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The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association

Kingdom(s) Come
Character Remediations and Polyperspectivity of the Final Fantasy franchise in Kingdom Hearts and Kingdom Hearts II

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Cite this article

McLean, J. (2022). Kingdom(s) Come: Character Remediations and Polyperspectivity of the Final Fantasy franchise in Kingdom Hearts and Kingdom Hearts II. *Loading*, *15*(25), 58–75. https://doi.org/10.7202/1092426ar

Article abstract

Over twenty years since its original release, Final Fantasy VII (Square 1987) fans continue to debate the video game's world and characters as they are mixed and remixed into new licensed products. This article explores the fan metanarrative that circulates the story, ludology, and industry discourses that bind Final Fantasy VII. It will demonstrate how fan practices operate within community spaces to locate, present, and police both knowledge and meanings about a fictional world that itself is continually being reshaped by the transmedia production milieu. This article explores the ongoing fan debates circulating characters Cloud, Tifa, and Aerith from Final Fantasy VII, and their respective remixing into the Kingdom Hearts franchise. Through a discourse analysis (Gee, 2007) of online Western fan bases, published above-the-line production interviews (Mayer et al. 2009), and self-reflexive experiences (Hills 2002), I seek to demonstrate the complexity of fan practices and how they attempt to locate (and generate) narrative coherency. I will argue that fans do not simply enjoy games for their variance in gameplay and story but seek a better understanding of a growing fictional world that is complex and is subject to sanctioned rewrites. Drawing on Eiji Ōtsuka's theories on world and variation (2010), this article will demonstrate how fans can function as textual barristers in their attempts to untangle the media mix (Steinberg, 2012) of Final Fantasy VII through its ongoing reiterations, adaptations, and world-sharing with Kingdom Hearts series.

Kingdom(s) Come: Character Remediations and Polyperspectivity of the Final Fantasy franchise in Kingdom Hearts and Kingdom Hearts II

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Abstract

Over twenty years since its original release, fans of *Final Fantasy VII* (Square 1987) continue to debate the videogame's world and characters as they are mixed and remixed into new licensed products. With its rich contribution to the worlds of *Kingdom Hearts* and *Kingdom Hearts II*, some *Final Fantasy VII* fans have sought to unlock the original game's meaning through the ongoing remediation and reconfiguration of its central characters to new media products. These new appearances can augment established character history and agency within their existing story continuity, but also, as in the example of *Kingdom Hearts*, can be aligned to new worlds and different franchises. This article explores the ongoing fan debates circulating the characters Cloud, Tifa, and Aerith from *Final Fantasy VII,* and their respective remixing into the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise. It argues that communal fan practices continually research, advocate, and police knowledge and meanings through their engagement with ongoing remediations. Such communities can provide a court-like setting to defend or prosecute arguments that have been reshaped by the transmedia production milieu. These debates are significant enough to influence production decisions regarding future releases, that in turn will become evidence in fan debate. Through a discourse analysis (Gee, 2007) of online Western fan bases, published above-the-line production interviews (Mayer et al., 2009), and self-reflexive experiences (Hills 2002), I demonstrate the complexity of fan practices and how they attempt to locate (and generate) narrative coherency. I argue that fans do not simply enjoy games for their variance in gameplay and story but seek a better understanding of a growing fictional world that is complex and subject to sanctioned rewrites. Drawing on Eiji Ōtsuka's theories on world and variation (2010), this article will demonstrate how fans can function as textual barristers in their attempts to untangle the media mix (Steinberg, 2015) of *Final Fantasy VII* through its ongoing reiterations, adaptations, and world-sharing with the *Kingdom Hearts* series.

Author Keywords

Kingdom Hearts, Final Fantasy VII, fan studies, Tetsuya Nomura, Netnography, videogames, franchises, media mix, worldview, polyperspectivity

Introduction

Kingdom Hearts is a transcultural, transmedia, and transfranchise property. Its impact upon fandoms can reveal some complex modes of engagement between fans and their relationship to the producers of videogame franchise narratives. Transfranchise is a term that has coined little usage, being described as "the parlaying of trademark franchise rights into promotional marketing products" (Beaver, 2015), and can be applied to the transaction of rights and assets between two franchises as part of a transcorporate negotiation. *Kingdom Hearts* mixes intellectual properties originating from two different countries, the USA and Japan, where differences in culture, language, and commercial practices further complicate fan debates on the meanings behind shared characters and narrative. Fans of *Kingdom Hearts*, as with any transfranchise property, are not always dedicated to the single franchise, but can exist as part of a larger fan community that explores the meaning of fictional world crossovers as interrelated properties. This fan engagement can be better understood through Eiji Ōtsuka's theory of worldview (2010) as it demonstrates the complexity and depth of fan engagement within multiple connected worlds. The world of *Kingdom Hearts* is built from such multiple, interconnected worlds, drawing from licensed creations of other franchises to create a brand-new story. To gain a deep and nuanced understanding of the *Kingdom Hearts* fandom, an acknowledgment that their interest may extend beyond the franchise, and can even be sustained through their interest in the meaning of associated works, is beneficial. In some cases, a fan's main engagement is with the licenses *Kingdom Hearts* brings together under its banner, rather than the videogame itself. In this regard, labels like '*Kingdom Hearts* fan' can be reductive in understanding the wider engagements of fandoms.

This article argues that to better understand the engagement of videogame fans in a growing media sphere of interactive franchises, transmedial releases, and sometimes transcultural properties, there needs to be a stronger emphasis on fan practices than on the association of fans to specific texts or franchises. It is through fan practices that the complex and reciprocal relationship between fans and their franchises is better understood. These reciprocal qualities can shape ongoing commercial and worldbuilding practices that feedback into the fan domain. To understand this process, fandoms must be framed as groups of mobile social agents rather than imagined communities (Anderson, 1983), such as '*Kingdom Hearts* fans', or '*Final Fantasy* fans'. Celia Pearce's notion of the ludosphere is useful here as it pertains to "the larger framework of all networked play spaces on the Internet, as well as within the larger context of the 'real world'" (2009, p. 137). Like a series of nested magic circles these "ecospheres of play" allow us to understand how virtual worlds both collide with and sustain real-world practices, forming contexts for "emergent behaviors" (2009, p. 9) and wider fan practices. Such ideas can be applied to the adjacent public forums and community spaces where videogame fan discourse proliferates and can have a material impact on a franchise's direction.

