

# The Kingdom's Shōnen Heart

## Transcultural Character Design and the JRPG

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### Article abstract

Taken by themselves, neither Disney nor Square Enix appears particularly successful at transcultural expression, although both are certainly marketing juggernauts in transmedia franchise operations (Smoodin, 1994; Consalvo, 2013). Disney may be understood in terms of American postwar cultural imperialism, while Square Enix is deeply rooted in conventions of Japanese storytelling. But together, somehow the two achieve a synergy in Kingdom Hearts (2002), coalescing in the figure of Sora, its youthful protagonist. This article performs a close reading of Sora's visual character design, a transcultural melding of Walt Disney's own Mickey Mouse and the shōnen figure of earlier Nomura Tetsuya creations. While gameplay dynamics point to a new action-adventure style for Square Enix, the shōnen characteristics of Sora's appearance combine with his sense of loss and yearning to position the game in the JRPG genre.

Transculturality of the non-player characters (NPCs) in Kingdom Hearts is then considered. These character designs remain static, anchored to their original reference texts. Where the Disney characters fit their settings in an uncomplicated way, providing escapism and nostalgia for the player, Square characters seem to be chosen for their complexity. The use of then-recent Final Fantasy X characters Tidus and Wakka in Destiny Islands is contrasted against the use of darker, brooding characters from older Final Fantasy titles encountered later in the game. Just as loss and yearning define Sora's shōnen character, the sense of loss manifested by Cloud, Aerith and Leon connect the player to the real-world context of the global late 1990s, speaking to Japanese anxiety following the Hanshin earthquake and Aum Shinrikyo attacks of 1995, and to the despair of 'Generation X' following Kurt Cobain's death in 1994 (Funabashi and Kushner, 2015; Brabazon, 2005). Meanwhile, the deep economic recession of Japan's 'lost decade' (1991-2001) connected perfectly to the post-9/11 unease in America at the time of the game's release. Overall, I argue that the game's success stems from its transcultural emphasis on loss and yearning, which fit not only the JRPG genre but also the sense of anxiety pervading both Japan and America at the time.

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# The Kingdom's *Shōnen* Heart: Transcultural Character Design and the JRPG

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## Abstract

Taken by themselves, neither Disney nor Square Enix appears particularly successful at transcultural expression, although both are certainly marketing juggernauts in transmedia franchise operations (Smoodin, 1994; Consalvo, 2013). Disney may be understood in terms of American postwar cultural imperialism, while Square Enix is deeply rooted in conventions of Japanese storytelling. Yet together, somehow, the two achieve a synergy in *Kingdom Hearts* (2002), coalescing in the figure of Sora, its youthful protagonist. This article performs a close reading of Sora's visual character design, a transcultural melding of Walt Disney's own Mickey Mouse and the *shōnen* figure of earlier Nomura Tetsuya creations. While gameplay dynamics point to a new action-adventure style for Square Enix, the *shōnen* characteristics of Sora's appearance combine with his sense of loss and yearning to position the game within the JRPG genre.

The transculturality of *Kingdom Hearts* extends to its non-player characters (NPCs). These character designs remain static, anchored to their original reference texts. Where the Disney characters fit their settings in an uncomplicated way, providing escapism and nostalgia for the player, Square characters seem to be chosen for their complexity. The use of then-recent *Final Fantasy X* characters Tidus and Wakka in Destiny Islands—a playable world inside of *Kingdom Hearts*—is contrasted against the use of darker, brooding characters from older *Final Fantasy* titles encountered later in the game. Just as loss and yearning define Sora's *shōnen* character, the sense of loss manifested by Cloud, Aerith and Leon connect the player to the real-world context of the late 1990s, speaking to Japanese anxiety following the Hanshin earthquake and Aum Shinrikyo attacks of 1995, and to the angst and despair of 'Generation X' in the West (Funabashi and Kushner, 2015; Brabazon, 2005). Meanwhile, the deep economic recession of Japan's 'lost decade' (1991-2001) connected perfectly to the post-9/11 unease in America at the time of the game's release. Overall, I argue that the game's success stems from its transcultural emphasis on loss and yearning, which fit not only the JRPG genre but also the sense of anxiety pervading both Japan and America at the time.

## Author Keywords

Transculturality; character design; *shōnen*; JRPG genre; Generation X; lost decade

## Disney, Square Enix and Transculturality

*Kingdom Hearts* was released for the PlayStation 2 console in 2002, as a collaboration between the Walt Disney Company and Square Enix, a Japanese game development company renowned for its role-playing games. *Kingdom Hearts* is a role-playing game featuring a youthful protagonist, the player-character Sora, who must traverse different worlds seeking his lost friends, helped by Donald and Goofy in a questing party of three. Game mechanics follow conventions of Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs) such as menu-driven commands, magical healing and attacks, and inventory items familiar to players of Square Enix's flagship series *Dragon Quest* (1986-) or *Final Fantasy* (1987-).<sup>1</sup> Before analyzing the text of *Kingdom Hearts*, it will be useful to consider the two corporate entities behind its creation—both global in scope with production offices located around the world, not to mention extensive networks of distribution, marketing and localization. Both studios employ transmedia strategies, leveraging successful IP—particularly popular characters—across a range of media such as film, videogames, toys, animation and associated print works. In this section I focus on the transcultural strategies of both corporations operating on a global scale to connect with audiences across cultures.

