

# **“I've been having these weird thoughts lately...”: Conspiratorial hermeneutics and metareflexive depictions of fan practices in the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise.**

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## **Abstract**

This paper draws on the theory of mastermind narration developed by M.J. Clarke in the context of prestige television dramas with highly complex non-linear narratives and inconsistent characters (Clarke, 2012) and Jason Mittell's (2015) concept of 'forensic fandom' to offer a reading of the *Kingdom Hearts* (Square Enix, 2002-) franchise in light of postmodern practices of textual consumption characteristic of current fandoms, such as those explored by Henry Jenkins (2006) and Matt Hills (2002), but also addressing Japanese theorists Hiroki Azuma (2009) and Eiji Ōtsuka's (2010) work around the notion of the Otaku. I argue that the series' significant deviation from Disney's traditional approach to narrative (Wasko, 2001) indicates a desire for the corporation to explore radical new forms of textual production, and to negotiate emerging fan consumption practices within the safe environment of a controlled and licensed text. Just as cultural theorists like Clarke and Anne Allison (2006) argue that a textual product can often contain traces that reflect its wider conditions of production, I propose that the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise can be read allegorically as an extended experiment by Disney into new forms of collaborative storytelling. I attempt to demonstrate this by concluding with an exploration of the metareflexive depiction of the fan practice of cosplay.

## **Author Keywords**

Kingdom Hearts; Cosplay; metareflexivity; Transmedia Storytelling; Fandom; Otaku; The Media Mix

## **Introduction: *Kingdom Hearts* as a transmedia text**

A fusion of the worlds and characters of American media giant Disney and major Japanese video game publisher Square Enix, *Kingdom Hearts* can be understood not only as a truly transmedia and transcultural phenomena but significantly also a transcorporate one, indicating how huge corporations like Disney and Square Enix are reorientating themselves towards new markets and fandoms in the contexts of postmodern strategies of consumption, globalized economies, and the network societies in which their texts circulate. Henry Jenkins defines transmedia storytelling as an approach that "depends less on each individual work being self-sufficient than on each work contributing to a larger narrative economy" (2004). Rather than the more linear model of

franchising, in which a core text (or mothership) is replicated in other media, here the texts are all bound up in a complex interdependent network with no clear beginning or end. Transmedia storytelling thus constitutes an example of what David Bordwell calls a new narrative mode, which is summarized here by Jason Mittell as, “‘a historically distinct set of norms of narrational construction and comprehension,’ one that crosses genres, specific creators, and artistic movements to forge a coherent category of practices” (Mittell, 2015, p. 17, citing Bordwell, 1989). I prefer the term ‘narrative regime,’ which Mittell uses, as it suggests a form of dominance not implied by mode.

The implications of this new regime are manifold, not least in the challenges faced by traditional media producers seeking to put their vast product portfolios to work across and through a variety of digital media platforms and new technologies, that accelerate and increase the complexity of fan interactions (Klastrup & Tosca, 2016). Such efforts run the risk of even major media conglomerates losing artistic control of their text’s meaning or economic control of its value, because, as Jenkins has famously observed, both kinds of control are challenged by the participatory nature of the fan cultures such transmedia texts both create and feed upon:

Fandom possesses particular forms of cultural production, aesthetic traditions and practices... Their works appropriate raw materials from the commercial culture but use them as the basis for the creation of a contemporary folk culture... *The nature of fan creation challenges the media industry’s claims to hold copyrights on popular narratives* [emphasis added]. Once television characters enter into a broader circulation, intrude into our living rooms, pervade the fabric of our society, they belong to their audience and not simply to the artists who originated them. (Henry Jenkins, 1992, p. 279)

Structurally and economically the transmedia narrative regime differs from Disney’s traditional strategies of cross promotion, synergy and franchising models (see Denison’s piece in this issue<sup>1</sup> for an exploration of these terms). For example, David Hesmondhalgh (2013, pp. 200–201) notes that in the postmodern era the trend is for corporations to reorientate around horizontal models of ownership operating across a diverse range of media (for instance licensing deals or owning subsidiaries), rather than older hierarchical models of vertical integration characteristic of the postwar era, in which a select few powerful media players owned and controlled every step in the chain from production to exhibition of a single media form.

Such highly networked approaches to media production and circulation are typically understood in the Japanese context by the concept of the ‘media mix’ (see Blom, 2019 for a particularly good breakdown). As a term the media mix stretches back to the 1989 where it was discussed by anime creator and critic Eiji Ōtsuka as an emerging form of fandom in his groundbreaking work *Monogatari shōhiron* (“A Theory of Narrative Consumption”, Ōtsuka, 2010). Then working as an editor at Kadokawa Books, the company that Steinberg argues was the first to fully exploit the process, these ideas would come to inform Ōtsuka’s own work. The term was cemented in Anglophone scholarly discussions by a number of books interested in exploring the characteristics

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<sup>1</sup> Denison, R. (2022). Controllers and the Magic Kingdom: Corporate Partnership, Synergy and the Limits of Cross-Promotion in Disney and Square Enix’s *Kingdom Hearts III* (2019). *Loading..*, 25(15). <https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/issue/view/31>.

of Japanese culture that followed the overseas expansion of Japanese comics (manga), animation (anime), videogames, and other forms in the 1990s, as embodied by the longstanding global success of *Pokémon* (Derusha and Acereda, 2004). Chief amongst these was Marc Steinberg's (2012) influential book *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* but Anne Allison's (2006) *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* is also worthy of mention. In Steinberg's work the media mix clearly shares some characteristics with transmedia, which includes: the collapse of boundaries between the work and its promotion; the new centrality of the child consumer which brings toys and animations to the center of the network; a "serial intercommunication of media texts and things" that involves an extension of the text into the larger media environment, thus "entailing the wider circulation of the image"; and the "displacement of the text as unified totality by the text as a series of transmedia fragments," which leads to a "reconceptualization of consumption as a form of productive activity or work" (Steinberg, 2012, p. 169).