As this paper will demonstrate, *Kingdom Hearts*' relationship to *Final Fantasy* fandom can be determined through the acts and practices of specific sub-communities that are heavily mediated and organized using gatekeeper and advocate roles. Where some fans interact with the text(s) through authorship, recreations, and social celebration, others interact in ways that are critical, investigative, and custodial of a text's meaning. These fans organize and defend their interpretation of a fictional world's singular meaning as if they were barristers in a courtroom drama.

To understand how fans have agency within ongoing franchises, it is important to understand how that agency exists. The practices of the fan barrister require a rich understanding of variations and hypertextual (Svelch, 2002) evidence. Fan barristers shape the fan metanarrative paradoxically stripping away variation on their world to locate definitive meaning through analyzing the variations on their world. Revealing the authorial intentions are the heart of the fan barrister's agenda. The profile of these debates is acknowledged by franchise producers, responded to, and sometimes has an impact on future decision-making. The metanarratives of *Final Fantasy VII* fan barristers can be demonstrated to have had an impact on the ongoing serialization of *Kingdom Hearts*, and through *Kingdom Hearts* shapes the ongoing discourses of *Final Fantasy VII*.

Final Fantasy, Kingdom Hearts, and the Love Triangle Debate

Final Fantasy VII continued the themes of previous installments of the RPG videogame franchise that focused on ecological concerns, unwelcome industrialization, and war. *Final Fantasy VII* was a standalone story that followed the lead protagonist Cloud Strife through a mix of flashbacks, false memories, and plot twists leading to an ending that, in 1997, was left ambiguous as to the survival of the heroes. Since its release, *Final Fantasy VII* has become a collective franchise of texts, leading to sequels, crossovers, and character guest-starring that span different media forms, and have expanded on the outcome, events, and characterizations of the original game.

The Love Triangle Debate has been one of the longest-running fan debates relating to the videogame, and its contestation has filtered into the exploration of other mixes, such as *Kingdom Hearts*. The Love Triangle Debate, or LTD, revolves around some complex interactions and revelations peppered throughout the original game.

Final Fantasy VII tells of a world polluted and poisoned by mankind's misuse of the planet's energy, primarily in the hands of the corporate power company Shinra. Cloud Strife is a mercenary who once worked for Shinra's elite military, SOLDIER. Cloud joins an eco-resistance group called Avalanche, reuniting him with childhood friend Tifa Lockhart. Tifa becomes the second person in the *Final Fantasy VII* love triangle. During one of their missions, he encounters Aerith Gainsborough, a gentle flower girl who lives in Midgar. She lives with her adopted mother and has been waiting for the return of her boyfriend Zack who remains missing in action. Aerith enlists Cloud as her bodyguard as she is being chased by Shinra's science division.

As the story progresses, Cloud fails to protect Aerith as he promised, and she is murdered. Cloud has a nervous breakdown whereupon the story reveals his childhood aspiration to join SOLDIER was born from a need to impress his childhood friend Tifa. Cloud never actually made the rank of SOLDIER and was a trooper assigned to SOLDIER member Zack, Aerith's missing boyfriend. Zack and a traumatized Cloud had escaped Shinra experimentation. Zack was killed whilst protecting Cloud as he tried to get them to Midgar to become freelance mercenaries. His guilt over Zack's death and Cloud's aspirations to become SOLDIER had him unknowingly adopt Zack's personality. Cloud is rescued from his second breakdown and comes to terms with these revelations through the help of Tifa. He reconciles his identity and goes on to fight to save the world from SHINRA, the alien JENOVA, and a deadly failed SOLIDER experiment called Sephiroth.

The complexities of the story left fandom debating timelines, character motivations, events, and meanings for decades. Whilst the debates over the game's original ending have been reconciled through its sequel *Advent Children* in 2005, the LTD debate continues on various *Final Fantasy VII* message boards over twenty years since the original game was released. The LTD passionately argues about who Cloud loved: was it Tifa, his childhood sweetheart whom he sought to impress, or was it Aerith, the friendly flower girl whom he failed to protect? The debate has been perpetuated by sequels and mixes, with new texts being used by fans to support new readings or substantiate existing ones.

The videogame medium heightened the debates. Multiple-choice options on how Cloud responds to characters take the player down different avenues of interpretation. Some vital information that defines character motivations, such as Zack's death, are only revealed as part of optional sub-quests. This type of polyperspectivity may suggest the narrative is naturally inclined to an open reading, with the intentional deployment of multiple narratives offering players multiple interpretations of the story, yet some fans will look for, and desire, a closed reading of *Final Fantasy VII*. Such arguments are not unreasonable, for while the original game did provide multiple positions in which to interpret the character and agency of Cloud Strife, the sequel *Advent Children* is not a videogame, but an animated film that responds and continues the original game's story. Yet this dissonance between an interpretative original and the return to the property in unique mixes, remixes, and continuing sequels has become part of the creative strategies in product (re)creation. In doing so, the creators are ensuring that the debates remain ongoing.[1]

It was not just the game's content that perpetuated the discussions, but the transnational marketing that initially played a factor in establishing legitimacy to one pairing. *Final Fantasy VII* was promoted in the United States with thirty-second cinematic trailers, the second of which referenced Cloud and Aerith. With recognized Western cinematic markers, a montage of images included an in-game sequence with Cloud carrying the body of Aerith. The moment was overlaid with a voice-over declaring "a love that can never be" (The Lifestream, 2014), emphasizing the romantic tragedy archetype. Furthermore, the US/PAL *Final Fantasy VII* instruction booklet consolidated this coupling: the manual provided a paratextual gateway, shaping character expectations before the player's journey into the game, as well as an intertextual resource for players looking to further their understanding of the game. Aerith's character profile spoke of her "being more interested in the deepening love triangle between herself, Cloud, and Tifa" (VGArtAndTidbits, 2016). Interestingly, Tifa's entry, as the potential third in the love triangle, does not mention romance at all, but defines her role as Cloud's "childhood friend". The instructional manual, while seemingly insignificant, has a long history of being used as evidence in the LTD. Whilst these materials do not necessarily contradict the themes and character motivations within the game, the promotion for *Final Fantasy VII* stateside identified a romance that would underpin fan arguments that Cloud and Aerith were the official pairings.

