DIGRA

Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association

EDITED BY
Hanna Wirman

ToDiGRA

ToDiGRA

Hanna Wirman

Contents

ToDiGRA

Hanna Wirman—Special Issue Editor

José P. Zagal—Editor-in-Chief
University of Utah, USA

Petri Lankoski—Webmaster
Södertörns University, Sweden

Gaydrie Browne—Copyeditor

ETC Press

Drew Davidson—Editor-in-Chief
Carnegie Mellon University, USA

Brad King—Editor & Director
Carnegie Mellon University, USA

Introduction

Hanna Wirman

Introduction to the Special Issue on DiGRA 2019: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo Mix

Since its inauguration in 2003, the DiGRA International Conference series has provided a venue for the presentation and discussion of digital games-related research from multiple and diverse areas. DiGRA 2019 was held at the Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, Japan, between 6th and 10th of August. The theme of the conference was 'Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo Mix'. The theme built on the idea of 'media mix' (wasei-eigo, メディアミックス or 'media mikkusu'), inviting "contributors to consider the possibility of 'ludo mix' where games and play increasingly occupy the focal point of such a diversified distribution and consumption model" (Wirman, Furuichi and

Mortensen 2019). Notably, Professor Eiji Ōtsuka, who coined the very term, offered the first keynote speech at the conference, providing true insights and inviting new perspectives into and around the theme.

DiGRA 2019 received a record high number of 414 submissions, including full papers, extended abstracts, panel proposals and applications for the doctoral consortium. Extensive work of reviewing was done by around 380 reviewers who provided more than 1200 reviews, 2-5 and typically not less than 3 for each submission, except for doctoral consortium contributions. 243 extended abstract and full paper submissions, 18 doctoral consortium proposals, 23 panels were accepted to the conference. Overall, DiGRA 2019 conference had a 62% acceptance rate for full papers and extended abstract submissions.

In the conference Call for Papers, we loosely defined ludo mix as follows:

"Ludo mixes may include several versions of a game or several different games together with other content thus resulting in novel media ecologies, business models, and development and consumption cultures."

It was not the intention of the conference in 2019 nor the purpose of this special issue to define or fix the concept of ludo mix. Instead, the term has been used to invite the community to think widely what it means when games, together with their design, development, distribution and play are fundamentally linked to other media. With the original conference theme, program chairs wanted to encourage curiosity toward theoretical traditions of other regions. Throughout this special issue, one can find references, not only to Japanese games and Japanese scholarship, but also words and terms from the Japanese language – such as kyara, omake, ouji, geemu ongaku and matsuri – thus making new theoretical frameworks and popular cultural phenomena available to the wider ToDiGRA readership. This kind of contribution to our

community has, in my view, been a significant outcome of both the conference theme and the country of the conference location. One of the authors of this issue, Laureline Chiapello, aptly finishes her article (spoiler alert!) stating that "to build a richer vision of game designers' activities, I hope that more translations of Japanese research on game design will become available". DiGRA chapter initiatives and support for local chapters play a part in continuing this work. This issue, I hope, invites more people to genuinely build on local vocabularies, approaches and viewpoints everywhere in the world.

With an attempt to further the conversation around the possibility of ludo mixes, and to document some of the valuable discussions held at the conference, DiGRA 2019 authors, whose papers explicitly addressed the concept of 'ludo mix', were invited to write a new contribution on the topic of their DiGRA 2019 paper for this special issue. Authors and co-authors of five papers accepted the invitation and their articles went through a full process of double anonymous review. Each article received 2 or 3 reviews. The five articles provide five distinct views into what happens when games become part of media mixes. To highlight the different perspectives to ludo mixes, keywords are emphasized in article introductions.

Nakamura and Tosca's article in the special issue discusses transmedia **production** strategies focusing on the *Mobile Suit Gundam* franchise. Nakamura and Tosca, among all authors, go furthest in their attempts to define and theoretically frame the concept of ludo mix. They emphasise its 'relational' nature, which means that meaningful analyses stem from looking into how different games and other products relate to each other in a wider ludo mix ecology. It is these relations in the *Mobile Suit Gundam* franchise that the article scrutinizes on a portfolio level.

Laureline Chiapello's article in this issue investigates game **designers'** role in the creation of ludo mixes, keeping in mind that the concept of media mix is traditionally marketing-driven.

Chiapello discusses a departure from thinking of "grand narratives" towards working on "grand experiences" and draws on the work of pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey. By applying the idea of game authorship, combined from 'Western' and Japanese theories of video game creation and design, Chiapello explains how understanding franchises as aesthetic experiences can successfully guide design in games.

Nökkvi Jarl Bjarnason's article focuses on the **development** of *The Final Fantasy XV Universe,* and thus presents a case from one of the best-selling JRPG ludo mixes of all time. Bjarnason discusses the game's reception, together with an account of how technological, aesthetic and economic incentives in development had an impact on the game, particularly its narrative. The article provides valuable insights into current game development practices and their instability by examining what happens when some parts of a game narrative reside outside of the game itself.

Providing one example of what media mix means to games, Joleen Blom focuses on game **characters** and writes that "Game characters do not just appear in games. They travel from game to game, from medium to medium, and from story to story." Blom goes on to explore the concept of dynamic game characters, together with the inconsistent characters of Japanese media mixes. The target audience of such characters, namely otaku, is said to consume "aggregated elements of characters and settings, but not the grand narrative". Through analysing the game *Fire Emblem: Three Houses,* Blom shows how game characters appear unique among those elsewhere in the media mix ecology.

Finally, Constantino Oliva's article analyses the games of the *Taiko no Tatsujin* **music** game franchise. He suggests that a certain kind of 'musical media literacy' is expected from the player, given the game's range of songs that originate from anime products. Meanwhile, the game's cultural references span beyond digital and media culture all the way to Japanese festive traditions. With the unique combination of the two ways of referencing different

practices of music making, Oliva promotes the use of the concept of 'musicking'.

References

Wirman, H., Furuichi, M. and Mortensen, T. 2019. "Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo Mix". In DiGRA 2019 Program Booklet. DiGRA 2019, Kyoto, Japan, 6-10 August.

Acknowledgments

The Mobile Suit Gundam Franchise

A Case Study of Transmedia Storytelling Practices and Ludo Mix in Japan

Akinori Nakamura & Susana Tosca

ABSTRACT

The present article looks at the *Mobile Suit Gundam* franchise
and the role of digital games from the conceptual framework of
transmedia storytelling and its relation to the ludo mix. We offer a
historical account of the role of digital games in the development
of "*the Mobile Suit Gundam*" series from a portfolio perspective,
and show how a combination of various types of game genres, or
otherwise 'ludo mix', played a role in enhancing the franchise's
convergent and divergent strategies, which contributed to the
success of the series. Our case can show some insight into the
importance of adopting a macro-level portfolio approach when

considering specific game design choices in the overall ludo mix within the franchise.

Keywords

Transmedia Storytelling, Media mix, Ludo mix, Business Strategy

INTRODUCTION

In the context of media production, the idea of transmediality is now more relevant than ever. With the global proliferation of broadband internet services, the number of over-the-top (OTT) media services is rising on a global scale. Along with such a drastic change in the media ecology, people's new media consuming habits are playing a central role in the development of emerging media platforms. Disney Plus, for instance, houses exclusive titles such as *Star Wars: The Mandalorian,* which is considered a "signature series" by top management (Hayes, 2020). As Hurely's (2020) essay argues, many viewers were attracted by the final season of the CG Television series *Star Wars Clone Wars,* another Disney Plus exclusive, for its potential to fill the gaps between the timelines of the *Star Wars* Universe. Among future programs, some of the most anticipated TV shows in Disney Plus are *Wanda Vision* and *Loki,* both of which are a part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Other OTT services are no exception in their strategies. Amazon Prime, which is currently filming a prequel series to *The Lord of the Rings,* also secured the global distribution rights for *Star Trek Picard.* Netflix, while initially focused on extending *Marvel Cinematic Universe* by creating such shows as *Daredevil, The Punisher* and *Jessica Jones,* among others, before the coming of Disney Plus, now has moved on to create a new TV series based on the film, *The Dark Crystal.* Netflix has also secured the global distribution rights for *Star Trek Discovery,* which is also expanding another side of *Star Trek* Universe in its unique way.

Transmedia storytelling refers to "a process where integral elements of 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[1]." However, there seems to be less emphasis on integrating digital games into the mix. Even the Producers Guild of America did not explicitly specify 'digital games' as a part of the definition of a transmedia narrative upon ratifying a new title "transmedia producer" in 2010 [2].

Nonetheless, digital games are one of the essential media today. Game apps for smartphones or AAA game titles developed for online play, as well as console game platforms, are an invaluable part of people's daily lives. There is no doubt that media convergence has now become an everyday reality for people around the globe.

In this paper, we attempt to offer a sustained account of how a transmedia producer adapts to their audience over a long period of time by developing digital games in a strategy to expand the overall portfolio of their media franchise. Building upon our work (Nakamura and Tosca, 2019), we propose to look at the conception and development of the Japanese *Mobile Suit Gundam* franchise from a macro-level portfolio perspective, to assess the role of the ludo mix within a transmedial franchise.

1. Jenkins, H 2007 "Transmedia Storytelling 101" *Henry Jenkins Official Blog* <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html> (Sep 10 2018 Access).
2. Finke N. 2010 "Producers Guild of America Agrees on New Credit: 'Transmedia Producer'" *DEADLINE HOLLYWOOD* <https://deadline.com/2010/04/producers-guild-of-america-vote-on-creation-of-new-credit-transmedia-producer-30751/ > (Sep 10 2018 Access).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A whole academic field has emerged and developed around the concept of transmediality. Freeman & Gambaratto's compilation (2018) shows how the concept has expanded over a broader area of academic disciplines in these years. For the present study, however, we examine transmediality exclusively from a macro-level portfolio perspective. In what follows, we will examine the role of the ludo mix, the term coined by the conference organizers during the DiGRA 2019 Conference.

Transmedia Storytelling and Media Mix

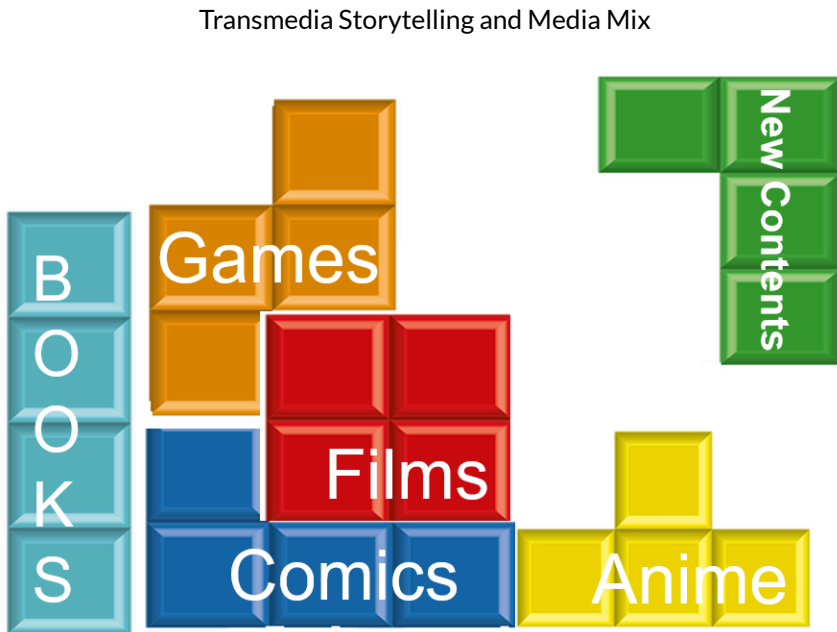*Figure 1: Conceptual model of transmedia storytelling based on Pratten's analogy.*

In our previous work, we attempted to clarify the concept of transmedia storytelling to make it analytically operational. We built upon the definitions proposed by Henry Jenkins (2003, 2006 and 2007), Jeff Gomez (2018), and an analogy proposed by Robert Pratten (2011) shown in Figure 1 (Nakamura and Tosca 2019). In

"classic" transmedia storytelling, every new instantiation extends a fiction in either time, space or in some cases, alternative dimensions. In transmedia storytelling, when each instantiation is added, various elements in the story universe need to be expanded without contradicting previous instantiations. Audiences are also expected to evaluate each instantiation from such a perspective, and in some cases, they will openly protest if they feel the transmedia universe's underlying rules are violated.[3] Such an open process is quite natural, considering the fact that the universe created for transmedia storytelling is intentionally designed in a way that allows spectators to immerse themselves in their favorite worlds by reproducing the mythos, topos, and ethos of the created instantiations (Klastrup and Tosca, 2004). Thus, IP holders that obscure the elements that sustain the popularity of the fictional universe usually receive negative fan response. In Japan, the practice similar to transmedia storytelling has been called "media mix." Marc Steinberg defines the media mix as "the cross-media serialization and circulation of entertainment franchises" (Steinberg: 2012a: viii)[4]. While media mix, just as transmedia storytelling, creates various works across media platforms, a majority of media mix products prefer a divergent model where

3. There are numerous examples of fan uproar when new transmedia products fail to meet their worldness expectations. For example, when the *Fantastic Beasts* movie introduced the word *nomajs* for those who can´t do magic, and who until now in the Harry Potter universe had been called *muggles,* the fans were extremely upset: https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/nov/06/muggles-jk-rowling-fantastic-beasts-and-where-to-find-them-american-term-non-wizards.
4. Steinberg distinguishes between the commercial approach, (the marketing media mix where various channels are used to advertise a major product) and the artistic one (the anime media mix, where the producers create different related products that can be consumed for pleasure in their own right), and the definition provided in this article is the artistic one.   This concept was further confirmed during the semi-structured interview by Nakamura (2017) with the Yokai Watch project team's brand manager in the USA, Natsumi Fujigiwa asking the differences between transmedia storytelling approaches to those of Yokai Watch (so-called cross-media). She pointed out that Yokai Watch focuses on surrounding fans with various IP-related products while creating more touchpoints for newcomers to a ground of products. The figure reflects on Fujigiwa's explanation.

variations from the central world are accepted, which is substantially different from transmedia storytelling (as it basically restricts a serialized work within the premises of consistent world building, even if that may imply additive complexity). This concept is illustrated in Figure 2:
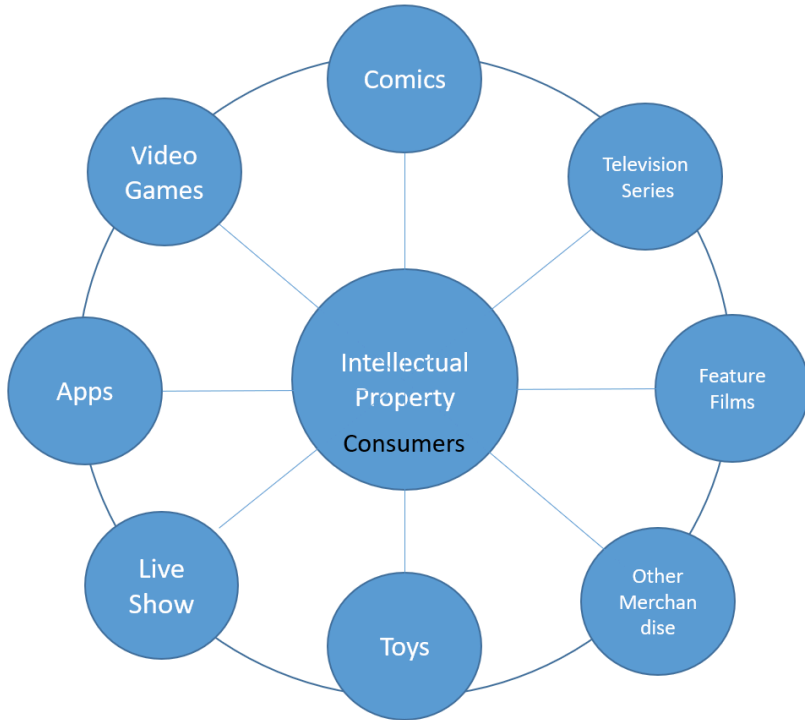
Figure 2: Conceptual model of media mix

Digital games in transmedia storytelling and the media mix

Digital games play an important role in both transmedia storytelling and the Japanese media mix. Kinder, which coined the expression "*commercial transmedia supersystem*" (1991), was inspired by observing avid youth consuming their favorite characters across multiple media platforms indiscriminately, including video games, even though at that time, video games were an emerging medium with limited graphic and sound capabilities. Jenkins also indicated that the young who were used to consuming

such a product as *Pokémon* would also become enthusiast consumers of transmedia storytelling products (2003). Since then, several scholars have examined the role of digital games within transmedia storytelling. Lachman, for example, shows how mini-games can be integrated as part of a transmedial educational project, in relation to the hard-science documentary mini-series, *Race to Mars*, produced by Discovery Channel Canada and launched as a core component (2010). Also, Wiik has examined transmedia projects in which games appear as central components of the franchise, and concluded that consumers who are motivated to consume game-centric transmedia franchises may have a different motivation than those who consume TV dramas or TV series, noting consumers' desire for immersion, in particular (2019). Just as in transmedia storytelling, video games served an important role in the media mix. Digital games developed in Japan have been considered as a part of the "media mix" ecosystem since the early days of the video game industry itself (Picard 2013; Navarro & Loriguillo 2015). While some academic papers have started scrutinizing these phenomena (i.e. Picard & Pelletier-Gagnon eds, 2015), others examine a certain franchise as a case study (Nakamura and Tosca 2019; Ernest Dit Alban, 2020).

The conceptual framework of the Ludo Mix

While previous studies examine the role of video games within transmedial franchises, a majority of them have focused on how the games were positioned within the entire franchise, with some notable exceptions. Hutchinson, for instance, examined several renowned game titles to investigate the transmediality of Japanese games, and concluded that digital games can be transmedial within one single gaming experience (2019, 69). The study by Hutchison, however, is very much focused on specific content, and did not explore the relational aspect of how various game mechanisms and playing elements constitute a gaming experience as a whole. The Ludo mix concept – proposed at DiGRA 2019 – addresses an unexplored dimension in digital game research. In the introduction

section of DiGRA 2019, the conference organizers proposed the theme "Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo Mix" as follows:

> Ludo mix may include several versions of the games or several different games together with other content thus resulting in novel media ecologies, business models and development of consumption cultures.

The ludo mix is thus a relational concept. That is, it does not operate at a single game level, but focuses on the relations that are established between games belonging to the same franchise, or between games and the other products of the franchise (anime, manga, etc.). As digital games have become ever more expansive, adopting a 'ludo mix' perspective that focuses on the relational side of the gaming experience is, we argue, vital in determining the overall experience of game narratives, as well as the roles the games play in the entire media franchise. But how to tackle this relational level analytically? Previous theoretical frameworks may provide a key to examine games from a ludo mix perspective, particularly those that attempt to classify games according to a genre division. As is well known, Roger Caillois categorizes games into four groups, namely, agon (Competition), alea (Chance), mimicry (Simulation) and ilinx (Vertigo). In his typology, each category affords a different gaming experience depending where the play is positioned on the continuum of the forms of play. The most spontaneous and improving activities, which are free from all restrictions, are termed *paidia*, while those activities expected to observe explicit and rigid regulations are called *ludus* (Callios 1961). Since then, various scholars have proposed classifications of games and simulation according to different criteria. Klabbers, for example, introduced several classifications regarding games and simulations (2003). Vossen proposed a classification that would cover physical games to games of sports, along with digital games (2004). The classifications proposed in these works may be too abstract to be directly adapted to the present study, with its portfolio focus. Nevertheless, they are relevant to us in that they point to the

fact that the diverse genres afford different gaming experiences that might be preferred by different kinds of players. A typology that gets closer to common industry labels is that of Dahlskog, Kamstrup and Aarseth, who narrow their focus to digital games, and propose four categories: 1) Strategy, 2) First-person shooters, 3) Progression and exploration games, and 4) Perfect information games (2009). Examining various games, the authors offered the important insight that these classifications should be modified over time, as new technologies are introduced in gaming experience (Ibid). An even more recent scrutiny on game genres has been undertaken by Heintz and Law, who propose the following labels: 1) Mini-game, 2) Action, 3) Adventure, 4) Role-play and 5) Resource, and add nine elements that add depth to the classification, which are a) Player, b) Input/Output devices, c) Actions, d) Challenges, e) Goals, f) Rewards, g) Setting, h) Perspective, and i) Structure (Heintz and Law, 2015). Any single game could be examined using these nine elements, in order to find out which genre it belongs to.

These approaches are useful to our ludo mix investigation, as they point to the differences between game experiences being conclusive. Truly, what is most inspiring to us here is their systemic ambition, that is, the different categories make sense only in relation to each other. It is not by chance that the ludo mix definition includes the expression "media ecology" as a metaphoric framework for a vision of how different entities can co-exist; we will return to this later. The ludo mix approach advocates for a situated perspective in which the significance of each game is considered against the backdrop of the whole network of products. This is related to genre (for instance, if we consider that a strategy game is such because it lets the player do something different than a first-person shooter), but there is something more. That is, when adopting the ludo mix perspective, not only do we care about game affordances, but also about how the game is a part of the transmedial universe. To scrutinize this dimension, we propose to use the categories of *convergent, divergent* and *hybrid*, which we explain below. The reasoning

behind this extra analysis dimension is that the different games in the ludo mix both afford different kinds of gameplay *and* actualize the transmedial universe in different ways.

Analysis method

The ludo mix perspective could arguably also be examined by conducting an in-depth close reading analysis of one or a few games, in a micro perspective. Various open-world games, MMORPGs and large-scale role-playing games can include multiple game mechanics. This would throw light on the combinations of ludic elements that constitute meaningful gaming experiences within a game. However, in order to contribute to ongoing dialogues regarding transmedial strategy that focus instead on the sustainability of a franchise, we have here chosen to explore the ludo mix from a macro perspective, that is, at the franchise portfolio level, to investigate how the digital games section of the franchise contributed to the extension of the entire franchise.

First, we consider the games in chronological order, with emphasis on how genre has been dispersed and/or concentrated, depending on each of the platforms for which the games are developed. We will also consider the games, depending on their popularity, in order to determine which genres tend to be embraced by fans. At the portfolio level, "popularity" equals sales numbers (both for games and/or related products) or notable media coverage, since we are not investigating the specific aesthetic experiences here, but only how the franchise evolves and survives (to continue with the ecological metaphors). In order to analyze relevant trends, we looked at video game titles that were featured in Weekly Famitsu from 1986 until the end of 2019, which are archived in the f-ism game database created by KADOKAWA Game Linkage (hereafter Famitsu Group); in other words, the software considered for this analysis are games developed for game-dedicated platforms. In classifying the titles, we first excluded any titles that were repackaged as special or discounted versions for the same

platforms, as these versions are completely the same, in terms of game design, as the original. Since our focus was on games launched for the game-dedicated platforms (either for console or mobile), those games that were developed as PC game software, online games, arcades, mobile game services, game apps, or virtual reality experience were excluded from the present study. There were several titles which were download-only titles, distributed in a given game platforms' network services. These were also excluded. Furthermore, any of the games that were repackaged as retro games (such as game archive collections or a mini-series) were also excluded. We have adopted the genre classification used by Famitsu group, since the terms they used in categorizing the games were quite generic and therefore easier to translate. We also looked in the Media Arts database created by the Agency of Cultural Affairs, Japan (https://mediaarts-db.bunka.go.jp/), to evaluate our list. After this process, there was a total of 162 titles on the list (if 18 titles, which resulted from the simultaneous release of one game to multiple platforms, are included, the number of the titles is 180).

OUR CASE: *THE MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM* FRANCHISE

The *Mobile Suit Gundam* franchise[5], a media franchise initiated as a science fiction anime series for television, first aired on April 7th, 1979. The franchise gradually expanded to feature anime film adaptations, original video animation, digital games, comics and novels, among other products. The most popular merchandise products were plastic scale models of robots, which were called 'mobile suits' within the story universe. The main plot depicts the armed conflict between two factions: the Earth Federation with headquarters located on earth, and the Principality of Zeon: a group of space colonies that declared their independence. The conflicts started in the (fictional) Universal Century 0079. The franchise initially followed the conflicts of these global alliances in

5. Unless otherwise noted, the subsequent sections are based on Nakamura and Tosca (2019).

the Universal Century, but the producers of the franchise, realizing that the extension of the story universe only pleased existing fans, created *Super Deformed Gundam,* or the *SD Gundam* series, in 1985. A study by Nakamura and Tosca (2019) found that creating the *SD Gundam* series brought back the younger audiences, and as a result, extended the lifecycle of the franchise. After this successful initiative, and considering the fact that the Bandai group (the manufacturer of *Gundam* plastic models and other toy-related merchandise) acquired Sunrise in 1994, a new televised anime series adopted the divergent model. In this new series, only *Gundam* and its designs [6] were used as reminiscence of the first *Gundam* series, while everything else, such as the development of the main characters and the world setting were vastly different from the previous titles (except for *Mobile Suit Gundam Seed* and *Gundam Seed Destiny)*. In the meantime, other media products such as OVAs, special short 3D CG
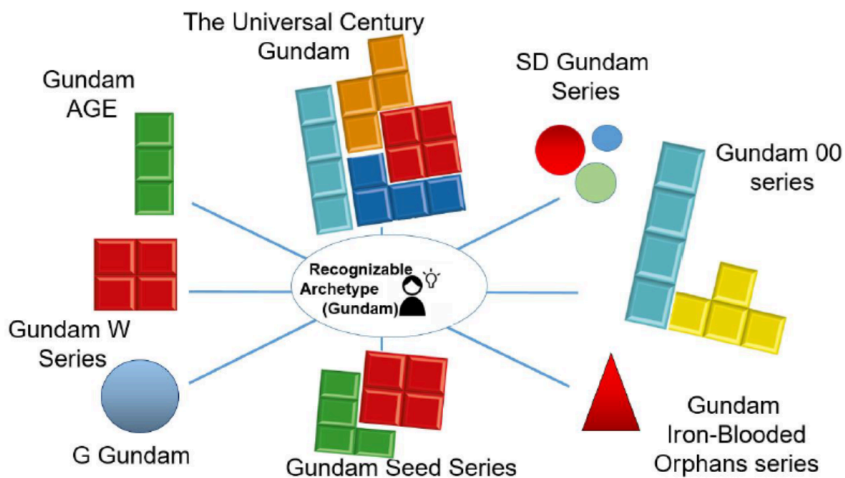
Figure 3: In the Gundam franchise, convergent approaches and divergent approaches to the franchise complement one another

cinematic experiences and the VR experience, continued to build on the Universal Century universe. With each new world that was created, new merchandise and other media products were

---

6. Based on a book written by Kenji Inomata in (1995. p134).

also launched, based on these new intellectual properties, as conceptualized in Figure 3.

Nakamura and Tosca's (2019) analysis revealed that *Gundam's* convergent strategies (transmedia storytelling) and divergent strategies (media mix) can be complementary, and that they are design possibilities that depend on each other, rather than two opposite kinds of media strategies, each with their territorial origins. In subsequent sections, we will assess the functions of the ludo mix in such a complicated media portfolio as that of the *Mobile Suit Gundam Franchise*.

<div align="center">

The Role of Ludo Mix in the *Gundam Franchise*

</div>

After scrutinizing the games for the selected 162 titles, we realized that these games could be categorized based on the divergent-convergent dichotomy, in relation to the mythos-topos and ethos of the Universal Century universe. This classification was done succinctly, based on our playing knowledge, but mostly on the documentation available about the games. We also investigated various 'explain' and 'let's play' videos on the individual games, which are available on video sharing sites, as well as Wiki Strategy Guides, which go through all dimensions of the games in elaborate detail. We categorized the games whose main game mode was designed to contribute to the extension of the Universal Century universe as convergent. As for those games that are not part of the Universal Century, those that only use characters from the Universal Century to represent avatars in the games, or games set in the Universal Century universe, but introduce alternative content that does not amount to an addition or extension of the canonic story world, we categorize these as divergent.

In this process, we realized that some of the games are not clear-cut in their game design. Thus, we added a new category, that of *hybrid* for those games that have some portions and/or game mode that extends the story world. We also separate the games that use *Super Deformed Gundam* mecha and other deformed Gundam

character designs from the regular ones for the purpose of our analysis, although they should all be categorized as divergent in a convergent-divergent dichotomy categorization. We also realized that some games were released for several platforms simultaneously, with no modification except for some graphic upgrades. We will maintain these numbers in platform analyses, but exclude redundancy for convergent-divergent categorical and genre analyses. Table 1-3 shows a summary of the data used.

	Total	SD	SD (%)	Regular	Reg. (%)	Divergent	Diver. (%)	Convergent	Conver.(%)	Hybrid	Hybrid (%)
Unique	162	69	42.6%	93	57.4%	52	(32.1%)	11	(6.8%)	30	(18.5%)
Redundant	18	4		14	100%	9	57.29%	0	11.46%	5	31.25%
Total	180	73		107		61		11		35	

Table 1 Numbers based on convergent-divergent-hybrid and SD (Divergent)

The Origin of the Gundam Game Franchise

Before going over the results, we will briefly introduce the origin of the *Gundam* games. According to the Media Arts database, four titles were released before the first games were released for the Family Computer (hereafter, Famicom). The first digital games for the *Mobile Suit Gundam* franchise were released in 1983 for the cartridge-changeable game platform, Emerson Arcadia. At that time, Bandai had the regional rights to sell this product; thus, Gundam was released along with several other titles. This was followed by *Gundam*: *Runatsu No Tatakai* (*The Battle of Luna II*) in 1984 for PC-8801. Both of these titles were 2D shooting games, using simple pixel art with a slight resemblance to *Gundam* characters and vehicles[7]. Then, an adventure game series followed for the PC-8801 series, following the main scenario of the first *Gundam*. But these games didn´t really bring anything new to the Universal Century World. They were targeted toward existing fans, and allowed them to revisit their beloved universe through engagement in immersive, repetitive play. These products fall

7. Agency of Cultural Affairs, Media Arts Database <https://mediaarts-db.bunka.go.jp/gm/index.php> (2019 Feb 11 Access) Let's Play video can be found in various sites.

within Kennedy´s categorization of typical transmedia games in the West, which, as he notes, tend to be secondary products to the source, that either simply use popular characters in a generic gaming environment like shooting, puzzle, etc., or roughly adapt the main story line of core content, with low degrees of interactivity (such as clicking and/or pushing buttons) (Kennedy 2018: 72). The first game for the Famicom, the *Mobile Suit Z Gundam: Hot Scramble* was more ambitious. Bandai invited Masanobu Endo, the main game designer credited for his directorial works on *Xevious,* the innovative shooting games with in-depth narrative, to be a main game designer. Although this was still considered a simple adaptation of repayable events within the narrative of *Z Gundam,* it did serve the purpose of letting fans experience the inside of the cockpit of *Z Gundam.* Thus, *Mobile Suit Z Gundam: Hot Scramble* sold approximately 570,000 units (Nikkei, 2007), which led Bandai to include the *Gundam* series as one of their important portfolios for producing more games. *Mobile Suit Z Gundam: Hot Scramble* is still ranked in 9th place in the Top 10 list of the most selling *Gundam* video games of all time.

