

# Controllers and the Magic Kingdom

## Corporate Partnership, Synergy and the Limits of Cross-Promotion in Disney and Square Enix's Kingdom Hearts III (2019)

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# **Controllers and the Magic Kingdom: Corporate Partnership, Synergy and the Limits of Cross-Promotion in Disney and Square Enix's *Kingdom Hearts III* (2019)**

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## **Abstract**

Who controls the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise? This article examines this question using a mixed industrial and promotional approach to seek moments of revelation about the creation and status of the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise for both of its conglomerate co-creators, Disney and Square Enix. Disney's conglomerated industrial practice has long been assessed for adherence to the concept of synergy. By examining where and how synergy was adopted as an industrial logic within the creation of the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise, and *Kingdom Hearts III* in particular, I argue that it is in moments of tension where we can find the most instructive evidence for who controls the games we play. Following work by Janet Wasko (2001) and Barbara Klinger (1999) in particular, I first look across the shared discursive history of the franchise and then at the promotion of *Kingdom Hearts III* for instances where synergy breaks down or becomes contested. These, I contend, demonstrate the limits of the logic of synergy in cross-cultural, transindustrial production cultures.

## **Author Keywords**

*Kingdom Hearts*, Synergy, Cross-promotion, Disney, Square Enix

## **Introduction**

Who controls the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise? This question is examined using a mixed industrial and promotional approach to seek moments of revelation about the creation and status of the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise for both of its conglomerate co-creators, Disney and Square Enix. Central to this collaboration is the idea of inter-conglomerate synergy. The concept of transmedia synergy has been widely discussed as a vital element in the Walt Disney Company's growth from a film studio into one of the world's leading media conglomerates. Writing in her foundational political economic study of Disney, Janet Wasko argues that by the 1990s, not only was Disney "busy diversifying, they became masters at business cross-fertilization, and perhaps

the quintessential masters of synergy” (2001, p. 36). As this suggests, synergy is normally conceptualized as both the cause and consequence of contemporary globalizing business practices involving media branding. It is the mechanism by which expanding conglomerates have tried to ensure that they are maximizing the reach of their intellectual properties, running smoothly, and creating ever-greater corporate efficiencies. Consequently, at the core of such discussions about synergy is the impression of corporate control, over everything from intellectual property rights to the exercise of power within partnership agreements, to control over public discourse itself.

However, Paul Grainge’s study of Hollywood studio branding suggests that such monolithic views of conglomerated power might be prone to over-statement. He argues that, “While much discussed, synergy has practical difficulties that are often ignored in brand criticism” (Grainge, 2008, p. 11). Grainge’s observations, as well as those of scholars like Simone Murray (2005), have suggested that synergy has changed meaning dramatically over the past thirty years, and that the term has been used indiscriminately to apply to everything from conglomerate mergers to efficiencies in business practices. To view Disney, or any other company, as a “master of synergy” is therefore to make a statement about the company’s conglomerated power, influence and reach within contemporary culture. Yet the meaning of synergy itself in relation to globalizing conglomerates remains amorphous.

The ambiguities and conflicts hidden within the indiscriminate use of “synergy” as a term are perhaps even more apparent around games than they are in relation to film. Synergy in games studies has been defined by Frank Roost as the way a diversified (often conglomerate) company

can use one media product to promote another, for instance by introducing a new song as part of a movie sound track, by promoting the broadcasting of a sports event with articles in a magazine, or by selling computer games featuring popular cartoon characters. (Roost, 2005, p. 262)

Wasko also finds an instructive example in the perceived failure of Disney’s *Hercules* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 2007). She traces the limits of Disney synergy—in the forms of marketing, merchandising and ancillary production—noting that even the biggest of conglomerates can misstep (2001, pp. 72-83). Henry Jenkins has queried the smoothness of such intra-conglomerate operations, which Jenkins has claimed can make “media companies look like dysfunctional families” (2004, p. 37). Although synergy may be a conglomerate’s goal, these studies suggest that more attention needs to be paid to how, when and to what extent conglomerates are able to create and successfully manage synergy. Game industry conglomerates are becoming central to these debates, and their competition and conflicts are often recounted in discussions about “platform wars”, and in the usage of biological evolutionary metaphors (Therrien & Picard, 2015). In this article, therefore, I look to an example of collaboration between the purported “master of synergy”, Disney, and Japanese games conglomerate Square Enix, in order to assess the extent and limits of synergy.

Just like Disney, Square Enix is at the forefront of debates involving synergy. In their case, Square Enix has been seen as crucial to the global rise and development of the Role-Playing Game (RPG) genre (Consalvo, 2016), and the company has been conglomerating ever since the initial merger/acquisition of Square by Enix in 2003 (Fujii, 2005). Mia Consalvo argues that

Square Enix is now an exemplar of these kinds of game industry conglomeration narratives, stating that:

decisions about localization and marketing further solidify Square Enix as a particular kind of game creator (or author) and a particular kind of company. That includes being transnational and multimodal but only in carefully considered complementary ways. (Consalvo, 2016, p. 115)

Square Enix's development as a company and involvement with Disney echoes Robert Allen Brookey's claim about transmedia synergy in games production. Brookey states that "What can be said with certainty is this: when film studios work with video game producers, it is often one major international conglomerate working with another" (2010, p. 23). The question for this article is: how well do Square Enix and Disney work together as conglomerates, and when they do, which one exercises control at which points and to what ends in the production and promotional processes of video games? I argue that by examining the tensions, debates and distinctive corporate practices that have arisen between Square Enix and Disney during the course of the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise, we can better understand the boundaries around the concept of synergy and control in inter-conglomerate transmedia collaboration.