The original *Kingdom Hearts* was released in 2003, between the release of *Final Fantasy VII* and the *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII* series that would follow in 2005[2]. In *Kingdom Hearts*, Cloud's inner struggle is presented as his story-arc, re-enforcing his inner struggles of honor and guilt established in *Final Fantasy VII*. These struggles also connect, knowingly, to his relationships with the characters Aerith and Tifa. Before *Kingdom Hearts*, characters from *Final Fantasy VII* had been mixed into other Japanese products. For fans of *Final Fantasy VII*, who look to the LTD

to locate definitive meaning within the franchise grand narrative, the multiple variations of the world are hotly debated. The character of Cloud Strife has appeared in multiple media. Some appearances have expanded the canonical world of *Final Fantasy VII*—for example, the videogame *Dirge of Cerberus* (Square Enix, 2006), the novella *Case of Tifa* (Square Enix, 2005), and the animated film, *Advent Children*. Other appearances have Cloud distinguished by his characteristics rather than his narrative experiences of *Final Fantasy VII* (examples including the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise, *Final Fantasy*: *Tactics* (Square 1997), and *Ehrgeiz* (Square, 1998). Other appearances of Cloud are limited to a playable avatar or drop-in aesthetic cameos (*Final Fantasy IX* (Squaresoft, 2000), *Final Fantasy VII*: *Snowboarding* (Square Enix,2005), *Final Fantasy Artniks* (Square Enix, 2012), or *Puzzle Dragons* (GungHo Online Entertainment, 2021). These are some of the few re-iterations of Cloud Strife, and these variations are mediated by some fans and given hierarchical value relative to their grand narrative importance. This does not necessarily mean that official *Final Fantasy* products will be given greater value than Cloud's use in other franchises. *Kingdom Hearts* is generally considered an important asset in finding meaning in *Final Fantasy VII* because of the shared authorial role in the creation of the franchise. To consolidate meaning within *Final Fantasy VII*, despite not sharing a canonical continuity, *Kingdom Hearts'* variation on the world of *Final Fantasy VII*, commonly analyzed through the lens of the LTD, has value because of its authorial interconnectivity, primarily, but not limited to, Tetsuya Nomura.

Fan barristers: Media-mixing, fan metanarratives, and the importance of worldviews

Such prosumer (Toffler, 1980) communities have agendas that utilize the collaborative Disney/Square Enix franchise of *Kingdom Hearts* to establish authorial meaning to *Final Fantasy VII*. This group of fans will use both *Kingdom Hearts'* story-world and the words of its creative producers (who are also creative producers on *Final Fantasy VII*) to construct robust cases that attempt to canonize their interpretation of *Final Fantasy VII*. Such fans can have loyalties to both franchises, but it is their practices that reveal what uses, values, and meanings come from their connections to these texts.

Contrary to the notion of fans having little institutional influence on the creation, production, and meaning of texts as a powerless elite (Jenkins & Tulloch, 1995), this paper will reinforce the argument that fan engagement with the worlds of videogame franchises can influence the decision-making that shapes future franchise iterations. The transnational franchise of *Kingdom Hearts* provides an interesting, and highly complex, case study of videogame fandom interactions with a franchise built from global franchise agreements. This article will demonstrate how fans do not always celebrate texts through transformation or recreation but engage as a practice of rigid canonization and curation of complex world narratives through transfranchise case building.
As franchises grow, intertwine, mix, and remix, many fans are drawn into a constant tension between the text, authorship, and fellow fans. Fans can seek to strip away the ludic variations within a videogame's narrative to locate a singular, intended metanarrative. Such practices may seem odd given franchises such as *Kingdom Hearts* and *Final Fantasy* share characters but are officially established to exist in different unconnected universes (Nomura, 2002, cited in Squall_of_SeeD, 2013). Through an understanding of world and variation, this paper demonstrates

how fans can draw upon the canon of *Kingdom Hearts*, specifically of *Kingdom Hearts* and *Kingdom Hearts II*, to better understand *Final Fantasy VII* and the *Final Fantasy VII* franchise.

Fan meta-narratives can work against the multiple realities and perspectives of digital role-playing games (RPGs), a concept I am defining as polyperspectivity, to locate unified meaning. Unlike Jenkins' (2006) concept of convergence and Steinberg's (2012) use of divergence that address multiple realities through consumer and production agencies respectively, polyperspectivity is used to acknowledge the variations of worlds, regardless of their genesis. The ludic qualities of RPG games encourage the player to enjoy multiple perspectives and outcomes as part of their playthrough, yet players will also hypothesize the meaning and value of different realities. For instance, whether the outcome of player choices results in Cloud going on a date with Barrett or Tifa will have different meanings to the player, and this meaning is a construct of the game's ludonarrative. Polyperspectivity speaks to the multiplicity of readings of a world and its variations, independent of who is responsible for their creations. With transfranchises, consumers and producers are continually working with polyperspectivity. Through a reading of *Final Fantasy VII* characters and worlds in *Kingdom Hearts*, different realities, some deliberately created by producers, and others interpreted independently by players, are discussed, approved, or dismissed in fan communities. Fan barristers will provide robust cases to demonstrate the authority of their interpretation, commonly seeking to align their truth with their perceived agenda of the game's producers. Game producers that are aware of the fan discourses can capitalize on such debates, using consumer product engagement to promote and shape future content. By focusing on the practices of fans rather than their textual associations, a more nuanced understanding of fan engagement can be revealed, as well as their commercial relevance to the ongoing creative processes of media.

The shared resources of *Final Fantasy VII*'s characters and world settings are not exclusive to *Kingdom Hearts* and such multiplicity of textual assets is not unusual in Japanese media. Marc Steinberg (2012) identifies the Japanese 'anime media mix', in which the synergetic use of multiple media is used not to exploit one singular marketing goal, but to work towards a broader consumption model of a franchise, thus sustaining growth. The concept of media-mixing can be linked to the post-war marketing strategies of Japan, whereupon marketing uses multiple media as vehicles to ferry consumption, adapting advertising to the properties and strength of those media (Steinberg, 2012). Steinberg makes a distinction within the anime media mix.