Console	Total	Total (%)	SD	SD(%)	Reg	Reg(%)
Family Computer	11	9.2%	10	90.9%	1	9.1%
Super Famicom	20	16.8%	14	70.0%	6	30.0%
Virtua Boy	1	0.8%	1	100.0%	0	0.0%
SEGA Saturn	8	6.7%	1	12.5%	7	87.5%
PlayStation	19	16.0%	7	36.8%	12	63.2%
Dream Cast	4	3.4%	0	0.0%	4	100.0%
PlayStation2	25	21.0%	5	20.0%	20	80.0%
Game Cube	3	2.5%	1	33.3%	2	66.7%
Xbox 360	4	3.4%	0	0.0%	4	100.0%
PlayStation3	12	10.1%	0	0.0%	12	100.0%
Wii	6	5.0%	4	66.7%	2	33.3%
PlayStation4	5	4.2%	2	40.0%	3	60.0%
Switch	1	0.8%	1	100.0%	0	0.0%
Console Total	119	100.0%	46	38.7%	73	61.3%
Mobile	Total	Total (%)	SD	SD(%)	Reg	Reg(%)
Game Boy	5	8.2%	5	100.0%	0	0.0%
Wonder Swan	13	21.3%	8	61.5%	5	38.5%
Game Boy Advance	5	8.2%	2	40.0%	3	60.0%
Game Gear	1	1.6%	1	100.0%	0	0.0%
PlayStation Portable	20	32.8%	3	15.0%	17	85.0%
Nintendo DS	7	11.5%	3	42.9%	4	57.1%
Nintendo 3DS	3	4.9%	1	33.3%	2	66.7%
PlayStation Vita	7	11.5%	1	14.3%	6	85.7%
Mobile Total	61	100.0%	24	39.3%	37	60.7%
Overall Total	180	100.0%	70	38.9%	110	61.1%

Table 2 Numbers based on Platform Distribution

Genre	Number (Total)	%	Number (SD)	% (SD)	Number (Reg)	%
Simulation	62	38.3%	44	71.0%	18	29.0%
RPG	11	6.8%	9	81.8%	2	18.2%
Simulation RPG	1	0.6%	0	0.0%	1	100.0%
Action	66	40.7%	11	16.7%	55	83.3%
Adventure	4	2.5%	0	-	4	100.0%
Card	1	0.6%	0	-	1	100.0%
Shooting	11	6.8%	1	9.1%	10	90.9%
Puzzle	2	1.2%	2	100.0%	0	-
Quizz	1	0.6%	0	-	1	100.0%
Table game	3	1.9%	2	-	1	33.3%
Total Number	162	100.0%	69	42.6%	93	57.4%
Mulitple Platform Redudants	18	N/A	4		14	N/A
Total Product Number	180		73		107	

Table 3 Numbers based on standard genre, based on Famitsu (note that overall distribution is the ratio of each genre over all of the titles, while the percentage for each genre represents how distribution is split between SD Gundam series and the rest)

Ludo Mix and divergent games in the *Gundam* Franchise

To understand the position of divergent games within the *Gundam* franchise, we decided to turn to the *SD Gundam* games, as *SD Gundam* products allow the production team to divert their strategy from taking purely convergent approaches. Table 1 shows the ratio of the *SD Gundam* titles compared to other *Gundam*-related games. Overall, the *SD Gundam* series consists of 42.6% or 69 titles, among which, 90.9% of the titles for the Famicom and 70% of the titles for Super Famicom are the *SD Gundam* series respectively, as shown in Table 2. The game titles for handheld games also demonstrate a similar tendency: all of the titles released for Game Boy are the *SD Gundam* series, while 61.5% accounted for the games developed for the WonderSwan handheld game device with 16-bit CPU.

From a genre perspective, the series introduced turn-based war simulation games to console game platforms. There were several war simulation titles that preceded them, but with the use of characters from the *Gundam* universe and the fact that the game was designed for young and novice players, the game lowered the bar of access to this emerging genre, which by then was mostly played by computer enthusiasts. Thus, the series popularized the war simulation genre for a younger audience. This situation reflects the overall ratio on the distribution of the genre between *SD Gundam* and the rest of the series, as shown in Table 3. War simulations occupy 71% of the *SD Gundam,* implying that simulation games are the dominant genre for the *SD Gundam* series. Another genre that *SD Gundam* explored for the *Gundam* franchise is the role-playing game (henceforth, RPG): 9 out of 11 games that are categorized as RPG in the *Gundam* franchise are part of the *SD Gundam* series. This genre choice is not coincidental, as it is stated in the 30th Anniversary memorial book of the *SD Gundam* published by Sunrise as follows:

> In this era of television, where screens have a resolution of 640×480, characters with smaller proportions are also suitable for reproduction in games, and thus, SD Gundam is heavily used as a subject for games. It was clear from previous titles that it was an easy one. It also blended in with RPGs, which were a persistently popular genre of game software for home consoles at this time. Due to the success of the first game, the highly popular "SD Gundam Gaiden" was released in that year for family computers, and a new one has been announced for the Super Nintendo, respectively. The game software was also actively promoted through commercial images and magazine advertisements, resulting in the release of SD Gundam. It also served as a tool for communicating to the public the existence of the SD Gundam series (Sunrise, 2019, 37).

This divergent strategy led to the expansion of the entire *Mobile Suit Gundam* franchise as exemplified in the *Samurai Warrior Gundam* and *Knight Gundam*, among others, which developed their own story lines, further attracting a young audience in the process. In total, 70 *SD Gundam* titles and three additional

deformed character titles have been released, with the latest titles being released in November 2019. The digital game version of the *SD Gundam* series has played a crucial role in expanding the *Gundam* franchise, as well as the fan base "by creating a parallel but related world and also stirs interest in the older instantiations of the franchise" (Nakamura and Tosca, 2019). Action games began to be released after the 32-bit/64-bit era when console video game platforms were equipped with interactive 3D graphic processing capabilities, and thus, the mechanic design could be more faithfully recreated in the digital realm. The convergent approach was more often adopted from then on. This will be discussed in the next section.

<center>Ludo Mix and convergent games in the *Gundam* Franchise</center>

As shown in Table 1, for non-SD *Gundam* series, divergent approaches are still prevalent, as they amount to 57.29%. Convergent approaches, on the other hand, cover 11.46%, and hybrid 31.25%. Combined with SD *Gundam*, the percentages of divergent type games has grown to 74.7%, hybrid 18.5%, and convergent only 6.8%.

That does not mean, however, that developers did not challenge the convergent approach. The convergent approach to the *Gundam* games started with *Mobile Suit Gundam: F91 Formula Wars 0122*, released for Super Famicom in 1991. But a majority of games that implemented the convergence approach were made for console platforms with 3D graphic processing capabilities. Table 5[8] shows the sales ranking of *Gundam* video games using convergent approaches. As exhibited in the previous study by Nakamura and Tosca (2019), even the best-selling titles did not reach sales of 400,000 units, which implies that these titles are meant for core

8. Numbers based on Nikkei Entertainment (2007, 107) All of the numbers are estimated. Other information is based on Media Arts Database <https://mediaarts-db.bunka.go.jp/gm/?locale=en&display_view=pc> F-ism Game database byGz Brain <https://www.f-ism.net/> confirms that game titles released after 2007 did not sell more than 570,000 units, leaving the ranking unchanged.

fans of the franchise. The ranking also reflects what these core fans want from the gaming experience. All of the platforms for which games were developed were consoles with 3D graphic processing capabilities. Nine titles were action-focused, among which, five titles are 3D actions with a third-person view. As for *Mobile Suit Gundam : The Blue Destiny* trilogy, and *Gundam Side Story 0079: Rise from the Ashes*, these were first-person shooting games where players had a fixed first-person view from within the cockpit of the mobile suite. Only two games are identified as a simulation game. *Mobile Suit Gundam: F91 Formula Wars 0122* was set in UC 0122, one year prior to the timeline in which the anime film, *Mobile Suit Gundam F91* takes places. The story in the game provides the basic premise of political, technological and social landscape of its time, with some of the characters overlapping the game and the film. Thus, the game extends the UC universe in both timeline and spatial details of the world. The armed conflict depicted in the game was later canonized with the conflicts being officially named as "Second Old Mobile Campaign.[9]" *Mobile Suit Gundam: Zoenic Front*, which is ranked in 3rd place, was intended to allow players to experience One Year War from the perspective of the Principles of Zeon. All of the aforementioned titles provide the details of the Universal Century universe.

9. It is listed on the official timeline of Formula Plan in the magazine *Gundam Mobile Suit Bible: Gundam F91* vol24 (2019/ In Japanese): p.32.

	Title	Platform	Genre	Graphic	Date	Sales
1	Mobile Suit Gundam Lost War Chronicle	PS2	Action	3D	2002/08/01	382,670
2	Mobile Suit Gundam Battle Field Record U.C. 0081	PS3	Action	3D	2009/09/03	259,245
3	Mobile Suit Gundam: Zeonic Front	PS2	Simulation	3D	2001/09/06	239,055
4	Mobile Suit Gundam Side Story: The Blue Destiny Vol. 1	SS	Shooting	3D	1996/09/20	206,937
5	Mobile Suit Gundam Side Story: The Blue Destiny Vol. 2	SS	Shooting	3D	1996/12/06	187,569
6	Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire	PS3	Action	3D	2006/11/11	146199
7	Mobile Suit Gundam Side Story: The Blue Destiny Vol. 3	SS	Shooting	3D	1997/03/07	134,878
8	Gundam Side Story 0079: Rise from the Ashes	DC	Shooting	3D	1999/08/26	118,813
9	Mobile Suit Gundam Side Stories	PS3	Action	3D	2014/05/29	110239
10	Mobile Ops: The One Year War	XB360	Action	3D	2008/06/26	38713
11	Mobile Suit Gundam F91: Formula Wars 0122	SFC	Simulation	2D	1991/07/06	N/A

Table 4: Estimated sales volume of the Gundam video games using convergent approaches.[footnote]Numbers are based on Gz Brain Database <https://www.f-ism.net/> All of the numbers are estimated.[/footnote] Based on F-ism.net
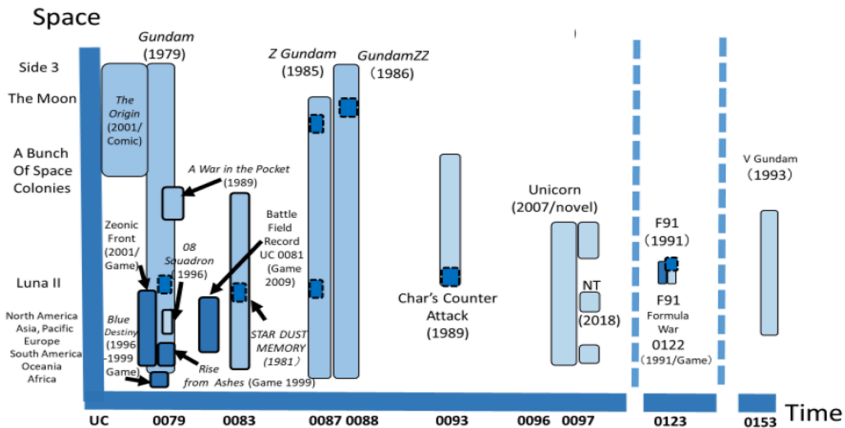
Figure 4: The expansion of the Universal Century World with convergence-type games (Nakamura and Tosca, 2019)

Furthermore, each title has manga and/or novel adaptation, which follow the main plot first introduced in these games[10]. Some titles with original mobile suites, such as *The Blue Destiny* trilogy and

10. eBook Japan (2017) Gundam Series Timeline The Universal Century Version (In Japanese) <https://ebookjapan.yahoo.co.jp/content/etc/gundam/nenpyo/>

Rise from the Ashes, even had plastic models released, further enriching the fan experience.

In Figure 4, the additional realm explored by convergent games is shown in a darker color. These additions seem to be canonically insignificant, as new additions are not the main plot of the various incidents taking place in the UC universe, but this is where the game design of these games plays a significant role. The numerous battle fields, which were designed for these games, and filled with meticulous details and intense combat experiences, allow the players to get absorbed in an in-depth experience from a protagonist perspective.

Hybrid type opens up for a wider player demographic

In this section, the hybrid type is analyzed. As shown in Table 1, 30 titles, or 18.5%, are considered to be hybrid in our classification. For the present analysis, among these 30 titles, five titles fall into the category of games whose primary mode is adaptation. Still, they have additional content that contributes to the extension of the Universal Century universe. *Mobile Suit Gundam* and *Mobile Suit Gundam Encounter in Space*, for example, follow the main plot of the first *Gundam*. But the players get to play a completely different role upon completing the story mode of the game. A war simulation game developed for Super Famicom, *Mobile Suit Gundam Cross Dimension*, has a side-story scenario upon completing the main scenario that follows the anime's storyline. *Mobile Suit Z Gundam and Mobile Suit Gundam Char's Counterattack* enables players to play from different characters' perspectives. Apart from this, two of the major series fall into hybrid categories. One is the earlier phase of the *Versus* series. This series is one of the main examples within the Gundam games that takes full advantage of the vast fictional world as a playing field. The series started with the launch of the arcade game, *Mobile Suit Gundam Federation VS. Zeon* (hence called *Versus* series), which was later expanded and ported to console game platforms during the PS2 era. This third-person perspective, the 3D fighting

game, was developed as a result of a collaboration with Capcom, the game development studio known for high-quality 3D action games, including 3D fighting games. Thus, the involvement of Capcom ensured the quality of game mechanics, both for single and multiple players modes. While many missions explore the main events and setting of the anime, other missions explore areas which were   never introduced before, thus expanding the story world. In this way, the series allowed long-time fans to get immersed in the *Gundam* world, and simultaneously enabled newcomers to have a great gaming experience without knowing much about the series. The second long-lasting series is *Mobile Suit Gundam Gihren's Greed* series, one of the most popular war simulation games in the franchise. This series covers major armed conflicts in the Universal Century universe, including extensive anime footage of the 'historical record' of the Universal Century, from the 1st anime to the incidents taking place in the *Mobile Suit Gundam: Hathaway's Flash*. It covers all of the main plot of the anime, but the game is known for its vast amount of information and graphic data on mobile suites , weaponry and characters, as well as numerous 'what if' scenarios for those players who are interested in finding alternative storylines. This series covers a wide customer base, as it could attract both *Gundam* fans and war simulation enthusiasts. On a parallel strategy, the *Gundam battle* series focuses on mobile suit fighting, not only for the main scenario in the anime series, but also incorporating side stories created for video games, novels and other transmedial products implemented throughout the series. In other words, hybrid games seemed to be designed to entice both gamers and core fans of the franchise, meeting the needs of very diverse target groups.

General considerations about the sales ranking of video games

	Title	Transmedia Type	Genre	Platform	Sales Date	Sales Volume
1	Mobile Suite Gundam Federation VS. Zeon DX	Hybrid	Action	PS2/DC	2001/12/6	950,000
2	SD Gundam Sengokuden: Kunitori Monogatari	Divergent	Simulation	GB	1990/3/24	920,000
3	SD Gundam G GENERATION	Divergent	Simulation	PS	1998/8/6	730,000
4	SD Gundam World Gachapoin Senshi 2 Capsule Senki	Divergent	Simulation	FC	1989/6/25	660,000
5	Mobile Suit Gundam: Encounters in Space	Hybrid	Action	PS2	2003/9/4	640,000
6	Mobile Suite Z Gundam A.E.U.G VS. Titans	Hybrid	Action	PS2	2003/12/4	630,000
7	SD Gundam G Generation Neo	Divergent	Simulation	PS2	2002/11/28	590,000
8	SD Gundam Gaiden Knight Gundam Story	Divergent	RPG	FC	1990/8/11	580,000
9	Mobile Suite Z Gundam Hot Scramble	Divergent	Action	FC	1986/8/28	570,000
10	SD Gundam G Generation 0	Divergent	Simulation	PS	1999/8/12	570,000

Table 5: Top 10 sales ranking of the Gundam video games in Japan

Finally, the sales tendency of the Gundam video game portfolio and ludo mix is discussed in this section. In relating to previous sections, the sales ranking affirms the effectiveness of the initial strategy adopted by Bandai Namco (at the time, Bandai, as they didn´t complete their merger with Namco until 2005) to concentrate on developing turn-based simulation games within the *SD Gundam* series. The series occupies six slots among the top ten best-selling *Gundam* games: five of which were simulation games and the other role-playing games, which can be considered as a great achievement in itself, since there were only four titles developed for this genre. The super-deformed mechanic design was suitable for non-action game genres, and was thus embraced by fans at the time. This style (developing war simulation games with super-deformed characters from Science Fiction anime) was eventually adopted for the *Super Robot Wars* videogames series, in which *SD Gundam* characters were also featured along with other robotic characters from the *Super Giant Robot* series, expanding this model to the creation of an entirely new series.

Apart from the simulation genre, four titles belong to the action genre, in which players assume the role of a pilot and control various kinds of mobile suites. Among four games, three titles were released for the PlayStation2, the bestselling video game

console platform to date with a global circulation of 150 million[11] and known for its highly advanced 3D graphic processing capabilities at the time of release. All of the three titles are of hybrid type, as they allow players to both go through the main plot of the anime series and also try a variety of missions that show unexplored areas of the Universal Century universe. Two of these titles are part of the *Versus* series. As far as action games are concerned, the *Versus* series is one of the most long-lasting series, as the latest instantiation was released on July 30th 2020. With 183 playable mobile suites stretching over 36 works at this latest incarnation of the series[12]. However, the series has eventually transformed into representing the most extreme case of divergence type of experience within the franchise. A similar path was taken by *Dynasty Warriors: Gundam* series. The games attempted to integrate various types of *Gundam* from different *Gundam* universes to entice action game fans with hack and slash fighting mechanics, using both melee and long-range attacks. Just as in the later Versus series, having various lineups from multiple universes bring the maximum number of players from the *Gundam* franchise fanbase.

11. Kyodo News (2019) "Sony's PlayStation recognized as world's best-selling game console" *Japan Times* <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/12/04/business/corporate-business/sony-playstation-world-best-selling-game-console/#.Xu-g7WgzbHo.>

12. Based on the information provided in the official home page Mobile Suit Gundam Versus series portal <https://gundam-vs.jp/extreme/index.html> (In Japanese)
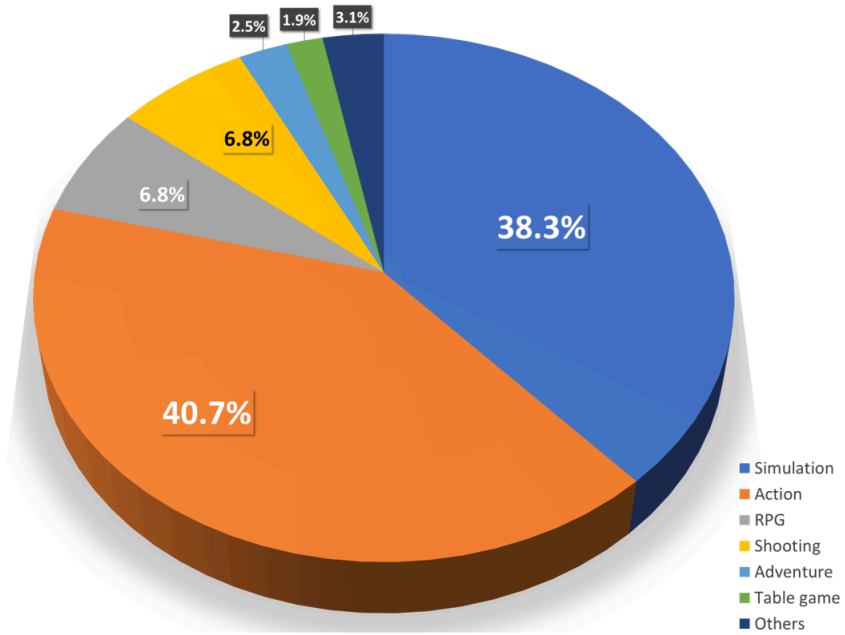
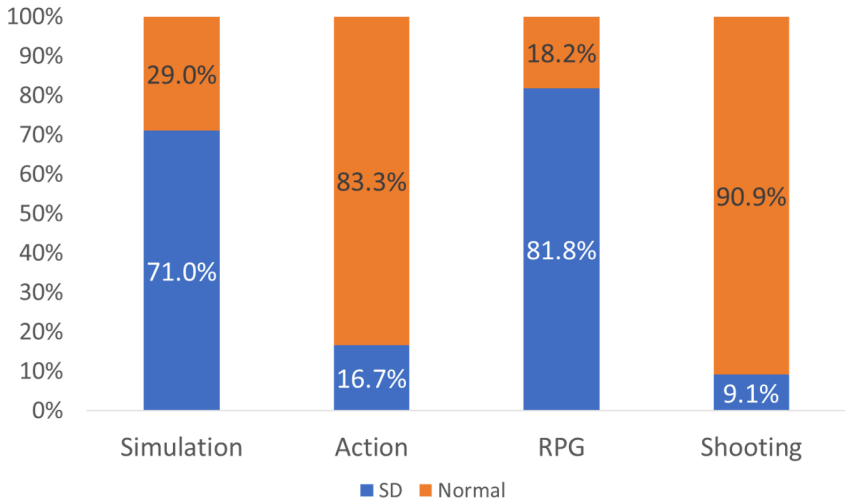*Figure 5: Overall distribution of Game Genre for the Gundam Franchise*

Figure 6: Genre distribution of SD Gundam games and regular Gundam games

CONCLUSIONS: A BALANCED LUDO MIX FOR THE
MEDIA FRANCHISE

Our analysis has revealed some interesting characteristics of the
overall distribution of game genres among the *Mobile Suit
Gundam* games released for video game consoles and handheld
platforms from 1986 to 2019 in Japan, which is shown in the pie
chart on Figure 5. In the cases where video game platforms, either
console or mobile, are not equipped with 3D graphic processing
capabilities, the characters in *SD Gundam* are the chosen means
of expression. The genre was carefully geared to optimize the
given specifications of the platform, as shown in Figure 6. While
the design of Super Deformed is not appropriate for heavy action
sequences, it is a good fit for such game genres as turn-based
war simulation and role-playing games; both of which do not
require dynamic movement of the in-game characters. However,
the design of Super Deformed is suitable for providing an in-
depth narrative experience (RPG), and for showing intricate world
settings and multiple situated possibilities (simulation). For the
simulation genre, using characters such as those from *SD Gundam*,
which are already familiar to the target audience of young male
players, the games naturally become a suitable entry point for this
genre. For games that use regular *Gundam* mobile suites and other
characters in realistic settings, the series gained more popularity
when the game platforms were upgraded with 3D graphics
processing capabilities. This is particularly important for games of
the convergent type, as they intend to allow the players to enter
previously unexplored regions in the Universal Century universe.
Since their players tend to be core fans of the *Gundam* franchise,
both the narrative and world experience need to be coherent with
the existing narrative within the universe. Therefore, actions and
shooting games are designed to meet this purpose. These gaming
experiences are often later complemented with manga and/or novel
adaptations to enrich the consumer experience in the tradition of
media mix practices common in Japan. In these developments,
games are the driving force of the expansive movement of the
franchise. Games of the hybrid type, on the other hand, focus on

trying to cover a wider player base. Thus, for actions, whether it's the 3D fighting or 3D hack and slash type, a variety of scenarios from the main storyline to side storylines are developed to enrich the player experience. From a business perspective, Bandai Namco´s decision to form partnerships with Capcom and Koei Tecmo, as leading game studios in their respective fields, is a rational and sound decision. For simulation games like the *Gihren's Greed* series, a vast amount of 'what if' scenarios, coupled with newly-created anime footage, allow players to immerse themselves in the gaming environment. In other words, a diverse mix of ludic elements or ludo mix meets the needs of both newcomers and core fans of the franchise; a phenomenon also observed in relation to the overall strategy of the *Mobile Suit Gundam Franchise* (Nakamura and Tosca, 2019). Returning to the ecological metaphor present in the ludo mix definition, we could say that the core components of the franchise (its DNA or *worldness*) are able to mutate into different species. Some will successfully adapt to their habitat, and others risk failing. For instance, a game like *Dynasty Warriors: Gundam* acts as a Trojan horse that can recruit action game enthusiasts to the franchise, presumably spinning other acts of consumption. The present findings reaffirm that the game portfolio is, in fact, the larger part of the overall *Gundam* media franchise, demonstrating a high flexibility in different "evolutions" and changes of environment.

Future research needs to be conducted to explore the usefulness of this ecological metaphor in a theoretically founded and more systematic way, as well as to determine the extent to which the overall business concept may or may not be influenced by the ludo mix. In this respect, a complementary micro-analysis level could help. This could either engage the content/aesthetic level or even the reception level, which would open the way for a more mixed-methods approach than the one we have chosen here. One could, for instance, conduct close readings of each of the three types of extensions, namely, divergent, convergent and hybrid, in order to elucidate how the ludo mix is structured in each type of game, in relation to the micro level, that is, within a single

gaming experience. Another avenue of inquiry could be to further scrutinize the hybrid game category that we have worked with in this paper. One way to do this could be to examine the nature of the gaming experience when the games engage both the main plot and another (extra) story for the game titles that were sold as "adaptations" of the original animation versions. This would mean incorporating a reception perspective into the analysis, engaging players by, for example, interviewing them or studying player documentation such as discussions in player fora, etc., hoping that further examination can clarify how hybrid games can be positioned within the divergent and convergent dichotomy. Further clarifying and conceptually strengthening these three categories will no doubt benefit scholarship preoccupied with mapping the life and evolution of entire media franchises. As for *Gundam* in particular, a further study avenue could be to incorporate those games that are excluded from the present study, such as PC game software, online games, mobile game services, game apps, or virtual reality experience and their roles played in ludo mix, in order to fully map the franchise.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Caillois, R. (1961). Man, play, and games. New York: Free Press.

Dahlskog, S., Kamstrup, A., & Aarseth, E. 2009. Mapping the game landscape: Locating genres using functional classification. Presented at the Digital Games Research Conference: *DiGRA2009: Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*, London. Retrieved from <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/09287.47544.pdf>

DiGRA 2019 Program (2019) "Game, Play and Emerging Ludomix Theme Introduction" DiGRA 2019< http://www.digra2019.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/ DiGRA2019booklet.pdf>

Ernest Dit Alban, E (2020) "Cross-media Gaming or Where Toys and Video Games Collide: The Pedestrian Dynamics of Level 5's Snack World" *Replaying Japan* Vol 02

Finke N. 2010 "Producers Guild of America Agrees on New Credit: 'Transmedia Producer'" *DEADLINE HOLLYWOOD* <https://deadline.com/2010/04/producers-guild-of-america-vote-on-creation-of-new-credit-transmedia-producer-30751/ >

Freeman M. & Rampazzo Gambarato R. *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*. New York: Routledge

Gomez, J. 2018. *Transmedia storytelling-interview with Jeff Gomez* Unitec Institute of Technology Channel on YouTube < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pf-MDZm2wsU >

Gundam Mobile Suit Bible: Gundam F91 vol24 (2019/ In Japanese)

Hayes, D. 2020 "Disney Sets Streaming Release Plan For 'The Mandalorian' Season 2; CEO Bob Iger Sees 'Star Wars' As TV-Centric In Near Term" DEADLINE <https://deadline.com/2020/02/disney-talks-streaming-plans-for-the-mandalorian-falcon-and-the-winter-soldier-more-1202851385/>

Heintz, S., and Law, E. L.-C. 2015. The game genre map: A revised game classification. In *Proceedings of the 2015 Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play*,175–184. ACM

Hutchinson, R (2018) "Transmedia Storytelling in Japanese Games" Replaying Japan Vol 00: pp 68-76

Hurely, L 2020 "Disney Sets Streaming Release Plan For 'The Mandalorian' Season 2; CEO Bob Iger Sees 'Star Wars' As TV-Centric In Near Term" DEADLINE < How Star Wars Rebels' Ending Impacted The Clone Wars' Final Season/>

Inomata Kenji 1995 *Gandamu Shinwa* (The Legend of Gundam) Daiamondo Sha

Jenkins, H 2003. "Transmedia Storytelling: Moving characters from books to films to video games can make them stronger and more compelling." MIT Technology Review <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/401760/transmedia-storytelling/>

_____ 2006. "Convergence Culture" New York: New York University Press

_____ 2007. "Transmedia Storytelling 101" *Henry Jenkins Official Blog* <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html>

_____ 2011. "Transmedia 202: Further Reflection" *Henry Jenkins Official Blog* <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2011/08/defining_transmedia_further_re.html>

Klabbers, J. 2003. The gaming landscape: a taxonomy for classifying games and simulations. In: Copier, M., Raessens, J. (Eds.), *Level up digital games research conference*, Utrecht University, 4–6 November: pp. 54–67

Kinder, M. 1991 *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*: Berkeley: University of California Press:

Kennedy, H. (2018). Transmedia Games. Aesthetics and Politics of Profitable Play. In Freeman M. & Rampazzo Gambarato R. *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*. New York: Routledge.

Klastrup, L. and S. Tosca. 2004 "Transmedial Worlds-Rethinking Cyberworld Design" Proceedings of the 2004 International Conference on Cyberworlds (CW04) IEEE: <http://www.itu.dk/people/klastrup/klastruptosca_transworlds.pdf>

Lachman R, et al 2010 "Rock Mars: Cross-Industry Collaboration on a Rich Media Educational Experience" *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 9 (2010) 1352–1356

Nakamura A. 2017 "Yokai Wocchi No Hokubei Senryaku Towa-Level 5 abby Inc. Tanto Intabuu." *Gamebusiness.jp* (in Japanese) <https://www.gamebusiness.jp/article/2017/06/26/13199.html>

Nakamura A., and S. Tosca 2019 "The Mobile Suit Gundam Franchise: a Case Study of Transmedia Storytelling Practices and the Role of Digital Games in Japan" *DiGRA '19 – Proceedings of the 2019 DiGRA International Conference: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo-Mix* <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/keywords/transmedia-storytelling/>

Navarro-Remesal, Victor & Loriguillo-López, Antonio. (2015). What Makes Gêmu Different? A Look at the Distinctive Design Traits of Japanese Video Games and Their Place in the Japanese Media Mix. Journal of Games Criticism. 2. 1-17.

Nikkei Entertainment (ed) 2007 *Otona No Gandamu 3: Mechanic & Business* (Gundam for the Adult 3: Mechanic & Business): Nikkei BP

Picard, M. 2013. The foundation of Geemu: A brief history of early Japanese video games. *Game Studies.* 13.

Picard, M. and J. Pelletier-Gagnon 2015 "Introduction: Geemu, media mix, and the state of Japanese video game studies." *Kinephanos: Journal of media studies and popular culture* 5 (December 2015): 1-19.

Pratten, R 2011. *Getting Started in Transmedia Storytelling: A Practical Guide for Beginners.* CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

Remake the Last Jedi. 2018. <https://www.remakethelastjedi.com/>

Steinberg, M. 2012a. *Anime's media mix, franchising toys and characters in Japan*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Steinberg, M. 2012b. "Condensing the Media Mix: Multiple Possible Worlds in "The Tatami Galaxy"." IN *Revue Canadienne D'Études Cinématographiques / Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, 21(2), 71-92.

Sunrise. 2019. SD Gundam 30th Anniversary: Sunrise (In Japanese)

Tosca, S. & Klastrup, L. (2016). The networked reception of transmedial universes: An experience-centered approach. *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research, 32*(60).

Vossen, D. 2004. "The Nature and Classification of Games." *Avante*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 7

Wiik, E 2019 "More Interaction, More Story, More Lore": Motivations Related to Game-centric Transmedia" Proceedings of the 2019 DiGRA International Conference: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo-Mix <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/more-interaction-more-story-more-lore-motivations-related-to-game-centric-transmedia/>

Game Designers and the Ludo Mix

Constructing an Aesthetic Experience

Laureline Chiapello

ABSTRACT

A ludo mix occurs when a variety of media are organized around
one or several central games. While this might be an opportunity
to build worlds and create new intellectual properties, it is also a
marketing strategy. These two perspectives are often contradictory,
and are difficult for game designers to address: how to design
games in a ludo mix? Firstly, I establish a theoretical foundation,
and suggest that a definition of ludo mix can encompass the game
designer's experience more explicitly by relying on the pragmatist
concept of "aesthetic experience" by John Dewey. Based on this
perspective, I will demonstrate how Dewey's concepts

complement the works of two major thinkers in Japanese media studies, Eiji Ōtsuka and Hiroki Azuma. Secondly, I validate the usefulness of Dewey's concepts for game designers by employing them in a "project-grounded" research approach. This particular project involves nine students enrolled in a narrative game design class, working on the franchise Aggressive Retsuko. The results show that pragmatism is indeed a fruitful philosophical stance for game designers; ludo mixes ought to be seen as "grand experiences" instead of "grand narratives".