The Disney corporation excels at creating and exporting a vision of fantasy youth—princes and princesses (most often princesses) engaged in heroic adventure and romance, fueled by imagination and an independent spirit. Disney adventures share a value system that teaches children ways to navigate a world they are soon to enter, emphasizing honesty and trust (as long as you trust the right people), go-getting ambition (accepting help when needed), and the fulfilment of dreams (true love, marriage, a safe family home or village). Disney films have attracted a wide range of scholarly attention, particularly from critics interested in representation and identity, although less attention has been paid to Disney's vast array of videogames based on characters from the animated films.<sup>2</sup> The success (or failure) of Disney's transmedia cultural products in the global market has also inspired much research; when viewed in terms of Joseph Nye's (2004) 'soft power,' Disney exports have such dominant influence in global marketplaces and playrooms that they may be understood in terms of American postwar cultural imperialism, exporting particular values and visions of beauty around the world.<sup>3</sup> Eric Smoodin describes the 'dual movement' of the Disney vision as 'one that goes both forward and backward, creating a vision of an "American century" of imperialist control and also a nostalgia for Western colonial hegemony' (Smoodin, 1994, p. 10). It is perhaps no coincidence that the first Disney theme park to open outside the United States was Tokyo Disneyland, in April 1983, in a country that had experienced seven years of US-led occupation (1945-1952) following the Asia-Pacific War.<sup>4</sup>

For its part, Square Enix is a globally renowned videogame studio, producing blockbuster role-playing games such as the *Final Fantasy* (1987-2020), *Dragon Quest* (1986-2021) and *Mana* (1991-2021) series as well as the cult classic title *Chrono Trigger* (1995). While these titles fit the template of the JRPG genre, Square Enix is also involved to various degrees with the production of games in the *Tomb Raider*, *Life is Strange* and *Just Cause* series. Due to the diffuse nature of videogame production, with different teams assigned to artwork, animation, battle systems, dialogue and so on, Square Enix has offices all over the world, prompting scholars to examine the

corporation as a global entity rather than a particularly ‘Japanese’ one.<sup>5</sup> The domination of Japanese companies in the global videogame market has also led scholars to describe Square Enix, Konami, Namco and others in terms of empire and the ‘Global North,’ exerting both cultural and capital power.<sup>6</sup> This accords with the ‘Cool Japan’ campaign from the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, aiming to increase Japanese soft power through exports of manga, anime, games and other character-based goods (McGray 2002).

The *Kingdom Hearts* collaboration served both studios as a strategic move to increase global sales following a low period in both companies’ fortunes. From the perspective of Square Enix, Nakagawa Daichi has framed the production in relation to the film *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, released in the US in July 2001. Although recognized as a pioneer of CGI technology, the film received poor reviews due to a stilted plot and the uncanny almost-lifelike appearance of the characters. Nakagawa (2016, pp. 346-347) maintains the failure led Square to begin negotiations to merge with Enix in 2001, setting the stage for the ambitious plan to approach Disney Corporation with a view to recouping losses. From Disney’s perspective, *Kingdom Hearts* was similarly released at a low point, as *Tarzan* (1999) marked the end of the ‘Disney Renaissance’ string of film hits. The industry was transitioning from 2D animation to 3D and CGI modelling, with fierce competition from Dreamworks and Pixar (not acquired by Disney until 2006). Success in the videogame industry with titles based on characters like Winnie-the-Pooh, Aladdin, and Tarzan made a crossover title appealing—using characters from an established JRPG juggernaut like Square Enix provided a ready-made path to greater success in this sector. In short, both Disney and Square Enix benefitted from the *Kingdom Hearts* collaboration as a way to promote their brands and IP, recouping finances and appealing to global audiences.

Media products from Disney and Square Enix may also be understood in terms of transculturation, involving degrees of cultural influence through their production and export practices. ‘Transculturality’ has been variously defined in terms of hybridity, fusion, entanglement and disjunction, where material cultures occupy a range of connectivities on a spectrum of blending and clashing.<sup>7</sup> There is certainly plenty of blending and clashing in *Kingdom Hearts*, with the entanglement of characters and worlds, the juxtaposition of disjunctive art styles, and a fusion of values common to Disney films and Japanese role-playing games. In the global exports of Disney and Square Enix products, it is interesting to note that the visual appearance of characters is not localized or adapted for different markets, although their dialogue may be translated into different languages. Similarly, the worlds the characters inhabit are not modified for different audiences. The ‘transcultural’ aspect of Disney and Square Enix media comes rather through varied cultural influences in the process of character design, the engineered appeal to global audiences, and what happens when the media product hits the target market, with audience appropriations ranging from princess parties to cosplay. In this essay, I will focus on the game content and market appeal of *Kingdom Hearts* rather than its appropriations, considering the design and narrative positioning of characters which connect the game to its transcultural contexts.

In terms of design, Walt Disney Studios was for many years influenced by white Anglo-heritage art and artists, later incorporating cultural elements from Polynesia, Native America, India and the Arab world with varying degrees of success.<sup>8</sup> Square Enix design, for its part, draws heavily on

Japanese anime and manga conventions, with games using a spectrum from 2D flat animations to fully-realized 3D worlds, and characters rendered with polygon-based or computer-generated art. In Koichi Iwabuchi's (2002) formulation, Japanese media products are often designed with a *mukokuseki* aesthetic, avoiding 'cultural odour' in order to sell widely on the global market. Looking beyond the blue eyes and blond hair of many JRPG heroes, however, we find a distinct and recognizable *shōnen* aesthetic in Japanese media products, as well as narrative structures stemming from Japanese literary conventions and themes connected to Japan's sociopolitical context (Hutchinson, 2019, pp. 103-128). Just as Disney has its own set of youthful values, *shōnen* JRPG narratives tend to favour tales of winning, friendship and perseverance, the three pillars of manga storytelling in *Weekly Shōnen Jump* (Schodt, 1996, pp 89-90). This *shōnen* aesthetic is clear in *Kingdom Hearts*, which makes it an interesting case study as a collaborative product.