Such works also posit the media mix as a uniquely Japanese network of media relations<sup>1</sup>, which is argued to be qualitatively different from the Western notions of synergy-based franchising favored by Disney (Wasko, 2001) and closer to more recent concepts of transmedia storytelling. Steinberg's argument goes further still, positing that what we now call transmedia in the Anglophone world is actually an importing and rebranding of the media mix philosophy, which has by now thoroughly influenced recent trends in Hollywood storytelling. For instance, Jenkins (2008, p. 101) identifies the key moment in which transmedia concepts from Japan cross to the USA as the moment in which the Wachowski siblings develop the strategy around their iconic cultural work *The Matrix* (1999) to feature a series of interrelated works incorporating films, anime (*The Animatrix*, 2003) and video games (*Enter the Matrix*, Shiny Entertainment, 2003). Significantly, they report formulating this plan on a return trip from Japan, where they had witnessed the media mix at work firsthand, making the account of this moment a kind of primal scene for America's encounter with an advanced form of transmediality, and the basis for the resulting traumatic reworking of the Hollywood model that reaches its acme in the Disney's own Marvel Cinematic Universe. Such insights demonstrate that the flow of Japanese culture abroad does not begin and end with products like *Pokémon* but includes the more subtle export of their underlying narrative regimes, which then intermix with Western approaches. Regarding this new narrative regime, Steinberg finds Ōtsuka's *MPD Psycho* (Kadokawa Shoten, 1997-2016) exemplary of the effect of the media mix on the kinds of texts produced and is worth quoting:

The world of [MPD] Psycho is so fragmented and complex, so traversed by conspiracy theories of which the reader is given but an inkling, so full of signs whose referents remain just out of view... that the reader as consumer must continue to pursue the next narrative fragment... to get a better sense of the whole. Moreover, each fragment warps the worldview, bringing it both closer to hand and further out of reach at the same time. (Steinberg, 2012, p. 181)

There is thus a conspiratorial bent to fan consumption that is often mirrored in the texts themselves, a process that aligns to Jason Mittell's exploration of 'forensic fandom' in which these media texts "convert many viewers into amateur narratologists, noting patterns and violations of convention, chronicling chronologies, and highlighting both inconsistencies and continuities across episodes and even series" (2015, p. 52). I allude to this mode of reading, or hermeneutics (Caputo, 2018),

in the title via a quote from protagonist Sora in the opening cinematic of *Kingdom Hearts*, which primes the player to take on this speculative mindset: “I’ve been having these weird thoughts lately... like is any of this for real or not?” (Squaresoft, 2002). This hermeneutic process is aided and abetted by M.J. Clarke’s notion of ‘mastermind narration’, a radical narrative mode which consists of a “retrospective shifting in narrative information” attributed to “a ghostly agency guiding narrative from the margins of the diegesis” (2012, p. 138), which I find a useful tool for exploring this aspect of the transmedia narrative regime that links so strongly to the act of forensic fandom. These two analytical modes—forensic fandom and mastermind narration—bind together the reception and production of meaning into an extremely tight feedback loop that is highly characteristic of transmediality and the media mix, and is only further intensified in the context of video games as a highly interactive media. I use the term conspiratorial hermeneutics to describe this feedback loop and to differentiate it from Mittell’s concept of forensic fandom, both because this can apply to an individual act of interpretation, whilst Mittell’s is an umbrella term describing the collective agency of the fan community, and because the term ‘forensic’ implies a rational, tidy and official kind of scientific positivism that differs from the messy and emotional, sometimes even irrational, nature of fan interpretation strategies.

It is now tacitly accepted that media texts are fundamentally changing in character as emergent forms of fandom become an increasingly important cultural and economic force (Jenkins, 1992; Hills, 2002; Klastrup & Tosca, 2016), and transmedia seems to be becoming a dominant narrative regime (Jenkins, 2008; Wolf, 2012; Mittell, 2015; Thon, 2016); however, the nature, extent and value of those changes is still unclear. This paper is concerned with how audiences go about reading, understanding, dismantling and recombining texts in a changing media landscape, and also how *Kingdom Hearts* metaphorically depicts, reflects upon and ultimately encourages such processes. I analyze the nature of these shifts in production and consumption through the notion of the ‘otaku’ (Azuma, 2009; Ōtsuka, 2010) as the embodiment of postmodern fandom, then I consider some aspects of the design of *Kingdom Hearts* that speak to its metareflexive interest in this participatory culture of cosplay. By metareflexive I mean both the text’s own playfully self-aware self-referentiality but also how the proper appreciation of the work depends on “the audience’s appreciation of stylistic and narrational strategies as a vital component of the story world itself” (Sconce, 2004, p. 106). Jason Mittell develops this into the concept of an extremely active ‘operational’ mode of viewing, which “encourages us to simultaneously care about the story and marvel at its telling” (Mittell, 2015, p. 46). To demonstrate this in practical terms, I explore the game’s acknowledgment of the fan practice of cosplay (Geczy et al., 2019; Winge, 2019) through the protagonists’ attempt to take on the aesthetics of each world they enter.

What I seek to demonstrate is that transmediality not only applies at the macro level of production and consumption but also fundamentally alters the poetics of individual texts at the micro level, something neglected in transmedia or franchise theory that often tends to focus purely on reception and platforms, as also noted by Klastrup and Tosca (2016, p. 108). In this shift towards the internal, textual traces of transmediality I follow other recent thinking on this topic, including Jason Mittell, whose work on what he calls ‘complex television’ attempts to develop a reader-oriented poetics in which the text functions “as part of a lived cultural practice, not a static, bounded, and fixed creative work” (Mittell, 2015, p. 7). In fact, whilst game studies has historically been influenced by a form of narratology adapted from film and literary studies, I find the more experimental and recent field of television studies a more fruitful source, particularly its attempts to grapple with the

highly complex nature of postmodern, post-network TV storytelling. We might, for instance, note the generally overlooked formal comparisons television shares with games (and especially a long-running series like *Kingdom Hearts*) with their ensemble casts, multi-strand long-form narratives and participatory fandoms. Meanwhile, in terms of games, Rachael Hutchinson (2018, p. 75) has attempted to reframe transmedia storytelling as a phenomenon that exists already within all video games as complex multimodal texts, in her keynote at the 2017 ‘Replaying Japan’ conference. This kind of ‘inside-out transmediality’ is, I would argue, already metareflexively encoded into the narrative logic of *Kingdom Hearts* and is part of its metareflexive transmedia narrative regime.

### **The ‘otaku’: A new form of post-Fordist consumer**

What is interesting about *Kingdom Hearts* is the way it radically extends transmedia strategies overtly out from Japan into the international context of a co-production, marking it a part of a larger strategic reorientation towards global markets. As argued by Mia Consalvo (2009), under the auspices of the geopolitical logic of globalization and the geocultural logic of transmedia storytelling, horizontal integration and transnational collaboration is becoming a key strategy in the Japanese games industry, which is being forced to shift its priorities towards international audiences in response to increasing production costs and a rapidly contracting domestic market, partly as a result of its dramatically aging population (Consalvo, 2009, p. 138). Clearly larger economic and social forces are at play, which I attempt to summarize here.

