known as Ganondorf). A common *topos* in the games is that Link, Ganon, and Zelda are associated with the Triforce, an artefact consisting of three distinct entities of power. The Triforce is considered to be the most important divine artefact of the game and it has become emblematic of any game in which Link manifests.

At some point, Nintendo created a paradox inside the main series and the versions of Link in different games within the series. Usually, Link was not portrayed to be a character with the same identity in each game instalment. The paradox was there but not bothersome if you assume that Link functions as a *kyara* (as explained in chapter 2) inside a media mix strategy. However, the chronology forces the player to consider different versions of Link to be connected, even if the continuity between them is imbalanced. The *Hyrule Historia* (Miyamoto *et al.* 2013, 41)—the compendium that introduces a chronology between the games released up to 2011—suggests that in some games the relationship between one Link manifestation and another is akin to that between the hero and an "incarnation." In other games, Nintendo implies a constant singular identity that connects versions of Link across works. The latter can be found, for example, in *The Legend of Zelda: Oracle of Ages* (Flagship 2001), and *The Legend of Zelda: Oracle of Seasons* (Flagship 2001), which use passwords given to players once they have finished each game. The password allows

players to connect the games to turn the narrative into a linear story so that Link's identity becomes singular.

As per the demand of fans (Custodio 2020, 18), Nintendo clarified the continuity between the works when it released *Hyrule Historia*. In this book, Nintendo explains how it controls Link's identity as follows:

> [t]his chronology merely collects information that is believed to be true at this time, and there are many obscured and unanswered secrets that still lie within the tale. As the stories and storytellers of Hyrule change, so, too, does its history. Hyrule's history is a continuously woven tapestry of events. Changes that seem inconsequential, disregarded without even a shrug could evolve at some point to hatch new legends and, perhaps, change this tapestry of history itself. (Miyamoto *et al.* 2013, 68)

The chronology introduced by Nintendo splits into three different timelines after the events of *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo 1998), based on whether or not Link defeats the evil Ganon. The chronology allows Nintendo to avoid having to adhere to a single linear narrative. Instead, it could choose from three different branches of linear continuity when creating new games. When the chronology was created, *The Legend of Zelda: A Link between Worlds* (Nintendo 2013) and *The Legend of Zelda: Tri Force Heroes* (Nintendo and Grezzo 2015) were not yet released. In the Zelda Wikipedia, however, fans keep track on where these games belong in the timeline, based on interviews with the series' producer Eiji Aonuma and other paratextual works. According to these pages, *A Link between Worlds* belongs to the "fallen hero" branch, in which Ganon defeats the hero in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* ("*The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds*" n.d.). *Tri Force Heroes* is said to take place after *A Link between Worlds*, thus belonging to the same branch ("*The Legend of Zelda: Tri Force Heroes*" n.d.).

Nevertheless, this branching form of narrative continuity is incredibly imbalanced, especially regarding *BotW*. In the Japanese video game magazine *Famitsu* (Famitsu 2018; Wong 2018), the series' producer Eiji Aonuma and the game's director Hidemaro Fujibayashi state that *BotW* takes place at the end of the chronology created by *Hyrule Historia*. The catch is that they did not specify in which of the three timelines *BotW* took place. Instead, they only mention that it is up to the player's imagination to decide on which timeline the game takes place. It seems therefore that it is only when the authorities are stuck in a paradox they have created that they let go of the reins and "grant" the player the agency to interpret the connection between the different versions of Link. Only then does Nintendo appear comfortable

enough to give its players the reins over the development of its characters, making Link's identity even more imbalanced than before.

Narrative agents: Shepard from the *Mass Effect* series

When a dynamic game character's development is dominated by their function as a narrative agent, they develop as fictional persons mostly through a game's story. As I explained in the previous chapter, the *Mass Effect* (ME) series provides great narrative continuity between *Mass Effect, Mass Effect 2*, and *Mass Effect 3* due to the possibility to transfer game data between different games so that players can carry their own protagonist, named Shepard, with them across these games.

However, the series attempts to extend this continuity to non-cybermedia. The *ME* franchise contains several novels and comics about the world depicted in the game series. These non-cybermedia lack the mechanical structure that the game series has, and by consequence cannot incorporate the player's integral role in the development of Shepard's identity. Instead, the comics take another route to avoid discontinuity between the player's version of Shepard and the version in the comics. The *Mass Effect Omnibus Volume 1* (Walters *et al.* 2016) and *Mass Effect Omnibus Volume 2* (Walters and Barlow 2017) convey the background stories of the games' companion characters. The stories occur either at the beginning of the events of the *ME* series, or the events in between the different game instalments. Shepard does not appear as the main character in these comics.[6] Rather, Shepard's appearance in the comics is limited by two constraints: first, Shepard's body is never clearly depicted and, second, Shepard's gender is never clearly stated. The volumes go to great lengths to avoid classifying Shepard's gender. There are no pronouns that reveal their gender, nor does the commander's proper name reveal it; Shepard is only addressed by other characters as either "Shepard" or "Commander Shepard," and occasionally as "my friend" or "the commander." Similarly, the comics avoid depicting Shepard's physical appearance. For example, *Volume 1* shows how Liara T'Soni tries to obtain Shepard's body after Shepard disappears in the explosion on the ship The Normandy. These events occur chronologically between the end of *ME* and before the start of *ME2*. When Liara finally discovers Shepard's body, it is in a coffin. Although this might make sense in terms of the diegesis—since the body is in a coffin to be transported—the same avoidance of visual

6 The exceptions are *Mass Effect: Genesis* (2011) and *Mass Effect: Genesis 2* (2013), which are stated to be "interactive backstories" in Electronic Arts' distribution platform Origin.

depictions appears across the two omnibus volumes. Whenever Shepard's body is shown, it is either hidden or beyond recognition.

The developer BioWare's omission of Shepard in the *ME* comics was a strategic choice. BioWare took a different approach with the comics of its other game series *Dragon Age* (2009–2014). In *Dragon Age: Origins* (*DA:O*) (2009), the player takes on the role of the Grey Warden, which refers to the character's function as a warrior. Like Shepard, the player can control the character's appearance and skills, which influences the character's overall development throughout the game. As a result, the player also controls the events and development of the Grey Warden's companion characters Alistair and Morrigan.

Dragon Age Omnibus (Gaider and Freed 2016) portrays a single outcome of the events in *DA:O* and its sequel *Dragon Age II* (*DAII*) (2011). The Grey Warden is completely absent in the outcome the omnibus depicts. After the archdemon is killed in *DA:O*, one of the possible outcomes is for Alistair to become king—but he can also become a drunk, stay a Grey Warden, or be killed in battle. This outcome is carried over to the game's sequel. On the other hand, the comics portray the adventures of Alistair as King of Ferelden, in which he tries to find his father. Alistair eventually does find his father with the help of his companions Isabel and Varric, but due to the evil wizard Aurelian Titus, his father unfortunately succumbs to his wounds and dies. There is no hint to these events in *DA:O*, nor do they fill in events in between the series' individual instalments.

At first glance, the *ME* comics appear to follow the rigid structure of Henry Jenkins's (2006) description of transmedia storytelling. The medium of the comic depicts events that the game series only hinted at as happening in the world of *Mass Effect*. However, these comics do not present new information that the player did not already know from the game series. Rather, they tell stories that the player already knows from the game but has not experienced, to avoid breaking with the *ME* series' established canon. For example, the player knows that Thane's wife Irikah was murdered in revenge; the comics just show in detail *how* she was murdered. Even this information is limited, because they only describe the aftermath, in which Thane describes his wife's death as: "what they did to her. Unspeakable acts" (Walters and Barlow 2017).

Although the *ME* comics flesh out the *ME* world and add detail, they do not *expand* the world. In contrast, the *DA Omnibus* expands the world of *Dragon Age*, because it contributes a new story to a selected outcome of *DA:O* and *DAII* by BioWare. However, BioWare's decision to depict one specific outcome of the *DA* game series canonises the events of the series. As an authority, BioWare implies that Alistair becoming king is the truthful

and authentic outcome of that character's characterisation process in the game series—a proclamation BioWare avoids in the *ME* comics. BioWare does not expand *ME*'s world, but neither does it force canonisation upon the player of the games.

The comics indicate the existence of a version of Shepard, but a version determined by the author never truly becomes manifest in them. Rather, by choosing to not expand on Shepard's identity, BioWare keeps the player's agency over Shepard from the games open. Without the player, no concrete identity of Shepard will emerge in the game series. This means that Shepard's appearance in the comics depends on the player to project *their* Shepard onto the Shepard from the comics; that is, to substitute Shepard in the comics with the Shepard they created in the game. The nature of Shepard's identity does not depend on the continuity of the character's identity between the game instalments and comics. It relies on the player's influence over Shepard's identity.

While I am quite fond of this strategy because the comics are open to the player's agency despite being in a non-cybermedium, I am also convinced that the agency players have over Shepard in the comics is derivative at best as long as the works are official works by the developer. The player's involvement in Shepard's development in the game establishes a concrete version whose identity the player then projects onto the comics. This involvement gives the false impression that the developer, like a benevolent author, grants the player the agency to imagine Shepard in the comics in whatever way they want. The author presents what Stuart Hall calls a "preferred reading" (Hall 1973)—a dominant reading in which the reader can only infer Shepard as a character in the comics that they have helped construct in the game series. At the same time, the developer is unable to expand the *ME* world through the comics, because that would break the player's involvement which is so important for their canon. This is as far as BioWare can go to cater to a broad audience; while BioWare might try to accommodate as many individual flavours of Shepard as possible, there is a limit to what it can do in the comics without negating the player's version of the character. This in turn means that if players want more creative agency over the characters with little or no influence from the developer, then derivative works like fan fiction become an attractive option.

Performative agents: Animal Crossing: New Horizon's kyara

Performative agents are the dynamic game characters whose function is determined by scripts in a flexible game structure. They are not only difficult

to design because they must adapt to the players' possible behaviour, but for the exact same reason they are also difficult to transfer to other media platforms.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons (Nintendo 2020) shows how Nintendo, the game's developer and IP owner, approaches the game's characters as *kyara*, a visual icon that looks like a character, as explained in chapter 2, to move between different media and create a media mix. *Kyara* are mostly treated as IP (Steinberg 2012) so that canonisation becomes less of a concern. Nintendo is notorious for how it treats its IP; it keeps most of its characters in its own family of products, and hardly ever provides any licences to other companies to use its IP. It also rarely uses characters from franchises from other companies, with only few exceptions such as *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (Nintendo 2018), which I will discuss in more detail in chapter 6.

At the time of writing this book, the performative agents from *New Horizons* have been transferred as *kyara* to different media platform through two approaches: between different player games, and between *New Horizons* and its advertisement comic. In the first approach, the characters move between different games. This means in the case of *New Horizons* that the *kyara* move between different game instalments in the overall media mix of *Animal Crossing*, and between *New Horizon* games of different players. I will focus here on the movement of the *kyara* between games of different players, since that shows how the *kyara*'s nature avoids the problem of narrative continuity.

New Horizons is a game that revolves around players personalising their own island: when two players both own a copy of *New Horizons*, they do not own the *same* game. Each player has their own island that they can adjust to their own tastes, with their own avatar, decorated house, and set of villagers. No island will be the same. For ease of understanding, we could say that each player has a different *player game*. Because each player game is different, the same applies to the villagers living on the islands. Since there are 460 individual villagers that can inhabit a player's island, it is uncommon for two players who know each other to have the same villager on their island, although it can happen. In *New Horizons* it is quite easy to visit another player's island. Players can either share a code over the internet with other players to come and visit their island, or locally connect the game consoles. As you visit your friends' (or strangers') islands, the chances increase that you will come across a villager you have encountered before on another island.

During the many visits to my friends' islands, as we all were in lockdown during the Covid pandemic, I encountered the same villager on one friend's island as I did on another friend's island. The villager was Goose, a jock-type

chicken villager who both friends on separate occasions described as quite annoying. When I met this chicken on the first friend's island and we became acquainted, he asked my name and asked me what island I came from. After that brief encounter, I left (I did not like him either). When I visited the island of another friend, I met Goose again. This time he greeted me as if we had never met before. Although the first friend reported that the Goose on his island was still chatting about me, remembering our very brief encounters together and asking where I was, the Goose on the second island did not share these memories. The only possible way to explain this is that the Goose on my first friend's island and the Goose on my second friend's island are simply *not the same* version of the character. They might be the same performative agent but they are also different quasi-persons.

The easiest way to explain the two versions is through the *kyara*. Goose and all the other villagers function as *kyara* between the *New Horizons* player games of different players. The image of Goose, and the script on which he operates, are entirely the same as in any other copy of the game. But the fact that a player can meet the same villager on two different islands, without them acknowledging the player or even knowing that they met before, demonstrates that this villager is not the same in both games. Rather, as a *kyara* they reflect the quality that Saitō describes as *fukusei kanō/tensō fukanō* ("potential to proliferate/impossible to transfer") (Saitō 2014, 109); they can proliferate across works as a *kyara* but not transfer as a character. Goose's and any other villager's image icon and script are reproduced in every game of *New Horizons*, but they cannot be transferred as the same version of the character to all these copies. Although both Gooses in my friends' games might now recognise me, if I ever meet Goose in another player's game, I will have to re-introduce myself all over again.