Keywords

Ludo mix, Japanese media mix, franchises, game design, aesthetic experience, pragmatism, research through design, teaching-research nexus, project-grounded research, Aggressive Retsuko.

INTRODUCTION

With the rise of media franchises, game designers are more and more solicited to create games that are part of a larger vision, where movies, novels or comics are intertwined. As a North American game researcher, I am in constant contact with all kinds of franchises and products, from the *Rabbids Amusement Park* to the infamous *Star Wars: Battle Front II* game (Motive Studio 2017).

In North American game studies, transmedia was popularized by Henry Jenkins and his theory about media convergence (Jenkins 2006). But Japanese media studies have also considerably contributed to the field. Indeed, Japanese "media mix" has been studied academically since at least the eighties, when one of the most prominent authors, Eiji Ōtsuka, published *Monogatari shōhiron* (1989).

According to Ōtsuka, a media mix can be understood as an opportunity to create original narratives. As he puts it, each piece of a media mix represents an opportunity to develop an extensive

world inhabited by multiple characters, otherwise known as a "grand narrative" (Ōtsuka and Steinberg 2010). Jenkins' work on franchises (2006) also shows that media ensembles are capable of producing impressive narratives, like modern counterparts to traditional mythological tales (Patrickson and Young 2013). This is an inspiring perspective for game designers who wish to take part in creative and meaningful projects.

Unfortunately, these noble aspirations often only come second to economic reality. A media mix is usually first and foremost a marketing strategy (Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015, Steinberg 2015). In this respect, Hiroki Azuma's work is often cited as a counterargument to Ōtsuka (Patrickson and Young 2013, Ōtsuka and Steinberg 2010). Azuma suggests that "grand narratives" are dead and that media nowadays tend to be reduced to disparate bites of information, consumed without a global meaning (Azuma 2009 [2001]). Indeed, a significant portion of TV shows and video games are created in order to sell toys (Hartzheim 2016).

These two perspectives often clash, making ludo mixes difficult for game designers to work with. Built upon the work of pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, this paper suggests another approach to ludo mix creation based on the concept of "aesthetic experience". While taking into account the work of Japanese authors Ōtsuka and Azuma, the results of this study suggest that pragmatist philosophy can open new research avenues and help designers work on ludo mixes in a cohesive and satisfying manner.

The first part of this paper is an exploration of the ludo mix theories and the new elements they bring to our understanding of game creation in transmedia. To begin, I will retrace how video games became such an important part of media mixes. I then will present Ōtsuka's and Azuma's concepts, detailing their unique visions of authorship in a media mix. Finally, I will introduce Dewey's work on the aesthetic experience, and justify its use as an alternative vision of media consumption and authorship.

The second part of the paper will be dedicated to putting Dewey's concept to the test. Using Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience, nine students were asked to create an Aggressive Retsuko media mix by adding a game to the franchise. This project-grounded research approach demonstrates how Dewey's concept can be useful for understanding ludo mixes from game designers' point of view.

Finally, I will discuss the results in relation with Ōtsuka and Azuma's work.

FROM TRANSMEDIA TO LUDO MIX: NEW CHALLENGES FOR GAME DESIGNERS

The promotion of video games as central products in media mixes is relatively new. As such, understanding how ludo mixes came to the foreground is necessary to furthering this research.

Briefly summarized, Jenkins' transmedia theory (2006) describes the convergence of different media in order to tell parts of a larger story while keeping the whole narrative structure coherent. Franchises are thus aggregations of media that create greater narratives, such as the Matrix universe. Japanese media mixes have the same premise according to Ōtsuka: each piece of a media mix is an occasion to develop on a "grand narrative", an extensive world inhabited by multiple characters (Ōtsuka and Steinberg 2010). However, thanks to Marc Steinberg's translation and research on the subject of the Japanese media mix, we now realize that several aspects differentiate it from North American franchises.

Firstly, Steinberg underscores the pronounced divergences in Japanese media mix: several versions of a world can coexist. For example, characters can die in a manga and live in its anime adaptation. Moreover, Japanese media mixes integrate fan art or caricatures into their marketing strategy (Steinberg 2012, Nakamura and Tosca 2019). Jenkins actually modified his initial

definition of transmedia storytelling to incorporate those aspects (Gallarino 2013).

Secondly, Steinberg pinpointed a useful distinction between "marketing media mix", "anime media mix" and "gameic media mix". According to Steinberg, it was in postwar American and Japanese marketing theory that the term "media mix" first arose (in 1963, precisely) to designate a strategy of advertising spread across various media, in order to reach a larger audience. Importantly, the advertisements diffused are not the product to be consumed, but are a means to an end: incite more purchases.

In order to avoid confusion, Steinberg introduced a clear distinction between marketing mix and a media mix. In a "media mix", an anime and its other related products (manga, movies…) are not advertisements, but true products: "The anime media mix, on the other hand, has no single goal or teleological end; the general consumption of any of the media mix's products will grow the entire enterprise." (Steinberg 2012, 141). In the seventies, the three primary forms of media in synergy were books, films and soundtracks. However, Steinberg showed that the first Japanese media mix was *Tetsuwan Atomu* (Astro Boy, Tezuka, 1963), which was based on an anime. Indeed, Japanese media mixes are quite often articulated around a central anime, as the work of Hartzheim (2016) also suggests. As such, Steinberg contends that the term "anime media mix" defines most Japanese media mix attempts (Steinberg 2012).

However, in 2015, Steinberg introduced a new term: the "gameic media mix", or video game media mix (Steinberg 2015). Through a historical analysis of media mixes, he shows that video games are indeed an important part of media combinations. He demonstrates that the link between manga and video games was especially important in the production of *Mōryō senki Madara* (MADARA,1987), created by Ōtsuka himself for Kadokawa productions. As Steinberg specifies: "*Madara* began not as a game, but rather as a manga that mimicked the properties and

rules of a role-playing game" (Steinberg 2015, 45). According to Steinberg, *Madara* became the first prototype of media mixes centered on games.

Moreover, Ōtsuka later used the success of *Madara* to develop his theory of media mix *Monogatari shōhiron (1989)* (*A Theory of Narrative Consumption*). Ōtsuka was a visionary, as he immediately perceived the importance of games and the challenge their design represents. In fact, he hired a game designer to help him in the serialization of *Madara*:

> As part of the preparation for the serialization of *Madara*, Ōtsuka enlisted the help of a game designer to design the rules for the *Madara* world. Hence, while initially a manga in form, the *Madara* world operates according to a set of rules much like the worlds of *Dragon Quest* or *Dungeons and Dragons*. These rules mostly lie in the background of the narrative, but the RPG gameic elements of the manga come to the fore periodically (Steinberg 2015, 47).

Steinberg also indicates that Ōtsuka defines himself as a "game master", a term conventionally reserved for the creator and narrator of tabletop role-playing games.

Gradually, games have become more and more central to media mixes. This evolution of transmedia storytelling was at the heart of the DiGRA 2019 Conference, themed around "ludo mix". The importance of games raises questions about the role of game designers. In Japanese media mixes, there is a strong connection between game designers and marketing departments. Ōtsuka valorizes game designers, and has worked with one since the beginning of *Madara*. Many Japanese media mixes also market toys and have a tight bond with toy designers (Hartzheim 2016). This relationship seems to be exciting for game designers who aspire to create a "grand narrative" (Ōtsuka and Steinberg 2010).

However, in North America specifically, the role of games in media mixes is still up for debate. Many Western media mixes are not centered on games, and their integration with the other media is

difficult (Brookey 2010). In his book, *Hollywood Gamers* (2010), Robert Alan Brookey interrogates gamers about video games in media franchises. He admits that they have a rather pejorative view of them: "You know, most of those games based on movies are really bad", said one of his participants, to which Brookey added "I found it difficult to disagree" (Brookey 2010, 138). According to him, a video game's marketing often overshadows its design, especially in transmedia storytelling. In Steinberg's words, we might say that a game is more closely related to a marketing mix than a media mix. Games become advertisements and product placement opportunities, more than anything else. In this situation, game designers tend to see media mixing as an economic necessity that hinders their creative process. White (2009) warns us that "market forces are killing digital games": even when a franchise is centered on games, some companies keep making similar games belonging to profitable licenses, with no concern for creativity or quality.

Beyond issues with marketing, Brookey notes that game designers do not seem to know how to design in a media mix. They do not appear to dialogue harmoniously with other media, and tend to reproduce what has already been done in the video game industry. Brookey believes that the "media convergence" reinforces the differences between media, instead of opening new and unexpected paths for storytelling through cross-pollination. He even concludes his book with some rather depressing words: "Even if these new narrative forms come into being, convergence may turn them back into the same old games. In that case, the games we play next will continue to look much like the games we have already played." (Brookey 2010, 140)

These conclusions might appear common, but they are paradoxical. Firstly, media mixes are not solely marketing strategies, as Steinberg demonstrated: Japanese gameic media mixes, like *Pokémon* (Game Freak 1996) or *Final Fantasy* (Square Enix 1987) are successful examples. Moreover, the relationship between marketing and media mixes does not have to be such

a difficult one. In fact, the idea of studying the "*consumption* experience" first appeared in North American marketing studies during the eighties (Carù and Cova 2003). The "*consumer* experience", an experience which is "totally dependent on what the market offers" (Carù and Cova 2003), is orchestrated by the marketing team. Inversely, a "*consumption* experience" designates an experience where other aspects, like family or friendship, are more important than the marketed products. People are no longer considered primarily as consumers. Thus, it looks like game designers and marketing teams could work together toward the realization of ideal ludo mixes if they reconsidered their steadfast consumerist view of games.

Secondly, game designers are responsible for the game, not the marketing team: the designer's reluctant attitude toward franchises might actually be symptomatic of a lack of design methods and tools for the media mix. This is indeed the situation observed amongst game designers of casual games (Chiapello 2013). The experience of designing a game remains a mysterious one: most of the time, game design methods focus on games and the experience of playing them, not on the process of making them (Kuittinen and Holopainen 2009, Chiapello 2017, Kultima 2015). The process is often summarized in three steps: prototyping, testing and refining. In complex projects, like ludo mixes, this seems a bit thin (Kuittinen and Holopainen 2009).

This last point is in line with game design research. As such, this paper covers ways of consuming and *designing* franchises, and asks: "How to design games in a ludo mix?" This question will be answered by studying Ōtsuka's and Azuma's work on ludo mixes, and cross-referencing them with Dewey's concept of aesthetic experience.

THE LUDO MIX EXPERIENCE: CONSUMPTION AND CREATION

As mentioned earlier, one of the most important theorizations of the Japanese media mix (Steinberg 2012) emanated from Ōtsuka's work in *Monogatari Shōhiron* (1989). The book is essentially a collection of essays and is available only in Japanese. However, thanks to Steinberg's translation, we can now read some parts of it in English (Ōtsuka and Steinberg 2010) and better understand "narrative consumption". The notion of "narrative consumption" has been criticized by Azuma, who suggests replacing it with the "database consumption" model. Both models will be detailed in relation to the designer's role and contrasted with Dewey's concept of aesthetic experience.

Narrative Consumption

In his essay entitled W*orld and variation: The reproduction and consumption of narrative,* Ōtsuka introduces the concept of the "grand narrative". Referencing Baudrillard, he explains that Japanese consumer society no longer revolves around tangible products, but around "signs" and intangible ideas. In order to illustrate his argument, Ōtsuka analyzes the phenomenon of Bikkuriman Chocolates (Bikkuriman Chokorēto). Briefly summarized, these chocolates, sold at the end of the eighties, were actually uninteresting as candies. However, they contained stickers with character portraits and lore that allowed children to construct an exciting saga involving diverse protagonists in an imaginary world. The story inside Bikkuriman Chocolates was not extracted from any existing work and was thus only accessible through these "fragments of information" contained in each package. As Ōtsuka puts it: "what the candy maker was 'selling' to children was neither the chocolates nor the stickers, but rather the grand narrative itself" (Ōtsuka and Steinberg 2010, 106).

As shown, the grand narrative is a story that is whole and complete (and often quite rich), but is slowly discovered through fragments. Said fragments can be stickers, but also anime episodes, manga books, etc. Prior to the commercialization of these fragments, the creators must imagine what Ōtsuka calls a "worldview" or "settings" that will be progressively revealed. Narrative consumption thus corresponds to the indirect consumption of a narrative thought the assemblage of different fragments and their "small narrative" (Ōtsuka and Steinberg 2010). As Steinberg notes, this is very different from previous media mix approaches, where repetition was the key: "the film repeating the narrative of the book and the soundtrack repeating the film minus the image track" (Steinberg 2012, 181). Contrarily, Ōtsuka suggests that fragments are complementary variations, not just repetitions.

Ōtsuka concludes his essay on a worried note concerning authorship. He fears that fragments created by consumers might overtake the original narrative and eclipse the author. However, Steinberg's reading of Ōtsuka's works suggests another opinion; contrary to Ōtsuka, who affirms that the assemblage of fragments will eventually lead to the completion of the "grand narrative", Steinberg stresses that the multiplication of fragments is actually a strategy to keep expanding the narrative: "what we find is a simultaneous fleshing out and expansion of this world such that the reader never actually grasps the totality after all. The reader, in following the series across media, continually learns more yet becomes less certain at the same time" (Steinberg 2012, 182). What is interesting is that this strategy becomes, according to Steinberg, a way for the author to maintain their dominant position: even if fan fictions of all sorts are encouraged, the narrative cannot be solely controlled by consumers, as the original author can always add new details to the canon that encourage a new reading of the world. Thus, from a designer's point of view, the narrative consumption model seems promising, as it gives authors the ability and liberty to expand the franchise universe.

Database Consumption

The second key author is Azuma, who is known as one of the main critics of Otsuka's theory of the grand narrative (Steinberg 2012). His influential book, *Otaku: Japan's database animals* (Azuma 2009 [2001]), is primarily focused on Otaku culture. However, through the idea of "database consumption", it also indirectly offers a new perspective on media mixes.

Database consumption is an evolution of Ōtsuka's narrative consumption. For Azuma, the term "grand narrative" refers to the idea that there is always an underlying ideology or single unified worldview that can explain everything (a view that was thoroughly dismissed by postmodernism). For Azuma, when the last of the real-world ideological enterprises collapsed, such as Marxism, "grand narratives" should have disappeared. However, some works of fiction tried to offer a "grand narrative" of substitution. "Fictional grand narratives" in media thus became a way to coddle disillusioned consumers looking for comfort in an imaginary world. Yet, according to Azuma, our transition to the postmodern era made grand narratives a thing of the past. The new generation does not seek these grand schemes anymore: "Consequently, any scheme for analyzing this consumer behavior that proposes that these fragmentary works had already compensated for 'the loss of grand narrative' is not really appropriate" (Azuma 2009 [2001], 36). Therefore, for Azuma, media consumption needed a postmodern theorization, ridden of "grand narratives".

To flesh out this postmodern theorization, Azuma suggests the "database consumption" model. He uses a "layered" metaphor to compare the grand narrative model and the database model. In the former, the grand narrative constitutes the base layer, while narrative fragments occupy the second layer. The second layer's fragments always spring from the first layer, ensuring coherence in meaning and worldview. In Azuma's database model, the base layer is no longer occupied by a grand narrative; it is instead an

aggregation of various "settings", which act like disparate parts. For Japanese anime characters, such examples include "cat ears", "antenna hair" or "maid costume". The second layer is made up of works that recombine these elements without preserving the original worldview. The base layer is a database of elements, not a coherent narrative. Azuma insists: "To summarize the discussion up to this point, there is no longer a narrative in the deep inner layer, beneath the works and products such as comics, anime, games, novels, illustrations, trading cards, figurines and so on" (Azuma 2009 [2001], 53). One consumes the database directly, without the need to connect the small narratives to a grand narrative.

Azuma's database model offers a new perspective on consumption, one where the idea of pleasing consumers is more important than expressing a message: "The intensity of the works does not come from the message or narrative embedded there by the author but is decided according to the compatible preferences of consumers and the *moe*-elements dispersed in the works" (Azuma 2009 [2001], 88). Azuma even compares Otaku consumers to drug addicts looking for a fix.

Without necessarily adhering to Azuma's radical view of consumers, his concept of database consumption allows us to question the way in which designers envision ludo mixes. Is the database model an adequate replacement of Ōtsuka's grand narrative model for authors? Azuma states that "Now the author is no longer a god" (Azuma 2009 [2001], 61). His analysis of the character Digiko, from the franchise *Di Gi Charat* (Koge-Donbo 1998), demonstrates that the designers' role is mutating: "In fact, the design of Digiko is a result of sampling and combining popular elements from recent Otaku culture, as if to downplay the authorship of the designer" (Azuma 2009 [2001], 42). This vision of authorship might not appear very attractive to game designers. In fact, as noted by the translators in the book's preface, "Certainly some readers will find a serious pessimism in Azuma's prediction of the future of humanity" (Azuma 2009 [2001], xxvii). Combined

with Brookey's (2010) cynicism concerning the questionable quality of games in ludo mixes, we might begin to wonder if designing games for franchises is even an interesting prospect for game designers. But, as Azuma's translators stress, this pessimistic view might also be taken as a call to action, an opportunity to rethink our relationship with culture, marketing forces and consumerism (Azuma 2009 [2001]).

A THIRD VISION OF CONSUMPTION IN MEDIA MIX: DEWEY AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

On one hand, with "narrative consumption", the author is a god that can reshuffle the structure of its world, and add new pieces of information at any time. On the other hand, "database consumption" designers are close to mere executants, developing databases dependent on the market forces, with little sense of authorship. To help designers overcome this dilemma, a more nuanced approach is needed, and I would like to introduce the pragmatist concept of *aesthetic experience*.

Pragmatism in Game Design Research

Dewey's concept of *aesthetic experience* is particularly relevant in regards to recent game design methods and game design epistemology (Chiapello 2020, 2017, Lankoski and Holopainen 2017).

Game design research has flourished as a part of game studies, resulting in several game design method books, although, as stated in the introduction, game studies typically focus on the object designed (games), rather than the process of designing (Kuittinen and Holopainen 2009, Chiapello 2017). Indeed, numerous texts describe how to analyze games (for example, Björk and Holopainen 2004, Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek 2004, Rollings and Morris 2004). Additionally, considerable attention was granted to players. Several authors have proposed theories on

the subject of play, using reflections from the fields of phenomenology, cognitivism, all the way to psychology (Keogh 2018, Sudnow 1983, Swink 2009, Sweetser and Wyeth 2005). But in the end, very few authors elaborated on their vision of game design activities: "the activity called design, is left to too little attention" (Kuittinen and Holopainen 2009, 7).

In order to provide a richer illustration of game design activities, several authors have turned their attention toward design theories in general (Kuittinen and Holopainen 2009, Chiapello 2013, Kultima 2015). According to them, the practice of game design has a lot in common with other design disciplines, such as industrial design, interior design, architecture and urbanism. Game design research can benefit from the outcomes of debates that have already occurred in design disciplines.

Indeed, design disciplines struggled to establish the sound epistemological foundations needed in order to become an academic discipline. Designers were seen mostly as practitioners applying different techniques borrowed from other disciplines. Thus, "design" was viewed as an "applied science", not a science in itself (Cross 2001). However, design disciplines took a pragmatist turn in the eighties, following Donald Schön's seminal work *The reflective practitioner* (Schön 1983). Schön employed a pragmatist approach to show that the division between knowledge and action is artificial, and that this division unfortunately bars us from the valuable insight of professionals (Schön 1983). Overcoming the duality between knowledge and action was indeed one of Dewey's main achievements. Using this argument, design researchers argued that designers are not blindly applying knowledge from other disciplines (psychology, anthropology…) but that they have their own knowledge, acquired through practice, that can be elicited and formalized (Cross 2001). Design became a full-fledged discipline, with its own unique concepts to explain design practice. A good number of the design process models developed since then have fostered pragmatist philosophy (Melles

2008, Dalsgaard 2014), often referencing Dewey's work in an attempt to breathe new life into the field.

Some game design researchers thus followed the lead; Jussi Kuittinen and Jussi Holopainen (2009) used Schön's work to describe game design as a situated practice. I also used Schön's and Dewey's work about "inquiry" to study the creative process of game designers (Chiapello 2019). Concerning the concept of aesthetic experience specifically, Philip Deen (2011) explains how video games can be considered as art using pragmatism, and highlights the importance of the transaction between the creator and the receptor. He concludes his paper with: "Dewey's pragmatic philosophy of art offers one way to frame future discussion of video games – one sensitive to its interactive nature and standing as popular entertainment – and, perhaps more importantly, to aid in making better ones" (Deen 2011). The act of playing video games as an aesthetic experience has also been explored by Veli-Matti Karhulahti (2014), who applies the concept to puzzles. Additionally, Tad Bratkowski (2010) gives a detailed analysis of playing *Rock Band* as an aesthetic experience. However, none of them made use of the concept from a game designer's perspective.

This study participates in this pragmatist trend of game design research. Indeed, the practice of "ludomixing" raises questions about how to make better games for franchises. I will now explain Dewey's concept of aesthetic experience (Dewey 1980 [1934], 1958 [1925]), insisting on its potential as a guide toward creating games for franchises.

The Aesthetic Experience as a Model of Consumption and Authorship

Experience is a central concept in Dewey's work. Drawing on Charles Darwin's work, Dewey believed that human beings are in constant transaction with their environment. This is what he

calls "experience": the constant dialogue between an organism and a situation. He then established distinctions between various experiential qualities, and subsequently built his theory of aesthetics around them (Dewey 1980 [1934]).

Generally speaking, "aesthetics" can refer to specific attributes in video games, or, in a narrower sense, to the graphic aspects of a game (Niedenthal 2009). But Dewey gave the term a new meaning. Dewey's concept of *aesthetic experience* stems from a critique of "Art": he thought that limiting aesthetic experiences to what we see in museums strips everyday life of any aesthetic pleasure, any beauty. Instead, Dewey believed that aesthetic experiences could manifest themselves in everyday life. An aesthetic experience is simply a special kind of experience, a "mode" of experience (Biesta and Burbules 2003). The aesthetic experience is introduced in Dewey's seminal book, *Art as Experience,* in a twofold fashion: the receiver's experience, and the creator's.

Dewey begins by focusing on what it is to *have* an aesthetic experience, to be on the receiving end. He defines "an" experience as a special kind of experience: "[…] we have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences" (Dewey 1980 [1934], 35). Indeed, most of our experiences are, unfortunately, "inchoate" (interrupted, unfinished and incomplete). They are so mechanical and so routinized that they are meaningless. But sometimes, we have "an" experience: it is coherent, integral, and "flows freely" (Dewey 1980 [1934], 36), without being mechanical. Having "an" experience does not simply describe spectacular moments of our lives. Mowing the lawn, eating a meal, or finishing a game can be "an" experience, as long as it has meaning for the person doing it. Moreover, "an" experience can also occur during difficult or unpleasant events, like a storm or an argument. Playing video games can be an aesthetic experience. For Bratkowski, "To play the game [Rock Band] is to experience the

unity of each song, to sense the way in which transitions between verse, chorus, and bridge sections all fit together in a seamless whole" (Bratkowski 2010, 85).

Dewey then turns his attention toward the creator experience. Dewey believes that the purpose of an artist "is to create especially aesthetic experiences" (Hildebrand 2008). *Aesthetic* experiences in art occur when encountering the meaning created by someone else: "to be truly artistic, a work must also be esthetic — that is, framed for enjoyed receptive perception" (Dewey 1980 [1934], 48). An aesthetic experience is only perceived by the receiver if it is "linked to the activity of which it is the consequence" (Dewey 1980 [1934], 49). Thus, the concept of aesthetic experience not only concerns reception, but also creation. Deen and Bratkowski also acknowledge this point: "Clearly, this video game seems designed to produce an experience" (Bratkowski 2010, 85). Thus, video game design can be considered as an activity consisting in creating aesthetic experiences.

To sum up, aesthetic experiences occur when two forms of inquiry meet: the creator's inquiry (which looks for a way to translate an experience into a specific vessel), and the receiver's inquiry (which looks for meaning):

> For to perceive, a beholder must create his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent. They are not the same in any literal sense. But with the perceiver, as with the artist, there must be an ordering of the elements of the whole that is in form, although not in detail, the same as the process of organization the creator of the work consciously experienced […] There is work done on the part of the percipient as there is on the part of the artist (Dewey 1980 [1934], 54).

Ultimately, designers and players enter a form of transaction mediated by the game: an aesthetic experience.

Aesthetic Experience and Ludo Mix

In relation to ludo mixes, two more aspects of Dewey's aesthetic experience deserve to be addressed.

The first is Dewey's insight into the creation process. According to him, creators do not simply elicit a raw emotion from the receiver, but aim to make a rich and complete experience:

> Talented artists, then, are not simply conveying an emotion. They are clarifying, ordering, and modulating their initial emotional impulses with careful and creative uses of their chosen media to express meaning. […] The result of artistic expression then, is not the delivery of an emotion but a transformation of an experienced situation (Hildebrand 2008, 2670).

Creators must not convey disparate bits of emotion; instead they ought to reconstitute an entire experience. Dewey notes that creators must also "care deeply", even "love" what they've created.

> "Aesthetic" refers to experience as both appreciative and perceptive. It is the side of the consumer. And yet, production and consumption should not be seen as separate. Perfection of production is in terms of the enjoyment of the consumer: it is not a mere matter of technique or execution. Craftsmanship is only artistic if it cares deeply about the subject matter *and* is directed toward enjoyed perception (Leddy 2014).

This means that a creator's sense of authorship must be very strong and humble at the same time.

The second aspect is the self-sufficiency of an aesthetic experience. In other words, aesthetic experiences are self-completing and don't require any exterior form of reward. Moreover, Dewey stresses that an aesthetic experience's end is "consummation and not a cessation" (Dewey 1980 [1934], 35). Drawing a parallel between experience and story (Dewey 1980 [1934], 43), Dewey explains that the end of an aesthetic experience

only makes sense because of what happened before: it is not simply a cessation, it is what gives the whole story it's meaning. Indeed, all the events of aesthetic experience are of equal importance: "This particular aesthetic quality of an experience is the result of the way the parts fit together in relation to this whole" (Bratkowski 2010, 84). As Dewey notes: "Occurrences melt and fuse into unity, yet do not disappear and lose their own character" (Dewey 1980 [1934], 36). This notion is particularly valuable in the context of the ludo mix, since different media can be seen as "parts" that have to "fit together". Dewey highlights the importance of wholeness in an aesthetic experience:

> The form of the whole is therefore present in every member. Fulfilling, consummating, are continuous functions, not mere ends, located at one place only. An engraver, painter, or writer is in process of completing at every stage of his work. He must at each point retain and sum up what has gone before as a whole and with reference to a whole to come (Dewey 1980 [1934], 56).

While this is reminiscent of Ōtsuka's idea of "grandness", wholeness is not only located in the story, but in every part of the work. Unity comes from the reflective position of the creator, who should always evaluate the singular in the light of the whole. Therefore, a ludo mix is more closely related to a "grand experience" than a "grand narrative".

In the end, Dewey's aesthetic experience offers a new perspective on consumption and creation. While it has no direct link with the consumer society, it is nonetheless a criticism of meaningless and inchoate experience, and advocates for the development of more aesthetic experiences. Dewey also establishes a vision of authorship that can be considered a compromise between Ōtsuka's and Azuma's work. In said vision, the designer is not an omnipotent force imposing his own ideals, but simply someone trying to reach the receiver. However, the designer is not submissive to the receiver or to the "market forces". Their relationship is more akin to a partnership.

Aggressive Retsuko Media Mix

Deeming the concept of aesthetic experience as a promising approach to design in a ludo mix, I decided to test it "in practice" following the pragmatist maxim, "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have" (Peirce 1878, 293). I chose to test it in a pedagogical setting with game design students in a post-graduate course in narrative game design. After presenting the methodological approach, I will discuss the students' reflections concerning Dewey's concept of aesthetic experience.

Teaching-Research Nexus

The "teaching-research nexus" approach, where teachers/researchers explore concepts with their students, is an epistemic position developed in Australia and adopted in French-speaking countries. Jean-Louis Le Moigne (2012) and Nicole Poteau (2015) are fervent defenders of this approach. The central idea of "teaching-research nexus" is to stimulate the connections between scientific research and teaching:

> Published work in the field called "the teaching-research nexus" (Stehlik, 2008), mostly in Australia, also explores the link between research and teaching; they are based on the idea that research provides knowledge to teach and that, conversely, teaching fuels research. The two are closely intertwined, in fact, since they are part of the very identity of the university, and also because the exploration of these links raises research questions that are of interest to all the actors of the institution (Poteau 2015, 85, my translation).

The goal is to learn alongside students instead of plainly teaching them. As Poteau explains, "Theory and practice, research and action, teacher-researcher, form couples of concepts most often presented in tension, when not in opposition" (Poteau 2015, 75, my translation). As Poteau points out, two main visions are in conflict: for some, research and teaching are distinct professions that cannot be practiced at the same time. Others, on the contrary,

affirm that the professions are complementary. Poteau defends the second position. As such, universities are a place of reflective development for both students (who must put into perspective what is taught to them) and teachers (who must question the ethical value of the knowledge they submit to students). University courses are a space to transmit and reflect on knowledge. Here, teachers are practitioners and researchers at the same time (Schön 1983).

Concepts taught are those that seem most relevant to the issues raised in class, even if they are not perfectly developed (this is in line with Dewey's idea of "warranted assertability"). These concepts are put to the test by students, who point out their limits. From my point of view, students make the concepts come "alive" by studying them: they test their viability in a real-world context. While investigating, students' inquiries involve a certain level of abstraction, making them actors in the scientific process, according to Dewey. Students are not mere guinea pigs, but active participants in the research. As Le Moigne (2012) asserts, a student's appropriation of concepts gives validity to the study. Poteau concludes that "the teacher-researcher nexus considers the student as a partner or collaborator for his own research" (Poteau 2015, 81, my translation).

Implementing this teaching-research nexus is relatively easy in design classes: a lot of the course material is taught through workshops, where students are assigned a project. Thus, it is possible to involve students in "project-grounded research" (Findeli and Coste 2007). Project-grounded research is a form of research *through* design (Frayling 1994, Godin and Zahedi 2014), therefore researchers are expected to participate (in one way or another) in the project. By reflecting during the design project, the researcher produces new knowledge. According to Alain Findeli: "If you want to understand a phenomenon or a concept, put it into a (design) project" (Findeli 2015, 56).

Collecting Data: Aggressive Retsuko Assignment

In this workshop, nine students were presented with Dewey's concept of aesthetic experience. All of them were first-year students in an advanced program in narrative game design. The course was specifically about the various approaches to game design, and several pragmatist concepts were covered over the semester. For this particular workshop, I asked myself: "Is Dewey's concept of the *aesthetic experience* useful in designing a game for a franchise?"

To avoid any biases on the student's part, data was collected without the students' knowledge (an ethical certificate has been emitted). Once the course was over, students were asked whether or not they wished to participate in the research (those who refused didn't have their data analyzed). Fortunately, all the students in this course agreed to share their data. Since this is a graduate course, a significant portion of participants had jobs as game testers or designers in the video game industry.

The workshop started in class, and the students were asked to work on a media mix inspired by Sanrio's anime *Aggressive Retsuko* (Sanrio 2016) for three hours.