> In contrast to the pyramid structure of the marketing media mix, which presumes a singular goal to which synergy is the means, the anime media mix regards synergy as a goal unto itself that will support its collective media life. (Steinberg, p. 141, 2012)

It is a model that opposes the Western paratextual approach to fan consumption that identifies the "conditioning passages and trajectories" uniting a text with audiences and industries (Gray, 2010, p. 23) through circulating ancillary texts. The anime media mix suggests a more flattened terrain with multiple entry points that mobilize franchise characters and world aspects into different products—Steinberg (2012) examples tie-in confectionary as an example of the use of non-media medium commodities—divorced and independent from their original text. This positions characters and associated narratives as polyperspective properties, providing multiple but

interconnected realities. Polyperspective characters are a staple of videogames, where their world and attributes are hybridized by both the characters' constructs and the players' agendas (Burn & Schott, 2004). As part of the media mix, polyperspectivity is even more pronounced, and for *Final Fantasy* and *Kingdom Hearts* threads between the universes of different franchises.

The anime media mix and its mobility are evident within Square Enix's strategies with both *Kingdom Hearts* and *Final Fantasy VII* franchises. Characters can function with relative independence from their origin world. This generates multiple iterations of the same characters, that are commonly linked not just by aesthetics but sometimes characteristics and agencies that mirror their use in the original text. For example, in *Kingdom Hearts* Cloud and Sephiroth maintain their antagonistic relationship from *Final Fantasy VII*, Aerith still has affection for Cloud, and Cloud's companion Cid remains a cantankerous engineer. These character traits provide fans with recognizable dynamics that exist in *Kingdom Hearts* without direct links to the storyline of the *Final Fantasy VII* world. Fans have used these character traits, despite being detached from their original narrative, to reflect, re-enforce, or re-interpret meanings they have located (and defended) in the source. In doing so, the hierarchy of importance and story continuity shared between texts in a mix becomes less important than how they relate to one another as variations of the same worldview. Worldview and variation speak to the erasure of assigned intertextual hierarchies of value, favoring the focus on the relationships that are forged and explored through intertextuality.

The idea of the worldview is discussed in detail by Eiji Ōtsuka (2010), who explains the fragmentary consumption of texts builds to a greater, more meaningful understanding of a created world. Ōtsuka concluded in his research into Bikkuriman chocolates, which devised a fragmented narrative across their range of confectionary, that "child consumers were attracted by this grand narrative and tried to gain further access to it through the continued purchase of chocolates" (p. 106). This desire for grand narrative, and the exploitation of these desires in the production of consumables, is not just relegated to children. As a key component of the anime media mix, media franchises build upon consumer attraction with sequels, adaptations, and reboots to perpetuate their intellectual properties. Regarding Bikkuriman, Ōtsuka notes that "what the candy maker was 'selling' to children was neither the chocolates nor the stickers, but rather the grand narrative itself" (106). Similarly, Kingdom Hearts is a collection of individual smaller narratives that are grand narratives within their own worlds, that together form the Kingdom Hearts grand narrative. The world of *Final Fantasy VII* becomes part of the Kingdom Hearts world, and to some degree, *Kingdom Hearts* becomes a part of the grand narrative of *Final Fantasy VII*. Neither world relates to the other's canonical story but shares asynchronous components that build a consumer's grand narrative as *variations*.

Alongside worldviews, variations are another key tenet of Ōtsuka's grand narrative and are integral in the importance of fan metanarratives. The layering of different narratives, that can come from a variety of sources, troubles the question of authenticity since the importance becomes "not which of these is the original work (a question that becomes meaningless) but rather the relative merit of each variation" (p. 113). Variation is very much at the heart of the 'ludonarrative' nature of videogames, a term in game studies that describe the meshing of a game's narrative and its system of rules that underpins gameplay. The continual tension between ludic and narrative properties within videogames already results in complex, fragmented narratives. Furthermore, the multi-modal nature of the RPG genre provides the player with multiple narratives through the simple act

of non-linear gameplay and fixed-points where players must take action, or even take on the role of an actor (Burn & Schott, 2004), choosing between options that will lead to different narrative consequences. While this type of RPG ludonarrative is not an active component of *Kingdom Hearts I* and *II*, *Final Fantasy VII* provides a degree of optionality that will result in minor variations to future dialogue and events. These discourses can be further complicated by the growing tendency for distributed videogames to be re-mixed to rectify incomplete or problematic releases with software patches, or to be reiterated with new ludic or narrative components as 'ultimate' versions of the game—see the *Fallout* franchise (Interplay, 1997; Bethesda, 2004-) and *Arkham Asylum* (Eidos & Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, 2009-) as AAA game examples of both strategies.

Japan has had a long history of mixing media components into different products under the regime of the media mix, making such approaches common to their production, marketing, and consumption (Steinberg, 2005), and can see established narrative elements being altered to fit new content. Such remixing can fragment or even withdraw essential narratives, creating new variations with different emphases. *Final Fantasy VII* has been mixed into a range of genres, including: fighting games such as *Dissidia* (Square Enix, 2015), *Ehrgeiz* (Square, 1998), and *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, (Nintendo, 2018); RPG games such as *Final Fantasy Tactics* (Squaresoft, 1997); puzzle games such as *Puzzle & Dragons* (Gungho Online Entertainment, 2012); and even card games such as *Final Fantasy Trading Card Game* (Square Enix, 2011). Each variation contains different mixes of characters and world elements. These fragmentations can be remixed further, as in the case of *Kingdom Hearts*, which not only builds on its use of *Final Fantasy VII* between *Kingdom Hearts* and *Kingdom Hearts II* but creates further changes in future remixes of those same titles. *Final Fantasy VII* is in the process of being remixed entirely for PlayStation 4 and Playstation 5 under the title *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, which is altering the flow of the narrative substantially to accommodate an episodic release schedule, though it is beyond the scope of this paper's methodology to consider these ongoing changes.