The same quality is also reflected when a villager does move between different player games. When *New Horizons* was just released, entire online player market economies sprung up for players to exchange characters and other goods. The villagers proved to be one of the most lucrative trading products for players to exchange (Blom 2022a). Villagers can move to another player's island when they meet a player from another island. Both players (the one on whose island the villager lives and the player who wants the villager) need to accept the villager's request to move. Once they have done so, the villager moves to the other player's island. This villager will be the same version of the character on the new player's island as they were in the former player's island. They will remember their previous owner, reminiscing about prior encounters with that player while also acknowledging that they live on a new island. So, in that sense, there can be a line of continuity

between the villagers in different players games, but each villager will be a unique individual due to the different players they have met, even if another version of them exists in another player game.

Nintendo's second approach brings us to the proliferation of the *New Horizon* characters into non-cybermedia. Nintendo's focus is predominantly on games, but as many media mixes do, the company also adapts its characters to manga, comics in Japan. The villagers from the *Animal Crossing* series have appeared before in manga serialisations, such as *Dōbutsu no Mori: Hohinda Mura dayori* [Animal Crossing: It's Hohinda Village!] (Abesayori 2001–2015) during the time *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (2012) was the newest instalment in the series.

Nintendo has introduced its *New Horizons* characters in a *yonkoma* manga online to function as advertisements for the game. *Yonkoma* manga are four-panel comics meant to display comical situations. They often do not require narrative continuity between each story since the focus is on the jokes. This makes them excellent means for performative agents to appear in a different media platform, since they do not demand continuity between game and manga and only rely on the agents' script and iconicity that are already provided in the games.

The *yonkoma* is called *Tanuki Michi* [The Tanuki Road], and features Tom Nook and his nephews Timmy and Tommy, serial characters that appear in (almost) every *Animal Crossing* game and are therefore familiar faces to fans. These comics are part of Nintendo's website *Tanuki Kaihatsu* that presents Tom Nook's travel agency almost as if it were an actual enterprise (Nintendo 2020). The premise of the stories is that Tom Nook, Timmy, and Tommy are preparing for the player to arrive on their island, but end up in comical situations, such as being unprepared for a blizzard in August (the hottest time of the year in Japan). It is specified that the comics on the website are a special addition to the game released in March 2020. They are meant as an introduction to the game, and have little function beyond being marketing tools. These comics do not add anything new, nor do they expand *New Horizon's* world; they just encourage Japanese audiences to play the game.

Only in the first of these approaches—in which the villagers move between different player games—does the performative agent also move across works. This is logical, since all *New Horizons* copies contain similar templates with the same *kyara* and scripts for the same villagers. Once players start playing their game, a villager in one player's game becomes a different version from the same villager in another player's game. However, in the latter approach, the scripts that turn the villagers into dynamic game

characters do not translate the performative agent to non-cybermedia; no performative agent appears in the *yonkoma* comics on the *Tanuki Kaihatsu* website. For example, Tom Nook, Timmy, and Tommy in the *Tanuki Kaihatsu* comics might seem to be the same characters in the *New Horizons* game, because there is somewhat of a logical sequential order between the comics and the game. However, their misadventures in the comics are never mentioned in the game, making the sequential order a one-way street.

The *Animal Crossing* media mix does not rely on continuity in the sense of canonisation by making connections between dynamic game characters and their versions across media platforms, but this does not mean either that Nintendo has handed the reins to the players; as I explained in the previous chapter, as pre-made performative agents, players also have very little creative agency over the *New Horizons*' villagers. The *Animal Crossing* media mix emphasises proliferation of the *kyara* between different player games and other non-cybermedia far more than the player's creative agency over these characters. This makes it very easy for Nintendo to control them as IP, since all they need to do is proliferate the *kyara* elsewhere and players can easily make the connection between the icons without the need for narrative continuity. This strategy works, as we have seen here, both for cybermedia and non-cybermedia.

Conclusion

In contemporary transmedia practices, the configuration of the character constantly shifts, thereby affecting the identity of the character as if it were a continuous entity across different works. The idealistic effort to give the impression that characters are coherent entities, instead of schemata that transform both within a single work and over the course of multiple works, triggers a constant fight for control. This battle unfolds across archaic venues of control such as the authorship, ownership of intellectual property, and canonisation. The different parties that meddle with the dynamic game character's configuration across different works break the "permission" granted to the player to be involved in those figures' development processes. This kind of meddling may even contribute to harmful discourses on minorities in terms of sexuality, gender, and race. While games with dynamic game characters promise the player creative agency over their development, the moment these characters are transferred to other works—even other games—the player's creative agency is sacrificed. Although it can be said that this might be necessary because non-cybermedia cannot structurally

support dynamic game characters, I stress that there are always multiple choices involved in transferring dynamic game characters from one work to another. These choices include decisions on how to portray dynamic game characters, which character to portray, which events from the game to feature, and which outcome of the character's in-game development to start a story from. Yet, the most important choice of all is whether to transfer the dynamic game character from one media platform to another at all. Transferring characters removes the promise of creative agency and forces the player's experience to comply with a dominant reading determined by an institutional authority for the sake of generating additional revenue. That is, I argue, the danger of transmedia characters.

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5. Parasocial relationships with non-playable characters

Abstract: This chapter discusses the system of affection (SA), a bonding system designed so that players can create parasocial relationships with non-player characters (NPCs) acknowledged by the game. The first part of this chapter presents an overview of the common design elements of the SA to facilitate these relationships. The second part of this chapter provides two close readings to highlight how the SA works. I will show through an analysis of *Persona 5* how affectionate bonds between the player character and NPCs are built and how this is reflected in the official transmedia adaptations of the game. An investigation of *Hades* will demonstrate how dynamic game characters can allow for a diversity of romantic queer and polyamorous relationships.

Keywords: Parasocial relationships, romance, affect, non-player characters

Parasocial relationships with game characters

Affective connections with characters are an important reason for many audiences to engage with stories across all different kinds of media. Scholars from Fandom Studies often use the term "affect" to explain how audiences engage emotionally with a text. In her work on affective reception, Nicolle Lamerichs (2018) refers to affect as an "embodied response towards the text and its characters" (18). She explains that "media texts generate affects with their audiences," which is not allocated within the text but generated by its audiences (30). Elizabeth Evans (2020) refers to affect as a form of emotional engagement with texts. She distinguishes between two kinds of emotional engagement with content by fans: first, *affect* in which narrative events evoke particular emotions in their audiences. Second, audiences develop *affection* for the content, which refers to the parasocial connections audiences make with characters over a prolonged period of time (100).

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Such affection for characters is discussed by scholars under the denominator of *parasocial relationships*. The term was coined by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl (1956) who discussed the face-to-face relationships between audiences and mass media performers (like television personalities) as interactions that share similarities with social relationships but are one-sided and controlled by the performer (215). Parasocial relationships are not exclusively a modern phenomenon; they include the relationships between citizens and major political figures, individuals and gods/spirits, and also relationships between audiences and fictional characters (Giles 2002). Nicole Liebers and Holger Schramm (2019) distinguish between parasocial interactions (PSI) and parasocial relationships (PSR): the former is limited to the interactions between the audience and a media character that only take place during media reception by the audience. The latter type exceeds such limits and "leads to or encompasses cross-situational relationships between audience and media characters" (4).

We are currently seeing an increase of PSR with fictional characters in our contemporary media ecology (Karhulahti and Välisalo 2021). As game characters are becoming more nuanced, there is a growth in the design of PSR in games (Elvery 2021). Subsequently, we see an increase in scholarly interest in love and romance with characters in video games (see Ntelia 2021; Ganzon 2022; Bruno 2023; Välisalo 2023). Digital games progressively facilitate romantic relationships between game characters and players (Kelly 2015; Waern 2015) and are particularly good at generating affective responses in players towards characters, since they give players the agency to make meaningful choices over the relationships (Tosca and Klastrup 2019; Galbraith 2021; Lamerichs and Rosendo 2022). Different forms of attachment to game characters have been identified, emphasising the multiple functional and emotional values characters can have for players (Bopp *et al.* 2019), but research on emotional attachment to non-playable characters shows that players particularly appreciate characters with whom they can form romantic relationships (Burgess and Jones 2020). This chapter's focus is on the games and related works that generate affection with dynamic game characters, in particular with characters that are often labelled "non-player characters" (NPCs).

Many games nowadays let the player create relationships with dynamic game characters, mostly of a romantic nature. For instance, *Mystic Messenger* (Cheritz 2016) is a mobile phone game that simulates a romance between the player and five different characters through real-time messages. *The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel* (Nihon Falcom 2015) features the adventures of a military school class amid an international political crisis.

Between quests, the player can manage the connections between the player character Rean and his classmates. Even games of a genre that are not necessarily about relationships nowadays offer opportunities for bonding. The roguelike action game *Hades* (Supergiant Games 2020) allows players to create bonds of different natures between Zagreus and other mythical figures, like Thanatos or his father Hades.

Not all the relationships that games permit their players to create may be parasocial, as the term "parasocial" specifically refers to the connection that someone may feel towards a character. However, I use the term to refer to the relationships players create between the player character and NPCs (or sometimes exclusively between NPCs) as structured by the game and its related texts, since in this way, the game actively stimulates affect for the text and its characters, and acknowledges the relationships players create, which is something non-cybermedia cannot do. I call the cybermedia process (see the section on "method" in chapter 1) that allows players to create PSRs with and between dynamic game characters the *system of affection*.

The *system of affection* (SA) is a procedural ludic process that allows the player to create and shape relationships between and with dynamic game characters. A system of affection is specifically designed to create affect from players for NPCs. These relationships are embedded in the game's possibility space, and the player influences these relationships by executing specific sets of actions that differ per game. Romance is the most common form of PSR, but the SA can create other types of relationships, such as friendships or rivalries. Some relationships can also be specifically designed to be toxic and unsustainable as exemplified by the relationship between Flowey and the player in *Undertale* (Toby Fox 2015) (Elvery 2022), although these examples are rare. The reason I call this process a *system* is because I perceive it as a process that is quantified and logical and designed purposefully so that each game element stimulates players to form an emotional attachment to an NPC over time. This aligns with my view that affect is not exclusively generated by audiences, but also partially stimulated by the design of the text, in this case, a game.

This system plays an important role in the dynamic game characters' development in-game, especially for those that we consider NPCs (i.e., not the player character). As I mentioned in chapter 1 and 2, Game Studies tends to focus predominantly on player characters and the avatar. In this chapter, I will relocate that focus by showing how certain games are designed to stimulate players to develop PSRs with NPCs that function as dynamic game characters. I will focus particularly on romantic PSRs, as they are the most common type of PSR we see in video games. In the next section I

will briefly discuss the common design elements that the SA usually has. In the following sections I will provide two close readings to highlight how this system works. *Persona 5* (P-Studio 2016) shows how affectionate bonds between the player character and NPCs are built and how this is reflected in the official transmedia adaptations of the game. The second close reading, *Hades,* shows how dynamic game characters can allow for a diversity of romantic queer and polyamorous relationships, subverting the heteronormative standard of relationships. However, I will also caution that this subversion is still set within the heteronormative framework of relationships.

A brief overview of the System of Affection

We can distinguish between two types of SA: one in which the SA is the primary mechanic in the game's overall narrative and another in which the SA functions as the game's secondary mechanics, easing the player's progression in the game (Sicart 2008). The former refers to games in which a relationship with a character is the desired end state. These kinds of games include dating simulators such as *Dream Daddy* (Game Grumps 2017) or *Hakuoki: Memories of the Shinsengumi* (Idea Factory 2013), but it also exists in the puzzle-oriented game *Catherine: Full Body* (Studio Zero [2011] 2019). Secondary SAs can be found in games such as *The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel*, *Mass Effect 2* (BioWare 2010), *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe 2016), and *Fire Emblem: Awakening* (Intelligent Systems and Nintendo 2012). The player does not have to develop relationships in these games, but it will improve their gameplay performance if they do. In these games, we could understand the SA as a game in a game; that is, it is not the main aspect of the game, but occupies a part of it that has a different set of rules and mechanics.

Types of character relationships

Overall, the SA lets the player influence three kinds of dyadic relationships: the player character with an NPC; the actual player themselves with an NPC; and between two (or more) NPCs. First, the most common kind of relationship is between the player character and an NPC. In this relationship there exists a continuous tension between the different entities that stems from the double nature of the player character. A player character is simultaneously a fictional person and the partial diegetic embodiment

of the player (Vella 2015). *Persona 5* is such a game (which I will discuss in detail below) where NPCs form a bond with Joker, the player character. The relationship between the player character and NPC is therefore both a connection between the player and another fictional person, and between two fictional persons.

Second, sometimes games encourage the player to create a PSR as themselves, as an external entity with the NPC. This means that the player does not embody an avatar inside the world of the game, but their existence outside the game is acknowledged instead. In *Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu!* and *Pokémon: Let's Go, Eevee!* (Game Freak 2018), the player normally controls an avatar who we see from a third-person perspective. The player can enter a segment called "Partner Play" in which they can bond with either their Pikachu or Eevee Pokémon. The third-person perspective then turns into a first-person perspective; the player character disappears and the Pikachu or Eevee gaze directly at the player, addressing the player instead of the player character. The segment allows the player to pet the Pokémon by touching the screen of the Nintendo Switch console, giving the impression that the player touches the creature directly rather than through the player character.

And finally, in rare cases, the player creates a relationship between two or more NPCs. Within this relationship, the player's creative agency is limited to the role of a facilitator (and they may therefore not create a PSR *per se*); they orchestrate the connection from outside of the relationship. They can influence the direction of the relationship, but unlike the player character, they do not share their existence with these characters. In *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (Intelligent Systems and Koei Tecmo 2019), for example, the player can invite two students to have lunch with their teacher, Byleth, or invite them to sing in a choir. Both segments strengthen their bonds with each other and with Byleth, the player character. Once their bond level is high enough, the player can activate scripted scenes between the two students to advance the students' relationship to the next rank.

