The Dynamic Game Character:

Definition, Construction, and Challenges in a Character Ecology

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This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) at IT University of Copenhagen.

July 2020

Title:
The Dynamic Game Character: Definition, Construction, and Challenges in a Character Ecology

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This research has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement No [695528] – Making Sense of Games).

Abstract

This study presents a theory about dynamic game characters within a broader character ecology in which characters are constantly produced and reproduced in a variety of media. Characters do not appear only in games, they migrate from one medium to another. They are independent from any medium in particular: a character does not require a specific medium to come into existence. Authoritative forces try to shape the overall interpretation of circulating characters transmedially in comics, television series, films, games and more through different venues of control, such as authorship, canonisation and ownership or intellectual property. This study addresses the struggle for interpretive authority by explaining how the player constructs the identity of dynamic game characters in digital games, and by discussing how dynamic game characters connect to and influence other character manifestations within a broader media ecology in which characters circulate.

The research question of this study is: *What are dynamic game characters?* Through reader-response theory adapted for cybermedia phenomena such as games, this study approaches characters as a player-constructed phenomenon, in which the game character needs the player in order to be invoked, but the game encourages the meaning-making process with different means to different effects. *Dynamic game characters* are those game characters whose development structures branch into different outcomes, each of which are undetermined until the player actualises one or more possibilities that steer that direction onto distinct paths with a specific outcome.

Dynamic game characters have become a phenomenon that challenges practices of (trans-)media control. A theory of dynamic game characters tells us about the migration of entities via different works, and how the perceiver comes to understand them within a context saturated with characters, stories and a variety of media platforms. Digital games are just one of the many media platforms that participate in this character ecology, and they allow characters to challenge the idea that within a single piece of work the character must maintain a linear, continuous and coherent identity that stretches the understanding of characters as authored and predictable within a single work.

This study argues that dynamic game characters are a type of quasi-person in digital games whose development consists of multiple outcomes. Digital games accelerate a dynamic game character's identity within a single work, unlike non-cybermedia in which a character's identity is constructed over multiple works. They challenge venues of control, because the player has creative agency over the dynamic game character's characterisation process within a single work. However, once dynamic game characters transfer to other works, authoritative institutions break the player's participation in the dynamic game character's development. These transfers sacrifice player participation to create the illusion of a coherent identity between the manifestations of the character over multiple works.

Resumé

Denne afhandling præsenterer en teori om dynamiske spilkarakterer, som er situeret i et større økosystem af karakterer og derfor konstant produceres og reproduceres i forskellige medier. Karakterer figurerer ikke kun i spil, da de migrerer fra et medium til det næste. De er uafhængige af specifikke medier, hvilket betyder, at en karakter ikke kræver et specifikt medium for at kunne eksistere. Autoritetsfigurer prøver at styre den overordnede fortolkning af karakterers transmediale cirkulation mellem tegneserier, tv-serier, film og spil m.m. gennem forskellige kontrolpunkter, såsom forfatterskab, kanonisering, ejerskab og immaterialret. Dette forskningsværk adresserer striden om fortolkning ved at forklare, hvordan spilleren konstruerer dynamiske karakterers identiteter i digitale spil, og ved at diskutere, hvordan dynamiske spilkarakterer kobler sig på og influerer andre karaktermanifestationer i den overordnede karakterøkologi, hvor karaktererne cirkulerer.

Problemformuleringen for denne afhandling er: *Hvad er dynamiske spilkarakterer?* Gennem receptionsteori tilpasset cybermediale fænomener såsom spil, griber dette forskningsværk karakterer an som et spiller-konstrueret fænomen, hvor spilkarakteren har brug for spilleren, for at blive fremkaldt, og hvor spillet inspirerer en fortolkningsproces med forskellige midler, der har forskellige virkninger. *Dynamiske spilkarakterer* er spilkarakterer, hvis udviklingsstruktur fordeler sig i forskellige slutscenarier, som ikke afgøres før spilleren aktualiserer en eller flere muligheder der styrer udviklingen hen imod specifikke retninger med specifikke udfald.

Dynamiske spilkarakterer er blevet til et fænomen der udfordrer etablerede praksisser for (trans-)medial kontrol. En teori om dynamiske spilkarakterer informerer os om migrationen af enheder via forskellige værker, og om, hvordan modtageren kan forstå dem i en kontekst der er fyldt af karakterer, historier og et væld af forskellige medieplatforme. Digitale spil er kun en ud af mange medieplatforme som medvirker i denne karakterøkologi, men spil lader karakterer udfordre den grundlæggende idé om, at en karakter skal fastlåses til en lineær, kontinuerlig og sammenhængende identitet indenfor et isoleret værk, og den åbning udvider den nuværende forståelse af karakterer som værende forfattede og forudsigelige indenfor et enkelt værks rammer.

Denne afhandling argumenter for, at dynamiske spilkarakterer er en slags kvasipersoner i digitale spil, og at deres udvikling kan munde ud i flere forskellige udfald. Digitale spil accelererer en dynamisk spilkarakters identitet indenfor et enkelt værk, i modsætning til ikke-cybermedier, hvor en karakters identitet konstrueres henover flere forskellige værker. Spil udfordrer gængse kontrolpraksisser, fordi spilleren har kreativ autoritet over den dynamiske spilkarakters karakteriseringsproces indenfor det enkelte værk. Når dynamiske spilkarakterer overføres til andre værker, træder toneangivende instanser dog ind og bryder med spillerens deltagelse i den dynamiske spilkarakters udvikling. Under disse overførsler, ofres spillerens deltagelse for at skabe illusionen om en sammenhængende identitet iblandt karakterens manifestationerne i forskellige værker.

Acknowledgments

A PhD is so much more than just writing a research dissertation. I think that the process of a PhD is a journey during which a person grows not only as a researcher but also as a human being. I certainly have. Over the past three years, I evolved, grown more robust, and become comfortable with who I am and who I want to be. I became louder and bolder—to the surprise of some, though to some it was not much of a surprise at all—but I am happier than ever. This dissertation is the final result of my journey. It is not only the fruit of my own labour, but also involves the support of those on whose shoulders I could stand during its creation. I wish to express my gratitude to them here.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Espen Aarseth for his continuous support throughout the process. Not only was his guidance one of the most important elements of my journey, but his endless encouragement gave me the motivation to start, continue and finish writing this work.

My sincere thanks to Hans-Joachim Backe for his aid during the many, many times I knocked on his door asking for help on the things I was struggling with. He was a co-supervisor in all but name. This dissertation echoes many of the conversations we have had over the years.

I would like to acknowledge my colleagues in the MSG project: Michael Debus, Paweł Grabarczyk, Milan Jaćević, Rune Nielsen and Miruna Vozaru for their assistance at several times during the process. To Ida Jørgensen I would like to express my gratitude for being such a kind officemate the past three years. And, I want to thank Nina Houe for the Danish translation of this dissertation's abstract.

I am thankful to my midway committee for their involvement in the process: Torill Mortensen, Miguel Sicart and Susana Tosca. Their feedback and helpful suggestions—both during the evaluation as well as during the three years of my PhD journey—shaped the dissertation as it is now. I would also like to express my gratitude to the PhD School for their aid behind the scenes, helping me to go to many a conference, workshop and PhD course around the globe.

I am grateful for the opportunity to go to the Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto for my international exchange in Spring and Summer 2018. I would like to thank Hiroshi Yoshida for hosting me, and the kind persons of the Ritsumeikan Center for Game Studies for their aid during the stay. I feel that I was particularly lucky to have met the following people who made my stay not only intellectually engaging, but also enjoyable: Shunsuke Mukae, Leticia Andlauer, Matthieu Borter, Chloé Paberz, Damien Leleu, and Fanny Barnabé.

My acknowledgments would not be complete without the special mentions of my friends at the ITU: Rosemary Lee, Mads Johansen Lassen, Sophie Steenborg, Sarah Brin, Maria Karampela, and Djordje Grbic. Each of them has been an invaluable source of encouragement to me. Last but not least, I would like to thank Dom Ford for proofreading the entire dissertation with a critical eye, pointing out small mistakes, adjusting my clunky sentences, and correcting my Dutchified English.

I am extremely grateful to my friends and loved ones who supported and nurtured me while I wrote this dissertation: Eva Trimp, Tom Omes, Lonneke Verheul, Sofie Munk Hasselbom, Marianne Krist, Martin Jæger, Benjamin Dahlerup, Salina Axen Langgaard, Stephanie de Smale, Martijn van Veen, Sonja Kwast, Robbie Peters, Philo Ouweleen, Andreia Kroezen, Sjors Martens, and Alex Gekker.

My final expression of gratitude goes to my family for their support and understanding to embark on this journey: my parents Hanneke Timmer and Peter Blom, my little sister Madelein Blom, my uncle Erik Blom, and my grandmother Rini Blom.

It is likely that I have not mentioned every person who should be in this section explicitly. I

would like to express my gratitude to those people as well.

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Part I
Introduction, Theory, and Method

Chapter One
Introducing the Dynamic Game Character

1. Why Study Game Characters?

This is a dissertation about dynamic game characters. Not only about games, not only about characters. This dissertation can be called a work about characters in games, or a work about games with characters, but I think that both descriptions do not exactly get to what I imply with 'dynamic game characters'. The combination of those three words tell precisely what the topic of this entire work will be: as much as it will be about games, it will also be about characters. And more specifically, they will be dynamic, meaning that I talk about game characters that are characterised by a constant change over a specific process.

Characters in Contemporary Transmedia Practices

Characters do not appear just in games, they migrate from one medium to another. They are independent from any medium in particular: there is no single medium that a character requires to come into existence. But, at the same time, the character does need representational material to come into existence. The character is always already a representation of itself. Game characters are, from that perspective, just that: characters realised into existence through games. A character that appears in a game might as well appear in a comic, a television series, an animation series, a musical play, a film, and more. Characters from the *Mass Effect* series (BioWare 2007–2012) appear in comics, characters from the game *Persona 5* (P-Studio 2016) are placed in an anime (Japanese animation) series, as well as in a manga (Japanese comics), as figurines, on stickers, etc. Even characters whose first manifestations were not in games, but in a different medium, appear in games as well. Superheroes like Wonder Woman, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, and I could continue to name a few, regularly make their appearance in digital games.

Researching game characters asks for an approach in which a broader picture of the media ecology in which characters and games reside should be taken into consideration. Characters—and also games—do not exist in a vacuum in which they develop independently from characters in a different medium, and I do not consider it wise to approach game characters as if they were completely distinct from characters in other media platforms.

Characters are an important aspect in today's media practice, which is actually *trans*media practice, described by Christy Dena as "the employment of multiple media platforms for expressing a fictional world" (2009, i). Fictional worlds can be interesting, but they need characters to become interesting. Additionally, characters do not necessarily need worlds nor stories per se. They are bound to a specific world or a specific story as little as they are bound to a specific media platform. Theorists of Japanese popular culture engage with the conceptual distinction of a character between a *character* and a *kyara*. The former refers to a person-like being inhabiting a (story) world, and the latter refers to the visual representation of a character detached from any specific story world (Azuma [2001] 2009; Itô 2005; 2011; Sadanobu 2015; Steinberg 2012; Wilde 2018; 2019). According to Hiroki Azuma ([2001] 2009, 38 - 54), *kyara* mediate a 'grand non-narrative', "a realm that exists behind small narratives but lacks any form of narrativity", where consumers consume

characters independently from any particular grand story in which they were originally placed.

Within today's media practice, Jens Eder (2015, 67 - 68) distinguishes between four different academic discourses, of which he considers adaptation studies to be the oldest. Adaptation studies focuses mostly on transferring the content of one artwork to another artwork (Hutcheon 2006). The second discourse uses concepts such as intermediality, transfictionality, and inter- or transtextuality (Ryan 2013), as it focuses on the complex relationship between an artwork and its medium-specific affordances. The third discourse, and the most recent one at that, is dominated by discussions of the "structures and the production of transmedial multitexts mostly franchises centered on fictional films or series" (Eder 2015, 68). This discourse is commonly known as 'transmedia storytelling' (Jenkins 2006; 2007), 'transmedia world-building' or 'transmedial worlds' (Klastrup and Tosca 2004; 2011; 2014; Tosca and Klastrup 2020; Wolf 2012), transmedia practice (Dena 2009), or in Japanese contexts: the 'media mix' (Azuma [2001] 2009; 2007; Itô 2005; 2011; Lamarre 2009; 2018; Ôtsuka 1989; [1989] 2010; Saitô [2000] 2006; 2014; Steinberg 2012). It operates under the phenomenon of media convergence in which content flows across a variety of media (McLuhan 1964; Bolter and Grusin 1999; Jenkins 2006). Finally, Eder (2015, 67 -68) locates the fourth discourse in communication studies and economics. This discourse looks at journalism and marketing in terms of cross-media and convergence.

My book is located within Eder's third discourse, which operates under names such as transmedia storytelling, transmedia world-building, or transmedia practice. For pragmatic reasons, I call this discourse 'contemporary transmedia practices', because it consists of multiple but similar practices that emphasise different aspects within a media ecology in which a variety of works is connected to each other effectively forming a network whose configuration changes and shifts. I will explain my perspective on contemporary transmedia practices over the course of this dissertation.

Motivation for the Study: Why Game Characters?

Why would someone research game characters, and specifically dynamic game characters, as a topic at all? The answer in the broadest sense is that I look at media literacy in contemporary transmedia practices; that is, the meaning attached to recurring cultural and textual patterns, and how these patterns manifest and transform via different communicative media platforms, with a focus on games as a means to communicate characters, in current Western and Japanese society defined by consumerism and capitalism.

Characters, proposed by John Frow (2014, x) as "patterns of transtextual repetition which organize textuality into meaningful units", play a fundamental role in the construction of stories via transmedia storytelling or the strategies of a media mix. While this might sound as if I discuss exclusively the impact of characters in our understanding of (fictional) stories, I would like to stress that characters also shape our understanding of reality. Not only because characters are used as means to have users consume media entertainment on a global scale, but also because characters can and have been used to affect readers' mental imagination of their own community.

Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) describes how two media platforms, the novel and the newspaper, create imagined political communities within society. According to Anderson, the affordances of the novel and the newspaper provide the technical means to represent the imagined community that we know as a nation (1983, 24). The novel allows readers to construct the idea of simultaneity: 'homogeneous, empty time' (25) in which events and characters move at the same time. The newspaper is the 'extreme' form of the novel, since it is

printed every day *en masse*, meant to be consumed by hundreds and thousands of persons, and tells of events and persons who these readers have never even met nor might ever meet at all. The thousands of copies of a single newspaper, printed in daily intervals, also ensures readers that these events are rooted in everyday life (35). As a result, the readers of these platforms come to imagine that they are all part of the same nation, belonging to the same political community through their own imagination.

Although Anderson's focus was on media platforms, I would like to point specifically to the role of characters in Japan during the Second World War (WWII) propaganda that created, through different and similar means, the effect of an imagined community. Eiji Ôtsuka (2018; 2019) argues that the origins of the current media mix in Japan originates from audience-participatory propaganda techniques during the WWII by the Japanese government. Such techniques enabled the government to promote Japanese nationalism to create a monolithic nation via the creation of derivative works made by its citizens. I will go into more detail in chapter four, 'The Immaterial Character'.

These brief examples demonstrate that already at the onset of modern transmedia practices, characters have been playing a powerful role in influencing readers' perception of their own socio-political society. Authority forces try to shape the overall interpretation of circulating characters transmedially in newspaper, comic or weekly magazine formats via means of censorship, or actively using characters to impose a certain political ideology on the readers. Characters are therefore not only important to discuss because they move as textual patterns via stories and narratives, but their movements throughout different media also reflect the current ideological practices by which our current societies shape and influence the perception of 'reality'.

The answer for why it is relevant to study dynamic game characters in a smaller sense is that games provide the player the opportunity to engage in *participatory culture* (Jenkins 1992). Joost Raessens applies participatory culture to games, calling it the active attitude that "makes special demands concerning the interpretation, reconfiguration, and the construction of computer games" (2005, 383). A focus on dynamic game characters puts under scrutiny the friction in this participatory culture of games between the player's construction of the characters' identities and authority figures, manifesting primarily as franchises and big corporations, that police the interpretation of the identities of characters. These authorities can be considered invisible hands (Backe 2012), institutions that collaborate on the construction of a characters official identity "through calculated measures" (Winko 2002, 11). Through different strategies, venues of control such as canon, intellectual property (IP), and the author function, these invisible hands attempt to control the interpretation of a character's identity for their own benefits instead of leaving the interpretation of a character's identity in the hands of each individual reader.

I am not the only one who noticed this struggle for interpretative authority within participatory culture. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2019) argues:

> Shifting cultural attitudes toward texts—and the contemporary struggle for interpretive authority over them—characterize meaning-making. While theorists from Roland Barthes to Michel Foucault would point out the historical nature of this struggle (and the longtime absence of the author), the question of the reader-author struggle must be revisited, given that in this digital age, more people than ever before are writing for work and during leisure, readers connect with one another in powerful networks, lines between readers and writers blur, definitions of what counts as text are negotiated and reconfigured in hybrid multimodal

> and multilingual constellations, and texts and people circulate across asymmetrical trajectories (154)

I attempt to revisit this reader-author struggle, or, rather, the current struggle for interpretive authority via the definition of, the construction of, and the challenges that the dynamic game character brings to the meaning-making process in contemporary transmedia practices in which games require a specific set of demands of their, as Raessens states, "interpretation, reconfiguration, and the construction of computer games" (2005, 383). Already in 2009, Jan-Noël Thon states that, to his knowledge:

> There exists no developed theory or typology of characters in computer games yet, but such a theory and/or typology would probably be necessary to further develop the notion of ideological perspective structure with regard to computer games. Such a theory of characters in computer games would also have to describe in more detail the relation between the player, the avatar and the other characters in a game. (2009, 291)

A little bit before Thon, Rune Klevjer (2006) grounded the theory on the avatar as an agent through which the player can act in the game world, "the embodied manifestation of the player's engagement with the game world" (10). Kristine Jørgensen (2010) describes how companion characters in the *Mass Effect* series (2007–2012) play a narrative role in the construction of the game's story. And, in 2015, Daniel Vella coins the term 'playable figure', the entity that simultaneously embodies the player and the character, thereby becoming the player-character in a heterocosm, the represented world of the game. In addition to their research, my research on dynamic game characters relocates the sole focus on a locus of agency within a single entity, like the avatar or player-character, to an agency in which the player influences a web of characters.

My theory on dynamic game characters addresses the struggle for interpretive authority by explaining how the player constructs the identity of dynamic game characters, and by discussing how dynamic game characters connect to and influence other character manifestations in a broader media ecology in which characters circulate, which I call in this dissertation a 'character ecology'. I look at the role of digital games as one of the primary communicative platforms that presents characters in contemporary transmedia practices. By looking at games specifically, it extends the role of game characters as currently thought of in game studies and beyond, because it becomes possible to point to how games shape characters, how they contribute to our understanding of reading and interpreting characters, and what role games in general play within contemporary media practices.

2. The Aim of this Research

This section discusses the overall goal of the research. The first section introduces the research questions that guide the analysis of game characters throughout this research.

Research Questions

The aim of this work is to create a theory about a specific kind of game character, the dynamic game character within a character ecology. I aim to define a theory about dynamic game characters and analyse their constitution as a certain type of game character. A theory of dynamic game characters allows discussion on how digital games communicate and present characters, and helps to

differentiate the means by which games enable players to consider game entities as characters. I will demonstrate that dynamic game characters cause friction in the larger character ecology in which forms of control attempt to police the reading and interpretation of the works in which characters appear.

I base my research question and sub-questions on Henriette Heidbrink's (2010) general notion of theory and her explanation about the position of characters within theory:

> A theory, in the broadest sense, builds a model or draws a set of descriptive explanatory propositions that claim a systematic relation to a defined object of interest. Therefore, the first steps mostly include a *description* or a *definition* of the object and further *terms* and *distinctions* that build on this basis in order to explain the *functional integration* of the object within given *context*. The research on characters displays these issues by repeatedly asking what characters are (ontology), how they can be defined (definition), what they are made of (components/elements/segments), how they are constructed (construction/characterization), what functions they fulfil within different media contexts (e.g., theatre/film/prose fiction), and how to explain the coherence-effect that characters reveal (synthesis). (Heidbrink 2010, 85)

My research question is therefore:

What are dynamic game characters?

A broad question that requests a description or definition leads to a set of sub-questions that drove me to research and establish terms and distinctions about dynamic game characters that explain their integration within a game. I adopt a constructive point of view where I consider it useful to perceive certain game entities as characters and ask how they are characters. I will explain this in more detail in chapter three, 'On Method'. This point of view provides me the possibility to explain the variety of means by which games communicate characters. In this research, I specifically ask what constitutes *dynamic* game characters, how the identities of these type of characters are constructed, how they are integrated within games, and how they are integrated outside of games in a general character ecology. The sub-questions therefore are:

1. What is the distinction between game characters and characters in other media?
2. What are the different means by which a game entity turns into a character?
3. What constitutes dynamic game characters?
4. How is the identity of a dynamic game character constructed?
5. How does a dynamic game character influence the character ecology?

Scope of the Research

There are, in my awareness, three major limits to the scope of my research: the omission of a typology, the exclusion of fan fiction, and the absence of empirical players. I explain the limits to the scope of my research here.

The perceptive reader will notice that the main research question seems to require at first glance an ontological answer. After all, ontology allows for the creation of a set of concepts and the relations between them, which partially answers the question as to what a (dynamic) game

character is. However, I do not think that an ontological answer is what this question needs, since the main question consists of multiple sub-questions that do not require nor will be answered in detail by an ontological answer. As I will explain in detail in chapter two, 'Theory', and chapter four, 'The Immaterial Character', the concept of character is so ambiguous that any attempt at defining the concept is always incomplete in the sense that it will exclude more forms of characters than that it includes.

Since I do not attempt to provide an ontological answer, the goal of this research is not to create a typology or taxonomy, by which I mean a systematic classification or categorisation of different kinds of characters and their exact relations between each other. Mieke Bal (1979, 3) explains that character classification should not be a goal *an sich*, but that if we want to say something significant about a specific character, it has to be compared to other characters implicitly or explicitly. This means that a taxonomy could useful if we want to talk about a certain kind of character and compare it to all other kinds of characters out there, but for its own sake the existence of a classification is unnecessary.

The more interesting matter of a classification is not necessarily the taxonomy itself and how to make one, but *who* creates one and for what purpose.[1] A taxonomy is not simply a model of the real world, but a constructed, systematic model that shows how someone perceives relations between concepts. Even if the creation of that model is well justified, there is still power who determines what is related to what and how. Ultimately, a taxonomy is a question of power.

However, since I talk about a specific type of character, a dynamic game character, which implies that non-dynamic game characters also exist, I am aware that a typology cannot be completely avoided. As Frow (2014, 106) argues, all descriptions of characters are in a sense typological: they classify concepts as certain types in order to describe the relations between these types. At the very least, some sort of typology is required if one wishes to say something significant about any character at all. I therefore cannot avoid entirely a taxonomy nor a typology, because I need a working definition of the terms *character*, *game character*, and *dynamic game characters*. A discussion about *dynamic* game characters can only exist on the premise that I distinguish between dynamic game characters and non-dynamic game characters, which is in turn rooted in a distinction between characters and *game* characters. The purpose of the definition and typology as I present it here is therefore a pragmatic one. It is not necessarily that I suggest it as the only way to discuss characters, rather it gives me the chance to formulate a description that I can present to others.

As I will explain in more detail in chapter three, 'On Method', I maintain a reader-response approach to my study, but I do not include empirical players in the research.

I also narrow down the research to digital games. Again, I will explain this in more detail in chapter three, but here I will only state that for this study, I exclude non-digital board games and play-activities such as hide-and-seek. I use the word 'game' to refer to 'digital games' unless specified otherwise.

This study does not have a story-centric approach to characters in games. Despite the fact that characters are often associated with stories, as I will explain in more detail in chapter four, 'The Immaterial Character', characters do not appear exclusively in stories. That said, I do not exclude stories either. By maintaining a character-centric approach to characters, stories will often be present in the background of what I discuss, but they are not the sole focus or topic.

Furthermore, I will refrain from studying fan fiction or other kinds of derivative works. Since

[1] For this explanation, I thank James Manning who pointed out to me that it is also of importance to consider who is creating a taxonomy and has the power to shape what and how concepts are related.

I do not look at empirical players' engagement with the struggle for interpretative authority, empirical fans and their practices are not the focus of my research. However, over the course of my research, I have attempted to keep my theory what I would call 'fan-studies friendly'. The multiplicity model that I introduce in chapter four, for example, is intended to include *all* kinds of works in which a character appears into consideration. Fan fiction and other derivative works belong just as much to the multiplicity model as the works by authoritative institutions do.

For that matter, my study also does not include interviews with authoritative institutions. The means of control that I discuss in chapter five, 'The Challenge of Manifestations and their Identities', are based on a combination of prior studies by scholars in the fields of reader-response theory, literary studies, game studies, fan studies and popular culture studies. I discuss these works extensively over the following chapters.

Limiting the scope of my research in such a way allows me to discuss how the player engages with the friction between the creative agency they have over a dynamic game character's identity in a game, and the (lack of) agency they have over that character's identity in other kinds of works within contemporary transmedia practices. It enables me to narrow the focus to create a theory about the concept of the dynamic game character, and the means by which this type of character comes into being.