A major point of similarity between Disney and Square Enix is their emphasis on characters and worlds to connect with audiences. Disney characters appear for meet-and-greets at theme parks, while Square Enix has sponsored pop-up cafés such as 'Melody of Memory' in Tokyo, which celebrates all things *Kingdom Hearts* and allows guests to enjoy 'a special menu, goods, freebies, and more.'<sup>9</sup> Both studios market cute versions of their characters, with Disney providing plush toys and 'tsum tsum' stackable stuffies, and Square using *chibi* art styles to create *kyara*—logo-like versions of characters that are understood to be more 'flat' and transferrable between media forms, as opposed to the more realistic 3D characters residing in fully-formed narratives.<sup>10</sup> In their respective media franchises, characters from Disney and Square are placed in perilous and challenging circumstances, in fully-realized worlds populated with distinct flora and fauna, monsters and villains, helpful villagers and obstructive mischief-makers. In Japan, this kind of world-building is called *sekai-kan*, with each media product from a franchise adding to and drawing on a shared vision and lore.<sup>11</sup> The studios thus share an emphasis on world-building and characters/*kyara*, as well as values based on a balance between leadership and co-operation, an ethic which works well in the party-based system of role-playing videogame adventures. Based on these shared characteristics, it is perhaps not surprising that the two corporations achieved a synergistic collaboration in *Kingdom Hearts*, a booming intellectual property worth millions of dollars. Critics and reviewers often mention the collaborative aspect of the game design and note the mixed IP as something remarkable about the series.<sup>12</sup> In this essay, I argue that the *shōnen* characteristics and open-ended structure of *Kingdom Hearts* position it as a Japanese 'JRPG' text, but the character sets of both Disney and Square are deployed in such a way as to effect a transcultural connection with global audiences.

### Transcultural character design – Sora and Mickey

The synergy of Square Enix and Disney coalesces in the figure of Sora, a likeable young protagonist who achieves a near-perfect melding of characteristics from classic Nomura Tetsuya designs from the Square canon and the iconic colour scheme and proportions of Walt Disney's own Mickey Mouse. The visual elements of Sora's design may be understood as an intelligent fusion of two design traditions. Heroic human characters drawn by Walt Disney tend to follow a pattern, with large eyes, flowing hair and clothing, and slim physiques. Animal characters have the same large eyes, set in heads proportionally large for their bodies. In a well-known study of

Mickey Mouse, Stephen Jay Gould (1979) showed the resemblance of this proportionality to a human child, engineered to play on adult human sympathy. The same pattern may also be seen in non-Disney characters as diverse as Betty Boop, Elmer Fudd, and Tom and Jerry. Heavily influenced by Disney's Bambi as well as Max Fleischer's Betty Boop, Tezuka Osamu brought this aesthetic to Japanese comics, while his *Astro Boy* (*Tetsuwan Atomu*) in turn influenced a new generation of artists at Mushi Productions (Schodt, 2007, pp. 44, 71-74). The legacy of Tezuka's style can be traced through Matsumoto Leiji to Oshii Mamoru and Anno Hideaki in the mid-1990s, with a maturing of the style and darker themes. But the *shōnen* manga/anime aesthetic of postwar Japan reached its most typical iteration with the art of Toriyama Akira's *Dragon Ball*, published in *Weekly Shōnen Jump* (1984-1995). In videogames, Toriyama provided similar spiky-haired, large-eyed protagonists for *Dragon Quest* and *Chrono Trigger*.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, a more androgynous beauty – the *bishōnen* or 'beautiful youth' – was also popular.<sup>14</sup> Amano Yoshitaka was the lead character designer for the *Final Fantasy* series up until 1994. Influenced by Western artists and comics, Amano produced beautiful characters with flowing hair and clothing.<sup>15</sup> With Amano's replacement by Nomura Tetsuya from *Final Fantasy VII* (1997), characters took on more of a classic *shōnen* anime look, with Cloud Strife's blond spiky hair, blue eyes and massive sword adhering more closely to Toriyama's template. Interestingly, the villain Sephiroth took a more Amano-like *bishōnen* silhouette, taller and slimmer than Cloud, with long flowing grey hair, narrow eyes and sharply angled features. As the lead character designer for *Kingdom Hearts*, Nomura used the dualistic *shōnen/bishōnen* aesthetic of the JRPG for the two lead characters: Sora, the player-character, is the typical *shōnen* protagonist, with round facial features and spiky reddish-brown hair, while his friend Riku is the *bishōnen* antagonist, tall with flowing grey-white hair and a slim yet muscular body.<sup>16</sup> Where Sora is a typical, relatable youth, Riku is presented as more distant and commanding. He acts as Sora's opponent in swordplay tutorials, teaches Sora about the properties of paopu fruit, and urges the group to leave the islands, yearning for adventure in the outside world.

Although Sora and Riku are clearly influenced by manga and anime visual conventions, Sora's costume design also incorporates many elements from Walt Disney's character Mickey Mouse. As seen in Figure 1, Sora's costume uses a palette of the primary colours red, yellow and blue, along with black and white. This gives a dynamic and energetic feeling, but also mimics the colour palette of Mickey Mouse. Sora's bulbous red pants and enormous yellow boots give a cartoony feel, duplicating Mickey's iconic red pants and yellow shoes. Sora's white shirt with black trim and back, paired with white gloves, echo Mickey's black body and white-gloved hands, although Sora's costume is detailed with zips, blue trim and buckles (according to Nomura's design hallmarks in the *Final Fantasy* series). Both figures are similarly proportioned with large heads and eyes, short bodies, and large hands and feet.