The tensions, debates and dysfunction engendered by large-scale collaborative video game productions are fruitful sites for analysis because they let us see the blemishes in brands. While they allow us to better understand the growing importance of synergy within media markets, they also aid in identifying and comprehending its limitations. As with other areas of synergy, Frank Roost declares that Disney offers a useful example for understanding not just intra-conglomerate synergy, but also external, cross-promotional and inter-industrial assertions of control and power. He states that

Disney offers an immense potential for both cross-promotional campaigns in cooperation with other companies and in-house cross-promotion marketing strategies—and the firm's management knows how to use this potential intensively. Cross-promotion—marketing activities carried out in cooperation by two different companies using the popularity of their brand names to promote one another's—is today a major profit source for Disney. (Roost, 2005, pp. 263-64)

As Roost suggests, corporate partnerships have long been an integral part of Disney's industrial strategy, extending back at least as far as the 1950s, when Disney sought external support for the construction of their theme parks (Birdsall, 2018).

The partnership between Disney and Square Enix has been immensely profitable for both, with each of the numbered *Kingdom Hearts* franchise games selling over five-million copies in the global market (Khan, 2019). Given the longevity of this franchise, I would extend Roost's observation about cross-promotion in the case of *Kingdom Hearts*. By co-creating the video games and their attendant promotional campaigns in the USA and Japan, Disney and Square Enix do more than raise one another's brand profiles. They have also created a new cross-industrial brand in *Kingdom Hearts* itself. In doing so, these promotional campaigns create a wealth of industrial discourse, including promotional texts, events and ancillary licensing that generate *new* brand meanings for Disney and Square Enix. At the same time such promotion

works to reciprocally *reify* each conglomerate's brand identity through their contributions to the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise. Therefore, this study focuses primarily on industrial and marketing texts and interviews from the Disney and Square Enix companies and creators in order to examine how this partnership has worked, and where the boundary lines between corporate worlds have been drawn. I do so by building on the political economic foundations laid for studio study by Janet Wasko (2001) and others (Meehan, 1999; Wasko & MacDonald, 2007) allied with historical materialist reception studies (Staiger, 2000; Klinger, 1997), in order to enable the study of corporate relations and the discourses they create in the service of *Kingdom Hearts*. I argue that by examining these cross-promotional traces and the way those who disseminate them attempt to exert control over our interpretations of *Kingdom Hearts* games, we can see the exercise of, and cracks in, the armor of conglomerate control.

Moreover, it behooves us to attend to these discourses because of the way globalization is increasingly framing game production as transnational and transindustrial. The potential for dysfunctionality, tension and synergistic failure is exacerbated when considering examples of production comprised of cross-industrial, transcultural and transmedia production. Specifically, this study focuses on the *Kingdom Hearts* games because they amount to more than a franchise. They are also what Heather Lea Birdsall calls a 'superfranchise.' Birdsall argues that *Kingdom Hearts* forms a superfranchise by remediating other franchises and enabling their stories and worlds to continue within its own texts (2018, p. 78). The games perform this superfranchise function by remediating already-popular Disney characters and characters from Square Enix's Final Fantasy saga inside a new storyworld. With this in mind, *Kingdom Hearts III* has been selected from the wider superfranchise series for deeper analysis, because it contains the most extensive remediation to date in the sense that *Kingdom Hearts III* incorporates more Disney characters than past games in the superfranchise. Part Disney, part Square Enix, *Kingdom Hearts III* provides a useful frame for analyzing debates about franchising, promotion, and the limits of synergy in transmedia, trans-industrial video game production.

### ***Creating a superfranchise: the industrial history and negotiations around Kingdom Hearts***

A first step towards greater understanding of the way *Kingdom Hearts* functions as a superfranchise is to trace the history of the collaboration and negotiation that went into its creation. Not least because the production of the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise has taken place against a tumultuous industrial period for both Disney and Square Enix. For Disney the late 1990s and 2000s saw, among other changes, the rise of computer-generated animation (CG animation) and the decline of its traditional base in cel animation (Budd & Kirsch, 2005). The mid-2000s also saw a rift in the company, as CEO Michael Eisner was forced to step down by the Disney Board, following poor industrial relations between Eisner and Steve Jobs at Disney's ascendant CG animation partner, Pixar. When Pixar's industrial agreement with Disney lapsed and Eisner failed to secure a new distribution deal, he was ousted, enabling the rise of the current Disney CEO Robert Iger (Pallant, 2013).

Iger's first letter to shareholder's identifies an important shift in Disney's policies as Iger took control of the company. He argues that "Technology – and our ability to leverage it effectively – is [a] critically important part of our long-term growth strategy" (Iger, 2006, p. 6). Under Iger Disney has increasingly diversified its technology and intellectual property holdings, for example, buying Pixar outright in 2006. Iger has also and brought Pixar's creative team into the

heart of Disney's animation production. For instance, Iger placed John Lasseter in charge of Disney's animation division. However, while Lasseter was successful in raising the profile of Disney animation (notably through the adoption of CG animation) he was recently also required to step down following allegations of sexual misconduct in the workplace (May, 2019). That these managerial upheavals and scandals have played out against the backdrop of a volatile production period in Disney's animation history is perhaps not surprising, but together they indicate how significantly Disney has changed as a company over the past twenty years, the period which roughly coincides with the Disney conglomerate's co-production of the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise.

Video games at Disney are a sign of these changing strategies and times. Notably, Iger's first letter to shareholders continues, "Video games, personal video players, broadband-based devices and other mobile content providers are having an increasing impact on our businesses" (2006, p. 6). Therefore, video games were, by 2006, already a significant part of the Disney conglomerate's industrial plans and landscape. The conglomerate had already set up a video game division in the 1990s, which bifurcated into Buena Vista Interactive and Disney Interactive in the early 2000s, only to be re-integrated and re-branded as Disney Interactive Studios in 2007 (Iger, 2007, p. 33). Thereafter, Disney Interactive Studios was folded into the Consumer Productions and Interactive Media division of Disney in 2015, with a press release from the time declaring that

The new structure is designed to share technological expertise and maximize opportunities and efficiencies across two divisions that have increasingly become focused on similar objectives of delivering cutting-edge, interactive consumer experiences and products. (New Disney Segment, 2015)

This continual re-organization of video game production at Disney during the 2000s suggests the conglomerate's struggle to find a reliably successful model for it. This has made the company more reliant on partners in the games industry that are able to help Disney better-exploit its intellectual properties. Moreover, these shifts indicate how quickly the video game market has been changing, reflecting the technological booms and busts that became a feature of the wider market in this period (Therrien & Picard, 2015).