This Dissertation's Argument

Identity is an important—if not the most important—aspect of characters, inherently intertwined with the existence of a character. The moment that one recognises the manifestation of a character, that character obtains an identity. But who determines that identity is a question of power, similarly to the question of who creates the categorisation. It is a question that identifies the official version of a character as it moves between different media platforms. No character appears in a vacuum, and therefore the theory I propose will have a transmedial aspect as well. As I argue over the course of this book, dynamic game characters become especially interesting when one places them within a broader character ecology, and juxtaposes them to their manifestations in different media.

The answer to what a dynamic game character is consists of many varied layers, which I will describe, analyse and explain over the course of this dissertation. What needs to be addressed in order to reach a proper answer is not only the distinction between characters, game characters and dynamic game characters, but also layers that include explanations for how characters manifest in a transmedial character ecology, how they manifest in games, and layers that provide discussions about who is creating and maintaining these characters and identities.

To answer the main research question, I use Frow's description of his argument on characters and persons (2014, vi) as inspiration. The argument of my dissertation can be briefly stated as such:

Dynamic game characters are a type of quasi-person in digital games whose development consists of multiple outcomes. Digital games accelerate a dynamic game character's identity within a single work unlike non-cybermedia in which a character's identity is constructed over multiple works. They challenge venues of control, such as the author-function, ownership, and intellectual property, because the player has creative agency over the dynamic game character's characterisation process within a single work. However, once dynamic game characters transfer to other works, authoritative institutions break the player's participation in the dynamic game character's development. These transfers sacrifice player participation to create the illusion of a coherent identity between the

manifestations of the character over multiple works.

My argument is not entirely new. The identities of characters are not rigid, but malleable and fluid, and always have been (Frow 2014, vi). Yet, dynamic game characters become interesting once the mode of existence between the various identities of characters over a body of different of works in which characters appear are taken into consideration in relation to the acceleration of identities of a dynamic game character within a single body of work. I try to do this by investigating how dynamic game characters are constructed within a character ecology as a phenomenon of contemporary transmedia practices, where the idea of an 'core essence' of a person-like entity or work in general is given an incredible value. Dynamic game characters have become a phenomenon that challenges practices of (trans-)media control, such as authorship (Foucault 1969), canonisation (Backe 2012; Harvey 2015), and ownership or intellectual property (E. J. Evans 2012; Wasko 2001). A theory of dynamic game characters tells us about the migration of entities across different works, and how the perceiver comes to understand them within a context saturated with characters, stories and a variety of media platforms. Digital games are just one of many that participate in this character ecology, and they allow characters to challenge the idea that within a single piece of work the character must maintain a linear, continuous and coherent identity.

3. A Brief Explanation of Terms Used in this Dissertation

Character, Game Character and Dynamic Game Character

Here, I provide a brief working definition of the terms *character*, *game character*, and *dynamic game character* here as I use it in this dissertation. I will explain the definitions in more detail over the course of the next chapters.

I use the term *character* to refer to Frow's concept of the quasi-person. Frow considers characters to be pieces of writing or imagining and person-like entities (Frow 2014, 2; 2018, 109). He argues that our understanding of characters is based on our prior knowledge of what persons are:

> Our recognition of the kind of thing fictional characters are depends on our prior knowledge of the kind of thing persons are. We understand characters as quasi-person. But the modeling goes the other way as well: our understanding of persons is, in part, shaped by our experience of dealing with fictional characters. Both fictional characters and kinds of persons are models of an aspect of the world, schemata which generalize and simplify human being in conventional ways and make it available to understanding and action. (2014, 107)

To his description, I add Gô Itô's description of the character, who describes characters as *toujoujinbutsu*, '*dramatis personae*' (2005, 117), with specific personalities that give the impression of a continuous existence in which they are born, grow up, develop and die (2005, 120).

The working premise that I adopt for this dissertation is that a *character* is a *quasi-person*. That is, a pattern of writing or imagining that readers understand as person-like figures from which the interpreter infers a continuous existence: a (daily) life to which they are born and in which they will die, and to whom thoughts and intentions are ascribed. However, as I will explain over the course of this dissertation, the idea that characters have a continuous existence is rather a

theoretical ideal than an actual rationale, as there are plenty of forces that attempt to mould, transform and control the existence of the identity and lives of characters.

A *game character* is first and foremost a character, a quasi-person, a person-like figure to which an interpreter infers a life-like existence. The game allows the player to see in the game character a life-like existence in which it is born and can die, and to whom the player ascribes thoughts and intentions. A character becomes a *game* character once it is integrated in the game's mechanical system which requires the player's non-trivial effort to progress from one state to another (see Aarseth and Calleja 2015). This means that a game character has a processual nature, so that it has the potential for change when the player progresses the game. That change can be rigid, scripted and set in stone so that a game character may only change in one specific direction.

The *dynamic game character* is a type of game character with a development structure that branches into different outcomes, which are undetermined until the player actualises one or more possibilities. A dynamic game character is inherently ergodic (see Aarseth 1997) because the player has to put in non-trivial effort to direct the development towards a certain outcome. The actualisation of these possibilities in a dynamic game character's development structure has structural consequences for the manner in which the player continues to traverse the game, as the game will indicate that the player influences the development of the character to a certain path, and thereby the closing of another path. The outcome does not necessarily have to be clear to the player until they have actualised it.

The game characters of which I speak are *game* characters, not game-*player* characters or *gamer*-characters. The difference lies in the focus. Although an experiential focus would very well describe how players experience game characters and develop a certain affective engagement with them, my reader-response method approaches characters as a player-constructed phenomenon, in which the game character needs the player to be invoked, but the game encourages the meaning-making process with different means to different effects. This is in line with Frow's (2014) understanding of the character as simultaneously being a piece of writing and a person-like entity, instead of being either only part of the work or only part of the player's perception of a person.

Other Terms and Definitions

In addition to the terms character, game character, and dynamic game character, I use several other terms over the course of this dissertation that require at least some clarification.

Let me first concretely specify what I do *not* mean when I use the term character. In almost every language, words, their signifiers and signifieds, can carry different connotations depending on the context. The word 'character' is no different: it has a variety of connotations that are different to how I use it within this work. However, I will avoid any ambiguity that the various connotations of the word 'character' can bring by simply using different alternative words. 'Character' can refer to the individual units of the Japanese and Chinese logographic writing system. Since the culture of Japan plays a significant role in the theory about characters within this work, I will instead use the Japanese word *kanji* to refer to the units of the logographic alphabet in their writing system. 'Character' can also refer to a person's personality, the accumulation of their perceived behaviour and being. When I refer to this behaviour, I will use the word 'personality' instead of 'character'.

The West is a term I use for the *conceptual* distinction between the West and Japan. In Edward Said's influential work *Orientalism* (1978), the West is juxtaposed against the Orient as the Occident, and they relate to each other in a relation of power in which the West dominates the East. While the scope of my research does not include the power struggle for dominance of the West

over the East, the conceptual distinction between the West and Japan I use is based on Said's description of the West and the Orient—a position taken up by Japan—as "an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that has given it reality and presence in and for the West" (1978, 5).

Japan is not simply a passive agent within the conceptual distinction. Although I do touch upon Japan's creation of its own image juxtaposed against the West in chapter four, 'The Immaterial Character', an in-depth discussion of the socio-historical development of this is outside the scope of this work. However, I will briefly state here that, according to Takami Kuwayama (2009), Japanese scholarship has been strongly influenced by Western Europe and the United States of America, which are often conflated within a single category called 'the West' to both positive and negative effect (2009, 44). Misconceptions about the West include ignoring that many Europeans are multilingual and most Americans monolingual, as well as the regional variations between Western, Northern, Southern and Eastern Europe etc. (45). On an academic level, "the generalised West has been held responsible for its alleged failure to clarify the interpersonal quality of the Japanese character" (2009, 45), particularly on the dichotomy between Western individualism and Japanese collectivism (45).

The player refers to the model of a player, a tool to describe how the player plays a role in the meaning-making process of a game, particularly when it comes to the construction of a dynamic game character's identity. In addition, I use the terms *the reader*, *the user* and *the interpreter* in similar ways, as models to describe the meaning-making process of a work, specifically when I refer to works in general or when I refer to specific works that are not game works. I will explain the model of the player in more detail in chapter three, 'On Method'.

Game(s) is a term I use to describe a digital game work which I consider to belong to the larger phenomenon of cybermedia which consists of a sign surface, a mechanical system, a material medium, and which requires a player (see Aarseth and Calleja 2015). For something to be a game, an actual player has to consider it one within their socio-cultural context. I will explain this term in more detail in chapter three as well.

The *character ecology* is based on Roland Barthes' description of text (1977). The character ecology refers to the ever-shifting sphere in which characters are constantly produced and re-produced. As I will explain in more detail in chapter three, the character ecology is not limited to a single piece of work, but is experienced in a constant flow of reading, constant activity of production, which in turn shapes the textual configuration of the character.

Note on names: all Japanese names in this dissertation appear in the order given name first, family name second.

4. Chapter Overview

The chapters of this dissertation are spread over three main parts. Part I contains the introduction, the theory, and the method of this dissertation. Chapter one, this chapter, is an introduction to the rest of the dissertation, stating the topic, the motivation for the study, its aim and the scope of the study. Chapter two is the literature review. It provides an overview of the different perspectives, paradigms and complications of characters and game characters within contemporary transmedia practices. The first part of the chapter presents historically shaped 'classical' perspectives about

characters in literary, theatre and film studies. The second part discusses the existence of characters in games, the connection between avatar and character, the player's agency over the player-character, and the (lack of) discussion on other characters in games. Chapter three introduces the methodological approach I apply to my research of dynamic game characters. It clarifies my use of reader-response theory as the central approach to studying game characters. This chapter explains the selection criteria of the corpus, and the challenges of conducting game analyses on dynamic game characters. It will additionally discuss the historical development of reader-response theory as the necessary context to clarify how the approach can be adapted onto the structures of games, onto the interpretation of game works by reader, and onto the function of the work as means to analyse dynamic game characters.

Part II examines the concept of the character in a character ecology. Chapter four introduces the multiplicity model. The first part of the chapter examines the appearance of characters in the character ecology. It focuses on the theory on contemporary transmedia practices from the West and from Japan. The second part specifies the conceptual problems based on the theoretical discussions from this chapter and chapter two. Following from that, it provides the definition of characters as quasi-persons, and introduces the multiplicity model to address the meaning-making process of the cultural of the character to explain its existence of multiplicity in the character ecology. Chapter five examines the challenges to the identities of the character in a character ecology. The first part of the chapter explains the fallacy of narrative continuity's importance to police the reader in interpreting a certain version of a character as the official truthful version. It addresses three venues of control authoritative figures use to gain interpretative authority: the author-function, ownership and canonisation. The second part of the chapter shows the textual organisation, the configuration of the characters Sherlock Holmes, Pikachu and Link to show how authoritative figures control of character's identities is enacted through the different venues of control that vary per character.

Part III examines the role of games in the character ecology. It introduces the dynamic game character. Chapter six focuses on how games constitute game characters. It explains the context and the means to how the player infers an entity to be a game character in order for me to discuss the particular means via which dynamic game characters are constructed in the next chapter. Chapter seven introduces the dynamic game character. It presents the topic and the basic conditions for the dynamic game character. This chapter also addresses the game's possibility space, and subsequently explains the development structure of the dynamic game character, which uses the possibility space so that the player plays a significant role in the characterisation process of the dynamic game character. Chapter eight examines the strategies in which dynamic game characters appear. It discusses the player's creative agency over the characterisation process, the migration of the dynamic game character between games to other media platforms, and the consequences this migration has on the dynamic game character's identity. Finally, chapter nine presents the system of affection as a process by which game characters become dynamic so that the player obtains creative agency to influence these character's characterisation process into a certain direction until the character has reached a specific outcome.

Chapter Two
Theory: Character Paradigms and Complications

This chapter provides an overview of the different perspectives, paradigms, and their complications about characters within contemporary transmedia practices. The chapter is split into two different sections: 'General Character Theory', and 'Characters in Games'.

The first section, 'General Character Theory', starts with 'classical' perspectives on characters. Here, I discuss the crucial debates that historically shaped the current academic understanding of characters.

The second section, 'Characters in Games', discusses the existence of characters in games: the connection between avatars and characters, the focus on the player's control over the player-character, and the lack of discussion about other types of characters in games.

1. General Character Theory

The first part of this section discusses characters in the field of theatre and drama studies, in which the earliest account of the concept of character can be located in the West. The second part discusses characters in the field of literature, perhaps the field where the discussion on characters likely has the most prevalence. The third part shifts the discussion of characters to that in film studies. And the fourth part, the summary, provides a short overview of the sections discussed prior.

Theatre and Drama Studies

The etymology of the English word 'character' derives originally from the Greek word '*kharakter*', an instrument for stamping a distinctive mark, which in turn derives from the Greek verb '*kharattein*', meaning 'to engrave' or 'to make sharp' (Cixous 1974, 386; Frow 2014, 7). When it appeared in Greek literature, *kharakter* referred to the impression made by the stamp and not to the instrument anymore (Frow 2014; 7). This impression served to differentiate between things of the same kind, such as between portraits (Cixous 1974, 386), speech, style of spoken expression, or abstract entities like virtue and noble extent (Frow 2014, 7)—even so far as to refer to a certificate of conformity, the "detailed report of a person's quality, good reputation" (Cixous 1974, 386). It is not until the word appears on stage that it denotes "the individual nature of a single person" (Frow 2014, 8) or "the representation of a 'real' that is itself a stage" (Cixous 1974, 386).

It is in the Greek theatre where the predecessor of the character in contemporary transmedia practices makes its first appearance. Perhaps the earliest account of the character is Aristotle's *Poetics* (around 330 BC) (see Aristotle 1902). In this work, Aristotle differentiates between agents (*prattor*) and character (*ethos*) in ancient Greek tragedy. Favouring plot, and therefore action, Aristotle considers agents—that is, persons who perform the actions—as necessary components to drama, which he perceives as an imitation of action and life; action is the soul of the tragedy. Character, on the other hand, Aristotle considers less important than the agent, as it describes the qualities of the agent which only come through via the agent's actions (1902). 'Character' here is understood as a set of traits that arise from the actions of an agent, while the

agent carries the progression of the drama via its actions.

Aristotle's disciple Theophrastus considers the moral character (*ethos*) as a set of inherent qualities, but one that manifests via choices made within the framework of these qualities. Following Aristotle, Theophrastus understands character as the habitual actions which give characters its consistency. Frow states the following in his historical overview of Theophratus' notion of character:

> Each 'character' begins with an abstract definition of a moral quality, and then describes the type who embodies it; the general formula is: 'He is the sort of person who will' " (Frow 2014, 108).

Besides Greek tragedies, other forms of theatre in which characters are of large influence include the *commedia dell'arte*, professional improvisation theatre that originates from the 16th to 18th century in Italy. Robert Henke (2002), who analyses *commedia dell'arte*'s combination of the spoken work and written text, explains that *commedia dell'arte* performances function on a general plot—mostly romantic plots—with substructures based on character interactions and speech performances actualised through verbal actions. He states that *commedia dell'arte* is one of the best examples in theatre history of a character system in which the characters are shaped in relation to another (2002, 15). The character system resembles a family with an extended structure of fathers, children and servants (15).

The masks in *commedia dell'arte* are one of the most—perhaps *the* most—essential parts of the performance. According to John Rudlin (1994, 34) the masks are identical to a persona: the mask is "the person part of a character played by an actor", and "the part of character sustained by anyone in the world". Each mask refers to a character type, the father, children, servants, or two lovers, but, as Rudlin states, should never be mistaken for the representation of actual human beings (35). However, Henke argues that *commedia dell'arte* characters are not stock characters—flat, stereotypical characters iterated in novels, films or plays, based on the premise that each character only has a certain set of traits—because the characters are rich and flexible (2002, 30). Each character type possesses a set of basic traits, but the actors of the character could also significantly diverge from the basis as long as they kept to the plot of the performance (2002, 19). Actors were often incredibly attuned to the role they performed, as they were often committed to the same role for an extended period of time, giving them plenty of opportunities to adjust the characters via the improvised dialogue of the performance that transformed the character type into an individual character (19).

Brenda Laurel (1991) uses theatre as analogy to describe the interaction between human user and computer, defining human-computer interaction as "representations of actions with agents of both human and computer origin" (46). Using the Aristotelian definition of agents as those who take action, and characters as those entities with a bundle of traits, she argues that computer programs have agency in some form, because they perform actions. However, the "real argument", she states, "is whether the agency is a 'free-floating' aspect of what is going on, or whether it is captured in 'entities'—coalesced notions of the source of agency" (60). Her answer is that even if these entities do not exist, they are implied since people tend to attribute agency to the computer itself (60). Explicit entities, on the other hand, "consist of bundles of traits or predispositions to act in certain ways" (61). She states that these entities need to have two kinds of traits: internal traits that determine how the agent can act, and external traits that represent the internal disposition of

the agent so that users can infer from them how the agent could act (61.).

According to Laurel, it is action alone that shapes the character—as suggested by Aristotle—and therefore she argues that the character's actions are dictated by the plot. To display traits that are not put into action would violate the principle that the character is shaped by action. Laurel prioritizes action—and therefore agent—over character, which she perceives as just a bundle of traits. Her perspective on computer-based agents is, in other words, one in which the computer-based entity is first and foremost an agent, and only by being coalesced into a single entity with traits does it become a character.

Janet Murray (1997) also discusses computer-based agents in her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. She presents the structure of *commedia dell'arte* as a solution to the problem of procedural (computer-based) characters acting inconsistently towards each other when they are written according to a set of rules that determines their behaviour, actions, and responses. Explaining that *commedia dell'arte* does not rely on a script, she sees a possibility for procedural characters in *commedia dell'arte*'s dependence on scenarios that allow the actors to create a coherent improvisation (236.). Murray considers the patterns found in these scenarios a formula for procedural characters to have the possibility to respond appropriately to each other (236).

Literary Studies

From the twentieth century onwards, characters are primarily discussed as a facet of narrative discourse in literary studies. Literary studies' response to the psychological approach to characters as human beings led to a structuralist position that saw characters as signs or structures of the text. In turn, the structuralist position was met with a more humanistic position about the nature of the characters. In her overview of the debate about characters in literary and media studies in recent times, Henriette Heidbrink explains the following:

> There is a long ongoing debate between >humanistic< positions on the one hand that deal with characters on a mixed basis of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and textual analysis, and on the other hand so-called formalists, structuralists and semioticians, that hold the view that characters should be addressed as signs, semantic components (>semes<), >bundles of differentiations< / paradigms, words, sentences, or more generally, textuality (2010, 73)

The humanistic position can be found in E.M. Forster (1927), who introduces the *Homo fictus*, an ambiguous species similar to the *Homo sapiens*, that, created in the minds of novelists, cannot exist in our world. The *Homo fictus* is a character in a book. Forster divides the *Homo fictus* into two different categories: flat and round. The former are characters created around a single idea or quality, but they are easily recognised and remembered by the readers of the novel, since they are not changed by the events of the novel (74). The latter are more complex. Round characters are the complete opposite of flat characters, because they change during the events of the novel or play. One of Forster's criteria to recognise round characters is that they must have the ability to surprise the readers.

Around the same time as Forster, the structuralist position also emerged: structuralist and folklorist Vladimir Propp (1928) reduces the basic elements of Russian fairy tales to their primary functions. Interested in spheres of action, Propp considers functions as the acts of *dramatis personae* (characters) that are significant to the overall events in the fairy tales (20). The 31 functions that he identifies are merged into seven spheres of actions and assigned to the roles of

the *dramatis personae* (such as the hero, the witch, the villain, the victim, etc.) (24 – 59). The roles themselves, however, are not characters but are only meant to be filled by characters. A single character can also take on multiple roles.

According to Heidbrink (2010, 73), from the mid-1960s on, semioticians and structuralists were against the synthetic idea of a character, in which the character was understood as a human being. They instead consider the character to have no autonomy beyond the text; the character is wrapped as a semiotic sign in the work (73). French structuralist A.J. Greimas (1966) introduces his 'actantial scheme', based on Propp's theories. The actantial model is a typology that breaks down an action to six actants in total: sender, object, receiver, helper, subject, and opponent. Greimas' actantial model is rooted in the structure of the narrative: the actions are carried by 'acteurs' who are then ascribed to the actantial classes of sender, helper, object, etc. (Greimas 1966; Heidbrink 2010; Hébert 2011). Acteurs are not necessarily human actors, nor characters in the strictest sense, because the model looks at thematised actions within any given (story-) text, so animals or inanimate objects can also be categorised as an acteur belonging to a certain actant. Furthermore, Greimas' model relies much on perspectives in which one acteur could correspond to several actants depending on the perspective of the acteurs.

From the same structuralist branch, Roland Barthes attempts in *Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits* [Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives] (1966) to capture the character with the categories of persons, though, as Heidbrink puts it, "not in a psychological sense, but in a grammatical one" (2010, 81). Barthes states that the distinction between agents and characters presents the following problem:

> One the one hand, the characters (whatever one calls them—*dramatis personae* or *actants*) form a necessary plane of description, outside of which the slightest reported "actions" cease to be intelligible; so that it can be said that there is not a single narrative in the world without "characters", or at least without agents. Yet on the other hand, these –extremely numerous- "agents" can be neither described nor classified in terms of "persons" […], in which case it is necessary to leave out of account the very large number of narratives […] comprising agents but not persons. (Barthes 1966, 276)

If a character is only considered to be an agent, then there exist, according to Barthes, a large amount of narratives that do not have any persons in them, only entities that act. According to Heidbrink, in 1970 Barthes attempts to solve the problem of characters as persons by understanding characters as a combination of both person and agent, thereby separating 'personage' (character) from 'figure' and the 'I':

> The character (figure) is thereby understood as a kind of literary foil that is detached from the personage and -particularly in modern literature- exposed to a high degree of ambiguity. (Heidbrink 2010, 82)

Another structuralist-semiotic perspective comes from Hélène Cixous (1974) who states that the character can only be made sense of as a figure used in semiotics: as a 'personage' that functions as a social sign in relation to other signs in the text (384). She presents the character as a set of externals, preconceived by an author, that is then offered up to interpretation by a reader who looks for identification with the character (385). Thereby, Cixous grounds the existence of the character in the work itself. Though the character might allude to a real-life referent, its essential traits are

fixed within the work, and on which the work depends (385).

Seymour Chatman (1978), also a structuralist, considered the idea that a character is nothing more than words to be wrong (see Heidbrink 2010, 76). He critiques how structuralist positions use the Aristotelian distinction between agent and characters, and instead argues for a theory that treats characters as autonomous beings independent from any type of medium (1978). Considering them not only as plot functions, Chatman argues that it is the audience that constructs characters via explicit and implicit evidence communicated by the text (1978). Characters, from his perspective, are a paradigm of traits: they have a relatively stable personality that may unfold through the story of the text, but these traits can also disappear, reappear, or new traits may appear (1978, 126). He attempts to fit his paradigm of traits into Forster's notion that deep characters have to surprise its readers by arguing that round characters are open-ended, which allows readers to uncover even more traits (126).

Gérard Genette, concerned with the ambiguity of narrative, distinguishes between three uses of narrative: a) as a series of events (story), b) as the signifier of the story (narrative discourse), and c) a telling about a series of events (narrating) (1980). When it comes to the topic of characters, Genette takes on the structuralist position and seems to be mostly concerned with the character's role in the narrative perspective. He distinguishes between narrator and character (though they sometimes overlap) by asking questions such as "*who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective*" and "*who is the narrator?*" (186). Without giving a concrete definition of characters, they seem to matter mostly to Genette in terms of the function they play in the construction of the narrative discourse and narration, contrasting Chatman's proposition to perceive characters as independent from the medium.

In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, Chatman's trait paradigm triggered a paradigm shift towards the humanistic position of textual analysis. Three scholars who were occupied with these questions were Mieke Bal, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, and Uri Margolin.

A work that is particularly overlooked in the English-speaking academic field of literary studies is the book *Mensen van Papier* [Humans of Paper] (1979) edited by Bal. Bal, known for her work *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*[2] (Bal 1978; 1999), points out that the lack of research about characters in literature was due to the idea that one had to look at the connection between character and person (1979, 2 - 3). She states that, although literary studies focuses more on the communication between author and reader and the function of literature within general society, at that time characters in literature were only discussed in terms of their classification. Commenting on the structuralist model, and specifically Greimas' actant model, Bal argues that the disadvantage of classifications is that they do not demonstrate the nature of the character, because the different classes and traits of these classes only relate to each other. As a result, the amount of classes and characters are asymmetrical: one particular class could have more characters in one text, whereas in another text, one character can fit more classes (1979, 4 -5). Nevertheless, she does point out that the advantage of a classification is that it allows one to relate the character to the whole text so that the character's development over the text can be shown (7).

Addressing the question of whether characters are people or words, Rimmon-Kenan (1983) writes in her book *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* that characters in stories function as constructs modelled after the readers' perceptions of human beings and are therefore person-like (33). Relating to Chatman, she notes that characters can be described in a network of character-

[2] Bal originally released this work in Dutch in 1978 as *De Theorie van Vertellen en Verhalen: Inleiding in de Narratologie*.

traits, and that every element in the text can function as a direct or indirect indicator of character (59 -61).