**Figure 1**  
*Riku and Sora character designs*



Sora's approximation of Mickey's colour scheme and proportions works to elicit feelings of familiarity and nostalgia, associated with family warmth, watching television, reading comics and possibly longed-for (if not accomplished) family trips to Disneyland. Mickey Mouse is one of the most-recognized animated characters on Earth, priming the player of *Kingdom Hearts* to feel a sense of almost-recognition at the familiar look and style. Mickey may be considered the most important and privileged character in the Disney canon, being drawn by Walt Disney himself and featuring as the main attraction in meet-ups at theme parks, as well as many cartoons and films with Donald, Goofy, Minnie and Pluto as supporting characters. Mickey himself appears only

briefly in *Kingdom Hearts*, although he is referenced frequently as ‘King Mickey,’ vanished from the land and the object of Sora’s quest. Mickey’s elusive status here mirrors his real-world absence from animated short films in the years 1995-2013, perhaps reflecting a broader desire to see him back on screen.<sup>17</sup> That Donald and Goofy support Sora inscribes something of Mickey’s position onto Sora himself, and the familiar grouping of Mickey-Donald-Goofy is replicated in the look of Sora-Donald-Goofy as they travel through the different worlds. Finally, the Gummi Ship (their mode of transport between worlds) echoes the same colour scheme, with primary red and yellow fuselage, transparent dome and white fins, reinforcing the bond between Mickey and Sora yet again.

On the other hand, *Kingdom Hearts* also contains many non-visual elements that position it as a typical JRPG. Long-time Square scenario writer Nojima Kazushige worked closely with Nomura Tetsuya to spin the tale of *Kingdom Hearts* into something quite similar in emotional tone to *Final Fantasy VII*, which he wrote together with Kitase Yoshinori, Sakaguchi Hironobu and Nomura Tetsuya. *Kingdom Hearts* employs the same spells and item upgrades as the *Final Fantasy* series, with Fire, Fira and Firaga spells increasing in magic power just as Potion, Hi-Potion and Megapotion increase in healing efficacy. Like most JRPGs, male characters take the lead with females in supporting roles, and Sora himself has much in common with Chrono from *Chrono Trigger*, Cloud from *Final Fantasy VII* and Tidus from *Final Fantasy X*, all searching for meaning in a confusing world. Like countless male protagonists before him, Sora has an absent father, while we only hear his mother’s voice from offscreen. He loses both Riku and Kairi early on and spends the game searching for his lost friends (while Donald and Goofy search for the mysterious King Mickey). In these ways the game is squarely positioned in the JRPG genre (Hutchinson, 2019; Barton, 2008; Zagal & Deterding, 2018).

Unlike other games in the genre, however, *Kingdom Hearts* does not follow the ludonarrative convention of collecting a party with members added one by one—Sora’s party is premade, and the battles are managed by direct-action rather than turn-based game dynamics. These elements point to a new action-adventure style for Square Enix, similar to the fighting styles of Nintendo’s *Legend of Zelda* series, and the extended battle sequences against hordes of Heartless are more like hack-and-slash game dynamics (most recently seen in *Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity*, 2020). Both Sora himself and the gameplay of *Kingdom Hearts* can thus be seen as drawing on two different legacies of character and game design, which skilfully combine in a complementary mix of elements to create something recognizably ‘Disney and Square’ in look, feel and affect. I turn now to the non-player characters (NPCs) in the game, which very definitely belong to either one or the other visual tradition. The next section examines the NPCs in terms of transcultural possibilities and their significance to different audiences.

### **Transculturality in the Non-player Characters (NPCs)**

Sora’s journey through the environment of *Kingdom Hearts* encompasses twelve ‘worlds,’ with four original settings designed by Nomura Tetsuya and the rest derived from Disney films. Nomura’s settings are Destiny Islands and Traverse Town at the beginning of the game, together with Hollow Bastion and The End of the World at the game’s conclusion. Where Destiny Islands is bright and cheerful, featuring steel drums in the music and an environment full of palm trees,



sandy shores, wooden walkways and the sound of waves, the other Nomura worlds are much darker in palette, using purples and greens to offset murky streets, towering castles and amorphous pulsating columns of energy. Disney settings encountered in order are Wonderland (based on the 1959 animated film *Alice in Wonderland*), Olympus Coliseum (based on *Hercules*, 1997), Deep Jungle (based on *Tarzan*, 1999), the Hundred Acre Wood (based on *The Many Adventures of Winnie-the-Pooh*, 1977), Agrabah (based on *Aladdin*, 1992), Monstro (based on *Pinocchio*, 1940), Atlantica (based on *The Little Mermaid*, 1989), and Halloween Town (based on *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, 1993). The recommended order of worlds to visit is easily understood by their ‘Battle Level,’ as the player/Sora is encouraged to progress steadily through skill levels. The settings do not follow the chronological order of the Disney films’ release, rather creating a whimsical journey of contrasting moods. The Nomura and Disney worlds work well together, and the player can always return to previous worlds via the Gummi Ship. In these ways the order of worlds presents a complementary mixture of Disney and Square elements, rather than trying to fuse the two together in each individual setting.<sup>18</sup>

As the player, beginning our adventure in Wonderland allows us to enter a fantasy world much as Alice does, following the White Rabbit and drinking potions to become bigger or smaller as needed. It is exciting to see the 2D animation come to 3D life, and the ability to interact with the well-known environment provides great enjoyment—for example, sitting on each of the chairs set at the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party rewards the guests with ‘Merry Unbirthday’ presents (potions and other upgrades). Sora, Donald and Goofy change their own appearance twice in the course of the game—in Atlantica they take on the attributes of sea creatures to be able to breathe underwater, appearing as a merman, squid and turtle, while in Halloween Town they wear spooky costumes featuring bandages and pumpkins to blend in with the inhabitants. Disney characters appear as themselves, the only difference being the change to 3D modelling, with some interesting effects—the cards in Wonderland appear flatter in contrast to their surroundings, for example, while Philoctetes looks even fatter in his 3D form. The adaptations made from film to game thus constitute a successful transmedia experiment, while keeping the original settings intact.