Political theorists such as Hardt and Negri (2001), and theorists of new media such as Manuel Castells (2009), have discussed the extensive restructuring of the social and economic orders described by the term globalization as a result of the development and cultural penetration of highly connective digital technologies. The resultant information based ‘network society’, as Castells names it (2009), has enabled modern capitalism to enter a distinctly post-industrial or ‘post-Fordist’ phase. Distinct from the kind of mass production that dominated the first two thirds of the twentieth century, as embodied in Henry Ford’s rigidly controlled production regime, post-Fordism is based on notions of flexibility and adaptability (both in the product and the work force), afforded by new flexible and hyper-efficient work methodologies—referred to collectively as ‘lean production’ and originating in the automotive industry of postwar Japan (Womack et al., 2007). Japan is thus taken to be the ground zero for postmodern forms of production (flexible lean processes) and for consumption (the media mix), both indicative of the nation’s growing ‘soft power’, a term that describes a nation’s cultural clout on the global stage (Nye Jr., 2005). Reinforcing this point, Steinberg also states that the media mix is a reflection of postmodern society’s transition from one economic regime to another, saying “the media ecology expanded to become the very environment of life under late capitalism” (Steinberg, 2012, p. xi).

It is clear through the work of many scholars (Allison, 2006; Lee, 1993; Pine II & Gilmore, 2011; Steinberg, 2012) that these larger social and economic changes occur at a production level in reciprocal feedback loop with the consumer cultures they depend on, meaning that our consumptions of digital media are marked by the same kinds of “flexibility, fragmentation, and fluctuation” (Allison, 2006, p. 97) that mirror its mode of production. The post-Fordist emphasis on flexibility and adaptability becomes baked into the very textual logics of the products

themselves. This is because texts always reflect and reflect upon their mode of production, as argued by M.J. Clarke in his analysis of transmedia television:

What is needed is a measure of reflexivity... understanding of texts not simply as the results of a set of pre-given conditions, but as being in conversation with these conditions, either butting against them or participating within them, but always implicitly commenting upon them. (M.J. Clarke, p. 18, 2012)

New digital media forms like video games are a symptomatic product of these new macro-economic structures, as argued by Martyn Lee (1993) in *Consumer Culture Reborn*, and some game scholars have taken this claim further to argue that the medium is the archetypal form of postmodern era, as video games are “a child of the computer technologies that lie at the heart of the post-Fordist reorganization of work” and “[exemplify] post-Fordism’s tendency to fill domestic space and time with fluidified, experiential, and electronic commodities” (Kline et al., 2003, p. 75). Taking as a starting point Clarke’s claim that texts bear the imprint of their conditions of production, video games can be understood as highly revealing textual responses to the very cultural conditions Kline et al. have argued that they are born from. It follows that studying the media produced in this new context helps us to understand the wider systems that produce them. I therefore propose we can read *Kingdom Hearts* as acutely aware of these fast-shifting relationships between producers and consumers within the postmodern regimes of fandom that I now turn to.

Socially disruptive new technologies like the internet and streaming platforms not only transform the production and distribution of media texts but the very conditions of their consumption, specifically allowing a greater degree of interaction between consumers and producers. For instance, in their work on the topic Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca have observed that such highly networked exchanges, driven by modern social media platforms and web 2.0 interactive systems, have fundamentally accelerated and enhanced all forms of affective fan engagement. The repercussions this has had on methodology, they argue, was that it was no longer possible to consider analysis of the text or its reception separately; rather the phenomena demanded a new, “holistic and integrated approach to the study of transmedial user engagement that is attentive to both the aesthetic qualities of cultural products, their reception contexts and the platforms on which users engage with them” (Klastrup and Tosca, 2016, p. 109). My approach here is informed by these insights and their methodological framework, named ‘networked reception’, which focuses on “how individual users ‘optimize’ their affective engagement with their favorite transmedial worlds through networked activities that connect them to other users” (Klastrup & Tosca, 2016, p. 111).

Such modes of consumption bear striking similarities with the kinds of database consumption that the Japanese postmodern theorist Hiroki Azuma sees as core to an emerging ‘otaku’ sensibility in fan consumption. Influenced by the work of Jean Baudrillard and Jean-Francois Lyotard, Azuma observed a new form of consumption that rejected the concept of a coherent ‘grand narrative’ characteristic of modernism in favor of a fragmented series of textual components, arranged in a database over which the consumer ‘grazes,’ combining and reconfiguring meanings based on personal whim rather than an overwhelming ideological framework. These ‘database animals’ aligned perfectly with the Japanese phenomena of otaku, a kind of hyper-fan circulating around material like manga, anime and video games that was previously considered culturally marginal

but had started to become highly influential in the 1980s and 1990s (perhaps unsurprisingly coinciding with the shift to post-Fordist production regimes). In language reminiscent of drug addiction or mental illness, Azuma argues that otaku “coolly consumed only the information that was behind the works without relation to the narrative or message of those works” (2009, p. 36). According to him they obsessively and compulsively collect and rearrange elements according to the logic of the database which is rhizomatic<sup>2</sup> in nature. Consistent with transmedia storytelling, that encourages such decentralized behavior, otaku are less interested in the unified whole (like traditional forms of narrative closure) and more interested in endlessly recombining elements over a networked sequence that extends in all directions forever.

Such impulses had already started seeping into global consumer cultures in the 1980s, a moment where modern forms of fandom were first taken seriously in an academic context in the West by Henry Jenkins, whose seminal book *Textual Poachers* (2012) outlined the urgency for studying fan communities and their discourses, given their increasing centrality to dominant forms of production and consumption. Amongst his observations on the practices of postmodern fandoms it is noted that they are highly collaborative, and characterized with a deep and active participation with the text, including leveraging online spaces to speculate on future narrative trajectories (Jenkins, 2012, p. 33). This produces fan works that extend the text in new directions, and see the fan conducting research activities that seek to stabilize the textual play of meanings (see McLean’s work in this issue<sup>2</sup> for an apt example). Mittell follows Jenkins in noting that these once ‘fringe’ practices of fandom, consistent with the otaku, have moved from being those of an “outlier [to] more one who resides on one end of a spectrum of engagement”, and like me he asserts that tracking the “behaviors exhibited by small groups of active online fans are indicative of broader tendencies among many less participatory television viewers” (2015, p. 8). In short, these tendencies are now becoming more mainstream and influential globally and need to be interrogated as exemplars or harbingers of these more general trends.