Margolin (1986) provides a definition of characters in stories as Narrative Agents (NA), human-like individuals to whom readers can ascribe mental properties based on the text. The ascription of these mental traits—that is, characterisation—is based upon the characters' individual acts. Characters are constructed through the accumulation of these traits but, moreover, Margolin believes that readers only have a full portrait of the final character once they have completed the text in which it appears (206). It must be noted however that a couple of years later, Margolin emphasizes that his NA theory is developed in the domain of possible world semantics in contrast to classical narratology, in which characters are only elements part of the narrative (1990). Possible world semantics can be traced to the early 1980s with articles from scholars such as Lubomír Doležel (1983) and Marie-Laure Ryan (1985). Within this domain, Margolin considers the NAs to be individual members of a possible world located in a certain space and time, and they can be identified through for example proper names or specific descriptions (1990). The role narrative plays here is that as a "verbal representation of hypothetical states of affairs": it mediates the actions and events within this world (844).

At the end of the 1980s, Frow (1986)—like Margolin—challenges the notion of characters as simply elements of a narrative. He acknowledges that characters do not simply belong to the field of literary studies, but also highlights that neither should characters be considered persons:

> The concept is both ontologically and methodologically ambivalent; any attempt to resolve the ambivalence by thinking character either as merely the analogue of a person or as merely a textual function avoids coming to terms with the full complexity of the problem. (1986, 227)

Frow identifies three stages to the problem of our understanding of the conceptualisation of the character: 1) there is a tendency to think of characters as textual effects, 2) literary characters have been historically differentiated based upon institutionally sanctioned conventions of the self and 'character', and 3) there is the question of how characters hold the interest of the reader in the story (238). As an answer to why characters belong to both (narrative) discourse and representation, and why characters tend to move between linguistic and mimetic domains, Frow argues that characters are both an object and a subject of speech simultaneously: "in the production of character, language produces fictional representations which in turn produce more language" (245 -246).

James Phelan (1989) attempts to solve the ambivalence of characters as an analogue of persons and as textual functions by distinguishing three different dimensions, which he considers the attributes that characters possess in isolation from the work in which the characters appear, and from which the text derives its significance (9). The first dimensions he calls "synthetic": characters are constructs from text and are thereby artificial (10). The second dimension he calls "mimetic": characters are analogues of persons and their attributes become traits to create an illusion of an actual person (11). And finally, the last dimension he calls the "thematic": characters are the representative entities to express certain ideas larger than the individual character (12 - 13).

In the early 2000s, Phelan continues his three dimensional model of the character, calling it 'character functions' instead (2005, 12). He presents the idea of 'character narration', and art of direction through which the author directs a message to the reader by means of the character as

the narrator, combining the 'I' figure in the narrator and the character (2005, 1). Although the 'I' figure is both the character and the narrator in a single figure, Phelan distinguishes between the 'narrator functions' and the 'character functions'. In the former, the narrator either functions as a reporter to the audience, or unwittingly tells the audience about certain events without knowing the audience exists. The latter refers to the three functions a character can have: synthethic, mimemtic, and thematic (12).

Another work that discusses character narration is Alan Palmer's *Fictional Minds* (2004). Palmer coins the term 'fictional minds' as a "functional and teleological perspective that considers the purposive nature of characters' thoughts in terms of their motives, intentions, and resulting behavior from action" (12). Using this concept, he describes how characters are constructed via the reception of the readers' observations in the narrative through not only speech—referring to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of polyphony (having multiple voices in a text) (1986), but also through actions and the way the inner minds of the characters experience these actions (Palmer 2004, 211).

Recent works on characters tend to focus less on constructing a comprehensive theory of characters, and instead take a broader look at the debate between the humanistic position and the structuralist position in order to construct a theory about characters. In *Characters in Fictional Worlds* (2010), Eder et al. show via articles from multiple writers the various perspectives from which one can understand characters. Within this book, Heidbrink provides an exhaustive survey, *Fictional Characters in Literary and Media Studies: A Survey of the Research*, which explains how the two different positions constructed characters in the past. She finds that characters have been discussed mostly around the three following topics:

1. The notion of a character naturally seems to be connected to concepts of *humanlikeness*, although they seem to be made of rather abstract *medial material* like words, images, and sounds.
2. Different characters seem to be of different importance to the plot in respect to their *acts* and *functions*.
3. Characters seem to be constructed by a link between the observed *material* and the thereby elicited *reception process* and *effects*.

> In general all three points refer to a continuum between >abstraction< and >concretion<, whereas the first pole stands for the medial material, the text, the signs, or the structures of the medial product and the second pole stands for the character that is *via reception* perceived as a humanlike entity with a coherent self including an individual personality (Heidbrink 2010, 72).

Besides Heidbrink's extensive literary overview, the book also offers an ontology of fictional characters by Maria E. Reicher, who perceives characters as existing but completely undetermined abstract concepts whose existence rely on stories as created by human activities (2010, 116). With this explanation, she seems to mean that as an undetermined abstract concept, the core feature of the character is its incompleteness, that is, not every aspect of the character is determined nor has to be determined in order for the character to exist at all (119).

In *The Living Handbook of Narratology* (2012), Fotis Jannidis gives an overview of characters in which he defines characters as "a text- or media-based figure in a storyworld, usually human or human-like" (2012).

Other recent works discuss, for example, the question of why readers are interested in

literary characters at all. Blakeley Vermeule (2010) argues that the answer lies in our curiosity to other humans in general, making us susceptible to gossip and therefore interested in characters as well.

It is Frow's book *Character & Person* (2014) that I particularly want to highlight here. Frow provides an extensive account of the tension between the thinking of characters as pieces of writing or imagining and thinking of them as person-like entities, which refers to the tension between the structuralist position and the humanistic position. His aim is to resolve that tension by proposing that (fictional) characters must be seen as both at once (2). He states the main argument of his book to be the following:

> Persons exist across a range of modalities. Some people are real and physically present to us; others are real but we know them only by repute- by the stories that are told about them or the reports we have of their existence or our assumption they must exist or have once existed - or they exist in our memories; others may or may not be real, or imaginary qualities may be grafted onto real people; and others may be fictitious, with varying degrees of resemblance to real people. The argument itself is neither original nor particularly interesting; It becomes interesting, I think, when we begin to examine the way these different modes of existence relate to each other. I try to do this here by investigating some of the many culturally and historically specific schemata by which real and imaginary persons are assigned their particular ways of being, and I take fictional character as the starting point from which to examine the spectrum of modalities along which persons exist. I do this because fictional characters have a more clearly modal existence than real people do (they are more clearly constructs of the imagination), and in that sense they are exemplary of the way a mode of reality is ascribed to persons of all sorts. (2014, vi)

Frow argues that the problem to understanding characters as both pieces of writing and person-like entities is that "characters and persons are at once ontologically discontinuous (they have different manners of being) and logically interdependent" (vii). He proposes that the solution is to view persons as somewhat familiar to fictional characters, because it "allows us to understand persons not as ontological givens but as constructs, which are in part made out of the same materials as fictional characters" (vii).

Frow's discussion on the character is not focused on the nature of the character—*what* they are—but rather he focuses on the construction of the concept of character, and he describes the dependence of its construction on the historically and culturally changing understanding of persons. Frow roots the concept of 'character' in the taxonomies of personhood, the character is constructed in a specific moment of time "within terms of an ethical or legal or religious or civic mode of action and understanding" (2014, ix).

The definition of the 'character' that Frow provides is established on the recipients' cultural understanding of persons, but also acknowledges that characters are constructed within texts. He therefore considers characters to be *quasi-persons*:

> Our recognition of the kind of thing fictional characters are depends on our prior knowledge of the kind of thing persons are. We understand characters as quasi-persons. But the modeling goes the other way as well: our understanding of persons is, in part, shaped by our experience of dealing with fictional characters. Both fictional characters and kinds of persons

> are models of an aspect of the world, schemata which generalize and simplify human being in conventional ways and make it available to understanding and action. (2014, 107)

I leave Frow's work for now, but over the course of this dissertation, I will frequently refer to this work as I explore the construction of the character via multiple works, and specifically its role in games.

Film Studies

Film studies derives its understanding of characters primarily from literary studies. The opposition between the structuralist position and the humanistic position can also be found within this field.

In film studies, David Bordwell (1985) discusses the classical narration of Hollywood studio filmmaking from 1917 to 1960. Classical narration is the specific normalised composition of how classical Hollywood films present their stories (156). Bordwell states that characters were defined as individuals struggling to solve a specific problem or a certain goal. They have a clear set of qualities, traits and behaviours, with the protagonist characters as the ones who progress the film in terms of its causality (157). According to Bordwell, the canonical Hollywood format relies upon character-centered causality that provides action so that these characters would achieve their goals (157).

Murray Smith (1995) focuses on films after the 1960s in the book *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*. He assumes the humanistic position, perceiving the character in terms of its mimetic relation to human beings, as he considers the term 'character' to be a "fictional analogue of a human agent" (17). He argues that the understanding of character does not only depend "on a general conception of human agency but also on conceptions of social roles specific to cultures" (21). He therefore provides a *person schema* that lists the features human agents are deemed to have, and on which culturally specific developments are based:

1. a discrete human body, individuated and continuous through time and space;
2. perceptual activity, including self-awareness;
3. intentional states, such as beliefs and desires;
4. emotions;
5. the ability to use and understand a natural language;
6. the capacity for self-impelled actions and self-interpretation;
7. potential for traits, or persisting attributes (21)

Smith demonstrates that the notion of character relies on a cultural understanding of persons. He considers characters as constructs: "but they are constructs formed on a perceptual and explanatory schema (the person schema) which makes them salient and endows them with certain basic capacities. Particular characters drawing on culturally specific schemata are built upon this foundation" (31). Although characters are structurally embedded in texts, Smith argues that the necessary condition for character construction appears primarily on the side of reception. Based on the person schema, the reader projects (initially) the person schema onto a figure and turns the figure into a character (31).

At the end of the 1990s, Robert McKee (1998), a screenwriter, argues that characters in a story and the structure of the story are the same (100). Characters not only provide structure to the story, but also belong to stories. McKee seems to assume the structuralist position. As he contrasts

characters as paradigm of traits—as suggested by Chatman—McKee considers the accumulation of traits simply to be characterization. A paradigm of traits gives the character a personality, but it is not a character on its own (100). According to McKee, there exists a distinction between characterization and 'true character', the latter of which refers to the personality of the character revealed when they are under pressure. McKee is mostly concerned with his idea of true characters that he constructs based on Forster's idea of round and flat characters. He considers the revelation of the true character as fundamental to major characters, because the revelation of their true personality is provided by the story structure that forces characters into dilemmas (105).

In the English summary of his German work *Die Figur im Film* (2008), Eder proposes to explore film characters as "identifiable fictional beings with an inner life that exists as communicatively constructed artifacts" (2010, 18). Eder approaches film characters through audience reception: the audience's mental model of the character is the core to constructing character. However, he considers characters to be not entirely subjective. Rather, reception is of importance to the analysis of characters, because the seed of their origin depends on the mental model that the audience has of characters (2010, 19). These mental models consist of multiple modalities: "they combine different forms of information processing—visual, acoustic, linguistic, etc.—into a vividly experienced unity" (19). The mental models of a character, *character models*, "represent the properties of a fictional being in a particular structure, with a particular transparency, and a particular perspectival orientation" (19).

Based on various theories of film analysis, Eder provides for the practice of character analysis a 'clock of character', that consists "of the most general domains of features that can be ascribed to characters, and it closely connects them with the viewers' reception" (2010, 22). Characters can be analysed as:

1. Artifacts; the representation of characters in terms of stylistic devices such as the composition, textual features, and aesthetic structures,
2. Fictional beings; the character as an individual living in a fictional world,
3. Symbols; a sign with a deeper meaning that answers, e.g., what does the character stand for?
4. Symptoms; "consequences or causal factors of real elements of communication; for example, as the outcome of the work of the filmmakers or as role models for viewers" (2010, 22).

As fictional beings, Eder refers to characters as "the inhabitant of an imaginary world": the reader has to consider them as entities that think, feel, and are active (23). As artifacts, characters are analysed in terms of their structure and how they are constructed "with the help of the devices and techniques of filmmaking" (26). They can be analysed in terms of their representation: via images and sounds, audiovisual streams provide information about the character. But they can also be analysed as artifact properties such as realism and consistency: "the combination of several artifact properties may correspond to high-level conceptions of character, which inform the decisions of scriptwriters, directors, and actors" (27).

Eder considers characters as 'symbols' and characters as 'symptoms' to be umbrella terms that cover a wide range of phenomena:

When we examine characters as symbols, the question to be answered is what indirect

> meanings they convey. When we examine them as symptoms, the question concerns the causes in the production process that lead to their specific properties, and the effects of them on the viewers during and after reception. (2010, 32)

Finally, Smith (2011) discusses the *twofoldness* of characters in order to explain the caring attitude that readers assume towards characters set in 'realist fiction', a narrative in a fictional world primarily based on "an existing or historical social reality and relies upon our recognition of this for proper appreciation of the fiction" (278). Twofoldness, a term he borrows from Richard Wollheim (1987) describes the phenomenon of seeing two aspects at once as a single experience (279). He explains that readers tend to respond to characters as actual persons, while also being aware of the designed status of the character. The central argument of his work is that the twofoldness of characters allows readers to "talk freely of fictional characters as if they literally inhabited our own world, but in so doing we do not lose sight of their invented status. Far from suggesting naïveté, such talk betrays the ease, sophistication, and naturalness with which we handle fictional characters" (2011, 291).

Section Summary: Pieces of Writing and Imagination, and Person-like Entities

The debate on the concept of the character does not occur in each field independent from the other field. Historically, the debate starts in theatre studies, moves into literary studies and continues in film studies. Subsequently, these fields also shape the discussions on computer-based characters.

Theatre and drama studies initially differentiates between the character and agent as two separate aspects of a figure; a Greek tragedy's soul is action performed by an agent to progress the plot. The character are only the qualities of the agent. *Commedia dell'arte* is a form of improvisation theatre that hinges on the relations between character types. Each character type has a certain set of traits, although actors can significantly diverge from these traits as long as they keep to the plot of the performance. Theatre studies, specifically the Aristotelian perspective, or *commedia dell'arte*, is also used to describe the construction of computer-based agents as characters, as computers have a certain form of agency, shaping the scripts to determine the agents' behaviour, actions and responses.

Literary studies' reaction to the psychological approach to characters as human beings started a long and ongoing debate between a more structuralist position on characters, in which characters are only situated within the text's as structures and signs, and the humanistic position, which focuses on the reception of the characters as person-like entities that exist beyond the text. Only recently have scholars in this field tended to look at characters from a broader perspective, and instead of trying to define the nature of the character, they consider the different perspectives by which a character can be analysed. Characters are, from that perspective, simultaneously pieces of writing and person-like entities.

Film studies is informed by the debate between the structuralist position and the humanist position from literary studies. The field seems to continue the debate that characters are either embedded in the structure of the film story or person-like entities. However, just as in literary studies, recent works discuss characters in film also from a broader perspective, perceiving them not to be either/or, but rather as constructs that are both embedded in the text and person-like entities at the same time.

2. Characters in Games

This section is divided as follows: in the first part, I discuss the historical development of the connection between characters and avatars in games. This leads to the second part, in which discuss how the literature of game studies discusses characters in games. In the third part, I provide a summary of this section, pointing out that the discussions on avatars and characters in games tend to construct their concept of game characters primarily around the player's direct control over the character, so that the player-character becomes the topic of focus, while other types of game characters –some of which players can indirectly control—tend to be neglected.

Playing with Puppets: The Confusion between Avatars and Characters

According to Lars de Wildt *et al*. (2019), the term 'avatar' gained prominence in tech culture—including digital games—around the early 1980s when Californian tech culture "inherited a fascination with Eastern philosophy and religion from their 'hippie' forebears" (2019, 1). In Virtual Reality software from the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, the term was used to refer to:

> 1. A virtual object used to represent a participant or physical object in a virtual worlds; the (typically visual) representation may take any form.
> 2. The object embodied by a participant.
> 3. Adapted from Hindu, meaning the earthly embodiment of a deity. (Sherman and Craig 2003, 13)

The term 'avatar' originally derives from the Sanskrit noun originating from Hindu scripture and theological literature. De Wildt *et al.* (2019) states that in its original context, "the avatar is an object of worship and the manifestation of divinity that descends on Earth. Avatar is most commonly translated into English as a form of '(re-)incarnation, 'an often cyclical 'making flesh' (*carn*-) of a deity" (4). I will discuss the problematic appropriation of the term 'avatar' in tech culture—and game studies scholarship—in more detail at the end of this section. First, I will describe in what terms game studies scholarship has discussed and engaged with the term 'avatar' in games.

Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* (1997) formulates the idea of a *cybertext*, dynamic texts for which readers have to put in non-trivial effort in order to traverse the text. Aarseth calls this effort ergodic, and thus considers all texts for which readers rely on ergodicity—including games—cybertexts (1997, 1). Despite not solely discussing games, Aarseth's manuscript is one of the earliest contributions to the field of game studies, one that presented games as essentially different from other literary texts by integrating a model of the player, the intriguee: the real user of adventure games, at the center of the text (127).

In his discussion about the intriguee, Aarseth explains that the user takes on the role of the main character by identifying with it as "a remote-controlled extension of herself" (Aarseth 1997, 113). While he first calls the figure the main character of the game, Aarseth uses term 'character' to describe an entity through whom readers identify and manipulate the game in terms of its modality, rather than a character in the sense that it has an individual identity with some sort of personhood. Instead, Aarseth differentiates between the implied user, the intriguee, and the puppet that he describes as follows:

> The puppet is not a character or a narratee but an empty body, a contested ground zero of both the discourse and the intrigue. And the intriguee […] represents an immanent position

> but one that must be (re)constructed by the implied user and not by the voice of the event narrator. The implied user, on the other hand, is both responsible for the action and the game's outcome. (127)

In response to Aarseth's concept of the puppet, James Newman (2002) disputes the direct one-to-one player-character relationship, because he argues that what Aarseth describes is a relation of vehicular embodiment. Therefore, Newman considers the notion of 'character' to be inappropriate for the figure that is controlled by the player. Instead, Newman perceives characters through an 'on-line' and 'off-line' framework in order to describe when players engage with characters and when they engage with vehicular embodiments. In what he calls the 'off-line mode', the player does not have to devote non-trivial effort or active input (2002). These might be, for example, cut-scenes, in which the character takes over so the player does not have to provide any input. The offline mode allows for characterisation as if the figure has personhood of its own. However, in contrast, Newman considers that the 'on-line mode'—in which the player has to employ non-trivial effort—presents the figure only in terms of its capacities and capabilities (2002). The player's ability to control their figure strips the character from being a character and turns them instead into a vehicle. The duality between character and vehicle here is, in other words, clearly separated by the moments of direct control that players have over the figure. This proposition assumes that characters in games can only prevail without interference of players to manipulate and control them. The figure, then, is in that way either an avatar or a character, but cannot be both at the same time.

Considering the player's identity in relation to the figure they control a point of friction, Richard Bartle (1996) distinguishes between the player, the avatar, the character, and the persona based on immersion, that is, the idea of the player inhabiting a figure's body so that the player is absorbed into the game world. He refers to the avatar as a "player's representative in a world" (1996). It functions as a tool for the player and the world to interact (1996). Bartle considers the character, on the other hand, to be a player's representation in a world, a representation of the player that they don when entering the world. To Bartle, this is a deeper level of immersion (1996.). The main distinction Bartle offers is that avatars "are dolls" whereas "characters are simulacra" (1996). The former is a tool, whereas the latter is a copy of the player whom the player role-plays.

Interestingly however, Bartle considers a persona to be the player: "the player *is* the character" (1996). The player is not role-playing, nor assuming an identity like they do with the character, but they *are* that identity. Their persona is them. However, Bartle omits how and where he draws the line in his distinction between the avatar, the character, and the persona. Can they exist at the same time in one figure? Does it always have to be three distinct figures? Does this distinction apply only to the MUD genre that he analyses, or can it be extended to other kinds of games? These are questions his distinction does not answer.

Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman use a general concept of 'character' that refers to "a fictional persona contained within a game representation" in their comprehensive book *Rules of Play* (2004). They distinguish between characters who are under the player's control (the protagonist character), and those outside the player's control. To them, the combination of interaction and the rules of the game constructs these characters instead of an on-line or off-line mode; they argue against the duality of the figure as a vehicle and as a character that Newman prior constructed. Instead, they identify two layers of the so-called protagonist character and relate it to the players. First, they consider the figure a persona through which players exert themselves into the game world. Second, simultaneously the figure is a tool, a puppet and an object for players to

manipulate according to the rules of the game (2004, 453).

Jonas Linderoth (2005) extends Salen and Zimmerman's idea about the relation between the player and the figure, but considers the playable game character an 'avatar' instead, referring to the Hindu mythology in which avatars are the incarnations of deities on earth. He identifies three functions of the avatar in games:

1. It is a fictive character; a role players can pretend to be;
2. It is a tool, a piece of equipment for players to manipulate that provides them with agency in the game;
3. A prop through which players identify themselves in the game (2005).

He borrows the first two functions from Salen and Zimmerman, and seems to add in Bartle's idea of the persona and calls it prop. His reason for adding the identity of the players as a third function might be because Linderoth looks at player sociability between players in multiplayer games, whereas Aarseth, Newman, Bartle and Salen and Zimmerman look at the playable figure as a construct within the game without the possible interference of other players. Linderoth's three-layered functionality of the avatar is completely dependent on players and how they might construct the figure as a character. Yet, while he calls the figure an avatar, a concrete difference between avatar and character is lacking in the sense that his model implies that the avatar is always a character that depends on players for their individuality and personhood. It relies on the concept of character as a role for players to play, but leaves out other ways in which games might construct characters.

It took until Rune Klevjer's work *What is the Avatar?* (2006) for game studies to get a grip on the difference between the avatar and character. Previous works used the terms 'character' and 'avatar', 'puppet', or even 'tool' arbitrarily without a clear distinction for when which term is applicable to the figure. Klevjer's notion of the avatar follows Newman's differentiation between character and vehicle in the sense that Klevjer perceives the avatar as a mediator of agency and control (62). He defines the avatar as "an instrument or mechanism that defines for the participant a fictional body and mediates fictional agency; it is an embodied incarnation of the acting subject" (87). It is the extension of the player: a body in the world of the game through which players are able to interact with the game environment. However, Klevjer also emphasises that the avatar is a reflexive extension: the avatar's body inhabits the environment and is part of it. It is therefore not only acted upon by players, but is also affected by the environment to which it is exposed (95). The avatar differs from a tool, because a tool does not belong to the environment since we are only interested in its capacity to alter it (95).

According to Klevjer, the difference between character and avatar is that a character is an independent subject, a subject that acts and can be related to as a human person with feelings (16). This is in alignment with notions of characters from literature and film studies in which characters are also perceived in terms of their reception as mimetic analogues to humans. The avatar on the other hand, is not an independent agent, since it is a "prosthetic extension of agency and perception" (Klever 2006, 94).

Agency specifically is important to Klevjer in order to differentiate between an avatar and a playable character. The embodiment that the avatar provides players relies on what he calls the simulation of 'realistic agency':

> Realistic agency is when you do not have to perform the simulation by following a set of instructions, and when the behaviours of agents, objects, and processes in the environment can be ascribed their own properties and capabilities rather than to formal procedures that are external to them. In computer game environments, this kind of realistic agency is often combined with and balanced by game rules that are *not* concretised—either because they are transparent and non-reified (as in a role-playing game), or because they were never integrated with the simulation in the first place (as when a timer cuts you off in a racing game). (Klevjer 2006, 110)

To have this type of agency, 'tangibility' is a concept that Klevjer uses to describe the simulation of a direct physical interaction with the game environment (118). The avatarial relationship between players and avatars is then defined by tangibility and real-time control to simulate realistic agency (124). What should be kept in mind is that an avatarial relationship with an avatar always implies avatarial embodiment that allows players to manifest with a body in the game, but for Klevjer this does not necessarily have to be a human-like body as it could also be a vehicle (116). He also distinguishes between two-dimensional (2D) and three-dimensional avatars (3D). The latter "mediates embodied interaction through continuous space" (167), whereas the former mediates embodied interaction as a puppet where players do not perceive the game world from a subject-position (167).

Although players could have avatarial relationships with playable characters, Klevjer emphasises that, first of all, such a relation does not imply avatarial embodiment as it is not the extension of the players' bodies per se, and playable characters can also be indirectly controlled, like in point-and-click games (119). In contrast, the avatarial relationship is always tangible and directly controlled (124), which means that the moment the player controls a playable figure indirectly, the avatar ceases to exist.

Ragnhild Tronstad (2008) responds to Newman's suggestion that identification with the playable figure relies on its capabilities and has little connection to the figure's appearance. Instead, Tronstad distinguishes between two different kinds of identities: 1) sameness identity: the player enters a state where they experience being the figure, and 2) empathic identity: the player experiences what the figure experiences as an entity other than themselves (251). With *World of Warcraft* (2004) as his case study, Tronstad finds that the sameness identity is found in what he considers 'regular gameplay'; the player experiences flow, "a state of trance-like concentration in which the body seems to perform and react automatically as well as perfectly, without the conscious mind interfering" (253). The player experiences being the figure, because capabilities of figure and player are perfectly in balance. Tronstad considers this type of figure an avatar, because it is simply a representation of the players without any identity of its own. This resembles Klevjer's notion of the avatar, although Tronstad considers the avatar to be a tool for players to use in the gameworld, whereas Klevjer specifically does not.