Aggressive Retsuko is considered a musical comedy anime: the protagonist, an anthropomorphic female red panda, works as an accountant in a large Japanese firm; She endures her toxic work environment, but regularly needs to release tension … by singing death metal in a karaoke bar! Each episode lasts only one minute, and uses music and humor to discuss important themes such as misogyny, harassment, workaholism and social pressure in Japanese society. This particular anime was chosen for its accessibility (the episodes were freely available and very short, therefore easy for students to watch) and singularity: Aggressive Retsuko is a one-of-a-kind experience with distinctive and alluring features. A second season of Aggressive Retsuko has since been

made, with longer episodes, but was not considered in this assignment.

During the workshop, students were regularly asked to stop and think about their actions, in order to explore the usefulness of Dewey's concept. After the workshop, they produced a description of their game (game design document) and a written justification of their choices. Finally, the value of Dewey's concept was discussed in class, as a group discussion, with all the students' designs presented and criticized by the professor.

Data collection was done through participant observation (as teacher of the course) and analysis of the students' works (Jorgensen 1989). I was able to witness first-hand the reflective cycle of the students by questioning them during the workshop. Then, I commented their work individually and organized the final group discussion in class (Davila and Domínguez 2010). I then acted as a facilitator for reflection on the concepts, as the whole class evaluated and discussed Dewey's approach. Only Dewey's concept was presented and discussed (neither Ōtsuka nor Azuma was introduced to the students).

To reiterate, in a teaching-research nexus, the teacher's job is to put certain concepts to the test: while I hoped that Dewey's concepts would prove valuable, their usefulness will ultimately be decided by the students' works.

Results

First phase

At first, students transposed elements from the anime into their games in a fairly straightforward manner:

> A key element was to keep the contrast between the cute side and the aggressive side of the series. This aspect is demonstrated by Retsuko's quiet façade, which turns into a Death Metal singer when

she has too much rage accumulated. The visual aesthetics as well as the music of the game will help create this contrast specific to *Aggressive Retsuko* (Team 1).

Students then focused on small aspects of the anime that could be paired with game mechanics. They likened Retsuko's rage to a gauge mechanic and her office duties to time management games. I noticed that they used game design patterns they were already aware of, like game genres (time management games) or specific game mechanics (gauge).

Team 3's marketing-oriented mindset was particularly interesting. For them, the game had to somehow incorporate different strategies to make money. It is worth noting that two out of the three members of this team came from the video game industry, and seemed quite confident that media mixing was first and foremost a marketing strategy.

Students proposed a customization game: the player chose outfits for Retsuko in a free to play mobile game, coupled with monetization strategies. The goals of the game were not clear, but the students were nonetheless adamant that customization sells, and that a marketing department (a hypothetical one) would love it. This approach did not engage effectively with the themes of the original anime; in fact, it even encouraged consumerism, which is heavily criticized in several episodes.

At the end of this first phase, the students ended up with "a bunch of mechanics" rather than cogent game systems. When questioned on the subject of aesthetic experience and their design processes, most students appeared very surprised: they had forgotten about Dewey's concept almost entirely. This first part of the workshop served as a form of warm up: very little was achieved in terms of game system development, and the concept of "aesthetic experience" was entirely lost on students. While this might be a sign of the uselessness of the concept, the second attempt proved more fruitful.

Second phase: Toward Aesthetic Experiences

Before starting the second part of the workshop, I offered the students a brief reminder of Dewey's theory, and asked them if they had simply forgotten about it, found it useless, or if another approach was needed.

At this point, Team 3 had an epiphany and totally changed direction. They suggested a game structured around mini games, coupled with a rage gauge. Losing mini games fills Retsuko's rage gauge. Once full, the game is over and Retsuko sings death metal in a karaoke bar, alone and frustrated. While this structure might not be the best translation of the anime's core message (as we will see later with Team 2's game), Team 3's strength was in their approach to mini games.

Figure 1: Mini games from Team 3

In Team 3's first mini game, the player has a simple goal: control Retsuko (the avatar) and distribute papers to the designated colleagues' desk. However, the camera does not automatically follow the avatar, so the player has to tilt the console to move the camera (using the gyroscope). To make things even more challenging, the player must avoid other colleagues, who might delay Retsuko in finishing the task on time.

A second mini-game revolves around Retsuko pouring beer for her manager while respecting Japanese etiquette: the beer must be expertly poured, with the label always visible. All this must be done while chatting in a relaxed fashion. The students translated this theme into a mini-game where the player has to tilt the whole console to pour the beer in a glass while simultaneously selecting dialogue options on the screen, which appear on top of the bottle, thus hiding feedback of the pouring.

The last mini-game was purely about reflexes and concentration: players classify documents into three categories as fast as they can. However, pictures of Retsuko's colleagues appear regularly: baby, pets or new lover. These pictures must be pushed away slowly by the player, or Retsuko's colleagues will take offense, which will infuriate Retsuko and end the game.

All these mini-games effectively translate Retsuko's experience as an office drone into gameplay, and this was done consciously by the students. They empathized with the little red panda, and tried to turn her experience into a game. They wrote the following statement (I translated and bolded the text):

> She is constantly harassed during work […] and her defence mechanism is to unload what she has on her heart at karaoke by singing metal; **sequences** that, in the show, are mostly very **strong and aggressive for the person watching.**

> The game will offer an **unbalanced experience** in control, speed, and difficulty in a variety of mini-games. Each part will be **irritating** because of the NPCs, the controls and even the camera.

> The **accumulation** of **increasingly difficult and unbalanced** challenges would **reflect the climbing rage of the character** of the series; like her, **the player must suffer** a whole day of **dissatisfaction** and start again next morning; **again and again**.

The TV show's experience was interiorized and reflected upon by the students, who then reproduced it using video game mechanics. They aimed to design a whole and coherent experience for the

player, rather than simply frustrate the player gratuitously, and tried to develop a sequence of interactions that would recreate an experience similar to Retsuko's predicament. Each mini game adds to the sum, extending the experience while reinforcing its meaning. The students carefully sought this "aesthetic" (coherent, global) aspect of the experience.

Is Death Metal "Game Over"?

As mentioned earlier on the subject of game structure, Team 2 pointed out a paradoxical aspect of Aggressive Retsuko:

> One contradictory aspect is that Retsuko wants to control her mood and avoid any excess of rage, but that's exactly what you want to see as a viewer. So, we tried to design a game that meets both of these needs and avoids the trap of ludo narrative dissonance (Team 2, my translation).

Here, ludo narrative dissonance is synonymous with Dewey's inchoate experience. Contrary to Team 3, Team 2 avoided making the karaoke synonymous with "game over". Instead, karaoke acts as a pressure release valve, which the player is rewarded with after successfully managing Retsuko's rage during the day. However, it is almost impossible to totally empty the rage gauge.

The message of the game is that you will eventually lose, despite your best efforts, which is clearly critical of Japanese workaholic society. We can see how the meaning of the anime is translated through gameplay, even if it goes against standard game systems: the rageful karaoke sequence (usually placed at the end of an episode) does not mark the end of the game, but acts as a reward. It is a moment of relief, humor and dissociation, mimicking the emotions experienced by both the TV show spectator and Retsuko herself.

The game does not elicit a single emotion through simple means, but evokes complex aspects in the form of a cohesive experience that develops over time. Moreover, the game cannot be won, as

there is no hope for Retsuko in this company, according to the students. They suggested that Retsuko should find another job. This adds meaning to the media mix, as the original anime did not clearly state anything of the sort: the first season ends with Retsuko having increasingly bad days, but quitting is never seriously evoked. All in all, the students tried to understand the original experience of *Aggressive Retsuko* and implement it in a video game: they led a creative inquiry and aimed for an aesthetic experience.
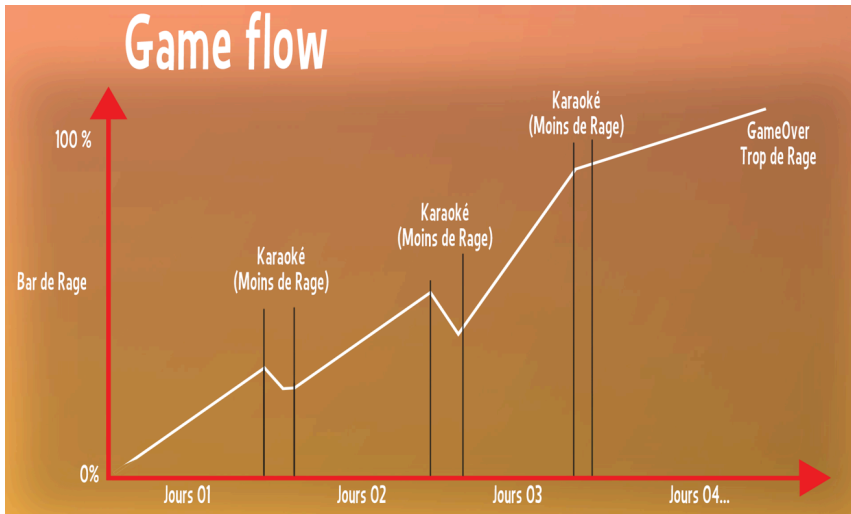
Figure 2: Retsuko's rage augmentation (vertical axis is the level of rage; horizontal axis is the number of days) by Team 2

Final Debriefing

During the final debriefing a few weeks after the workshop, the students concluded that their second design attempts would be more coherent and valuable for the franchise. This was made apparent through their design statements and the ensuing group discussion. The students seemed to collectively agree that the concepts of aesthetic experience and wholeness were useful in their approach to game design.

Through their assignment on Aggressive Retsuko, students demonstrated how their vision of media mixes evolved over time. At the beginning of the workshop, their ideas were quite similar to Steinberg's *marketing* media mix, and Azuma's database model. Various elements of the anime were pulled apart and stripped of their meaning in order to be recombined into classic game structures, fitting existing genres. However, discussing Dewey's concept with students changed some of their presuppositions.

In the final discussion, students showed that, as game designers themselves, they preferred viewing designers as authors. In the end, students did consider Dewey's idea of aesthetic experience as a transaction between designer and player. By elaborating their games through creative inquiry, students hoped to create coherent and meaningful experiences. I could also assess that they understood the idea of media mixing (versus marketing mixing) better. Once the students got used to the concept of aesthetic experience, it transformed them: they became authors in a ludo mix.

Combining research *through* design and the teaching-research nexus poses several limits. Indeed, the findings are largely comprised of "warranted assertabilities" (Dewey 1938), meaning that the data is not reproducible nor objective knowledge. Instead, the data is the testimony of a situated experiment, the results of which nourish our reflection about examined concepts. I had a moment of doubt when several students overlooked Dewey's approach in their design process. But after the whole exercise was over, I saw that Dewey's "aesthetic experience" – while difficult to grasp at first – provoked tangible changes in the students' approach to franchised video games design.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the results of my experiment were sent for approval to all participants before publication. One of them sent me the following comment by email:

> As you mentioned, many of us (students) were a little skeptical about the idea of *aesthetic experience* at the beginning of the session, but I recently discussed it with some members of the group and we all had the same impression: at first we did not understand it too well, but once it clicked, it was one of the things that we found most useful in the program! I think it just took us a while to really understand the usefulness of this concept in a real-life context of making video games […] (student from group 1).

As Jenkins noted in his own courses on transmedia, it is often difficult to show the value of a particular theory to students at first. However, a concrete experience through a workshop can help resolve this issue and reinforce the idea that practitioners can be researchers in their own way:

> The key point here is that transmedia needs to be understood as an ongoing conversation between academic theorists and industry practitioners, that many of the key conceptual leaps have been made by vernacular theorists working in the media fields and trying to explain their own practices (Jenkins 2010, 46).

All in all, the Aggressive Retsuko workshop reassured me that comparing Dewey's, Ōtsuka's and Azuma's visions could indeed be fruitful.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

I will now discuss my results using Ōtsuka's and Azuma's vision of the ludo mix, and explain why Dewey's aesthetic experience is a useful concept for game designers.

Dewey's vision of authorship is similar to Ōtsuka's, where authors express greater meaning through "grand narrative" and aim for "narrative consumption". What differs from Ōtsuka's theory is the scope: Dewey does not talk about a "narrative" consumption experience, but a whole and multifaceted one. Theories on the subject of ludo mixing and transmedia storytelling have been focused on narrative aspects. While Ōtsuka is occupied with the

"story", Steinberg and Azuma focus on characters. My research does not aim to reactivate the debates between narratologists and ludogologists, but the question of "narrativity" remains problematic: focusing mainly on story might be a source of difficulty in designing games. The concept of aesthetic experience could be a better introductory point for game designers, as it encompasses other aspects of design, besides story. A ludo mix ought to be seen as a "grand experience" instead of a "grand narrative".

Concerning Azuma's work, the results contradict his vision: in the end, a well-rounded and whole vision, coupled with a "message", was a better source of inspiration than disconnected patterns. However, Azuma mostly criticized Ōtsuka on postmodernist grounds. For Azuma, the very idea of a grand narrative referred to the ideological rigidity of modernism and its supposed single truth or hidden common denominator. He often references the French philosopher Lyotard, who declared that postmodernism is the end of "grand narratives". As Steinberg already stressed: "Azuma's mistake is to collapse Lyotard's and Ōtsuka's uses of the term grand narrative, starting him off on the wrong foot" (Steinberg 2012, 254). Indeed, Ōtsuka's definition of the "grand narrative" does not contain any reference to ideological modernism. As Steinberg noted, Ōtsuka always had different worldviews and numerous narratives running in parallel.

Nevertheless, Azuka's postmodern criticism is interesting: it would indeed be unfortunate to return to a modernist vision of ludo mixes. However, his postmodernist criticism led him to a view of consumption that might be depressing for game designers. Dewey is also considered a postmodernist, but he does not fall into this trap. As Larry Hickman pointed out:

> If the end of the grand narrative means recognition of the futility of attempts to build metaphysical systems such as those constructed by Hegel and Marx, systems that attempt to encompass everything, then Dewey was already a card-carrying postmodernist more than a century ago (Hickman 2007, 17).

According to Hickman, Dewey's postmodernism rejects the idea of a system that encompasses everything, but still believes that there is a commonality in human experiences. By using the concept of aesthetic experience, human beings can reconstruct the experiences of one another, even if the results aren't exactly the same. They conduct an inquiry, building meaning progressively. This is the type of pragmatist inquiry that students made in order to organize the mechanics with which to reach their players. It is also through inquiry that players will discover the meaning conveyed by the designers. Thus, despite being a postmodernist, Dewey's vision offers a framework to understand human experiences globally and guide game designers in their practice as "authors" in a ludo mix.

However, this pragmatist stance also raises questions for game designers: can they design in a ludo mix if they have no interest in the original experience? How can they design if they don't have a personal aesthetic experience with a media franchise? Is it even ethical to work on franchises when one does not truly want to share their experience with others?

To conclude, by reframing ludo mixes within the context of Dewey's aesthetic experience, this paper suggests a point of view that is somewhat different from Ōtsuka and Azuma's. In fact, by using pragmatist philosophy, I slightly displaced the focus: I shifted ludo mixes from a consumer experience (in marketing terms) to a consumption experience (in philosophical terms). By doing so, I suggested affirming the importance of designers (not only receivers). In a pragmatist view, game designers conduct an inquiry in order to create a "grand" experience for their players.

While pragmatist philosophy might seem intimidating, it can be an opportunity to develop a new approach to ludo mixes, where video games are at the heart of meaningful experiences. Each new addition to the mix should add cohesiveness to the overall experience and avoid shattering what has already been constructed. The goal is not to overstretch intellectual property,

but enrich it; It's all about well-rounded experiences. To reconcile franchises, marketing and players, game designers might want to see the ludo mix as a pragmatist aesthetic experience.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that this study was an attempt at bridging the gap between Western and Japanese theories of video game creation and design. To build a richer vision of game designers' activities, I hope that more translations of Japanese research on game design will become available.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Azuma, H. (2009 [2001]). *Otaku: Japan's database animals*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Biesta, G., and N. Burbules. (2003). *Pragmatism and educational research*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Björk, S., and J. Holopainen. (2004). *Patterns in Game Design*. Rockland, MA: Charles River Media.

Bratkowski, T. (2010). "Applying Dewey's Aesthetics To Video Games: An Experience of "Rock Band"." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* no. 93 (1/2), pp.83-93.

Brookey, R. A. (2010). *Hollywood gamers: Digital convergence in the film and video game industries*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Carù, A., and B. Cova. (2003). "Revisiting consumption experience: A more humble but complete view of the concept." *Marketing theory* no. 3 (2), pp.267-286.

Chiapello, L. 2013. Formalizing casual games: A study based on game designers' professional knowledge. In *2013 Digital Games Research Association Conference: DeFragging Game Studies*. Atlanta, GA.

Chiapello, L. (2017). "Epistemological Underpinnings in Game Design Research." In *Game Design Research: An Introduction to Theory & Practice*, edited by Petri Lankoski and Jussi Holopainen, 15-33. Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Mellon University ETC Press.

Chiapello, L. 2019. *Le pragmatisme comme épistémologie pour le design de jeux Enquête sur la créativité et le processus de design*. Thèse de doctorat, Faculté de l'Aménagement, Université de Montréal, Montréal.

Chiapello, L. (2020). "A pragmatic inquiry on creativity." In *Handbook of Research Methods on Creativity*, edited by Viktor Dörfler and Marc Stierand, 152-164. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.

Cross, N. (2001). "Designerly ways of knowing: Design discipline versus design science." *Design issues* no. 17 (3), pp.49-55.

Dalsgaard, P. (2014). "Pragmatism and design thinking." *International Journal of Design* no. 8 (1), pp.143-155.

Davila, A., and M. Domínguez. (2010). "Formats des groupes et types de discussion dans la recherche sociale qualitative." *Recherches qualitatives* no. 29 (1), pp.50-68.

Deen, P. D. (2011). "Interactivity, inhabitation and pragmatist aesthetics." *Game Studies* no. 11 (2), pp.188-200.

Dewey, J. (1938). *Logic: The theory of inquiry*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Dewey, J. (1958 [1925]). *Experience and nature*. New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc.

Dewey, J. (1980 [1934]). *Art as experience*. New York, NY: Perigee books.

Findeli, A. (2015). "La recherche-projet en design et la question de la question de recherche : essai de clarification conceptuelle." no. 1 (1), pp.45-57.

Findeli, A., and A. Coste. (2007). "De la recherche-création à la recherche-projet: un cadre théorique et méthodologique pour la recherche architecturale." *Lieux communs* no. 10, pp.139-161.

Frayling, C. (1994). "Research in Art and Design." *RCA Research Papers* no. 1 (1).

Gallarino, A. (2013). "Jenkins Reloaded: évolution de la pensée d'Henry Jenkins de Textual Poachers à (l'avant) Spreadable Media." *Terminal. Technologie de l'information, culture & société* (112), pp.115-120.

Game Freak (1996). *Pokémon*, [Game boy]. Nintendo. Kyoto, Japan: played december 1999.

Godin, D., and M. Zahedi. (2014). "Aspects of research through design." *Proceedings of DRS 2014: Design's Big Debates*, pp.1667-1680.

Hartzheim, B. H. (2016). "Pretty Cure and the Magical Girl media mix." *The Journal of Popular Culture* no. 49 (5), pp.1059-1085.

Hickman, L. A. (2007). *Pragmatism as post-postmodernism: Lessons from John Dewey*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.

Hildebrand, D. (2008). *Dewey: A beginner's guide*. London, UK: Oneworld Publications.

Hunicke, R., M. LeBlanc, and R. Zubek. (2004). MDA: A formal approach to game design and game research. Paper read at AAAI Workshop on Challenges in Game AI, Nineteenth National Conference on Artificial Intelligence, 25-26 July, at San Jose.

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Jenkins, H. (2010). "Transmedia storytelling and entertainment: An annotated syllabus." *Continuum* no. 24 (6), pp.943-958.

Jorgensen, D. L. (1989). *Participant Observation.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Karhulahti, V.-M. (2014). "Fiction puzzle: storiable challenge in pragmatist videogame aesthetics." *Philosophy & Technology* no. 27 (2), pp.201-220.

Keogh, B. (2018). *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Koge-Donbo. (1998). *Di Gi Charat*. Tokyo, Japan: Broccoli Books.

Kuittinen, J., and J. Holopainen. 2009. Some notes on the nature of game design. In *2009 DiGRA Conference: Breaking New Ground*, edited by Tanya Krzywinska, Helen Kennedy and Barry Atkins. Brunel University, London.

Kultima, A. 2015. Game Design Research. In *AcademicMindTrek '15*. Tampere, Finland.

Lankoski, P., and J. Holopainen, eds. (2017). *Game Design Research: An Introduction to Theory & Practice*. Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Mellon University ETC Press.

Le Moigne, J.-L. (2012). *Les épistémologies constructivistes « Que sais-je? »*. Vol. n°2969, *Que sais-je?* Paris: Presses universitaires de France.

Leddy, T. 2014. Dewey's Aesthetics. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. Online.

Melles, G. (2008). "An enlarged pragmatist inquiry paradigm for methodological pluralism in academic design research." *Artifact: Journal of Design Practice* no. 2 (1), pp.3-13.

Motive Studio (2017). *Star Wars: Battlefront II,* [PC]. Electronic Arts. Redwood city, CA: played May, 2019.

Nakamura, A., and S. Tosca. 2019. The Mobile Suit Gundam Franchise: A Case Study of Transmedia Storytelling Practices and the Role of Digital Games in Japan. In *DIGRA 2019 Kyoto: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo-Mix*.

Ōtsuka, E. (1989). "Monogatari shōhiron [A Theory of Narrative Consumption]." *Tokyo: Shinyosha*.

Ōtsuka, E., and M. Steinberg. (2010). "World and variation: The reproduction and consumption of narrative." *Mechademia* no. 5 (1), pp.99-116.

Patrickson, B., and S. Young. (2013). "The Transcultural Transmedia Media Mix." *The Journal of American Studies of Turkey* no. 33, pp.43-65.

Peirce, C. S. (1878). "How to Make Our Ideas Clear." *Popular Science Monthly* no. 12 (January), pp.286-302.

Picard, M., and J. Pelletier-Gagnon. (2015). "Introduction: Geemu, media mix, and the state of Japanese video game studies." *Kinephanos: Journal of media studies and popular culture* no. 5, pp.1-19.

Poteau, N. (2015). "De la recherche-action à la pédagogie universitaire: une démarche pour articuler enseignement et recherche." *Les dossiers des sciences de l'éducation* (34), pp.75-90.

Rollings, A., and D. Morris. (2004). *Game architecture and design: a new edition*. Indianapolis, IN: New Riders.

Sanrio. (2016). *Aggressive Retsuko*. Anime by Fanworks Rareko (dir).

Schön, D. A. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner : How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books.

Square Enix (1987). *Final Fantasy*, [NES]. Square Enix. Tokyo, Japan: played june 1992.

Steinberg, M. (2012). *Anime's media mix: Franchising toys and characters in Japan*: Unniversity of Minnesota Press.

Steinberg, M. (2015). "8-Bit Manga: Kadokawa's Madara, or, The Gameic Media Mix." *Kinephanos: Journal of media studies and popular culture* no. 5, pp.40-52.

Sudnow, D. (1983). *Pilgrim in the Microworld*: Warner Books New York.

Sweetser, P., and P. Wyeth. (2005). "GameFlow: a model for evaluating player enjoyment in games." *Computers in Entertainment (CIE)* no. 3 (3), pp.1-24.

Swink, S. (2009). *Game feel: a game designer's guide to virtual sensation*. Burlington, MA: Morgan Kaufmann.

White, M. M. (2009). "The senescence of creativity: How market forces are killing digital games." *Loading* no. 3 (4), pp.1-20.

The Ludo Mix and the Loss of In-Game Narrative

A Case Study of the Final Fantasy XV Universe

Nökkvi Jarl Bjarnason

ABSTRACT

Employing the Final Fantasy XV Universe as a case study, this
article examines how the changing climate of game development,
in tandem with established media mix strategies, contributes to
the emergence of the ludo mix as media ecology. Through a
comparative analysis of the climate of modern game development
and the adoption of media mix strategies, the case is made that
these two distinct phenomena intersect to create novel challenges
and incentives for a particular kind of game development. This
has resulted in the strategic outsourcing of *Final Fantasy XV*'s in-
game narrative to outside the ludic sphere, and negatively affected
the game's critical reception. These findings posit challenges and

opportunities for the future of the ludo mix, noting that the evolving technological, aesthetic, and economic climate of game development continues further down the same path, while simultaneously advocating for the ludo mix as a framework for better understanding the disproportionate load imposed on media via transmedia collaborations.

INTRODUCTION

The Japanese term, "media mix", refers to a specific media ecology that is prevalent in Japan, wherein publishers employ marketing strategies across different media in order to promote and expand on a common franchise (Jenkins 2006, 110). Video games have played a significant role in these marketing practices, and have, to a larger extent than before, become a dominant feature of individual media mix hierarchies. This has led to the coining of the term "ludo mix", as the evolving media landscape of Japan invites researchers to explore in what way games have become the driving force behind the production and reception of certain media franchises (DiGRA 2018). The ludo mix might, therefore, be defined as a variant of the media mix that emphasizes or privileges the medium of games. The Final Fantasy XV Universe is a recent and notable example of such a venture, featuring a host of interlinked gaming properties, coupled with transmedia tie-ins, and spearheaded by Square Enix, one of Japan's most prominent game developers.

The Final Fantasy XV Universe is a sub-franchise in the Final Fantasy series of games that centres on the 15th numbered title in the series, namely *Final Fantasy XV* (2016). The game was initially announced in 2006 as *Final Fantasy Versus XIII* and

advertised as an independent spin-off of *Final Fantasy XIII* (Square Enix 2009). However, due to the mixed reception of *Final Fantasy XIII*, the game was ultimately rebranded in its current incarnation for marketing purposes. Throughout its long development history, the project was turned into a transmedia property under the banner of the Final Fantasy XV Universe, consisting of a CGI feature film, an anime series, an audio drama, a novel, manga, six separate games including the main game and, last but not least, episodic DLC (downloadable content) released in instalments post-launch. Aside from *Final Fantasy XV: Pocket edition* (Square Enix 2018), which is an abridged version of the main game designed for mobile devices, the instalments in the Final Fantasy XV Universe feature supplementary experiences to *Final Fantasy XV*, as opposed to exploring alternative versions of events. In regard to the game's narrative, this classifies the project as a work of transmedia, as opposed to multimedia, and emphasizes the fact that the individual instalments are intended to work together to convey the story as a whole (Jenkins 2006, 95–96). This is not the first instance of a Final Fantasy title being at the epicentre of a transmedia property; the Compilation of Final Fantasy VII series, for example, set a notable precedent. The way in which the Final Fantasy XV Universe differs from previous examples, however, is that the coherency of the narrative of the main game is, to a larger degree, reliant on these supplementary texts – requiring players to familiarise themselves with them in order to get the full picture.

The game's plot revolves around Noctis Lucis Caelum, heir to the throne of Insomnia, and his entourage, consisting of his three close friends, Gladiolus, Prompto and Ignis. The four of them set forth from Insomnia on a mission to meet up with Lady Lunafreyja, Noctis's bride-to-be, but soon after they depart from the citadel the city is invaded and Noctis's father is killed in the onslaught. The game never explores this attack in depth, even though it is the catalyst that sets Noctis upon his path of opposing the empire and eventually laying claim to his father's throne. The CGI film, *Kingsglaive* (2016), explores this opening setup in its

place and puts the main game's story into some much-needed context (Webster 2016). The audio drama, *Final Fantasy XV Prologue Parting Ways* (2016), which was only released as a transcript in English, further bridges the gap between the game and the film by having otherwise exclusive characters on either side interact with one another. The remainder of the original roster, however, predominantly features character development, as opposed to being plot-driven, such as *A King's Tale: Final Fantasy XV* (Square Enix 2016), which tells the story of Noctis's father recounting his glory days, in the guise of a bedtime story, while the anime, *Final Fantasy XV: Brotherhood* (2016), and the first batch of DLC episodes focus predominantly on Noctis's teammates. The second season of DLC, conceived of post-launch and in conjunction with the game's reception, was also intended to delve deeper into selected characters, but this time with a greater emphasis on fleshing out their motivations, in addition to conveying certain key plot points that had been missing or portrayed poorly in the original game. *Episode Ardyn* (Square Enix 2019) was the only second-season DLC to be released, the remaining three DLC relating to Aranea, a mercenary in the service of the empire, Lunafreyja and Noctis himself ultimately being novelized as *Final Fantasy XV: The Dawn of the Future* (2019) as a result of their respective DLC being cancelled.

The reception of *Final Fantasy XV* has been, at least partly, favourable, with multiple sources praising the main cast for their chemistry (Carter 2016, Ingenito 2016). A major point of criticism, however, has been the presentation of the narrative, which has generally been the main appeal of Final Fantasy games, as it appears to have glaring omissions concerning some character motivations and plot details, leaving it relatively disjointed in comparison to previous entries in the series (Beck 2016). Players can fill in some of these gaps by familiarising themselves with secondary content such as *Kingsglaive*, although the problem appears to persist, the implication being that the narrative seems to be lacking, even as a work of transmedia. In addition, not everyone is willing to go to these lengths to make sense of the

game. Curiously, such critique is not limited to the international sphere, since, even in its native country of Japan where transmedia strategies are particularly common, the plot of the game has come under attack for the same reasons previously outlined (Fukuyama 2016).

According to an interview with Hajime Tabata, the game's director, who took the place of Tetsuya Nomura mid-development before ultimately resigning (resulting in the cancellation of aforementioned DLC), part of the reason for the transmedia approach had to do with marketing. Tabata cites two distinct demographics when it comes to the marketing of *Final Fantasy XV*: firstly, longtime fans that have followed every new development since the introduction of *Final Fantasy Versus XIII*, and secondly, potential players that aren't yet familiar with the series in general (Loeffler 2017). This duality of the game's target audience is further represented in a dedication in the opening of the game that reads: "A FINAL FANTASY for FANS and First-Timers" (Square Enix 2016). By adopting media mix strategies, the team behind *Final Fantasy XV* has therefore attempted to create multiple points of entry for potential players, establishing a media world wherein, as is often the case with media mixes (Steinberg 2012, 141), the consumption of one element is intended to drive the consumption of others.

In a separate interview, Tabata gave an additional explanation for the transmedia approach, noting that the reason the team opted for turning the story of *Final Fantasy XV* into a transmedia property was to avoid having to ship it as multiple games. This entailed a substantial amount of restructuring, and the team ended up reallocating certain story elements to media properties outside the main game (Corriea 2016). What is curious about Tabata's reasoning is that it presupposes the need for multiple games to tell a single story. This has not been the case with previous instalments in the Final Fantasy franchise, even those that featured elaborate narratives. For example, *Final Fantasy X* (Square 2001) and *Final Fantasy XIII* both inspired sequels, but

each game contained a coherent and independent narrative (albeit convoluted by some standards). If Tabata's comment is accurate, it must, therefore, reflect some changes in terms of the culture and limitations of game development within the company or the game industry in general.

These two distinct reasons for the transmedia approach situate *Final Fantasy XV* at the nexus of traditional media mix strategies on the one hand, and the continually evolving landscape of game development on the other. The study of the Final Fantasy XV Universe, as ludo mix must, therefore, take both distinct phenomena into consideration. By employing a comparative analysis of modern game development and media mix strategies, as they relate to the franchise, this article intends to clarify in what way they have interacted to create novel challenges and incentives for a particular kind of game development. The findings presented are primarily based on textual analysis of *Final Fantasy XV* and its interaction with other media, media coverage pertaining to its reception, as well as previously published interviews with developers. Due to the significant change in the visibility of developers, such an approach has become increasingly viable, regardless of its limitations (O'Donnell 2014, ix). Since there is always a risk that such accounts might misrepresent the game development process (Whitson 2020), they will only be employed herein to the extent they are thought to be substantiated by textual evidence from the end product itself.