More of an ‘entanglement’ or ‘fusion’ is found in the ways in which characters are positioned in worlds best suited to their purpose in the narrative and gameplay. Of the Disney characters, Merlin (from *The Sword in the Stone*, 1963) and the Fairy Godmother (from *Cinderella*, 1950) are placed together in a house in Traverse Town where Sora can learn magic, while others like Simba (from *The Lion King*, 1994) and the Genie (from *Aladdin*) ‘travel with’ Sora’s party in the form of Summons, only visible when called on in battle. The villains of the game also fit their setting of Hollow Bastion, a dark environment in which Malificent (from *Sleeping Beauty*, 1959), Hades (from *Hercules*), Ursula (from *The Little Mermaid*) and Oogie Boogie (from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*) can plot against Sora and his friends. Malificent and Hades travel easily between worlds, lending them a supernatural air. In this way many of the Disney movies are referenced through the narrative, settings and gameplay dynamics. The Disney characters fit their settings in an uncomplicated way, providing a sense of escapism and nostalgia for players around the world. By contrast, the Square characters seem to have been chosen for their complexity.

Unlike Disney, Square chose only a few of its previous character sets to deploy in the narrative of *Kingdom Hearts*, most notably Cloud Strife, Aerith Gainsborough and Yuffie Kisaragi from *Final*

*Fantasy VII* (1997), Squall Leonhart (named Leon in *Kingdom Hearts*) and Selphie Tilmitt from *Final Fantasy VIII* (1998), and Tidus and Wakka from *Final Fantasy X* (2001).<sup>19</sup> The massive sales of *FFVII* on the new PlayStation console in 1997, followed by *FFVIII* just a year later, made the games strong reference points for *Kingdom Hearts*. *Final Fantasy X* shared a development schedule and platform with *Kingdom Hearts*, both released on the PlayStation 2. Opening *Kingdom Hearts* with the bright and cheerful Destiny Islands, featuring Tidus, Wakka and Selphie in fighting tutorials, was a smart marketing move to draw in this shared audience. Just as in *FFX*, Wakka fights with his blitzball by lobbing it at Sora, who can deflect it back.<sup>20</sup> Tidus holds a *bō* staff in this game and appears shorter and younger than in *FFX*. Selphie is the least intimidating, fighting with a jumprope. This character set trains both Sora and the player in fighting skills, acting as mentors and guides. This speaks to the player's possible familiarity with the characters, and acts as a gateway for unfamiliar players. Since the setting of Destiny Islands is an original Nomura creation, it stands in contrast to the later Disney sets and makes the player feel safe in a familiar JRPG environment before setting out from 'home base.'

In contrast to the bright demeanour of characters in Destiny Islands, the Square characters found in Traverse Town manifest a sense of darkness, brooding, and loss. Traverse Town is another Nomura creation, a dark jumble of buildings and alleyways with many obstructions such as gates, crates and high walls. Aerith stands in the main square, while Yuffie and Leon meet Sora in the hotel. Seeing Aerith may be a shock for the player, as her death in *FFVII* was one of the defining moments of the game, if not the JRPG genre as a whole.<sup>21</sup> Yuffie was a minor and optional character in that game, and is deployed here mostly as a fighting companion to Leon, as her ninja skills and shuriken attacks enliven his swordplay strategy.<sup>22</sup> For his part, Leon is an enigmatic figure, tall and intimidating on first meeting, dressed entirely in black clothing with a scar across the bridge of his nose. He corrects Yuffie when she calls him 'Squall,' intimating that he has taken on a new identity in Traverse Town. Leon's character in *FFVIII* was one of angst and standoffishness, alienating some players and critics. Although he grew psychologically over the course of that game, his brusque way of speaking and cold answers were well known. Taken together, Aerith, Yuffie and Leon seem more mysterious and mature than the characters encountered in Destiny Islands. The fact that their colour palette and general outlook accord with their environments suggest that these two character sets were chosen to create or amplify a certain mood for the player.

At the next world, the Olympus Coliseum, Sora and friends fight against Heartless in rounds of battle, with the strongest opponents appearing last. In the Pegasus cup, Leon and Yuffie are the final opponents, but just as Philoctetes is complimenting Sora and pals on their success, a tall caped figure in black clothing walks in with a measured tread. As he passes the camera, we see Sora's eyes open wide in admiration. It is Cloud Strife, face half obscured by the cape, but immediately recognizable for his blond spiked hair, piercing blue eyes and massive sword. During the tournament, we see Cloud on the sidelines talking to Hades, objecting that killing Sora is not in his contract. Cloud is a tough opponent in the coliseum, either defeated by Sora or victorious, in which case he refrains from dealing Sora a killing blow. Sora later emerges from the fighting grounds to find Cloud on the steps, looking downcast. Cloud admits his connection to Hades: 'I'm looking for someone. Hades promised to help.' Echoing the narrative of *Hercules*, we assume that Cloud is searching for someone in the Underworld, who could be either Aerith or Sephiroth. When

Sora admits he is searching too, Cloud gives him the Sonic Blade and tells him not to lose sight of ‘your light’. In these ways, the character set of *Final Fantasy VII* plays a large role in *Kingdom Hearts*, with the Cloud scenario connecting to themes of death and loss, searching and the dark side of human nature (see also Wood, 2009). In the *Kingdom Hearts Final Mix* we see Cloud and Sephiroth meet in battle at the coliseum. Fitting the narrative of both *FFVII* and *Kingdom Hearts*, Sephiroth asks Cloud to join him in darkness. His question, ‘I’m a part of you, am I?’, is an astute reference to both the ‘heart’ narrative of *Kingdom Hearts* and the genetic clone narrative of *FFVII*. This moment is a fine example of transculturality in *Kingdom Hearts* as past characters are leveraged not only for consumer appeal and marketing, but also for narrative fusion.