According to Tronstad, empathic identity is found in the act of role-playing in *World of Warcraft*, in which players identify with the figure through an imaginative form of empathy in the sense that players are aware that the figure is a different entity from them with its own identity, history and motivations. For Tronstad, this is a character actualised through the player's act of role-playing, whose development as a character is not completely in the hands of the player, although the player does play a deliberate part in the construction of the character (257 - 259).

Tronstad points out that even if the player perceives the figure as an extension of themselves,

it is still materialised in the context of a gameworld with its own history, which enables the player to distinguish the figure as an entity separate from themselves to a certain extent (259), meaning that they are never fully capable of experiencing 'being' the figure.

Klevjer's work is the most extensive contribution to this point in debates on the avatar and its distinction from a character in games. That is not to say that discussions on the avatar are over. After his work, several academics have made contributions about the avatar in terms of role-playing by players taking up their own identity within the world of the game (Manninen and Kujanpaa 2007; Westecott 2009; Carter, Gibbs, and Arnold 2012). Additionally, when the avatar is considered to be an extension of the self, it opens up the possibility to look at interaction between players through the avatars (van Vugt, Hoorn, and Konijn 2010). Nevertheless, while studies about the notion of the avatar-as-tool after Klevjer have been few, there are exceptions, such as Linderoth (2013), who looks at the avatar from the perspective of ecological psychology, and Peter Bayliss (2007), who proposes a distinction between the player-character as a separate body of the players and the avatar as tools to change the game world.

Finally, de Wildt *et al*. (2019) explore the cultural appropriation of the term 'avatar' within Western tech culture, which used "Eastern traditions to re-chant technology with a sense of wonder" in the 1980s and 1990s (7). Their argument is that the contemporary use of the term 'avatar' in gaming cultures:

> 'plays' on and with the original meaning, and that this hybridity is fraught because it is based on asymmetrical power dynamics and obscured through secularization, by which we mean both the long-theorized and observed general decline, in the Western world, of religious practice within and sense of 'belonging to' institutionalized—e.g., Christian—church religion. (2)

For gaming this meant that the term 'avatar' was appropriated as a term to signal that playing digital games "was 'other' to mundane everyday experience" (7). According to de Wildt et al., the avatar gave the impression that digital games have the potential for creating embodied, empathic experiences, as the avatar was not merely a tool, but "a potentially incarnation of self" (7).

They pinpoint three key reinterpretations of the term 'avatar' entering in Western tech culture that established the current use of the term: the game *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* (Origin Systems 1985), the MUD game *Habitat* (LucasArts 1986), and the novel *Snow Crash* (Stephenson 1992). De Wildt *et al*. argue that in *Ultima IV* the avatar is used as an Orientalist story device, framed as the 'Other', but rendered to correspond to typical Christian values; rather than being an embodiment of a god out of many gods, the avatar in this game the only embodiment of virtue. "It re-mystifies the secular Western world through this gesture towards otherness, but the sacred world it invokes is thoroughly Christian and Western, yet rendered unfamiliar" (8).

In *Habitat*, the term 'avatar' received a new connotation: the avatar became the embodiment of the players in the game world: "Rather, than picking up a tool to execute a function, an avatar was possessed, inhabited, and a representation of the self to others in the virtual world" (10 -11).

In *Snow Crash*, the Western use of the term took on its final form as it is used in contemporary media practices. De Wildt *et al*. state that one of the novel's core themes was the exploration of mind, language, and myth through computation models giving computation a transformative power: the "fictional avatars of the Metaverse are technologically advanced, and

signal a potential future where a great deal of human activity is augmented and enabled by avatar technologies" (11). De Wildt *et al*. suggest that acknowledging this relationship in game studies has three important consequences for game scholarship:

1. Videogames are culturally hybrid.
2. While videogames are a global phenomenon, they draw from (and are experienced in) multiple, uneven local contexts.
3. Power and privilege shape how we experience and understand games. (20)

The term 'avatar' operates on an uneven power relationship between the West and the East. The use of the term illustrates that the cultural exchange between East and the West functions on a historically-set Orientalist discourse that extends beyond the cultural exchange between the Euro-American hemisphere and Japan. Instead, the term avatar suggests an uneven power balance by which games are experienced (21).

Game Characters: Playable Figures and Miniatures

The previous section showed the early debates on the distinction between avatar and character. These tended to focus on the idea of immersion, in which the avatar becomes a tool or an embodiment for the player to act within the world. Klevjer (2006) however, pointed out that he considers the character to be a separate entity from the avatar, an entity that acts independently from the player. His idea is that the moment the player is in a direct avatarial relation with a character, this is an avatar instead of a character, thereby shaping the initial perception of what was considered in game studies to be a character and what was an avatar.

In this section, I will focus on game characters in the works within game studies. The initial debate on the distinction between avatar and character continues in the discussion on characters in game, resulting in debates about the nature of game characters whose primary focus is the identity of the player-character, the character who the player has an avatarial relationship to and whose identity they therefore partially take on. However, that is not to say that discussions about characters that are not the player-character do not exist, but that they usually are discussed together with the player-character in order to set the player-character apart from these kinds of characters, with a few exceptions.

Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen *et al*. (2008) present a typology on characters in games in general that includes types of characters beyond the player-character or avatar. In contrast to Klevjer, they consider the player-character to be a character that the player can directly control and which therefore has an avatarial relation to it. They approach characters in a similar fashion as Aristotle, perceiving them as agents who make actions happen and are therefore the ones to produce stories (2008). Their typology is created from a theatre studies approach as they identify four different types of characters:

1. Stage characters: part of a scenario and do not have their own personality nor motive.
2. Functional characters: similar to stage characters, but they have a general function.
3. Cast characters: characters with different degrees of personality that have a specific function in the game related to its story.

4. Player-characters: characters manipulated by the players, but the characters' motivations are decided by the story of the game. (209)

There are few works that discuss in detail characters diverging from the player-character. One of them is Dan Pinchbeck's analysis (2009) of non-player characters (NPCs) that identifies the persistent NPC (PNPC). According to Pinchbeck, an NPC implies an agent that "has some form of individuality, that they are recognisable as a separate character from the background population" (262), whereas PNPCs "are those individuals presented in the diegesis who appear repeatedly or have a definable role in the world and plot. They are, to an extent, defined by diegetic significance rather than representation" (262). He argues that the PNPC is a type of character that plays a significant role in the plot, moving it forward—often as the ally but also as the enemy (263 -264).

In Pinchbeck's analysis, characters other than the player-character do not particularly contribute to the game structure, and are only present as characters in 'off-line' segments of the game. He argues that they are primarily shown via cut-scenes or audiovisual segments (267). If they are crucial to the ludic structure, he argues, they are goal-givers, giving the player quests and rewarding the player, enabling the player to attach significance to these characters and rewarding them for this significance (270). In other words, these characters—although he considers them persistent—remain on the periphery of the game, with the player-character as the agent who structurally impacts the progress and structure of the game.

Kristine Jørgensen (2010) does identify characters other than the player-character-important to the structure of the game. She discusses supporting characters as narrative devices that enable a coherent narrative experience in games such as *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009) and *Mass Effect 2* (2010). She considers interesting characters and a plot that unfolds in conjunction with character development as the basis for a successful implementation of a narrative depending on characters (2010). She regards support characters—what Egenfeldt-Nielsen *et al*. consider 'cast characters'—as having their own individual identities and that they are in charge of advancing the narrative of the game (315). A focus on these supporting characters places players in the position of that in a traditional narrative (like film or novels) in which they take on the role of a witness (323.). She is quick to point out that the difference between these traditional narratives and the games she discusses is that the games allow "the player to take some part in its progression by making the player responsible for the growth and development of the protagonist" (323).

Gordon Calleja (2011) identifies two types of characters that the player can control: the avatar and miniatures. He considers the former an entity to whom the player's presence is fixed and whom the player directly controls. For the latter, Calleja uses the term 'miniatures' to describe entities who the player can fully or partially control, but who do not represent the player (60). This means that the player could control multiple miniatures simultaneously in games in what Calleja calls a 'miniature environment', a representation of a landscape in which the player has a bird's eye view and is present in all places at all times with these miniatures under their command, as if the player were a god (91).

The terms 'game character' or 'character' in games are mostly ascribed to the role of characters within a story that a game supposedly tells. Calleja's notion of miniatures refers to games that emphasize the management of resources, but Pinchbeck's and Jørgensen's approaches are specifically tied to games that emphasise narrative progress. Egenfeldt-Nielsen *et al*. describe game characters mostly in terms of their narrative function or story role as well. Nevertheless, the assumption that characters always have to be discussed in terms of their narrative function can

cause friction in games in which the characters hop from a storytelling medium to a game genre with less storytelling capacities. Celia Pearce (2006) and Jessica Aldred (2012) address the issues of adaptation from film to games. Pearce argues that the reason game-to-movie adaptations fail is because the functions that characters play are "diametrically opposed" (2004, 152). According to her, characters who serve as avatars stimulate player interpretation: "taking a caricature that has been created as a vehicle for player-projection and trying to develop it unto a full-blown cinematic character is a dangerous game to play, so to speak" (152).

Aldred (2012) observes that the issue with movie-licensed (video) game characters is the balance between those characters as stand-ins for the player (as player-characters) and the characters being "visual and narrative associations demanded by their source medium" (92). She states the following:

> Game characters forced to be "digital doubles" of their filmic incarnations are similarly bound to the expectations and constraints of that image. Not only does this force the game character in question to function more as object for aesthetic contemplation rather than locus of player agency and subjectivity—it also leaves minimal space for users to form a successful *projective identity* (101).

Aldred distinguishes between the roles that game characters represent in two dimensions: a) the game character functions as the avatar of the game to embody players in the game world of the film, and b) the game character functions as the film character transported to the game (2012, 101). Abstracted characters such as Lego figures help players to obtain a sense of projective identity (101). Building on Scott McCloud's (1994) assumption that cartoon characters are empty shells who can absorb our identities due to their abstraction, Aldred states that abstraction allows players to perceive these characters as extensions of themselves, while simultaneously the abstraction takes away the associations demanded by the source medium (101).

In her later work, Aldred (2014) extends the idea of (video) game characters being the extension of players and being fictional entities that serve to advance the story of the game world by adding another dimension to game characters: characters have also become symbols for the larger game franchise to which they belong as agents that can be easily translated into other types of media. I should point out, however, that Aldred uses the term 'agent' to describe the characters as film characters due to their lack of customisability, contrasting with the term as used by Aristotle to describe agents as performers of actions.

Like Aldred, Aarseth (2012) also considers characters to be one of the most important elements of crossmedia productions. Based on Forster's (1927) character model, Aarseth categorises characters found in games into three different kinds:

1. Bots: without individual identity.
2. Shallow characters: little personality but with names and individual appearances.
3. Deep characters: with full personalities, names and individual appearances. (132)

Aarseth's typology is compact and embodies the same simplicity of Forster's. However, Aarseth's typology avoids the dependency on narratives and stories, instead taking the depths of the characters' personalities into account, which suits more game genres than just those that rely on narrative conventions. The simplicity of the typology shows us a spectrum on which, on one end,

characters with depth can become an authorial tool for designers to regulate strictly any game progress. On the other end, we find characters that are limited in authorship but are more malleable and provide players with more control (2012, 132).

Felix Schröter and Jan-Noël Thon (2014) present a method to analyse video game characters based on their theoretical understanding of medium-specific representation and the additional mental processes involved in the construction of characters via player reception. Contrasting Newman's on-line and off-line framework (2002), they propose three modes of representation that each contributes to three dimensions of video game characters as intersubjective communicative constructs:

> First, the *mode of narration* is primarily used to represent characters as fictional beings to whom the players can ascribe a specific corporeality, mentality, and sociality. Second, the *mode of simulation* – the interactive gameplay as such – primarily focuses on these characters' function as game pieces, which is connected to specific ludic abilities (such as 'running' or 'shooting') and characteristics (such as 'health' or 'accuracy') as well as to the game goals and the possibilities of interaction that the game provides. Third, the *mode of communication* allows for forms of self-representation that let characters function as representations of the players in the social space of the game. (2014, 48)

Schröter and Thon's modes of representation echo the three functions of the avatar that Linderoth (2005) previously identified in which avatars are simultaneously a fictive character, a tool for players to manipulate, and a prop through which players identify themselves in the game. Schröter and Thon's points of departure are similar: Linderoth focuses on player sociability, while Schröter and Thon believe that player experience is more closely related to game characters as intersubjective communicative constructs than how games represent characters (2014).

Although Schröter and Thon have given us a model for character representation in games, they emphasise player reception and how players construct characters over how games communicate characters. They present three frames of player experience of game characters based on Erving Goffman's (1974) concept of frames and Gary Alan Fine's (1983) frame analysis:

1. Narrative experience: players perceive game characters as fictional beings with an inner life. This is the dimension of fictional being that crosses different media.
2. Ludic experience: players perceive the characters as part of the game mechanics – as game pieces. The player-character is a tool that allows players agency in the game world.
3. Social experience: in multiplayer games, players look at the other players behind the avatar. (Schröter and Thon 2014, 49 – 50)

What Schröter and Thon seem to present is a method of analysis that indicates that every character in a game is to be represented through all different modes and that game characters are to be experienced in at least two different ways.

Daniel Vella (2015) describes how the player makes sense of the game world via playable figure: a controllable entity that could become a character. Vella combines a phenomenological approach to games with an in-depth textual analysis of the playable figure. He argues that the characters who players directly control in games—the player-characters—are ontologically speaking

game components: entities that comprise the games in which they appear. As such, he considers that calling them 'characters' for this reason would be inadequate as the term refers to represented individuals within the represented world of the game, while ignoring their status as elements (10). Put simply, instead of looking strictly at player-characters in terms of their representation as characters, Vella promotes a formal approach to perceive them as elements of the game as well. He thus refers to these entities as playable figures, a term that "encapsulates both the fact that the entity is taken on and 'played out' by the player […], but also the fact that it remains a figure in its own right" (10).

From the perspective of phenomenology, Vella explains the dual nature of the playable figure that consists of both an 'I' as the player herself, and also an external entity belonging to the mediated world of the game (20). Of relevance to game characters is Vella's account of the playable figure's transition into a character. Vella distinguishes between the terms 'playable figure' and 'character' in order to clarify the difference between the ludic subjectivity of the player—that is, the player's own performance within the game world and the ludic subject that the player controls. Using Margolin's concept of the 'possible non-actual individual' (Margolin 1986), Vella argues that the term 'character' does not refer to the playable figure, but "to the unity into which the representation of the player's subjectivity is shaped as seen from the objective, external perspective" (2015, 366). In other words, the game presents the figure as if it were a character, which does not depend on the identification of the players with the character (367).

Based on his previous model with Thon, Schröter (2016) provides a cognitive approach in order to theorise the ontology, reception and emotional engagement with game characters. His model presents game characters in three distinct dimensions: as fictional beings, as ludic game pieces, and as social representations of other players. As fictional beings, game characters perform as inhabitants of a storyworld with certain personality traits, motivations, social roles, etc., which the game narrates to the player. As ludic pieces, they function as entities in the game's mechanical system with certain game-related features and abilities. As the representation of other players, they allow the player to create a mental model of the other players in the social space of multiplayer games[3].

Just like his model with Thon, Schröter's model focuses solely on the player-character, and presents game characters as fictional beings that the player can only experience narratively. The cognitive approach that he presents, then, is one that only describes those characters that the player can directly control, and with whom the player has an avatarial relationship. Nevertheless, he omits the ontology, reception, and emotional engagement the player could have with other kinds of game characters. Instead, by using the general word 'game character' to refer to the player-character, Schröter implies that only the player-character is a *game* character.

In this chapter, I focus mostly on monographs that engage with characters in games as a theoretical construct directly, but the interdisciplinary field of game studies has been paying attention to game characters from different perspectives as well. To give a short summary of a few examples: from a gender perspective, Diane Carr (2002) discusses the issues around the representation of female characters using Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* series as a case study. Carr shows that Lara's exaggerated proportions as a female avatar is problematic in terms of neutral participation by players of all genders as Lara's duality as the avatar to be manipulated and her exaggerated sexual appearance seems to be specifically imagined for a heterosexual male consumer

[3] I initially wrote this paragraph for my article 'The Definition and Construction of Dynamic Game Characters in Digital Games' for the Character and Figurine academic seminar at Ropecon (2019) in Helsinki, Finland.

(8). Later, Jeroen Jansz and Raynel G. Martis (2007) dubbed the appearance of a competent female character in video games as the 'Lara phenomenon' and showed that strong female characters like Lara were represented as overly sexual, but they also showed that men in games were represented as gender-stereotypical and hyper-muscular, aimed at the heterosexual male audience as well.

Characters are also discussed from a design oriented approach. In *Better Game Characters by Design* (2006) and *How Games Move Us* (2016), Katherine Isbister provides a practice-oriented approach towards game characters (player-characters mostly) through whom players project themselves in games. Furthermore, she identifies common social roles of non-playable characters in games, such as minions, rescuees, pets, allies, guides and more, although a methodological explanation is absent. Another character design book is *Virtual Character Design* (2015) by Robin J.S. Sloan. Sloan uses the term 'virtual characters' to acknowledge the existence of game characters in other types of media, stating that virtual characters only come to life within virtual simulations once a user runs the software (xii). Yet despite her theoretical approach towards terminology, Sloan's book mostly focuses on how to design characters in terms of their bodily autonomy, visual and audio style, personality, story and more.

Section Summary: Avatars and Game Characters

This section shows that at the beginning of game studies, game characters are primarily discussed in terms of the difference between the avatar and the character. The term 'avatar' comes from the Sanskrit noun originating from Hindu scripture and theological literature, and was culturally appropriated in the 1980s and 1990s by a tech culture fascinated by the East as the 'Other'.

In game studies, the focus in the debates between the avatar and the character is about whether or not the entity the player directly controls is a character, the representation of the player in the world, or a tool that the player uses to interact with the world. Since Klevjer's (2006) distinction between the avatar as the extension of the player and the character as an agent independent from the player, discussions about the nature of the avatar have calmed down.

Nevertheless, debates about the nature of the character continue in the *player-character*, where the convergence of the identity of the player-character and the identity of the player is the main interest. Whenever game characters other than the player-character are discussed, they are discussed within a general character overview that tends to focus on the narrative roles of these characters, with the player-character as a separate kind of character since it takes on the main role within the games' narratives.

The main distinction on which the debates focus is between the character that the player avatarially controls—the player-character—and those that the player does not control. Aside from Calleja's 'miniatures', Jørgensen's (2012) discussion about supporting characters, and even Pinchbeck's PNPCs, there is a striking lack of academic works about game characters that the player only partially controls or influences. It seems that game studies' primary interest is the player's relation to the player-character, often the protagonist of the game, but seems to lack interest in how the player's agency can also affect characters beyond the one that the player directly controls. A reason for this interest in the player-character might be because the particular discipline in game studies that discuss characters in games, with scholars from the field of literary studies, implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) compares game characters to characters to other fields of media studies, such as literature, comics, film, theatre, etc. The player-character becomes then seemingly distinct from other characters, because the player has avatarial control over it, whereas in the other fields of media studies such avatarial control over the characters in these media almost always does not

exist.

3. Summary

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the paradigms in which characters within contemporary media practices are discussed, and what kind of complications arise when the nature and constitution of the character as a concept is up for debate. I showed this overview by first outlining how the discussion on the character developed in the more 'classical' fields of literary studies, theatre studies, and even film studies.

I then moved towards the discussion of game characters within game studies. In the discussion about game characters, I noted that game characters have primarily been discussed in terms of control and agency over the avatar/player-character, which could be attributed to the lack of a mechanical system in non-cybermedia where the character had been discussed prior. However, academic discussion about game characters without the player's agency to directly control them seems to be lacking in game studies.

Chapter Three
On Method: Selection Criteria and Reader-Response Theory

This chapter explains the methodological approach to dynamic game characters. It is devoted to the explanation and discussion of the use of *reader-response theory* as a central approach to studying game characters. The chapter is split into two main parts. The first part is devoted to the process of corpus selection. In this part, I discuss the challenges of conducting game analysis on dynamic game characters. More specifically, I discuss the challenge posed by the creation of a corpus consisting primarily of cybermedia artefacts whose processual nature changes the state of the medium. In this part, I therefore also discuss the problems in the conceptualisation of games in order to support the choices of games in the corpus. The chapter ends with an explanation of the role of games within a character ecology.

The second part explains how to adapt reader-response theory for an analysis of the cybermedia in which dynamic game characters appear. I highlight the historical development of reader-response theory to provide the necessary context in order to show how the theory's main characteristics—the structure of the work, and the reader interpreting the work and the text—function particularly well to explain the construction of dynamic game characters within a character ecology.

1. Approach: How to Reach an Analysis of Dynamic Game Characters?

This section starts with a discussion of the challenges concerning the game analysis of dynamic game characters. The next section defines the corpus consisting primarily of games and related media, and clarifies the role of games within a character ecology.

Game Analysis

This section describes the challenges of performing game analysis, especially on game characters. I will outline my motivation behind the choices of the means by which I conduct the analysis.

Early on the field of game studies, Espen Aarseth (2003, 2) already points out that the question of game analysis is not necessarily about how to do it, but why, since the motives of the research provides an answer as to how to conduct that research. He presents three main methods for researching games. First, one can analyse the design, rules, and mechanics of the game so far as they are available. Second, one can observe others playing and make conclusions based on their knowledge. And third, one can play the game themselves (2003, 3). His argument is that the latter one is best, because it allows researchers to put themselves in the role of the player and experience the "mental interpretation and exploration of the rules, which of course is invisible to the non-informed non-player" (2003, 3).

The necessity to play the game one analyses lies in the game's dependence on the non-trivial effort (see Aarseth 1997) the player has to exert so that the game progresses. As Aarseth explains,

while literary or filmic works need an analytical approach, games, on top of that analytical approach, also require "analysis practiced as performance with direct feedback from the system" (2003, 5). He proposes a set of different strata of engagement to conduct game analysis:

- Superficial play, the researcher only plays for a couple of minutes to get a feel of the game, but does not learn any structural features;
- Light play, the researcher learns a bit to make meaningful progress, but stops once that progress occurs;
- Partial completion, the researcher stops when a specific goal or series of goals has been reached;
- Total completion, only possible in games with defined endings;
- Repeated play (and expert play), which only happens after total completion unless the researcher is so completely used to the genre that learning more about the game has become unnecessary;
- Expert play, where the player is typically also a winner of multi-player games;
- Innovative play, where the researcher invents new strategies and does not play to win but to reach goals not generally acknowledged by other players. (2003, 6)

These strata show the amount of engagement required when analysing games empirically. When the motives are clear, the researcher can create an empirical basis from which they can attempt to answer the research question. However, as Aarseth also warns, one "must be careful to choose games that not only will confirm our hypotheses, but also potentially refute them. Our choice should be well argued and thoroughly defensible" (2003, 6).

There exist a few other works on approaches for game analysis in the field of game studies that describe how one reaches interpretation and attaches meaning to games. Like Aarseth's description of game analysis, these approaches focus on hermeneutics and textual analysis. For example, Clara Fernández-Vara's *Introduction to Game Analysis* (2015) presents strategies borrowed from textual analysis, but is written as a step-by-step guide primarily for audiences who are new to the field. Another example would be David Jara and Evan Torner (2018, 271) who suggest to 'close-play', a reader/player-based methodology centered around the subjective experience of gameplay, typical for the analysis of table top role-playing games. This type of methodology has been around in game studies for quite a while, and also been applied to digital games, from scholars such as Aarseth (1997), Torill Elvira Mortensen (2003), Astrid Ensslin (2014), and Kim Johansen Østby (2016), among others. Works on the study of game characters are primarily situated in the area of game design. Both Katherine Isbister (2006) and Robin J. S. Sloan (2015) offer guides that explain how to design a character's appearance, how a character's (visual) design affects certain types of players' experiences, or the role the characters have to play in certain types of games. Petri Lankoski's (2010) work describes characters as facilitators for gameplay-related emotions that focus on social conflict. He uses what he calls 'gameplay design patterns', the "semiformal interdependent descriptions of commonly reoccurring parts of a game that concern gameplay" (2010, 164). These patterns can be used as analytical tools to chart possible design spaces and expand them. However, as Lankoski points out, no specific method or choice of aesthetic is required to use these patterns, and so even when using these gameplay design patterns for game analysis, the researcher is still required to explain and specify their choice for using and describing certain patterns on a specific game character.

This means that when it comes to the analysis of game characters, it becomes imperative to borrow approaches from other disciplines and adapt them to fit the analysis of game characters, and specifically dynamic game characters. As I will explain, the approach I assume for my research is based on *reader-response theory*, a school of literary theory that focuses on the reader. Reader-response fits the interpretative and meaning-making process assigned to game characters that this work intends to explain. However, my approach is not only reader-response theory. It goes beyond it, because this research's main corpus is not simply literature but cybermedia with mechanical systems that require the player's non-trivial effort to traverse (see Aarseth 1997; Aarseth and Calleja 2015). Reader-response theory allows me to show the means by which games communicate dynamic game characters, and how the role of the player influences not only the player's particular interpretation of the character but also how the player affects the game character's development and identity on the structural level of the game.