Most notable for Disney was the rise and fall of its Disney Infinity games system, which combined the purchase of Disney character toys with video game content through bespoke technologies that connected toys to consoles. Beginning in 2013, Disney Infinity combined toy sales with video game content, with each toy purchased adding playable areas and characters to the game system. This meant that Disney characters could be played across different modalities, enabling remediation and extension of storyworlds, and the augmentation of characters and interaction between storyworlds. However, the system saw diminishing returns across three iterations, and Disney Infinity 3.0 was eventually revealed as the last in this Disney superfranchise game. Iger explains that the game "business is a changing business and we did not have enough confidence in that business in terms of being stable enough to stay in it" (Alexander, 2016). The abandonment of Disney Infinity, read alongside the near-constant reshaping of the divisions managing video game production and licensing at Disney, are, as Iger argues, suggestive of Disney's failure to achieve intra-conglomerate synergy in the games arena. It is also indicative of a broader shift from Disney as game producer to copyright holder and licensor instead.

As a corporate partner, Disney's activities within game production are highly varied. Sometimes, Disney has directly created games, but at other times the company has acted as a character licensor with little involvement in production itself. The company's relationship with Square is a reflection of these changing corporate strategies. Japanese games company Square became one of Disney's partner institutions in the early 2000s. Although it was already well-known for the *Final Fantasy* franchise, when it first entered into this partnership with Disney, Square was not yet a conglomerate. As Consalvo (2016) has argued, Square's merger with Enix created a period of consolidation at the games company, while enacting the corporation's first taste of conglomeration. Importantly, this merger made Square Enix company multi-national. For instance, Consalvo points to Square Enix's acquisition of British company Eidos in 2009 as a turning point in the company's conglomeration because "[s]uch resources are key to its overall strategy—finding more efficient inroads into global markets" (2016, p. 113). Square Enix's acquisitions in this same period, then, are a sign of its attempts to synergize its operations through conglomeration. In essence, Consalvo argues that the Japanese RPG is made transnational (if not global) in this period through the creation of a network of companies and games that shared technological and narrative traits with their Japanese counterparts (and owners) at Square Enix. This is significant because it demonstrates Square Enix's growing experience in working to synergistically create games across borders, languages and markets.

However, just as Disney experienced upheavals as it grew, so too have the past two decades been a period of rapid and sometimes uneasy change for Square Enix. This occurred despite the company's rapid conglomeration. According to the company's annual reports, Square Enix has struggled to keep pace with the quick changeovers in consoles during the early 2000s, and then again with the shift to downloading and mobile gaming in the late-2000s and 2010s. Company president Yoichi Wada claimed in 2006, for example, that the preceding era was better thought of as the "game console" era, and that "the prerequisite conditions necessary to maintain this ecosystem have begun to crumble" (Wada, 2006, p. 3). When Yosuke Matsuda took over in 2013, it was to a grim picture of over-crowding in the console game market, even while that market was being eroded by "social gaming" (Matsuda, 2013, pp. 3-4). His answer was, in part, to seek ways to synergize even unfinished game content during development, and to turn towards content that could be localized by region, instead of chasing massive global game releases (2013, pp. 6-7). Part of this has resulted in the kinds of conglomeration noted above, but it is also worth observing that, as Square Enix has consolidated its position as a leading RPG conglomerate, it has shifted from being a weaker to a more dominant industry partner in such arrangements. For example, Matsuda has declared that "We believe that partnerships with local companies will prove effective in developing our content business [in China] and intend to continue to collaborate with key players" (Matsuda, 2016, p. 10). The implication is that Square Enix's strategy of global expansion into developing games markets was well-established (and continuing to expand) during the time of its partnership with Disney to co-create the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise.

As these tumultuous histories are intended to suggest, Disney and Square Enix were both expanding and changing shape to meet the needs of the games market in the early 2000s as they moved into one another's orbits. The creation of *Kingdom Hearts* as a collaboratively produced franchise is a sign of the experimentation resulting from this shifting industrial landscape. *Kingdom Hearts* is, consequently, a complex franchise whose production has also been marked by shifts between platforms and (unequal) partnership agreements. Nevertheless, according to

trade sources from the time of the partnership's inception, Square's president Hisaishi Suzuki saw his company's collaboration with Disney as excitingly "unprecedented". He states:

Square's expertise in game design and action-based RPGs, combined with Disney's historic legacy of rich characters, animation and story development, will allow us to bring a unique product to established gamers who already expect the best from Square, while at the same time introducing new players to this genre of interactive entertainment. (Suzuki, quoted in JKMedia, 2001).

As Suzuki's comments suggest, the unprecedented aspects of the partnership operated at the level of inter-corporate synergy. In the guise of *Kingdom Hearts*, this inter-corporate synergy functioned as a mechanism by which each company could commingle existing properties to manage potential risk and heighten potential rewards. As might be expected, Suzuki's statement works to reassure: the risk associated with game design for Square would be off-set by the presence of Disney's characters, while Disney's own risk would be mitigated by having experienced RPG designers handling game creation.

