

(Re)Creating Disney: Converging Game World Architecture in Kingdom Hearts

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(Re)Creating Disney: Converging Game World Architecture in *Kingdom Hearts*

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Abstract

The *Kingdom Hearts* franchise (2002-2020) is truly a product of convergence culture: in its aesthetics and narrative world, it unites games, films, animations, fairy tales, comics and cartoons. The games' premise to merge intellectual properties from Disney and Square Enix into one coherent universe strikes as an ambitious effort with contrasting themes, motifs, characters, and worlds sharing a single stage on top of a new cast of characters and an original storyline. An analysis of any franchise is often associated with complex licensing structures, its economic impact, and the great financial endeavour to create multimedia franchises. With *Kingdom Hearts* however, its franchise relationships to other media can be made apparent through a media-centred analysis, allowing us to understand its franchise character from within. One method to make this approach possible is to look at how the franchise delivers on its cross-collaboration premise by creating game worlds inspired by Disney. Some of these worlds are seemingly exact copies of their original and others deliver a new experience altogether. It is exactly this ambivalence that truly stands out in the franchise, juggling between old and new.

Author Keywords

Game design; game worlds; game space; Disney; convergence culture

Playing Disney, Playing Convergence

A franchise the size of *Kingdom Hearts* is daunting: as of 2021, the franchise consisted of thirteen titles across various platforms, with possible future titles yet to come. As media franchises are often characterized by their “multiplied replication of culture from intellectual property resources” (Johnson, 2013, p. 6), the first impulse to characterize the franchise aspects of media such as video games is to consider their economic and corporate efforts in the stages of production, licensing, and merchandising. In contrast, Henry Jenkins' work on convergence culture emphasizes storytelling across different types of media, collaborative authorship, and fan engagement with the fictional universe (Jenkins, 2006). Certainly, all of this still applies to *Kingdom Hearts*—it has sustained a loyal fan base since the release of *Kingdom Hearts I* (2002), and its manga adaptation was in collaboration with artist Shiro Amano, previously working on the manga adaptation of another Square Enix game series, *Legend of Mana*. The games themselves involved massive collaborative efforts, as the development team had to work with each Disney and/or Pixar team associated with the respective world they created in *Kingdom Hearts* (Skrebels, 2019). At the same

time, since the game's very premise is to use Disney assets to create worlds, which are visited by the protagonist and player-character Sora, perhaps more can be said about its franchise character from within than any other media franchise. Marc Steinberg's work on Japanese franchise systems, media mix and how (anime) characters play an important role in establishing cross-media references reflects the approach of this paper:

To grasp the specificity of character merchandising and the media mix system, and to account for why and how subjects consume media and things within the anime system, we must pay attention to the way media and things themselves construct connections. (Steinberg, p. xv, 2012)

Kingdom Hearts has plenty of these connections—since its inception, the franchise lives from its curious amalgamation of Disney and Square Enix properties. Their game worlds and characters are an example of that: the protagonist Sora is joined by Donald Duck and Goofy, and as a trio they travel across worlds and meet other characters such as Ariel from Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (Clements and Musker, 1989) or Cloud from *Final Fantasy VII* (1997). The worlds they traverse are inspired by Disney or original worlds. The focus in this paper will be the Disney worlds the franchise features, especially in *Kingdom Hearts III*: to see how these worlds have been made playable, or in other words how they have gone through the process of ludification. The worlds of *Kingdom Hearts* can be broadly described as evocative spaces, as they build on stories well-known through Disney, allowing players to visit these worlds they will probably already know through popular culture (Jenkins, 2004, p. 123). However, the strategies employed to create the game worlds can differ vastly from one another:

Computer games are essentially concerned with spatial representation and negotiation, and therefore a classification of computer games can be based on how they represent – or, perhaps, implement – space. (Aarseth, 2001, p. 154)

This paper will thus highlight two worlds from *Kingdom Hearts III* to illustrate the differing approaches. As I will propose here, it is the ambivalence in these differing approaches that defines the franchise.