The study of fan practices has been a long part of fan studies, going back to its first wave (Jenkins, 2012), with concerns centered on cultural perceptions of fan habits and communities, as well as on how they are researched by scholars (Green et al., 2006). Research into fan practices circulating both the *Final Fantasy* and *Kingdom Hearts* franchises can draw upon the understanding of fans pioneered through second-wave fan studies. Such studies focused on locating pleasures within hierarchal videogame subcultures, the visible capital within their debates, and the various modes of fan engagement with videogame texts (Sullivan, 2013). However, with sympathy to third-wave fan studies (Gray et al., 2017), research into what fan practices can bring to the individual fan in terms of meaning and pleasure is at the heart of this study. Analyzing their interpretive and creative practices, we can see they are neither exclusive to fan communities nor are a necessarily inherent part of the skillset that can see fans move along the spectrum from fan-consumer to industry professional. The skillsets demonstrated in this analysis are situated in rhetoric, deduction, research, and organization, familiar to researchers and advocators of truth (like the judiciary). It is a reminder that social practices are mobile and can be utilized in the search for knowledge, understanding, and meaning.

The practice and pursuit of the textual barrister are not to transform or reproduce the text as can be evident in fanfiction, cosplay, or fan art. Rather, the intent is to find unifying meaning beyond

the text. In a post-structuralist perspective, their practice remains an interpretative act and thereby has the potential to shape a text's meaning. However, the barrister's desired goal is not to interpret but to uncover and enshrine what they believe is the authorial voice of the text. This paper will demonstrate the practices of fans as social actors seeking to trace, reveal, and defend an authorial truth through the text's circulating paratextual, epitextual (see Genette, 1991; Gray, 2010; Consalvo, 2017), or hypertextual (see Svelch, 2002) material. Fans will assign capital and hierarchize particular producers of *Final Fantasy VII* and the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise. Sympathetic to Michel Foucault's theory of author-function, which positions the author as a designated function of cultural discourse, fans can attribute the author function to selected producers to "neutralize the contradictions that may emerge in a series of texts" (1991, p. 111). In this way, authorial intent is leveraged by fandoms to not only reinforce their interpretations but to add credibility to their status within the hierarchical privileged inside of the fandom.

To better understand different types of fan practices, this paper expands upon Henry Jenkins' (1992) framing of the fan as a textual poacher to explore the phenomenon of fans practicing as textual *barristers.* In videogames especially, these fans fight an ongoing case for locating author function in a media industry that works to deliver worlds that are then reshaped by sequels, franchise mixings, and world remixes. In selected fan forums the textual barrister is constantly making a case to defend or prosecute their reading of authorial accuracy. What and who is perceived as having authorial status is key, as is their text's relationship to its author. The battleground for these debates has commonly been fan forums in which the message board posting styles have a strict-linear dialogue framework. A point made by one barrister can be analyzed, interrogated, and rebutted in the following post. Forums provide a space where the barrister can easily navigate to evidence presented within a topic thread or from external sources. Such sources again can be easily analyzed by the opposing side. These forums tend to be public spaces but can have different sides prepare work and strategize within private locked forums. It was through the personal experience of this practice I was able to occupy both such public and private spaces.

Method

This paper will apply a netnography-based methodology, looking at predominantly Western fan practices within online *Final Fantasy* communities, online interviews with *Final Fantasy* and *Kingdom Hearts* above-the-line directors and writers, as well as embrace my own past experiences as a fan who participated within these debates, conforming to Matt Hills (2002, 2007) notion of autoethnography. As a form of anthropology, netnography is an analysis of socially framed textual discourse rather than traditional ethnography's grounded observation of human discourse and behavior (Kozinets, 2002, 2015). Online presences are heavily constructed, with the individual's offline identity obscured. In some cases, a person can exist under multiple accounts within the same social group, performing different roles and agendas. Netnography thereby looks to what is said rather than the identity of individuals. Markers of identity such as race, age, gender, nationality, and location can be distorted by the subject. Discourse and practice can be best identified and analyzed through netnographic analysis, and will be evidenced in the discursive 'Love Triangle Debate' (LTD) topic threads of fan forums at finalfantasyforums.net and editorials that provide strong evidence of practice at *Final Fantasy VII* franchise fan website, TheLifestream.net.

The use of above-the-line creative practitioners involved in *Final Fantasy VII* and related projects comes predominantly from interviews translated by LTD caseworkers. Interviews can be found on multiple blogs and forums, usually linking to specific translations. The translations I have evidenced come from the quotes of individual forum posters, or the website TheLifestream.net regarding the words of *Final Fantasy VII* and *Kingdom Hearts* franchise designer and director, Tetsuya Nomura. The editorial sources will post multiple translations if applicable, the linked source material (usually a scan), the Japanese text, and a link to the translator. While the paper's position is to evidence and analyze fan practices, and thereby how these translations are positioned and applied in arguments is key, Nomura's creative ideologies and his responses and thoughts on the issues relating to *Final Fantasy VII*, *Kingdom Hearts I and II*, and the LTD both energize and perpetuate the LTD discourse. When Nomura is quoted for his industry reflexivity and self-theorizing (see Caldwell, 2008), the Lifestream.net translations are referenced for their critical efforts for accuracy.

To explore how these fan communities, conduct their debates and practice their casework, the paper refers self-reflexively to the author's personal experience in the Final Fantasy communities in 2008 and 2009. I extensively took part in several of these debates, particularly at TheLifestream.net forums and before that, the since-closed AdventChildren.net forums. Through this forum activity, I was introduced to both a public fan community culture and a siloed private fan space. This involvement gave me first-hand experience of the fan practices involved, the underlying agencies, and the heterogeneous nature of these fan cultures.

This article will first map the terrain of the *Final Fantasy VII* fans who operate as textual barristers regarding the franchise's Love Triangle Debate and how that discourse continues to be ignited by the franchise's integration into *Kingdom Hearts I* and *Kingdom Hearts II*.