Conditions

The player cannot create bonds without any limitations; often they will have to meet several conditions before they can form a bond with or between NPCs. These conditions exist in the form of parameters, gender and sexual compatibility, and resources that determine how much creative agency players have over the characters: player characters often have parameters or statistics which the player must raise for another character to become interested in their friendship or romance. In *Persona 5* the player can raise

Joker's *social stats* — e.g., attributes of knowledge, charm, guts, proficiency, and kindness — through actions such as eating a giant hamburger or studying. Depending on the NPC that players might want to romance, a different statistic needs to be at a specific level.

The availability of in-game resources is another condition. In an SA, resources often translate into a character's availability for a relationship. In *The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel*, the player can only bond in a single diegetic day with the same number of characters as the number of bonding points. When the player has two bonding points, they can spend them on two characters, even if there are three or four of them available for the player to spend their points on. This game does not allow the player to completely develop each NPC's bond with the player character Rean. Instead, the player must strategically choose whose relationship they wish to influence and develop. This endows the game with replayability, stimulating players to play the game once again to develop each relationship to its maximum.

The most common conditions are those of gender and sexual compatibility, which, unfortunately, are often defined by heteronormative standards. Gender and sexuality often function as statistical values because they determine the nature of relationships, particularly romantic ones. They also reflect the inherent ideals behind coupling that stem from a normative cultural understanding of how relationships work in society. Kim Johansen Østby points out that the *Mass Effect* series contains a heteronormative "public game" that every player will encounter. It also contains a "private game," which only some players choose to see, in which the player moves tentatively into queer territory (2016, 407). For example, although the first instalment in the series, *Mass Effect*, allows the player to romance Liara T'Soni regardless of Shepard's gender, in *Mass Effect 2,* a female Shepard cannot enter into a romantic relationship with another female character. The player is bound to a heterosexual relationship even if their female Shepard romanced Liara in the previous game. Such statistical values promote dominant heteronormative readings of sexuality and gender when it comes to romance in games. In games such as *Shin Megami Tensei Persona 4* (Atlus 2008), and *Persona 5*, the player characters can exclusively pursue romance with characters of the opposite gender, and only friendship with characters of the same gender. Even in cases in which the player can create same-sex couples, these games can structurally punish the player for creating such connections, or never make these same-sex romances explicit.

Most often, the (romantic) relationships between characters are also monogamous. When romantic relationships are available, games tend to either allow the player a monogamous relationship with another character

or punish the player for pursuing more romantic relationships. In *Dragon Age: Origins*, the player can pursue a romantic connection with both Alistair and Zevran. However, at some point the player must choose between them. Zevran will let the player know that he is fine with the player having two boyfriends, but states that Alistair is not fine with it, so that the player has no other option but to choose between them.

Yet it is not all doom and gloom. The trend of heteronormative romances is changing; particularly in independent (indie) games in Euro-American game cultures, romance has become more open to depicting same-sex romances, and in certain cases, also polyamorous relationships, as shown in my analysis of *Hades* below. The SA should therefore be understood as a process that demands scrutiny when gender, sexuality, and the shape of the relationship are used as conditions for the representation of romantic relationships.

Procedures

Once the player passes the hurdle of complying with the game's rules on who can enter a relationship with whom, they can finally begin working on how to create a relationship. Each SA demands that the player goes through a set of procedures to establish a relationship. The processes that lead to a relationship vary per character, but in general players will have to go through at least one of the following procedures: transactions, character-targeted dialogues, quests, or time-related events. Transactions—players giving items or objects—are one of the most common ways to influence a character's affection. The player gives the character they wish to attract a valuable object, so that the character's parameters might rise or decline. In *Stardew Valley*, the player must learn every character's taste in specific items by trial and error (or look it up online if they are lazy like me). For instance, if the player wishes to create a romantic relationship between their avatar and Elliot in *Stardew Valley*, they will have to constantly give him items like lobsters, duck feathers, or squid to raise his affection.

Although these transactions often come in the form of gifts, they also reveal the tension between a dynamic game character's function as a ludic agent (see chapter 3 for an explanation of the concept of ludic agent) and the game's encouragement to perceive the figures as quasi-persons. The transactions simplify elusive and complex concepts such as love and friendship. The message is that a player only has to give nice trinkets for a character to come around to liking them. The player cannot determine exactly how the character will respond or in what direction the character will develop

(for more detail, see chapter 3). However, once the player has learned the character's preferences, it is simply a matter of giving them items to raise the statistics of the ludic agent. Thereafter, the player's impression of the character as a quasi-person may decrease since the character no longer upholds the illusion of being a person-like entity with their own will.

Another common procedure is character-targeted dialogue. This comes in the form of a "dialogue wheel" in which the player chooses options that could lower or raise the character's affection towards the player character. The options presented consist of dialogue answers, actions that the player character can perform, or both. The accumulation of these decisions changes the probability of outcomes until the player has reached the necessary outcome of the game's end state. Games that have the SA as their primary mechanic and those with SA as a secondary mechanic are quite different. Games with the SA as their primary mechanic use character-targeted dialogues to direct the narrative to a certain outcome. But games that have an SA as a secondary mechanic, like *Persona 5*, have dialogue wheels that exclusively affect the characters and not the overall narrative of the game. For players of *Persona 5* this means that regardless of their answers in the dialogue wheel, the outcome of the game will not change. Only small nuances inside the story might be changed such as how characters will respond to the player character, but the end state of the game remains unaffected.

Quests tend to come in the form of requests or favours asked by characters. The player must complete quests to influence the relationship. The actions the player must execute can be simple or complex and might often involve one or more of the other procedures in this section. However, they all share a common objective: to advance the relationship between characters. In *Mass Effect 2*, Miranda requests help to escort her sister to a safe location by distracting enemies. The player traverses a maze-like area and takes down enemies by running by them while kicking and shooting them. These actions do not directly affect Miranda, but after the completion of the quest, Miranda's "loyalty" status changes from "neutral" to "loyal."

Time translates into two kinds of mechanisms in an SA: waiting for and attending to the character. Waiting in games happens in two different forms of time: diegetic time in the game, and in "real-life time" as it passes in the world of the player. The latter involves making the player wait by subjecting them to the whims of the characters when the latter demand attention, such as the *Tamagotchi* (Bandai 1996) or *Mystic Messenger*. Yet in other games where the player is represented through a player character in a diegetic world, waiting tends to be bound to the player's progress. In *Mass Effect 2*, waiting depends on how fast the player proceeds with the characters' quests.

If the player wishes to romance Garrus as Shepard's boyfriend (like I did), they must complete several high-priority quests to receive opportunities to attain that status. Nevertheless, some of Garrus's quests do not become available until the player has advanced in the game's main narrative. It cannot be said therefore that waiting in the game is entirely independent of the game's main narrative.

Appearing is on the opposite end of the spectrum to waiting. In games, appearing translates into game mechanisms in which players are expected to appear at a given time in the game's diegetic world. In *Stardew Valley*, some characters give the player appointments to show up at a specific time if the player wants to unlock scripted scenes to raise the characters' affection. For example, the player can discover that Elliott is usually in the saloon between three and ten. If they enter the saloon when Elliott has four hearts of affection towards their avatar, Elliott proposes a toast and the player can decide what to toast to. Depending on the player's response in the dialogue wheel, Elliot's affection for the avatar can rise or decline—all because the player was at the right place at the right time.

Dating in *Persona 5*

As I have hinted on several occasions in this chapter, *Persona 5* is a generic example of how an SA appears in most video games. After an incident in his former hometown during which Joker is unjustly accused of harassing Masayoshi Shido, a powerful politician, Joker is put on probation and transferred to Shujin Academy in Tokyo. His criminal past is soon revealed, causing students and teachers to shun him. Immediately afterwards, a mysterious application pops up on his phone: the Metaverse Navigator. Joker deletes the application, but that night in his dreams, he is transported to the mysterious Velvet Room where the room's attendant, Igor, tells Joker that destruction awaits him. The only way to avoid destruction is to become rehabilitated into a free man again by stealing the hearts of corrupted people and changing the world. Joker initially sets out to free the world from corrupted people by himself but is soon joined by other students. They call themselves *Kaitōdan* ("Phantom Thieves of Hearts"), a vigilante group that roams the palaces of the shadow world to steal treasure from corrupted individuals to reform their hearts.

Persona 5 has a rigid main narrative that the player cannot change. As long as the player progresses through the game, these events will happen no matter what the player does. From this perspective, *Persona 5* corresponds

neatly to the traits commonly associated with its genre, the Japanese role-playing game (JRPG). According to Schules *et al.* (2018, 114), fans and industry associate JRPGs with limited exploration possibilities in the game world, well-defined characters, anime/cartoon style art, a linear and singular story, and a fantasy world. *Persona 5* exhibits all of these traits. Yet, the game is not without dynamic game characters; it has an SA as a secondary mechanic which gives the player the creative agency to develop parasocial relationships between the player character Joker and NPCs, all dynamic game characters. Through the SA, the player can influence characters' identities without interfering with the developer's established versions of the characters. Joker, Ann, Tae, and all the other optional *confidants* the player meets during gameplay will adhere to their rigid pathway, but how they relate to Joker is up to the player.

Persona 5's SA is called *confidant* (or *kōpu* in the Japanese version) by the game itself. NPCs with whom the player can build relationships are known as confidants. There are twenty confidants in total, and they include the party members of the *Kaitōdan* with whom players traverse through dungeons. Confidants also include NPCs that are not party members. The game further divides confidants into optional and mandatory; players can choose whether to build a relationship with optional confidants, whereas the game's main narrative naturally establishes a relationship with the mandatory confidants as the player progresses through the game, because these characters are important for the main narrative. For example, Joker's relationship with Akechi Goro, a party member, is mandatory and will naturally progress through the game. The player will learn about Akechi's hidden motives which ultimately lead to Akechi's betrayal of the entire *Kaitōdan*. By doing so, Joker and the rest of the characters discover Akechi's connection to Shido, the person who harassed Joker prior to the events of the game. This discovery triggers the *Kaitōdan*'s final heist to discover the true culprit of the dangerous happenings in the game's story.

The player's relationship with each confidant is presented through a ranking system, in which level one is the lowest level, at which Joker and the confidants are merely acquaintances, up to level ten, the highest level which represents a close relationship either as friends or as romantic partners. The player needs to gather points through several procedures to level up the ranks, mainly dialogue wheels and transactions, by choosing the right answer and giving the NPCs items they like.

Building these relationships allows the player to create meaningful connections between Joker and the confidants as narrative agents, while simultaneously developing them as ludic agents. This system occurs in the

periphery of the game, outside the game's main storyline when the bond with a confidant character is optional. For example, if the player wishes to further the relationship with Ann, a party member, to the second rank, they must reach "considerate" (the second level) in the kindness category of the Joker's social statistics. As the player progresses through Ann's ranks, she develops as a narrative agent; she will get over her worries about her friend Shiho. She also starts taking her modelling career more seriously and overcomes her struggles with a competing model. After rank nine, the player can choose to have Ann become Joker's girlfriend, making the relationship either romantic or platonic.

Ann also develops as a ludic agent, which smoothens gameplay. Any party member with whom the player builds a relationship learns new skills that are useful for battles in dungeons; they will be able to perform follow-up attacks or save the player character from fatal attacks. Each party member will also obtain their own unique abilities. For example, Ann gains the ability to negotiate with an enemy again if the player fails the negotiation the first time. Once players have reached level ten, Ann's persona Carmen, the spirit that she uses to fight in battles, will transform into Hecate, a more powerful persona, to reflect the change she has experienced. So, even if the player is not interested in Ann's development as a narrative agent, they will be rewarded nonetheless as she becomes more useful as a ludic agent. But it will not affect the overall outcome of the game's main storyline if the player decides not to engage with Ann at all (or any other optional confidant characters for that matter).

NPCs that are optional as confidant characters function rather alike their party member counterparts, with the exception that they develop only minimally as ludic agents. Progressing through Tae Takemi's relationship ranks, Joker's (illegal) medical doctor, Joker takes part in clinical trials. As their bond deepens, the player will discover that the trials are an attempt to regain her credibility as a doctor, which she unjustly lost a few years prior to the events of the game. However, even if the player is not interested in their development as a narrative agent, this does not mean that these NPCs are not useful. Deepening the bond with Tae Takemi still rewards the player. As the player progresses through Tae's ranks and deepens the bond between them, the player will be able to purchase more healing items, or the prices of the items will drop as the player raises Tae's rank. These changes are beneficial because they smoothen boss battles to reach the game's end state.

I have to note that despite the number of different dynamic game characters with whom players can create a bond, *Persona 5* notoriously avoids same-sex couples and explicitly celebrates heteronormative monogamous

romantic relationships. The former is visible in the selection of characters with whom Joker can enter into a romantic relationship; while the player can choose whether the relationships with Tae and Ann becomes romantic or platonic after rank nine, such a choice is absent for male confidants. If the player decides to build a relationship between Joker and Yusuke Kitagawa, a party member whose confidant is optional, they will go through a similar process as with Ann: Joker and Yusuke grow closer with each rank, Yusuke will work through his issues, which have to do with his painting aspirations and his late mother whom he never met. Simultaneously, he will develop as a ludic agent, gaining more skills and abilities until the player reaches rank ten during which his persona transforms into a stronger version. But, even if the player fervently wishes so, the relationship will never become romantic.