Worlds

Whilst most video games usually make use of only one coherent game world, the use of plurality for *Kingdom Hearts*' game worlds is deliberate: the games literally contain different worlds, separate from another in a spatial and diegetic sense. On a diegetic level, only Sora and his friends and of course other allies and antagonists can travel to and from the other worlds, but if Sora visits a character outside of this privileged group, such as the mermaid Ariel for instance, these characters have no knowledge of those other worlds. In terms of game design, each of these worlds is spatially separated—almost in isolation. Most conventional video games take place in one game world that may have differently themed areas, but at least they act under specific rules and laws within their fictional universe. With *Kingdom Hearts*, no such coherence exists. The worlds differ dramatically not just in appearance but in their rules—for instance speaking toys are possible in the world of Toy Box, a world inspired by the *Toy Story* films (Lasseter et al., 1995-2019), but do

not make much sense in the world inspired by *Pirates of the Caribbean* (Elliott and Rossio., 2003-2017). Perhaps a comparison to conventional video game design makes less sense than comparing it to Disneyland, a theme park consisting of different lands. Laws of physics aside, each land follows their own rules too—themes regulate the kinds of merchandise a visitor may purchase in each land, the restaurants that can be visited, and so forth. Finally, each land is designed to obstruct the view to its neighboring worlds and of the park's own physical limits, creating the illusion of truly being in an infinite fantasy land, rather than a closed off space. Considering the lands individually, the worlds of *Kingdom Hearts* are designed in a similar fashion in their layout and how they are intended to regulate the player's movement. Additionally, just as some lands at Disney theme parks intend to cross-promote their media franchises, so does *Kingdom Hearts*. As far as the Disney worlds are concerned, I will categorize them into two types: worlds marked by sameness, i.e. worlds in which the game deliberately attempts to copy its original; and worlds where Square Enix builds on familiar themes of Disney's popular culture to create something new altogether.

The Case of Frozen

The world of Arendelle in *Kingdom Hearts III* is based on *Frozen* (Buck and Lee, 2013), one of the highest-grossing animated films of all time (McClintock, 2014). The film's legacy has left a powerful impact on pop culture, with plenty of merchandise featuring the protagonists Elsa and Anna in the form of collaborations with fast fashion labels or fast-food chains, and infamously spawning a wave of young children seemingly obsessed with the film's songs, singing them at every opportunity (Cohen, 2014). With Disney's sequel *Frozen II* released in 2019 (Buck & Lee, 2019), the films became a powerful franchise in their own right, and it is then most curious to observe it appearing inside another one altogether. Much of the film's plot revolves around Anna looking for her sister Elsa, hiking up a snowy mountain to do so. In a similar fashion, Sora and his party come across Elsa as they enter the world of Arendelle, seeing her run away erratically. The party decides to follow her, beginning the ascending hike on the mountain themselves—mirroring Elsa's actions in the film.

Like most of the worlds across the franchise, Arendelle is a linear world with some areas slightly more open than others, allowing for occasional exploration, yet with clearly defined exits and entrances. At best, these spaces can be described as varying between linear labyrinths, i.e. consisting of a single path, and mazes, offering branching and multicursal maze forms (Nitsche, 2008, p. 177). In principle, the spatial layout in the *Kingdom Hearts* series has remained largely the same: each world is an arrangement of consecutive mazes or labyrinths. Enemies will spawn randomly across these places, with the player having to clear the areas every time they revisit the world. The correct paths through these mazes and labyrinths are those advancing the story, often indicated by triggering a cutscene. These structured spaces are almost identical to the purpose and functionality of areas at *Disneyland* theme parks. Scott Rogers, former Principle Imagineer at Disney turned Game Designer, cites spatial design as one of the core principles learned from his work at Disney that he now uses in game design (Rogers, 2009). He outlines the area of Frontierland at *Disneyland*, an area themed after the American Frontier of the 19th century: this area, in comparison to the other lands, is arranged more openly, with different paths the guest can presumably take. However, despite its openness, the area in Frontierland only has few paths

leading away or into the area. Openness is merely an illusion of freedom and so are the areas in the *Kingdom Hearts* worlds. The player fights level after level to scale the mountain, some areas being slightly more linear than others; but for the player, it becomes clear that the goal of their travel is to reach the top of the mountain. This is implied diegetically—Sora's goal to find Elsa and eventually his enemies, the Heartless—but also spatially through linear areas which may seem open but leave the player with few choices, either when descending or ascending the mountain.