Before I delve into an explanation of reader-response theory and how I connect that to play research, I believe it is necessary that I first describe in more detail what I mean when I use the word 'game', as it is a term that since the start of game studies as a field has led to many a dispute. After a brief overview about what games are, I will combine play research with reader-response theory to further construe the means by which I arrived at the definition and description of the dynamic game character.

Corpus: Which Games to Select?

To create a corpus, I had two choices. One choice would have been a close study of one or two games or game series. This would allow me to show the multiple possibilities and means by which dynamic game characters could potentially develop in intense detail in these one or two games. Østby's (2016) work does just that. His close study of the *Mass Effect* series (2007–2012) allows him to explain the multiple ways the game series portrays heteronormative standards within seemingly homosexual relationships between characters.

The other choice is to take a large corpus of a variety of games in different genres that present game characters, and more importantly, dynamic game characters. This approach allows me to demonstrate how a variety of games present different species of dynamic game character.

I am by far not the first person who has attempted to describe a theory of a certain phenomenon that allows us to understand, evaluate, and analyse that phenomenon. A theory of characters presents similar challenges as theories of narrative. Characters, albeit not bound by stories, are definitely dominated by stories and, just like stories, they appear over many a different medium. Even within games, characters appear in different shapes and roles and so, as a result, one of the main challenges that one encounters when trying to create a theory about game character is the corpus. How does one reach a certain corpus? Which games does one study to come to a definition of game characters?

Roland Barthes (1966) and Mieke Bal (1978; 1999) describe similar ways to delimit a corpus. Facing the problem of millions of narratives, Barthes (1966, 253–254) proposes a deductive method that starts with a theory, and then works down gradually from the proposed theory to different narrative species that conform to and depart from the model. This way, the researcher is able to perform an analysis that allows them to describe the differences and similarities within these different narrative species. Bal (1978, 12; 1999, 3) proposes a similar approach. Facing the impossibility of analysing millions of narratives, she considers the corpus an issue of relevance. To consider a specific work relevant, the researcher first needs to propose a theory so that that

formulation of characteristics allows one to delimit the corpus. Then they can start to describe each individual work and how it departs from and conforms to the proposed definition. The chosen works have to conform to the definition in a broad perspective, but should also allow the researcher to research the differences and similarities between each work.

The Conceptualisation of Games: The Problem of Game Definitions

Before I explain the approach of my game analysis in detail, it is necessary to clarify the selection process of the games that I analysed, because 'games' and 'digital games' are not clear distinct objects where it is specifically clear what is or is not a game. Many pragmatic decisions of corpus building stem from foundational ideas about the nature of games. I consider it therefore necessary to explain the foundational ideas about the nature of games on which this research has been built. The aim of this part of is not to describe what a game is, but rather to provide the reader of this work with "the 'dictionary' so that one understands what another means" (Bal 1999, 5).

This dissertation is by no means a work about the definition of games. The ideal situation would be that I have a valid definition of the term, but I unfortunately do not. And neither do the scholars whose topic of research is the conceptualisation of games. Elliot M. Avedon & Brian Sutton-Smith (1971), Bernard Suits (1978), Espen Aarseth (1997; 2014, 201), Jesper Juul (2005), Christian Elverdam & Espen Aarseth (2007); Aki Järvinen (2008), Jaakko Stenros (2017), Espen Aarseth & Pawel Grabarczyk (2018) are just a few of many works that have been discussing the definition of games until now.

The discussion on games is usually considered to start with Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1949), originally published in Dutch as *Homo Ludens: Proeve Ener Bepaling van het Spelelement der Cultuur* ([1938] 2008). The title originally means something akin: "A test of the definition of the element of 'spel' in culture", which implies rather a study on the definition of the element than about the element itself. Furthermore, the English version translates Huizinga's use of '*spel*' as 'play', although the words do not have the same connotation. Huizinga writes in the Dutch version:

> Wij moeten uitgaan van het begrip spel, zooals het *ons* gemeenzaam is, d.w.z. zooals het wordt gedekt door de woorden, die er, met eenige variatie, in de meeste Europeesche talen aan volgt: spel is een vrijwillige handeling of bezigheid, die binnen zekere vastgestelden grenzen van tijd en plaats wordt verricht naar vrijwillig aanvaarden doch volstrekt bindenden regel, met haar doel in zich zelf, begeleid door een gevoel van spanning en vreugde, en door een besef van 'anders zijn' dan het 'gewone leven'. Aldus bepaald schijnt het begrip geschikt, alles wat wij spel noemen, van dieren, kinderen en volwassen menschen te omvatten, behendigheids-, kracht-, vernuft-, en kansspelen, op- en uitvoeringen. Deze categorie spel scheen als een der meest fundamenteele geestelijke elementen van het leven te mogen worden aangemerkt ([1938] 2008, 56).

The English translation of this paragraph states the following[4]:

> We can only start from the play-concept that is common to us, I.e. the one covered, with slight variations, by the words corresponding to the English word "play" in most modern

[4] Unfortunately, the translator of the English version remains anonymous.

> European Languages. Such a concept, we felt, seemed to be tolerably well defined in the following terms: play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is "different" from "ordinary life". Thus defined, the concept seemed capable of embracing everything we call "play" in animals, children and grown-ups: games of strength and skill, inventing games, guessing games, games of chance, exhibitions and performances of all kinds. We ventured to call the category of play: one of the most fundamental in life. (1949, 28)

One of the main challenges to translation is that it is difficult to directly translate the meaning of a spoken and/or written statement, especially when the languages diverge to a great extent. Certain things that someone says in one language might not have an equivalent in another language, so as a result, the translator often ends up translating the attitude of a given statement in one language to a similar attitude in the other language instead of providing a one-to-one translation. For example, the Japanese term '*yoroshiku onegaishimasu'* does not necessarily mean anything until it is spoken within a given context; it can mean 'thank you', or 'please', but can also be used as a way of saying 'sorry' or formally saying 'it is up to you'. However, for translations of academic works, translating the attitude of an academic statement that discusses the meaning of a given phenomenon or term is beyond tricky. It is non-trivial that the translator chooses the terms carefully, as the translation of a word also changes the meaning of that word. To use Ferdinand de Saussure's sign model (1916), when one changes the signifier, the signified will also (slightly) change.

The English version of Huizinga suffers from the problem that by changing the Dutch word *spel* to the English word 'play', Huizinga would appear to discuss a different phenomenon in the English version than in the Dutch version of his work. He states in the original version that the use of the concept of *spel* varies slightly per European language, however the English version concretely states that it covers words from most modern European languages that correspond to the English word 'play'. The Dutch version does not make the claim that it only examines the Dutch phenomenon of *spel*.

To a native speaker of the Dutch language like myself, the word *spel* remains ambiguous at best. *Spel* could mean games as an artefact, but Huizinga discusses *spel* primarily as a process or activity ('handeling of bezigheid'). If I want to refer to *spel* as an artefact in the modern Dutch language, I would need more context. I could do this by adding a verb ('spel spelen') or use the diminutive version of the word ('spelletje'). The former allows me to say that I am playing a game, and the latter can be used in contexts that suggest that the artefact is something less serious: "Het is maar een spelletje" ("it is only a game"). However, even when these derivative forms of the word *spel* are used, the distinction between *spel* as an artefact, an activity, or a process is still not entirely clear. A board game might be a *spelletje* as an artefact, but I could use the same word for the performance of someone dressing up and pretending to be *Sinterklaas* (Saint Nicholas), a historical figure and the patron saint for children who, every year in November and December, comes to visit Dutch children to give them sweets and toys. During the time of this ritualistic Sinterklaas festival, adults might perceive the performance of Sinterklaas as nothing more than a *spel* or a *spelletje*, which refers to the performance as an activity or process (although not a very serious one). But, for children—especially those who still believe this figure is real—this festival is more than just a *spelletje*. That said, the profoundly debated (and highly problematic) blackface performances of the

servants of *Sinterklaas,* the *Zwarte Pieten* (Black Petes) suggest that, even for adults, the *Sinterklaas* festival is a serious *spel*. As Huizinga already said, the opposite of '*spel*' is not 'earnest' (seriousness) (1938, 33). *Spel* can be very serious.

For *spel*, Huizinga also uses the variant of *spelen*, which indicates either a verb or a noun. As a verb, the term is an activity that can be used in similar means as the English verb 'to play'. One can play a game ('een spel/spelletje spelen'), or play an instrument ('een instrument spelen'), or just play ('spelen'), although the latter invites the question of what one plays. As a noun, *spelen* refers to an event of (competitive) activities and sports, such as the Olympische Spelen (the Olympic Games). It is important to point out that the plural of *spel* as an artefact would be '*spellen*' and not '*spelen*'. *Spelen* as a noun can include games as an artefact, but is not necessarily an artefact itself nor does it have to consist of games. The English version translates the activities that Huizinga in Dutch considered to be *spelen* as 'games': "behendigheids-, kracht-, vernuft-, en kansspelen, op- en uitvoeringen" become "games of strength and skill, inventing games, guessing games, games of chance, exhibitions and performances of all kinds" (1949, 28). The translation of '*spelen*' as 'games' makes sense when one talks about the Olympic Games, but unfortunately the emphasis on the activity rather than the artefact in the Dutch version is lost in translation in the English revision of the work.

In short, what Huizinga's use of *spel* emphasizes, more so than the use of 'play' and 'games' in the English version, is the infinite and varied ways humankind engages with the spectrum of *spel*. The central problem in Huizinga's discussion of *spel* for this dissertation, however, is that for the use of game characters, or perhaps *spelpersonages* in Dutch, Huizinga's concept of *spel* is too broad as it covers anything that might possibly be playful. And if anything could possibly be a game character, then nothing is.

That games are infinite and varied is precisely the point that other early works emphasise as well. Roger Caillois' (1958) work, as a critical response to Huizinga, discusses Huizinga's English definition of 'play' as something that is voluntary, separate from ordinary life, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, and a form of make-believe (1958, 9–10). It is important to note here too that Caillois' work was originally in French, and his classification is a classification of the French word '*jeu*'. Caillois' classification shows the categories of *agôn*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx* spread between *paida* (free play) and *ludus* (structured play). It is an attempt to cover all the different characteristics of games, but just like Huizinga's definition of *spel*, Caillois' definition of *jeu* is too broad to use for an analysis of game characters.

In English, the words 'play' and 'games' seem to have two distinct but related meanings. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004, 72) explain the complex relationship between these terms, stating that the relation can bear connotations of games as a subset of play, and can bear connotations where play is a component of games. In the former, they point out that games belong to the broader form of play, where games portray a form of organised play with formalised rules, whereas other forms of play can be looser and less formal. The latter describes games as containing play as one of the many elements of which games consist.

Games as Cybermedia and Corpus Selection

Although these researchers change or adjust the definition of a game, they share the disposition that the term 'game' has many different uses. My own use of the term 'game' is not one that attempts to contribute to this discussion, but one that demonstrates what kind of corpus I use to come to my theory about dynamic game characters.

First, I consider the games that I use for dynamic game characters as artefacts in accordance with Espen Aarseth and Gordon Calleja's article: *The Word Game: The Ontology of an Indefinable Object* (2015). Aarseth and Calleja accept Ludwig Wittgenstein's ([1953] 2009) idea that games cannot be formally defined and are instead a historically constructed notion (Aarseth and Calleja 2015, 2). They propose instead an analytical framework that acknowledges the wide variety of cultural artefacts that are referred to as games. To solve the distinction between games as an 'object' and games as a 'process', they propose to look at games from a *processual perspective*. This refers to:

> The potential for change in every engagement with the game and favours a dynamic and recursive view of games. A processual perspective thus presents games as ever evolving and socially contingent in a manner consistent with other domains of social experience. The processual nature of games also presupposes a ludic perspective from the part of the player towards the game object. (2015)

Aarseth and Calleja place games under a more general class of phenomena that they call 'cybermedia'. Building on Aarseth's proposition for cybertexts (1997), each cybermedium, they argue, requires non-trivial effort from its user that puts into motion the mechanical system underneath the surface (Aarseth and Calleja 2015). Cybermedia, to which games belong, consist of four different elements. The first three elements are: a *sign surface* that follows Umberto Eco's semiotic theory (1976), the *mechanical system* that structures the process so that the cybermedium switches from one state to another, and the *material medium* like the material incarnation of which the cybermedium consists. These three elements describe the cybermedium as an object, so that it can be studied in isolation from the user (Aarseth and Calleja 2015). The fourth element is the *player*, the human agent(s) that engages with the cybermedium object. What Aarseth and Calleja stress is that in order for the cybermedium to be considered a game, the player has to consider it to be one, which means that the set of practices that the player deploys is always inherently related to the "social and cultural contexts of the player" (2015).

Following Aarseth and Calleja's suggestion, I consider games belonging to the larger phenomenon of cybermedia, which consists of a sign surface, a mechanical system, a material medium, and which requires a player. For it to be a game, a player has to consider it one within their socio-cultural context. Yet, this broad definition of games still requires another set of criteria for corpus selection.

Second, the games I speak about communicate characters. Inside contemporary transmedia practices they present characters in similar and distinct ways to novels, television series, films, or theatre plays. The characters presented within these objects form a character ecology, an environment in which characters are always related to each other and to different versions of each other, where with every new addition of a character the composition of those characters within that ecology shifts.

Third, the games are digital, or digital games. Players play them on consoles such as the PlayStation 4 or the Nintendo Switch, but also on the computer via, for example, the distribution service Steam. I exclude games such as board games or *spel*-activities like hide-and-seek. They may have a mechanical system, they may be capable of communicating characters in a specific way, but board games and *spel*-activities have less of a contribution in the development of characters within the discourse of contemporary media practices that tends to expand the characters' appearances

and development over multiple media and stories.

Nevertheless, when I speak of digital 'games', what counts as a digital game to me, might be considered an 'interactive movie' to others. *Erica* (Flavourworks 2019) for example could be considered an 'interactive movie'. At the same time, it is only playable on the PlayStation 4. This game blurs the line between games and film since it belongs to the broader class of cybermedia. I do not see this as an issue, rather it shows that 'dynamic game characters' are not a type of character distinct to games, but appear and influence users in other media as well, and are therefore relevant to speak about. I will discuss the appearance of dynamic game characters in other media in more detail in chapter 6.

Fourth, since I speak of characters within a discourse of contemporary transmedia practices, let me provide the time period of the body of works that I have chosen: 2000–2019. This time period corresponds to the beginnings of the discussions around the Western-centric contemporary transmedia practices, which started around Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca's (2004) article on transmedial worlds, Jay Lemke's (2004) critical analysis of media franchises, and Henry Jenkins' introduction of transmedia storytelling (2006). The current meaning of the Japanese media mix has been around since the 1980s (see Steinberg 2012, 1), but the concept gained its current popularity in Japanese academia with Eiji Ôtsuka's narrative consumption (2010) and Gô Itô's ground-breaking work *Tezuka is Dead* (2005). Albeit not necessarily using that term, the concept's popularity has been on the rise in the Euro-American hemisphere since the translation of Hiroki Azuma's *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (Azuma [2001] 2009), with Marc Steinberg's *Anime's Media Mix* (2012) giving it a permanent spot on the map. The phenomenon of the media mix however has been discussed years prior by Susan J. Napier in *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke* (2001), and by Anne Allison in her book *Millennial Monsters* (2006). Using games that were created and played around this time period makes sense because their instantiation aligns with the rise of discussions surrounding contemporary transmedia practices to which digital games belong.

And fifth, an important condition for my corpus of digital games was variation. I attempted to have as diverse a corpus as possible to obtain an idea about the different means by which games communicate characters. The most important aspect of a dynamic game character is the dynamicity in its development over the course of playing the game. This means that the games I analyse in order to discuss this type of character are games that focus on the development of characters. In certain kinds of game genres, game characters and especially dynamic game characters dominate the genre more so than in other game genres. In role-playing games, visual novels, dating simulators, simulation games like *The Sims* (Maxis 2000) or *otome* and *bishoujo* games, characters have a much more prominent presence as these games tend to emphasise character development, which could be via stories or some kinds of mechanics like simulating bonding, or taking care of characters' needs to name just two. These kinds of games are also primarily designed to be single-player games (although single-player games can still be enjoyed by multiple persons at the same time). That does not mean that games from (multi-player) genres such as race- or fighting games do not contain characters, but their focus is—as the names of the genres suggest—more on racing or fighting competitions between players, or between the player and the computer. As a result, my corpus consists much more of games like visual novels or role-playing games than racing or fighting games.

I make, however, no statements about the role of genres in presenting characters. The focus of my dissertation is on game characters, not on game genres. Moreover, even within game genres that are very similar, constructing characters can differ to a great extent. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding describe the role-playing game (RPG) as a "word used by multiple social groups to refer

to multiple forms and styles of play activities and objects revolving around the rule-structured creation and enactment of characters in a fictional world" (2018, 46). They distinguish between four different forms of role-playing games, to specify the different characteristics a role-playing game can have: the tabletop role-playing game (TRPG), computer role-playing game (CRPG), (massively) multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), and the live-action role-playing game (LARP) they act and respond to situations within the game world. In LARPs, players enact their characters, using their own bodies, with costumes within a 'real-world' physical setting with props to act with (34). In MMORPGs, 'characters' primarily serve as a persona or an extension of the player to engage with other players, which I have discussed in the previous chapter. Unlike the other forms, CRPGS are usually offered to solitary players, as 'single-player games'. They provide characters whose actions are limited to options made available by the game; their abilities and the outcomes of their actions tend to be determined by quantified rule systems, but player-characters also tend to improve over the course of the game (2018, 39). No character is constructed by exactly the same means in each RPG form. There is definitely some overlap, as well as some distinctions, but in the end there is no common core to constitute a character between these four forms.

The corpus does not exclusively consist of cybermedia. Games make up the mass of the corpus, but since this dissertation discusses game characters within contemporary transmedia practices, other non-cybermedia are also part of the overall corpus. I explain the use of each non-cybermedium in detail in the chapters where I discuss these media.

I selected these non-cybermedia to discover how a medium that does not have a mechanical system—which allows the processual change on which a dynamic game character relies—would resolve the challenge of presenting a character that is a dynamic game character in the game(s) in which it appears. To give an example, my choice to discuss the *Mass Effect Omnibus Volume 1* (2016) and *Mass Effect Omnibus Volume 2* (2017) comics is to put under scrutiny the strategies of transmedial appearances of the dynamic game characters. There is one exception to the rule: in the next chapter, I discuss Sherlock Holmes, the famous detective whose original manifestation manifested in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's novels (1887–1915). I chose this character precisely because the character is an exception to the rule of corpus selection within this dissertation, and also because Sherlock Holmes is a character created at the start of capitalistic consumer culture that eventually gave birth to contemporary transmedia practices as we know it now. He is also a character that has evolved over the past 100 years through multiple identities, including identities appearing in digital games such as the dating game *Guard me, Sherlock!* (NTT Solmare Corporation 2016) and the mystery game *Sherlock Holmes: The Devil's Daughter* (Frogwares 2016). That is to say that he is a character with a large variety of appearances over multiple media and media franchises in a relatively short amount of time, and for whom it is clear in which work he first appeared.

It can therefore be said that I study characters in *game works*. When these works belong to the more general class of cybermedia I will refer to them as 'games'. When they do not belong to the general class of cybermedia, I will specify the medium (comics, film, novels etc.).

Which Game Version?

The final note that I will make about the corpus selection is that in our current media landscape it has become increasingly difficult to make a clear separation between 'complete' and 'incomplete' games. Digital games are no longer only sold in a physical format of a package that buyers can hold in their hands, or as a CD-ROM to put in a computer. Just a connection to the Internet can be more than enough to buy a digital game. Virtual online stores (e-stores) such as the Nintendo eShop,

Sony's PlayStation Network store (the PSN store), Steam, or smartphone stores such as Apple's App Store or Google's Play Store, allow users to download games to a platform of their choice. The games do not necessarily have to be the 'complete' game. Downloadable content (DLC), 'add-ons', expansion packs, and more are common phenomena that players can buy to expand their experience in these games.

An additional challenge is that games, especially via e-stores, are often released in different editions where one version might contain more content than another version. For example, the European PSN store provides players the choice between three versions of *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (Eidos Montréal 2018): *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, *Shadow of the Tomb Raider – Digital Deluxe Edition,* and *Shadow of the Tomb Raider – Croft Edition*. The difference? The first is the original game, playable and (seemingly) finished for players to experience as a 'complete game'. The second edition includes the 'original game', an 'extra weapon/outfit', the original game soundtrack, and an extra 'skills booster pack'. And the third edition contains the 'original game', a 'Season Pass' (a ticket for DLC that will be released in the near future), three extra weapons and outfits, the original game soundtrack, and an extra skills booster pack.

No Man's Sky (Hello Games 2016) is a game that the developers have continuously been patching and upgrading since its release in August 2016, because players found that it did not live up to the expectations. Two years later, the developers released their latest update called *No Man's Sky NEXT,* which introduces a "full multiplayer experience, near-unlimited base building, command of freighter armadas, a graphical overhaul and more" (Hello Games 2018). It completely changed the original game and turned it into another game. This makes it difficult to address games as finished, singular products that are continuously the same. Some players might opt to download some extra content, while others will not. And if games can change completely after their initial release, this raises the question of how we should address the characters within those games. Should one only discuss the game character's initial release and not discuss DLC that could possibly change the character, or should all the DLC of the game in particular be discussed? The character Javik in *Mass Effect 3* (2012) only appears in the game if the player buys and downloads the *Mass Effect 3: From Ashes* DLC pack. Javik's entire existence depends on the player's choice to add this DLC pack to their game. It also grants the player more knowledge about several diegetic events set prior to the events of the game. Not only does this DLC pack shape the player's experience of the game world, Javik's dependence on the DLC also challenges whether he should be considered to be officially part of *ME3*, as part of its canon.

I have no perfect answer to that question, but I do have a practical one in relation to my own corpus selection. And that is that I specify when I discuss DLC. The availability of DLC can make an impact on the identity of the character to one person in comparison to another person. The question is therefore not so much whether or not I should discuss DLC, but rather, it shows that characters—even within a single work—belong to an ever-changing landscape, a character ecology.

Games in a Character Ecology

In *Image Music Text* (1977), Barthes describes how a photographic image becomes a text—that is, an object that can deciphered and interpreted. I find it relevant to use Barthes' distinction between the *text* and the *work*. He considers the work as something that can be held in the hand, something that can be seen in bookshops, catalogues, or exam syllabuses (1977, 157). The text on the other hand is not a single product, but an ongoing process in language:

> [The text] only exists in the movement of a discourse […]; the Text is not the decomposition of the work, it is the work that is the imaginary Tail of the Text; or again; the Text is experienced only in an activity of production. It follows that the Text cannot stop (for example on a library shelf); its consecutive movement is that of cutting across (in particular, it can cut across the work, several works) (157).

Torill Elvira Mortensen explains Barthes' distinction between the work and the text in the following way:

> The *work* in Barthes' definition is the unrealised text, the writing *before* the reader has accessed it and begun the act of reading: the book on the shelf, the piece of music on the sheet, the game in the CDrom. The *text* is the realised work. When the reader reads the book he *creates* the text. When the music is heard or played, it is created through the performance *and* by the listener. This opens for an understanding of the text as a much broader concept than the written word. The concept links the text to the user, the reader, or the performer. Unused and unperformed, the work is not a text at all; it simply has the potential for becoming a text. This approach empowers the user, the reader, to a thought-provoking extent. (2003, 38)

The text revolves around the act of reading. The work on its own has not been accessed yet, and can be shelved away until someone decides to grab it and read it. That is when the text comes into existence. The text can cut across several works. It is not limited to a single work, but is experienced as a constant flow of reading, that is, the activity of production.

However, the work does not go away. The work is non-trivial in producing the text, and its affordances and limitations affect how the reader will create the text. Without a work, the reader cannot produce the text. Although the text is important in the understanding of the overall ongoing process, it is also vital to understand what and how a work contributes to the activity of production of the text.

In this dissertation, I find it important to emphasise the text in which characters move, and simultaneously acknowledges the contribution of the work that allows for the activity of production of the text. I therefore approach the text and the work in the following way: Barthes' text is the character ecology I speak about, to which games as works contribute. In contemporary transmedia practices where characters hop from one work to the next, it is necessary to study the sphere in which they appear. If we were to approach characters solely within a single medium, we miss a vital perception to our understanding of characters in contemporary culture, namely that readers make sense of them in the multiplicity of their existence. Studying what games contribute to this character ecology stresses that games do not operate in a vacuum, but that they communicate in a network consisting of a variety of media that users of those media constantly interpret. Characters are independent from any given medium, but are simultaneously dependent on media to be invoked at all. This means that we should not discard medium specificity in its totality. As Marc Steinberg argues: "each manifestation of the character foregrounds the distinct properties of the medium in question […], the character in its media crossing generates a degree of convergence between media forms around its image, but it also abstracts some of the specificity each medium and transposes this specificity to other material incarnations" (2012, 85). Even if characters transfer from one medium to the next, the properties used to invoke the character in a game can vary from those in,

for example, a novel or a film. At the same time, some properties of the media are similar so that those media generate a degree of convergence around the character.