There is a similar issue with monogamy in this game. The monogamy in *Persona 5*'s romantic relationships is a double-edged sword; the game allows the player to develop multiple romantic relationships at the same time (up to nine in total) but it will later punish the player for it: when the game reaches 15 February, the day after Valentine's Day, any character with whom Joker is romantically involved will show up to call out Joker for two-timing them. They will then beat him up off-screen. Yet, the scene ends with Sojiro Sakura, Joker's caretaker, saying he covered for him and got him off the hook. So, in the end, the two-timing has no major consequences, instead providing a supposedly funny scene, while simultaneously sending the message that any romantic relationship outside heteronormative norms is heresy.

Confidants in *Persona 5*'s media mix strategy

Being part of a Japanese media mix strategy, the *Persona 5* characters proliferate across media. As I have been explaining throughout this book, Euro-American theory on contemporary transmedia practices tends to strive for narrative continuity across works, whereas Japanese theory usually favours character proliferation. The strategies of control over characters' identities in Japanese media mix strategies tend to be established based on the characters as intellectual property (IP). In this way, the figures proliferate so that fans can choose which product they want to consume, while the IP owner at the same time creates "more touchpoints to newcomers to a ground of products" (Nakamura and Tosca 2021, 5).

Persona 5's media mix strategy functions accordingly and maintains multiple touchpoints through which consumers can experience the IP owner Atlus's products. While controlling the character's transtextual identity to

create narrative continuity is not a major concern for most media mixes, *Persona 5* shows that the developer Atlus is still interested in policing the identities of the *Persona 5* characters in some regards. As I will show below, this has consequences especially for the confidant characters, because the player's creative agency to build relationships with them in-game cannot easily be sustained by non-cybermedia.

In a prior study on *Persona 5* (Blom 2020), I showed that Atlus recognises two official *Persona 5* adaptations: the *Persona 5* manga series (Murasaki 2017a; 2017b; 2018a; 2018b) and the *Persona 5 The Animation* TV anime series (Ishihama 2018). Both adaptations follow the game's rigid main narrative with slight variations, since an adaptation is always a modification of the original work (Hutcheon 2006). Nevertheless, the manga and anime series remain faithful and equivalent to the original source work, granting it the status of "axiomatic primacy and authority" (Hutcheon 2006, 16). In the preceding study, I stated that neither the manga nor the anime series contain any hint to acknowledge that the player can build relationships between Joker and various NPCs like Tae, Ann, and Yusuke. However, in the time between that study and the writing of this book, *Persona 5 The Animation* released an original video animation (OVA) episode on 26 June 2019, as an extra, with the publication of the DVD and Blue Ray volume 12 that contained the final episodes of the series.

The OVA episode is titled *Persona 5 The Animation: A Magical Valentine's Day* and briefly depicts each of the Valentine dates with the female confidants. Whenever the episode transitions to another date, the new scenario starts with an "In case of," clearly hinting at how the date would go in case the player were to date one of these women in the original game. Each date also ends happily with a kiss between Joker and his date. Yet, the final scenario of this episode is called "A Tragic Valentine's Day." It depicts the case of Joker two-timing all nine female confidants on 15 February, and, as I described above, shows the women taking their revenge on Joker by beating him off-screen.

The official animation does indeed acknowledge the SA in the original game, but as an OVA, the *A Magical Valentine's Day* episode falls outside the main storyline. The facts 1) that it was not aired on television like the other episodes; 2) that it does not have an official episode number; and 3) that it was released as an extra on DVD volume 12, demonstrates that this episode is nothing more than a wink to the Valentine Day scene in-game. It is meant to please fans as fan service, also known as an *omake* in Japanese, a "little something extra." In other words, the developer, Atlus, places the SA, over which the player has a certain degree of agency, in the periphery

of the transmedia adaptations to maintain a degree of control over what is and is not part of the *Persona 5* media mix's main storyline.

Such a strategy to control the main storyline can be seen in other manga publications of the franchise as well. As per the strategies of a media mix, the developer grants IP rights over the *Persona 5* characters to manga magazines, which use them to write alternative stories with the characters, not previously depicted in the original game. In Japan, merchandise stores like Animate sell fan magazines that received copyright to use the *Persona 5* characters in their comics. The *Persona 5 Dengeki Comic Anthology* (DengekiComics 2017), and *Persona 5 Comic Anthology* volumes 1 (DNA Media Comics 2017a) and 2 (DNA Media Comics 2017b), are such manga magazines. These magazines consist of several short "what-if" comic stories written by different authors. These short stories explore characters' backgrounds and provide additional information about the relationships between Joker and the confidant characters outside the game. These stories function as fillers; they are written to provide extra background, but do not change the game's main storyline. For example, *Persona 5 Anthology* volume 1 presents the story *Na mo Shiranu Kafetomo* ["My café buddy whose name I do not know"]. This story describes an encounter between Goro Akechi and Tae Takemi in café Leblanc, where Joker lives. This story does not occur during the events of the game, and there is no hint of it in the scripted sequences between Tae Takemi and Joker, or between Joker and Goro Akechi.

These volumes also contain pastiche and parody stories making fun of in-game events, also known as *yonkoma*. A modified version of the failed Valentine's Day where the nine female confidants beat up Joker is also depicted here: the short comic *Saigo no Kotoba* ["Final Words"] depicts Joker tied up and hanging from the ceiling surrounded by his female teammates Ann, Makoto, Haru, and Futaba. The following words appear on the right of the first panel: *Uwaki ga BARE da* ("Infidelity EXPOSED"). Joker's infidelity has been revealed. When Ann tells him that he is the worst of all for dating all four of them, Joker delivers the punch line: she is wrong, he had been dating *nine* women.[1]

So, while the magazines do acknowledge the SA in the original game, the actual adaptation of the SA within these magazines only resides on the level of convention. In his article on the friction between games and media with narrative affinity, Espen Aarseth (2006) concludes that "cross-media

1 I originally wrote the short analyses on the stories *Na mo Shiranu Kafetomo*, *Morugana Kagehika*, and *Saigo no Kotoba* for my prior study, published in the article "Manifestations of Characters in the Media Mix" (Blom 2020).

transfer happens relatively smoothly between forms that are alike, such as books and films, and less so between forms that have strong structural differences, such as amusement park rides, games, and narratives" (210). We see this friction occur in both the official Atlus anime adaptation as well as the manga magazines with the short stories and parodies; they acknowledge the fact that the player can build parasocial relationships between Joker and the confidant characters, but as non-cybermedia platforms, they have no underlying mechanical system to incorporate the player's agency of the game.

To make up for this, the exploration of the relationships between Joker and other characters is relegated to the periphery of the media mix: either in unofficial magazines (but with copyright licenses) or in an official episode placed outside the main storyline. This assigns an almost holy value and truthfulness to the original game that proclaims that these characters—even as they proliferate through different media platforms—are only accepted by the developer as long as they correspond to the characters in the main storyline. This conveys the message that the player's creative agency over the construction of the characters' relationships matters only as far as the developer can control it; that is, parasocial relationships outside the game and official texts are implied to be heresies.

Queer and polyamorous dating in *Hades*

The majority of the games that I discuss throughout this book are part of franchises and are owned by large conglomerates with the means and resources to proliferate a story and its characters across different works. However, such games are by no means the only types of games with dynamic game characters with whom the player can build relationships. In fact, there has been an increase in indie games with an SA since 2017 after the global success of *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator* in which a father can date a variety of other fathers. Over the course of the years, the number of such indie games has grown and it now encompasses a variety of genres, even genres in which one might not expect dating with characters to be a possibility. They therefore provide excellent examples to show how dynamic game characters can allow for a diversity of queer (romantic) parasocial relationships, a diversity that is entirely absent from *Persona 5*, which operates in a framework of heteronormativity.

In this section, I will focus on the indie game *Hades*, a rogue-like game developed by the small independent game studio Supergiant Games. As an indie game, *Hades* does not have any official transmedia adaptations

or expansions across multiple media platforms—at least, not at the time of writing this book, and not in the way understood in transmedia storytelling in which intellectual property is licensed across different works. The game's narrative and characters are inspired by the myths and mythological figures of Ancient Greek, a common story setting for many popular transmedia works and franchises from the past decades, which ranges from Disney's animated movie *Hercules* (Musker and Clements 1997) to games like *God of War* (Santa Monica Studio 2005), *Persona 3* (Atlus 2006), *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft 2018) and many more (see Ford 2022 for an elaborate discussion on myth in games). *Hades* assumes a degree of familiarity with these mythological figures on the part of its players, not only regarding who is who, but also concerning the dynamics between the different gods and heroes.

The protagonist and player character of the game is Zagreus, the prince of the underworld and son of Hades, the God of the underworld. The player is tasked with making Zagreus escape the underworld in the hope of reuniting with his estranged mother Persephone. Death is merely an inconvenience for Zagreus, because every time Zagreus dies, he returns to Hades' palace from which he has to start his escape anew—a move classic to the rogue genre. However, not every escape attempt is an entirely new start; Zagreus is immortal, so the game acknowledges that he dies and returns to the palace without pretending as if his escape attempt never happened. Rather, NPCs acknowledge the many attempts and failures to escape: his father mocks him for it, whereas his mentor Achilles encourages him to not give up.

This narrative also translates into the game mechanics; with every escape, players will gain new resources and useful items that carry over to a new escape attempt. Every round, another Olympic god supports Zagreus in his escape with magical boons that modify his attacks, his speed or health in a unique way. To give a spoiler: Zagreus makes it out of the underworld quite fast—within a single attempt or a couple of attempts—depending on the skills of the player (it took me several attempts). Once he reunites with Persephone, they discover he cannot stay alive for long in the world of the living. Zagreus dies after only a brief encounter with his mother and returns once again to the underworld.

The game only just starts then. Its gameplay relies on high replayability; with each new attempt, the player will be able to set new challenges, gain greater rewards, and new weapons. The player can also build parasocial relationships between Zagreus and different NPCs, such as his father, his mentor Achilles, residents of the underworld like Eurydice, or Olympian gods like his uncle Zeus or his cousin Athena. Through these bonds, the player can explore the backgrounds of each character in greater detail. The game's SA

works similarly to *Persona* 5; each available character has an affinity gauge that goes up to rank 10. The SA relies mostly on transactions. If the player wishes to go to a higher rank, they need to give the character nectar or ambrosia, resources that the player can obtain while in the dungeons. Doing so unlocks a new scene during which the character in question will reveal a little bit more about themselves, indicating the growing intimacy between them and Zagreus. Once the player has reached rank 10, the gauge has maxed out and the player has completed the relationship between Zagreus and the NPC.

Most relationships remain platonic, but the player can build romantic relationships between Zagreus (and, thus, the player), Thanatos, Megaera (Meg), and Dusa. While the number of available romantic options is quite low compared to the nine romantic options in *Persona 5*, the low number allows for more variations of different types of relationships between Zagreus and these NPCs. First, the player has the option to engage in a queer relationship between Thanatos and Zagreus, both of whom identify as men; during the relationship-building process, the game hints that the bond between Zagreus and Thanatos might be of a romantic nature: they are childhood friends (a common romantic trope), Thanatos is visibly upset that Zagreus tried to escape the underworld without telling him, and he helps Zagreus in his escape by defeating Zagreus' enemies. Once the player has reached the maximum affinity (level 10) with Thanatos, the player will be able to choose to turn the relationship into a romantic one through a dialogue wheel. If the player chooses the romantic relationship, they will be rewarded with a bedroom scene between the two (although mostly off-screen).

Second, in extension of the game's depicted queer options, the player can choose to engage in consensual polyamory (unlike in *Persona 5*). Should the player pursue a romantic relationship between Zagreus, Thanatos, Meg, and Dusa at the same time, there will be a possibility to turn the relationship between Zagreus, Thanatos and Meg into a polyamorous one. Dusa and Zagreus will always remain platonic friends no matter the degree of closeness between the two, but if the player has reached maximum romantic affinity with Meg and Thanatos, the player will find both NPCs at some point in Zagreus' bedroom at the same time, giving the player the choice of the three of them to engage in another (off-screen) bedroom scene.

The reason why I am quite keen on this variation in relationships is that the game prioritises neither path by design; the player can choose to have a monogamous romantic bond with either Thanatos or Meg, a consensual polyamorous relationship, or none at all. Neither choice would put the player at an advantage or disadvantage. The only real difference lies in the character development of the narrative agents on a story level.

I would also like to emphasise the consensual aspect of the polyamorous option. The heteronormativity in *Persona 5* is rather toxic; building multiple romantic relationships is always done non-consensually and is therefore cheating, which is a recurring (and frankly, boring) joke across multiple adaptations of *Persona 5*. However, *Hades* allows the player to choose freely; they can choose to exclusively pursue a heterosexual relationship between Meg and Zagreus, but that relationship is not prioritised above a queer relationship between Thanatos and Zagreus. Rather, we might even argue that by virtue of being rewarded with more romantic scenes, the polyamorous option could be seen as the most rewarding.

The subversion of heteronormativity in *Hades* is something the game can be applauded for, but that does not mean that it is entirely free from heteronormative standards. As Mark Kretzschmar and Anastasia Salter (2020) explain: "queer romances built into a framework for heteronormativity does not itself subvert that heteronormativity." *Hades* partially subverts heteronormativity, but heteronormativity is also built into it due to the design of its SA.

The main issue of most games is that they simplify the development of a relationship to a few predetermined steps so that players only execute the "correct" strategy to create a bond with a character (Kelly 2015). Such a strategy is, as Peter Kelly puts it, "baked into the systematic processes from which it cannot intrinsically escape" (47). Due to the game's mechanical system, the SA, the game cannot avoid employing a "correct" way of playing if they want their player to successfully woo a character. As has been mentioned by other scholars, these games run the risk of depicting relationships as something to be won (Kretzschmar and Salter 2020), and as something that the player deserves by performing the right actions (Waszkiewicz 2022, 135). If the player carries out the correct actions, pushes the right buttons, or chooses the right dialogue option, they will win the affection of the other fictional person. These actions resemble codes developed in our modern societies to communicate feelings of affection, such as giving gifts or showing up at a date.