Although the notion of the otaku, which comes from the Japanese pronoun roughly meaning ‘your house’ (perhaps emphasizing the introverted nature of such figures), is associated strongly with Japanese culture, Azuma convincingly argues that it is by now a global phenomenon and may even have its roots in the Japanese reception of American cultural imports following World War II (Azuma, 2009, p. 11). In spite of its potential origins in the West, otaku culture as a concept associated with Japan has increasingly spread via transcultural flows of globalization, gaining significant traction as a term of identification for Western fandoms (and particularly video game and anime fandoms, whose objects of passion flow from Japan). Such fandoms typically shear the term of its negative connotations (see Azuma’s reading of the term above) and see it as a badge of honor to demonstrate their deeper belonging to an international form of geek identity. For instance, in a memorable article about the spread and popularity of Japanese media in America, which he termed ‘pop cosmopolitanism’, Jenkins saw the internationalist qualities of otaku culture as a potential mode of liberation for young American consumers who found in Japanese media an escape from the conformity of American culture and an opportunity “to enter a broader sphere of

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<sup>2</sup> McLean, J. (2022). Kingdom(s) Come: Character Remediations and Polyperspectivity of the *Final Fantasy* franchise in *Kingdom Hearts* and *Kingdom Hearts II*. *Loading...*, 25(15).  
<https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/issue/view/31>.

cultural experience... [inspiring] new forms of global consciousness and cultural competency” (2006, pp. 155–156).

The positive internationalism and highly engaged and creative participation suggested by Jenkins presents an idealized consumptive mode of Western fandoms, which jars strongly with the disinterestedly ambivalent interpretative strategies of their Japanese counterparts, as Azuma’s pathological view of fan consumption would have it. Such readings thus demonstrate the complexity of this term, *otaku*, as it transitioned between the two hemispheres of Earth and their particular manifestations of youth counterculture, transported by the product flows of globalization. Azuma argues that this kind of socially dysfunctional anime geek now has a transnational reach and appeal, meaning it can be understood as the key model for new forms of textual consumption in the postmodern age across much of the globe. Whether the terms ‘otaku’ and ‘prosumer’ are competing definitions for the same phenomena of fandom or describe discrete manifestations of these communities is open to conjecture, but what is clear is the application of Azuma’s theories outside of a Japanese context, making them particularly relevant to a text that bridges Japanese and American texts and consumers, as *Kingdom Hearts* does.

### **Tetsuya Nomura as mastermind narrator**

For M.J. Clarke the characteristics of transmedia television texts in the postmodern era include a kind of extreme authorial reflexivity that he defines as ‘mastermind narrative,’ a radical narrative mode which consists of a “retrospective shifting in narrative information” attributed to “a ghostly agency guiding narrative from the margins of the diegesis” (2012, p. 138). Such shadowy agents manipulating events from the fringes of the text in some ways allegorically stand in for the manipulative hand of the authorial figure themselves (2012, pp. 142–143). Tetsuya Nomura has been creative director of the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise since its inception, and is widely known to the fanbase as the continuing creative force behind it. In this sense Nomura functions somewhat like the show runners M.J. Clarke sees as the authorial custodians of the complex narrative bibles of prestige TV shows, who begin to function as the ultimate manifestation of the mastermind narrator. Indeed, *Kingdom Hearts*, Nomura’s first project as a director, was key to his rising star at Square Enix, where he now helms the flagship *Final Fantasy* series (1987-present), making him undoubtedly one of the best-known video game auteurs in the world. Evidence of Square Enix crafting Nomura as their public spokesman is evident in the myriad interviews that exist with him across the internet, and particularly a memorable example being one between him and Nintendo’s former president Satoru Iwata (2012), in which Nomura boasts that he was upfront about stamping his own identity on the project even if it meant resisting the desires of Disney’s executives.

In line with notions of transmedia storytelling such mastermind authorial effects are reinforced by the highly serialized nature of nonlinear and complex narratives, “implying a possible center, but never giving it form” (Clarke, 2012 p. 161). The resulting texts are informationally dense narratives that are impossible to grasp all at once, unlike more traditional grand narratives or what postmodernists like Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) have famously critiqued as ‘metanarratives’ due to their totalizing, homogenizing and universalizing tendencies. Therefore, in contrast to the stand-alone grand narratives of modernism, mastermind narratives are highly linked to transmedia networks that provide multiple points of access to a variety of potential audiences across a



multitude of different but connected media platforms, and are often accompanied by the decentralized, crowd-sourced and conspiratorial practices of information gathering and speculation that characterize their most dedicated fandoms (both of which have been outlined above).

Such tendencies help to encourage a mode of active and invested viewing abetted by the collaborative and encyclopedic elements of Web 2.0 technology, which new media theorist Lev Manovich sees at the very heart of cultural transformations in the postmodern digital economies. Indeed, according to Manovich the ‘windowed style’ of the GUI (Graphical User Interface) introduces a language that fundamentally challenges the integrity and stability of the classical rectangular screen of modernism with its carefully delineated boundaries, instead offering “a number of coexisting... overlapping windows”, in which, “no single window completely dominates the viewer’s attention” (2002, p. 97). The decontextualization and proliferation of images presents a cornucopia of meanings akin to the historical break Walter Benjamin (2008) argued was ushered in by the printing press, in which original images became stripped of their ritualistic ‘aura’ in a particular time and place via the act of mechanical reproduction, allowing them to be spread and combined in radically new and potentially democratizing ways. A key difference between older print and new digital image media is that these disenfranchised images are now organized in the loose, rhizomatic structure of the database (rather than the modernist grid-like structure of the mosaic), with the database being a non-hierarchical network on which computer logic and postmodernism alike both depend. As Manovich argues, through the logic of the database “the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records” (Manovich, 2002, pp. 194–195).