The visual similarities between the world of Arendelle and the film *Frozen* are striking: both portrayed worlds look the same. This also applies to the characters appearing in the game, as if the game developers had plucked them out of their original film. This is at least the case for *Kingdom Hearts III*, as developers directly used digital assets from Disney to make this possible (Skrebels, 2019). This in part echoes Jenkins remarks on convergence culture and the reuse of digital assets:

Media convergence makes the flow of content across multiple media platforms inevitable. In the era of digital effects and high-resolution game graphics, the game world can now look almost exactly like the film world – because they are reusing many of the same digital assets. (Henry Jenkins, p. 106, 2006)

Indeed, for *Kingdom Hearts III*, the producers achieve the uncanny likeness of their worlds and characters by using Disney's digital assets, or at least by perfecting their own digital assets to align almost perfectly with their filmic counterparts. To a certain extent, this speaks to the media-specific capabilities of digital media in the sense of modularity, just as Lev Manovich described (2001, p. 30) and also represents a common practice in the video game industry to reuse assets when possible. It is notable that both Jenkins and Manovich speak of digital modularity as if they can be exchanged across digital media without issues. Yet the developers of *Kingdom Hearts* often had to rebuild assets from scratch, because those used at Disney were not meant for video games, as Square Enix art director Toru Yamazaki notes in an interview:

Joints in bodies weren't defined and had to be added manually, physics-enabled objects like capes were built for much more advanced calculations than gaming tech can handle moment-to-moment, and needed to be rejigged to stop your console from just bursting into flames. (Joe Skrebels, 2019)

It is evident that *Kingdom Hearts* puts strong emphasis on creating the very same worlds that are known from the films, rather than telling a new story. Minute details, even as small as Elsa's hair or eyelids, were the subject of debate between the teams of Square Enix and Disney (Skrebels, 2019). Indeed, the steep, snowy hike up the mountain, the glistening snow, trees either covered by a snow blanket and tree branches sparkling through frozen ice unmistakably mirror the world of *Frozen*. Even if a player has had no prior knowledge of *Frozen*, they undoubtedly will now. At the same time, players who are familiar with the story and its setting will find themselves playing in a world they have only been able to view on screen before. In other words, the world can serve as a point of entry for another franchise altogether, or expands the horizons in which something familiar can be experienced anew. Either way, it sustains both Disney and Square Enix and promotes their franchises through cross-media references.

As with *Frontierland*, the linear spatial layout helps to direct a player's movement and perspective. The result is playing through a world that almost identically copies the story of its original in detail. *Kingdom Hearts III* achieves this through a combination of its spatial layout, visual aesthetics and the frequent use of cutscenes. One of these is perhaps the exact re-enactment of one of *Frozen*'s most iconic scenes when Elsa begins to sing the song "Let it Go"—embracing herself and her powers, creating an ice castle in which she seeks to reside (or find refuge in). The cutscene in the game seems almost identical to the film—the song itself, the animation, the filmic composition. The only key difference is Sora and his party becoming part of this scene as observers: upon reaching the mountain top, the cutscene will begin with Sora and his party coming across Elsa singing, fighting through a heavy snowstorm. Whilst the cutscene is otherwise almost identical to its filmic counterpart, it will also show Sora and his party watching Elsa create her ice castle out of thin air—much to their own surprise, as Sora exclaims excitedly: "Look at that!"

Through this scene and many other scenes in other Disney worlds Sora visits, the player-character Sora and his friends become observers of the action. Fittingly, when the cutscene ends, Sora, Donald and Goofy are in awe of the now towering ice palace in front of them. It is in this manner Sora and his friends traverse the Disney worlds—as observers, even as tourists. John Urry and Jonas Larsen describe the tourist relationships as "movement of people to, and their stay in, various destinations" (2011, p. 16). As far as these destinations and places are concerned, they are "chosen to be gazed upon because there is anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures [...]" Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 17). Sora almost seems like the embodiment of Walt Disney's ambitions for Disneyland to be a place of adventure, a happy place, a place for adults and children who seek wonders and magic in the past, present, or in fantasy. Not surprisingly, he is almost always in awe at the sights he discovers. These sights on the other hand are never an accident—the game makes it abundantly clear which sights are special. The reaction of Sora is the very same reaction Anna has in the film (an expressive 'wow' accompanied by wide eyes in awe) and furthermore, both are standing on the very same spot as they look up to the castle. The direction of the cutscene but also the build-up of anticipation as the player ascends the mountain all embody the very same scenes from its film. The spatial design ensures the player to reach the mountain top from this specific angle, and aside from the castle itself there is no other path diverging from this area. The castle is the reward for the player, a rewarding vista: "[they] attract players to linger at them by offering interesting or unique game art to look at [...]" (Totten, 2019, p. 306). These perspectives are absolutely necessary for these worlds to get their narrative across, as it is "the nature of a camera (virtual or real) to select, frame and interpret. [...] It narrates the space to the player" (Nitsche, 2008, p. 77). The player's movement and perspectives are strategically directed to allow these tourist relationships to arise—one that specifically replicates Disney films and its most iconic moments.