Following and building from the first section, this article will focus on *Kingdom Hearts, Kingdom Hearts II,* and one of its creators, Tetsuya Nomura, who was an artist, writer, and director for both *Final Fantasy VII* transmedia franchise and the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise. In doing so, it will demonstrate how the ongoing franchise growth and remixing of produced texts perpetuate the role of the textual barrister and their need to find and define the assumed canonical meaning of the texts. Such professionalized research challenges notions of fans in postmodern times as database animals (Azuma, 2009), rather positioning them as advocates of deeper understanding of and meaning within videogame texts. They are constantly (re)building a metanarrative that embraces postmodern methods of convergence and spreadable media (Jenkins, 2013) whilst challenging postmodern thinking through the rejection of variation, fragmentation, and the pastiche in favor of the unending hunt for the classical, the definitive, and the canon.

Author function and fan value

Tetsuya Nomura was a character designer, battle visual director, and story writer on *Final Fantasy VII* (Leone, 2017), taking a more executive role as writer and director in the game's sequels (branded *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII*) and the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise (Leone, 2017). In both *Final Fantasy VII* and *Kingdom Hearts*' fan discourse, Nomura's role and commentary are commonly used to defend a given interpretation.[3] Whilst a team player in *Final Fantasy VII*, his executive position in *Kingdom Hearts* has significant capital with fans. Yet *Kingdom Hearts* is

also a rich repository for evidence in the *Final Fantasy VII* love triangle debates, because of its perceived authorial truth.

Nomura has responded to the question of the *Final Fantasy VII* love triangle in interviews and ancillary merchandise to both *Final Fantasy* and *Kingdom Hearts*, acknowledging the fan question and its relationship to both franchises. He noted on one occasion "[…] I was frequently asked if there had been a romantic relationship between Tifa and Cloud for two years after FF7 ended, but I don't have any clue" (Nomura, 2005, cited in Squall_of_Seed, 2013), and another "I think that this volume can deeply grasp the relationship between the two [the relationship between Cloud and Tifa]. It would be simple to say in words, but I don't know" (Squall_of_Seed, 2013). One fan barrister concluded, "I would also argue that Nomura knew the answer all along, but simply preferred letting people figure out the answers on their own" (Squall_of_SeeD, 2013). The importance of the authorial voice in making sense of the text and its worldview is a critical part of the fan discourse on the two franchises. The importance fans place on these interviews is not unreasonable given creatives can and do capitalize on the questions in pitching the value of their work. In promoting *Kingdom Hearts*, Nomura explained:

> There's no relationship from FFVII to the *Kingdom Hearts* stories. I consider them separate stories. But if you play *Kingdom Hearts*, towards the end, some of the questions about the relationship between Cloud and Aeris in *Final Fantasy VII* might be answered.(Nomura, 2005, cited in Squall_of_SeeD, 2013)

Nomura not only acknowledges the debates on the characters but weaponizes that ambiguity to promote the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise. In doing so he further consolidates his author function position with the fans, who take his answers to shape their arguments. In this regard, *Kingdom Hearts* is a conduit for fans to analyze their perceived author's creative decision-making and use that knowledge to locate meaning in *Final Fantasy VII*. Fans will acknowledge that what happens in one franchise does not necessarily relate to the other, but through that text, they can better understand the authorial position on the shared characters (Cloud, Tifa, and Aerith). In doing so, fans are not seeking to establish an interpretation, but as barristers advocating evidence to reveal a truth. To defend this position fans utilize authorial commentary. For example, fan Greygardens takes Normura's words and uses them to formulate a truth, demonstrating this process:

> Nomura specifically says that although the two universes of Kingdom Hearts and
> FFVII are separate, the Kingdom Hearts universe might help answer questions
> about the relationship between Cloud and Aerith as it pertains to *Final Fantasy
> VII*'s universe. Cloud and Aerith are seen together at the end of *Kingdom Hearts*
> similar to other romantic couples. (Greygardens, 2013)

Greygardens takes Nomura's statement and editorializes the ambiguity to fit a sought truth about Cloud and Aerith. While Nomura remains ambiguous, Kazuchiga Nojima, scenario writer for both franchises, becomes another example of author function in the love triangle debate. In one piece of fan casework arguing for a pro-Tifa/Cloud reading, the fan positions Nojima as the key voice in locating authorial meaning, arguing Nomura "only seems to be speaking for himself here rather than everyone on the FFVII development team" (Squall_of_SeeD, 2013). Quoting from the *Kingdom Hearts II* companion Ultimania book, Nomura says: "In Nojima's scenario, the

connection between Cloud and Tifa was discussed more concretely, but I chose to erase that, I thought it would be more interesting for players to think about it instead" (Nomura, cited in Squall_of_SeeD, 2013). There is an argument for maintaining a game's ludic value by keeping the narrative flexible, allowing the player to personify the protagonist (Cloud) with their own values and preferences, and this presents a problem for fans looking for a definitive linear storyline in an RPG videogame. However, with *The Compilation of Final Fantasy VII* being transmedia (videogame, cinematic, novella, and animation), there is a linear worldview that exists within the franchise continuity. Both Nomura and Nojima have spoken of Tifa and Aerith respectively as Koibito 恋人 to Cloud, translated as 'lovers'. Yet the translation of the kanji has been hotly disputed by Western fans as evidence to advocate opposing positions on the romantic discourses (Chloe, 2018; CloudandAerith.com, n.d; ourfinalheaven, 2016; Makoeyes, 2009). Disputes on this topic are common and the Western readings of Japanese interviews and companion guides are often through a Japanese-speaking fan within the community. The importance of translated interviews and statements of *Final Fantasy* and *Kingdom Hearts* producers is an important part of creating robust cases. One fan argues that four creative voices establish canonicity in *Final Fantasy VII*. Glenn The Twilight Mexican cites Nomura, Kazushige Nojima, Yoshinori Kitase (director of *Final Fantasy VII* and *Kingdom Hearts* producer), and Square Enix art director Yusuke Naora as the key four creatives commonly considered to be the authors of Final Fantasy VII canon. The fan barrister concludes:

> This is where we begin to see the ease in establishing canon when multiple core developers are involved. One need not always depend on the input or involvement of a single individual for establishing canonicity, as in this case, where two of FFVII's four core developers. (Glenn The Twilight Mexican, 2010)

The establishment of canon gives fans a mutually acknowledged space from which opposing case-builders can draw evidence. Without an agreed author function, even Square Enix produced material can be disputed, such as *The Compilation of Final Fantasy VII* novella, *The Maiden Who Travels the Planet* (Square Enix, 2005). This novella was written by Benny Matsuyama and is commonly dismissed because of its authorship:

> I do believe that there is an interview or statement from Benny Matsuyama stating that he had no oversight whatsoever when he wrote Maiden. So it's mostly just head-canon for him compared to the more "official" canon media from Square. (grekaosangel, cited in Cloudywolf76432, 2020)

The novella proves contentious with fan barristers not solely for its non-canonical author but for its questioned consistency with other official material (Glenn The Twilight Mexican, 2010); however, its authorship alone is a common ground for immediate dismissal.