Disney also proclaimed the benefits of its partnership with Square on its inception. Michael Eisner, then still the CEO at Disney, wrote in 2001 to his company's shareholder's proclaiming:

An area of great potential growth is our interactive games business. [...] Clearly, the cutting-edge technology of Interactive games is a natural fit for our company. For example, we are currently working on a game called *Kingdom Hearts*, which Square Soft of Japan is developing with us. (Eisner, 2001)

Eisner's proclamations of ownership over the first *Kingdom Hearts* game seem to clash with those seen in Suzuki's comments. Furthermore, Eisner's statement hints at the inequality at the heart of this early deal. Square is positioned as working *for* Disney, and Disney is suggested to be actively controlling the game's design process. From the beginning, each company worked to position themselves within the *Kingdom Hearts* collaboration as the senior partner within it, suggesting that synergy was always a highly contested business for Disney and Square Enix.

### ***Wrestling for control: creative control within long-term inter-conglomerate partnerships***

Press releases from the time of *Kingdom Hearts*' inception suggest that Disney did exert a high degree of control over the early production of the franchise. For example, even one press release from Square proclaims that the game's protagonists, Sora, Riku and Kairi, are "new Disney characters" (Yamashita, 2002; JKMedia, 2001). Later commentary on the franchise confirms this assessment, as when series creator Tetsuya Nomura is taciturn on his return to the franchise for *Kingdom Hearts II* (Nomura, 2005):

'I love Sora, but it's with a broken heart,' Nomura mutters out from underneath his hat. Indeed, not unlike a parent giving a child up for adoption, Nomura has no control over Sora or any of the other original characters appearing in *Kingdom Hearts*. The contract between Square Enix and Disney gives almost full control of the *Kingdom Hearts* property over to Disney ("*Kingdom Hearts* Ultimania Interviews," 2005).

This statement operates as both a complaint about Square Enix's lack of creative power within the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise, and as a claim to authority over the franchise by its originating



author and designer, Nomura. However, Nomura was not entirely powerless and developments around three aspects of his control over the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise are worth greater consideration: first, his ongoing negotiations over character rights with Disney; second, his team's recreation of Disney characters at Square Enix; and third, his control over the marketing of his games.

Nomura's negotiations to gain greater access to Disney's characters are an ongoing refrain across his time on the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise. In a press release for games event E3 from 2002, the originality of Nomura's concept for *Kingdom Hearts* (Nomura, 2002) is framed not just as being about narrative recombination, but also about scale:

For the first time, multiple Disney characters and worlds co-exist in one interactive product. More than 100 Disney characters appear in the game including Jafar and Aladdin from Disney's *Aladdin*, Clayton and Tarzan from Disney's *Tarzan*<sup>TM</sup>, Hades and Hercules from *Hercules*, The Queen of Hearts and Alice from Disney's *Alice in Wonderland*, Oogie Boogie and Jack Skellington from Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and Simba from Disney's *The Lion King*. (Yamashita, 2002)

The sheer number of characters and worlds invoked by this trade article demonstrate the diversity in Disney's licensing to Nomura and Square for the original game. The types of characters are also noteworthy. They include live action Disney films and stop motion films in addition to Disney's animated characters. In this regard, the first *Kingdom Hearts* games becomes a showcase for Disney's feature film holdings, synergistically juxtaposing usually separate aspects of Disney's brand identity. Additionally, Square Enix was in negotiation for use of Disney protagonists and antagonists in almost equal measure, which suggests their clear intention to re-use key moments of conflict from across Disney's storyworlds as part of the gameplay, deepening the narrative connections between those usually separate worlds. Furthermore, by focusing on the remediation of a large number of Disney characters into videogame aesthetics, Square Enix is able to assert control over that process of adaptation. The *quantity* of synergy between Disney's famous characters forms and their spectacular incorporation into the new *Kingdom Hearts* game world demonstrates the distinctive ways that synergy was being applied within both partner companies.

This focus on ever-expanding uses of "gamified" Disney worlds has been a significant part of the promotional discourse around the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise. For example, for *Kingdom Hearts III*, a promotional narrative swirled around the potential inclusion of Pixar-created characters in new game. This was confirmed in a D23 convention announcement about *Toy Story*'s (John Lasseter, 1996) inclusion in *Kingdom Hearts* in 2017, which was later followed in 2018 by another D23 announcement about the appearances of Monstropolis and characters from Pixar's *Monster's Inc.* (Pete Docter, 2001) (Buhlman, 2018). Nomura later revealed that this process required the creation of a new relationship between Square Enix's staff and the creative team at Pixar. For example, in interview for the *Ultimania* book series, Nomura explains that he went to America twice to negotiate for the inclusion of Pixar characters in *Kingdom Hearts III*, and that it was Pixar that required the Japanese game team to create a new narrative for the use in the game. This was unusual, in as much as was more common for the *Kingdom Hearts III* team at Square Enix to work on recreating existing scenes and narrative sequences from Disney properties for reuse in their new *Kingdom Hearts* game. Here, Pixar's incorporation into the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise generates new game logics, simultaneously allowing Pixar to assert

control over their assets and making them different to the handling of other Disney properties, while ceding some narrative and creative control over the storytelling to Square Enix.

Nomura notes that this process was a piecemeal trust-building exercise between Pixar and Square Enix that began with the licensing of *Toy Story*. He recounts:

we were in correspondence for quite a long time, until the plans were boiled down into something they finally approved. It was the first time we had worked with Pixar, and we built a relationship through *Toy Story* which we used as a base when suggesting other titles (Nomura, quoted in Cecily, 2019).

As this suggests, Square Enix were not immediately or automatically granted access to all of Disney's cast of characters, even after Pixar became a subsidiary of the Walt Disney Company. Instead, Square Enix had to separately negotiate and compromise around the requirements of Disney's in-house creative teams. This indicates significant intra-conglomerate differences in working and licensing practices at Disney in this period, and the limits these differences placed on the synergy attainable by Square Enix for *Kingdom Hearts* games.