The form of emergent spectatorship that belongs to the generations born into or native to<sup>3</sup> the logic of the database and the windowed style of the computer is still in the process of being understood, but seems to paradoxically be both deeply engaged and distractedly shallow: a “decentered one that keeps one eye on the on-air series itself and the other on a computer screen viewing an episode guide or a wiki entry, simultaneously juggling a wealth of minute, visual details and character backstories” (Clarke, 2012, pp. 140–141). The resulting regime of spectatorship thus exists somewhere between and beyond the classic mode of the intense ‘gaze’ that characterizes invested cinema viewing and the less involved ‘glance’ that has been said to characterize distracted TV consumption (Ellis, 1992, p. 128). This hybrid form has been referred to by the portmanteau term the ‘glaze’ by Chris Chesher (2007), who fittingly sees it as emblematic of a mode of consumption aligned to the video game. The procedural nature of computers and the database logic of consumption that underpins the glaze results in extremely unstable forms of narrative construction, particularly in terms of characterization. Mastermind narratives rely on dynamic, unstable characters that place an emphasis on textual ambiguity and enigma, designed with gaps in which fans can exercise their own theorizations. These gaps are enhanced by a long-form seriality, intrinsic to the mediums of TV and video games, encouraging such fan theorizing because “narratives are delayed and stretched across episodes” (Clarke, 2012, p. 139). This is particularly true of *Kingdom Hearts*, where gaps of many years between key titles allow fan theorizing to run rampant, with new entries quickly dissected by the community (see Figure 1).

Such radically open and dynamic characters are unfamiliar territory for Disney, a company that traditionally exercises extreme levels of control over their properties and characters, as noted by

Janet Wasko, who quotes Paul Pressler, vice president of merchandising and licensing: “our characters are the foundation of our business and project the image of our company, so it’s imperative that we control who uses them and how they are used” (2001, p. 84). Contra this, the increasing license the series takes with Mickey and other Disney properties demonstrates a growing relaxation of the studio’s orthodox approach to story and a loosening of the control of their intellectual property (IP), perhaps using the *Kingdom Hearts* series as an exotic space of playful experimentation outside of their more rigorously maintained portfolio. Much like a government uses a black-ops unit, by using *Kingdom Hearts* as a sole site of experimentation Disney had a means of plausible deniability if things went wrong.

Regardless of the reason behind their gradual relaxing of control, this newfound versatility is in direct proportion to the growth in complexity of the game’s mythos, which ascribes increasingly to the notion of mastermind narration as the franchise goes on. This is most obvious in the introduction of Organization XIII, a shadowy group first appearing in *Kingdom Hearts II* (2005) to account for many of the games’ increasingly conspiratorial leanings. The members of this organization are not only doppelgangers of the main protagonists (indicated by the fact that their names are anagrams with an added ‘x’) but also, confusingly, are all fragments of the arch-nemesis Xehanort. The roles of these original characters produced by Square Enix gradually displace the traditional Disney villains that are leaned on more heavily earlier in the series, slowly unveiling a layer of mastermind narrators beyond initial appearances, even as the narrative mode shifts from a focus on Disney’s IP to Nomura’s own original ideas.

As the series has developed and become more successful, Disney have seemingly become more lenient in the extent with which they allow Square Enix to take ownership over their characters, and draw them into the web-like Japanese media mix; however, compromise has often been needed. For instance, in the same interview with Iwata, Nomura recalls how he initially shocked Disney executives by demonstrating his vision for the protagonist Sora holding a chainsaw (Iwata, 2012). Nomura returned to the drawing board and armed his protagonist with a keyblade instead; a sword shaped like a key that would become an iconic and largely nonthreatening prop in the series. Meanwhile, as the success of the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise grew, Square Enix insisted that they be allowed to use Mickey Mouse more frequently, having famously been restricted to a single appearance of the Disney mascot in the first game. So rather than an immediate hands-off relationship, the textual complexity emerges from a series of constant negotiations between Disney, Square Enix and Nomura himself, creating a production context as complex as the game’s mastermind narrative itself and worthy of further investigation (a process begun by Rayna Denison in this issue<sup>3</sup>).

But this radical mixing of the source material is also somewhat misleading. Testament to seeing the series as a safe space for experimentation, its most radical gestures largely exist at the meta-level of the story, whilst the narratives of individual Disney properties like *Alice in Wonderland* (Geronimi et al., 1951) merely provide backdrops for more important events to unfold. Indeed, many fans have noted how increasingly insignificant the actual Disney properties are in the

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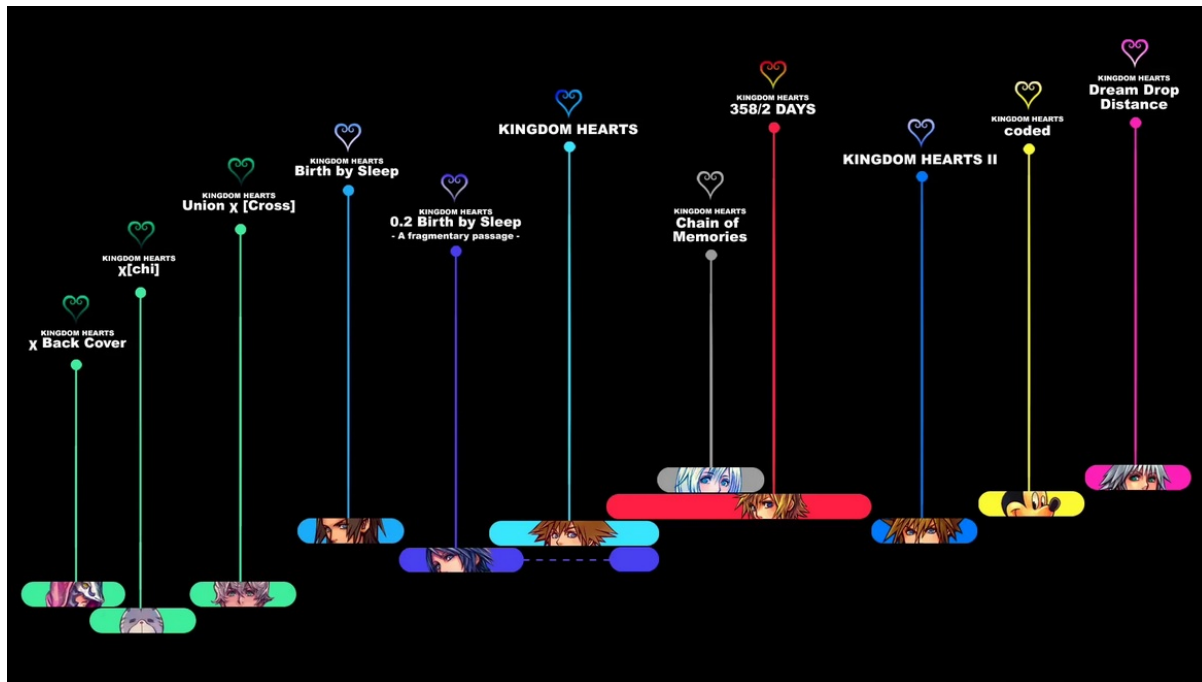
<sup>3</sup> Denison, R. (2022). Controllers and the Magic Kingdom: Corporate Partnership, Synergy and the Limits of Cross-Promotion in Disney and Square Enix’s *Kingdom Hearts III* (2019). *Loading..*, 25(15).  
<https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/issue/view/31>.