Beyond what evidence can be considered official, the idea of world and variations is prone to change as the franchises grow and evolve. For *Final Fantasy VII*, the original Japanese release did not have the Emerald and Ruby Weapons enemies—both featured in the FMV (full-motion video) scenes for the North American and Japanese international releases. Character moments, including Tifa's flashback to finding Cloud in Midgar and Cloud's flashback sequences, were also later additions that became established canon, underpinning the plot of the *Advent Children* sequel.

These additions are considered canonical by most fans, despite having been added after the original Japanese release (Squall_of_SeeD, 2013), evidencing a post-structural awareness by many fans as to the selectiveness of authenticity within their debates.

The instability of ongoing franchises can enrich discourses that perpetuate the debates. For fan barristers, remixes add to the continual research and case building, where given authenticity can be reshaped by new material. Looking to *Kingdom Hearts*, the original release included dialogue and side-quest material that had Cloud searching for someone, identified as Aerith, his spiritual light. However, in the North American release, an arch-nemesis was added, alluding to a different motivation behind his quest. In the *Kingdom Hearts: Final Mix* release, the dialogue was altered to confirm Cloud's hunt being for Sephiroth, and not Aerith (Squall_of_Seed, 2013). These changes would destabilize given interpretations used as fan evidence and reopen the debates on such questions. It further demonstrates the complex entanglement of transfranchise characters. *Kingdom Hearts II* saw Tifa added to the cast: as Sephiroth represented Cloud's symbolic darkness, Tifa represented his light. Again, this storyline was a side-quest to the *Kingdom Heart*'s main storyline, peripheral to the key events and a world away from *Final Fantasy VII*. Nevertheless, it would be a further case point in the fan debates. Fans would read Tifa's inclusion and importance to Cloud as an erasure of the case for Aerith being symbolic of Cloud's spirit in the previous *Kingdom Hearts* game. This all demonstrates how franchises can provide new information to enrich but not necessarily stabilize worldviews, adding to the growing palimpsest that resists the fan desire for fidelity, and emphasizes the hermeneutic qualities of the worldview (see Dean Bowman's piece[1] in this issue for another discussion of hermeneutics). The question of the original is again disputed. As one fan barrister opined:

> Go ahead and make the argument that Cloud wasn't searching for Sephiroth because Sephiroth wasn't in the original release of *Kingdom Hearts*. In the process, one would have to essentially destroy the plot of *Final Fantasy VII* — not to mention cast aside all the significant new details from *Kingdom Hearts II: Final Mix*, the altered Chaos Reports in the North American and Universal Tuning releases of *Dissidia Final Fantasy*, retcons from *Dissidia 012* and the retcons and added footage from Advent Children Complete. (Squall_of_Seed, 2013)

The fan's challenge to their opponents is largely rhetorical, knowing that they too look for coherency within the same material, and both sides largely agree on the importance of the listed sources. The fan challenges the opposing argument for being unable to sustain a grand narrative without destabilizing the entire worldview of *Final Fantasy VII*. This further demonstrates how the cases made by fans can be complex, looking beyond the single franchise, but at the matrix of transformative actors that interconnect as variations within the worldview. However, this matrix is not flat, it is hierarchical, which is why the fan barrister must exist—to create robust cases and argue what the text is intended to mean rather than how it can be interpreted. For this reason, as the world grows through its variations, and cannot remain constant, fan barristers are left with the duty of continually reopening cases and assessing new evidence.

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[1] Bowman, D. (2022). "I've been having these weird thoughts lately...": Conspiratorial Hermeneutics and Reflexive Depictions of Fan Practices in the *Kingdom Hearts* Franchise. *Loading..*, *25*(15. https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/issue/view/31).

Fan practices and Fan spaces: A reflexive analysis

I became engaged in the LTD debates between 2008 and 2009 after viewing *Advent Children* and sought fellow fans to engage with the film. Though the film left me with many questions, it became clear that the topic that was constantly pinned to the top of Final Fantasy forums related to the LTD. At AdventChildren.net, the forum threads would regularly need replacing with new threads to keep up with the continual daily debate on this topic.

From reading the discussions, I concluded that the original game, *Final Fantasy VII*, did have an absolute storyline which the ludonarrative could adjust (rather than subvert) depending on interactions by the player. Resonating with Matt Hills' experience of fan cultures (2002), my experience of these forum debates was that they were highly territorial sites of discourse, and neither side had a set outlook. Some fans looked to validate their romantic pairing ('shipping' Cloti or Clerith), whilst others looked for definitive answers. Fans, demonstrating little engagement or interest in gender roles within their communities[4], shipped characters for whom they would enjoy the pleasure of exploring or celebrating a preferred pairing, which itself is a contribution to the worlds of *Final Fantasy VII* and *Kingdom Hearts*. Those seeking to understand the intended meaning of the game were less keen on embracing polyperspectivity, and more interested in revealing a singular, intended author-function. Some fans were both shippers and interested in narrative clarity and felt both agendas were inclusive. Invariably, however, they would seek to place a hierarchical value on worlds and variations, where their shipping preference was also claimed to be the correct reading of the game's narrative. It was therefore the correct interpretation of the game and thereby a variation that should be canon.