Converging Cities: San Fransokyo

If exploration is rather limited in worlds like Arendelle, it comes as a surprise when the game goes out of its way to expand its spatial scope in non-linear ways, such as the city of San Fransokyo in *Kingdom Hearts III*. A portmanteau of San Francisco and Tokyo, the world is based on Disney's

2014 animated film *Big Hero 6* (Hall and Williams, 2014). If the player is not familiar with the film, the opening scene once the player enters San Fransokyo is quite telling about what to expect: Sora and his friends find themselves on what seems like San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, with the key difference of the iconic red towers shaping a torii gate instead. Usually associated with Shinto shrines in Japan, the torii gate here is fused with the Golden Gate Bridge and despite both structures having an iconic look, the fusion allows for familiar elements to merge into something new. The setting of San Fransokyo is exactly that: a fusion of two metropolitan cities that takes elements that make each city recognisable and combines them into something new altogether. Of course, the city's premise is no different in the animated film: *Big Hero 6* shines through its intricate portrayal of a San Francisco and Tokyo fusion, making the city not only an interesting setting but a focal point when transferring the world into a video game. Although the world still has pre-determined entrance and exit points, the city itself seems so vast that this linearity is almost irrelevant. The city boasts an area much greater than any of the segments in Arendelle, placing the player in the middle of a city landscape.

It is here where Henry Jenkins' core statement about convergence culture shines through most: "each medium does what it does best [...]" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 98). Applying this to *Kingdom Hearts* and San Fransokyo in particular, the city becomes more than just a visual setting but a playground. Unlike Arendelle or some other worlds of *Kingdom Hearts*, the story in which Sora finds himself once entering the city acts as a sequel to the original film. Thus, in stark contrast to Arendelle, the world builds on the familiar to extend its fictional universe, rather than building on sameness. This allows for the game to shift its focus, rather than drawing on extreme parallels to its original. The world's greatest strength is arguably the city itself, made playable. The space of this game world is wider and bigger, making regular movements seem almost insignificant amidst the numerous skyscrapers and buildings shaping the cityscape. Efficiently moving through the city is then made possible through the ways the game allows Sora to scale buildings at ease, fly and glide great distances. San Fransokyo does not have specific iconic sights and linear levels that build upon a singular kind of anticipation, but it is rather the whole city that becomes a place of experience and exploration.

The city's seemingly infinite cityscape is implied through a skybox: it "surrounds the three-dimensionally arranged game world by its cubic or spherical volume" (Bonner, 2021, p. 65), it is "constructed as a cube or sphere" (p. 66) and "experienced as a seemingly undefinable vastness by the players' point of view within the game world" (p. 66). At first glance, it is perhaps best compared to a theatre's backdrop, often paintings that frame a setting of the stage. With regards to games from the 90s, this is certainly true: games such as *Final Fantasy VII* use hand-painted images to create depth in their otherwise 2D landscapes. These backdrops are usually *passive level structures* (p. 67), i.e., beyond their visual function to deepen space, there is no way to interact with them and they are easily discernible in comparison to polygon-shaped objects belonging to the active level structure. With the case of newer games, the skybox has grown beyond a backdrop image, as "three-dimensional passive level structures like mountain ridges, thickets or endless oceans obfuscate the skybox and its function as the edge of the world" (p. 67). Rather than becoming a hard border between active and passive level structures, it "acts as an intermediary between the active level structure and the large-format panoramic skybox in order to conceal the

junction from one to the other by stating a fluid transition” (Bonner, 2021, p. 67).