From the Disney side, too, the successful recreation of characters from active franchises became an issue. Part of the tension around character licensing has resulted from the inability to transfer Disney-Pixar's CG animated characters and their movement patterns directly from film to games. The common technologies being used generate tensions over ownership and control. These tensions are shown when Nomura explains, "We can't use the data as is, we have to recreate it ourselves [...] But sometimes when we create something that's really good and Disney think it's really good, they will ask for our information in return" (Nomura quoted in Hoggins, 2018). Tasha Sounart, from Pixar, who worked with Nomura on the *Kingdom Hearts III* adaptation, gives a different version of this encounter between the studios, saying:

Once you get the characters looking close to the film, the more people expect them to move like the films, so it creates extra-challenging work to get the animations spot-on with lots of rounds of feedback from our team (Sounart, quoted in Ahmed, 2018).

The two creative voices jockey for position in these comments, indicating an ongoing negotiation not just for the rights to reproduce Disney's characters as game characters, but also a tension between media and the different kinds of movement they require. In addition, these mutual claims about control and leadership suggest tensions around creative control, and a desire from both sides for recognition in relation to their respective technical mastery. Nomura has openly compared the adaptation process for the first and third games in the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise, saying "Because we go directly to the creators [of newer Disney films], they have the most passion for their titles. So it's just a bit harder to have freedom. On the older titles, it used to be a bit easier" (Futter, 2018). Such comments suggest that the temporal proximity between the production of films and games has put a strain on the relationship between Square Enix and Disney, and, as a consequence, the more friction arises the harder it is to attain synergistic, smooth game production.

One area where Nomura has retained a high degree of control is in his creation of the marketing for the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise. For example, in relation to *Kingdom Hearts II*, Nomura told *PlayStation Magazine*:

for all the trailers for all of my products, I'm literally there, directing the trailers. That's [an] advantage, because I'm able to take what I'm thinking in my head and portray it in the actual trailer. You probably didn't know that, but I'm there, editing every frame of the trailer ("Nomura: The Heart of the Game," 2005).

Now that Square Enix releases such promotional materials through its own website, the creation of these trailers affords Nomura with a high degree of control over the market positioning of his games and, consequently, over their promotional meanings.

This is extended by Nomura's work on the poster art for the franchise. Again, in relation to *Kingdom Hearts III*, Nomura has spoken about his personal investment in the franchise's marketing imagery. He has, for example, claimed that he was rushed by the international release date of *Kingdom Hearts III*, and that the

illustration dragged itself out until right before the deadline: coloring included, it took me about a week of straight work to finish. [...] I worked on it in the midst of people urging me to hurry since 'at this rate, the international version is just going to have a black cover!' (Nomura, quoted in Cecily, 2019).

Nomura's comments suggest both brinkmanship on his part, but also some of the distinct challenges presented by globalized deadlines and product chains. In both cases, the presence of Nomura at the creative center of the art and editing for the *Kingdom Hearts* marketing campaign's content and imagery is suggestive of the way production and promotional narratives have begun to blur within video game production. Moreover, it suggests that marketing may provide one of the best ways to assess issues of corporate control, power and tension in the transnational, transindustrial games industry. On this analysis, it seems as if authorship remains a hub in a wider networked wheel of negotiation, tension and debate, and that it is Nomura's authorial narrative that has often worked to synergize and smooth over the gaps and joins in the production process of *Kingdom Hearts*.

### ***"Synergy alert!": the marketing of Kingdom Hearts III and the limits of cross-promotional synergy***

When *Kingdom Hearts II* was released, *Daily Variety* in the USA placed a warning on one of their short reviews that read: "Synergy Alert!" (Lewis, 2007). This alert, however, came long after Nomura at Square Enix had undertaken to ensure that his authorial vision for the games would be fully represented in their paratextual marketing materials (Gray, 2010). Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witherford and Grieg de Peuter have argued that the marketing of games is more central to their meanings than is perhaps the case with other media. Using a system similar to du Gay et. al's "circuit of culture" they envision marketing as one of three overlapping circuits within production and consumption associated with the games industry (2003). Leading on from this observation, Kline, Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter also cite Disney as a leading influence on game industry marketing campaigns, while noting that the marketing done for video games echoes the kinds of marketing practices seen in other conglomerated businesses (2003, p. 222). In this section, therefore, I focus on three elements of the marketing circuit of promotion for *Kingdom Hearts III*, the newest (at the time of writing) numbered game in the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise. I begin by considering how Disney and Square Enix's characters share marketing time and space through an analysis of Nomura's cover art for *Kingdom Hearts III*. Then, I consider

how larger events worked to tease and explain certain parts of the collaboration between Disney and Square Enix. I then end this section by using the case study of *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (Rich Moore and Phil Johnston, 2018) as a means of probing the limits of synergistic cross-promotion. By moving from art created by the game's director, to stage-managed promotional events, and then into less overtly connected cross-promotion between Disney and Square Enix, I illustrate how control over the franchise shifts in relation to time, media and place, probing the limits of synergy.

Kline, Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter argue that

[t]he hyperrality of video and computer gaming is also 'hyped' reality where marketing managers and advertising agencies practise their best moves on youthful consumers they aim to enlist for a lifetime of purchasing experience (Kline et al., 2003, p. 218).

This is complicated by the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise, in that the marketers were just as frequently practicing their best moves on existing consumers of the Square Enix and Disney sub-brands, from *Final Fantasy* to Mickey Mouse. For the creators of *Kingdom Hearts*, therefore, marketing was also one more way of exerting control. On the one hand, Disney decreed where the video games could be advertised, specifically forbidding the marketing team at Square Enix from putting trailers on channels and time slots aimed at adults (Hein, 2006). On the other hand, Square Enix was able to produce a slew of in-house television commercials, event trailers and full trailers for the game that were archived and "owned" by their website. The hyped reality that game fans encountered was consequently a mixed bag of local, globalized, personal and corporate interpretations of the meanings of *Kingdom Hearts*. Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in the cover art for *Kingdom Hearts III* (Figure 1).