Employing this methodology, the case will be made that the game's core narrative has been strategically outsourced to other media on account of new challenges faced by game developers, and that media mix strategies have prioritized character development at the cost of alleviating the need for such concerns, and negatively affected the critical reception of the game. Ultimately, these findings posit certain challenges and opportunities for the concept of the ludo mix going forward, noting that the continually evolving technological, aesthetic, and economic climate of game development continues further down

the path that has led to this outcome, while simultaneously advocating for the ludo mix as a framework for better understanding the disproportionate load imposed on media via transmedia collaborations.

THE LUDO MIX AS MEDIA MIX

Media mix strategies have been a dominant marketing strategy in Japan with an emphasis on character merchandising, licensing and various collaborations. Accordingly, when Tabata and his team set out to reconfigure *Final Fantasy XV* as a transmedia property, they could, to a large extent, rely on marketing practices that consumers and publishers were already familiar with. As a subject of study, these marketing practices have been linked with anime and the anime media mix (Steinberg 2012). When it comes to the conceptualization of a ludo mix, such as the Final Fantasy Universe, it is therefore of interest to examine in what manner the game industry can employ or imitate media mix strategies and what effect those strategies can be said to have had on the coherence in narration of *Final Fantasy XV*.

Character vs plot

Much like in the case of anime, games in Japan have been represented by a cast of iconic and marketable characters such as Mario, Sonic and Donkey Kong (López et al. 2015, 8). The list could be extended in Japan to include characters such as Final Fantasy's Cloud Strife, and internationally to include Lara Croft from the Tomb Raider series, and Steven from *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011). What these characters have in common, aside from being well-known video game characters, is that they have all been reincarnated outside their original games in one form or another, with media properties including Hollywood feature films, TV shows, various toys and Lego sets. The recognizability of the characters, as well as their previous entanglements with multimedia, is evidence of the fact that the emerging ludo mix

can, in part, adopt comparable strategies to anime when it comes to the focus on character promotion. This approach is, however, much more common with Japanese franchises, a fact that reflects their socioeconomic history, as developments within the Japanese market have cemented its usage locally (Picard 2013).

It is important to note that the concept of transmedia is not limited to the notion of narrative, as can be observed by the fact that the aforementioned characters have more often than not been redistributed across media with little regard to the coherency of their plot of origin. In this regard, characters can be seen as independent components of the stories in which they were originally conceived (Bertetti 2014). The same can be said for the study of transmedial worlds, as various worlds can be said to be recognisable without referring to the narrative that takes place in said world – leading to the study of such worlds across media (Klastrup and Tosca 2004, Wolf 2012). Even though the article at hand is focused on the ludo mix and its possible impact on the *Final Fantasy XV*'s in-game narrative, such alternative frameworks for the study of transmedia properties might nevertheless shed some light on the issue – at least to the extent the game's development can be said to have prioritized such concerns over the narrative.

With that in mind, *Final Fantasy XV* features a heavy emphasis on character promotion and design, with the four leads frequently and aptly being compared to a boyband (O'Connor 2017), as their diverse personality types seem calculated to appeal to a diverse group of players. The designers of *Final Fantasy XV* present the players with an assortment of anime-inspired archetypes that are more readily palatable due to their relatability through an intertextual reading with other media properties. In Noctis's entourage, Gladiolus wears the mantle of the wild and manly one, Prompto is the cute and feminine one, and Ignis the serious and dependable one (with the glasses to back it up). This ensemble is reminiscent of the anime *Ouran High School Host Club* (2006) wherein Gladiolus, Prompto and Ignis roughly correspond to the

characters of Takashi Morinozuka, Mitsukuni Haninozuka and Kyoya Ootori. Much like the gang from *Final Fantasy XV*, the host club members have their own sets of idiosyncrasies, but can nevertheless be understood in conjunction with anime archetypes, such as the strong and impassive one, "shotacon" and "megane" (literally meaning glasses) (Cavallaro 2013, 81). This inter-readability is likely to make the trio especially relatable to Japanese audiences or players that are in some way familiar with these specific tropes of Japanese animation.

Given his status as prince, it seems quite straightforward to classify Noctis himself as the typical "ouji" character, meaning prince. Such characters typically embody virtuous behaviour and are held in high esteem by their peers. As royalty, Noctis is indeed cut from a different cloth, but he has many character flaws, including being a notoriously picky eater and having a hard time coping with responsibility. By the end of the game, Noctis has, however, come to terms with the burden he must bear, and has completed his Hero's journey, having outgrown his boyband persona during the course of the game, and made his way back a new man. For the sake of media tie-ins such as Noctis's inclusion in *Tekken 7* (Bandai Namco Studios 2017) and *Dissidia: Final Fantasy NT* (Team Ninja 2015), Noctis's character development is, however, kept in a state of perpetual infancy and transmitted one-dimensionally across media. This is a common element of the Japanese media mix, as the coherent identity of individual characters become discontinuous in the process of them being dispersed across multiple media (Blom 2020). What remains is the recognizability of Noctis as a sort of mascot character for Final Fantasy XV – serving as an entry point for prospective players of *Final Fantasy XV*.

The way the Final Fantasy XV Universe has been structured to a large degree around the concept of character, as opposed to plot, is further emphasized in its own transmedia incarnations. For example, *Brotherhood: Final Fantasy XV*, the anime series, mainly focuses on developing the characters and their relationship

to one another, as opposed to being predominantly plot-driven. The same can be said for the DLC additions of *Episode Gladiolus* (Square Enix 2017), *Episode Prompto* (Square Enix 2017) and *Episode Ignis* (Square Enix 2017). These episodes recount the exploits of the characters off-screen from the main game, in addition to fleshing out the world and supporting characters. Character development, and to a lesser degree worldbuilding, takes centre stage, while the core narrative is left wanting. As has been demonstrated by scholarship pertaining to transmedial characters and worlds, these components can be said to be separable from the direct concerns of the overarching narrative, and cultivated independently. In general, this would not count as distracting from the overall plot if it were not for obvious omissions relating to the coherence of the story presented in the main game to begin with. Judging by a textual analysis of the works from within the Final Fantasy XV Universe itself, it can, therefore, be claimed that rather than prioritizing a fully coherent plot, the team behind *Final Fantasy XV* opted for character building.

The *Kingsglaive* film breaks up this pattern in favour of delivering a plot-heavy experience that is, to some degree, crucial to understanding the plot of *Final Fantasy XV*. The film's cast is nonetheless notable for not including the four protagonists of the main game, so it is partly excluded from such concerns. The audio drama, however, acts as a sort of bridge between the film and the game, featuring Noctis and his pals along with characters from the film in a mostly plot-driven scenario. It would, therefore, be a false dichotomy to declare that the entirety of the Final Fantasy XV Universe is focused on character promotion, as opposed to plot development, since it is not a question of one or the other. There is nevertheless a great tension between character development and the development of plot, which the game has been criticized for, caused by an imbalance between these two approaches, which favour character over plot.

Merchandising and advertising

Taking note of the character merchandising that has proliferated the Japanese media scene, at least since the advent of the *Tetsuwan Atomu* (1959) anime series (Steinberg 2012), a variety of merchandise has been released with *Final Fantasy XV*. DLC itself could be considered a form of character merchandising, since it offers players new and novel ways to engage with characters, aside from more common forms of character merchandising such as action figures and plushies. Perhaps the most novel addition to this ecology is a collaboration with the Japanese fashion designer Roen, credited with designing the clothes of Noctis and his party that were made available for real-life purchase (Ashcraft 2016). This is reminiscent of *Final Fantasy XIII*'s Lightning venture into fashion in collaboration with Louis Vuitton, where the digital character was made out to be the model for the brand (Louis Vuitton n.d.). Other examples of product placement in the Final Fantasy XV Universe are the inclusion of an Audi in *Kingsglaive*, American Express stickers on windows in the main game and the Coleman camping gear, which the foursome use to camp outside – the camping gear being prominently featured on the box art for the game.

The most gratuitous example of advertising for many players has been the inclusion of Nissin Cup Noodles in the game itself. In addition to TV-spots that linked these two elements, the game gets players excited about a non-existent game titled "Cup Noodle XV", and players can visit a noodle truck in the city of Lestallum and purchase noodles from a street vendor. Gladiolus favours Nissin Cup Noodles, and his noodle-mania even goes as far as to trigger an in-game mission centred on procuring ingredients for the ultimate cup of noodles. According to Ray Chase, the English voice actor for Noctis, the cast recorded two versions of the dialogue relating to the noodles, one in earnest and the other ironically, with the latter making its way into the game (Reddit 2016). This sense of irony further establishes the inclusion of an actual noodle brand as a foreign element.

Figure 1: Lunafreyja holding up a cup of Nissin Cup Noodles for a TV-spot as a part of the collaboration between Nissin and Square Enix.

In-game advertisements have become a major advertising medium, the presence of in-game advertisements becoming less and less of a novelty. Such advertisements may even play a part in enhancing a game's sense of realism, as in the case of sports games that replicate sport venues commonly laden with various advertisements (Nelson 2002). Being mindful of the type of game or genre being considered for such advertisements might, therefore, be of great import to potential advertisers, considering that, depending on the game, a certain advertisement might be considered too disruptive to be considered appropriate (Terlutter and Capella 2013). In the case of *Final Fantasy XV*, the inclusion cup noodles might break the immersion for some players by blurring the line between the world of fantasy and the interests of real-world capital. However, even though this publicity stunt could be criticized for breaking the fourth wall, it does not mean that it will detract from the narrative in any meaningful way. With regard to the structure of the game, the only concern is suitable representation, requiring a receptible character such as Gladiolus to be a sort of spokesperson for the brand, and that the in-game noodles are rendered with adequate care. In this regard, the merchandising and advertising associated with *Final Fantasy XV*

has applied a very limited set of restrictions, allowing developers substantial creative freedom. As a part of general media mix strategies applied to the transmedia property in question, these factors have, therefore, seemingly had a minimal effect on the narrative of *Final Fantasy XV*, even though such concerns have the potential to become leading factors, for example, if game development becomes less financially independent.

THE CHANGING CLIMATE OF GAME DEVELOPMENT

Being somewhat synonymous with the medium of games, research into the emerging ludo mix must take into consideration not only the generalities of transmedia collaborations, as exemplified by established media mix strategies, but also the way the changing culture and limitations of game development itself shape the medium and its connections with other media. The culture and climate of game development is constantly in flux, as technological advancements, as well as innovation and aesthetic expectations within existing parameters, reframe the way games are conceptualized and critiqued. In the case of the development of *Final Fantasy XV*, it can be said that the current climate of game development has incentivized the development of a particular kind of game. Such incentives can, for example, be of a technical nature, catering to the current possibilities and limitations of game development, aesthetic, in the sense that the expectations of players and the aesthetic palette of games is constantly changing, and last but not least, economic, adjusting to the rising cost of development and new opportunities for monetization.

Technological incentives

Final Fantasy XV had an infamously long development history, spanning the better part of 10 years, 13 if the development of DLC is included. During the early years of the franchise, fans of the series could expect a new instalment within regular short

intervals of one or two years, whereas players now can expect to wait several years until a project becomes marketable. This development is not limited to the management of Square Enix, as AAA development has been getting less manageable across the board, with larger development teams working for longer periods on single projects (Koster 2018). As technological advancements make designing games more accessible by making the core game development toolkit more readily available and powerful, they simultaneously raise the bar for technological excellence expected of mainstream AAA titles, making development of such titles exponentially more demanding and resource consuming.

One of the challenges the team had to face was the implementation of towns and cities, major towns and cities having been a staple of the Final Fantasy series up until the release of *Final Fantasy XIII*. These cities have come in all shapes and sizes ranging from the small mining town of Kalm in *Final Fantasy VII* (Square 1997) to the sci-fi metropolis of Esthar in *Final Fantasy VIII* (Square 1999). As a form of digital architecture, such locales in the series have an interpretive dimension that can invoke a host of meaningful connotations. This has been demonstrated by William Huber in his analysis of the three main cities of *Final Fantasy XI* (Square 2002–), wherein he argued that the fantastical cityscapes found in the game bear representational traces of real-world cultures (Huber 2005). Such towns and cities also bear a functional dimension, having been playable areas where players have been able to explore freely, perform various activities and interact with the inhabitants in meaningful ways – the ways in which available actions can be said to be in line with a player's understanding of a city's function being paramount to conveying the embodied experience of the city (Vella 2018, 5). With a rising demand for graphical fidelity, such locations have become much harder to configure; the team behind *Final Fantasy XIII* even went on record to say that technical difficulties had been the main reason for the exclusion of such locales (Schramm 2010). It is possible to make such cities in ways that satisfy demands, like in the case of *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games 2013) or *Spider-*

man (Insomniac Games 2018). However, such games focus mostly on the city, while in Final Fantasy games the city is traditionally only one part of a much larger journey. The recent *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (2020) further emphasizes this point by dedicating the entire game solely to the city of Midgar, as opposed to featuring all the locales featured in the original *Final Fantasy VII*.

In *Final Fantasy XV* the largest playable cities are Lestallum and Altissia. There is nonetheless another city that is perhaps even more relevant to the plot of the game, namely Insomnia. Insomnia is prominently featured in the CGI feature film, *Kingsglaive*, as well as in the anime. It is also central to the audio drama, but has been relegated to a mere dungeon in the main game. The city still maintains the appearance of a city, but it does not function in the same way, its functionality having more in common with monster-infested caves and sewer areas found in the game. However, in early promotional material, parts of it were seemingly playable or at least represented in-game, showing Noctis in a penthouse suite conversing with Stella, the former heroine of the game before the advent of Lunafreyja, later taking to the streets to confront her (Weiss 2016). The extent of Insomnia's intended playability is ultimately speculative, but the shift to different media to tell the story of the city situated it firmly outside the ludic sphere, making it unnecessary to spend excessive resources on the construction of an interactive cityscape for the player to traverse and scrutinize. The option for transmedia storytelling, thereby may have incentivized the boycotting of certain technological limitations at the cost of the coherence of the overall narrative, it being more cost-effective to depict a city in the guise of film or drama, as opposed to having it offer a fully interactive and embodied experience – especially if it was intended to do justice to players' expectations.

Even though some of the issues with the development of *Final Fantasy XV* can be traced back to the pursuit of technological fidelity, the internal management of Square Enix is also

responsible for the game's long development time. Character designer, Roberto Ferrari, who worked on the game and some of its key characters, including Ardyn Izunia (the main antagonist), noted how highly disorganized the development team was, working on major designs while the story of the game still hadn't been finalised (Stine 2016). Tetsuya Nomura, the original director of the game, was also spread thin, working on multiple games and directing four of them (Figueroa 2016). Regardless of such managerial mishaps, however, the technological incentives present within the current state of the game industry remain a factor that cannot be ignored.

<center>Aesthetic incentives</center>

Since the release of the first Final Fantasy title back in 1987, the aesthetic conceptions about what a game is and should be have been challenged multiple times with new genres coming into light and existing genres being extrapolated on – perhaps even refined. In recent years, Japanese role-playing games have been criticized for not keeping up with these changes in comparison to their western counterparts. Keiji Inafune, best known for his work on the Mega Man series, has voiced his concerns that the Japanese game industry, which had previously dominated the global market, now lacks innovation, and was at the time of his original statement "at least five years behind" (Tabuchi 2010). Even though Inafune attributes the shortcomings of the Japanese game industry to a lack of innovation, he is vague about what exactly this entails. The only thing he can say for certain is that modern Japanese games seem to lack the global appeal of their predecessors.

One point of contention globally is the implementation of turn-based combat systems, often associated with Japanese role-playing games, as opposed to the more action-oriented titles from western developers. Even though turn-based combat retains a dedicated fan base, especially in Japan, the global appeal of such games has come into question in the last decade, and with falling

sales in the local market, Japanese game developers have had to adapt and tackle foreign markets with more tact (Kitami et al. 2011, 285). Another factor is the game industry's tendency for hybridization, as transnational influences are permitted to shape the production of games, catering to a global media culture (Consalvo 2006). In order to stay relevant, the Final Fantasy series has been grappling with this problem since the development of *Final Fantasy XII* (Square Enix 2006) seeing major changes to the formula, with *Final Fantasy XV* ending up as a full-fledged action RPG, much like the Kingdom Hearts series. Square Enix further drives this point home by producing the remake of *Final Fantasy VII*, a game that originally featured turn-based combat, as an action RPG.

The major point of contention, however, in terms of the narrative of the game, is the question of linearity, Final Fantasy games and other Japanese role-playing games having customarily been fairly linear in comparison to western gaming properties such as the Elder Scrolls series. Even though it is not enough in and of itself to constitute a genre definition, one of the genre distinctions made by players and the media between western and Japanese role-playing games is that of sandbox vs confinement; in other words, open-world vs linearity (Schules 2015, 54). At the time of its release, *Final Fantasy XIII*, the game that *Final Fantasy XV* has had to distance itself from, was harshly criticized for being overly linear – its linearity even being the subject of academic scholarship (Cruz 2011). To avoid treading old ground, *Final Fantasy XV,* therefore had to avoid the perceived mistakes of its predecessor and adopt a more open concept.

In an interview with the Japanese game magazine Famitsu, Tabata explained that the first half of *Final Fantasy XV* was intended to be open world, while the latter half was designed to be more linear. This way he believed players would be able to enjoy the best of both worlds – taking on the freedom of open-world games without getting bored, while at the same time getting a taste for the more traditional Final Fantasy experience in the form of linear

progression (Famitsu 2016). This approach has received some positive feedback in terms of the game's global marketability, as the game has been compared to successful open-world games such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) (Roberts 2018). Tabata, however, noted that this shift was seen more favourably in the west than in Japan, with a more significant percentage of Japanese players being less impressed with the open-world style (Smith 2017).

In effect, this might have contributed to the game's disjointed narrative as the open-world structure does not fit well with the tightly woven narrative of *Kingsglaive* that is meant to precede it. While Noctis and his pals leisurely cruise around performing menial tasks for strangers and engaging in recreational fishing, the fate of his kingdom and the world supposedly hang in the balance. A certain suspension of disbelief is to be expected when it comes to Final Fantasy games, as in the past players have been afforded opportunities to engage with the game world, regardless of their most imminent duties. In this case, however, it seems as if the core narrative is held at arm's length from the player in order to serve a certain aesthetic that has hitherto been alien to the series, and is perhaps in some way foreign to the developers. It would be an overstatement to take this as evidence of the limitations in narrative of open-world gameplay, even though some claim that open-world structures can be detrimental to narratological ambitions (Rush 2010). However, coupled with the technological incentives and the focus on traditional media mix strategies, it becomes clearer how the outsourcing of narrative might become enticing in this climate.

Economic incentives

Lastly, the economic climate of games has shifted, ushering in new opportunities for monetization, along with challenges to remain profitable. In the case of the anime media mix, such strategies can be considered a lifeline for the medium, as the production of anime in and of itself would rarely be viable

(Steinberg 2012). In comparison, the medium of games has historically been financially independent as the advent of the medium can testify to (Kent 2001). As with the rising demands created by technological advancements, however, games have become more expensive to produce. To cope with the rising cost of development, and to make use of new opportunities for monetization, developers and publishers have resorted to various marketing practices, such as the sale of in-game items, subscription models and DLC sold separately to prolong the economic viability of individual games (Nieborg 2014).

According to Tabata, the episodic DLC content relating to Gladiolus, Prompto and Ignis were all planned prior to the release of the game (Parish 2018). With the introduction of the season pass, which entitled customers to all the episodes and more, Square Enix executed a plan to keep the game profitable post-launch. Each DLC episode takes place at various points throughout the story. This means that the trio had to disappear sporadically with Gladiolus leaving the party to take care of some unexplained business, Prompto getting kicked off a moving train, and Ignis being left with unexplained blindness after getting separated from the pack in the empire's assault on Altissia. To account for the existence of these DLC episodes, the game has therefore been intentionally structured in such a way as to create gaps in a narrative that was already loosely strung together.

There was a second season in the works, but after Tabata left Square Enix the only thing that remains is *Episode Ardyn* (Square Enix 2019). According to Tabata, the aim of the second season was to alleviate some concerns relating to the integrity of the plot – filling in some gaps and securing the story (Parish 2018). Although this content was not originally planned, it goes to show how new economic models seek to justify the release of the kind of games that would previously have been considered unfinished. This allows developers to relegate the burden of completion to the future while compromising the original launch of a title.

SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS

Considering the ludo mix at the junction of traditional media mix strategies and development within the game industry itself makes the study of the Final Fantasy XV Universe a fruitful endeavour. The team behind the franchise has implemented media mix strategies in addition to taking the current state of game development into account. This has resulted in a game that has been criticized for its narrative or lack thereof. Aside from alleged management issues within Square Enix itself, this outcome has seemingly been incentivized by a number of factors relating to the presentation of the game as a part of an expanded universe of transmedia properties, where key plot points have been outsourced to other media due to difficulties arising from the technological, aesthetic and economic climate of the game industry. In cases where these issues could have been alleviated, the focus on character development in the vein of media mix strategies has dominated, resulting in the favourable reception of the game's characters as opposed to its plot.

Regardless of the favourable reception of the main characters, the lacklustre presentation of the narrative has been the largest factor in devaluing Final Fantasy XV's critical reception, and there is cause to believe that going further down this path would lead to the further devaluing of individual gaming properties. The omission of Insomnia and its outsourcing to film, anime and drama might be viewed as prophetic, or at the very least as a cautionary tale, since incentives present in the current state of the game industry appear perfectly reasonable, yet at the same time undesirable. In the past, game developers could abstract the feeling of large cities, but they are now tasked with the almost insurmountable task of painstakingly rendering the minuscule aspects of city life. All the while, media such as anime remain relatively stable and cost-effective, making media mix strategies that take advantage of this more alluring to developers.

Even though this article has introduced a comparative analysis of the media mix and the climate of game development, as they comprise the ludo mix, there is a significant overlap where their interests might align—for example, the interests of merchandising and economic incentives. As previously stated, even though the franchise fraternizes with various merchandising and advertisements, it does not appear to be a dominating factor, aside from the existence of the franchise itself as self-promotion. Considering the rising developmental costs of games, future ludo mixes might be inclined to go further down this path as game development becomes less financially independent, or players more accustomed to in-game ads. This, however, presumes that the cost of game development will keep rising indefinitely or at least for the indefinite future. Such statements are mainly speculative since the industry might eventually stabilize itself.

Ultimately, the terms of the ludo mix are still being negotiated, and the Final Fantasy XV Universe only represents a certain point in its ongoing development. Developers such as Square Enix might be advised to be mindful of this constantly shifting landscape and work within their means, although that might entail having to tell stories that are structurally different from what the company has done in the past. However, due to rapid changes within the game industry, this advice might soon become obsolete. As the study of the ludo mix is tasked with monitoring these changes, it requires a comparatively high degree of adaptability, as opposed to the study of media mixes relying on media that is more stable, since the climate of the game industry continues to evolve in unexpected ways.

CONCLUSION

This article aimed at exploring how the current climate of game development, in tandem with traditional media mix strategies, operates to create what might be referred to as ludo mix in the case of the Final Fantasy XV Universe. Offering a comparative

analysis of these two distinct phenomena, at the point of merger, has shed light on the development history of *Final Fantasy XV* as well as positing more general speculations about the nature and future of the ludo mix.

In the case of the franchise in question, the technological, aesthetic and economic climate of the game industry has led to the outsourcing of the games' core narrative to more cost-effective media, and affected its critical reception in a negative way. Media mix strategies, as they have been employed in the case of *Final Fantasy XV*, favour character development and promotion, as opposed to plot development, resulting in the prioritization of character-focused content. This has, in effect, further marginalized the narrative of the game.

Lastly, the development of the Final Fantasy XV Universe raises questions about the way that ludo mix strategies might differ from traditional media mixes. Due to the fact that major incentives for this approach can be traced back to changes within the game industry and culture of games, it could be held that the ludo mix can be seen as an extension of these changes. To the extent that the climate of game development is changing more rapidly than that of other media, it can, therefore, be speculated that the study of the ludo mix is required to be more adaptable than the study of traditional media mixes based on more stable media.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ashcraft. B. 2016. "Buy Official Final Fantasy XV Clothing for Thousands of Dollars". *Kotaku*. Retrieved January 5. 2019 from https://kotaku.com/buy-official-final-fantasy-xv-clothing-for-thousands-of-1768416443.

Bandai Namco Studios, 2017. *Tekken 7*. PlayStation 4. Bandai Namco Entertainment.

Beck. A. 2016. "Review: Final Fantasy XV". *Hardcore Gamer*. Retrieved December 5. 2018 from http://www.hardcoregamer.com/2016/12/01/review-final-fantasy-xv/237763/.

Bertetti. P. 2014. "Toward a Typology of Transmedia Characters". *International Journal of Communication*, 8(1). 2344–2361

Bethesda Game Studios. 2011. *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. Microsoft Windows. Bethesda Softworks.

Blom. J. 2020. "The Manifestations of Game Characters in a Media Mix Strategy". In *Comics and Videogames from Hybrid Medialities to Transmedia Expansions*. Edited by Andreas Rauscher, Daniel Stein, Jan-Noël Thon. New York and London: Routledge. 201–221.

Carter. C. 2016. "Review: Final Fantasy XV". In *Destructoid*. Retrieved January 2. 2019 from https://www.destructoid.com/ review-final-fantasy-xv-399859.phtml.

Cavallaro, D. 2013. *Japanese Aesthetics and Anime: The Influence of Tradition*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company.

Consalvo. M. 2006. "Console video games and global corporations: Creating a hybrid culture". *New Media & Society*, 8(1). 117–137.

Corriea, A. R. 2016. "15 New Things We Learned from Final Fantasy 15's Director". *Gamespot*. Retrieved November 19, 2018, from https://www.gamespot.com/ articles/15-new-things-we-learned-from-final-fantasy-15s-di/1100-6436138/.

Cruz. J. Q. 2011. "How Linearity Affects Narrative: The Incomplete Story of Final Fantasy XIII". *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 5(1). 105–110.

DiGRA. 2018. "Call for Papers". In *DIGRA 2019 KYOTO JAPAN: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo Mix*. Retrieved January 4, 2019 from http://www.digra2019.org/call-for-paper/.

Famitsu. 2016. "Fainaru Fantajii XV – Enki no uragawa to mesasu toutatsuten – Tabata Hajime shi Intabyuu – Gamescom 2016". *Famitsu*. Retrieved January 11, 2018 from https://www.famitsu.com/matome/ff15/2016_08_25.html?fbclid=IwAR3QCpdtLBnVXBCGX06LxJoulpU9ZBvhZKMtNMfL45PiQUJXJZVcd8WqJI

Figueroa. J. 2016. "Final Fantasy XV Designer On Why It Took 10 Years, Blames Dev Team". *Inquisitr*. Retrieved January 17, 2019 from https://www.inquisitr.com/3825430/final-fantasy-xv-designer-on-why-it-took-10-years-blames-dev-team/.

Fukuyama. K. 2016. "Fainaru Fantajii XV Rebyuu". *IGN JAPAN*. Retrieved January 2. 2019 from https://jp.ign.com/final-fantasy-xv/9635/review/xv?fbclid=IwAR1CjjXhmGGutlYyXFPFtNqBfSoTt1DEjgDZeNfeTJfRYRWMEfvv5MAYZkc.

Huber. W. 2005. "Fictive Affinities in Final Fantasy XI: Complicit and Critical Play in Fantastic Nations". In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference: Changing Views – Worlds in Play*. 1–7.

Ingenito. V. 2016. "FINAL FANTASY XV REVIEW". *IGN*. Retrieved January 2, 2019 from https://www.ign.com/articles/2016/11/28/final-fantasy-xv-review.

Insomniac Games. 2018. *Spider-Man*. PlayStation 4. Sony Interactive Entertainment.

Jenkins. H. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York, London: New York University Press.

Kent. S. L. 2001. *The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to Pokémon and Beyond – The Story Behind the Craze That*

Touched Our Lives and Changed the World. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Kitami. K., Saga. R., and Matsumoto. K. 2011. "Comparison Analysis of Video Game Purchase Factors between Japanese and American Consumers". In: König A., Dengel A., Hinkelmann K., Kise K., Howlett R.J., Jain L.C. (eds) *Knowledge-Based and Intelligent Information and Engineering Systems*. KES 2011. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, vol 6883, 285–294.

Klastrup. L and Tosca. S. 2004. "Transmedial Worlds: Rethinking Cyberworld Design". In *Proceedings of International Conference on Cyberworlds*.

Koster. R. "The cost of games". *Gamasutra*. Retrieved January 28, 2019 from https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/RaphKoster/ 20180117/313211/The_cost_of_games.php.

Loeffler, J. September 05, 2017. "The Big Final Fantasy XV Interview – Hajime Tabata Talks Tech, Switch, DLC, the Future and Much More". *DualShockers*. Retrieved November 19, 2019 from https://www.dualshockers.com/final-fantasy-xv-hajime-tabata-interview/.

Louis Vuitton. N.d. "Lightning: A Virtual Heroin". In *Louis Vuitton*. Retrieved 15. January, 2019 from https://us.louisvuitton.com/eng-us/articles/lightning-a-virtual-heroine.

López, A. L., and Remesal, V. N. 2015. "What Makes Gêmu Different? A Look at the Distinctive Design Traits of Japanese Video Games and Their Place in the Japanese Media Mix". *Journal of Game Criticism*, 2(1). 1–18.

Mojang Studios. 2011. Minecraft. Windows. Mojang Studios.

Nelson. M. R. 2002. "Recall of Brand Placements in Computer/ Video Games". *Journal of Advertising Research*, 42(2).

Nieborg. D. B. 2014. "Prolonging the Magic: The political economy of the 7th generation console game". *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 8(1). 47–63.

O'Connor. A. "Anime boyband roadtrip confirmed for PC." *Rock Paper Shotgun*. Retrieved January 2, 2019 from https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/ 2017/08/21/final-fantasy-xv-pc-release-confirmed/.

O'Donnell. C. 2014. *Developer's Dilemma: The Secret World of Videogame Creators*. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press.

Parish. J. 2018. "Hajime Tabata on Final Fantasy 15's finale and what comes next: From DLC to LARPing, Square Enix isn't done with its blockbuster adventure just yet". *Polygon*. Retrieved January 5, 2019, from https://www.polygon.com/ features/2018/9/ 21/17885000/hajime-tabata-final-fantasy-15-finale-dlc-larping

Picard. M. 2013. "The Foundation of Geemu: A Brief History of Early Japanese video games". *Game Studies,* 13(2).

Reddit. 2016. "You guys…are the best. Seriously. Ray Chase (Noct, Edgar) here to answer your questions!" *Reddit*. Retrieved January 5. 2019 from https://www.reddit.com/r/FinalFantasy/ comments/5ibvvc/ you_guysare_the_best_seriously_ray_chase_noct/.

Rockstar North. 2013. *Grand Theft Auto V*. PlayStation 3. Rockstar Games.

Roberts. S. "Final Fantasy 15 is a flawed epic that makes the series relevant again". PC Gamer: The Global Authority of PC Games. Retrieved January 18, 2019 from https://www.pcgamer.com/final-fantasy-15-is-a-flawed-epic-that-makes-the-series-relevant-again/.

Rush. A. 2010. "Fable 2 as Simulation, Game and Narrative: A Contest". *Scan: Journal of media arts culture,* 7(1).

Schules. D. 2015. "Kawaii Japan: Defining JRPGs through the Cultural Media Mix". *Kinephanos: Journal of Media Studies and Popular Culture*, 5(1). 53–76.

Schramm. M. 2010. "Final Fantasy XIII producers: Traditional RPG towns are tough to do in HD". *Engadget*. Retrieved January 2, 2019, from https://www.engadget.com/2010/02/05/final-fantasy-xiii-producers-traditional-rpg-towns-are-tough-to/?guccounter=1.