development of the core mythos, other than as a staging ground to explore the series' more general themes. There is thus a paradox at play in which *Kingdom Hearts* appears to take many liberties with Disney's texts, even though certain protections are put into place to mitigate the extent of these liberties. Indeed, consistent with Clarke's view that texts often allegorically refer to their conditions of production, such protections are justified in the narrative logic of the story itself. For instance, the inciting incident in *Kingdom Hearts* lore is the Keyblade War, which explodes a unified world of fairytales into multiple fragments, each of which come to evolve independently, much as Disney's myriad products are normally held in relatively protective isolation from one another as legally protected IPs. The Keyblade War thus mimics the tendency in transmedia theory, media mix theory and Azuma's reading of postmodern texts towards fragmentation of meaning. In spite of this Nomura's design takes some pains to cleverly and reassuringly insulate Disney's material as separate planetary spheres separated by a void. Like field boundaries the American corporation's IPs are thus protected and fenced off from some of the more extreme implications of the fragmentation of their texts like mastermind narration and the radical grazing nature of otaku consumption. This is all very carefully stage-managed experimentation.

The threatening, destabilizing aspects of the media mix to IP holders can be seen in Steinberg's summary of its core characteristics, especially "the displacement of the text as unified totality by the text as a series of transmedia fragments", and "the expansion from media text to media environment" (Steinberg, 2012, p. 169). The former point relates to the structure of the text, in which, echoing Azuma, the story is no longer contained in a single work but exist as a series of fragments joined up by a complex network of links that the consumer reassembles. In the media mix there is no such thing as an original, instead there is just a circular iteration of artifacts, much like the notoriously complex timelines of the *Kingdom Hearts* series (see fig. 1). The latter point relates to the consumption environment in which the emphasis shifts from an individual film or cartoon to the entire environment in which it exists, becoming a much more intimate part of our lives and identities, as Klastrup and Tosca have also argued (2016). Both processes result in a threatening loss of control for IP holders.

## Figure 1

A timeline from YouTuber 'Everglow' (2018)



*Note.* This Patreon-funded series of lore explainer videos runs to a staggering 122 episodes, demonstrating both the complexity of the series and the deep desire for fans to unpick this complexity and explain it to series new-comers. The image was reprinted in the major video game journalism website Polygon illustrating how such fan theorization can circulate within wider gaming culture.

Even back in 1989 Ōtsuka noted that the niche practice of otaku fandom was not only becoming more prevalent but risked disrupting the world of anime production in the long term even as they increased its profitability in the short term. However, unlike Azuma, Ōtsuka believed there was still a metanarrative (*Sekai*, or worldview, a term derived from Kabuki theatre) to be found behind these works, and that otaku acted like detectives attempting to access the greater whole through its parts in order to “dig out the worldview hidden in the background” (2010, p. 108). As it was impossible to sell the grand system it had to be broken up and sold in cross-sections, but fans would then inevitably produce their own small narratives (fan fictions) from the meta form, which ultimately threatens copyright holders because it leads to a “final stage of narrative consumption” in which “there will no longer be manufacturers. There will merely be countless consumers who make commodities with their own hands and consume them with their own hands” (2010, p. 111). Steinberg argues that Ōtsuka sees the image of the character as the solution to this impasse, since it is the one thing that can be copyrighted and also thematically holds all of the diverse texts together, thus taking on a core regulatory role, one far more potent than the brand because it can be ascribed with a richer range of narrative meanings (Steinberg, 2012, p. 182). Ultimately, because each fragment (or ‘variation’, to use Ōtsuka’s term) puts the totality or worldview even further out of reach, fans are still bound to the fountainhead of narrative-meaning ultimately

controlled by Kadokawa and mediated by Ōtsuka's position as author in an ever-evolving dialogical tug of war with fans over the official meaning of the text.

Such a process is also apparent in the publicity networks around *Kingdom Hearts* where Nomura takes on the role of the kind of ultimate authority Ōtsuka ascribes the author figure.<sup>4</sup> As Huber and Mandiberg observe, "Square Enix has consistently in its interviews aided and abetted highly speculative readings of its works" (Huber and Mandiberg, 2009, p. 6), mostly through the mouthpiece of Nomura and his impish relationship to his fans. For instance, when asked whether Cloud is searching for Aeris, an answer eagerly sought by *Final Fantasy VII* (Squaresoft, 1997) fans in order to resolve a famous love triangle in that game (explored further in McLean's piece this issue<sup>4</sup>), Nomura merely responds with a question and an ambiguous explanation:

Well, what do you think? If indeed it was Aeris, then the bit in the ending was the answer. You might say it was made so that you can take it that way. Cloud is a popular character, and I don't really want to decide myself, yes he is like this. Because players make strong conclusions by themselves, I want to leave room for everyone's line of thought. (Tetsuya Nomura, quoted in DChiuch, 2018)

The frequency of such interviews increases in line with not only the success of the series but the growing complexity of the storytelling, which demands the producers 'check in' with the wider fan base to ensure they are following along. But the main reason for keeping the meaning unresolved is of course not so much in empowering the reader through a gesture of interpretive generosity, but in a desire to keep the crucial engine of fan speculation running by avoiding pinning down any ultimate meaning. In other words, closing down the interpretive space would also eliminate the speculative hype that keeps *Kingdom Hearts* alive in culture between releases (see Figure 1, which was produced in the years leading up to the release of *Kingdom Hearts III*). Games journalists regularly run articles on how confusing the story of *Kingdom Hearts* is, even suggesting that Nomura himself has lost track (Farokhmanesh, 2018), but this might just as easily be a pretense for the purposes of maintaining mystery. Ultimately, the confusion that arises from the mastermind narration of the text helps create a complex and ongoing discourse between producer and consumer, maintaining the author as relevant because they are still seen by fans as the ultimate site for the convergence of meaning. Games journalism maintains this feedback loop between producer and fan through constantly returning to Nomura, thus helping to translate ambiguity into marketing hype. Indeed, fans unthinkingly collaborate with producers by creating detailed and very high-quality videos (see Figure 1) and wikis to help with onboarding series newcomers, thus growing and maintaining the fandom. These interviews help fuel such endeavors (because each revelation will require revisions to the fan wikis and thus more unpaid labor by fans), but they also show Nomura settling further into his role as arch-mastermind narrator, carrying inside his head the complexities of the world's lore and doling it out carefully to his adherents.