### Figure 1

*Riku and Sora character designs*



*Note.* Tetsuya Nomura, 2018.

In Nomura's artwork, Disney's Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Goofy occupy roughly the top, right-hand third of the image, seemingly relaxing on a rooftop in a variety of nonchalant poses. Fans of the series will recognize that Mickey holds a "keyblade," the franchise's main weapon (a key/sword that unlocks hearts) and that he is dressed in a way that mirrors Sora's (the game's protagonist), outfit. Goofy looks up at Mickey, directing us to look in his direction, and Mickey in turn looks up over the cityscape, effectively gazing towards the game's title. This differs from all the other characters, who gaze into the middle-distance of a cityscape we cannot see. Notably, Mickey stands alone, isolated in the top of the image, standing above and apart from the franchise's protagonist, Sora. The positioning, the gazes and props held by the Disney characters each suggest their separation from Nomura's custom-designed *Kingdom Hearts* characters. This hierarchically organized image is especially interesting because of the way, even after a dozen games, it continues to position Mickey and the other Disney characters as separate to (but perhaps also as spectacularly more important than) the native *Kingdom Hearts* protagonists, Sora, Riku and Kairi. That Mickey, Goofy and Donald form a loose triangle in one corner of the image, drawing the eye through their iconic forms and brightly colored clothing, while the other *Kingdom Hearts* characters are either positioned below them or in darker costumes also demonstrates core differences in the handling of Disney's iconic characters in comparison to those created by Nomura and his team at Square Enix. There is, as a result, a visual limitation to the synergistic incorporation of Disney characters into *Kingdom Hearts*—to be spectacular, they cannot be too similar to Square Enix's characters.

One further interesting aspect of this image is the way it incorporates one of the franchise's villains, a Heartless. The Heartless seems almost to merge with the city scenery given its resemblance to a gargoyle. Plucking a star from the sky, the Heartless leans out into the twilight cityscape of Nomura's image suggesting the corruption that this team of heroically framed custom-made and Disney characters will battle. The closeness of the Heartless to the heroic characters, however, also indicates the complexity of the saga's narrative, and the connections between its heroes and villains. In these ways, Nomura's central image for *Kingdom Hearts III* is as much about the world of the franchise as it is about character. But, the hierarchically-structured character presentation also suggests an ongoing tension between the custom-made (Square Enix) and licensed (Disney) characters. More notably, the use of the villainous Heartless creates a structuring absence around the frequent use of Disney villains across the *Kingdom Hearts* series. Already a complex image, therefore, Nomura's artwork for *Kingdom Hearts III* champions the positive presence of Disney, while eliding the more complex nature of the licensing processes.

Inclusion and elision of characters played out in different globalized and localized ways in the promotion for *Kingdom Hearts III*. This was perhaps most conspicuous in the events that promoted the new game all over the world. The way *Kingdom Hearts III* featured heavily at the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) trade show in 2018 is especially significant. One UK-based games journalist announced that "this year there was no escape from the cartoon faces of Goofy and Donald Duck, the beaming co-stars of *Kingdom Hearts 3*. This barmy, complex role-playing crossover between Square Enix and Disney was everywhere at E3" (Hoggins, 2018). At E3 then, *Kingdom Hearts III* became a pervasive part of the event's experience and imagery. E3, very much like other major media expos and conventions in the USA has been expanding in recent years and has also begun to include the general public in its events, making it one of the most significant launch-windows in the annual games release calendar (Pereira, 2019). Perhaps

unsurprisingly, the staging of E3 in the USA leant itself to the greater inclusion of Disney's licensed characters than of the native *Kingdom Hearts* protagonists. In using Disney characters, however, the marketing elides Square Enix's presence from the spectacle of *Kingdom Hearts*. As a result, the ubiquity of Goofy, Donald and Disney characters at E3 becomes emblematic of the transindustrial reach of the Disney conglomerate.

However, the Disney-heavy promotion at E3 about *Kingdom Hearts III* was not always in Disney's direct control. There were several "teaser" announcements made at E3 on different days by different companies involved with the release of the new game. The first appearance at the E3 trade event was by neither Disney nor Square Enix, but rather Microsoft, whose Xbox One console was a major platform for *Kingdom Hearts III*'s release. At Microsoft's press conference, an announcement was made about the inclusion of Disney's *Frozen* (Jennifer Lee & Chris Buck, 2013) in the new *Kingdom Hearts* game. Another major console-maker for which *Kingdom Hearts III* was produced, PlayStation, then featured a new trailer for the game, one which centered on the game's inclusion of a new CG animated version of *Pirates of the Caribbean* (a franchise in its own right, beginning with *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, Gore Verbinski, 2003). Simultaneously promoting and celebrating the release of the sixth film in the Pirates franchise, *Dead Men Tell No Tales* (Jaochim Rønning & Espen Sandberg, 2017), this trailer functioned as cross-promotion for Disney's Pirates franchise and for its co-produced video game. Therefore, the promotional campaign for *Kingdom Hearts III* reveals Disney (or at least its famous characters) as the core promotable features of the new *Kingdom Hearts* game.

By comparison, Square Enix's own approach to promoting the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise at E3 was more subdued. The Square Enix and Microsoft trailers for *Kingdom Hearts III* were fairly similar, intermingling the spectacle of Sora's quest through Disney character worlds in a montage of character reveals and gameplay battle spectacles, whereas the PlayStation trailer focused much more heavily on character spectacle, narrative and cut scenes from the game. When Square Enix held their press conference at E3, it featured a comparatively understated event, comprised of a recorded message and trailers. The recorded message included a general greeting from Square Enix president Matsuda, before a slew of trailers for upcoming and in-progress games. The extended montage of trailers starts with *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (Daniel Chayer, 2018), before featuring a host of other Enix-owned franchise game trailers, leading up to a mixed live-action and game footage trailer for a new game about a deaf protagonist, titled *The Quiet Man* (Kensei Fujinaga, Human Head Studios, 2018). Square Enix's compendium of trailers then concludes with a specially edited *Kingdom Hearts III* trailer and a final montage of spectacular moments from across Square Enix's new games. The whole compendium trailer was narrated by Hollywood star James Earl Jones, who provided a presaging voice over to the *Kingdom Hearts III* trailer intoning: "For every night, there is a dawn. For every question, there is an answer. And, for every door, there is a key. All you have to do is wield it." An on-screen message follows, proclaiming that "The light is gathering together/ Hearts driven by one oath, one purpose", which message then flies apart to reveal the beginning of Nomura's trailer. The combination of Jones's voice and Nomura's trailer is striking for the way it localizes the Japanese company's transnational selection of intellectual properties.