Visually, the appearance of Cloud and Sephiroth together reinforces the *shōnen/bishōnen* duality of Sora and Riku, while Sephiroth’s character design is echoed closely in that of Ansem, the final boss of *Kingdom Hearts*. These characters are evoked particularly to resonate with themes of rivalry, the yearning for eternal life or a vanquishing of death, and the search for missing loved ones. In Hollow Bastion, Aerith, Yuffie and Leon give Sora the sad news they will never meet again, even though memory will provide an everlasting connection. The central narrative of Sora, Riku and Kairi is left up in the air at the end of the game, with Sora promising to find Riku once again. However, Cid brings Cloud to Traverse Town in the end credits, and we see Aerith peering up into Cloud’s face as if to check he is all right. While closure is not achieved for the central character set of *Kingdom Hearts*, this small scene seems to promise the player that closure may be possible in time.

### ***Kingdom Hearts* in Context**

Japanese game scholars have expressed ideas about time periods (*jidai*) and games in various ways. Ishii Zenji (2017, p. 14) argues that *jidai no nagare*, the flow of time, should be taken into account when analyzing the impact of any one game text.<sup>23</sup> Where Ishii follows a decade-based model, Nakagawa Daichi (2016) divides Japanese game history into *jidai* or ‘periods of time,’ moving from the ‘age of ideals’ up to 1970 to the ‘age of fiction’ in the 1980s to the ‘age of virtual reality’ in the 1990s-2000s, based on the ambitions and capabilities of game designers as well as technological advancements. Both critics share an emphasis of noting the real-world context when analyzing game content, design features and popularity, the last measured not only in terms of sales but also in terms of waiting lists, crowded arcades and positive reviews. Where videogame histories use ‘generations’ and ‘ages’ to connect game texts to their contexts, more text-based approaches analyze themes and cultural content in games to connect them to their place of origin or the time in which they were made.<sup>24</sup>

*Kingdom Hearts* is an interesting text for the ways in which it leverages characters from the past as well as the present, connecting to audiences that recognize the worlds and characters of Disney films and Square games. The Disney characters are well represented in a cross-section of popular films from the 1940s to the present, with a wide range of settings and character types. The fact that such a broad cross-section of Disney characters is chosen ensures that players of all ages will find a touchstone from their youth in *Kingdom Hearts*. Where Disney characters in *Kingdom Hearts* make emotional connections with players of all ages, however, the specific choices of characters from the *Final Fantasy* series speak to audiences from two distinct points in time—those who

remember *Final Fantasy VII* and *VIII* from the late 1990s, and those who just played *FFX* the year prior to *Kingdom Hearts*' release in 2002.

*Kingdom Hearts* draws the player in with the bright dynamism of *FFX* and *Destiny Islands* but soon turns to darker themes, widening the game's appeal to an older demographic, while at the same time following conventions of the JRPG—using psychological trauma and loss as stepping-stones to character development and growth. The sense of loss and yearning expressed by the central narrative of Sora, Riku and Kairi is mirrored and emphasized by the use of Cloud and Aerith, while death and despair permeate the story overall. The question of the human soul—what we are without a heart—is examined through many elements of the game's story, including the scientific reports of the villain Ansem. Reminiscent of Professor Hojo's secret reports to Shinra Corporation in *FFVII*, Ansem's reports show a man struggling with questions of life and death, but losing all compassion in the process. We read with horror his experiments on sentient beings, a narrative element that connects strongly to themes of bioethics in Japanese games of the period (Hutchinson, 2019, pp. 153-178). The overwhelming sense of loss and sadness connects the player to the real-world context of the late 1990s.

In Japan, *Kingdom Hearts* spoke to a pervading sense of anxiety following the Hanshin earthquake and Aum Shinrikyo attacks of 1995, as well as the 'lost decade' following the collapse of the bubble economy in 1991-1992 (Funabashi & Kushner, 2015). It is well documented that Japanese youth in the 1990s faced a very different economic outlook to that of their parents, experiencing less-employed forms of existence that became known as 'freeter' and 'NEET' (Goodman et al., 2012). The era has been studied for the 'disappearance of childhood' and a different kind of society emerging in the upheaval (Field, 1995). Japanese cultural critic Uno Tsunehiro sees 1995 as a dividing line between old and new ways of thinking in Japanese society. A time of tumultuous change and *jidai no henka*, or a 'change in era,' the latter half of the 1990s laid the groundwork for a sea-change in thinking about labor, precarity, and globalization, reflected in anime, manga, films, novels and TV programs of the time (Uno, 2008, pp. 13-15). Uno devotes a chapter to '1995 ideology' (*1995-nen shisō*) which examined the question of how to live in a time of such uncertainty, finding answers in a new self-consciousness and a belief in one's own power to create an individual narrative. This may be seen in artworks such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, focusing intensely on the self and the meaning found in everyday relationships (Uno, 2008, pp. 95-98).

In North America, Europe and Australia, the gloomy palette and sense of loss manifested in the *FFVII* characters spoke to the existential angst of 'Generation X,' a term from Douglas Coupland's 1994 novel that resonated with young people facing high unemployment and social disconnection.<sup>25</sup> 1994 also saw the release of *Reality Bites* (dir. Ben Stiller), widely recognized as a Generation X film, in which young people become disillusioned facing difficult choices in their lives and careers. The lingering sense of loss and mourning engendered by Cloud's search for Aerith may have resonated deeply with players of this generation, with themes of death also echoing the 1994 death of Kurt Cobain, lead singer of the Seattle grunge band Nirvana.<sup>26</sup> Tom Beaudoin has argued that for this generation, intense personal emotion and suffering could be seen as spiritual in nature, while their 'shared immersion' in popular culture provided 'a major meaning-making system' (Beaudoin, 1998, p. xiv). *Final Fantasy VII* was a breakout title that attracted massive audiences across the globe, marking the entry of 'JRPG' into the Western imaginary. The

emotional impact of *Final Fantasy VII* has been described as ‘profound’ (Wood, 2009, p. 167), so the use of Cloud and Aerith in *Kingdom Hearts* may be seen as a strategy to draw in gamers in their 30s as well as younger players.