Unfortunately, the procedures the player performs downplay the complexity of these relationships. Kelly, in his observations on the ludic romantic systems in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Bioware 2014), argues that these systems are "ultimately an exercise in masculinity" (2015, 59), due to their dependence on logical parameters and strategic navigation (59). In other words, an SA risks becoming a masculine practice that detracts from the emotional experience and replaces it with cold logic. After all, all that the player must do is to execute the correct strategy to attain relational satisfaction.

Although *Persona 5* is a clear example of such heteronormative design, *Hades* also contains several mechanics and procedures that operate within the framework of heteronormativity: the moment the relationships between Zagreus, Thanatos, and Meg reaches rank 10, the relationship has become romantic and cannot be developed further, which implies it is completed and thereby "won." This kind of design emphasises the creation of a relationship over maintaining it, and privileges societal standards of what a relationship should look like. It also places the focus on sex as a reward to which the player has a right once a romantic relationship has been established, as all three possibilities between Zagreus, Thanatos, and Meg will end up in a bedroom scene (and we all know that means sex).

Another mechanic that implies heteronormativity is the game's codex. At the beginning of the games, Achilles gifts Zagreus a codex, an encyclopaedia that contains information about the characters, enemies, creatures, items and other resources. The affinity level with each character is also depicted in their biography in *Hades*'s codex. Encyclopaedias are common for digital games, and are used to contain, catalogue, and label objects in-game. They come in the shapes of bestiaries but also as diaries and character catalogues. I would add that relationship ranking systems like those found in *Hades* and *Persona 5* can also be seen as encyclopaedic. The implication of encyclopaedias for characters and their relationships is what turns the characters into objects, which Jaroslav Švelch (2018) calls "encyclopedic containment" based on Janet Murray's (1997) description of digital media as encyclopaedia. Encyclopaedia containment contrasts, strikingly enough, with the idea that characters are perceived as quasi-persons in contemporary transmedia practices, but at the same time it shows how video games turn relationships into something quantitative and collectable that can be contained and controlled, as something to be won rather than as the elusive business they actually are.

Despite this critique, *Hades* simultaneously shows a way to challenge the heteronormative design in the romantic relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, a relationship that is not parasocial *per se* since it is not a romantic relationship between Zagreus and them. As the player levels up the affinity gauge between Zagreus and Achilles, Achilles will ask the player to grant him a favour by finding a way to reunite him with Patroclus, his former lover when they were still alive, who resides in Elysium where Achilles cannot enter. To do so, the player must deepen the relationship between Zagreus and Patroclus. They have to travel as far as Elysium, the final section of the underworld's dungeon, and have to be lucky enough to meet Patroclus, as they will not meet him at every escape attempt even if

they reach Elysium. Zagreus must also find out Patroclus' name through the codex by asking Achilles. When the player has finally reached enough affinity with both characters, Achilles requests that Zagreus helps him change Achilles' pact with Hades so that he can enter Elysium. And when the player succeeds, Achilles and Patroclus will reunite, setting aside their regrets and move on together.

While the logical design of the SA is not explicitly gone, this example shows that once the player is set aside—when the relationship is no longer parasocial since it is not about the player—the focus shifts from building a romantic relationship to maintaining one. It also moves away from the idea of sexual intercourse as a reward. In other words, it subverts the idea that a relationship is something one expects can be won; instead, the player is rewarded with a meaningful reunion between two lovers—but only in its periphery.

Conclusion

Dynamic game characters can provide players the possibility to play with and to build parasocial relationships with them that a game structurally acknowledges—unlike non-cybermedia, which cannot do this because it lacks an underlying mechanical system. Through the analyses above, I have pointed to the fact that there are both benefits as well as critical issues of which we should be aware when games provide dynamic game characters with whom players can build relationships, especially characters that are dateable. We know that parasocial relationships with (dynamic) game characters are meaningful to players because games give players choices to build such relationships and structurally acknowledge the relationships. The dynamic game characters encourage emotional investment; the player puts in effort to develop relationships, but they must also manage the uncertainty that their effort might fail if they make the wrong choice.

Creating parasocial relationships with different NPCs has the player explore what Susana Tosca and Lisbeth Klastrup (2019) wonderfully call "a network of stories, a myriad of parallel worlds which together make sense as a whole and are sources of narrative pleasure and delight" (106). It provides extra background to the characters to flesh out their human-likeness. *Persona 5* allows its confidant characters to come to terms with their issues if the player pursues a relationship with them, and in *Hades* the player can even reunite the long-lost lovers Achilles and Patroclus, a very

satisfying ending to an otherwise sorrowful myth about the Trojan War.[2] The emotional investment that the player devotes to fostering these kinds of relationships and intimacies between dynamic game characters builds meaningful experiences from which the player can derive pleasure. For instance, Tosca and Klastrup found that in *otome* games, dating simulators aimed at straight women, female players wish to explore all the possible routes of a romantic relation with a character, even going so far as to discuss which rendering of the same plot point they favour (2019, 106).

Nevertheless, although such experiences are meaningful, they are often reduced by games through rewards and player achievements, which are common to video games. I agree with Kelly (2015, 60) that the translation of human connection in the form of rewards for making connections is reductive. Both *Persona 5* and *Hades* give the player achievements in the form of trophies: completing one confidant character's relationship rank in *Persona 5* grants the player the "A True Confidant" trophy. In *Hades*, if the player succeeds in reuniting Achilles and Patroclus, they will obtain the "Divided by Death" achievement. As the player collects these achievements, the achievements become visible in the player's public accounts for other players to see, thereby becoming a way to show off their success—implying that they have done better than other players. As a result, the player's emotional investment in these relationships becomes nothing more than grounds for quantifiable bragging.

Such a heteronormative framework runs through these relationships. Even the depiction of queer and polyamorous relationships as in *Hades* does not completely escape them. On a representational level, the relationships are seen as something to be won, with sex as the ultimate reward. Polyamorous relationships are depicted in *Persona 5* as non-consensual and as cheating, and although the polyamorous relationship in *Hades* is happily consensual, sex is still its ultimate reward. It just comes in the shape of a threesome.

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2 Patroclus, pretending to be Achilles, was killed by Hector of Troy, which enraged Achilles, who killed Hector in revenge. In turn, this prompted Paris, Hector's younger brother (or, in other versions of the myth, the god Apollo) to take Achilles' life by shooting an arrow in his heel.

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6. The construction of transmedia game characters

Abstract: This chapter explains how game characters are transmedially constructed when narrative continuity is not the dominant ideal across works. For this reason, the chapter looks at the fighting game genre, which relies less on linear storytelling, instead using a set of transmedia techniques to construct its fighter characters. First, I will discuss the ambiguity of how media and video games construct characters. Then, the chapter moves to a discussion on transmedia game characters in the fighting game genre, and presents a close reading of the fighting games *Soulcalibur VI*, *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, and *Marvel vs. Capcom Infinite* to show how their use of transmedia techniques depends on the player's repertoire of knowledge of the fighters across different works.

Keywords: Fighting games, transmedia techniques, *Soul* series, *Super Smash Bros.* series, *Marvel vs. Capcom* series

The presentation of characters across media platforms

The fighting game genre lends itself well to explaining how characters can be constructed without a focus on narrative continuity because it relies less on linear storytelling and instead draws on a gamut of transmedia techniques to construct its fighters as characters. Characters in fighting games often move from game to game and from medium to medium, making them especially relevant to our focus on transmedia qualities.

In the previous chapters, I explained how dynamic game characters are constructed within video games and how they move transmedially across different works. Most of all, I have pointed out how players lose their creative agency over the development of the dynamic game character once it transfers to another medium or story due to the ideal of narrative continuity of transmedia storytelling. This is because dynamic game characters, like

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any other type of character, are predominantly shaped through stories. But what if the focus is not stories? Can video games construct characters without stories as the dominant discourse? And if so, how do these characters move transmedially from work to work if narrative continuity is not the ideal? To engage with these questions, I will shift the focal point in this chapter from dynamic game characters to transmedia game characters in order to show how game characters are transmedially constructed across works when narrative continuity is not a dominant discourse in a game.

In this chapter, I will analyse characters from the fighting games *Soulcalibur VI* (Bandai Namco 2018), *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (Bandai Namco Studios & Sora Ltd. 2018), and *Marvel vs. Capcom Infinite* (Capcom 2017). All these games use different transmedia techniques to construct the games' fighters as characters. I will first briefly discuss how medium specificity—or rather, its ambiguity—informs how media and video games construct characters. Then I will move to a discussion of transmedia characters in the fighting game genre and will end with an in-depth analysis of three fighting games that shows how the success of their transmedia techniques depends on the player's repertoire of knowledge of the fighters across different works to understand their behaviour and internal motivations as characters.

As explained in chapter 2, characters are quasi-persons that we understand simultaneously as pieces of writing and as person-like entities (Frow 2014, 2). Because of their double nature, characters are therefore independent from any given medium, that is, they appear across different kinds of media platforms without needing any *specific* medium. Yet, at the same time, the character relies on representational material to appear; it needs a medium to exist at all. This means that the medium specifies how the character is presented as a person-like entity and thus partially informs how we understand characters.

The representational abilities of media and their role in society is a broad topic in Media Studies. Marshall McLuhan's (1964) famous phrase "the medium is the message" points out that any medium or technology has physical and social consequences for already existing processes within human society, which determine how humans act and associate (8). His notion was followed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999), who discuss "remediation"—the convergence of media within other media. They specifically discuss the convergence of three technologies—computer, telephone, and television—which each appropriate aspects from each other, and through this appropriation will continue to produce future devices and practices within our culture. How different media are related and shape our experiences of characters thus deeply involves our relationship and experiences with media.

Yet, more so than ever before, our contemporary transmedia culture contains a plurality of different media through which content flows. Media platforms are often almost indistinguishable from each other. Are we still "watching television" when we open Netflix on our computer? Is the interactive thriller *Erica* (Flavourworks 2019) on the *Playstation 4* console a movie or a game? The difference might lie in the terms only. Since characters move between different media, they are affected by how these media platforms present them. In turn, that presentation also affects our reception of them, how we experience them, and what we believe characters should be like.

In order to understand the interrelations between different media, Lars Elleström (2010) seeks to define more precisely what is meant by the term "medium": "the understanding of what a medium is and what intermedial relations actually consist of has vital implications for each and every inquiry in old and new fields of study concerning the arts and media" (11). This includes a study on characters. His underlying argument is that any materiality of art (or any form of expression) depends on the technology that mediates it. Since he considers the concept of "medium" too broad to define, he divides it into four modalities—material modality, sensorial modality, spatiotemporal modality, and the semiotic modality (15). The element from Elleström's description that is relevant for characters is his explicit argument that each medium possesses these modalities in some mixture and combination to mediate any form of expression. The distinction between different media and their modalities is so ambiguous that no medium is entirely distinct from another in how it communicates characters. Each medium—such as film, television, literature, and even digital games—shares modalities with other media. Some media materialise characters in ways that are similar to other media, while they have their own distinct properties and conventions for expressing these figures. These properties and conventions can even differ within the same medium.

Just like films, novels, theatre, and television series, video games convey characters to audiences. They wrap the character in representational material using culturally learned conventions so that the player will consider the figure a person-like entity. The difficulty, however, is that the means and conventions that video games use to wrap characters in representational material can differ greatly by game. Games focused on telling a story, like role-playing games, will dedicate more time to the inner thoughts of a characters than a puzzle game. Dynamic game characters, too, are subject to the means and conventions of the medium, even more so, because they rely on the processual nature of cybermedia (Aarseth and Calleja 2015). As I explained in the first chapter, cybermedia have a processual nature that give

characters the potential to change depending on who plays them. Although this nature sets dynamic game characters somewhat apart from characters in non-cybermedia, they share many similarities with other characters in how they are constructed through and across media platforms.

Daniel Vella (2015) offers an extensive account of how games turn entities into characters. He constructs a semiotic-structural model of the player character—the figure "that emerges through the accretion of a set of textual signifiers" in digital games (371). Vella uses Uri Margolin's (1986) "characterization statements" (CS) to explain signifiers as textual cues. The reader uses these cues to deduce attributes and traits belonging to a character, giving the impression that a character has mental properties and capabilities (Vella 2015, 373). Vella adds ludic elements to Margolin's CS, which he considers to be the vehicles for characterisation unique to games:

- *Capabilities and Limitations*: that is, what the players can and cannot do through the character in the game world. (387)
- *Passion*: "the vulnerability and openness to be acted upon as much as by its capacity to act" (387) so that player characters can be influenced by other entities.
- *Goals*: these might be self-imposed or set by the player, but they are the ludic goals of the game. (388)
- *Attributes*: statistical values attached to the character that need to be able to be compared with those of other characters. (389)
- *Development*: the capacity for the character's ludic elements to change over time. (391)

Vella's description demonstrates in extensive detail how games turn a playable figure into a quasi-person. However, because his understanding of characters is rooted in the field of Literary Studies—the dominant theoretical discourse on characters—he assumes that characters, even in games, are exclusively constructed through stories. Although stories might be the most dominant way to convey characters, it is important to recognise that such an approach can only be used in games that employ stories to create a new character version. Additionally, Vella's model only fits the player character, which means that it does not explain how any other types of game figures turn into quasi-persons. This reflects the tendency of Game Studies to primarily discuss avatars and player characters. Vella's model can therefore only explain how the ludic elements turn the playable figure into a character.