The messaging for *Kingdom Hearts III*, when promoted by Square Enix, works to place the new game in a wider games universe, and attempts to reinforce the transnationality of the Square Enix

company brand. For the game's main co-producer, therefore, *Kingdom Hearts III* was just one of several new offerings, albeit an important one. Within this American event, Nomura's re-edited trailer notably focuses on Sora's encounters with Disney characters, rather than his adventures with custom-created *Kingdom Hearts* characters. Sound, as suggested above, is a significant part of promotion, and one that has implications for the synergies being attempted within the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise. Around this time, as Callum May notes, Disney had recently established a new subsidiary, Disney Character Voices International (May 2019). This was part of a wider move by Disney in the early 2000s to consolidate its control over the translation and management of its properties. This followed from the establishment of Walt Disney International in Japan in 2000, under the leadership of Koji Hoshino. Hoshino was specifically looking for "ways to put other characters in the spotlight" besides Mickey Mouse (Naito, 2003) and the new Disney Character Voices International was a means to smooth out the transmedia, transnational production for video games. The use of James Earl Jones to provide the voice over for Square Enix's American event may be a sign of some unexpected synergy in action. Jones has a long-standing relationship with Disney, famously providing the voice of Mufasa in *The Lion King* (Rob Minkoff & Roger Allers, 1994), so his appearance in the Square Enix trailer at E3 could be read as an effort to aurally associate the Square Enix brand with Disney's animated worlds. Indeed, in the case of *Kingdom Hearts*, May claims that original voice actors were given first right of refusal about reprising their film roles in the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise (2019). Whether planned or not, the associational affordances of Jones's voice offer an example of localization and brand confluence that play up to notions of inter-corporate cooperation and synergy.

*Kingdom Hearts III*'s perceived ubiquity at E3 was, then, part of a globalized strategy of promotion that connected the game not just to its developer, but also much deeper into the landscape of global gaming via consoles, and deeper still into the landscape of globalized media production through emphasis on star characters and voice talents. Reading across the whole of the E3 event, the trailer videos produced by Nomura at Square Enix appear to have been the most carefully strategic in their revelations about the new games. Within the US-promotional context, Square Enix emphasized the "local" spectacle of Disney's involvement over their established or newly created characters. They also re-emphasized this synergistic strategy through association with ancillary star voices. Therefore, the marketing of *Kingdom Hearts III* was coordinated to be synergistic and transnational at E3, which is simultaneously US and global, and the coordination of the announcements and trailers worked to emphasize the US-roots of the franchise. Further, the collaborations reached beyond Disney and Square Enix, demonstrating how powerful ancillary console creators understood the draws of the franchise. At E3, each of Disney's partners took differing routes to emphasizing the importance of Disney characters within the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise, sometimes to the exclusion of Japanese character worlds and the games newer, bespoke characters. In US and "globalized" promotion, therefore, Disney rests at the heart of the campaign's transnational spectacle. But, the picture for local promotion in Japan was different.

In Japan, these globalized events like E3 were still important, but so too were local, pre-release promotional events. These did not all take place at glitzy roll-out events like game expos. For *Kingdom Hearts III*, for example, two of Tokyo's busiest train stations played host to a hybrid form of advertising-cum-art exhibition created to celebrate the game's content. These exhibitions took place in the transitional spaces of the train stations, with aspects of *Kingdom Hearts III* advertised on large displays and were skinned onto walls near the exits of the stations. These

were featured along with image boards for *Kingdom Hearts III*'s content that graced exit points and staircases. The awkward positioning of these installations in high-traffic spaces that require continual flows of train passengers suggests strongly that these were more publicity stunts than serious art exhibitions (see Figure 2). So, too, does the fact that the text associated with these images is minimal, once more placing the emphasis on promotional spectacle. The characters featured in these exhibitions suggest the continuing importance of Disney characters, although the focus was on different Disney characters than those featured at E3. As shown in the image below, the artwork in these exhibitions focused on *Monster's Inc.* and *Tangled* (Byron Howard and Nathan Greeno, 2010), rather than on *Toy Story* or *Pirates of the Caribbean*. This distinctive kind of Japanese advertising “exhibition” raises questions about the status of games and franchises like *Kingdom Hearts* in Japan. The implication, in this case, being that Square Enix was working to create an impression or reading of their video game and its source texts as a form of popular, public art. In undertaking localized promotional campaigns that included publicity stunts like these exhibitions, Square Enix demonstrates how distinctive the reception context for games is within its local market. This, in turn, suggests how important it is to attend to the local meanings of even the most globalized of games.