Smith. M. 2017. "The director of 'Final Fantasy XV' isn't finished yet". Engadet. Retrieved January 18, 2019, from https://www.engadget.com/2017/08/26/final-fantasy-xv-director-interview-gamescom-2017/?guccounter=1.

Square. 1997. *Final Fantasy VII*. PlayStation. Square.

Square. 1999. *Final Fantasy VIII*. PlayStation. Square.

Square. 2001. *Final Fantasy X*. PlayStation 2. Square.

Square. 2002. *Final Fantasy XI*. Microsoft Windows. Square.

Square Enix. 2020. *Final Fantasy VII Remake*. PlayStation 4. Square Enix

Square Enix. 2006. *Final Fantasy XII*. PlayStation 2. Square Enix.

Square Enix. 2009. *Final Fantasy XIII*. PlayStation 3. Square Enix.

Square Enix. 2016. *Final Fantasy XV*. PlayStation 4. Square Enix.

Square Enix. 2018. *Final Fantasy XV: Pocket Edition*. Android. Square Enix.

Square Enix. 2016. *A King's Tale: Final Fantasy XV*. PlayStation 4. Square Enix.

Steinberg. M. 2012. *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.

Stine. J. 2016. "Artist Roberto Ferrari speaks about his designs in Final Fantasy XV". *Nova Crystallis*. Retrieved October 30. 2020 from https://novacrystallis.com/2016/12/artist-roberto-ferrari-speaks-designs-final-fantasy-xv/.

Tabuchi. H. 2010. "Japanese Playing a New Video Game: Catch-Up". *The New York Times*. Retrieved January 5. 2019 from https://www.nytimes.com/ 2010/09/20/technology/ 20game.html?_r=2.

Team Ninja. 2018. *Dissidia Final Fantasy NT*. PlayStation 4. Square Enix.

Terlutter. R. and Capella. M. L. 2013. "The Gamification of Advertising: Analysis and Research Directions of In-Game Advertising, Advergames, and Advertising in Social Network Games". *Journal of Advertising*, 42(2-3). 95–112.

Vella. D. 2018. "The City in Singleplayer Fantasy Role Playing Games". In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2018*. 1–17.

Webster. A. 2016. "You should watch the Final Fantasy XV movie and anime before playing the game: Do your homework". *The Verge*. Retrieved January 5. 2019 from https://www.theverge.com/ 2016/11/28/13763158/ final-fantasy-15-kingsglaive-movie-brotherhood-anime.

Weiss. D. 2016 "Final Fantasy XV (Versus XIII) All Deleted Scenes". *YouTube*. Retrieved January 7. 2019 from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JkVYVpxNarU&t=527s.

Whitson. J. R. 2020. "What Can We Learn From Studio Studies Ethnographies? A 'Messy' Account of Game Development

Materiality, Learning, and Expertise". *Games and Culture*, 15(3). 266–288.

Wolf, Mark, J. P. 2012. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History ofSubcreation*. New York: Routledge.

Characters in Fire Emblem Three Houses

A Ludo Mix Perspective

Joleen Blom

ABSTRACT

The article focuses on how dynamic game characters create
friction in a ludo mix strategy consisting of primarily ludic media,
disturbing the narrative coherency that trans- or cross-media
strategies strive for. In particular, dynamic game characters, with
a development structure that the player influences, cause narrative
inconsistencies with the character's transmedia appearances. Yet,
in Japanese media and ludo mixes, character proliferation is the
norm so that different versions of the same character can exist
without any issues of narrative coherency. Through a case study
of the *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* ludo mix, this article argues
that the Japanese concept of the *kyara*, a proto-character,
demonstrates to be an excellent means to avoid a clash between

the dynamic game character in one work and its appearance in another work. It concludes that through the use of the *kyara,* the IP owner avoids any clash between the dynamic game character's appearance in its source work and its appearance in other ludic works, thereby giving the impression that the player's agency over the dynamic game character stays intact.

INTRODUCTION

Game characters do not just appear in games. They travel from game to game, from medium to medium and from story to story. Although game characters require their own medium-specific analytical framework, they need one that is situated in a larger media ecology that takes their different counterparts into consideration, because games create tension in cross-media transfers, as the underlying ludic structure of the game cannot be adapted to non-ludic media such as most novels, comics, or films. Game characters add to this cross-media tension, so that when they are dynamic – that is, when the player has creative agency over their development—they obtain multiply identities within a single work. These identities are difficult to sustain in trans- and cross-media strategies such as media and ludo mixes. Since a media mix is a commercial strategy to spread content across a variety of media platforms and objects (Steinberg 2012), a ludo mix can then be considered a variant of a media mix in which games are the focal point of the strategy. As a result of having multiple identities, dynamic game characters tend to be pushed to a peripheral position in the transmedia network in which they appear, giving the player only the illusion of creative agency (Blom 2020a).

This article is a continuation of my article "The Manifestations of Game Characters in a Media Mix Strategy" (Blom 2020b) on the influence of dynamic game characters in the *Persona 5* (P-Studio 2016) ludo mix. Here I argue that, although characters do not have to have a fixed coherent identity in the *Persona 5* ludo mix, the ludo mix's intellectual property (IP) owner, Atlus, maintains a position of authority to determine which identity of the dynamic game characters should be counted as normative, and which as heresy. *Persona 5* manifests as a ludo mix in which official adaptations by Atlus focuses only on the game's overarching narrative, ignoring the *system of affection* segments in which the player facilitates relationships between the game's protagonist, Joker, and other characters (mostly of a romantic nature). On the other hand, peripheral comic magazines – such as the *Persona 5 Comic Anthology* (DNA Media Comics 2017a; 2017b) — that obtained the copyright to use the character images, do acknowledge the relationships between characters in their short 'what-if' stories exploring the different relationships between Joker and the other characters. However, this acknowledgment only occurs on the condition that the depiction of every relationship neatly corresponds to the relationships presented by the game. No story opposes the source work's original relationships. If anyone wants to see alternative queer readings of these relationships, they will have to go to fan works that have not obtained any copyright permission. This strategy of which relationships are normative and which are heresy implies that the creative agency that the player has in *Persona 5* is ultimately of secondary value to the game's overarching narrative structure.

Nevertheless, this was but a single case study of a ludo mix strategy with dynamic game characters, mostly comprised of non-ludic media, such as *manga* or *anime*. Therefore, I find it imperative to explore other ludo mix strategies to understand how dynamic game characters cause friction with their counterparts in other media. *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (*Three Houses)* makes for a good additional case study, because the *Three Houses* ludo mix has a different structural organization; it consists mostly of

games. With the exception of the peripheral online comic, "Fire Emblem Heroes – a Day in the Life" (Intelligent Systems 2017), the *Three Houses* ludo mix has its characters also appear in the games: *Fire Emblem: Heroes* (Intelligent Systems 2017) and *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (Bandai Namco Studios 2018). The connection between these three games make up this article's case study. Doing so, this article examines the tension created by dynamic game characters in media and ludo mixes as a result of games conveying an illusion of creative agency over the identity of the character to the player, while the dominant identity of the characters is (for commercial reasons) presented in the media mix's other media platforms. It therefore engages with the question: how do dynamic game characters create tension in media and ludo mixes?

This article uses the theoretical distinction between the *kyara*, a visual icon without a story, and the *kyarakutā*, a *dramatis persona* that develops as a person in a story, from Japanese media studies, to explain what strategy the *Three Houses* ludo mix's IP owner, Nintendo, adopts to avoid a clash between the multiple identities of its dynamic game characters. Japanese scholarly work often uses the *kyara* to explain the overabundance of incoherent information about a character in a media mix (Wilde 2019), or considers it a touchpoint for new consumers to a ground of products in a media mix (Nakamura and Tosca 2019, 3 – 4). This article however, adds to those functions that Nintendo's use of the *kyara* actively serves to avoid clashes in the coherence of dynamic game characters' identity when the figures spread over multiple works. It argues that, even when a ludo mix contains multiple ludic works, the IP owner seems reluctant to add a story to the characters outside of *Three Houses*, in order to potentially avoid any clashes with character coherence in their source work and their appearances in other ludic works.

THE MEDIA MIX: KYARA AND THE KYARAKUTĀ

The phenomenon of media convergence is known in Japan as the media mix, which, as stated before, refers to a commercial strategy to spread content across a variety of media platforms and objects. Steinberg (2012) describes the media mix as the "cross-media serialization and circulation of entertainment franchises" (vii). It has its own history and development alongside of what we know as media convergence in Europe and North-America (also called the "West") (vii). In the "West", common labels used for the phenomenon of media convergence are "transmedia storytelling" (Jenkins 2006; 2007), "transmedial worlds" (Klastrup and Tosca 2004), or "transmedia practice" (Dena 2009), among others.

Unlike transmedia storytelling, in which the coherence of stories is of primary interest (Jenkins 2007), in a media mix, characters are the focus point that connect different media, stories and objects with each other (Steinberg 2012, 83). Character proliferation is the means for all these media platforms to connect, as characters appear in different stories and settings that do not necessarily have to make any coherent or continuous sense. As a result, multiple versions of the same character exist and continue to proliferate as they hop from one medium to another.

Works on transmedia storytelling took off in the early 2000s, but Japanese works on the media mix have been around since the late 1980s. In 1989, Ōtsuka defined the concept 'narrative consumption' (Ōtsuka 1989; [1989] 2010) to describe how individual narratives of characters enables consumers to gradually learn about the world in which they live. Through the accumulations of multiple small narratives of the characters, the consumer comes to see a grand narrative, the world behind the characters so that the consumer comes to understand what is happening in that world (Ōtsuka 1989; [1989] 2010).

Ōtsuka's work remains largely untranslated, but one of the few translated works on the topic of the Japanese media mix is Azuma's *Database Consumption* ([2001] 2009). Within this work, Azuma responds to Ōtsuka's concept of 'narrative consumption', claiming that the 'narrative consumption' Ōtsuka speaks about collapsed with the entrance of postmodernity. According to him, the collapse resulted in the phenomenon in which, for the *otaku*[1], *the character becomes the most important object of a work (31). Contrasting narrative consumption, Azuma names the consuming behaviour of the otaku "database consumption", which refers to otaku consuming the aggregated elements of characters and settings, but not the grand narrative (54). The database he speaks of consists of these aggregated elements based on the moe, feelings of desire towards a fictional character that they might invoke, which could be cute cat ears, sailor uniforms, or specific types of hair, and more. From this database, different elements can be put together to form a new figure, towards which one has feelings of desire, and placed in a new context.*

To account for all the different versions of a character, Japanese theorists and scholars of Japanese media studies distinguish between the *kyarakutā* and the *kyara* (Wilde 2019, 5), first coined by Itō Gō (2005). In his – still largely untranslated — book, *Tetsuka izu Deddo*, Itō describes the former as a *dramatis persona*, a person who gives the impression of being born into a life and also having the possibility to die in that life (120). The *kyara*, on the other hand, is just a 'proto-character', a visual icon that only looks like a character; it precedes the *kyarakutā* before it actually becomes a character (116). The main aspect of the *kyara* is its versatility to be repurposed for many different contexts. Wilde explains that *kyara* function essentially as hubs or interfaces that can be placed and used in many different contexts (7). For example, in *manga*, or *dōjinshi*[2], *kyara* function more

1. Otaku are men, usually between 18 and 40 years old, who obsessively consume popular cultural products, such as anime, manga, or games.
2. *Dōjinshi* are self-published fan magazines by amateurs depicting alternative stories involving the characters of a particular media or ludo mix.

akin fictional persons, whereas as figurines they are merely a visual representation. This means that, unlike the *kyarakutā*, the *kyara* is a character without story, which, according to Wilde, is not because the image is not grounded in a lack of narrative information, but rather, it is "based on the (over)abundance of competing and utterly incoherent information" (2019, 6). Although Wilde considers them hubs or interfaces, Azuma, in the untranslated book *Gēmuteki riarizumu no tanjō* (2007, 125), explains the *kyara* to be *meta-monogatari–teki na setsuten,* meta-narrative nodes that can be placed in different narrative contexts. As nodes, they enable the possibility of a *meta-monogatari–teki na sōzōryoku no kakusan*, proliferation of the power of meta-narrative imagination, that lets consumers imagine the character in separate stories, which includes not only the original works from the same author, but also derivative works from other authors. In short, what can be gathered from these explanations is that, while the *kyara* can be considered a visual cliché useful to be placed into different settings, the theoretical distinction between the *kyara* and the *kyarakutā* operates as a theoretical spectrum to make sense of the different narrative settings in which the character appears due to the media mix's focus on character proliferation.

Most discussions on the distinction between the *kyara* and the *kyarakutā* remain untranslated to the English language, but gradually, more articles in English on the topic are starting to appear, which can be particularly useful to understand the more pragmatic use of the *kyara* in a media mix. Such an article comes, for example, from Nakamura and Tosca (2019), who describe the *kyara* functioning as a "recognizable archetype" (12) in different series and media entertainment that do not have to make any continuous linear sense. They explain that, as the IP holder surrounds consumers of a particular media mix with IP-related products in the form of the *kyara*, fans can choose whatever product they want to consume. Simultaneously, this allows the IP holder to create "more touchpoints to newcomers to a ground of products" (4). In other words, besides a visual image without

story, the *kyara* is part of the consumer strategy of the IP holders to attach as many possible consumers to their media mix as possible.

DYNAMIC GAME CHARACTERS IN A LUDO MIX

The Japanese video game industry is characterised by the media mix (Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015, 3). This industry is shaped on a local scale by marketing strategies, on a national scale by industrial transformations, and on a global scale by creative and technological developments (3). Picard calls the particular media ecology of Japanese games "*geemu*" (2013), as the Japanese video game industry operates "at the crossing of electronics, computer, amusement and content industries in Japan –and technological and artistic developments – from the hardware to the software" (2013). *Manga* or *anime* are usually the main media platforms for a media mix (Itō 2005; Lamarre 2009; 2018; Napier 2001; Steinberg 2012), but games increasingly occupy the focal point in the consumption of a media mix strategy as well. Although one of the best internationally known media mix examples would be the *Pokémon* franchise (Allison 2004; 2006), more recent examples include *Nier: Automata* (PlatinumGames 2017), *Persona 5* (P-Studio 2016), *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo 2020), *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (Square Enix 2020), and this article's case study: *Fire Emblem: Three Houses*, to name just a few.

A ludo mix presents its own challenges in consumer strategies: games tend to cause friction in trans- or cross-media strategies, disturbing the narrative coherency that transmedia storytelling strives for, as they structurally differ from non-ludic media (Aarseth 2006). This friction is usually dismissed by relegating games to peripheral, ancillary elements of, and gateways to, a transmedia storyworld (Aarseth 2006; Bateman 2014; Evans 2008; Harvey 2015; Wolf 2012). Yet, in a ludo mix, as games become the anchor on which the strategy operates, the

incoherency that games create, cannot be concealed. According to Aldred (2012), game characters especially tend to cause issues in movie-to-game cross-media transfers, because they have to act as the embodiment of players in the game world, while simultaneously they have to function as film characters transported to the game (91). She explains that the friction lies in the duality in which film characters are tied to the seemingly realistic representations of the actors playing them, whereas game characters primarily operate on their functionality in the game space (100). Although other scholars such as Thon and Schröter (Schröter and Thon 2014; Schröter 2016) describe game characters as more than just functions in game spaces, explaining the entities as intersubjective communication constructs to be experienced by players as fictional beings, game pieces, and representations of others respectively, Aldred (2012) points to the expectations and constraints movie-to-game characters are bound to as the representative of their filmic manifestations. The structural differences between games and non-ludic media force the movie-to-game character to be coherent with its filmic counterpart, rather than being a locus of agency and subjectivity for the player to experience the game world with (102).

It is within this friction between games and other, often non-ludic, media that the dynamic game character becomes relevant. In an earlier study, I explain (Blom 2020a) that dynamic game characters are a type of video game character with a development structure that branches into different outcomes. These outcomes are undetermined until the player actualises one or more possibilities that influence the direction of the development onto distinct branches with a specific outcome. The actualisation of these possibilities has structural consequences for how the player continues to traverse the game as they open up a certain path and thereby close off another path of that character's development (Blom 2020, 146). For example, choosing to destroy Maelon's data in *Mass Effect 2* (Bioware 2010) has major consequences for Eve in *Mass Effect 3* (Bioware 2012), who dies because there is not enough knowledge of her condition to save her. Had the

player chosen to keep Maelon's data, Eve would have survived. This means that the player has creative agency over the identity of that character, so that, as a result, different players can end up with vastly different versions of the same figure.

Given that characters are the devices through which media platforms and objects connect in media, it becomes relevant to perceive how the dynamic game character creates additional tension to the already existing friction between games and non-ludic media in trans- and cross-media strategies — such as the ludo mix.

SHAPING DESTINIES IN THREE HOUSES

Three Houses is the newest instalment of a long line of games within the *Fire Emblem* (FE) series. The player takes on the role of Byleth, a mercenary-turned-professor at Garreg Mach Monastery, the headquarters for the Church of Seiros and the Officer Academy. Although Byleth is the figure that the player directly controls, the player has, in fact, agency to influence a whole cast of different dynamic game characters. Each character has their own specific statistics, conditions, possibilities and limitations that the player influences throughout different segments of the game. This influence spans across the game's macrostructure (Backe 2012), the overarching narrative structure, and the game's microstructure containing different segments and events, including battle, cooking, dinner, support, or tea party segments contributing to the characters' development.

Agency in the overarching narrative

The game's macrostructure can be pictured as a four-branch narrative tree with four different main outcomes, depending on which house the player opts to be the leading professor. At the start of the game, the player chooses between three houses: the Blue Lions, Golden Deer or the Black Eagles, each represented by

its respective house leader, Dimitri, Claude, or Edelgard. This choice bears heavy structural consequences for how the player will traverse the game: each house will present the player with a different story route, and a different ending. As the leading professor of the Golden Deer house, the player will enter the upcoming war with Claude to open Fódlan to the outside world. Choosing Dimitri's house, the Blue Lions, leads the player on a route towards revenge, as Dimitri has sworn to kill Edelgard, the leader of the third house, the Black Eagles. Choosing the Black Eagles gives the player two possible routes: as this narrative branch unravels, the player can either choose to side with either Edelgard to create a unified Fódlan under the Empire's power, or they side with the Church of Seiros against the Empire. In short, because of this choice at the start of the game, the player can effectively experience the game's story from four different perspectives, all with different story outcomes, to experience the maximum of the game's content.

The choice for different narrative branches also bears structural consequences for the development of the characters. Each house has a group of students over which the player has a certain amount of influence, but that agency is limited to the house that is led by Byleth. For example, if Byleth leads Dimitri's house, the Blue Lions, the player is able to influence the Blue Lions students' development, which the player cannot do for students in the Golden Deer or Black Eagles house, unless they specifically recruit these other students. Recruiting characters from the other two houses can be quite important to the player, because being in the player's house ensures the students' survival in the upcoming war, a major plot point in the game's macrostructure. However, this recruitment depends on the combination of the (skill) statistics that the different students prefer, and Byleth's acquisition of those specific statistics. During my play of the Golden Deer route, I managed to recruit Felix, Sylvain and Dorothea, because my Byleth's statistics for her sword and magic skills were high enough, and the character was female (the condition to recruit Sylvain). However, especially in the first

playthrough, it is incredibly difficult to raise all Byleth's statistics, as the resources are scarce and increase only slowly throughout the overarching narrative story when Byleth's level also increases. As such, the player will be unable to recruit all available students in a single playthrough – with deadly consequences. For example, I tried to recruit Ferdinand from the Black Eagles house into the Golden Deer house, but due to my low dexterity and heavy armour skills I could not persuade him. Only death awaited him.

As such, the choice of house determines which narrative branch the player will unravel in the overarching narrative, and simultaneously affects the destinies of the dynamic game characters within each branch. This choice bears particularly heavy consequences for the house leaders, Dimitri, Claude and Edelgard, as – although Claude can survive the war in most narrative branches – Edelgard and Dimitri will always die outside of their own narrative branch. That said, the player does have the agency to influence these characters by recruiting them into their house so that their destiny in the overarching narrative would be different than if they had stayed in one of the other houses. However, the player's agency does not simply stop there, since, as I will explain in the next section, the player will be able to influence the students with greater granularity in the game's microstructure than the game's macrostructure can provide. In the microstructure the player obtains the creative agency to create and shape the relationships between the individual students and teachers to develop them as narrative entities and game pieces alike.

Dynamicity in the microstructure: romance and friendship

The dynamicity of the characters in this game's microstructure is mostly derived from the game's *system of affection,* a ludic process that lets the player facilitate relationships between game characters (Blom 2020, 197). Several games from the *FE* series make use of the system of affection, also known as a support system in these series. Games that use the system of affection

include *FE: Genealogy of the Holy War* (Intelligent Systems 1996)*, FE Awakening* (Intelligent Systems 2012)*,* and *FE Fates* (Intelligent Systems 2015). The latter two games, and *Three Houses,* have been using a so-called marriage system, brought over originally from *FE: Genealogy of the Holy War.*

As the player recruits different students in their house, the player obtains the possibility to create different connections between different students, and between Byleth and the students throughout multiple segments of the game. For example, during the exploration mode, the player has the possibility to dine with two different students that strengthen the connection between each student, and each student with Byleth. The students can also sing, cook, or have a tea party with Byleth. In the battle mode, the player has the possibility to position students who fight next to each other to strengthen their relationships. And, in the overarching narrative segments, the player will sometimes choose between two to three answers that can strengthen – and also weaken – the connection between Byleth and the other student or teacher. Although the player has many opportunities to facilitate these relationships, they can only facilitate these connections between a fixed set of characters: for some students the player is unable to create any kind of relationship at all, whereas for others, the player can only facilitate a certain kind of connection[3]. No matter how much I might wish it, the student Marianne will never have any kind of relationship with student Felix beyond what the

3. These limitations are specifically determined by the characters' gender. Byleth can obtain an 'S'rank with one individual out of all characters from the opposite gender, but only a limited amount out of the characters from the same gender. It is especially striking that a female Byleth can have a rank of 'S' with five female characters: Edelgard, Dorothea, Mercedes, Rhea, and Sothis, whereas a male Byleth can have an 'S' rank with Lindhardt, Jeritza, Gilbert, and Alois, of which the latter two are platonic relationships (Fandom n.d.; n.d.). This means that, despite the characters' dynamicity, this dynamicity is limited by the heteronormative standards the game maintains, and when it does allow queer relationships, it favours female-to-female relationships. This could suggest one of two things: either the game is more comfortable with the depiction of queerness between women, or the game caters to the male gaze that objectifies women's sexuality aimed towards heterosexual men.

overarching narrative dictates. Additionally, even if I were to try to facilitate a connection between her and the student Sylvain, this connection will not surpass rank 'B'.

The facilitation of relationships between characters rewards the player in two ways: first, the player obtains stronger game units in battle. When two or more characters with a relationship rank of 'C' or above are within three squares of each other, they receive bonuses in their statistics, making it easier to win from difficult enemies. Second, the player receives additional narrative content. This reward is particularly important, because the system of affection in *Three Houses* is ultimately a meaningful experience on the narrative side of the character. When the player puts in time and non-trivial effort to facilitate relationships between characters, they are rewarded with special conversations between the characters whose connection they strengthened, which can reveal additional information about these figures' backgrounds. For instance, the relationships between Byleth and Dimitri, Claude and Edelgard can only be strengthened if the player has chosen their respective house. When the player reaches rank C between Dimitri and Byleth, for example, they discover early in the game that Dimitri lost his parents at a young age – his mother due to illness, and his father and stepmother four years prior. They also learn that Dimitri was close to lord Rodrigue, the father of the student, Felix. If the player then also reaches rank 'C' between Dimitri and Felix, they learn that Felix hates Dimitri, considering him more a beast than a human, due to the Dimitri's ruthless slaughter of a rebellion two years prior.

The information that the player receives through these meaningful events in the game's microstructure provides them with *additive comprehension*. Additive comprehension is a term borrowed by Henry Jenkins from game designer, Neil Young (Jenkins 2006, 123). It can be described as a term that refers to the additional knowledge someone attains when they gain a piece of information that turns their perception of the situation around. Dimitri looks and acts like the prime example of a noble young heir to the

throne, but even before the player discovers the full extent of Dimitri's dark past through the game's overarching narrative structure, the system of affection's support scenes demonstrate Dimitri's bloodlust tendencies, showing that he is not who he initially appears to be. Later, when confronted with rampaging inhabitants of the village of Remire, the player can interpret Dimitri's painful reaction to the scene as bloodlust, rather than suddenly being ill or afraid of the sight – which is what the scene initially suggests. This interpretation was later confirmed by Dimitri himself when he apologized for his behaviour at that time. In other words, it is in the microstructure in which the system of affection is most prominently present that the player is able to delve deeper into the character's background stories and the (initial) nature of their connections to the other students. As the player facilitates and strengthens these relationships between the characters, the information that the player obtains gives them the possibility to interpret narrative segments from the game's macrostructure in a different light.

That said, it is not only additive comprehension that the player attains through facilitating these relationships. Additionally, the player can influence the individual endings that all (surviving) students will receive through the system of affection. The possible endings differ slightly, depending on which story route the player takes, but the biggest differences between the students depend on which partner the characters end up with. When the player manages to bring Dimitri and Byleth together – have them married, that is— Dimitri's individual ending will look as follows:

> Paired with the end of war, the joyous marriage of Byleth, the newly-appointed archbishop, and Dimitri, the newly-crowned king of Farghus, gave the people of Fódlan much to celebrate. The two were devoted to improving life for the people and to seeking greater wisdom in order to reform the government and the church from the inside out. As leaders of church and state respectively, at times they engaged in heated debate. Even still, when enjoying a long horse ride or a quiet evening, they were not as the world saw them, but

rather two adoring spouses, desperately in love. They remained as
such for the rest of their days. (Intelligent Systems 2019)

Most dynamic game characters in this game will have a similar
ending, provided they have a partner. If Dimitri ends up without
any partner, his ending describes his focus for making his
government more participative in his reign, listening to all kinds
of voices, which grants him the title of Savior King.

All in all, it can be said that the granularity to which *Three
Houses* lets the player influence these dynamic game characters
primarily operates on the system of affection. This system makes
the game characters become dynamic, and as such, enables the
player to create meaningful experiences that they can enjoy as
they influence relationships between characters, based on their
own personal preferences and limitations of the game.

CHARACTERS IN THREE HOUSES' LUDO MIX

At the time of writing, Nintendo, the IP owner, does not seem to
have granted a copyright license to have *Three Houses* adapted
into a *manga* or an *anime*. This does not mean that the characters
do not make any appearance outside of the main game at all. As
character proliferation is the main aspect for media and ludo mix
strategies, the *Three Houses'* ludo mix has its characters appear in
the mobile phone game *Fire Emblem: Heroes* (*Heroes*) and in
Super Smash Bros Ultimate (*SSBU*), both on the Nintendo Switch
and intellectual property of the Nintendo company. Since both of
these platforms are ludic media, which means they have the
structure to uphold dynamic game characters, it is relevant to see
how a ludo mix strategy consisting of primarily games engages
with the tension that dynamic game characters bring to the
different ludic works.

Fire Emblem: Heroes

Heroes is a free-to-play game, available to any player as long as they have access to the internet on their smartphone. The game consists of six different battle modes, of which I will focus on the so-called 'Story Maps' that contain the narrative structure. This story mode includes a 'main story', 'paralogues' and three other 'maps' in which the player can refresh the rules of the battles, or obtain additional skills for the fighters. The main story is currently divided into four different books consisting of different chapters. In each chapter, the player is presented with a map, the game's battle segments, in which they must defeat the opponents to progress to another chapter. The game's story is told through cut-scenes appearing before and after the map. It follows the adventures of Alfonse and his sister Elena, the prince and princess of Askr Kingdom, and the player who dons the role of the summoner able to transport *FE* heroes from other worlds into Askr Kingdom. Technically, the player can completely ignore the story mode and its paralogues, and still play the other battle modes just fine, but it is beneficial to go through the different chapters, as it will reward the player with new heroes that the player can use for the battle segments.

The summoning of different heroes is one of the main features of the game. These characters can be obtained with the in-game currency of orbs that the player obtains by logging in, participating in special events, or clearing battle maps, among others. The player spends these orbs through a mechanic adapted from *gachapon*[4] machines, vending machines with capsule toys found in Japan, that the player of *Heroes* uses to exchange four to five orbs per round to receive a single random hero. The chances of summoning a five-star hero, the highest rated heroes with the best abilities and statistics, are very low; so low that Nintendo often creates special events to allow players to obtain these kinds

4. *Gachapon* are vending machines in Japan, dispensing capsule toys. By throwing in a certain amount of money (usually between 100 – 500 yen), consumers can obtain a random mini-figurine from a determined set of figurines.

of heroes through different means other than pure luck. One of the opportunities to receive a *Three Houses'* character was that players who used the same Nintendo account for their copy of *Three Heroes* on the Switch, and for their copy of *FE: Heroes,* could receive the male version of Byleth. The female Byleth on the other hand, can still only be received through the *gachapon* mechanic, and has therefore been much harder to obtain. What the statistics of the characters suggests is that these characters are game pieces to be possessed and used, rather than characters with their own story development.

The treatment continues throughout the entire game. The heroes lack the distinctive impression of being a character, functioning instead as *kyara* more than as *dramatis personae.* The characterization of the heroes happens through beautiful visual images and voice lines. The characters are drawn by different artists, with each character unit containing four different images: a 'normal' image, an 'attack' image, a 'special' image, and a 'damage' image. Each character also has several voice lines they utter when the player taps on them in the character screen, during battle, or when the character is summoned. For example, one of Byleth's voice lines is: "My heartbeat is…not what you expected it to be", which does not exactly give away what is so unexpected about their heart beat, but a player familiar with the source work, *Three Houses,* will know it refers to Byleth's lack of heartbeat. Yet, their 'character-ness' does not extend beyond the visual and audible representation, that is, beyond the *kyara.* They might look and sound like characters, but unlike the story-driven *dramatis personae* from *Three Houses*, these heroes lack the story to turn them into *dramatis personae*. In this game, the heroes function only as game pieces, and are just as replaceable as the player's pieces in a game of chess. All their visual images and voice lines do is refer to the characters' source works, from which they borrow their sense of 'character-ness', and even then, only on the condition that the player is familiar with that source work. In short, these heroes function as *kyara* because they completely depend on the intertextual support from their source works to give

some impression that they are a character, but aside from that, they lack any story in *Heroes* itself to give that impression.

On top of that, despite the game having a story mode, the narrative structure can be entirely ignored as the game focuses on the heroes primarily as game pieces whose abilities and statistics are of importance to the battle segments. The number of stars they have and their statistics and abilities are aspects of the character that the game constantly asks the player to strengthen and level up by giving them not only orbs, but also feathers, and the skill points they obtain by completing battle segments. These statistics only matter for the battle modes, and add almost nothing to the game's story mode. Even so, in the battle mode of the story, the battle's mechanics is extremely minimized in comparison to the battle mode in *Three Houses*. In *Three Houses* the battle mode matters for the improvement of the characters' relationships, as the characters' positions next to each other raises their affection. In *Heroes* the battle mode matters not because there is no system of affection; all the heroes' position on the battlefield determines is how high their statistics are, to increase the chances of defeating the opponent. The only aspects that the player hears or sees to give the heroes an impression of 'character-ness' is the hero's visual representation and voice lines when they use the unit. Yet, the same line is repeated so often that it can become annoying to the player. I took the hero, Shigure, out of my team, simply because I could not stand to hear the line: "I am Shigure!", one more time.