Although many *Kingdom Hearts* worlds, especially in *Kingdom Hearts III* make use of such skyboxes, the illusion of its vastness is easily discovered, given the strict linear spatial layout, as well as the mini map for each world indicating active and passive level structures. San Fransokyo forgoes these conventions and relies on Sora as the player character to navigate the city—both vertically and horizontally. The fantasy setting in *Kingdom Hearts* allows Sora to take on equally fantastical abilities which allow him to move in specific ways—flying, gliding or quick consecutive teleports under certain conditions. As Michael Nitsche notes, “Like digital game worlds, architectural space comes to life through the way it is used, and specific structures can help particular patterns evolve” (2004, p. 159). For the player to effectively navigate San Fransokyo, they must learn the strategies to scale high-rise buildings and navigate across distances quickly to reach their destinations. The shift in perspective—especially when fighting on top of a skyscraper—is astonishing. The city’s buildings are at times reminiscent of typical San Francisco architecture such as Victorian and Edwardian-style houses, but with a twist of Japanese elements such as lanterns, roof tops, or lucky cats. The high-rising buildings themselves evoke the urban landscape of Tokyo, with its trademark billboards, signs indicating shops and restaurants inside buildings and so forth. The battles in *Kingdom Hearts III* together with Sora’s movement abilities allow the player to view the city’s landscape from a multitude of angles. It is of course no coincidence that, shortly after entering San Fransokyo, the game makes the player navigate through the city’s space by playing a story-related mini game, tasking Sora to fly and run across the city. Although the world’s point of reference, a Disney film, is made abundantly clear as it uses the same setting and the same characters who eventually befriend Sora, the emphasis is not on re-enacting the same scenes as the film but on building on the familiar to forge something new.

New and Old: Ambivalence as Trademark

The worlds of Arendelle and San Fransokyo illustrate the differing approaches Disney worlds follow in the franchise and in *Kingdom Hearts III* in particular. The contrast in the worlds sampled here can be described as the following: one puts its emphasis on sameness whilst the other one attempts to create something new through its media-specific capabilities. However, given the context of Disney and franchising, sameness is often associated with the profit-oriented replication of goods: “Culture today is infecting everything with sameness. Film, radio, and magazines form a system. Each branch of culture is unanimous with itself and all are unanimous together” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 94). To a certain extent, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer are not incorrect when they make this observation about the culture industry: after all, some of the worlds of *Kingdom Hearts* are deliberately designed to be the same, as illustrated above. The franchise has no intention to tell a new story about Elsa and Anna but merely lets a new participant be part of it. It is here where Adorno speaks of the culture industry’s transferral of “profit motive naked onto cultural form” (Adorno, 1991, p. 99). Additionally, Disney has often been at the focus of cultural critics for its trivialising and sanitising character (Bryman, 2004, 6), often framed under the term of Disneyfication:

[...] that shameless process by which everything the Studio later touched, no matter

how unique the vision of the original from which the Studio worked, was reduced to the limited terms Disney and his people could understand. Magic, mystery, individuality [...] were consistently destroyed when a literary work passed through this machine that had been taught there was only one correct way to draw. (Schickel, 1986, p. 225)

This particularly references Disney's way of handling the original sources of the fairy tales and how they become disneyfied, in other words turned into a product that is undoubtedly a product of Disney (Bryman, 2004, p. 5). The tradition of Disney critique is long, upheld by scholars such as Umberto Eco infamously writing about Disneyland: "An allegory of the consumer society, a place of absolute iconism, Disneyland is also a place of total passivity. Its visitors must behave like its robots" (Eco, 1983, p. 48). However, this tradition has somewhat come under scrutiny in the past decades, as Jennifer A. Kokai and Tom Robson note:

By virtue of their status and their relatively early writings on Disney, much scholarship is dominated by a specific European strand of scholarship that interprets Disney parks using semiotics, interpreting the signs presented by Disney and analyzing what meaning they contain. Highly critical of Disney, prestigious scholars such as Umberto Eco, Jean Baudrillard, and Frederic Jameson all examined Disney through postmodern lenses to comment on Disney's existence as a sign with no reference, a hyperreal space that encourages mindless consumerism. (Jennifer Kokai & Tom Robson, 2019, pp. 6-7)

Sameness, a profit-driven business, and mindless consumerism have been the focus of Disney critique for long, and it is an inevitable pitfall when it comes to analysing the worlds of *Kingdom Hearts*. Undoubtedly, Arendelle and other worlds of *Kingdom Hearts III* such as the Kingdom of Corona, based on the animated film *Tangled* (Greno & Howard, 2010), operate under the very same formula. Using the spatial layout akin to theme parks to its advantage, in addition to the use of cutscenes, the game worlds are disneyfied in the sense that the worlds are unmistakably Disney. Yet, to reduce *Kingdom Hearts* to an extended arm of Disney alone, to a product of mere Disneyfication is to only look at one side of the franchise.