Transmedia characters in fighting games

Vella's approach to the characterisation of game characters follows the dominant discourse on storytelling and, by extension, narrative continuity across works. However, there are ways besides stories in which characters can be constructed as quasi-persons. The fighting game genre is a category of video games in which fighter characters are incredibly important. Games of this genre do not tend to construct characters in a linear narrative structure. Rather, the fighter's development happens through the games' peripherals.

Rachael Hutchinson (2019, 71) explains that, having their roots in arcades or game centres, fighting games deliver story and character development at different points than game genres that rely on hours of linear gameplay. Fighting games are structured around three-minute battles between two characters that players control on a delineated stage before moving to the next battle. The narrative structure of fighting games constructs characters in a much more scattered manner than role-playing games. That is, according to Hutchinson, these fighters develop through story peripherals such as cover art, cabinet designs, and game manuals, outside the game itself. Inside the game, there are opening cinematics, game environments associated with different characters, speech lines, and short scenes before and after the battles (Hutchinson 2019, 71). Hutchinson regards this type of characterisation as a puzzle, as

> players must piece together in their minds as they play through the game. True experts know every character inside and out, not only adept at manipulating the character's moveset but also knowing their backstory, likes and dislikes, enemies and allies. (2019, 73)

Hutchinson primarily focuses on the evolution of game characters from their origin in fighting games. The fighting game genre uses an assemblage of different transmedia techniques to construct its game characters. These techniques stimulate the player to connect one version of a character to another, giving the figure a sense of personhood. As the story is relayed through peripherals, characters obtain a sense of personhood through art, move sets, speech lines, and short scenes that the player fits together in their mind. This is why narrative continuity across works is not necessary for fighting game characters.

Like many other genres, fighting games adopt and adapt characters from other game genres and media. For example, fighting games such as the *Super Smash Bros.* series consists exclusively of figures from other games. Other

fighting games, such as the *Soul* series, which originated in the arcades, bring "guest characters" into a new series. Characters are affected by how media platforms are capable of presenting them. Therefore, quasi-persons borrowed from non-cybermedia or even other game genres have to be adjusted to fit the fighting game genre. This means that, although their initial character development might have happened through linear stories, their appearance in fighting games forces their development to unfold in a more dispersed narrative structure.

Such is also the case for dynamic game characters: while certain game characters might be dynamic in some games, once they transfer to another game, they might not be a dynamic game character in that game. Since fighting games use different transmedia means to construct game characters, dynamic game characters initially seem to be largely absent from the genre due to its dispersed narrative structure and lack of player's creative agency over the character's development. Yet, it would be a mistake to assume that the genre does not engage with dynamic game characters at all, as I will show in the analysis of *Soulcalibur VI*. The remainder of this chapter will discuss three examples of fighting games with different transmedia approaches to constructing game characters from different works: *Soulcalibur VI*, *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, and *Marvel VS. Capcom*.

Geralt of Rivia in *Soulcalibur VI*

The ***Soul*** series was first developed for the arcade in Japan, then later ported to and developed for home game consoles. It currently consists of fourteen games, of which there are seven main instalments—the fighting games that advance the story of the series. The current main instalments are: *Soul Edge* (Project Soul 1995), *Soulcalibur* (Project Soul 1998), *Soulcalibur II* (Project Soul 2002), *Soulcalibur III* (Project Soul 2005), *Soulcalibur IV* (Namco 2008), *Soulcalibur V* (Namco 2012), and *Soulcalibur VI* (Project Soul 2018).

The instalments up to and including *Soulcalibur V* tell a continuous story set in the same world with characters that represent the same person. *Soulcalibur VI* breaks with this tradition and introduces a new timeline. This new timeline is a retelling of the original timeline as it occurs from *Soul Edge* up to and including *Soulcalibur V*. For someone lacking experience with the previous instalments, the timeline introduced in *Soulcalibur VI* is the timeline as they know it. For other players, it would be a retelling of the original storyline, which they might or might not consider blasphemy. The reboot is an excellent illustration of how invisible hands alter perceptions of a character's authenticity and identity through canonisation (as explained

in chapter 4), as there is now an "original" timeline from the previous games and a new timeline, with *Soulcalibur VI* overwriting the first story with new plot twists, introductions of new characters, and endings enforced by a top-down approach to appeal to both old and new players.

Soulcalibur VI introduces its story through a mission mode and a story mode. The latter is the main storyline that carries most of the new timeline. In the game's story mode, Soul Chronicle, the player is presented with multiple timelines. There is a main timeline, and individual timelines for over twenty different fighters—including Geralt of Rivia, whose adventures I will discuss below. In the main timeline, the player experiences the history of the evil sword Soul Edge and sees how different characters battle for the possession of it. In every other scene, the player gains control of a different individual and defeats opponents to advance the story.

In each individual timeline, the player controls individual fighters and experiences that person's perspective of the events of the main timeline. The individual timelines show the figures' personal motivations for why they are searching for Soul Edge. This narrative structure of a main narrative and individual narratives is also known as the "character-world relationship" common to media mixes, in which a grand story structures how smaller story fragments fit based on individual characters (Ōtsuka 1989; [1989] 2010; Schules 2015). As the player progresses through the main storyline, the game adds the individual experiences of different characters, to help the player understand the workings of the world of the *Soul* series.

In addition to the story mode, the game includes a mission mode, called Libra of Soul, in which the player can create their own avatar. Their custom avatar embarks on a journey to stop the evil mastermind, Azwel, from gathering the Soul Edge shards to create a new Soul Edge. In this mode, the player can "shape their own path" (Romano 2018) by meeting and fighting characters from the main story line, which suggests that the avatar and the other fighters are dynamic game characters. However, the player's choices have no impact on the main storyline of the story mode. Instead, by separating the story into two modes, the game is effectively split into different games, or "games within a game" (see Aarseth and Calleja 2015), to avoid a clash between the player's creative agency in the player's timeline and the main timeline as determined by the developer, which implies that narrative continuity is an ideal here. The ideal for narrative continuity also affects Geralt, one of the many guest characters that appear in the *Soul* series.

Within this swirl of modes, we find a familiar character that has not previously appeared in the *Soul* series: Geralt of Rivia from the *Witcher* series. The *Soul* series has a history of cross-overs by bringing in characters

from other media franchises. These include Yoda and Darth Vader from the *Star Wars* franchise, Link from *The Legend of Zelda* series, Lloyd Irving from *Tales of Symphonia* (Namco Tales Studio 2003), and Ezio Auditore da Firenze from the *Assassin's Creed* series. From this perspective, Geralt of Rivia fits perfectly into the mould that the *Soul* series has created for itself, in which guest characters bolster the roster of the series' original characters.

The series' new timeline allows the developer to add and alter elements from the original timeline to make space for new characters. This is the case with Grøh, a completely new fighter, but also with Geralt, who originated elsewhere. His appearance promises that he is somehow part of the new timeline. For example, the online encyclopaedia Fandom, where fans share their knowledge on popular culture, claims on the page on Geralt of Rivia that "Geralt is the first guest character to be part of the *Soul* series canon" ("Geralt of Rivia" n.d.). According to the page, Geralt is part of the official, rebooted timeline. Unlike previous guest characters, Geralt seems integrated into the new timeline—but is he really, and if so, to what extent?

Geralt of Rivia was originally the protagonist of the *Witcher* book series (1993–2013) created by the Polish writer Andrzej Sapkowski. This fantasy book series consists of several novels and short stories, in which Geralt is a "witcher"—a monster hunter for hire. This series was later adapted into several other media, including a film called *The Hexer* (2001), two television series—*The Hexer* (Brodzki 2002), and *The Witcher* (Schmidt Hissrich 2019) on Netflix—and *The Witcher* video game series (CD Projekt RED 2007–2016). In the video game series, the player controls Geralt, performing his duties and navigating challenges they meet as Geralt travels through the Northern Kingdoms and the Nilfgaardian Empire. The version of Geralt in the video game series diverges from the version in the book series. For example, in the books, Geralt is partially disabled, but the video games do not portray any such injury.

Geralt as he appears in *Soulcalibur VI* resembles the Geralt in *The Witcher* video game series. Not only is his visual appearance similar, but the transmedia techniques of Geralt's voice and fighting style also link both character versions. The main difference lies in what type of game character Geralt portrays in both games, as they are of different genres. *The Witcher 3* is a role-playing fantasy game in which the player roams and develops Geralt as a dynamic game character over the course of the game. Depending on the player's choices in Geralt's interactions with Ciri, his protégé, the game's endings will differ. Geralt is not a dynamic game character in *Soulcalibur VI*, a fighting game whose characters develop almost exclusively through its peripherals.

Although the Fandom Wikipedia page claims that Geralt is integrated into the new timeline of *Soulcalibur VI*, it is hardly possible to argue that he is part of the series' canon. The main story's timeline starts in 1583 and ends in 1590 AD. Geralt's part in the timeline starts in the year 1586 and ends in 1587, so the player receives one year of Geralt's adventures. At the start of his story, Geralt is looking for a sorceress. When he finds her, she transports him to the world of Soul Edge against his will. In this world, he tries to find a gate to return him to his former world, but to reach that goal he must fight and defeat different opponents. While most characters presented in the timeline are shown to know each other or meet each other, Geralt knows nobody. He only meets Zasalamel and Mitsurugi, whom he must fight and defeat to return to his own world. Geralt is not interested in the Soul Edge, nor in anyone in that world; all he cares about is returning to his former world, which he manages to do. In fact, Geralt's presence does not influence how the rebooted story plays out; he appears but does not influence the other characters' attempts to find the cursed sword Soul Edge and its counterpart, the spirit sword Soul Calibur. Rather, he disappears back to his own world almost as soon as he enters the world of Soul Edge.

I suspect that Geralt's role has been minimised in *Soulcalibur*'s new canon because he clashes with the game's narrative continuity. As I discussed in the previous chapters, aside from being manipulated by the strategies of control of canonisation and the author function, characters are valuable intellectual property for character merchandising. This type of merchandising does not combine well with the ideal of narrative continuity. If Geralt had played a larger role in the story, this would clash not only with the previous timeline of the *Soul* series, but it also with Geralt's established identity in *The Witcher* book series and video game series on which this game's manifestation of Geralt is based. As such, we may assume that marketing is the obvious reason for Geralt's presence. Playing as Geralt, feeling how he moves and defeats enemies in a different game, is probably of interest to fans of both the *Soulcalibur* series and *The Witcher 3* series. Given that the *Soul* series has been making use of guest characters since *Soulcalibur II*, any guest character's appearance is a marketing strategy; it attracts both old and new pools of fans from *The Witcher* series and the *Soul* series.

Link in Super Smash Bros. Ultimate

The fighting game genre originates from the arcade, but a notable exception is the *Super Smash Bros.* (SSB) series, which first appeared on a Nintendo home console. In 1999, Nintendo released the first game instalment, *Super*

Smash Bros. (*SSB*) (HAL Laboratory 1999), for the Nintendo 64 console. This game featured twelve fighters from different Nintendo game series, including Mario from Nintendo's *Super Mario* series, Link from *The Legend of Zelda* series, Kirby from the *Kirby* series, Pikachu from the *Pokémon* series, and Fox from the *Star Fox* series. With this first set of fighters, Nintendo created the initial template for future instalments. In 2001, the company released *Super Smash Bros. Melee* (HAL Laboratory 2001) (*SSBM*). This game used the prior game's fighters, move sets, and stages, but also expanded the group of fighters with newcomers such as Marth, originally from *Fire Emblem: Shadow Dragon and the Blade of Light* (Intelligent Systems 1990), and the Ice Climbers from the *Ice Climber* series. Every new instalment expanded the roster of fighters with new characters, move sets, and stages, and simultaneously updated the older group of fighters to fit the new game. The template that Nintendo has set over the series tells us about the process of how the game transmedially constructs its characters through the use of *kyara* (explained in chapter 2), and how it depends on the player to use their repertoire of knowledge to make sense of the fighters as characters.

Nintendo tends to adjust the fighters' visual design, move set, and voices in newer game instalments so that the figures resemble earlier versions. Consider the fighters originally from *The Legend of Zelda* series: the first fighter introduced was Link in *SSB*, whose visual design referred to his manifestation in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo 1998). The next instalment, *SSBM*, introduced new fighters from this series: Princess Zelda, Sheik, and Young Link, who also all visually resembled their counterparts in *Ocarina of Time*. Princess Zelda and Sheik are the same fighter; during a match, Zelda can transform into Sheik and gains the ability to manoeuvre around the stage. This transformation refers to them being the same person in *Ocarina of Time*. In the next instalment, *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* (Sora Ltd. 2008) (*SSBB*), the characters started to refer to other *The Legend of Zelda* games. Link's and Zelda's appearances mirror that of their counterparts in the *Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess* (Nintendo 2006). Young Link was replaced with Toon Link to resemble Link's counterpart in *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* (Nintendo 2002).

Currently, there are over eighty different transmedia characters in the series, which shows how Nintendo asks its players to know where the different characters originally come from. Just recognising all the references to different versions of what is only a handful of characters is a job in its own. Link, Toon Link, Sheik, and Zelda, all underwent drastic changes from *Super Smash Bros.* for the Nintendo 3DS handheld console (Bandai Namco Studios & Sora Ltd. 2014) (*SSB4*) to *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (*SSBU*). For

example, Sheik and Zelda became two different individuals, and Zelda and Link are not presented as a matching couple anymore; Zelda's appearance now resembles her version from *The Legend of Zelda: A Link between Worlds* (Nintendo 2013), whereas Link resembles his counterpart from *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2017).