The emphasis on the hero as a game piece is also clear in the main story mode. In this mode, regardless of the heroes the player chooses for their battalion, the characters in the story mode ignore the heroes' appearances, and only acknowledge the characters that have been scripted to be in a particular battle segment, that are usually, if not most of the time, the opponents. Additionally, if the player places the character on their team that is also on the opposite team, the game ignores it. Two or even three characters can exist in the same battle at the same time, and it will not make

a difference to the story. The player can even have the same character twice or more in their database of heroes, with the only difference being the star rate and therefore different skills and statistics. In other words, as far as their 'character-ness' goes, it does not go beyond the heroes' visual images and their voice lines, which refer to the source work they appear in. This is quite convenient since it means that Byleth's dynamicity from *Three Houses* does not clash with any story that *Heroes* might depict. Rather, as Byleth is without story in *Heroes,* only existing as a character on the level of intertextual references to its source work, the game avoids any friction in Byleth's character coherence. Byleth's function as a *kyara* in *Heroes* makes it so that there is no tension in character coherence between *Heroes* and *Three Houses,* because *Heroes* does not present a story to clash with.

Super Smash Bros. Ultimate

Besides his/her appearance in *Heroes,* Byleth is also available as downloadable content (DLC) in *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (*SSBU*), a crossover fighting game for the Nintendo Switch. When the player buys this DLC, Byleth joins the 63 other characters as a playable fighter whom the player(s) can choose to use to fight battles in the multi-player and single-player modes of the game. Other characters, such as Claude, Edelgard, or Dimitri only appear in the background environment that comes with the DLC, but cannot be engaged with otherwise.

Characters play a large role in the fighting game genre. According to Hutchinson (2019), unlike role-playing games or action-adventure games, characterization of the figures occurs primarily in the game's peripherals, since the fighting game genre does not contain hours upon hours of linear gameplay to flesh the characters' backgrounds (Hutchinson, 2019, 71). Instead, the characters' backgrounds and relationships are told through peripheral segments such as the game environment associated with the figure, the opening cinematics, cut-scenes between fights, and the voice lines they utter before or after the fighting

segments (Hutchinson, 2019, 73). "All these pieces of story and characterization act like a puzzle, which players must piece together in their minds as they play through the game" (Hutchinson, 2019, 73).

One of the most important aspects to the fighters in the fighting game genre are the moves of the character. Hutchinson (2019, 73) points out that characterization partially happens through players becoming familiar with the fighters' move-sets. In *Three Houses*, the player controls Byleth's fighting moves only through indirect control due to the game's turn-based battle system; on the battlefield it is just a matter of giving the character the order to fight, and Byleth will act on that order. In contrast, in *SSBU* the players' direct control over Byleth lets them experience the character in a more physical way. The character's fighting moves from *Three Houses* are translated into moves that the player directly controls in *SSBU*. As a result, the character can be characterized differently in one game than another. For example, to my surprise, Byleth moved slower in *SSBU* than in *Three Houses,* because I had always thought of the figure as a rather fast and light fighter. Instead, Byleth's heavy movements changed my impression of him/her, piecing together a different part of the puzzle that makes up Byleth in *SBBU.*

That said, although the game attempts to characterize Byleth through the aforementioned peripheral segments commonly used in fighting games, as a *cross-over* fighting game, it ultimately emphasis the character's intertextual appearances, recontextualizing the figure as a *kyara* in a fighting game. Just like *Heroes*, the game rewards the player by recognizing the intertextual references, which players unfamiliar with *Three Houses* might not understand. The example I use here is Byleth's 'Final Smash' move. Each *SSBU* fighter has a 'Final Smash*'*, an all-out attack so powerful that it usually knocks an opponent out of the fighting stage. They can only use it occasionally. During the release of Byleth's Final Smash, the goddess, Sothis, appears, while at the same time, Byleth's visual appearance briefly

changes to his/her god-form. The story behind this reference is utterly lacking, as nothing in *SSBU* even attempts to explain why Byleth has this move, why there is suddenly another character present, or why Byleth's appearance changes. In *Three Houses*, however, all these aspects are explained, as *Three Houses* reveals in any story route that Byleth is the reincarnation of the goddess Sothis, and eventually merges with the goddess to gain their ultimate power. A player unfamiliar with *Three Houses* will not understand the intertextual reference, which is a significant factor of Byleth being a *dramatis persona*, whereas, a player familiar with that game can interpret Byleth's 'Final Smash' as the figure tapping into his/her true potential, knowing the story behind the transformation. In short, just as in *Heroes*, the story of Byleth remains in the character's source work, with *SSBU* just relying on that story while offering no story in the game itself.

As such, even in this game, Byleth does not escape its fate as a *kyara*, and operates primarily as a game piece without a story. The game relies on Byleth's manifestation as a *dramatis persona* in *Three Houses* to give a sense of 'character-ness', but does not give Byleth a story that could potentially clash with the character's source work. Instead, by characterizing Byleth only through its visual depiction and moveset, which intertextually depends on Byleth's source work, *SSBU* stays neatly within the lines of *Three Houses'* characterization of the figure. As a result, Nintendo avoids any conflict between Byleth's different manifestations within *Three Houses'* four story branches, and Byleth's manifestation in *SSBU*.

TENSION IN THREE HOUSES' LUDO MIX?

Out of the three games discussed, only *Three Houses* presents its characters as dynamic, enabling the player to influence the outcomes, fates and different nuances. Both *Heroes* and *SSBU* portray Byleth primarily on the level of the *kyara* in which his/her visual image from the source work is used to recontextualize the

character in a different setting, whose role is then adjusted accordingly to fit the mechanics of the game. On top of that, the system of affection is nowhere to be found in both *Heroes* and *SSBU*. Rather, both games present the character more akin game pieces than a *dramatis persona* with a story.

To come to my conclusion on how dynamic game characters cause friction in a ludo mix, I would like to return to Wilde's (2019) and Nakamura and Tosca's explanation (2019) on the *kyara*. As stated before, Wilde describes the *kyara*'s existence as a theoretical concept grounded in the overabundance of incoherent information to explain the entity as coherent (6) – as is often the case for the Western understanding of characters (Blom 2020). Nakamura and Tosca explain the *kyara* as touchpoints for newcomers to the IP's products. What I demonstrated through my analysis of Byleth's appearance in *Three Houses, Heroes,* and *SSBU,* is, however, that the *kyara* is not only an explanation for the overabundance of incoherent information, nor simply a touchpoint, but it is also used by IP owners to strategically avoid clashes in character coherence – in particular, that of the dynamic game character. The four different story routes of *Three Heroes'* overarching narrative, and the system of affection on the microstructure of the game gives the player agency to such granular detail over the dynamic game characters, that any transfer to another medium not only clashes with the player's own agency, but also with the macrostructure of the game's narrative. The *Persona 5* ludo mix strategy showed that the IP owner, Atlus, has no issues ignoring the player's agency in their official *manga* and *anime* adaptations, but in the case of *Three Houses*, the four different story routes pose another problem: which story route should the IP owner adapt? Adapting any story route to a *manga* or *anime* would mean that Nintendo risks rejecting the narrative structure they created, casting off three narrative branches while giving significant weight to the other branch. This would also mean that one of the three house leaders, Claude, Edelgard or Dimitri would be presented as bearing more significance than the others. This is a risk that Nintendo might not want to take and

could be a reason why *Three Houses'* story may never be adapted into an official *manga* or *anime.*

It should be noted, however, that *Three Houses* is not a ludo mix completely separate from the previous *FE* ludo mixes, especially the ludo mix of *Heroes. Heroes* has an official – but peripheral — *manga* series called "Fire Emblem Heroes – a Day in the Life" (Intelligent Systems 2017) available online in a selection of languages such as English and Japanese, and updated with a new page every fortnight. The format of this manga is the *yonkoma,* four-panel comics meant to provoke laughter. Each page contains a what-if story written by different artists about the characters that appear in *Heroes.* Since *Heroes* operates on summoning characters from previous games, this means that the *yonkoma* has a rich cast of *kyara* that they could recontextualize in this short-story format. It provides the opportunity to show how characters, which usually do not appear in the same game, meet and interact with each other through comical what-if situations, or they are used to make fun of *Heroes'* mechanics. For instance, Byleth appears as two separate characters, just as in the game, *Heroes.* For example, the *yonkoma* 'Eat Up!' shows both male and female Byleth in one panel, showing no problem at all that this is technically not possible in *Three Houses.* Yet, this is entirely appropriate, due to the *yonkoma* format of this *manga,* which is not meant to be taken as the actual story of *Three Houses,* but rather as *omake*[5], little extra stories that stand apart from the main narrative of any storytelling medium. These comics stand completely separate from *Heroes,* and are not meant to be interpreted as a continuation of any story.

A similar strategy occurs with *Three Houses, Heroes,* and *SSBU.* As demonstrated, neither *SSBU* nor *Heroes* clash with the dynamicity of the *Three Houses* characters. Both games

5. *Omake* are quite common in Japanese popular culture. In anime or manga series *omake* often manifest as short comedy sketches at the end of an episode or volume that depicts characters breaking the fourth wall by talking to the audience, or otherwise being in comical situations, in general.

completely ignore the dynamicity of *Three Houses* by not adding any story to the characters. The appearances of the characters in *SSBU* and *Heroes* remain on the level of the visual surface; they function as *kyara*, recontextualized in the context of those two games, whose characterization depends on the player's recognition of the intertextual references to the source work, *Three Houses*. Therefore, the *kyara* shows to be an excellent means to avoid a clash between the dynamic game character in one work and its appearance in another work. It gives the impression that the player's agency is still intact within the source work, and lets Nintendo off the hook of the problem of how to transfer the four-forked narrative to adapt to a non-ludic medium that is not meant to make light of or ridicule the intense and serious story that *Three Houses* presents. Of course, only time will tell if Nintendo will actually adapt *Three Houses'* story into a *manga* or *anime*, but if I were to bet money on it, I'd bet against it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aarseth, Espen. 2006. "The Culture and Business of Cross-Media Productions." *Popular Communication* 4 (3): 203–11.

Aldred, Jessica. 2012. "A Question of Character: Transmediation, Abstraction, and Identification in Early Games Licensed from Movies." In *Before the Crash: Early Video Game History*, edited by Mark Wolf J.P., 90–104. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Allison, Anne. 2004. "Cuteness as Japan's Millennial Product." In *Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokemon*, edited by Joseph Tobin, 34–49. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

———. 2006. *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination.* Durham, N.C.: University of California Press.

Azuma, Hiroki. 2007. *Gēmuteki Riarizumu No Tanjō: Dōbutsuka Suru Posutomodan 2*. Tokyo, Japan: Kōdansha.

———. (2001) 2009. *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*. Translated by Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono. Minneapolis/ London: University of Minnesota Press.

Backe, Hans-Joachim. 2012. "Narrative Rules? Story Logic and the Structures of Games." *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 27 (3): 243–60.

Bandai Namco Studios. *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate.* Nintendo Switch. Nintendo, Kyoto, Japan, 2018. Played January 2019.

Bateman, Chris. 2014. "What Are We Playing With? Role-Taking, Role-Play, and Story-Play with Tolkien's Legendarium." *International Journal of Play*, May, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/ 21594937.2013.877639.

Bioware. *Mass Effect 2.* PC. Electronic Arts, California, 2010. Played April 2018.

———. *Mass Effect 3.* PC. Electronic Arts, California, 2012. Played May 2018.

Blom, Joleen. 2020a. "The Dynamic Game Character: Definition, Construction, and Challenges in a Character Ecology." Ph.D. dissertation, Copenhagen: IT University of Copenhagen.

———. 2020b. "The manifestations of game characters in a media mix strategy." In *Comics and Videogames: From Hybrid Medialities To Transmedia Expansions*, edited by Andreas Rauscher, Daniel Stein, and Jan-Noël Thon, 1st edition. Routledge Advances in Game Studies. Oxford and New York: Routledge.

Dena, Christy. 2009. "Transmedia Practice: Theorising the Practice of Expressing a Fictional World across Distinct Media and Environments." Ph.D. dissertation, Sydney: University of Sydney.

Evans, Elizabeth. 2008. "Character, Audience Agency and Trans-Media Drama." *Media, Culture and Society* 30 (1).

Fandom. n.d. "Byleth/Female Supports." Wiki. Fire Emblem Wiki. Accessed July 1, 2020a. https://fireemblem.fandom.com/wiki/Byleth/Female_Supports.

———. n.d. "Byleth/Male Supports." Wiki. Fire Emblem Wiki. Accessed July 1, 2020b. https://fireemblem.fandom.com/wiki/Byleth/Male_Supports.

Game Freak. *Pokémon Sword and Shield.* Nintendo Switch. Nintendo, Kyoto, Japan, 2019. Played December 2019.

Harvey, Colin, B. 2015. *Fantastic Transmedia: Narrative, Play and Memory Across Science Fiction and Fantasy Storyworlds.* London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Hutchinson, Rachael. 2019. *Japanese Culture through Videogames.* Routledge Contemporary Japan Series. London and New York: Routledge.

Intelligent Systems. *Fire Emblem: Genealogy of the Holy War.* Super Famicom. Nintendo, Kyoto, Japan, 1996.

———. *Fire Emblem Awakening*. Nintendo 3DS. Nintendo, Kyoto, Japan, 2012. Played May 2013.

———. *Fire Emblem Fates.* Nintendo 3DS. Nintendo, Kyoto, Japan, 2015. Played June 2016.

———. *Fire Emblem Heroes*. Smartphone. Nintendo, Kyoto, Japan. 2017. Played May – June 2020.

———. 2017. "Fire Emblem Heroes – a Day in the Life." Comic. 2017. https://fire-emblem-heroes.com/en/manga/.

———. *Fire Emblem: Three Houses.* Nintendo Switch. Nintendo, Kyoto, Japan, 2019. Played August 2019 – June 2020.

Itō, Gō. 2005. *Tetsuka Izu Deddo*. Tokyo: Seikaisha Shinsho.

Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.

———. 2007. "Transmedia Storytelling 101." *Confessions of an Aca-Fan* (blog). March 22, 2007. http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html.

Klastrup, Lisbeth, and Susana Tosca. 2004. "Transmedial Worlds – Rethinking Cyberworld Design." In *Proceedings of the 2004 International Conference on Cyberworlds*. Tokyo, Japan: IEEE Computer Society Washington. http://www.cs.uu.nl/docs/vakken/vw/literature/04.klastruptosca_transworlds.pdf.

Lamarre, Thomas. 2009. *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

———. 2018. *Anime Technology*. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press.

Nakamura, Akinori, and Susana Tosca. 2019. "The Mobile Suit Gundam Franchise: A Case Study of Transmedia Storytelling Practices and the Role of Digital Games in Japan." Presentation presented at the DiGRA 2019, Kyoto, Japan, August 7. http://www.digra2019.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/DiGRA2019booklet.pdf.

Napier, Susan J. 2001. *Anime from Akira to Princess Monoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Nintendo. *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Nintendo Switch. Nintendo, Tokyo, Japan, 2020. Played March – August 2020.

Ōtsuka, Eiji. 1989. *Monogatari Shouhiron*. Tokyo: Asuki Shinsho.

———. (1989) 2010. "World and Variation: The Reproduction and Consumption of Narrative." Translated by Marc Steinberg. *Mechademia: Fanthropologies* 5: 99–118.

Picard, Martin. 2013. "The Foundation of Geemu: A Brief History of Early Japanese Video Games." *Game Studies* 13 (2). http://gamestudies.org/1302/articles/picard.

Picard, Martin, and Jeremie Pelletier-Gagnon. 2015. "Introduction: Geemu, Media Mix, and the State of Japanese Video Game Studies." *Kinephanos Journal of Media Studies and Popular Culture* 5 (December): 1–19.

PlatinumGames. *Nier: Automata.* Playstation 4/Microsoft Windows. Square Enix, Tokyo, Japan, 2017. Played May 2019.

P-Studio. *Persona 5*. Playstation 4. Atlus, Tokyo, Japan, 2016. Played December 2016 – August 2017.

Schröter, Felix. 2016. "My Avatar and Me: Toward a Cognitive Theory of Video Game Characters." In *Video Games and the Mind: Essays on Cognition, Affect and Emotion*, edited by Bernard Perron and Felix Schröter, 32–52. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.

Schröter, Felix, and Jan-Noël Thon. 2014. "Video Game Characters: Theory and Analysis." *Diegesis* 3 (1): 40–77.

Steinberg, Marc. 2012. *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Square Enix. *Final Fantasy VII Remake.* Playstation 4. Square Enix, Tokyo, Japan, 2020. Played April 2020.

Wilde, Lukas R.A. 2019. "Recontextualizing Characters. Media Convergence and Pre-/Meta-Narrative Character Circulation." *Image*, Recontextualizing Characters, no. 29 (January): 3–21.

Wolf, Mark, J.P. 2012. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.

The Musical Ludo Mix of Taiko no Tatsujin

Costantino Oliva

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the *Taiko no Tatsujin* (Bandai Namco 2001/ 2018) franchise and the musical literacy it conveys. While previous accounts of game musical literacy have focused on the competence necessary to interpret references across media (van Elferen 2016), this paper expands on the concept, and includes the discussion of live performances and oral traditions.

The musical compositions included in *Taiko no Tatsujin* pertain to the Japanese phenomenon of media convergence known as media mix (Steinberg 2012), as they have been previously popularized by anime and *geemu ongaku* (or game music) (Yamakami and Barbosa 2015). However, the musical participation initiated extends its references to the practice of Japanese *taiko* drumming, a largely oral, non-notated musical form, which cannot be reduced

to a musical repertoire. The resulting, emerging ludo mix, a form of media mix centered around digital games (Blom 2019; Bjarnason 2019; Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015; Steinberg 2015), presents original musical characteristics, representing and synthesizing a dynamic musical culture.

The conclusions show that game musical literacy is based, not only on competence with previous media forms, but also with various different forms of participation in musical performances, or musicking (Small 1998), which concur in constructing game musical literacy. The musical side of the ludo mix can therefore be expressed through a large variety of musical practices.

Keywords

Music, *Taiko no Tatsujin*, media mix, ludo mix, musicking

INTRODUCTION

Few games have captured the collective imagination about the Japanese arcade scene like the *Taiko no Tatsujin* franchise. With more than 50 entries, the series has been deployed on platforms such as PS4, Nintendo Switch, PS Vita, Nintendo Wii, Android mobiles and more. Arguably, the most recognizable version of *Taiko no Tatsujin* remains however its arcade iteration, which features two large drum-shaped input devices. Proportionately large mallets are available to the player, immediately suggesting the option that the drums can be hit hard (Figure 1).

Figure 1: YouTuber, Mikupi, playing an arcade cabinet of Taiko no Tatsujin. Still frame from the YouTube video, "Got more raves?"

The color, shape and general look of the input devices mimic that of a traditional Japanese *taiko*. The musical compositions included in the game, however, seem to be less based in the actual taiko tradition. In fact, they might be more familiar to fans of digital games, J-pop, or anime. The first game in the series, simply called *Taiko no Tatsujin* (Namco, 2001), features theme songs related to popular manga and anime characters, such as *Doraemon* and *Ampanman*; tracks from other Namco game franchises; and original compositions in diverse genres, from ska to heavy metal. In that regard, *Taiko no Tatsujin* can be considered as an example of the "ludo mix", "a convergence of products organized around one (or several) central games" (Chiapello 2019). The ludo mix is understood as a game-oriented perspective on the "media mix", or "the practice of marketing interconnected works for different media (manga, anime, movies, etc.) and tie-in products" (Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015) within the context of the Japanese media entertainment industry. While the media mix commonly includes digital games, the concept of ludo mix recognizes that "games increasingly occupy the focal point in the consumption model of the media mix" (Blom 2019). *Taiko no Tatsujin*, however,

does not just take part in the media mix by featuring popular characters from anime, but also by including a musical repertoire associated with, and popularized within, the media mix. In that regard, *Taiko no Tatsujin* heavily relies on the "musical media literacy" of its player, intended as "the fluency in hearing and interpreting film, television or advertising music through the fact of our frequent exposure to them and, subsequently, our ability to interpret their communications" (van Elferen 2016).

The anime songs included in the digital game provide a cultural context situated within the media mix, generating novel ludo mix dynamics, initiating a specific cultural discourse with potential players. This musical context and repertoire would not generally be associated with the tradition of taiko drumming. In fact, this broad class of Japanese percussion instruments is definitely not primarily used in musical compositions pertaining to the above-mentioned genres and contexts. In that regard, *Taiko no Tatsujin* shows a crucial difference with comparable, music-oriented digital games, such as *Guitar Hero* (Harmonix 2005) or *Rock Band (Harmonix 2007)*. The similarities between these games are primarily found in the game mechanics, which, at least on a basic level, require the players to correctly "hit" a pattern of notes in time with popular songs. However, both *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* feature musical compositions that are archetypical of the musical practices represented; as such, these digital games consistently aim to be legitimately positioned within a musical discourse, largely situated within the "rock" musical genre. *Taiko no Tatsujin*, instead, takes a more ironic, surreal approach, juxtaposing the relatively traditional practices of taiko drumming with musical compositions largely situated within the modern cultural sphere of the media mix.

Therefore, on one hand *Taiko no Tatsujin* entails the musical media literacy of its players, referencing previously available compositions situated in the media mix; on the other hand, a different kind of literacy is involved, situated outside of media literacy and within the cultural practices of taiko performances.

How is it possible to describe the overall musical literacy conveyed by *Taiko no Tatsujin*? To answer this question, this paper will expand the context of musical literacy in digital games, going beyond media analysis, to include other forms of musical participation not based on media forms. In doing so, I argue that the musicological contextualization of digital games cannot be solely situated within a given mediascape (be it the Japanese one or otherwise), but rather can benefit from taking into account a diverse range of cultural practices. The musicological theoretical tools deployed in this paper will reflect this scope, referring to the concept of musicking introduced by New Zealand musicologist Christopher Small (1998). Small considers "music" not as a noun, but as a verb: "to music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing" (1998, 9).

Small specifies that this list of music is not finite, and does not exclude other possible musickings:

> The verb to music is […] descriptive, not prescriptive. It covers all participations in a musical performance, whether it takes place actively or passively, whether we like the way it happens or whether we do not, whether we consider it interesting or boring, constructive or destructive, sympathetic or antipathetic (1998, 9).

In this regard, this paper identifies the musicking enabled by *Taiko no Tatsujin*, and the complex web of musical meanings referenced by it.

GEEMU ONGAKU FROM MEDIA MIX TO LUDO MIX

In this section, I will introduce the concepts of media mix, ludo mix and *geemu ongaku* (or videogame music), positioning *Taiko no Tatsujin* within this specific cultural context.

The term media mix was originally intended, within the Japanese mediascape, as a marketing strategy that targets different advertising media in an organic, comprehensive fashion. This understanding of media mix was formalized in 1963 by the ad journal *Senden Kaigi* (Advertising Meeting) (Steinberg 2012, 139). However, as mentioned, "media mix" now identifies a phenomenon of convergence between different media, in which given intellectual properties are spread across a number of different outlets such as manga, anime, toys and more. While the compatible idea of media convergence has already been described by Jenkins (2006), mostly in relation to the North American mediascape, Steinberg argues that the media mix phenomenon has, instead, a specific history situated in Japan, and is primarily centered on anime.

> The emergence of Japanese television animation, or *anime*, in the 1960s as a system of interconnected media and commodity forms was […] a major turning point and inspiration for […] the media mix (2012, viii).

While synergy across media is an international phenomenon, Ito draws distinctions between the Japanese media mix and the US mediascape:

> Unlike with US origin media, which tends to be dominated by home based media such as the home entertainment center and the PC Internet, Japanese media mixes tend to have a stronger presence in portable media formats such as Game Boys, mobile phones, trading cards and character merchandise that make the imagination manifest in diverse contexts and locations outside of the home (2010, 86).

Digital games are increasingly involved in the media mix, often taking a central role. Research has considered this relatively new phenomenon and its significance, identifying game-centered forms of media mix, sometimes called either "ludo mix" (Blom 2019; Bjarnason 2019; Chiapello 2019), "gameic media mix" (Steinberg 2015) or "geemu media mix" (Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015), which I will refer to as ludo mix. These compatible definitions

considered games as "central to the conceptualization and deployment of the media mix" (Steinberg 2015, 52). As noted by Steinberg (2012, 177-182; 2015), the ludo mix as a crossmedia marketing strategy has been pioneered by the Kadokawa Corporation with the *Madara* franchise, which includes digital games, manga and anime. *Madara* began in 1987 "not as a game, but rather as a manga that mimicked the properties and rules of a role-playing game" (Steinberg 2015, 45), banking on the coeval popularity of the RPG genre. Kadokawa would subsequently produce interconnected *Madara* media products, adopting a style of media mix where games exert a fundamental structuring role. More recently, Kadokawa produced the franchise *.hack,* "a multimedia series whose media instances [feature] manga, anime, Playstation 2 (PS2) console game" (Lamarre 2018, 289). *.hack* represents a mature example of ludo mix: Kadokawa has in fact carefully planned the release of its different iterations, "releasing the *.hack* manga in a Kadokawa magazine and broadcasting the anime series just before launching the first game" (Lamarre 2018, 293). Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon also focused on a game-centered media mix, introducing the concept of "geemu media mix", aiming to analyze Japanese digital games (or *geemu,* in Japanese) in the media mix: "understanding the different articulations of the geemu media mix allows to better identify the development, marketing and consumption practices of video games in Japan" (Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015). Given these examples, the ludo mix can be considered as an established phenomenon within the Japanese mediascape.

The role of digital game music has also been specifically analyzed in relation to the media mix. In their analysis of geemu ongaku, Yamakami and Barbosa identify in the 1980s the "golden age" of Japanese videogame music (2015). The authors primarily understand as geemu ongaku musical compositions originally composed for digital games. While they consider it difficult to formally define geemu ongaku as a consistent genre according to its intrinsic musical characteristics, they argue that, at least commercially, it can be considered as such, noting that by the end

of the 1990s, over 350 CDs of "game music" were available on the Japanese market. Fritsch also documented the popularity of these releases (2016).

Specific magazines have also been instrumental in the development of geemu ongaku culture. *Beep*, founded in 1984 by Softbank, included not only "sonosheets"[1] of game music, but also criticism and analysis of music or sound design, basic courses in acoustics, interviews with composers, and introductory guides to direct audio recording of video games in arcade centers (Yamakami and Barbosa 2015, 145). Geemu ongaku culture, however, does not appear solely in media forms such as music CDs, digital games, or magazines: the geemu ongaku repertoire is also performed during live concerts, which features diverse ensembles ranging from small bands to large symphonic orchestras. Live geemu ongaku concerts also facilitated the emergence of "sound teams": musical groups like Zuntata, Kukeiha Club, or Sega Sound Team Band (Figure 2). Teams, formerly hidden behind a game title or company name, came under the spotlight as true "musicians" and artists. The sound part of their games was recognized as a musical "work", and since that time, any new release, for many admirers, meant the creation of a new piece by their favorite musician (Yamakami and Barbosa 2015, 147).

1. Probably best known by Western audiences as "flexi discs", it is a phonograph record made of a thin, flexible vinyl sheet, compatible with regular turntables.

Figure 2: Members of the Sega Sound Team Band performing live. Still frame from Game Music Festival Live '90: Zuntata Vs. S.S.T. Band (1990). https://youtu.be/R_OPK0FBL8k

Taiko no Tatsujin participates in remediating geemu ongaku, since it features musical compositions from prominent digital game franchises. Starting from its 8th arcade version, *Taiko no Tatsujin 8* (Bandai Namco 2006), geemu ongaku was featured as a distinct musical genre with its own dedicated playlist, alongside J-pop hits, anime songs, and other genres. A total of 12 geemu ongaku songs were included; tracks ranged from classic, easily recognizable tunes like the *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo 1985) and *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo 1986) respective main themes, to songs from the Bandai Namco franchises *Tekken* (Namco 1994) and *Soulcalibur* (Project Soul 1998). Also notable is the inclusion of the main theme of *Darius* (Taito 1989), a classic shoot 'em up arcade game. The remediation of geemu ongaku tracks in *Taiko no Tatsujin* also happens through collaboration and exchanges with other popular rhythm and music games. An example of this is the annual live event *Tenkaichi Otogesai*[2] (literally "The Universe's Greatest Rhythm Game Festival"), which started in 2014 and

---

2. http://www1.otogesai.jp

features a rotating cast of arcade rhythm games by Sega, Taito, Konami and Namco (Figure 3), including *Taiko no Tatsujin*. The event is a unique combination of a gaming tournament and musical happening, and routinely sees tracks made popular by one game being featured in the other, celebrating geemu ongaku across different music games. For example, the track *Got more raves?*, made popular by the Taito rhythm game franchise *Groove Coaster* (Matrix Software 2011/2019), was included in *Taiko no Tatsujin* starting in 2015 as part of a ludo mix promotional strategy connected with *Tenkaichi Otogesai*. The track was composed and arranged by Koshio Irozaka, a former Zuntata team member, strengthening the connection of the featured games with geemu ongaku culture.

Figure 3: Players line up on stage at Tenkaichi Otogesai 2019, held at Makuhari Messe, Tokyo. https://twitter.com/AOU_Tenkatui/status/1089033903891931136/photo/1

However, *Taiko no Tatsujin* does not just remediate previously available geemu ongaku compositions, but also contributes to the genre's repertoire. In fact, the game regularly features several original compositions that should arguably be considered as part of geemu ongaku. These original tracks are grouped in the game song list under the moniker of "Namco Originals", and are specifically composed for *Taiko no Tatsujin*. Compatibly with what has been

described by Yamakami and Barbosa with regards to other geemu ongaku tracks, the Namco Originals are introduced in a given digital game and subsequently remediated in different ways. For example, the audio CD *Taiko no Tatsujin OST – Katanuki* (2018) is a compilation consisting entirely of recent Namco Originals tracks. This latter audio CD is one of the many available records dedicated to *Taiko no Tatsujin*: these releases usually feature a mix of different genres, juxtaposing, for instance, anime songs and J-pop. The *Katanuki* compilation can therefore be considered as a testament to the popularity of Namco Originals within geemu ongaku culture, proving *Taiko no Tatsujin's* contribution to the genre's repertoire.

Taiko no Tatsujin is therefore embedded both in the media mix and in geemu ongaku culture, structuring a unique example of musically-oriented ludo mix. As illustrated, a variety of different forms of musical participation, or musickings, are practiced within this specific musical culture. Even a brief overview reveals that the different musickings performed by geemu ongaku participants range from playing given digital games, to purchasing geemu ongaku CDs, to buying dedicated magazines, and more.

GAME MUSICAL LITERACY IN THE LUDO MIX

The musical culture described by Yamakami and Barbosa documents the peculiarity of the musical literacy shared by geemu ongaku listeners. While I have previously introduced the different ways in which *Taiko no Tatsujin* engages with geemu ongaku, it will now be necessary to further debate the concept of musical literacy in order to understand how it applies to geemu ongaku and to *Taiko no Tatsujin*.

As previously mentioned, van Elferen (2016) has discussed musical literacy across media, defining it as the fluency in listening and interpreting "film, television or advertising music". The concept expands on previously formalized theoretical tools related to media and game studies, applying them specifically to music

in digital games. Media literacy has been defined by Roepke as "habituated practices of media engagement shaped by cultural practices and discourses" (Roepke, 2011, as cited in van Elferen, 2016). Audiences have "developed a certain expectation curve with regards to [these media] form, style and possible socio-cultural meanings" (van Elferen 2016) through engagement with any kind of medium, including digital games. While media literacy is not medium-specific, Zagal has applied the concept, focusing on digital games. The "ludoliteracy" of digital game players is the sum of diverse skills, ranging from the competence of operating a game console, to the ability in interpreting established game design tropes and situations (Zagal 2010).