## Figure 2

*Awkwardly positioned artwork on the stairs of Shinjuku station in Tokyo.*



Note. Reproduced from: <https://www.jp.square-enix.com/topics/detail/676/>

These exhibitions appear to act as reminders to Japanese gamers of what they had enjoyed about Disney's collaboration with Square Enix in *Kingdom Hearts*, while disclosing the game's new Disney attractions. Disney, however, was not as invested in cross-promoting *Kingdom Hearts*. The company made little of *Kingdom Hearts* when producing its own CG animated feature films about video games. For example, only two months before the release of *Kingdom Hearts III*, the sequel to Disney's successful *Wreck It Ralph* (Rich Moore, 2013) film—*Ralph Breaks the Internet* (Rich Moore and Phil Johnston, 2018)—was released to cinemas. The film, as with its predecessor, is about a video game villain who travels between video game worlds in his off-screen time. As such, the Ralph franchise held great potential for transmedia video game promotion, for Disney and Square Enix alike. However, characters from the *Kingdom Hearts* games do not feature in either of the Ralph films. Keen-eyed fans have spotted what they think is a *Kingdom Hearts III* arcade game in the background of one early shot in *Ralph Breaks the*



*Internet* (Anonymous, 2019), but the sequence in the film was very brief and goes uncited by the onscreen characters.

By contrast, Nomura did license and include Ralph in *Kingdom Hearts III*. Within the game's hierarchy of characters, however, Ralph appears only as a 'Link' in the Toy Box world of the *Toy Story* characters. Sora can use Ralph to increase his attacking power in that part of the *Kingdom Hearts* game. So, neither Disney nor Square Enix made strong synergistic use of characters or worlds in this instance. However, Nomura did briefly include Ralph in the latter parts of the marketing for *Kingdom Hearts III*. Ralph's inclusion in the games and their marketing is intriguing because he did not feature in the marketing discourse until E3 in 2018. Thereafter, a short sequence in which Ralph is shown falling into the *Kingdom Hearts* world from his own game and lets Sora ride his shoulders was repeated across many of the television, event trailers and full trailers. In this final example, once again, we can see how Nomura and Square Enix capitalize on Disney's new releases more fully than Disney incorporates *Kingdom Hearts* into its own computer-centred narrative worlds. So, while synergy clearly exists between *Kingdom Hearts III* and Disney's films, it is sometimes very limited in nature. Disney appears to have been focused on the *Kingdom Hearts* games as a discrete franchise, rather than attempting to connect its game and film worlds synergistically and intertextually on a deeper level. By contrast, Square Enix has taken a wider view when incorporating Disney's characters and worlds into *Kingdom Hearts* throughout the franchising process, making Disney's characters not just into games characters but also into powerful synergistic promotional forces.

## Conclusion

In explaining the different approaches to cross-promotion in the case of Ralph, it is tempting to read the tensions as a difference in industrial cultures. There are echoes here in the distinctions that Marc Steinberg draws between "marketing media mix" forms of synergy and what he terms the "anime media mix". Steinberg argues that these are distinct models of synergy wherein:

The marketing media mix aims to use the synergetic effect of multiple media in concert to focus the consumer toward a *particular* goal—the purchase of the advertiser's product as the final endgame. The anime media mix, on the other hand, has no single goal or teleological end; the *general* consumption of any of the media mix's products will grow the entire enterprise. (Steinberg, 2012, p. 141)

Applying this idea to the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise helps to explain the endless remixing of its games, including literal "Remix" and other revised editions of games, but also the downloadable content (DLC) patches and extensions that frequently follow major releases, allowing consumers to grow their experience of *Kingdom Hearts*. These extension texts obviously have reciprocal benefit for the co-creators as they continue to gain income from the game development process far beyond the initial game release. Ralph's appearance in *Kingdom Hearts III* can be read the same way. His appearance may bring new fans to the universe, and any consumption of that franchise is a win for the co-creators. By contrast, the lack of reciprocal advertising on the part of Disney might suggest that their own view of synergy is still focused on a marketing media mix approach, rather than on the kinds of endless consumption favored by the anime media mix approach to synergy. In this way, the issue at stake may not be synergy or its lack, but rather

different corporate interpretations of what synergy means and when it is something to be valued and chased after. In this way, the limits of synergy return to the different ways that term is deployed in different global markets and industries. In the case of *Kingdom Hearts*, the Japanese producer Square Enix seems to utilize a more expansive view of synergy than even the purported “masters of synergy” at Disney.

The differences between the local and the global versions of the marketing for *Kingdom Hearts III* suggest similar industrio-cultural distinctions in relation to promotion. The Japanese examples examined here required only comparatively modest outlays in terms of web-archiving and “pop up”-style gallery creation. By comparison, Disney’s form of synergistic promotion at something like E3 takes in partnerships and industrial relationships with some of the world’s most powerful games and technology companies, from PlayStation to Microsoft. By contrast, the use of E3 as a space to promote a range of their current projects, rather than just *Kingdom Hearts*, signals Square Enix’s depth of belief in synergy; with *Kingdom Hearts* acting as one among many franchises, and E3 as a location in which to celebrate the breadth of Square Enix’s franchising (media mix) logics at work. It is unclear which company paid for the direct advertising at E3, or whether the hoardings that decorated the event site were paid for by both Disney and Square Enix. In this way, the more costly elements of the promotional campaign for *Kingdom Hearts III* create ambiguity around questions of synergy, even while serving as highly suggestive evidence for its significance.

The tensions around characters and their promotion that have become visible during franchise production and promotion for *Kingdom Hearts*, therefore, may be signs of industrio-cultural difference, but they do not necessarily undermine synergy. The attention given to Sora versus the importance of Mickey is not always the point. Rather, the emphasis on particular characters at specific times and events reveals something of the industrial logics at work in those event and promotional spaces. Moreover, the difficult working relationships between studios can be used as mechanism to galvanize fandom. Nomura certainly courts this kind of reading of his creative work, continually discussing the blockages and stoppages that Disney put in his team’s way when developing the *Kingdom Hearts* games. However, much of what he relates as difficulty is a product of working to converge the technologies and appearances of Disney films and Square Enix games. Synergy, in this instance, may actually be resulting on a meta-level beyond the games themselves, as Nomura and his team work closely with CG animators from Disney, bringing the aesthetics of games and Disney films closer than has ever been seen before. The *Kingdom Hearts* superfranchise, viewed in this light, brings controllers into the Magic Kingdom and vice versa.

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