I will now address how the player makes sense of the fighters as characters in the most recent instalment, *SSBU*. The game presents two modes: Smash mode and Spirit mode. The Smash mode is a multi-player mode in which two or more players can fight, each choosing one of the over eighty characters on more than a hundred different stages. The Spirit mode is designed to be a single-player campaign or an adventure mode, in which the goal is to save the fighters captured by the evil Galeem. There is, in other words, a story embedded in this game. With Kirby as their starting fighter, the player is asked to free fighters from the evil Galeem by defeating puppet fighters that resemble the captured fighters. If the player manages to win, the freed fighter joins their roster, and the player can choose to play as them.

Unlike Geralt of Rivia's integration into a pre-existing storyline in *Soulcalibur VI*, *SSBU*'s story is unconcerned with continuity between character versions from earlier games and media. *SSBU*'s Spirit mode attempts no narrative continuity between fighters and their prior versions, and just repeats the formula from the previous SSB's instalments. Transmedia characters from different series are united without any logical explanation of why they appear together. It would even be incorrect to state that *SSBU* presents a Nintendo universe, as not every character that appears is created or owned by Nintendo. Simply put, these characters are not characterised by their narrative continuity with prior manifestations. Rather, they are controlled as intellectual property and function as *kyara* in the *SSB*'s media mix.

Kyara, the visual representations of a character detached from a story world, are an excellent way to avoid narrative continuity between the different character versions. The *kyara* plays a major role in character merchandising in Japan, in which income is generated through selling and/or leasing of the rights to use a figure's image (see also Steinberg 2012, 40). As I explained in chapter 4, when a character is licensed to third parties, the IP owners control the character's development across works by licensing the figure to multiple parties. Eventually, the figure ends up with multiple transtextual identities.

Kyara avoid the problem of continuity between identities since they are to be consumed independently from the story in which they were originally placed. Hiroki Azuma states that *kyara* exist in a "grand non-narrative," which refers to a "realm that exists behind small narratives but lacks any

form of narrativity" (Azuma [2001] 2009, 38–54). However, I disagree with his claim that they exist in a grand non-narrative. Transmedia characters are not completely independent from other stories; there is just no dominant focus on storytelling. Such a point of view minimises the reader's efforts to make sense of the multiple identities of a character appearing across multiple works. Instead, in *SSBU*, a *kyara* functions as an amalgam of the different versions of the character, minus their story. It requires the presence of the player and their repertoire of knowledge about the character to think of the *kyara* as a character. But it does not enforce narrative continuity between prior versions. Rather than on storytelling, it focuses on fragmented, predominantly visual references that, as Hutchinson (2019, 73) stated about fighting games, the player pieces together.

Let us return to Link, who functions as a *kyara* in *SSBU*. *SSBU* uses transmedia techniques to connect Link (not Young Link or Toon Link) to his counterpart in *Breath of the Wild*. They visually resemble each other, as this fighter sports the hero tunic, the master sword, and Hylian shield from Link in *Breath of the Wild*. *SSBU* also connects the two Link versions through gameplay. For example, Link uses an ancient bow and ancient arrows during his all-out attack. The bombs that Link can throw and detonate on impact in earlier instalments are now replaced by remote bombs.

As a *kyara*, Link's move set only makes sense if the player is familiar with his version in *Breath of the Wild*. Yet it would be inaccurate to say that only those familiar with that particular version of Link would be able to construct Link as a character. Link's original context is not *Breath of the Wild*, but the first *The Legend of Zelda* game, and he is the protagonist of all instalments within *The Legend of Zelda* series. Within this series and media, Link's manifestations are quite similar; he often wears green clothing and bears the mark of the Triforce of Courage, a major emblem throughout the series. So even if the player is only familiar with one or two games from this series, they would likely still recognise Link.

Nintendo no longer exclusively uses characters that it owns. Since *SSBU4*, Nintendo has started using characters from third-party developers. In *SSBU*, the player can obtain and download several fighters originally from game series not created and owned by Nintendo. These third-party fighters also demand that the player knows the context in which the characters have appeared before but only few players are likely to recognise the specific reference. For example, it was revealed at the Game Awards in December 2020 that Sephiroth, the antagonist of *Final Fantasy VII* would be joining *SSBU* as a fighter. For some reason (fan service, most likely), the player can choose to have Sephiroth enter battle without a shirt on. When I tried to find in

which games Sephiroth has been shirtless before, I discovered that a shirtless Sephiroth appeared in *Dissidia Final Fantasy* (Square Enix 2008), not in the antagonist's origin source *Final Fantasy VII*. In other words, a player must know a repertoire of game characters that expands beyond Nintendo's intellectual property to make sense of the plurality of references.

In short, the *SSBU* fighters function like *kyara*. Their construction does not depend on storytelling, yet nor are they completely independent from earlier games. Rather, the characters were licensed through intellectual property, as Nintendo united fighters from its own franchises and others. The player is then asked to make inferences to prior games and media, though it is not required that players know all the characters. Rather, the huge roster of characters appeals to different players, as most players of this game will be familiar with at least one or more of the characters. The fighters in the *SSB* series therefore also function as amalgams; through transmedia techniques in the game's narrative structure, the construction of these fighters as characters depends on what transmedia connections the player can make.

The cast in Marvel vs. Capcom Infinite

Of the three games I discuss in this chapter, *Marvel vs. Capcom Infinite* is the least character-oriented game. This game is a crossover between the characters from the American company Marvel Entertainment and the Japanese video game developer Capcom. Like *Soulcalibur VI* and *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, this game also belongs to a longer series—the *Marvel vs. Capcom* series. The collaboration between the two companies started with *X-Men: Children of the Atom* (Capcom 1994) for the arcade, developed by Capcom using licensed characters from Marvel Comics. The release of *Marvel vs. Capcom: Clash of Super Heroes* (Capcom 1998) was the first instalment of the *Marvel vs. Capcom* series, making the game I discuss here the fifth instalment of the series.

As a young girl in the 1990s who mostly played family-oriented Nintendo games, I had almost no exposure to the products of either company. The Marvel comics and films were of little interest to me if I noticed them at all. Superhero comics did not grab my attention as I was mostly reading comics made for teenage girls. I only became familiar with Marvel films when I met friends in my twenties who were all fans of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). They dragged me to the cinema whenever a new film was released and explained the plot to me when I did not understand what was happening. I was not even aware of games made by Capcom until *Phoenix*

Wright: Ace Attorney (Capcom Production Studio 4 2001) was adapted from the Nintendo Gameboy Advance to the Nintendo DS handheld game console in 2005 in Europe. Even then, I was not interested in popular franchises by Capcom such as *Resident Evil, Monster Hunter*, and *Street Fighter*.

I am relating my background to emphasise that the construction of transmedia characters in fighting games relies on the player's knowledge of the characters in other media and games. Games can contain many references to other sources, but if the player does not grasp these, they will have no idea what motivates the character and why it acts as it does. In my case, that means my repertoire for *Marvel vs. Capcom Infinite* was limited to my knowledge of the MCU and the *Ace Attorney* series. Since no characters from the *Ace Attorney* series appear in *Marvel vs. Capcom Infinite*, my practical knowledge to make sense of its characters relies on my knowledge of the MCU, which will be the main source for the analysis on the next pages.

Marvel vs. Capcom Infinite offers the player a story mode for playing on their own, a battle mode in which players can face off against each other, a training mode to develop a player's skills with individual fighters, and a mission mode, which is essentially a tutorial for new players to become familiar with the fighters' move sets. Just as in the previous games, I limit my analysis here to the story mode in which the game attempts to explain the combined presence of all the different characters. The story mode starts *in medias res*, when the Marvel and Capcom heroes are trying to stave off Ultron Sigma, a villain who merged the world of Marvel and the world of Capcom into a single world to control both. Amid all the chaos, the heroes aim to restore both worlds by trying to defeat Ultron Sigma.

Hutchinson (2019) explains that because fighting games use peripherals to tell stories, they rely less on linear gameplay than other genres. However, we see that *Marvel vs. Capcom Infinite* suffers from trying to tell a linear story; it seems to want to look like a movie. The narrative structure is similar to that of *Soulcalibur VI*. Both games contain cut scenes for battles. However, I see two major differences between the two games. First, aesthetically, *Soulcalibur VI* looks more like a comic. The player is shown in drawn static images in each cut scene. *Marvel vs. Capcom Infinite*, on the other hand, looks more like a Marvel movie, with moving polygon characters fighting their way through all the action.

Second, *Marvel vs. Capcom Infinite* exclusively contains a main story line with little opportunity for the player to breathe. As soon as one battle is over, the player is launched in another quick-cut scene leading up to another battle. In almost every scene, the player is introduced to another

set of characters whose move set they must learn quickly. This suggests that the game not only requires players to be familiar with the characters but are also used to the fighting game genre in general.

When I said that this game focuses the least on its characters, I did not mean it does not focus on its fighters at all. Rather, the pace of the story it attempts to tell downplays characters in favour of storytelling. As a result, this fast-paced narrative structure demands a thorough repertoire of knowledge of both franchises to construct its characters. The Marvel heroes in this game are not modelled after their cinematic counterparts, which means that for players used to the MCU, certain character versions feel more alien. For example, Thor in this game appears larger, bulkier, and less charismatic than the actor Chris Hemsworth's Thor version in the MCU movies. The lack of similarity between Thor in this game and Chris Hemsworth's version signals that the character has a different identity in *Marvel vs. Capcom Infinite* than in the MCU.

One difference stood out for me when comparing the Marvel and Capcom fighters. Most Marvel heroes in the game had appeared in comics and movies together before, whereas the Capcom fighters came from different games and franchises. Marvel heroes generally have different origin sources. For example, Captain America first appears in Marvel Comic's *Captain America Comics* #1 (Simon and Kirby 1941) and Captain Marvel/Carol Danvers first appears in Marvel Comic's *Marvel Super-Heroes* #13 (Thomas and Colan 1968). They appear together in Marvel's Avenger comics, where these heroes band together to fight evil. This pattern also occurs in the MCU. Captain America, played by Chris Evans, first appears in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Johnston 2011), the fifth instalment of the MCU. Captain Marvel, played by Brie Larson, first appears in *Captain Marvel* (Boden and Fleck 2019), the twenty-first film instalment of that series. They appear together in the twenty-second instalment *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo and Russo 2019).

Creating a larger universe that contains multiple linear worlds like the MCU is a common transmedia technique to enforce narrative continuity in a larger transmedia franchise (Thon 2015). From that perspective, it makes sense that these characters—and any other Marvel figures that belong to the Marvel's complex universe—have pre-established bonds that can transfer to another work. Yet I am not aware of a similar pattern for the Capcom heroes. During my research of the Capcom heroes, I did not find Capcom heroes banding together outside of the *Marvel vs. Capcom* game series. I believe this is because Euro-American-centric transmedia storytelling strives for narrative continuity, while Japanese media mixes proliferates characters.

That is, the Capcom characters function like *kyara* and are used in a similar way as the fighters in Nintendo's *Super Smash Bros.* series.

The problem with the story's linearity and pace is that it gives the player little opportunity to gradually construct the heroes as quasi-persons. Not that every game needs to entirely explain a character's motivation and background. However, this game's presentation of references to other sources demands a huge amount of knowledge from its players to understand the linear plot. There is probably a whole gamut of techniques and references that the game had been throwing at me, which players might not understand due to their lack of knowledge of either one of the franchises. For example, I know I missed the transmedia reference of the combined name of Ultron Sigma. The first part of the name refers to a Marvel antagonist, and the latter to the villain of the Mega Man series produced by Capcom. So this game predominantly appeals to a group of fans who are either familiar with both franchises or this series in general, or do not mind it if they miss specific references.

In summary, *Marvel vs. Capcom Infinite*'s transmedia techniques are less character-focused and instead create a cinematic experience with a linear story. The characters are then subjugated to supporting the plot. The player requires a vast amount of knowledge to understand the plot and the relations between the characters (particularly Marvel superheroes), yet the game barely explains them. The game does not deepen the connection between the Marvel and Capcom fighters, nor does it make clear references to the relationships between Capcom fighters. The Capcom fighters also have fewer pre-established connections between each other, since they come from different franchises and function like *kyara*. Unlike the Marvel heroes, the Capcom heroes are not part of a bigger universe that creates a form of narrative continuity. What we see is that *Marvel vs. Capcom Infinite* requires the player's prior knowledge to understand the game's plot and the construction, relationships, and motivations of its characters.

Conclusion

The fighting games discussed in this chapter provide the opportunity to explore how game characters move across works when narrative continuity is not an ideal. Although storytelling is not completely absent, treating it as secondary shifts the focus from story to character. Furthermore, to construct their fighters, the fighting games demand a broad repertoire of knowledge from players, or at least familiarity with the context of the characters in other works.

Soulcalibur VI does not require that players are familiar with the original story since it has created a new main timeline, which can appeal both to old and new players, but it does ask the player to be familiar with Geralt as the main guest star in their roster of fighters. He is the one who sells the game, but his presence in the game's canon is in the end downplayed in favour of the plot between the original characters from the *Soul* series.

On the other hand, while it is the least character-oriented among the examples covered here, *Marvel vs. Capcom*'s fast-paced and linear narrative structure requires thorough knowledge on the part of the player to understand the characters' behaviours and motivations, and perhaps gain some narrative catharsis in the process.