Game musical literacy is therefore formalized as a combination of media and ludic literacy:

> Combining the audiovisual literacies of film and television music with ludoliteracy, game soundtrack design appeals to a specific game musical literacy. Through intertextual references to audiovisual idioms from other media, game soundtracks deploy player literacy for their immersive effect: it is because gamers recognise certain composing styles that they are able to interpret gaming events and feel involved in gameplay, game worlds, and game plots. Boss fights, for instance, are often accompanied by the high-tempo, brass-heavy, dissonant orchestral scores with syncopated percussion that players recognise from exciting scenes in heroic action movies (van Elferen 2016).

This conceptualization of game musical literacy is therefore focused on interpretation of musical sections, cues or fragments during gameplay. Moreover, it also stresses the role of these musical parts, which contribute to the overall semiotic process happening during their subsequent deployment in any given gameplay situation. In other words, players also make sense of in-game situations, thanks to cross-media referencing. This point is also reiterated within the relevant literature: "Game music […] establishes, utilizes and reinforces musical signifiers (interacting

with a wider pan-media currency of musical semiotics)" (Summers 2016, 141).

The concept of game musical literacy, however, can also be expanded, for a productive application of the concept, to geemu ongaku in the media mix, including diverse forms of musical participation that are detached from direct engagement with digital games. In fact, the various different musickings, described in the previous section of this paper, showed the diverse forms of musicking available and practiced across geemu ongaku culture. Some of these musickings have little to do with actual gameplay or with games-as-played, so to speak. Rather, they seem to have formed a robust musical culture of their own, which finds, in the medium of digital games, a unifying territory. Geemu ongaku, in fact, consistently maintains its "game music" identity even when it is extrapolated from the digital game medium and transported in a different medium or setting.

Participation in geemu ongaku is not even necessarily primarily associated with actual game-playing. Exposure to the geemu ongaku repertoire is arguably connected with listening to music CDs or participation in live happenings just as much as it is related to playing digital games. Geemu ongaku, therefore, nonchalantly traverses not only different media (digital games, music CDs, magazines, etc.) but also exists in live concerts. This aspect is crucial, as it proves that geemu ongaku culture actually extends beyond the conventional confines of the media mix. Live happenings, in fact, are in general hardly identifiable as "media"; specifically, live concerts are not usually included in discussions regarding the media mix. In this case, musical participation in digital games is therefore not solely confined within a media-based environment.

The aspects debated within this section are arguably legitimately related with the "game musical literacy" of participants in geemu ongaku culture. The literate listener is in fact capable of discerning geemu ongaku, regardless of any formal characteristic of a given

geemu ongaku composition. This is unlike other possible and apparently similar examples of "game music". Chip music or chiptune, for example, is a musical genre identifiable with digital games, and particularly focused on the 8-bit sound aesthetic. It is not easy to pin down the formal characteristics of the genre, as it "continues to spread into innumerable musical and media genres, niches and intertextuality", but it can be said that it is at least "semi-consistent in its microsound or 'bit-crushed' timbres" (Reid 2018, 280). In this sense, chiptune strives to establish a discourse of authenticity based on the timbric qualities of the hardware used to produce such compositions. Geemu ongaku, on the other hand, does not have coherent or at least recurrent structural components or characteristics. Only a literate music community can therefore uphold the confines of geemu ongaku, being able to apply the genre's tropes thanks to a deep web of interconnected semiotic meanings, which are made explicit during a variety of different musickings. In that regard, geemu ongaku participants do not just apply the audiovisual literacy that they acquired by watching film and television to "interpret gaming events and feel involved in the gameplay" (van Elferen 2016), but rather are engaged in a much wider musicking phenomenon. In that regard, Frith makes a compelling argument about the productiveness of musical activities conducted by listeners of popular music:

> Different musical activities (listening, playing, performing, dancing) produce different aesthetic objects. In particular […] the music produced by the composer must be distinguished from the music produced by the listener (with performers, critics, and analysts occupying uneasy positions between the two) (Frith 1996, 267).

And indeed, geemu ongaku is an excellent example of these kind of processes, confirming that "musical meaning is not inherent (however "ambiguously") in the [musical] text" (Frith 1996, 250), but rather, it is constructed by the interplay of previously mentioned musickings practiced by geemu ongaku participants.

As mentioned, different iterations of *Taiko no Tatsujin* have featured a variety of geemu ongaku compositions, ranging from

original recordings to new arrangements of popular tracks. *Taiko no Tatsujin* therefore remediates geemu ongaku in original fashion, effectively adding a new context for tracks that already belong to the genre. The game musical media literacy entailed by *Taiko no Tatsujin* can also be considered as a form of ludo mix musical literacy. In *Taiko no Tatsujin*, in fact, players experience specific musicking participation, drumming along with certain musical tracks on the taiko. However, this musicking also references other popular digital game compositions familiar to the players. Possibly, the players have in fact previously experienced such tracks when playing other digital games that exposed them to the same musical compositions remediated by *Taiko no Tatsujin*. This complex referencing system is inherently ludo-centric and situates the game in a specific semiotic domain, discernible by geemu ongaku participants, thanks to their game musical literacy; however, it does not necessarily have any functional, gameplay-related implications. It provides valuable cultural context, but it does not indicate any gameplay scenario (such as a boss fight, as previously mentioned by van Elferen). In that regard, I maintain that digital game musical literacy is not necessarily functional-oriented, and it cannot be solely reduced to its applications during engagement with digital games.

ON TAIKO DRUMMING

In the previous section, I expanded the concept of game musical literacy, commenting on occurrences in which players refer to their literacy while not directly being involved in gameplay activities. I have also situated *Taiko no Tatsujin* within the ludo mix, the media mix, and geemu ongaku. That, however, is still not enough; the musical literacy referenced by *Taiko no Tatsujin*, in fact, expands far beyond the conventional confines of the ludo mix. I now intend to expand further on the overall musical literacy at stake with *Taiko no Tatsujin* by looking at the most evident musical reference set by the game: taiko drumming. The analysis of this aspect will shift focus from musical content and compositions to a variety

of relevant forms of musical activities and participation forms. The subject matter of musical analysis of digital games, in fact, is not only constituted by the musical compositions contained in a given game example; rather, it can also include in the discussion the different musickings practiced by game players (Oliva, 2017, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c).

Taiko no Tatsujin is primarily based on taiko drumming; that is obviously the most self-explanatory musical connection established. In order to understand what kind of musical literacy is being referenced in this case, it will however be necessary to introduce taiko drumming. What is a taiko drum, and what are the musical and cultural practices connected to it? A fully detailed answer to this question would expand well beyond the limits of this paper; nonetheless, a general introduction to the meanings of taiko practice is necessary to appreciate the musical participation made possible by *Taiko no Tatsujin*.

In general, a taiko is a wooden, barrel-shaped drum. It can be used as the centerpiece for various kinds of musical performances, involving one or more taikos of different sizes, alongside different musical instruments such as flutes, *shamisens*, as well as vocal and dance performances. Taiko's history and developments are rich and varied, having passed through different eras and cultural contexts.

> Taiko is an instrument that historically has been used in Japanese classical music such as Gagaku (lit., "elegant" or "refined," the Imperial court music of Japan dating back to the sixth century) and folk and religious music, as in traditional festivals tied to Buddhism and to Shintoism. The drum was either a solo instrument or played in relation to other musical instruments and characterized by a fixed form and steady, predictable rhythm with little syncopation (e.g., unexpected stresses of rhythmic beat) (Powell 2012, 104).

This historical form of taiko practice underwent a considerable transformative phase after World War II.

> Although the roots of wadaiko [literally "Japanese drum", a term here used interchangeably with "taiko"] music may be traced to the drum and flute ensembles that accompanied Shinto rituals, agricultural rites, and Bon festivals in Japan for centuries, wadaiko has come to mean a new drumming style that developed after World War II out of the music played by such ensembles […]. Groups started performing at hot spring spas and hotels as tourist attractions in the mid-1950s. The performances of a few such groups at the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo and the 1970 World Exposition in Osaka placed wadaiko music in the national limelight (Terada 2001, 37-38).

Banking on their increasingly national popularity, taiko events have, in recent years, extended to international venues. Formed in 1981, *Kodo* is arguably the most prominent and well-known taiko ensemble to ever operate. In the same year of its formation, Kodo made its international debut, performing in Berlin and touring Italy, West Germany and Japan (Kodo, 2015). This milestone can be considered as the start of the contemporary international popularity of taiko performances. Following this event, taiko exhibitions have been staged at the Nagano Winter Olympics in 1998 and at the FIFA World Cup, which was co-hosted by Korea and Japan in 2002 (Bender 2012, 3). *Taiko no Tatsujin* seems to be regarded as proof of the popularity of taiko performances:

> Building on this popular appeal, [taiko] has even been converted into a video game. In "Taiko no Tatsujin", an arcade game created by the Japanese company Namco, players use wooden mallets to tap […] on an electronic drum shaped like a taiko. The company has released software and hardware home console versions of "Taiko Master", along the line of the "Guitar Hero" and "Rock Band" series of video games. Clearly popular domestically, taiko drumming has arguably become Japan's most globally successful performing art (Bender, 2012, 4).

The previous quote is interesting for at least a couple of reasons. To start with, notice how being the subject of a digital game is read by the author as a testament to the popularity of a certain phenomenon. Gone are the days in which a digital game could be superficially dismissed as an automatic trivialization or belittling

of certain cultural aspects. But apart from considerations related to the cultural status awarded to the medium of digital games in this context, more questions arise. In his overall analysis, Bender does not focus on the compositions being played (the musical scores that taiko players would eventually perform). Rather, taiko practice is considered from the ground up in his analysis, as a performing art: a perspective that necessarily includes various aspects of anthropological value. Specifically, taiko practice is understood as a form of "new folk performing art", a definition that intends to "centre attention on performance culture that is presumed to be a communal possession, expressive of that community, transmitted orally within it, managed by it, and owned by no one of the community members more than another" (Bender 2012, 11). The horizontal perspective traced by this definition seems to be typical of informal musical setups, differing from musical forms that are structured in a more vertical or hierarchical fashion. The latter structures are best exemplified by the clear-cut roles established within Western classical music practice, as mentioned and critically addressed by Small, who details the emergence of the conductor role within orchestral ensembles as the person "in charge of every detail of the performance" (1998, 83).

More generally, the new folk performing art is, however, an expression form ascribable to non-notated musical traditions. The latter is a crucial notion: Small's criticism of musicological practice is in fact based on the discipline's focus on notated music, and its neglect of performance-based, non-notated musical forms. "Musicology is, almost by definition, concerned with Western classical music, while other musics, including even Westerns popular musics, are dealt under the rubric of ethnomusicology" (Small, 1998, p. 3). Similar concerns have prominently been raised by Cook, who notes that "musicologists have traditionally treated music as a form of sounded writing" (2014, 1), even if "it is performers who function as the primary motors of musical culture" (2014, 25), provocatively adding that "composers, after all, just write the notes" (2014, 25). Abbate, touching on similar points, adds that "musicology […] generally bypasses performance,

seeking meanings or formal designs in the immortal musical work itself" (2004, 505). This creates a methodological conundrum: musicology claims to study music, but continuously refers to "music" as only a segment of musical expression. The problematic consequences are that "the word music becomes equated with works of music in the Western tradition" (Small, 1998, p. 3). Ethnomusicology, "a […] word which is widely used to refer to the study of the different musical systems of the world" (Blacking 1973, 3), is faced with the complex task of studying a plethora of musical systems, which are intertwined with countless practices, histories and, in general, cultural implications of any possible human group. Bender's research is therefore compatible with this theoretical frame, adopting a wide ethnomusicological lens in order to pin down musical characteristics of taiko culture. Once again, the complexity of taiko performance culture is a large subject, but I intend to extrapolate from Bender's work those meanings that will be useful for a proper musical analysis of *Taiko no Tatsujin*. In fact, musicking with *Taiko no Tatsujin* also involves engaging with musical practices that go beyond the limits of musicology described by Small. The next section will discuss the musical literacy at stake in *Taiko no Tatsujin*.

TAIKO NO TATSUJIN AND MUSICAL LITERACY

The actual taiko instrument is only one of the many facets of taiko culture, which, as discussed, is a vast topic with deep ramifications in Japanese culture. Similarly, the musical literacy to be discussed involves comparably vast implications.

The taiko featured in *Taiko no Tatsujin* is most probably a reference to the *chū-daiko* (also called *miya-daiko*): "the most extensively used variety of taiko in the contemporary taiko ensembles" (Bender 2012, 32). The *chū-daiko* is in fact often mounted on a slanted stand (*josuki-daiko*) (Vetter 2015) that tilts the drum, favoring a comfortable position for the performer. This

setup is similar to the standard arcade iteration of *Taiko no Tatsujin* (Figure 4).

Figure 4: A Taiko no Tatsujin 2011 (Bandai Namco 2011) arcade cabinet. Picture by Minseong Kim, CC BY-SA 4.0.

The *chū-daiko* is used in religious rituals and in the folk performing art genre. In *Taiko no Tatsujin*, as mentioned, there is no direct reference to religion, and the emphasis is arguably put in representing the largely secular contemporary matsuri. Also, the *chū-daiko* is not a type of taiko used in classical stage performing art, thus excluding that specific musical culture from the referencing system conveyed.

The game does not directly or literally refer to the taiko techniques associated with *chū-daiko* either. However, through the design of its input devices, *Taiko no Tatsujin* encourages gestures that are comparable to the typical techniques associated with playing a large taiko, which is considered an intense physical performance, requiring strength and stamina. This rhetoric of physical strength in taiko performance can be traced back to the performance piece, *Õdaiko*, created by the taiko group *Ondekoza*.

> In Õdaiko (literally, "big drum"), a drummer, usually a man, stands naked except for a white loincloth and headband in front of an enormous drum. Slowly and dramatically, the drummer draws together his large bachi (wooden drum mallets) and begins to pound furiously on the instrument for more than ten minutes […]. Since its creation by Ondekoza, Õdaiko has been modified into a generic style of performance by countless amateur and professional taiko groups both within and beyond Japan […]. However, the focus on one drummer pounding ferociously on a large drum is consistently maintained, emphasizing the tremendous effort it takes to perform with strength and skill on such an imposing instrument (Bender 2010, 844, 863).

This aspect of taiko performance epitomized by *Õdaiko* is present in *Taiko no Tatsujin*, particularly considering its arcade iterations. In fact, the big plastic drums that form an integral part of the arcade cabinet are calibrated to register input only if struck considerably hard, and will not detect a soft touch. This design choice renders the execution of rapid note sequences considerably difficult, as each drum strike needs to be loud and emphatic. The timbre of the taiko, exemplified by its characteristic deep thud, is also prominently featured, alongside the highly pitched rim shot. As the game mechanics guide the player towards hitting either the center or the rim of the drum, the resulting acoustic output will be double. While the plastic taiko itself provides organic, direct acoustic feedback after being struck, it also triggers digital sounds reproduced by the cabinet speakers: the subsequent acoustic feedback is a combination of recorded and "live" sounds. The resulting, typical *Taiko no Tatsujin* performance has the potential

to induce players to "pound ferociously", as Bender mentioned; but other evident references related with the performance practice and repertoire of prominent taiko groups such as *Kodo* or *Ondekoza* are virtually absent.

Primarily, in fact, *Taiko no Tatsujin* does not center its range of references on the taiko drum as an instrument and its use in performance art settings, but rather focuses on certain elements that are typical of its adoption within festive contexts. While I have previously situated *Taiko no Tatsujin* in the ludo mix, I now intend to position it within the larger frame of the contemporary, shifting meanings surrounding Japanese festivals, or *matsuri*. According to Bender, "the common English translation of the Japanese matsuri as "festival" lacks the nuance of the Japanese term" (2012, 106). The key difference lies in the religious nature of the term. Even if sometimes used to indicate a religious festivity, the common use of the English term "festival" can, of course, indicate a secular happening, perhaps a large open event. In Japanese, instead, the original meaning of "matsuri" was strictly religious. In recent times, however, the term has started to be used to also indicate secularized events, incorporating the meanings of the English term. This shift is particularly common within urban matsuri, such as those taking places in the large metropolitan areas of cities like Tokyo or Osaka. Contemporary taiko groups seem to increasingly "base membership on residence, regardless […] of shrine affiliation" (Bender, 2012, p. 108). The communal aspect is therefore still strong, but shrine affiliation is no longer a fundamental discriminating factor. To corroborate these points, I can anecdotally mention to have had the opportunity to participate in one of such festival, the Akasaka Jodoji Bon Odori in July 2016, held in the ward of Minato, Tokyo. *Bon Odori*, which translates to Bon dance, is a style of dancing performed during the summer *Obon* period. Appropriately, a large taiko drum took center stage on that occasion. Alternating performers would share the instrument, playing a repertoire of pre-recorded musical tracks, sometimes accompanied by crotal bells. The event explicitly invites people external to the neighboring community to

participate. Members of the organization would offer free light drinks to tourists, and invite them to join the *bon odori* dance.

Through visual elements, *Taiko no Tatsujin* sets up a playful matsuri of its own, complete with food stalls, goldfish scooping, and of course the classic tower (or *yagura)* bandstand, a centerpiece of the matsuri. The tower is prominently featured on the cover and promotional material of the *Drum Session!* (Bandai Namco 2017) iteration of the franchise (Figure 5a), and also appears on the menus and in certain stages of the game itself (Figure 5b).

Figure 5a: Promotional image for Taiko no Tatsujin: Drum Session! (Bandai Namco 2017). A yagura bandstand is displayed in the center of the picture.
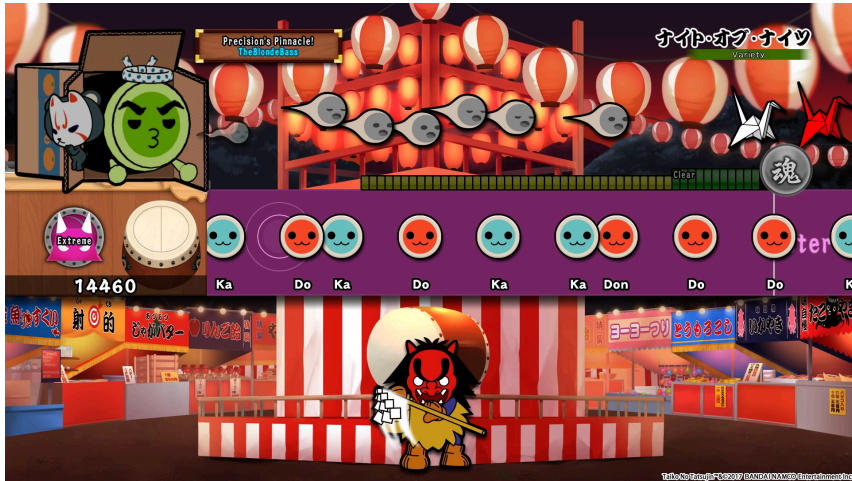
*Figure 5b: Promotional image for Taiko no Tatsujin: Drum Session!
(Bandai Namco 2017). Yagura bandstand and food stalls are depicted in
the background.*

This range of references, while not directly or solely musical, is
nonetheless imbued with musicking value; as such, in this context
they can be considered as part of the musical media literacy
conveyed by the game. Arguably, players without such musical
literacy will be unable to competently place the collective
imaginary projected by *Taiko no Tatsujin* in an appropriate
semiotic domain, thus missing on a variety of referenced
musicking meanings. Moreover, in this case, the game musical
literacy does not refer to exposure to other media, or even
competence in the repertoire of a given musical genre. Rather,
the literate player will be able to gather the larger musicking
and cultural context associated with the taiko drum, thanks to the
presence of a plastic replica of the instrument, and from a range of
in-game visual elements portraying a typical matsuri scenario. As
discussed, the musical compositions included in *Taiko no Tatsujin*
have largely very little to do with taiko practice or matsuri, since
they are instead situated in the cultural sphere of the media mix.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has debated *Taiko no Tatsujin* and the musical literacy it conveys. The concept was originally intended to emphasize the fact that digital game players are able to gather "intertextual references to audiovisual idioms from other media [...] to interpret gaming events and feel involved in gameplay, game worlds, and game plots" (van Elferen 2016). However, *Taiko no Tatsujin* involves a wider musical literacy, extending its referencing frame beyond the confines of media, to include musical meanings practiced within taiko drum culture. Moreover, *Taiko no Tatsujin* effectively works on two largely separated cultural paths: the media mix on one side, and taiko practice on the other, generating a unique, musical-centered ludo mix.

The first path is found by analyzing the musical content (here intended as the included musical compositions) of the digital game. The featured tracks are primarily imported from popular anime franchises, vocaloid singers, and pop and rock genres, as well as geemu ongaku. As such, it can be said to participate in musical media literacy in a conventional sense, as it refers to previous musical experiences from other media. However, as mentioned, *Taiko no Tatsujin* also participates in geemu ongaku, here understood as a loosely defined musical genre unified by digital games culture, in which game musical literacy is involved in different ways. The participants' musical literacy is also necessary during happenings that do not include direct engagement with digital games, such as listening to geemu ongaku music CDs or participating in live concerts. Nonetheless, participation in this musical culture involves a high degree of competence in game musical literacy. Players that do not fluently navigate this crux of musical references would of course still be able to go through *Taiko no Tatsujin* and engage with its game mechanics, but they would be unable to appreciate the creative juxtapositions of this unique example of ludo mix.

The second path is found by analyzing the taiko musicking practices referenced by *Taiko no Tatsujin*. While the musical content of the game is largely based in the media mix, its primary musical inspiration is instead the taiko drum, and the complex web of meanings that taiko drum practice conveys. Taiko musicking is a case of contemporary oral tradition, rapidly evolving in the wake of new phenomena surrounding its practice. The musicking afforded by *Taiko no Tatsujin* can be situated in the cultural discourse that I have so far introduced. Devoid of religious implications, the game joyfully celebrates in exuberant fashion matsuri and taiko, juxtaposing them with meanings derived from a mishmash of media mix music. In doing so, the game actually creates a ludo mix that is composed of a mixture of musicking practices, generating an ironic, caricaturistic effect. The game, in fact, constitutes a case of music-focused digital game that prominently features musical practices based on non-notated music and its oral traditions. In that regard, it creates its credibility, not necessarily by featuring clearly recognizable musical compositions ascribable to a specific genre (like the comparable *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* franchises), but rather by conveying the larger musicking frame associated with taiko culture. These aspects, however, are not peripheral to taiko practice: rather, they could be considered its core.

This paper argues that analyses of musical literacy in digital games should therefore not be limited to musical content across media, but should rather involve the many different musicking practices that might be intertwined with digital games culture. Musicking, understood as any form of participation to musical performances (Small 1998), provides a meaningful theoretical frame where digital games can be situated (Oliva 2019).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abbate, Carolyn. 2004. "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" *Critical Inquiry* (The University of Chicago Press) 30 (3): pp. 505-536.

Bandai Namco. *Taiko no Tatsujin* (franchise) [Advanced Pico Beena, Android, Arcade, iOS, Nintendo 3DS, Nintendo DS, Nintendo Switch, Nintendo Wii, Nintendo Wii U, PlayStation 2, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Portable, PlayStation Vita]. Bandai Namco, Asia/North America/Europe, 2001/2018.

Bandai Namco. *Taiko no Tatsujin: Drum Session!* [Playstation 4]. Bandai Namco, North America/Europe, 2018. Played November, 2018.

Bandai Namco. *Taiko no Tatsujin 2011* [Arcade]. Bandai Namco, Japan, 2011.

Bandai Namco. *Taiko no Tatsujin 8* [Arcade]. Bandai Namco, Japan, 2006.

Bender, Shawn. "Drumming from Screen to Stage: Ondekoza's "Ōdaiko" and the Reimaging of Japanese Taiko." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69 (3): 843-867, 2010

Bender, Shawn. *Taiko Boom: Japanese Drumming in Place and Motion.* University of California Press, 2012.

Bjarnason, Nökkvi Jarl. "A Recipe for Disaster? The Emerging Ludo Mix and the Outsourcing of Narrative." *DiGRA 2019: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo Mix.* Kyoto.

Blacking, John. *How Musical Is Man?* University of Washington Press, 1973.

Blom, Joleen.. "A Ludo Mix Perspective on Dynamic Game Characters." *DiGRA 2019: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo Mix.* Kyoto.

Chiapello, Laureline. "Ludo Mix as an Aesthetic Experience: Designing Games for Franchises." *DiGRA 2019: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo Mix.* Kyoto.

Fritsch, Melanie. "Big in Japan. Digging in the History of Japanese Game Music Culture." *Ludomusicology Conference 2016,* University of Southampton, UK.

Harmonix. *Guitar Hero* [Playstation 2]. Red Octane, North America/Europe/Australia, 2005. Played December 2006.

Harmonix. Rock Band [Xbox 360, PlayStation 2, PlayStation 3, Nintendo Wii]. MTV Games, North America/Europe/Australia, 2007. Played December 2008.

Ito, Mizuko. "Mobilizing the Imagination in Everyday Play: The Case of Japanese Media Mixes." In *Mashup Cultures,* edited by Sonvilla-Weiss S., 79-97. Vienna: Springer, 2010.

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide.* NYU Press, 2006.

Kodo. *Kodo History.* Accessed March 10th, 2017. http://www.kodo.or.jp/general/history_en.html.

Lamarre, Thomas. *The Anime Ecology: A Genealogy of Television, Animation, and Game Media.* University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

Matrix Software. *Groove Coaster* [íOS, Android, Arcade, Nintendo Switch]. Taito. 2011/2019.

Namco. *Taiko Drum Master* [Playstation 2]. Namco, Japan/North America, 2004.

Namco. *Tekken* [Arcade, Playstation]. Namco, Japan/Europe/ North America, 1994. Played February 1996.

Nintendo. *Super Mario Bros.* [Nintendo Entertainment System]. Nintendo, Japan/North America/Europe, 1985. Played May 1991.

Nintendo. *The Legend of Zelda.* [Nintendo Entertainment System]. Nintendo, Japan/North America/Europe, 1986. Played May 1991.

Oliva, Costantino. "Ergodic Musicking." *Ludomusicology* Conference 2019, Leeds, UK, 2019a.

Oliva, Costantino. *Musicking with Digital Games [PhD dissertation].* Msida: University of Malta, 2019b.

Oliva, Costantino. "Musicking with Digital Games." *DiGRA 2019: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo Mix*, Kyoto. 2019c.

Oliva, Costantino. "On the Ontological Status of Musical Actions in Digital Games." *11th International Philosophy of Computer Games Conference,* Krakow, 2017.

Picard, Martin, and Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon. "Geemu and media mix: Theoretical approaches to Japanese video games ." *Kinephanos – Journal of Media Studies and Popular Culture* 1-19, 2015.

Powell, Kimberly A. "Composing Sound Identity in Taiko Drumming." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 101-119, 2012.

Project Soul. *Soulcalibur* [Arcade, Dreamcast, iOS, Xbox 360, Android]. Namco Bandai Games, Japan/North America/Europe, 1998. Played March 2003.

Reid, George. "Chiptune: The Ludomusical Shaping of Identity." *The Computer Games Journal* 7 (4): 279–290, 2018.

Roepke, Martina. "Changing Literacies: a Research Platform at Utrecht University." Accessed January 16th, 2019. https://mmroepke.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/cl-working-paper-1-voor-boekje.docx. 2011.

Small, Christopher. *Musicking: the Meaning of Performing and Listening.* Wesleyan University Press. 1998.

Steinberg, Marc. "8-Bit Manga: Kadokawa's Madara, or, The Gameic Media Mix." *Kinephanos* 40-52. 2015.

Steinberg, Marc. *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan.* University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

Summers, Tim. *Understanding Video Game Music.* Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Taito. Darius 2 [Arcade]. Taito, Japan, 1989.

Terada, Yoshitaka. "Shifting Identities of Taiko Music in North America." *Senri Ethnological Reports* 22: 37-59, 2001.

van Elferen, Isabella. "Analysing Game Musical Immersion: The ALI Model." In *Ludomusicology : approaches to video game music* , edited by Michiel Kamp, Tim Summers and Mark Sweeney. Equinox Publishing, 2016.

Various Artists [Audio CD]. *Taiko no Tatsujin OST – Katanuki.* Namco Bandai, 2018.

Vetter, Roger. "Nagado-daiko." *Grinnell College Musical Instrument Collection.* 5 12. Accessed January 12th, 2019. https://omeka1.grinnell.edu/MusicalInstruments/items/show/149. 2015.

Yamakami, Yôhei, and Mathieu Barbosa. "Formation et développement des cultures autour de la « Geemu ongaku » (1980-1990)." *Kinephanos – Journal of Media Studies and Popular Culture* 142-160, 2015.

Zagal, José. *Ludoliteracy: Defining, Understanding, and Supporting Games Education.* ETC Press, 2010.

Zuntata and S.S.T. Band [VHS]. *Game Music Festival Live '90: Zuntata Vs. S.S.T. Band.* Pony Canyon, 1990.

About ToDiGRA

Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association (ToDiGRA) is a quarterly, international, open access, refereed, multidisciplinary journal dedicated to research on and practice in all aspects of games.

ToDiGRA captures the wide variety of research within the game studies community combining, for example, humane science with sociology, technology with design, and empirics with theory. As such, the journal provides a forum for communication among experts from different disciplines in game studies such as education, computer science, psychology, media and communication studies, design, anthropology, sociology, and business. ToDiGRA is sponsored by the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA), the leading international professional society for academics and professionals seeking to advance the study and understanding of digital games.

Further information on DiGRA is available at http://www.digra.org

Further information on ToDiGRA is available at http://todigra.org

About The ETC Press

The ETC Press was founded in 2005 under the direction of Dr. Drew Davidson, the Director of Carnegie Mellon University's Entertainment Technology Center (ETC), as an open access, digital-first publishing house.

What does all that mean?

The ETC Press publishes three types of work:peer-reviewed work (research-based books, textbooks, academic journals, conference proceedings), general audience work (trade nonfiction, singles, Well Played singles), and research and white papers

The common tie for all of these is a focus on issues related to entertainment technologies as they are applied across a variety of fields.

Our authors come from a range of backgrounds. Some are traditional academics. Some are practitioners. And some work in between. What ties them all together is their ability to write about the impact of emerging technologies and its significance in society.

To distinguish our books, the ETC Press has five imprints:

- **ETC Press:** our traditional academic and peer-reviewed publications;
- **ETC Press: Single:** our short "why it matters" books that are roughly 8,000-25,000 words;
- **ETC Press: Signature:** our special projects, trade books, and other curated works that exemplify the best work being done;
- **ETC Press: Report:** our white papers and reports

> produced by practitioners or academic researchers working in conjunction with partners; and

- **ETC Press: Student:** our work with undergraduate and graduate students

In keeping with that mission, the ETC Press uses emerging technologies to design all of our books and Lulu, an on-demand publisher, to distribute our e-books and print books through all the major retail chains, such as Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and Apple, and we work with The Game Crafter to produce tabletop games.

We don't carry an inventory ourselves. Instead, each print book is created when somebody buys a copy.

Since the ETC Press is an open-access publisher, every book, journal, and proceeding is available as a free download. We're most interested in the sharing and spreading of ideas. We also have an agreement with the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) to list ETC Press publications in the ACM Digital Library.

Authors retain ownership of their intellectual property. We release all of our books, journals, and proceedings under one of two Creative Commons licenses:

- **Attribution-NoDerivativeWorks-NonCommercial:** This license allows for published works to remain intact, but versions can be created; or

- **Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike:** This license allows for authors to retain editorial control of their creations while also encouraging readers to collaboratively rewrite content.

This is definitely an experiment in the notion of publishing, and we invite people to participate. We are exploring what it means to "publish" across multiple media and multiple versions. We believe this is the future of publication, bridging virtual and physical

media with fluid versions of publications as well as enabling the creative blurring of what constitutes reading and writing.