Through these interactions, I witnessed the courtroom of the public fan forums and the private social spaces where arguments were prepared by fans with similar mindsets. These private forum spaces, bound by formal invite and password lock, were informal and often venting spaces about their opposition. Fans from the private forum would seek to gain access to their rival's private spaces either to antagonize or to spy on their case planning. Where fans in their private spaces were informal and disrespectful to their opponents, in the public spaces those same fans were articulate, polite (as they could manage), and rule-abiding. The difference in behavior was tactical. In the public spaces, where their forums were moderated (or adjudicated) by a supposed neutral party, fans would be on good behavior and would avoid being incensed into making statements that could leave their position subverted or their presence banned from the topic. In this regard, these spaces felt like a courtroom—with a judge presiding to uphold the forum's rule of law (or code of conduct), and with barristers offering evidence to demonstrate a preferred reality. The linear nature of the bulletin board forum posting provided a formalized points/rebuttals system of address, and the forum post coding made for easy dissection of a speaker's case through the quotation framework.

Outside of these spaces, the private domains were akin to legal offices. Barristers would vent to like-minded colleagues whilst working on the specificities of their case: seeking evidence from texts or interviews, retaining reliable translators to build stronger arguments, and interacting with

colleagues who could help strengthen their argument. These fans in the private spaces were fans of *Final Fantasy VII*, but they would be equally fans of a key character (Tifa) but less inclined to be associated with the adoration of Aerith. They would be well-acquainted with the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise, with experience of the game, its links to *Final Fantasy VII*, and an interest in the above-the-line producers. However, they would rarely speak of *Kingdom Hearts* outside of its relevance to the case—the Love Triangle of Cloud, Aerith, and Tifa. In this regard, what they were a "fan" of was less important than how they practiced being a "fan". For these fans I interacted with, their engagement in the LTD was about the pleasures of a well-constructed case and using that case to deconstruct arguments that they felt were reductive to their fandom. The LTD debate felt far removed from their pleasure in playing videogames, but rather an act of research, rhetoric, and case building that, for a while, I happily participated in.

Conclusions

This article has demonstrated the complexities of fan cultures, specifically as to how growingly complex world-building through shared or related franchises can shape fan practices. It has emphasized the benefits of looking beyond the labeling of fans and texts, to what the practices are that can sustain those relationships. Fan labels, such as a '*Kingdom Hearts*' fan or a '*Final Fantasy VII*' fan does little to reveal the subcultural activities at play within those fandoms.
Ōtsuka and Steinberg's concept of worldview can provide theoretical foundations for a better understanding of how and why some fans engage with the multiple franchises. For videogames, where narratives are influenced by ludic elements, fan practices can be complex and critically driven in their search for intended narrative meanings. The polyperspective tapestry shared by franchises can see fans of *Final Fantasy* draw upon textual and metatextual products of *Kingdom Hearts* to justify their interpretation of *Final Fantasy VII*'s meanings. Their knowledge of both worlds needs to be significant to meet the courtroom interrogations of opposing fans within the same culture.

In this regard, *Kingdom Hearts* functions as a collision of intellectual properties in which fan engagement is a mobile agency operating within and between two franchise properties. Whilst the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise remains detached from the continuity of *Final Fantasy VII's storylines*, it nevertheless exists as part of its worldview, its shared characters loaded with relevance and meaning. Fans seeking meaning will understand that franchises may not strictly exist within the same story continuity but will still attempt to understand that continuity by interrogating any surrogate to their selected text. These interrogations are not isolated to a singular text, although the interest can be an isolated facet of the narrative, such as a love triangle. These interrogations operate in fan domains akin to a courtroom, to some degree thanks to the linear model of forum posting. Fans can present cases, collect evidence, and challenge opponents. Evidence needs to be sourced meticulously, as the opposition will aggressively scrutinize any counterargument. In the debates surrounding *Final Fantasy VII*, sources are often archived, and translations of written material need to demonstrate lingual proficiency and, ideally, be Japanese in origin.

These practices and their associated discourses are shaped by the state of the ongoing franchise(s). Fans will be locked into perpetual debates seeking to demonstrate a singular meaning to a text (or a set of texts) within a complex textual/franchise tapestry that is being continually re-woven. These

discourses can be potent enough to factor into how characters are written in associated franchises. The application of *Final Fantasy VII* characters in the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise does acknowledge continuing discourse from fandoms. This acknowledgment is not purely textual, and can be referenced within ancillary merchandise or interviews with the creators.

The role of the creator within these fan practices can be evidenced as essential within *Kingdom Hearts* and the *Final Fantasy* characters. In deference to notions of fans taking superficial pleasures in their texts, fans seek singular meaning which they identify as being that of the author(s). Rather than seeking to locate meaning as interpretation, the debates look to find an absolute meaning that when made, can be evidenced by interviews or statements by producers with creative capital. Yet by seeking to avoid meaning being dependent upon subjective interpretation, subjective interpretation is common if not inevitable in unpacking (and translating) the statements made by authors. As a transcultural text, the translations (and the fan-translators) are heavily scrutinized by fans seeking defined answers. This is further complicated by some authors, such as Tetsuya Nomura, who will contradict themselves, or be oblique as to answers, occasionally making statements that knowingly acknowledge debates and deliberately refusing to give clarity. In doing so, creators both empower fans through industry acknowledgment of their discourse and subvert them through the resulting creative choices that can align or resist with fan readings.

Kingdom Hearts is a franchise that builds its world on the association and knowledge of characters and worlds from other franchises. In this sense, the reach of its narrative, and the decisions made therein, can impact its texts. Yet where notions of worldview and variation can demonstrate how fans can enjoy multiple different yet associated iterations of a narrative, fans themselves can resist its palimpsest qualities in favor of defined answers. In this regard, some fans can be understood through their authoritarian practices for grand narrative justice, as opposed to being inhabitants, defendants, or celebrants of any singular media property.

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[1] The debates are currently being refueled by the episodic PlayStation 4 remake that itself has changes to storyline and characterizations from the original.

[2] While the *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII* is an official multi-textual continuation, some of its texts are questioned for canonical truth by fans. Within the LTD debates, *Final Fantasy VII* is the canonical text.

[3] Nomura's significance to the transcorporate creative management of Disney and Square Enix for *Kingdom Hearts* is discussed in depth by Dean Bowman and Rayna Denison in their articles this issue.

[4] This is not to say gender was never a factor in the LTD, but discourse would rarely focus on the identified gender of users, and the leading voices in the debate were users presenting as male and female.