When one studies a work as part of a text, the object is part of an activity of production that adds and shifts the multiple meanings this text can bear constantly. The character ecology in our contemporary transmedia practices is subject to change with every single contribution in the possible shape of a (re-)new(ed) novel, a film adaptation, or a new game instalment in a game series. In order to see the contribution of games to this ecology, the analysis is situated within the practice of interpretation. Rather than a method that suggests that there is a rigid, constant, single meaning attached to this character ecology, my approach assumes a position that players gain knowledge via their interpretation of game characters within this character ecology. This requires the position that games communicate characters from which players can derive a variety of meanings and interpretation; that games have a specific structure that manifests characters which the player interprets in specific ways. Reader-response theory is therefore particularly useful, as it allows me to address the contribution of games to the ever-changing character ecology. That is, it allows me to discuss characters within the structure of the cybermedia, and discuss how players derive meaning from these structures and add these meanings to the overall character ecology.

2. Adapting Reader-Response Theory to Game Analysis

This final section discusses how I adapt reader-response theory for an analysis of cybermedia.

A Brief Historical Overview

Before I propose how reader-response theory can be adapted as an approach to cybermedia, it is important to highlight the historical development of reader-response theory, since that provides the necessary context surrounding how the main characteristics from reader-response theory function particularly well in the construction of dynamic game characters.

Reader-response theory is closely associated with structuralism. Structuralism, or structuralist narrative theory, downplays the work as a *product* and favours the *process* of meaning-making, as it focuses on reading and untangling the work in the larger context of the text (see Freed-Thall 2018, 63). Major thinkers who contributed to structuralism are, for example, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, and Gérard Genette. With its roots in de Saussure's discourse about structuralist linguistics in *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916)—which I will discuss in the chapter called *Immaterial Character*—structuralism pays attention to the semiotic gaps and ambiguities within a work (Freed-Thall 2018, 61). This way, it invalidated traditional ideas about canonisation, the author's authority, and masterpieces (2018, 61).

Although structuralism declined in the 1960s, it paved the way for reader-response theory in its foundation that there exist various ways in which readers derive meaning from a text (see Davis and Womack 2002, 58). Reader-response theory gained prominence in the 1960s and 1970s with authors such as Wayne C. Booth, Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, and Wolfgang Iser. Some of these writers were also influential in structuralism. The main difference between structuralism and reader-response theory primarily lies in the emphasis of both approaches: structuralism describes how literature functions as a series of signs (Davis and Womack 2002, 58), and roots interpretation and meaning-making within the structures of the text. Structuralists "listen to the text's interplay of voices; to linger in the interstices between narrative levels; to explore the experimental realms of tone, mood, and atmosphere; and to examine how meaning is produced by the friction among these and other elements" (Freed-Thall 2018, 63).

Reader-response theory, on the other hand, considers the text inherently meaningless without a reader to create meaning from the text. It takes the structure of works into consideration, but emphasises the reader's role in constructing meaning from the text. In this sense, it provides a model that analyses the reading process as well as the mechanisms that works and texts share in the production of meaning (Davis and Womack 2002, 51). According to Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack, the three principal questions reader-response theory explore are: "do our various responses to literary works produce the same (or similar) readings?; can literary texts genuinely enjoy as many meanings as readers are able to create?; are some readings essentially more valid and justifiable than others?" (2002, 51).

One work in particular that preceded modern reader-response theory is *Literature as Exploration* ([1938] 1995) by Louise M. Rosenblatt. According to Booth, who wrote the foreword to the 1995 edition of Rosenblatt's book, Rosenblatt was hardly acknowledged as a predecessor of reader-response theory due to her resistance considering every reading of a text as good as others (Booth, [1938] 1995, x). According to Rosenblatt herself, there exists no such thing as a generic reader nor a generic literary work; rather only an unlimited amount of potential works. A work such as a novel or play means nothing until the reader reads it and transforms the work into a set of meaningful symbols ([1938] 1995, 24). Her resistance against every reading being as good as any other reading derives from her argument that in order to come to a sound interpretation of the literature, readers must critically assess themselves via the text in order to understand how they came to a certain interpretation. She does not asks for a single correct interpretation, since that would require the author's intention, but rather, as readers draw on their past experiences to interpret a text, she demands active awareness from the readers to come to an critical—and therefore correct—interpretation of the text ([1938] 1995, 24).

Reader-response theory identifies the reader as a significant agent to derive meaning from works and text. The model of the reader derives from pre-reader-response theory in the form of Booth (1961), who also wrote the introduction to the 1995 version of Rosenblatt's book. In order to understand the reading process, Booth (1961) formulated the concept of the implied reader and the implied author. The implied author is the image the actual author constructs of themselves and is responsible for dictating the meaning of the work to a model of a reader they constructed as well, the implied reader. "The author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of his reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement" (1961, 138). A successful and enjoyable reading occurs when the implied reader's belief system coincides with the implied author's beliefs.

Iser (1978) deepened Booth's concept of the implied reader in his phenomenological approach to the reading process. His implied reader (in German: "*impliziter Leser*"), is not exactly the same as Booth's implied reader, and does not exist as an empirical reader. Instead, Iser considers it a structure in the text (Iser 1978, 60; Schmid 2013). The implied reader is a model that "embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect—predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself" (Iser 1978, 34). The structure of the work itself anticipates a specific reader, although never defines it (1978, 34).

As a response to Iser, Eco (1979) constructed the concept of the model reader, which resembles Iser's implied reader. To Eco, a text (a message consisting of different codes) has two components: the author who generates the text, and the model reader who decodes the text that the author theoretically foresees (Eco 1979, 7–8; Prince 2011). However, Eco emphasizes that,

despite an author's intentions, no text can be read independently from the reader's experiences of other texts (1979, 21). This experience is what Eco considers *intertextual knowledge*, which refers to the process by which readers overcode the text and rely on their previous experiences of other texts that gives them a certain intertextual frame to interpret the text (1979, 20–21). Eco uses the idea of frames as the "(cognitive) knowledge representations about the 'world' which enable us to perform such basic cognitive acts as perception, language comprehension and actions" (1979, 20–21). The author of the work that the reader reads plays a minimal role within this process; they do not determine the interpretation of the work to which the reader arrives.

Preceded by structuralism and New Criticism, the author loses their control over the meaning-making process of reading in reader-response theory. In 1967, Barthes announces the death of the author, thereby shifting the emphasis from the author of a work to the reader of the work (1967). Ten years later, in *Image Sound Text* (1977), he argues that there is no single ultimate meaning in a text, because the text is made up from a tissue of citations resulting from a thousand of years of culture (1977, 3). The text—or character ecology as I call it in this dissertation—does not consist exclusively of a single author, the works belonging to this text derive from multiple cultures and continuously enter "into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation" (Barthes 1967, 6). According to Barthes, the place where the multiplicity of these works are gathered and made sense of is therefore not in the author, but in the reader:

> The reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination; but this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted. (1977, 6)

Like Iser's implied reader, and Eco's model reader, Barthes' reader is not an empirical reader, but a model in which all the works of a text are gathered independently from any specific cultural, socio-economic environment that comes with empirical readers. The readers proposed by Iser, Eco, and Barthes contradict Rosenblatt's empirical reader. Rosenblatt does not consider her concept of the (student) reader without any cultural background. Rather, she is in favour of having any reader use their own previous experiences, shaped by their cultural and socio-economic background, to derive meaning from a work. It is on this point where she—unlike Iser, Eco, and Barthes— argues against the relevance of any reading of a work as being as relevant as any other work. The ignorance of one's background not only negates any critical opinion, but also ignores the context of connotations and relations that someone might only understand when they come from a specific cultural environment (1938, 106–108). This does not mean that there exists only one 'correct' interpretation, but rather she urges readers to heed the variety of possible contexts in which a work can exist (1938, 106–108).

Although reader-response theory emphasizes the role of the reader and does not favour one reading over the other, it is important not to forget that any model reader or any work is rooted within a set of socio-historical conventions whose patterns have developed over long periods of time within a given culture, of which the researcher is also part. That is to say that the model reader is not simply a blank slate without any preconceived bias who reads and interprets a work in a neutral way, nor is a work on its own neutral, because it is rooted within a specific culture. A researcher should therefore be aware that any interpretation is not an unbiased interpretation,

but that their model reader and the analysed works are inclined to be read in a certain way.

Early on, Rosenblatt ([1938] 1995) already argued that readers have to critically assess themselves via the text in order to understand how they came to a certain interpretation. A similar approach to the awareness of how works shape the interpretation of their readers is given by cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1973). Although Hall is not directly a reader-response theorist himself, his work about the encoding/decoding of messages is relevant to reader-response theory, because it points out that not every work is open to simply any kind of reading. Similar to the previous reader-response theorists, Hall's account rejects the simple passage of the message of an author to a receiver. According to Hall, every message—or work—yields a certain code that is encoded when it is placed in a certain shape to be communicated. In order to be understood by a receiver, it needs to be decoded. As Hall points out, both moments—encoding and decoding—are determinate moments that affect the 'message'. The encoded moment is the moment a message enters a communication system, i.e., when it becomes a work. The message is then shaped according to the particularities of the medium (1973, 92). The other determinate moment is when the receiver decodes it according to determined social practices (1973, 93). That is, the conventions on which the coding relies which shape a certain discourse and ideology in which readers interpret the work (1973, 96).

Hall distinguishes between three different kinds of readings. The first is the dominant meaning in which readers read according to "a pattern of 'preferred readings'; and these both have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized" (1973, 98). The second is the negotiated position, a position, against the dominant mode of reading, that adapts the hegemonic code of the dominant reading, but with certain exceptions (1973, 102). And the third reading is the oppositional code in which readers dismantle the preferred reading and construct it within an "alternative framework of reference" (1973, 103).

In summary, reader-response theory presents the model reader as a tool that provides the possibility to describe how the reader plays a role in the meaning-making process of a work. However, as academics or interpreters, it is important to be critically aware of a model reader that theoretically gives any interpretation of a work as one needs it. The cultural and socio-economic situation determines not only a reader's interpretation, but also shapes the conventions on which the reader determines their interpretation. No reader, and no interpretation, is without these factors, or can even exist without these factors.

Reader-Response Theory for Cybermedia

The remaining part of this chapter discusses how reader-response theory can be applied to cybermedia, and games in particular. Reader-response theory emphasises the role of the reader in the reading-process. As I have discussed, the processual nature of games requires the player to initiate the changes between states within the game (see Aarseth and Calleja 2015). Although Aarseth and Calleja argue that they do not look at empirical players, the model reader from reader-response theory has been applied to digital games before. Aarseth (1997, 110) shows that Iser's idea of *leerstellen* -gaps which the reader fill in themselves, has been used by scholars in the 1980s and early 1990s to argue that adventure games have a second type of gap: the narrative vacancy that must be filled in by the reader (see Niesz and Holland 1984; Buckles 1985; 1987; Randall 1988; Ziegfeld 1989; Lanestedt 1989; Sloane 1991). He points out however that the narrative vacancy is not a gap that the reader fills in with their imagination, "rather", he explains, "they are used as a filter, in which only the "correct" response lets the user proceed through the text. To use another

metaphor, they are keyholes, fitted by the text for very specific keys" (1997, 111). That is, the player has to find the solution to a puzzle rather than imagining the narrative vacancy.

Aarseth proposes several alternative concepts to the idea of narrative vacancy. He introduces for example the idea of the *intriguee* who "is a parallel to the narratee, to the implied reader of the narratologists, as well as to the main character" (1997, 113) to whom the undecided outcome of the secret plot of the adventure game is targeted. In a later work (2007), Aarseth uses Iser's (1978) concept of the implied reader to describe the implied player, the kind of player "as a role made for the player by the game, a set of expectations that the player must fulfil for the game to 'exercise its effect'" (2007). He also links the model of the implied player to Hans-Georg Gadamer's ([1960] 1989) notion of the unfree player subject, adding to the model that the implied player is a boundary imposed on the player-subject (the empirical player) as a limitation to the player's freedom and choice within the game.

Another adaptation of reader-response theory to digital games is Mortensen's (2003) concept of the player-reader. She points out that the composite nature and flexibilities of games makes it difficult to study games just by observing them -which was simultaneously pointed out by Aarseth's (2003) approach to game analysis. Mortensen's model of the player is based on Barthes' reader model, but is more active than his reader and has more control over the text. She suggests that the player-reader is aware about their power to shape the text of the game, that they can influence it and the thereby the options of other players (she speaks about MMORPGs), but does so without becoming an author (2003, 71). Mortensen posits the player-reader as a model that does not just consume, but that shares an authorial position with the producers and other players of the game, because of their partial control over the text (2003, 89). The player-reader not only arrives at a particular interpretation through their cultural and socio-economic status, but also takes an active part in constructing the structure of the game that they play, which shapes the meaning-making process.

The player-reader's position in relation to the text is a position with influence. Depending on what kind of game it is, the player can choose, with the choices ranging from the ability to choose the sequence of events, to the wide range of choices available in a Multi-User Dungeon (MUD). This freedom of choice appears to be an astounding freedom from the popular media's space of entertainment formulas, where the consumer's only space for feedback is a greatly delayed yes or no via consuming or not consuming. Computer games do not presuppose a consuming user, and not even an actively understanding reader, but a manipulating reader who is a part of the player (2003, 92).

Mortensen seems to come from the point of view that players read a text that they write, and argues that players do not merely absorb what the game gives them, but that they play an active part in the construction of the game and create their own unique text in the process. I should mention that Mortensen's research is specifically focused on the MUD, a multi-user role-playing computer game genre of the 1990s, while the games that I discuss were released between 2000 and 2019. While I agree that, in some games, the player definitely takes an active part in participating and shaping their own text, this does not exclude that some games may presuppose a more or less consuming user. That would, however, mean discussing the way games allow players to handle them. A game in which the player, for most of the time, has to push a single button—as is often the case with visual novel games like *Danganronpa: Trigger Happy Havoc* (Spike 2010)—is perhaps more structured for a consuming user than games in which the player has to use skill in pressing combinations of buttons to get through the game, such as *Nier: Automata* (PlatinumGames 2016).

Yet, this difference in the activity of consuming games does not determine how the player shapes their own interpretation of the text within those games.

Before Mortensen, Janet Murray (1997) also discussed the authorial position of the player in digital environments like those of cybermedia. She explains that we should make a distinction between playing a creative role within the authored environment and having authorship over that environment. She argues that in digital environments the *interactor* (or player of the game) "can only act within the possibilities that have been established by the writing and programming" (1997, 152). For Murray, the player does not share an authorial position with the authors due to the player's influence over the text, but rather has creative control within the affordances and constraints that have been placed there by the authors over the work. This kind of *derivative authorship* is what Murray considers to be *agency* (1997, 153).

A recent study using reader-response theorist Iser's work for game analysis has been conducted by Gerald Farca (2018), who utilises Iser's implied reader and adjusts Aarseth's implied player (which was based on Iser) as a framework to understand empirical players. Farca proposes the implied player as an affordance and structure of the game that allows us to outline an empirical player's participation in the game (2018, 194). He explains the use of the implied player as follows:

> The implied player offers an intersubjective and (potentially) multi-layered framework of play that enables the empirical player to subversively engage in its structure and in a fruitful dialectic- delighting in the elegance of the form, but, at the same time, negotiating its contents and exposing it to meticulous scrutiny through play. It can thus be seen as the affordance and appeal structure of the game that offers the player various roles to perform and functions as a road map to catharsis and the aesthetic effect (harbouring all necessary predispositions) (2018, 209)

Farca states that "the empirical player assumes a particular role that is both informed by who she is yet, at the same time, is guided by the structural finesse of the implied player and its system of perspectives" (2018, 213). In an attempt to fuse the implied player with the empirical player, Farca creates another player-type, one that according to him is a type of player who is neither an "ideal nor a model player" but a "real-world player who engages in a creative dialectic with the intersubjective structure of the implied player" (2018, 198). He calls this type of player the 'emancipated player' (198). However, despite these attempts at a fusion between these two kinds of players, Farca unfortunately provides no data on actual empirical players. In one of his five hypotheses that he ascribes to the emancipated player, he claims that the emancipated player slumbers in every empirical player (198), yet provides no proof or support to back up this claim. This means that his claims on the emancipated player do not leave the realm of the ideal player, and are therefore unfounded.

The most important factor that should be taken into consideration for the analysis of dynamic game characters is that they are *dynamic*. The different outcomes of their development structure means that just playing a single game once does not show the player all the possibilities of how the dynamic game character could potentially develop. Astrid Ensslin describes the result of replaying a game in the following way: "Different playings of a game, conversely, tend to result in entirely different games, with outcomes as varied as winning or losing, gaining and/or losing lives, credits, and other countable units, radically different navigation options, and as a result, a large diversity of the gameworld per se" (2014, 28). A single game with a dynamic game character is not

just simply a single game in the same sense as that Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is a single novel in which Elizabeth Bennet will marry Fitzwilliam Darcy regardless of how many times the reader reads it. Quite the opposite: the mechanical system in which a dynamic game character is integrated as well as the need for the player to engage with that system so that the character's identity develops, adds the challenge that no matter how much a player plays a game, they might not *ever* discover all the possible outcomes and nuances of the dynamic game character's potential developments.

This control over the text is, for example, explained via Aarseth's description of scriptons and textons. The former refer to strings of signs "as they appear to readers" and strings of signs "as they exist in the text" (1997, 62). Aarseth points out that in a static text the scriptons are constant, but in a dynamic one the scriptons change while the number of textons remain the same (1997, 62). Due to the game's traversal nature, "the mechanism by which scriptons are revealed or generated from textons and presented to the user of the text" (1997, 62), the player is capable of changing the text as they manipulate how the scriptons of the text are revealed to them. Meanwhile the structure of the work, the textons themselves, do not change. This mechanical system is what should be taken into account in reader-response theory that engages with cybermedia: the layer where the player-reader manipulates the scriptons of the work is where they construct the identity of the dynamic game character.

In order to research dynamic game characters from the perspective of reader-response theory, there are two approaches I can take. Either multiple players play the same games over and over and I analyse their process in creating the identity of a particular dynamic game character. Or, I play multiple games myself and critically assess my own choices while shaping the identity of the character. Since my approach is based on Barthes' (1966) and Bal's (1978; 1999) approach to the creation of a theory about narrative, I choose to do the latter. I want to establish a theory based on a variety of structures and strategies through which games communicate and constitute dynamic game characters within a broader character ecology, instead of limiting myself to how one or two games communicate dynamic game characters. The former does not provide a general model of a dynamic game character flexible enough to suit the variety in which dynamic game characters appear, but an applied model that covers only those two works. My approach is not without limits, of course, but its strength is that it covers a variety of means used to communicate characters, which defines the dynamic game character based on those empirical examples, and can describe the differences and varieties of the dynamic game character.

Using reader-response theory while not discussing the empirical players in digital games might appear obstinate, since the mechanical component of a cybermedium requires a player to stimulate the processual nature within a digital game. Kristine Jørgensen (2012) for example argues that the mechanical system specifically requires empirical players to understand how games react differently to different playstyles. She is critical of the use of Iser's (1978) implied reader as a model because that model does not take into consideration the different strategies and interactions empirical players use to engage with the game system (Jørgensen 2012, 379).

My work is, however, not about empirical players' understanding of characters, and how their playstyles affect an empirical player's experiential understanding of characters. Instead, this research focuses on the available structures that enable dynamic game characters; it focuses on the mechanical system that allows the player to take an active part in shaping the identity of the character. The player is part of the reading process, but the cultural and socio-economic background of empirical players is not the main aspect that informs the readings that they can make. If I were

to have multiple players play this game and analyse their responses and experiences, that would instead entail a focus on their affective engagement rather than on the structure of the game (although I will not claim that affective engagement with a character does not inform a player's playstyle).

Using reader-response theory applied to games involves the mechanical system that provides each player with different scriptons while the textons stay the same depending on their choices in the game. That structure is relevant as a topic of study on its own, because it actively shapes the character ecology in ways that non-cybermedia do not. The structure of the game reveals the different strategies games use to constitute the dynamic game character. Adding more empirical reader-players to play these games would not lead to anything new in what I already present. That is, that dynamic game characters' development structure contains multiple outcomes that the player affects in a certain direction, which the structure of the game enables. However, as I explain in section in the next section, I do use the experience of a collective of empirical players as a secondary source to enhance my game analysis.

As I play these games, I position myself as the player who has a certain amount of agency over the construction of the dynamic game character. The player also has a certain amount of influence over the character ecology within which that character is located, but that influence is far from being unlimited, and is not met without opposition from other sources that claim to have a specific authority over the identity of that character. Reader-response theory, as I adapt it in this dissertation to cybermedia, provides the opportunity to discuss the constant dialogue in which multiple forces try to shape the identity of a dynamic game character inside the character ecology, as the player plays an active—and constrained—part in its construction inside the game and within this ecology.

My own play experience of the games in which I construct a dynamic game character allows me to discuss the various forces that attempt to control the characters' identities, as my own experience might, for example, compete with the character as it is presented in other (non-cyber)media or even in paratexts (see Genette 1997; Consalvo 2007; Gray 2010). One of the main premises that I carry with me throughout this dissertation is that there exist no single 'correct' construction of a dynamic game character's identity when the textons of the work provide a plurality of possible identities.

Recognising Dynamic Game Characters

The final question that requires an answer before delving into the construction of game characters and, subsequently, dynamic game characters is: how can a player know when a game character is dynamic? Or to be more specific, how do I as a player know that my choices affect the outcome of the construction of the character and, as a result, how my choices affect the identity of the character? The answer is that games tend to be quite clear about the dynamicity of their characters due to their processual nature. Some games, like *Erica* (Flavourworks 2019) or *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment 2015) state from the beginning that the player's choices affect the development of the character. Before the player starts playing *Erica* for example, they are told: "This is an interactive story. Your choices form one of many perspectives. No single path holds all the answers". 'Interactivity' refers here to the player's agency to make certain choices to affect the outcome of the story in a particular direction. The player is presented throughout the game with multiple options from which they have to choose, for instance, to have lunch with one character, help another character, or make perfume with a third character. These choices then determine the

following set of choices the player can make, and subsequently make the player shape Erica's construction and identity over the process of the game.

In other games, feedback shows where the character is within their development process. In this case, the game helps them to decide how to proceed next. For example, *Persona 5* (P-Studio 2016) shows the player how far the player-character, Joker, is within the development of his relationship with other characters. This is done with a progress bar that shows on exactly what level the player is (with a maximum of ten levels, ten being the highest attainable point in the relationship). With each level the player is rewarded with new skills, items, and scripted segments between Joker and the character with whom Joker has attained a certain level of relationship.

The player might not always know exactly which choice changes the development of the character, and often it is not a single choice that shapes the character's final outcome. Games consist of different segments that each can contribute to the overall development of the character so that no one decision by the player necessarily determines the character's development. *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (Intelligent Systems and Koei Tecmo 2019), for example, has the player choose at the beginning of the game which house (or faction) they wish to be part of, which determines on which side the player will be during the big war later in the game (but not always). It also contains a progress bar for each individual character that shows not only the kind of relationship the player-character has with other characters, but also what kind of relationship these other characters have with each other, all of which the player can influence. Furthermore, if the player recruits a character from another house, that character's development will also be different to how it would be if the player had not recruited them. (The player only learns this later in the game, during the events of a war in which they are be forced to kill the characters they did not recruit.)

Since so many segments can potentially influence characters' development, the player will always miss a possible construction of the dynamic game character. And, even if the player plays the same game a second or third time (or more), they may be unable to reproduce the character exactly as they were in other playthroughs. As a result of my choice to play a variety of games, it is impossible to play all the games multiple times in order to perceive which specific choice results in a different development outcome of the character. Nevertheless, this is not an impossibility that cannot be overcome: Aarseth (2003) mentions that a game analysis consists of two main types of analysis: playing and non-playing. The former I have already explained above. Aarseth (2003, 6) explains that, in combination with hands-on playing experience, non-playing analysis can serve as secondary sources to enhance the game analysis in order to reach the best potential for success. Since cybermedia consist of paths and variations that a single player will never be able to experience, "a collective pool of experience will always bring new aspects forward" (2003, 6). He argues that this collective pool of experience is therefore not merely useful, but even crucial.

Aarseth identifies several general types of sources for non-playing analysis:

- Previous knowledge of genre
- Previous knowledge of game-system
- Other players' reports
- Reviews
- Walkthroughs
- Discussions
- Observing others play
- Interviewing players

- Game documentation
- Playtesting reports
- Interviews with game developers (2003, 6)

In regards to my motivations to identify the dynamic game character, and the available structures and strategies in which dynamic game characters appear, observing other players is not necessary; just as scholars rely on other scholars to perform their research, I rely on other players' observations as critics to obtain a collective pool of experience advantageous as support for game analysis. The pool of experience useful for my research is a combination of other players' reports, walkthroughs, and their game documentation. This particular combination can be found in many sources on the Internet. For example, when Eve died in *Mass Effect 3* (2012), I searched on the *Mass Effect* ("Eve" 2019) wiki page if there had been any way to avoid her death. It turned out that her death was the result of a choice I made in the previous game, *Mass Effect 2* (2010), and there was little I could have done within *Mass Effect 3* to have prevented her death.

That said, the games which I analyse in this dissertation, I make sure to have played myself. The use of secondary sources do not dominate the game analysis; they only function as supplements to enhance the analysis.