Thus I maintain that real fan behaviors, like those analyzed by Klastrup and Tosca (2016) or McLean in this issue, are often closer in spirit to Ōtsuka's notion that fans still strive to gain access

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<sup>4</sup> McLean, J. (2022). Kingdom(s) Come: Character Remediations and Polyperspectivity of the *Final Fantasy* franchise in *Kingdom Hearts* and *Kingdom Hearts II*. *Loading...*, 25(15).  
<https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/issue/view/31>.

to a deeper meaning from the narrative fragments they are presented with, rather than Azuma's more cynical take that fans are quite happy to graze unthinkingly on the fragments of an exploded textual database. This is demonstrated by the endless debates that occur across the online and offline spaces of fandom as to what is considered canon in a particular narrative sequence. Thus, the conspiratorial impulse is intrinsic to fandom, and manifests as an extreme level of engagement with the text by fans producing their own derivative works in order to explain inconsistencies or to showcase theories. As Steinberg says, such a system "assumes that the reader will not only avidly follow a series of works but will also work herself to patch over gaps in the author's creations by undertaking the production of secondary works" (2012, p. 182). However, fans ultimately value a fundamental and correct reading above these derivative works, and companies leverage this impulse to retain ultimate control over the text's meaning. As Ōtsuka has observed, the more complex the text becomes the more dependent it is on an external authority (the author) to intervene and negotiate fannish interpretations.

Returning to the notion of conspiratorial hermeneutics, which I use to describe this feedback loop, we can further define this as a complex discursive process carried out by large, highly networked fandoms seeking to stabilize the meanings of increasingly complex narrative works, whose *raison d'être* is increasingly to feed and thwart such activities: a constant ever-shifting game of cat and mouse that can be as exhausting to those looking in from the outside as it is engaging for those inside the fandom. Thus the producer of the conspiratorial text can both have their cake and eat it: building and retaining audiences over a long period through community engagement by tolerating fans to produce their own spin-offs and ideas, but retaining the ultimate authority of the canon so highly valued by otaku.

This goes some way towards explaining why the narrative of *Kingdom Hearts* becomes more complex, fragmented and, indeed, conspiratorial as it progresses. Whilst it began as a potential one-off collaboration, its growing success as a series both forced the producers to add complexity in order to develop the potential for seriality and to create the textual richness necessary to nurture modern fandoms. Indeed, Nomura had initially planned a fairly straightforward story aimed at children, until Hironobu Sakaguchi, the designer famous for the *Final Fantasy* series (Squaresoft/Square Enix, 1987-) that Nomura himself would eventually take control of, warned that if the game was not as complex as that series then "the game would be a failure" (DChiuch, 2018). Nomura took this to heart and admits that they extensively reworked the story to add complexity as well as introducing important concepts and characters like Organization XIII (discussed above), and even the antagonist Ansem. It is also likely that the complexity of storytelling as it developed from game to game, forming deeper conspiracies for the players to unpick, was a result of both Disney's loosening of their control and Nomura's growing ambition as he became the driving creative force at Square Enix. Put another way, the series becomes a kind of metareflexive biography of Nomura's rising star.

### **Sora, Donald and Goofy as cosplayers**

Unlike more linear models of franchising, in which the core text is spun off and retold in different formats, under a transmedia regime fan practices utilize the core text as a raw resource to be quarried and transformed in a decentralized, nonlinear network that, much as Ōtsuka predicted, is

ultimately much harder for corporations to control (and therefore riskier for them to enact). *Kingdom Hearts* is not only a key resource for fans to utilize in their participatory culture, but actually dramatizes this practice and, by doing so, tacitly endorses it. A concrete example will now be used to illustrate this point. Cosplay is one such radically appropriative fan practice that features metareflexively in the narrative. When the player travels from world to world they deliberately take on the aesthetic and stylistic tropes of those worlds in order to avoid disrupting the narrative cohesion of the original text.

In the first game in the series this cosplay occurs only twice, when Sora, Goofy and Donald travel: to Halloween Town from *A Nightmare Before Christmas* (Selick, 1993), and, much like trick or treaters, disguise themselves as ghouls; and to Atlantica, the realm of *The Little Mermaid* (Clements & Musker, 1989), where Donald memorably transforms into a shirtless squid. Whilst the first game made attempts to aesthetically differentiate each of the Disney worlds being used in its virtual environments, such attempts were somewhat constrained by the capabilities of the game's graphical engine, not to mention by overall corporate resources (including the budget Square-Enix were willing to commit to a risky and untested formula). However, as the series progressed the characters' transformations became more and more elaborate, and as such started to feature more prominently in the game's publicity (see Figure 2). Alongside advances in 3D graphics in the games industry, the series began to experiment more and more with taking on the aesthetic qualities and level of detail of the source material, including appearing alongside a CGI Jack Sparrow in *Kingdom Hearts III* (Figure 3) in which Sora's textures are upscaled and he takes on more recognizably human characteristics than his typical smooth skinned anime style character model.<sup>5</sup>

Just as the studio were able to use Disney's brand mascot Mickey more freely as the series went on (Byrd, 2019), these transformations of Donald and Goofy demonstrate a growing confidence in Nomura and his team over their disruptive vision for the Disney properties, and also hint at a growing trust from Disney executives over another company's use of their characters. In short, Donald and Goofy are enacting a form of sanctioned in-house cosplay within Disney's extensive dressing up box. This more permissive, sanctioned form of cosplay undertaken by the heroes, which takes pains to preserve the authorial integrity of the texts, is countered by an unlawful, appropriative hybridization, which is dramatized by Maleficent, the villain from Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi et al., 1959), who in the first game is kidnapping the 'princesses of heart' from their respective worlds, causing those worlds to malfunction.