*Kingdom Hearts* may also be considered in terms of the real-world context of 2002, its year of release. Much scholarship has shown the impact of the deep economic recession of Japan’s ‘lost decade’ (1991-2001), which in fact stretched into ‘decades’ as successive administrations failed to stimulate economic growth. The title of Harootunian and Yoda’s 2006 book, ‘Japan after Japan’ points to a desire for moving on, even though society and the economy both remained stagnant. Mathews and White (2004) examine Japan’s ‘changing generations,’ while Brinton (2010) studies Japanese youth ‘in transition.’ However, the fact that no transition to a new state of being ever emerged in terms of concrete change added to the sense of the doldrums facing Japanese youth in the new century. On the other side of the Pacific, the game was released in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. It is difficult to overstate the psychological impact of this event on American society. The very words ‘September 11’ still evoke strong ideas of death and terror, massive civilian losses, the work of unseen forces, and an overall sense of shock and despair. Uno Tsunehiro connects the global sense of anxiety after the 9/11 attacks to a strong sense of precarity in Japan, intensified by the neoliberal labor restructuring of new Prime Minister Koizumi Jun’ichirō (Uno, 2008, p. 13). Bringing this context back to the game *Kingdom Hearts*, players in both Japan and America would have been surrounded by a public discourse of anxiety and unease. It is perhaps unsurprising that the game took such dark themes as its storyline, but the game also offers a great deal of hope.

The first *Kingdom Hearts* is a very hopeful game, carried by the idea that light will always conquer the darkness, and even though people may disappear, we can always find them again. Although Disney films are well-known for their happy endings and neat sense of closure, the lack of closure to the game narrative in *Kingdom Hearts* is conventional in Japanese storytelling, where readers/players are often invited to speculate for themselves on possible endings. In *Kingdom Hearts*, it seems there is no closure to Riku’s disappearance, and seeking him will most likely form the quest for the next game. This echoes the conclusion to *Final Fantasy X*, which ends in a state of questioning—Tidus is sacrificed, becoming an object of Yuna’s search in the sequel *Final Fantasy X-2* (which was not released until 2003). By opening the game with Tidus and Wakka in the Destiny Islands, *Kingdom Hearts* offers players hope that Tidus is still alive somewhere in the fictional imagination. In both *Final Fantasy* and *Kingdom Hearts* the player is invited to suspend their disbelief and live in a world where the missing are found and the dead presumed risen. While Sora began as a transcultural character design, *Kingdom Hearts* ultimately conforms to the *shōnen* JRPG genre, complete with Japanese narrative structures and the *Weekly Shōnen Jump* ethic of friendship, winning and perseverance.

## Conclusions

There is a deep connection between games as texts and their real-world contexts, which we can express in terms of a discourse. The connections between real world and gameworld in *Kingdom Hearts* mirror the in-game connections (and disjunctions) between Disney and Square, using characters imbued with nostalgia and characters of the present. The greatest disjunction in the

game comes from the clash of art styles, although this is mitigated by using a uniform colour palette, positioning Sora in Mickey's place in the Sora-Donald-Goofy trio and transforming the appearance of Sora and pals in Atlantica and Halloween Town. The greatest connection is made through the leveraging of past characters from Disney and Square to populate the world of *Kingdom Hearts*, which is both a commercial marketing ploy and a reach towards the global audience.<sup>27</sup> Although the Disney characters trade more on nostalgia and Square characters draw on darker themes, the perfect transcultural moment is captured in the meeting of Cloud and Hades at the Olympus Coliseum, as the player must draw equally on their knowledge of both *Hercules* and *Final Fantasy VII* to understand the significance of the scene. The game production can certainly be seen as a strategy to recoup finances at a low point in company fortunes at both Disney and Square Enix, but the ways in which past characters are deployed is very astute. *Kingdom Hearts* deliberately and obviously evokes the past, trading on nostalgia and player emotion in powerful ways.

Examining the game as a transcultural production means also taking into account the global historical context, connecting to contemporary upheavals and despondency. In this essay I have argued that a major contributor to the success of *Kingdom Hearts* is its emphasis on loss and yearning, which fit not only the JRPG genre but also the sense of anxiety pervading both Japan and America at the time of its release. *Kingdom Hearts* is deeply rooted in conventions of Japanese storytelling, following the journey of the *shōnen* protagonist as he grows and develops through the story, but leaving the ending open to interpretation. In the end, the JRPG conventions in *Kingdom Hearts* are stronger than its transcultural visual elements. However, the ways in which the narrative employed nostalgia, loss and hope have generated a lasting impact on audiences around the world, accomplishing a transcultural connection far beyond the bounds of the initial collaboration.

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<sup>1</sup> *Dragon Quest* (1986-) was published by Enix while *Final Fantasy* (1987-) was published by Square – the two companies merged in 2003. In-depth discussion of JRPG game elements as well as the use of the term 'JRPG' may be found in Hutchinson and Pelletier-Gagnon (2022); see also Zagal and Deterding (2018).

<sup>2</sup> An excellent recent source on Disney and representation is Roberts (2020). Brode (2005) rejects criticism of Disney representation in terms of race, gender or sexual identity. Critiques levelled at the films can be applied to the representation in Disney transmedia products including videogames, although game mechanics and player agency may affect the interpretation in different ways.

<sup>3</sup> Armstrong (2018) examines music in Disney's *Moana* as the American imperialist appropriation of Polynesian culture, while Di Giovanni (2017) considers translations of Disney products into Arabic in terms of a 'new imperialism.' Hong Kong Disneyland (Choi 2010) and Euro Disney (Smoodin, 1994, pp. 14-16) have also been studied in terms of American cultural imperialism.

<sup>4</sup> Takahashi Masatomo, president of the Oriental Land Company, approached Walt Disney Productions with the idea to open a park in Tokyo as early as 1978. Yoshimoto (1994) rejects the notion of American cultural imperialism, arguing that Tokyo Disneyland should be understood in terms of Tokyo's cultural hegemony over regional Japan.