Part II
Characters in a Character Ecology

Chapter Four
The Multiplicity Model: Transmedial Characters from the West and Japan

This chapter is split into two parts. The first brings attention to the appearance of characters in a broader character ecology within contemporary media practices and the effect their migration has on their nature and identity. By focusing on theory on contemporary transmedia practices from the West and from Japan, this part focuses on the migration of characters from one medium to another. It explains how academic works about this migration from the West, specifically transmedia storytelling, tend to discuss the nature and identity of the character in terms of coherence and continuity. It also discusses the Japanese *media mix*, a media strategy from Japan that focuses on the proliferation of characters to stimulate the consumption of this media. The character in this media mix does not have to make sense with its other appearances in a coherent and continuous way.

The second part specifies the following conceptual problems, based on the theoretical debate from the first part and from chapter two: a tension between transmedial and medium-specific perspectives on characters, an assumption of characters as inherent elements of stories, and a friction between the different identities that a character holds over the course of multiple works. Following from that, the second part provides a definition of characters as quasi-persons, and introduces the *multiplicity model* to address the meaning-making process of the cultural understanding of the character to explain characters in their existence of multiplicity in a character ecology. This model provides the opportunity to discuss the character's lack of sequential continuity within the character ecology and within the representational materials in which the character manifests at the same time. Both of these topics I will discuss in the following chapters.

1. Transmedial Characters

Let me briefly explain why it is necessary to discuss game characters in relation to transmedial characters. A character such as Pikachu from the *Pokémon* franchise is not just a character who exists within the *Pokémon* games, but is also a character who plays a major role in the *Pokémon Adventures* anime (Yuyama 1997 - present), appears in the *Pokémon* manga, and can be regularly spotted decorating an iPhone case or a notebook, and also exists as a stuffed toy and figurine. A character who migrates from one medium to the next medium is often referred to as a 'transmedial character'.

In our contemporary transmedial practices, a transmedial character like Pikachu cannot be discussed as a game character without attesting to its counterparts, since those counterparts inform the identity of the game character as well, and vice versa. Although not necessarily every character is transmedial, every character has the potential to become transmedial. The character ecology, the sphere in which characters are constantly produced and reproduced, not only shapes the nature of the character, but also shapes their identity. It is therefore imperative to take into consideration the

game character's movement within the broader character ecology as the character moves through and manifests in a diversity of media.

Transmedia Storytelling and World-Building

This part is divided as follows: the first section is dedicated to the Western notion of transmedia storytelling, a phenomenon that belongs to the convergence between different media. The second section discusses the position of characters within this discourse. The third section leaves the West and focuses instead on the role of characters in the media mix, the Japanese version of convergence culture.

The notion of transmedia storytelling appears early on in game studies, when Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca define transmedial worlds (TMW) as:

> Transmedial worlds are abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms. What characterises a transmedial world is that audience and designers share a mental image of the "worldness" (a number of distinguishing features of its universe). The idea of a specific world's worldness mostly originates from the first version of the world presented, but can be elaborated and changed over time. Quite often the world has a cult (fan) following across media as well. (2004)

They link storytelling to the idea of creating a single world that users receive and interpret through a variety of media platforms. It is, however, Henry Jenkins who came to be known for coining the term 'transmedia storytelling' in his book *Convergence Culture* (2006). Inspired by Marsha Kinder's (1991) concept of 'transmedia intertextuality', Jenkins mentions transmedia storytelling as a phenomenon belonging to our media convergence culture, one that allows characters to become more compelling as they move from one medium to the next (Jenkins 2003).

In his book, Jenkins states that storytelling has become the basis to create a world, which cannot be contained in a single story or medium. Each medium would add a new story to an already existing world to expand the world of that specific story (2006). Later, on his website, Jenkins would add additional information about his view of transmedia storytelling. For example, he considers transmedia storytelling as a process whereby stories are distributed through various media channels in order to create "a unified and coordinated entertainment experience", preferably with each media channel making a unique contribution to the whole of the story (2007). Media conglomerates stand at the centre of this type of storytelling as it allows them to distribute and expand their franchise across a diversity of media channels (2007).

Carlos Alberto Scolari (2009) argues that the idea of transmedia storytelling does not exist on its own, but exists alongside a variety of concepts that roughly describe the same experience. According to him, there are multiple terms used to describe a narrative that expands through different languages and media and that contributes to the construction of a narrative world. Previously, Klastrup and Tosca use transmedial worlds to describe this phenomenon, but the term 'cross media' also belongs to this spectrum. Jay Lemke (2004) discusses meaning-making across the cross-media franchises and the involvement of media conglomerates behind them through which ideological systems are distributed. He argues that in a global marketing culture, media conglomerates are caught in a contradiction:

> On the one hand, it maximizes profits to the extent that there is a homogeneous cultural order […], but on the other hand, the conditions of reproduction of capital concentration […] demand a differentiated and hierarchical culture (2004, 12).

Continuing Lemke's (2004) proposition, Aarseth (2006) points out that media conglomerates try to make the marketing of franchises less costly and more effective. He argues that the content flow relies mostly on medium conventions and affordances, where the flow between media that are alike is smooth (e.g., books and films) but less between media forms that have structural differences (e.g., games and stories) (2006, 210).

The business sentiment towards transmedia storytelling is also shared in a relatively recent work by Colin B. Harvey (2015). He takes a broad approach to the concept of transmedia storytelling, and focuses on the methods of media conglomerates to govern the franchises that make use of contemporary transmedial practices.

Besides the business culture behind transmedia and its adjacent concepts, transmedia storytelling has also been thoroughly discussed alongside a variety of different concepts, mostly relating to the idea of world-building. Mark J. P. Wolf (2012), for example, considers stories as not the only method through which imaginary worlds are created. Using fantasy writer J. R. R. Tolkien's concept of subcreation (1997), Wolf introduces the idea of world infrastructures. These are a set of existing concepts such as nature, maps and genealogies through which readers locate information that allows them to create a consistent model of the world in their minds (Wolf 2012, 154).

Marie-Laure Ryan (2013), known for her work on possible world semantics, discusses the concept of transfictionality and its three relations to texts—expansion, modification, and transposition—within the potential of transmedia storytelling. She describes how each world, created by multiple stories, expands or diverges from its relation to other story worlds.

In my own recent article (Blom 2018), I explain that transmedia storytelling implies that every medium has the same kind of capacity for telling stories to equally contribute to a single coherent world. Against that assumption, I therefore discuss how games disrupt the sense of coherence within transmedial worlds. Using *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment 2016) as a case study, I propose to consider the *Overwatch* franchise a shared universe that consists of multiple types of worlds, such as the virtual world of the *Overwatch* game and the storyworld that emerges from the *Overwatch* comics and short films on the developer's website. Players connect the events inside the game to the events happening in the comics and films on a representational level even if any continuity between the worlds is incoherent and contradictory. I argue that the connection between the different worlds are therefore imagined, since consumers (players, readers and so forth) rely on their imagination to connect these media (2018, 9).

However, instead of considering *Overwatch* an imagined universe, I consider it a shared universe, because the players share the imagination of the connection between the worlds supported by Blizzard Entertainment who places the *Overwatch* comics and short films on their website that users can read and watch for free to spread the *Overwatch* franchise. For example, *Overwatch* is always played with multiple players online (except in a tutorial), and Blizzard Entertainment has the comics and short films freely available on their website. In other words, the franchise constantly confirms the imagined connection between the media platforms to its consumers, therefore turning the *Overwatch* universe in a *shared* universe rather than an imagined one (2018, 10).

However, Gregory Blomquist (2019) justifies the *Overwatch* franchise as transmedia

storytelling because "it does not offer its video game as the 'mothership' for its narrative and instead relies on all its media to convey a full story". Applying Rüdiger Heinze's (2015) concept of heterarchy, Blomquist states that the *Overwatch* characters develop through a "systematic, non-hierarchical distribution of content, offering exemplars of transmedia characters and transmedia storytelling" (2019). However, despite his claim that the franchise offers a full story through a "non-hierarchical distribution of content" (2019), he omits any explanation of narratives and stories, conflating the two concepts in the process, and instead seems to romanticise the distribution of content with clouded aspirations for coherence in a story. However, the ideal that he seems to describe—a systematic non-hierarchical distribution of content—contains similarities to the Japanese media mix—which I discuss later in this chapter—although the media mix has little focus on the coherence of stories and rather focuses on the distribution of content via characters that do not necessarily have to make sense in a continuous and coherent 'full story'.

Transmedia Characters

In Western contemporary transmedia practices, concepts such as transmedia storytelling and imaginary worlds engage with characters as important aspects. Important, but not vital. Whenever characters are discussed within contemporary transmedia practices, the theory, as I will discuss here, focuses on the constitution of transmedia characters over a variety of works. Similar to discussions about the coherence of stories and worlds, the discussions about transmedia characters concentrate on the continuity between the appearances of the character over multiple works. A topic of importance is the constitution and the identity of the character. For example, in 1972, Umberto Eco (1972) discusses the many iterations of Superman as a mythical character of comic strips. Eco argues that the iterations of telling and re-telling Superman stories result in different stories in which Superman's appearances and actions contradict each other. Eco believes that these contradictions are a necessary component for Superman as a mythic hero in order to not be completely consumed by its readers, since it would ultimately lead to his death (16).

Discussions about the identity of the character in the West tend to contain hidden assumptions about the 'essence' of the character's identity in which scholars try to determine what essential components make up the character, or try to explain the continuity between character appearances. In the following section, I provide an overview of the debates about transmedial characters in the West.

There are few sources with a specific focus on characters within transmedial storytelling. There is, for example, Elizabeth Evans (2008) who discusses transmedia drama series. She points out that characters become a point of contact for the audience, because they are recognisable across the different media in which they appear and reappear, and "therefore help orient the audience within the narrative"(2008). Lincoln Geraghty (2017) seems to come to the same conclusion as Evans when he concludes that transmedial characters are not only a profitable opportunity for a franchise to create new stories, but that they are also familiar signposts that direct audiences to important moments in the franchises' stories. There is also Shira Chess (2011) who writes about the supernatural horror character Slenderman and its development in an online space. She mentions that many different versions exist as a result of open-sourcing, where multiple users of the Something Awful forums would contribute to the creation of Slenderman and its mythology.

Before Jenkins coined the term transmedia storytelling, William Uricchio and Roberta Pearson (1991) discuss the construction of Batman. In their exploration of who Batman is, they argue that no primary work, text, or time period defines the character. Instead, they argue, "a set

of key components, becomes the primary marker of Batman texts: the key components of the Batman character have constituted the *sine qua non* for any Batman narrative in any medium" (185). According to Uricchio and Pearson, it is these key components that set Batman apart from other serial fictional characters (185). In other words, they distinguish Batman from other characters, because they consider his appearances not based on continuity but based on a set of components that emerge as a pattern in all works describing Batman.

The five key components constitute the Batman character that Uricchio and Pearson propose are as follows:

- *Traits/attributes.* They consider Batman to have four main traits: wealth, physical prowess, deductive abilities and obsession.
- *Events.* They distinguish between fixed and accruing events such as the character's origin story, and iterative events, primarily fighting events.
- *Recurring characters.* The good and bad characters with whom Batman interacts who maintain a constant presence over the Batman stories.
- *Setting.* Batman lives in Gotham City where (most) Batman stories take place.
- *Iconography.* The basic elements that remain identifiable, such as Batman's cape, costume, gauntlets and logo, even when the iconography changes over time. (1991, 186 - 187)

Just like Uricchio and Pearson, Will Brooker (2012) focuses on Batman and his appearances in the character ecology. Instead of key components however, Brooker proposes three distinct models of continuity in which Batman appears. First is that of a myth—as a popular icon that appears in all existing Batman texts. Second, Batman continues to exist as a brand, a product that is carefully controlled by the intellectual property owner, Warner Bros. (153). And third, as canon that, according to Brooker, is: "the strict sense of what counts and what happened, what is 'true' and what isn't, in the mainstream comic book universe" (154).

Paolo Bertetti (2014) presents a transmedia character typology, defining the transmedia character as a "fictional hero whose adventures are told in different media platforms, each giving more detail on the life of that character". However, Bertetti does not consider transmedia characters and transmedia worlds to have a direct correspondence. He gives two main reasons: the first is that a transmedia world sustains multiple stories that can each focus on a different character. The second reason is that he argues that the presence of the same character in a text does not necessarily imply the same world (2346). Indirectly, this means that a character can have a different identity even when it seems to be the 'same' character. Their backgrounds, physical appearances, or relationships with other characters might vary per text, turning these characters into completely different entities. Bertetti therefore makes a difference between a character's existential identity and fictional identity based on Aristotle's differentiation between agent and character (2348). The existential identity consists of a proper identity—"the set of elements that relates to a character's being" (2349)—and a relational identity—"based on the relationship of the character with the world around him" (2349). The fictional identity consists of an actantial identity that covers the different roles played by the actor/character, the modal identity—how the character is communicated—and, lastly, the axiological identity that reflects the deep values which lead the character to certain actions (2349). Bertetti's differentiation provides a detailed overview of the similarities and differences between the transmedial appearances of a character, but his typology is primarily based

semiotician Greimas' actant model (Greimas 1966) which we see mostly reflected in the fictional identity category of his typology. The fictional identity of characters is based on how they act within specific stories, thereby assuming that any medium in which a character appears tells a sequential story.

Pearson (2019) tries to avoid the implications that a focus on narrative continuity between character appearances brings. She uses Shane Denson's (2011, 536) idea about the existence of iconic characters as 'traces between of previous incarnations' for her thinking on the cohesion between character appearances. This kind of cohesion does not have to be narrative continuity. Instead, she argues that cohesion between appearances is invoked via 'points of contact': "the overlaps with previous texts that identify an addition as part of an established transfiction. Maximum points of contact lead to strong cohesion, while minimal points of contact lead to weak cohesion; the degree of overlap establishes a spectrum between strongly and weakly cohesive transfictions" (2019, 149). Characters then who appear over two or more media have, according to Pearson, a stronger cohesion with the other works in which they appear when there is more overlap between the works, and less cohesion when the works have less overlap.

She argues that there exist three structuring factors for this overlap: two narrative factors and one industrial factor. The first narrative factor involves the time and setting of the world in which the character appears. Her hypothesis is that cohesion between character appearances arises primarily from points of contact between the character appearances over the works, and the character's name, function and template (such as appearances that strongly resemble previous appearances of the character in terms of visual and acting style) (152).

The second narrative factor is the difference between realist and fantastic transmedia characters. According to Pearson, realist characters (such as Sherlock Holmes) and fantastic characters (such as Batman) differ in the amount of points of contact they have with their appearances in other works. Her hypotheses are:

- Specific environments are more of a requirement for the template of fantastic characters than for the template of realist characters.
- Realist characters can function in fantastic world, but fantastic characters cannot function in realist world settings.
- As a result, realist characters have more strategies available to them to proliferate and maintain cohesion across different works than fantastic characters. (152)

Pearson's third factor is an industrial one. Her hypotheses are first that proprietary works in which characters appear can use more paratextual strategies to create cohesion between appearances than public domain works. And second, that public domain works of characters show that they are much more dependent on textual strategies of established templates than proprietary works over which intellectual property owners own the rights to weave the works together, such as with cross-over works.

The Japanese Media Mix

In this section, I discuss characters in the Japanese media mix. In the first section, I introduce the media mix, the role of games, and explain why the media mix should be taken into consideration for this study on dynamic game characters. In the second section, I introduce the origin of the media

mix, having its roots in the Japanese propaganda strategies of the Second World War (WWII). In the third section, I discuss the role of characters in the media mix, which as a device stimulate their proliferation and connect media. In the following sub-sections, I first discuss *moe* and *kawaiisa*—'desire' and 'cuteness'—as aspects that underline the proliferation of characters in media mix strategies, before I subsequently delve into the *kyara* and *kayarakutaa* distinction, a discourse that takes a prominent spot in discussions about the character within Japanese theory on contemporary media practices.

The Media Mix and the Role of Games

In Japan, the phenomenon of media convergence is known under the name of the 'media mix'. There are two ways the term 'media mix' can be used in contemporary media practices: 1) as theory, the media mix is the "cross-media serialization and circulation of entertainment franchises" which has its own history and development alongside the term *media convergence* from the West (Steinberg 2012, viii), and 2) as an artefact, a media mix refers to the commercial strategies used to spread content across a variety of media to stimulate the consumption of these media (viii). Although the two meanings often overlap in use, I will call the latter a media mix *strategy* when I point specifically towards a certain media mix project, but otherwise the reader can assume I mean the media mix as a theory.

The media mix accentuates the use of the character as the "device that simultaneously allows audiovisual media and objects to connect and forces their proliferation" (Steinberg 2012, 83). Unlike transmedia storytelling or transmedia world-building, characters are the entities via which transmedia franchises connect their entertainment media and objects. These media do not necessarily tell stories with characters that have the same continuous identity as if they are the same character. Rather, the character functions as a *kyara* or 'recognizable archetype' (Nakamura and Tosca 2019) that can be placed within different series and media entertainment without the necessity of these series having to connect from a continuous linear sense.

The connection of the media mix to digital games is tight; the Japanese video game industry is characterised specifically by the media mix (Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015, 3). It is shaped simultaneously on a local scale by marketing strategies, on a national scale by industrial transformations, and by creative and technological developments which were established on a global scale (3). As Martin Picard (2013) puts it:

> The Japanese video game industry is at the intersection of local innovations in marketing strategies — in part in a context commonly called the *media mix*, which is itself linked to a broader context of a consumption culture that has risen from contemporary, and some would say postmodern (Azuma, 2007, 2009), Japan — national industrial transformations — whereas the Japanese video game industry is at the crossing of electronics, computer, amusement and content industries in Japan — and technological and artistic developments — from the hardware to the software — in which some aspects were, subsequently or synchronously, established globally and under an increasingly transnational mode, all forming a particular media ecology or system, that I name "*geemu*". (ibid.)

Rachael Hutchinson's book *Japanese Culture Through Video Games* (2019, 15) calls attention to the Japanese game industry as a source of Orientalist rhetoric. In each chapter, she explains how the Japanese game industry makes itself marketable on both local, national, and global scale, using the

idea of 'Japanese essentialism'. She explains that the Japanese game industry in, for example, fighting games, tends to take 'essential' elements of its culture and uses those elements to represent the whole culture. This, as Hutchinson puts it, "lies at the heart of Orientalism, a rhetorical structure prominent in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century art and literature from Britain and France, which represents the lands of Asia as exciting, different, sensual and sexualized in an intoxicating alternative to life at home" (2019, 81).

The search for *nihonjinron*[5], which refers to theories of Japanese uniqueness, was at its height during the development of games such as *Street Fighter II* (Capcom 1991), a fighting game that, together with *Karate Champ* (Technôs Japan 1984), *Virtua Fighter* (Sega 1993) and *Tekken* (Namco 1994), served as the main template for the representation of Japan and its others outside of Japan, primarily by creating a Japan/USA binary (Hutchinson 2019, 70). According to Hutchinson, while being criticised for racism, xenophobia and cultural essentialism, *nihonjinron* was a reaction to the rapidly shifting social environment during the 1990s in Japan, when people wanted certainty and reassurance that Japan was still a significant country (82 - 83). It is likely the combination of the Orientalist rhetoric from the West and the pursuit of *nihonjinron* coming from Japan that provided an excellent basis for Orientalist rhetoric, which the Japanese game industry could dip into and use to sell its games on local, national and global scales.

Orientalist rhetoric is not just confined to the fighting game genre, nor even to Japanese games. Rather, entire fields of cultural production are divided between 'Japanese' and 'Western' versions of products (see Napier 2007). According to Mattias van Ommen,[6] "these categories do not exist to maintain separate forms of products, but labels such as these help maintain *conceptual* categories of distinctiveness" (2018, 30). The juxtaposition turns Japanese games into the exotic 'Other', and thus speaks to the Western-centric perspective of game studies.

The relevance of the Japanese industry is precisely because it works on a local, national and global scale, and so that the use of the media mix is not only relevant to its own restricted community, but also influences the larger—Western-centric—global transmedia practices to which games contribute as one of the various media that communicate characters. The Computer Entertainment Supplier's Association (CESA) (2017), a Japanese game industry association, has been publishing the growth of the Japanese game industry each year since 1996. Their 2016 statistics for the Japanese video game market show that the domestic market's size counts "126.7 billion Yen for hardware, 188 billion Yen for software, and 314.7 billion Yen in total" (based on the retail numbers). Additionally, the "game software download is 7.9 billion Yen" (2017, II). The overseas market counts "1.0854 trillion Yen for hardware, 1.494 trillion Yen for software and 2.5794 trillion Yen in total" (2017, II)[7]. Just based on its size in the domestic and overseas market, the Japanese game industry's influence takes a prominent place in their local game culture, as well as in international game culture.

As Martin Picard and Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon (2015) point out, game studies has a Western-centric understanding of games (1 – 2). Reasons they attribute to this gap are, among others, the language barrier and a lack of knowledge of Japanese studies (1). Most discussions about

[5] Harumi Befu (2009)describes *nihonjinron* as discourses on Japaneseness:" *Nihonjinron* basically asserts the uniqueness of Japanese culture and people, and spells out the ways in which they are unique. The discourse exceptionally covers the whole gamut: from the biological make-up of the Japanese, prehistorical cultural development, language, literary and aesthethic qualilties, human relations, and social organisation to philosophy and personal character" (25).

[6] The current paragraph was first written in the abstract for the panel 'Japanese Role-Playing Games in the Ludo Mix: Paradigms, Practices, and Challenges' at the DiGRA 2019 conference, in collaboration with Mattias van Ommen.

[7] 314.7 billion Yen would be roughly 2.6 billion Euro. And, 2.5794 trillion Yen would be roughly 21.4 billion Euro.

Japanese contemporary media practices—including games—are not translated to other languages, and the language barriers for Japanese game scholars also make it hard for them to break through in game studies. As a result, the tendency of the Western-centric field of game studies continues a tunnel-vision: it places itself as the centre of academic research, focusing on phenomena they identified using theoretical knowledge that they themselves created without the awareness of knowledge produced in non-Western areas of the field—even when that field has been contributing to contemporary transmedia practices in the West since its instantiation.

Yet, I do not wish to paint such a doomed scenario. Looking at the academic works I discussed in the last few pages, I can say that, gradually, more work about Japanese contemporary transmedia practices has become available in English by scholars who locate their work at the junction of game studies and East Asian studies. Furthermore, the Digital Games Research Association's (DiGRA) 2019 conference in Kyoto with the ludo/media mix as its theme shows that the relevance of Japanese media, as well as the contribution of Japanese scholars (even only in translation), is acknowledged by the field of game studies. Respectively, this means that the knowledge that Japan brings on games becomes more available to those scholars without (high) proficiency in the Japanese language, as exemplified by Carl Therrien's (2019) recent work on video game platforms from the late 1980s, and Tosca and Klastrup's (2020) book on transmedial worlds and social media.

It is particularly important to use Japanese theories of characters because it allows us to describe the use of characters without this singular Western-centric perspective of characters having to be inherently part of a narrative or story. The Western-centric approach, as proposed by Eder (2015), is so fixated on the idea that characters have to belong to stories that must make sense in a continuous, linear and coherent fashion that it ignores that Western mainstream transmedia practices also use characters as devices to connect media with each other when the stories are not continuous, linear or coherent. To give a recent example, the animated movie *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (Persichetti *et al.* 2018) functions on the assumption that Spider-Man has multiple identities, yet the movie does not try to conflate its world or stories with the various identities of Spider-Man in other stories in which these versions of Spider-Man appear. Its connection to the other stories is not the linearity nor the continuity between these different stories. Rather, its connection is the character that connects and conflates these different stories.

It is therefore high time to take into consideration knowledge of games and their production from outside of the West. My dissertation's scope is limited to the West and Japan, but I highly encourage future work to look at other non-Western countries and cultures beyond Japan.

The Origins of the Media Mix

Before I delve fully into the current trend of characters in the media mix, it is important to pay attention to Eiji Ôtsuka's (2018; 2019) observation that the origin of the media mix lies in the audience-participatory propaganda techniques during WWII by the *Taisei Yokusankai* (Imperial Rule Assistance Association), a special governmental organisation established in 1940 to promote Japanese nationalism in order to create a monolithic nation. These propaganda techniques functioned as a media mix strategy that was created by state power (2019).

The propaganda technique that the *Taisei Yokusankai* used was known as the *Yokusan Ikka* media mix production (Ôtsuka 2018, 6; 2019). The start of this strategy was announced via multiple large newspapers, including the *Asahi Shinbun,* the *Yomiuri Shinbun* and the *Osaka Mainichi Shinbun,* and depicted cartoon characters of the fictional Yamato Family and members of the *tonarigumi*, the Neighbourhood Association (the smallest unit of the Japanese mobilization program during WWII),

consisting of fire fighters and civil defence. These characters were placed within a specific neighbourhood map that functioned as the world in which they lived (Ôtsuka 2018, 20; 2019).