In *Costuming Cosplay* Therèsa M. Winge undertakes an anthropological study exploring the development, motivations and contexts of cosplay (short for costume play, from the Japanese *kosupure*). She finds that although the practice is primarily associated with Japanese anime culture in the popular imagination, much like the notion of otaku explored by Azuma, it in fact has roots in North America going back to the nineteenth century. Arguing that in its current form it was exported to Japan by Nobuyuki Takahashi after witnessing it at Worldcon in Los Angeles in 1984, she suggests it should rightly be thought of as

a transcultural and transnationalism phenomenon, [which] creates spaces for interconnections and intersections of social, (sub)cultural, political, and economic

values and impacts to converge without concern for or awareness of national or geographic borders. (Therèsa M Winge, 2019, p. 7)

Cosplay is a complex transcultural point of exchange with the text that mixes cultural identities just as much as it does reality and fiction. Through dressing up as figures from anime, video games and other similar works, fans are not only signaling their affection for the text and its characters but exercising and demonstrating their own subcultural capital. It is an ambivalent practice that can both be interpreted negatively as a manifestation of otaku culture (embodied in Maleficent's appropriative actions) or positively in light of Jenkin's (2006, pp. 155–156) notion of pop cosmopolitanism (embodied by Sora, Donald and Goofy and their attempts to 'fit in'). The narrative logic of the game thus metareflexively explores the poetics and ethics of cosplay as a fan practice, displaying it as both potentially appropriative and supportive of the original materials.

Although such processes might also be read as versions of other corporate strategies like reskinning—the economical practice of taking successful games or concepts and repackaging them with new aesthetics—I maintain that this process is closer to cosplay since it relates to the circulation of characters within the text itself (whilst reskinning is a meta strategy that occurs between separate texts), and in each case Donald, Goofy and Sora are explicitly in disguise and therefore still recognizable as themselves (just as a cosplayer's identity is never fully dissolved into its object). Studying virtual idols like Hatsune Miku and other entities like Hello Kitty that do not seem to fit narrative oriented models of the media mix, Lukas Wilde (2019) has discussed such figures as 'mediated performers' who circulate between narrative structures and participatory cultures, including cosplay, allowing for "user-level reshuffling and reenactment" (Wilde, 2019, p. 220). In just such a way the characters circulate between discrete narrative worlds, their mediated performances a clear surrogate for the fan's own reenactments. Perhaps this is only possible thanks to the complex multi-modality Hutchinson notes of video games, which allows for such an inside-out form of the media-mix where the game already embodies a rich mixture of medias, styles and IPs the characters circulate between.



**Figure 2**

*Point of sale marketing materials for the major high street video game retailer Game Stop*



*Note.* This features the characters ‘dressed up’ for their various in-game appearances.

**Figure 3**

*Sora, Goofy and Donald take their cosplay game to the next level in Kingdom Hearts 3*



*Note.* The setting of *Pirates of the Caribbean* returns with an aesthetic much closer to the realist CGI of the movie than the game’s usual simpler 3D models.

### Conclusion: *Kingdom Hearts* as Fan Fiction

Throughout this paper I have argued that *Kingdom Hearts* can be considered an important lens onto much larger cultural shifts, specifically changes in fan consumption practices, because these processes are—sometimes intentionally but more often metaphorically—explored in the text itself through metareflexive processes. Specifically, the examples referenced in this paper demonstrate how the series incorporates numerous appropriative practices of fandom that major corporations are struggling to relate to and profit from. In line with M.J. Clarke's call to read media texts as allegorical extensions of the production contexts that shaped them, we may therefore be able to read the evolution of the series as bound up with larger shifting cultures at Disney, and their attempt to move from a safe and familiar linear franchising model to a highly volatile and unpredictable model based on the transmedia narrative regime. In this context narrative elements from the Disney back catalogue are creatively recontextualized, first by the developers themselves as they plunder Disney's toy box, and then by the fanbase. The games seem to not only to anticipate these practices but to endorse and even facilitate them. It may not be a stretch to say that *Kingdom Hearts* is something like Nomura's Final Fantasy/Disney fan fiction that somehow made it through the greenlighting processes of two of the biggest entertainment corporations of their respective media and nations. These allegorical elements of *Kingdom Hearts* must also be understood in the larger complex of global shifting power relations, production environments and narrative regimes that mark it as a thoroughly transcultural, transmedia and, ultimately, *transcorporate* text.

The transformations at a textual level are characteristic of corporations beginning to accommodate more directly the new forms of spectatorship that postmodern fan communities have been built around. Thus, we can observe a qualitative shift from the kind of exchanges Jenkins famously studied in his landmark book on online fandoms, *Textual Poachers*, that, as observed by Klastrup and Tosca (2016), results in greater affective resonance and immediacy due to a tighter and more complex feedback loop between consumer, text and producer. It is my contention that we may be entering a second stage of what Jenkins calls participatory culture in which media conglomerates are adapting and restructuring to take full advantage of the grass roots shifts in consumption we have seen in the last two decades, as for instance recorded in Jenkins' *Convergence Culture* (2008). Such works that seek to capitalize on these new trends have initiated a subtle but profound transformation in the design of narrative structures at the level of textual production, that has gone unmentioned on by all but the most observant critics. Much like the clichéd depictions of conspiracy theorists, whose walls are filled with maps, photos and news clippings all crisscrossed by a network of red string, such products are increasingly less like the linear dramatic arcs and pat resolutions of traditional narratives (of the kind typically characterized by Disney's classic fairy-tale derived narratives) and increasingly closer to works like *Kingdom Hearts*. Here rhizomatic networks of meaning are spun by mastermind narrators that must be actively and intentionally linked together by their viewers, in a process I have tentatively named *conspiratorial hermeneutics*.

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<sup>1</sup> Ōtsuka (2019) himself has traced the media mix back to wartime Japan where he claims it was developed as part of the Nationalist regime's approach to propaganda, but this is beyond the scope of this enquiry.

<sup>2</sup> This being the non-hierarchical web that Deleuze and Guattari (2013) see as the emblematic structure of postmodernism.

<sup>3</sup> These generational groups include 'generation Y' (more generally referred to as Millennials) and the latter 'generation Z' (Zoomers) who are currently coming of age as independent consumers. Generation X, named for the Douglas Copeland novel, are an interesting transitional case in this regard as they were raised in a world of analogue media and modernist ideals, before encountering postmodernism and computer culture in their formative years.

<sup>4</sup> There are of course links here to Michel Foucault's (1991) famous exploration of the function author as a guarantor of meaning and its development as a concept in relation to the growth of copyright.

<sup>5</sup> See Hutchinson's piece in this edition for a detailed analysis of the stylistic influences of Sora's design.