Paradoxically, although Adorno and Horkheimer insist on the sameness of the culture industry, they also write that it "fuses the old and familiar into a new quality" (1991, p. 98). The old and familiar here being that the Disney films and their characters are forged into a new quality by turning them into a game. Whilst Disneyfication is to some extent a part of *Kingdom Hearts*, it builds on these homogenised worlds to create a new kind of experience. San Fransokyo is indicative of convergence culture, in which the city itself, one that serves as a passive setting in its film, becomes the foregrounded element to play in and with. It is in this vein that for instance the world of Toy Box, based on Disney's *Toy Story* films, shifts its focus from being a mere recreation of the films to a setting exploring what it is like being a small-sized toy. Sora, who turns into a toy himself, is fighting in a world where everything else is much bigger than he is. The player is in a seemingly gigantic toy store, and due to the player-character's size in comparison, they always find themselves in a frog's eye view to all the objects around them. The gaming technology to

make these worlds possible has advanced since the release of its first instalment in 2002 and its emphasis on a spatial experience is more present than it was before.

It is in these worlds where the notion of Disneyfication does not suffice and is not applicable anymore—more than anything, it seems to hinder a way to analyse one of the most captivating franchising characteristics of *Kingdom Hearts*. Although it may seem difficult to separate franchising from its profit-driven endeavours with some of these strategies certainly touching on Disneyfication, resisting such a one-sided analysis can prove to be productive, as illustrated through San Fransokyo. Resisting Disneyfication and its associated negative outlook on media and culture has been reflected in other parts of Disney scholarship. Alan Bryman for instance addresses the inherently negative connotations that come with Disneyfication:

[...] it is precisely the negative tone that is the problem, because Disneyfication has become a synonym for depthless products. It has become difficult to discuss the impacts of Walt Disney and his company in a neutral tone when employing Disneyfication as shorthand for discussing the nature of those impacts. (Bryman, 2004, p. 9)

Considering the ambivalence of the sampled worlds here, and the stark differences in their approaches and strategies to turn them into a game, franchising is not only a marketing strategy but also an artistic and creative endeavour, reflected in the game itself and its worlds.

The ambivalent character of recreating Disney or adding new experiences to existing Disney worlds is made more apparent when considering the original worlds of *Kingdom Hearts*, which have not been the focus in this analysis. The focus on Disney inevitably left out other worlds featured in the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise that follow an entirely different strategy. Although the franchise always had some original worlds, it was the release of *Kingdom Hearts III* that could signify a new beginning for the franchise. Regarded as a somewhat concluding chapter in terms of story, *Kingdom Hearts III* unites many of the original worlds and characters from its other games in this title. The initial premise of having a Disney and *Final Fantasy* crossover game has somewhat faded into the background, especially due to no *Final Fantasy* characters appearing in *Kingdom Hearts III*. Whilst Disney is still present, it has not become more dominant either. Rather, due to the franchise's extensive development of its own characters, worlds and storylines, these have become just as or perhaps even more relevant than the Disney worlds. Although Disney's role in the franchise is significant, it cannot be too overstated. *Kingdom Hearts* benefits from Disneyfication to form its own worlds and characters, and it does so quite deliberately. *Kingdom Hearts'* franchising character goes beyond its Disney worlds, and future analysis may shift the focus away from Disney to give more insight into its other facets. I am hopeful this essay has demonstrated that franchises are not limited simply to licensing and profit-driven marketing, and neither is it necessary to address the overly-complex story of *Kingdom Hearts* in its entirety to understand what seems to drive the franchise. With current franchises becoming omni-present in the cultural landscape, the franchising character is often already established from within, rather than externally.

Conclusion

Whilst films, books or games typically only become a franchise by building on the success of their first title, *Kingdom Hearts* follows a more recent trend in the sense that since its inception, it has been laid out to be a franchise in its story, characters, and worlds. Convergence culture here does not therefore only refer to licensing, merchandise products, collaborative authorship, fan culture and engagement, but its converging and franchising character is embedded within the medium itself. *Kingdom Hearts* is driven by Disney's popular culture that Disney itself has influenced, shaped and dominated for the past several decades. As far as its Disney worlds are concerned, *Kingdom Hearts* engages its players in game spaces that either recreate Disney experiences or gives them new aspects to engage with. *Kingdom Hearts* shines through its ability to invite new and seasoned players alike—always building on familiarity but twisting it into something altogether different.

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