Super Smash Bros. Ultimate relies little on storytelling, less so than the other two games, and provides no narrative continuity between its huge roster of fighters and their counterparts in other works. Instead, the game predominantly presents its fighters as *kyara*; the fighters function as visual amalgams in which the game stimulates the player to make connections with the fighters' original contexts to make sense of them. Since the roster is so huge, has been growing with DLC characters, and increasingly has characters from third party owners, the game does not seem to require player familiarity with all the characters, but instead appeals to a large group of players familiar with at least some of the characters.

Looking at these games shows not only that the three strategies of control (authorship, ownership, and canonisation) are the mechanisms underlying the transfer of characters from one media to another, but more importantly, I argue, it also demonstrates that the scope of transmedia game characters and their crossovers to other works is limited to the audience's knowledge. Indeed, a developer may make as many crossovers and references to prior works as it wishes to construct its fighter characters, but if almost no one can understand the references, then what use would this be?

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7. The future of dynamic game characters

Abstract: This chapter reflects on the need to study fictional characters in the current transmedia landscape. As this landscape sees an increase in affective economics within transmedia franchises, dynamic game characters shape consumer desires and influence their purchasing decisions since these characters promise users creative agency. In this chapter, I will therefore chart my vision of how dynamic game characters will be depicted in the upcoming transmedia landscape.

Keywords: Parasocial relationships, 2.5D culture, character monetisation, affective economics

Charting a vision

Characters matter. They are the reason why we invest so much energy in popular culture, why we become immersed in movies, television series, novels, or video games. Our contemporary media landscape is seeing an increase in affective economics, as Jenkins (2006) predicted would happen, to increase the appeal of transmedia franchises. Affective economics can be understood as the building, developing, and maintenance of relationships in order to shape desires that influence purchasing decisions (Galbraith 2019). We see affective economics in the increase in parasocial relationships with fictional characters (Karhulahti and Välisalo 2021). Within these economics, *dynamic* game characters are an ideal type of character to shape desires and influence purchasing decisions, because they promise users creative agency so that the characters become personalised according to individual tastes and enhance personal experiences. These characters become a part of us, and, in turn, we become a tiny part of them. Below I will briefly chart my vision on how dynamic game characters are and should

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be depicted across our transmedia landscape, which relies increasingly on affective economics.

Increase in diversity in romances

Dynamic game characters provide a way to break with heteronormative standards in game culture. Video games are becoming more diverse in their representations of characters. One way in which we see this for the dynamic game character is in video games with a *System of Affection* that allows players to date a variety of different characters. Recent years have seen a rise in romance simulation games from indie game developers that carry more representation in terms of the characters' gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. *Hades* (Supergiant Games 2020), the game I discussed in chapter 5, is one of the best examples that provides players with the opportunity to date a small group of characters in different relationship structures (i.e., monogamous or polyamorous). More games like that have entered the market: *Mystic Messenger* (Cheritz 2016), *Dream Daddy* (Game Grumps 2017), *Monster Prom* (Beautiful Glitch 2018), *Your Royal Gayness* (Lizard Hazard Games 2018), or *Boyfriend Dungeon* (KitFox Games 2021), are just a few examples of games in which the player can enter romantic relationships with characters of various genders, ethnicities, and sexualities.

At the same time, dynamic game characters have the tendency to reinforce any imbalance in narrative continuity, which also affects the representation of characters, and might even reinforce heteronormativity. Developers may contribute to harmful discourses around sexual identities by enforcing heteronormativity as the default, as shown by *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft 2018) in chapter 4. Chapter 5 showed that romance simulation games, like *Hades*, still tend to operate within heteronormative frameworks, depicting romantic relationships and sex as something to be won, and systematise love and friendship. These games tend to frame a character's sexual orientation in terms of the player, a "player orientation" so to speak. Regardless of the players' actual sexual orientation or gender, the character will be attracted to the player. The characters might be dynamic in how the player creates the relationship, but they lack dynamicity and their own agency to choose anyone but the player. That said, I am still rather optimistic. The increase in diversity in romances in video games that are LGBTQIA+-friendly shows that dynamic game characters can provide a way of breaking with heteronormative standards.

Character monetisation

Dynamic game characters have become ways to monetise games. Game monetisation has changed since the early 2000s. In the early 2000s, video games were sold as cultural commodities that generated value through the sale of boxed or digital units (Bernevega and Gekker 2021). However, with the rise of smart phones and tablets as gaming devices, the freemium model became the monetisation model that dominates the game industry: free-to-play games that contain in-game purchases (Nieborg 2015). This shift occurred in the East-Asian game markets ahead of the Euro-American game markets, but now dominates the game industry globally (Alha 2020).

In-game purchases often contain gambling-like mechanics. In the Euro-American game markets, we often think of loot boxes as in-game purchases, which are little treasure chests that contain a random set of rewards and items. The East-Asian game markets use *gacha*, derived from *gachapon* machines associated with Japanese media mixes, that sell capsule balls containing different items. By purchasing a ball, consumers may or may not obtain a desired item. *Gacha* is found in the form of playing cards and/or in console or mobile games. Above all, *gacha* is character-oriented—the item usually contains a desired character.

Characters are usually the most important collectibles in *gacha* games. Character collection is reported to be the main feature among the highest ranked mobile games worldwide and the reason for these games' success (SensorTower 2023, 32). One of the highest grossing games on the global market is the China-based free-to-play game *Genshin Impact* (HoYoverse 2020) that generates most of its revenue from China, Japan, and the USA (Chapple 2022). The game shows how important players' desire for characters has become to fuel the monetisation of a game. Every couple of months, HoYoverse releases new (and popular, old) characters in a so-called "wish banner," their most lucrative source of revenue, for which players use in-game resources, obtained through hours of gameplay or by paying, to have a chance at obtaining a character they desire. HoYoverse uses all kinds of transmedia marketing techniques to stimulate this desire in their players: the characters look like cute Japanese cartoon characters found in anime or a manga, they use popular Japanese voice actors that players know from other Japanese media platforms, and release information about these characters across their multi-lingual social media channels like Twitter and YouTube.

HoYoverse has even added a *System of Affection* to increase the characters' appeal: in the game, players can go on dates with characters like Thoma, Barbara or Beidou. The dates are designed in a tree structure, in which

each player choice leads to a different path with a different ending. That means that these characters are dynamic game characters. However, the catch is that no choice truly matters, since none of the endings affects the game's main storyline; it only provides rewards that players can use in the wish-banner. This is yet another game example that diminishes relationships for the purpose of obtaining external rewards, and from which the developer will benefit economically. So, while I am optimistic about the possible diversity that dynamic game characters may provide, I remain critical about their role in current game monetisation for free-to-play games, which will only continue to increase.

Beyond video games

Finally, dynamic game characters will increasingly appear outside of video games. As a matter of fact, they already are. Dynamic game characters are not entities exclusive to video games; as characters that appear in cybermedia, dynamic game characters appear across all different kinds of media platforms. In her extensive work on Japan's emerging 2.5-dimensional (*ni-ten-go jiten*) culture, Sugawa-Shimada (2020) defines 2.5-dimensional culture as "cultural practices which reproduce the fictional space of contemporary popular cultural products (such as manga, anime, and videogames) along with the fans' interplay between the real and fictional spaces" (125). Examples of this cultural phenomenon include cosplay, voice-actor/character concerts, anime-induced tourism, or virtual YouTubers (also known as VTubers), just to name a few (125). According to Sugawa-Shimada, the 2.5D cultural phenomena started to emerge since the early 2000s in accordance with the rise and development of the internet, social media, and virtual technologies (129). In other words, 2.5D refers to a hybrid reality in which the virtual, fictional, and real merge. We may connect this to the rise of convergence culture that we see also in Euro-American-centric popular culture.

The dynamic game character thrives in the hybrid reality of fiction, real, and virtual that Sugawa-Shimada describes. As an example, she mentions virtual reality (VR) technology that has come to be sold at an affordable price for the normal customer since 2016: "Through products like PlayStation VR, players could easily experience close and realistic interaction with fictional VR characters in the pseudo-reality space of their own home" (129). We have been seeing examples of this ever since. With regard to games, for instance, the gaming platform Steam sells *VR Kanojo* ("VR Girlfriend") (Illusion 2017), a virtual reality experience in which players can play out

an erotic fantasy with the character Sakura Yuuhi, the player's virtual girlfriend, in her room by directly interacting with her, for instance by sharing food, kissing her, and touching her. As per the dynamic game character's nature, the fantasy plays out along different paths based on the player's choices.

It is thanks to this hybrid reality that we see dynamic game characters outside video games. To name just a few examples, first we have Sugawa-Shimada's curious case of fictional characters from anime, manga, and video games having their own official Twitter accounts from which they (supposedly) send their own messages and personal photos (2020, 129). As a result, the line between the virtual, the fictional, and the real, but also between human and machine is increasingly blurred (see Turkle (2017 [2011]). This also means there is more space for characters in real life. Secondly, nowadays, technologies are coming in the shape of humanoid robots or voice assistants. In my own work (Blom and Mikkonen 2022), I have mentioned that voice assistants have become increasingly character-like. The case of the Japanese voice assistant Hikari Azuma, developed by the company Gatebox, who has the visuals of a cute character found in anime, manga, and video games, is an example of how dynamic game characters can be found outside games. She is designed to serve (straight), single men, telling them when to take an umbrella with them, and turns on the lights for them in their house. Most strikingly, she is supposed to change overtime as she interacts with the user, becoming more idiosyncratic to match the user's preferences. While voice assistants like Siri and the Google Assistant do not have Hikari Azuma's cartoon girl visuals, they nonetheless emulate a sense of intentionality, associated with the human likeness of characters (174).

Finally, VTubers are surging in popularity as well, including outside Japan in countries like South Korea, China, but also the USA and the UK (Suan 2021). They align with the increasing popularity of online streaming on gaming and social media platforms such as YouTube or Twitch, where the hosts assume anime avatars through motion-capture software to perform as an anime character while playing games as audiences watch. The appeal lies in the character persona that the actor performs. In Japan, fans of these VTubers can even buy their song albums to support them not only online, but also through the purchase of character goods.

All in all, I expect that as affective economics continues to grow in popularity, new forms of dynamic game characters will emerge from the phenomena that have just been mentioned to develop beyond the video games that I discussed throughout this book.

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Glossary: A brief typology of characters

Throughout this book, I use specific terms to refer to different types of characters. Importantly, it is entirely within this book's framework that multiple terms can be applied to a single character; a character can be transmedial, as it disperses throughout different media, and dynamic within a video game. A character can simultaneously be an avatar and a player character. The point is that although there are different categories of characters, they are not mutually exclusive. This glossary serves to provide short explanations on what I mean by certain terms.

Characters: I refer to characters as *quasi-persons*, a concept borrowed from John Frow (2014, 2), who describes our current understanding of these figures as both pieces of writing and person-like entities. Quasi-persons are simultaneously a figure of speech and a figural representation (8). This dual understanding of characters is relatively recent and the result of a long debate in Literary Studies since the early 1900s between those who saw characters as structures of a text and those who regarded them in terms of their humanity. I will therefore occasionally also refer to characters as "figures." It is in this context that characters have come to be understood as pieces of writing and as entities that the reader considers to be person-like.

Dynamic game characters: I define dynamic game characters as a type of game character whose development outcome, and thus identity, changes depending on how the player plays the game. By exercising creative agency over a game character's growth and development, players become part of them. Dynamic game characters may be playable characters, like a player character, or characters over whom the player has no direct control like non-playable characters. As long as the player's agency in the game has consequences for their growth and outcome as *quasi-persons*, I will treat them as dynamic game characters.

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Game characters: ultimately, I treat game characters as quasi-persons that are materialised through the artefacts of games. This means that any being we recognise as a character that appears inside a game may be called a *game character*. Yet, game characters can become transmedia characters when they appear in other media platforms. This does not mean, however, that different types of game characters do not exist. I make the following distinctions:

> *Avatars and player characters*: a distinction can be made in games between playable characters that players control directly and non-playable characters (NPCs), which they do not control. A common distinction for playable characters is between the "avatar" and "player character." Although the two terms have different meanings, they are often conflated. The avatar is an extension of the player, whom the player uses to engage with the game world. Avatars can take the shape of a hammer, mouse, or a playable person-like figure. By contrast, the player character is a playable figure—a quasi-person—that the player controls. As such, an avatar can be a character and a player character can be an avatar, but both categories do not necessarily have to be present in the same figure at the same time; while most player characters can be considered avatars, not all characters in a game have to be avatars, nor do player characters consistently have to be avatars in the same game.
>
> *Non-playable characters*: there is a stark lack of significant discussions in Game Studies on different types of game characters other than the avatar and player character. I use the term "non-playable characters" exclusively for quasi-persons over which the player has absolutely no control in terms of how they develop, such as background characters or functional characters like merchants.

Kyara and *kyarakutā*: I explain the difference between these terms extensively in chapter 2, but to put it briefly, *kyarakutā* is the Japanese word, borrowed from the English language, for "character," which denotes a fictional figure with a personality and human-like behaviour, as defined by Itō (2005). In other words, a *quasi-person*. A *kyara* is a (usually visual) icon that only looks like a character. It is a "proto-character" that precedes the *kyarakutā* before readers perceive it as a character (ibid.). Since these are Japanese nouns, they can both be used as plural and as singular.

Transmedia characters: once characters hop from one medium to another—across novels, television series, video games, and figurines—we can say that they are *transmedia characters*. Transmedia characters are inherently

transtextual. As Richardson puts it, they are "characters that exist in more than one text" (2010, 527). The difference between transtextual characters and transmedia characters is mostly theoretical, and is in fact redundant, since we see characters appear virtually everywhere. But while a transtextual character could potentially stay within the same medium, like a novel, a transmedia character necessarily is a character that moves to another medium, whether it be a novel, video game, or film.

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