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Brannen (1992) argues more persuasively that Tokyo Disneyland can be understood as a recontextualization of American culture, to suit Japanese consumer tastes.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Consalvo (2013) and Pelletier-Gagnon (2011).

<sup>6</sup> For example, see essays in the collection edited by Penix-Tadsen (2019).

<sup>7</sup> The introduction to *Engaging Transculturality* (Abu-Er-Rub et al, 2019) examines these ideas in turn, together with their scholarly legacies.

<sup>8</sup> On one of the most egregious failures, Donald Duck in *The Three Caballeros* (1945), see Julianne Burton-Carvajal's essay in Smoodin (1994).

<sup>9</sup> The pop-up café was hosted by OH MY CAFE! in Tokyo and Osaka for one month, 11 December 2020 to 11 January 2021, and also at the ARTNIA & SQUARE ENIX CAFE from 16 January to 12 March 2021. See <https://www.dangonews.com/popup-cafe/khcafe2020>

<sup>10</sup> See Blom (2020) on the different understandings of characters and *kyara* in Japan.

<sup>11</sup> Publisher Kadokawa Haruki did much to popularize the idea of *sekai-kan* as the basis for building media-mix franchises.

<sup>12</sup> Prior to *Kingdom Hearts*, Capcom enjoyed great success with Japan-American collaboration (e.g. *Street Fighter*), but not so much in the artistic design part of the equation. Japanese artists took the lead while American Mick McGinty was responsible for the airbrushing and 3D effects (Hutchinson 2019, pp.80-81).

<sup>13</sup> For more on *shōnen* visual style, aesthetics and themes see Drummond-Matthews (2010), Okabe (2019), Hutchinson (2019, pp. 106-109), Hutchinson (2020).

<sup>14</sup> Monden (2018, pp.71-72) notes the influence of teen fashion magazine illustrator Naito Rune on the 'cute' *shōnen* image in the context of 1950s girls' culture, and explains the role of *shōjo manga* (girls' comics) and TV in the flourishing *bishōnen* aesthetic.

<sup>15</sup> Amano began his career working on more typically 'shōnen' titles like *Speed Racer*, but he is best known for the *Final Fantasy* artwork, as it stands out for its idiosyncratic flowing lines, and slightly surreal beauty. Amano's art books in *The Sky* series are easily available on Amazon, as well as his biography, featuring *Final Fantasy* characters on the cover. Amano's new book *Elegant Spirits* begins with visualizations of *Tale of Genji* characters, followed by depictions of fairies from Gaelic folklore, along with characters from Arthurian legend and Shakespearian drama (Amano, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> The *bishōnen* aesthetic also carries a sense of melancholy and tragic fate (Monden 2018), fitting for Riku's story.

<sup>17</sup> Mickey's 2013 reappearance in *Get a Horse!* spurred an Oscar nomination for Best Animated Short Film in 2014. See also Kaufman and Gerstein (2018).

<sup>18</sup> Licensing agreements also ensured the integrity of original Disney settings. An interesting account is May (2019).

<sup>19</sup> Auron appears in *Kingdom Hearts II*. Although successful on its release in North America, *Final Fantasy VI* (1994) was not referenced in *Kingdom Hearts*, possibly because it lacked a 'main character,' with the player able to form their party from any of the game's 14 playable characters. Although Terra would have provided an excellent conflicted protagonist, she does not fit the *shōnen* aesthetic of *Kingdom Hearts*, and was not required for the gameplay through the entirety of *FFVI*. The player's bond with Cloud, Leon and Tidus is arguably stronger, playing as those protagonists through almost the entire story of their respective games.

<sup>20</sup> A good playthrough of *Kingdom Hearts Final Mix* by JetMonkeyHDGaming may be seen at

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0eo8MT8UyY&list=PL6zNqSnoLmqgJSneElumSF8WyoaPwLIYR>

<sup>21</sup> See Gamestm Staff (2014), Retro Gamer staff (2011).

<sup>22</sup> In *FFVII* Yuffie fought to protect her islands, colonized by the military forces of Shinra Corporation. The loss of these islands to corporate greed provides the geopolitical backstory to *FFVII*.

<sup>23</sup> As an example, the success of *Street Fighter* may be understood through its context of Japan's mid-1990s economic recession, 'Japan-bashing' in the American press and the onscreen rivalry between Ryu and Ken as stand-ins for Japan and America, fighting on screen and off. This application of Ishii's ideas to *Street Fighter* is seen in Hutchinson (2019, pp. 77-78, 83, 96-97).

<sup>24</sup> See Hutchinson (2019, pp. 8-11) for an overview of this approach.

<sup>25</sup> For cultural and political analyses of Generation X see Brabazon (2005), Craig and Bennett (1997). Ritchie (1995) demonstrates the conundrum marketers found when attempting to sell products to the Gen X audience in the 1990s.

<sup>26</sup> An outpouring of grief followed Cobain's suicide, with *New York Times* writer Lorraine Ali (1994) concluding: 'I will always remember where I was when the news of Kurt's death reached me. Now, like my mom with President Kennedy or my father with Anwar Sadat, I too have a moment etched in my mind.' Not all people in the same generation felt the same way about the same event, and much diversity of experience comes from socioeconomic status as well as race (Craig and Bennett, 1997, pp.4-6). While Kurt Cobain may have been the 'voice of Generation X' for many, the death of rapper DMX in April 2021 caused historian Peniel E. Joseph (2021) to mourn the loss of 'a Gen X icon who gave Black men like me a stronger voice.'

<sup>27</sup> In previous work I criticized *Kingdom Hearts* in terms of both the disjunctive art style and the consumerist use of past characters (Hutchinson, 2019, p. 110).