The *Yokusan Ikka* media mix strategy reflects similar practices to Anderson's (1983) description of the newspaper: it is consumed *en masse* by hundreds and thousands of persons, but diverges in two aspects from Anderson's proposed method for how the newspaper creates an imagined community. First, the media mix strategy simulates the cartoon characters in real-life situations to restructure everyday life by educating its readers about the *tonarigumi* system (Ôtsuka 2018, 58 - 104; 2019). It set itself apart from 'real news' explicitly by placing fictional characters in fictional situations, but these situations are inspired by daily life during that time. In this sense, it combines Anderson's idea of the novel and the newspaper: the *Yokusan Ikka* media mix strategy gives its readers 'homogenous, empty time' (Anderson 1983, 25), produced *en masse*, which tells of events inspired by daily life so that its readers imagine that they all belong to the same nation.

Second, the *Taisei Yokusankai* stimulated the creation of derivative works (*nijisousaku*) by amateurs which featured the *Yokusan Ikka* characters. This stimulation had been part of the strategy since the beginning: at the same time as the announcement of the strategy, readers of the *Asahi Shinbun*, for example, were invited to draw scenes from their everyday life and send these scenes to the newspaper (Ôtsuka 2018, 10; 2019). The characters were deliberately drawn using only simple contours so that everyone would be able to draw the characters. The *Asahi Shinbun* also released in their newspaper a short guide on how to draw the *Yokusan Ikka* characters in order to stimulate the production of derivative works by its readers (Ôtsuka 2018, 107; 2019).

Nijisousaku was an important component in the media mix strategy to restructure the daily lives of Japanese citizens during WWII as it stimulated the circulation of the *tonarigumi* system via the use of the fictional *Yokusan Ikka* family, while simultaneously being under strict control of the *Taisei Yokusankai* who held copyright over these characters. Ôtsuka deliberately calls this form of propaganda *participatory fascism* (*sankousuru fashizumu*) as amateurs were used to create and proliferate the characters of *Yokusan Ikka* under the control of state power (2018; 2019).

In contemporary media practices, audience participation within a media mix strategy or franchise is still widespread. Fan culture is a common form of audience participation in which fans of certain brands or franchises stimulate the proliferation of characters in derivative works known as 'fan fiction'. Fans create their own articulations of the characters, placing them in situations and in relationships that the intellectual property owners do not wish to see them in since these works diverge from the owner's official identity of the characters—that is, their 'canon'. Unlike the *Yokusan Ikka* media mix strategy, fandom and derivative works operate on a site of contest between fans and authority forces where different sides try to gain control over the interpretation of a character's identity (see Harvey 2015, 97).

Let me emphasise that Japan was far from the only country under the control of state power that used the circulation of media and characters to propagate their ideologies. Rikke Platz Cortsen *et al.* (2014) demonstrate how comics shaped the societal, political and cultural development in the Nordic countries (with case studies from Denmark, Sweden, and Finland) between the 1930s and 1950s. Their examples point to how comics are effectively used as an illustration of the fight between artists, newspaper and government officials over censorship (117), how comics were used as means to create social cohesion (119), how publishers influenced other markets to influence nationally-produced comics (126), and how comics reflect the sentiments of the times during which they were produced (130). These comics all used characters to express the different mentalities in order to influence the readers of these comics.

Despite the character's relative free movement through media without the necessity for coherence and continuity, it should be clear that the media mix is an explicit strategy to stimulate the consumption of mass media, with roots in fascism that, besides Ôtsuka's description of the media mix's WWII history, can also be found in the media mix's founder Haruki Kadokawa's original ideas for the media mix. Steinberg (2017) suggests that the goal of the *Yôkai Watch* media mix strategy, his case study, is the total mobilisation towards collection-based consumption by young audiences. One of the most appalling details that Steinberg points out are the troublesome comments of Kadokawa. On several occasions Kadokawa commented that:

> Hitler and his *Mein Kampf* were his inspiration in formulating his media mix strategy. He, quite provocatively, 'reads' Hitler's use of uniforms, music, Rilke's poetry and Nietzsche's thoughts as elements of a wider media strategy key to total mobilization […]. He claims that *Mein Kampf* is his 'greatest textbook', in an article and later an autobiography titled 'Wa ga tôsô' or 'My Struggle', the Japanese translated title of the Hitler book he references. (2017, 247)

According to Steinberg, a successful media mix moves towards a form of total social mobilisation in which consumption has become the focus as the driver of the economy instead of production (248). The goal of total social mobilisation of consumption replaces the social production towards war-making from the Junger model (248). The *Yôkai Watch* media mix strategy strives towards total social mobilisation via forms of 'affective condition' combining "supply chain conditions, limited merchandise, an animation expository sequences that are at once parodic *and* priming, and a media mix system in which collection of both in-game and physical objects is central to the expanded game experience, within which animation—both in-game animation and anime show—was a mission critical element" (255).

Characters in the Media Mix

Characters played a prominent role early on in discussions about the media mix. In 1989, Ôtsuka formulates the concept 'narrative consumption' (Ôtsuka 1989; [1989] 2010), a theory that explains how the individual narratives of characters allow users to gradually learn about the world in which a character lives. Ôtsuka uses the Bikkuriman Chocolates, a chocolate wafer product with stickers inside that became a hit among Japanese children in 1988 and 1989. Ôtsuka ascribes the children's motivations behind the craze to certain devices implemented within the stickers as follows:

- Every sticker contained the drawing of one character. On the reverse side of the sticker was a short bit of information called "Rumors of the Devil World," describing the character drawn on the front of the sticker.
- With one sticker alone this information amounted to little more than noise. But once the child had collected a number of them and put them together, the child began to vaguely see a "small narrative" emerging […].
- This unexpected appearance of narrative functioned as a trigger to accelerate children's collection.
- Moreover, with the accumulation of these small narratives, a "grand narrative", reminiscent of a mythological epic appeared.

- Child consumers were attracted by this grand narrative, and tried to gain further access to it through the continued purchase of chocolates (106).

Ôtsuka links the 'grand narrative' to the term 'world view' commonly used in the field of *anime* (106). Every *anime* episode, animators show a 'small narrative' focusing on the central character of the series, but it is only the accumulation of the series' episodes that allows for a complete 'worldview' so that the audience understands what happens in the world.

Within this relationship, characters become the central element around which the narrative revolves, but a narrative continuity is not a given even within a serialisation. As Hirohito (2011, 86) points out, one of the elements for characters to stand out is for them to have a certain autonomy or para-existence. Their individual appearances should evoke something like a background narrative world behind it, but it is the character that creates the continuity, as there is no coherent sequence of events between the narratives in which they appear (86). This is not unlike Ôtsuka's narrative consumption. As readers consume the small narratives in which the character appears—despite the narrative incoherence—a certain background narrative (grand narrative) arises that makes sense so long as the characters are the central point.

Albeit not necessarily explicitly, the phenomenon of the media mix has been discussed years prior in the West by Susan J. Napier in *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke* (2001), by Anne Allison in her book *Millennial Monsters* (2006) and Thomas Lamarre in *The Anime Machine* (2009). It is however not until Marc Steinberg's *Anime's Media Mix* (2012) that the media mix became widely known in academic circles in the West, primarily in the fields of media studies and Japanese studies.

In a media mix, Steinberg (2012, 85) considers characters as devices whose nature is to travel across different media, and who are materialised in each medium in a distinct way. While he considers characters to be abstract entities that cannot be caught in their entirety within any one medium, Steinberg stresses that each medium is able to foreground each manifestation of the character according to the capabilities of that medium (85). The convergence—or rather synergy—between these media is within the media mix actualised through the number of manifestations of the character within various media, the character's undertaking in connecting these media, and the character's distinct properties within each medium (85).

Steinberg ascribes to the character a double nature, perceiving it to be an "im/material entity, a composite of the actual and the virtual" (Steinberg 2012, 194). He takes this idea of the double nature from Deleuze's notion of the virtual that "is fully real in so far as it is virtual" (Deleuze and Patton 1994) in the sense that something can be real and not actual simultaneously. It is due to the character's virtual nature that it is capable of moving through different media, and can therefore never be confined to a single manifestation:

> The virtual quality of the character enables its multiple material and transmedial embodiments. It prevents the character from ever being confined to a single one of its manifestations, and it keeps the character ever open to new and subsequent transformations, leading to the formation of character-based media environments. (Steinberg 2012, 195)

Both Ian Condry (2013) and Douglas Schules (2015) point towards the lack of necessity in storytelling in the media mix when the character is its focus. Condry notes, for example, that the character's

openness allows for a transmedial and unified experience that only depends on storytelling to a degree (Condry 2013). Schules (2015) summarises concretely the relationship between characters, stories, and worlds within narrative consumption: "narrative consumption […] focuses on the role stories play in driving the consumption of discrete media. Motivating this consumption is the character-world relationship, where a grand narrative (or worldview) structures how smaller ones known as narrative fragments fit together" (57).

The constitution of the concept of character in English articles has also been applied to field beyond the media mix in contemporary media practices. Toshiyuki Sadanobu (2015) applies the concept of character to discuss style and personality in communication research. He argues that 'character' can be a useful applied tool to explain why learners of the Japanese language sound strange when they speak textbook Japanese, because the Japanese language incorporates the speaker's personality into the style of the speech (2015, 23).

In his article *8-Bit Manga: Kadokawa's Madara, or, the Gameic Media Mix* (2015), Steinberg discusses the role of games in the mix. Steinberg provides Madara as a case study, a *manga* created by Ôtsuka, and which was the basis for Ôtsuka's narrative consumption theory. The Madara *manga* and world was designed in accordance to the rules of role-playing games similar to that of Dungeons and Dragons (1974). Steinberg points out that information such as hit points, karma, health etc. were maybe not necessary for the narrative in the manga, but it gave the manga an intermedial quality "as if it were a RPG video game" (2015, 48). While this gives an impression of characters, it only shows how game-like elements could be used outside of games.

Shige C.J. Suzuki (2019) critiques the argument that the Japanese public embraces *yôkai* (preternatural monsters in Japanese folklore) characters due to Japan's Shinto-inspired animistic beliefs, because such a perspective invites "an Orientalist frame from outside and cultural nationalism from within" (2200). He argues instead that the proliferation of *yôkai* characters is due to the ongoing practices of the media mix (2200). However, instead of praising the media mix for its focus on characters instead of storytelling, he argues that the lack of storytelling diminishes the folkloric, collective, and critical nature of the *yôkai* in narrative formats, because media mix products exist only to be "owned, consumed, and forgotten without any narrative or critical traces in a neoliberal society" (2211).

Desire Towards Characters: *Moe* and *Kawaiisa*

Early Japanese scholarly work on characters focuses on the desire for virtual characters. As a response to Ôtsuka's narrative consumption, Japanese cultural critic Hiroki Azuma released in 2001 *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* ([2001] 2009). Azuma argues that before postmodernity, Ôtsuka's narrative consumption was the entrance for consumers into a world, but that this kind of consumption collapsed during the rise of postmodernity, meaning that for *otaku* culture the character has become the most important object in a work (31). An *otaku* can generally be described as a man between 18 and 40 years old who obsessively consumes media such as *anime, manga*, games and other related Japanese products. In contrast to Ôtsuka's narrative consumption, Azuma names the consuming behaviour of the *otaku* 'database consumption', whereby *otaku* consume the aggregated elements of characters and settings, but not the grand narrative in which they appear (54). This is supposed to contrast with Ôtsuka's narrative consumption in which audiences consume the grand narrative via small narratives.

An important element to the database consumption is *moe*, which Azuma describes as the "fictional desire for characters of comics, anime, and games, or for pop idols" (47 – 48). He states

that *moe* stimulates the popularity of a product by the ability to invoke desire through the character's design and/or illustrations (48). Azuma repeatedly points out that characters are not created based on their stories, but are created first thing based on the feelings of *moe* they might invoke, which is then followed by world and stories. The database itself consists of these *moe*-elements, fragments of characters which might be cat ears, sailor uniforms or a specific type of hair (48). In other words, a character is taken apart based on its *moe*-elements, and the elements are then categorised and put into a database. As a result, with the elements from that database, one can put together a character that visually evokes a feeling of desire towards that character.

Based on this premise, Azuma argues that a distinction between an original character and its copy does not seem to exist for the *otaku*. In such a situation, it is quite ambiguous what the original is or who the original author is, and the consumers rarely become aware of the author or the original. For *otaku*, the distinction between the original and the spin-off products (copies) does not exist; the only valid distinction for them is between the settings created anonymously (a database at a deep inner layer), and the individual works that each artist concretised from the information (a simulacrum on the surface outer layer). Here, even the idea that the original functions as an entry point into the settings or the worldview is becoming inappropriate (39).

Azuma builds his theory based on French sociologist Jean Baudrillard's (1994) notion of simulacra, in which there is no distinction in a postmodern society anymore between an original product and its copies. The original product and its copies become replaced by a dominant interim, a simulacrum that is neither original nor copy (Baudrillard 1994; Azuma [2001] 2009). The character in the database consumption replaces the original character. It is neither original nor a copy: it is a simulacrum put together from a set of fragments of desire in a database. If the character is placed into a setting, a world or a story at all, this only happens after the creation of the character—that is, the character is not created with the purpose of being an inhabitant of that world. It is visually created to invoke *moe* and can therefore easily be taken apart into *moe*-invoking elements, put in the database, and put together again to appear in a new, unrelated setting ready for the *otaku* to consume.

Another work that describes the desire for virtual female characters is Tamaki Saitô's *Beautiful Fighting Girl* ([2000] 2006). Saitô argues that the beautiful fighting girl, a specific type of character, is not a unique phenomenon to Japan, but can be woven well into a media mix strategy. Saitô attempts to normalise the *otaku*'s desire for virtual female characters. However, Lamarre points out that Saitô's psychoanalytic approach to these characters reinforces the normative ideas about sexuality. Lamarre states:

> Saitô's psychoanalytic approach falters in the sense that it's a defense towards simple normalcy. He wishes to highlight the creativity of the otaku, but that is always in keeping with normal sexuality, which means to him heterosexuality. In Saitô's opinion, otaku sexuality differs from ordinary daily sexuality in its self-consciousness delight in fictionalization. (2009, 255)

Moe's sexual connotations are also a topic of debate in games when it comes to games with explicit sexual content. Galbraith (2017), relying on Azuma's notion of *moe,* discusses sexual violence against cartoon characters in digital games such as *RapeLay* (Illusion Soft 2006). In adult games with sexual content, *moe* characters are the kind of characters that trigger affective response through interaction with them that could range from suggestions of sex to explicit interactive rape (Galbraith

2017, 15). Galbraith states that the term 'moe image literacy' exists to describe the culture of reading and responding affectively towards these *moe* characters. The premise of *moe* image literacy is approaching characters as fiction, a fantasy distinct from reality and real images (16). This then becomes especially the case for characters in adult pornographic games like *RapeLay*, in which these violent "sex acts are imagined and produced by creators and players, but no one, and no body, is engaged in sex acts that are recorded as part of the pornographic work. The sex, however violent, is not a record of violent sex acts. Adult computer games are completely constructed representations of sex acts" (16). *Moe*, on the premise that the characters are fiction, is used as a form of desire to inspire violent sexual acts to the characters.

The role of attraction to and desire for characters are aspects of importance within the character ecology of Japanese culture.[8] Another much discussed aspect of characters in Japanese culture is their *kawaiisa*—that is, their cuteness. *Kawaiisa* and *moe* often use similar elements to invoke these feelings of desire or attraction towards characters. A character that is *moe*-invoking often also has cute elements that reinforce this desire.

Kawaiisa in characters is often treated as a product specific to Japan. Allison (2004) explains that *kawaiisa* has become the cultural product that Japan sells to the global marketplace of children as a form of 'cultural power' that Japan is cultivating overseas. The qualities with which *kawaiisa* is associated are along the lines of sweetness, dependency and gentleness, which are in turn linked to comfort and warmth (40). *Kawaiisa* is mostly shown through a character's visual appearance—something it has in common with *moe*—but Alison stresses that *kawaiisa* also refers to the relationship people form with cute characters (43). An example of a game character she provides in *Millenial Monsters* (2006) is the Tamagotchi (Bandai 1996), a portable game that was hugely popular during the late 1990s in Japan but which also became a huge hit in Europe and America. It was quite simple in its idea that it allowed players to take care of a virtual pet. The cute appearance was not that important, rather it was the affordance of taking care of these creatures and bonding with them that mimicked raising a flesh-and-blood animal (2006, 166). In other words, *kawaiisa* not only describes the character's virtual qualities, but also highlights the bonding process between person and character.

Schules, like Allison, argues that *kawaiisa* is a cultural product used by the Japanese government as part of the Cool Japan campaign to promote Japanese soft power overseas as a form of cultural uniqueness (2015, 58). He considers *kawaiisa* a persistent motif in Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs) and argues that, specifically for Western players, *kawaiisa* shapes the game experience in such a way that it gives these players the chance to experience Japanese 'uniqueness': "To originate in Japan implies that a product is somehow invested with a fragment of the country's culture, a characteristic so intrinsic that it even applies to products imported into the country" (62). However, the idea of Japanese uniqueness is a concept to be wary of. As stated previously, Hutchinson (2019, 15) points out that the Japanese game industry is a source of Orientalist rhetoric. By attributing 'Japaneseness' or Japanese 'uniqueness' to a product, such as games originating from Japan, Japan turns itself into a "marketable commodity" (2019, 75). *Kawaiisa* and *moe* are not aspects unique to Japanese culture, but are used as stereotypical tropes to make Japan more marketable and to establish cultural power particular in the West.

[8] But definitely not exclusive to Japanese culture. The popularity of fan culture and (slash) fan fiction shows that the desire for and attraction to characters also plays an extensive role for fan consumers in the West. See, for example, Jenkins' *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992), or *Sherlock and Transmedia Fandom* (2012) edited by Louisa Ellen Stein and Kristina Busse.

Kyara and Kyarakutaa

The debate about desire towards characters takes a turn with the publication of Gô Itô's book *Tetsuka izu Deddo* [Tezuka is Dead] (Itô 2005; 2011). Unfortunately, the book is mostly untranslated; there is only an abridged translation of the book's foreword and its opening chapter 'Manga in Transformation and Its Dysfunctional Discourse' by the translator Miri Nakamura (2011). In the introduction of the translation, Nakamura reveals that Itô's goal is to come up with a theoretical tool to analyse *manga* as a distinctive representational form, contrasting those that conflate *manga* with *anime* and film. She states that Itô argues over the course of the book that "realism of modern manga originated from the suppression and effacement of its postmodern elements - epitomised by what he defines as *kyara*, a "proto-character" entity that turns into a complete kyarakutaa once the reader identifies it as human-like" (2011, 69). The distinction between the *kyara* and the *kyarakutaa* (character) defines the rest of the debates in Japanese scholarly works about the constitution of characters.

Itô bases his distinction between the *kyara* and the *kyarakutaa* on famous *mangaka, manga* artist, Osamu Tezuka, who is also known as the 'father of the (modern) manga'. The distinction between the *kyara* and the *kyarakutaa* is primarily visual. Tezuka considers a body made out of simple lines a *kigou shintai*, a 'symbolic body', only the visual representation of a body, but not yet a character (Itô 2005, 116). Using Ôtsuka's idea of the character as human-like (and who can therefore die) (see Itô 2006), a *kyarakutaa* is what Itô considers to be a *toujou jinbutsu*, a *dramatis persona*, who convinces it readers that it is an "appealing dramatis persona" (Itô 2005, 120). The character appeals as a *dramatis persona* by showing the following aspects: the character has to give a sense of a *seikatsukan*, the feeling of having a daily life of a person, *ikigata,* a way of life, *hanashikata*, a speaking style, and *jinseikan*, a certain stance in life. These aspects combined should give the character a *sonzaikan*, a feeling of existence—that the character is born, grows up, gets old and dies (2005, 120). Itô considers the character to be the representation of a body with a personality (121). In contrast, the *kyara* is an easy icon that only looks like a character. It is a 'proto-character', it precedes the *kyarakutaa* before readers consider it a character, and can therefore even be considered to be a visual cliché.

Itô follows Ôtsuka's idea that the *toujou jinbutsu* (the *dramatis persona*) has to be akin to a 'real' person. That is, it needs to have a corporeal element (2005, 131). In contrast, Zoltan Kascuk points out that the *kyara* is purely the semiotic aspect in Ôtsuka's duality of the character's nature (Kascuk 2016, 279). In other words, the *kyara*'s body functions as a sign, but is not the *kyarakutaa*, while the *kyarakutaa* also uses the body as a sign, but has the medium to evoke 'human-like' behaviour in the sign, turning it into a character.

Another work that remains untranslated is Azuma's *Geemuteki Riarizumu no Tanjô* [The Birth of Game-like Realism] (2007) in which Azuma continues his discussion on database consumption that the established in *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (2009 [2001]). Azuma continues to build his argument on Ôtsuka's narrative consumption (2010 [1989]) and Itô's distinction of the *kyara* and the *kyarakutaa* (2005). Azuma points out that Ôtsuka distinguishes between three different forms of light novels (young adult novels usually aimed at middle and high school students): *jyubunairu shôsetsu* (juvenile novels) from before the seventies, *joshi shôsetsu* (girl novels) appearing in the seventies, and *teeburutaaku rôrupureingugeemu shôsetsu* (table-talk role-playing game novels or TRPG novels) (2007, 111). According to Kascuk, Azuma's argues that Ôtsuka considers the table-talk role-playing game novels[9] inferior to the other novels about which Ôtsuka speaks, because the

[9] In Japan, 'tabletop role-playing games' are known as '*teeburutooku* RPGs', that is, 'table-talk role-playing games'.

former do "not contain the inevitability of death—due to the possibility of resets, replays, and alternative endings" (Kascuk 2016, 278; Azuma 2007, 118 - 120). Ôtsuka's conceptualisation of the character relies on the character's mortality (Kascuk 2016, 278). A character from Ôtsuka's perspective cannot maintain multiple lives, because it needs to die in order to give the presence of a person who similarly is born and dies. However, according to Azuma, characters function like nodes and enable the possibility of a *meta monogatariteki na souzouryoku no kakusan*, the proliferation of the power of meta-story-like imagination.[10] When *otaku* read characters in one story, they can easily imagine the character appearing in another separate story, not only in works from the same author but also in derivative works or products (2007, 125). These characters have a meta-story-like quality in the sense that they can be "freely extracted from stories and relocated, and new story endings can be created, […] irrespective of whether the original work from which the character comes is a game or not" (Kascuk 2016, 279). The characters move from story to story, with the author unable to stop this movement (Azuma 2007, 125). In short, Azuma's argument is that characters that are used in *anime* or *manga* novels and characters that appear in game novels (such as the TRPG novels) have a *geemuteki na* (game-like) existence (125). This is because their meta-story quality enables them to migrate from story to story without the necessity that these stories have to make continuous sense nor that the character has to be the same character throughout all the stories. In other words, what Azuma describes is a *type of transmedial character*.

Azuma uses Itô's distinction between the *kyara* and the *kyarakutaa* to demonstrate that the movement of the character is not against the nature of the character as proposed by Ôtsuka. While Itô considers the *kyara* to be primarily visual, Azuma's focus on the character's meta-story quality leads him to conclude that the possibility to repeat the character in various works has always been an essential element to modern manga as drawn by Osamu Tezuka (2005, 138).

The idea of the *kyara* seems very different to how Western theory discusses the transmedial character, but is in fact not an entirely new concept. Uricchio and Pearson distinguish characters such as Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse as distinct from Batman despite the characters' similarities in "being multiply authored and not bound to a particular medium, urtext or period" because they "function as actors/celebrities rather than characters" (1991, 185). However, they seem to root the *kyara* and *kyarakutaa* phenomenon as two entirely different concepts where a character that sometimes function as a *kyara* cannot be a character, and a character that is a *kyarakutaa* is not a *kyara*, because it maintains a human-like life. Yet, the *kyara*/*kyarakutaa* phenomenon is more of a spectrum on which a character functions in some works or products more akin to a *kyara* and sometimes more as a *kyarakutaa* without there necessarily being a clear-cut distinction as to when it does function like one or the other. Brooker's (2012) framework, however, does acknowledge that one existence for Batman is that of the brand, whose iconic appearance decorates many a product, and functions thus as a *kyara*.

Building on Itô's *kyara*/*kyarakutaa* distinction, Hiroshi Odagiri (2010) contributes to the discussion on characters by arguing that the concept of character has a combination of three elements: *zuzou* (icon), *naimen* (interior) and *imi* (meaning) (119). Characters defined by the image function as the *kyara* and are a fetish character (2010, 120), not unlike the description of the

[10] Kaskuck translates *meta monogatariteki na souzouryoku* as 'metafictional imagination'. I use *meta-story-like imagination* instead, in order to avoid the ambiguous meaning of 'fiction' and 'fictional'. *Monogatari* refers to a general form of 'story' in Japanese literature, particularly from the Heian period (794 AD) until the Muromachi period (1573 AD). These stories are often considered 'fictional' in the sense that these stories are 'not real', but can contain actual historical events.

characters in Azuma's database who consist of elements that invoke *moe*. Characters defined by the interior refer to round characters who have a certain personality obtained in media such as *anime* or *manga* (119). And characters that primarily consist of meaning are flat characters and symbolic characters that represent a certain theme such as Uncle Sam, the personification of the USA as a country (120). According to Odagiri, the combination of these three elements constitute the character as a concept.

Saitô's *Kyarakutaa Seishin Bunseki: Manga, Bungaku, Nihonjin* [An Analysis of the Soul of Characters: Manga, Literature, and Japanese Persons] (2014) discusses the appearance of the character—and the distinction between *kyara* and *kyarakutaa*—as a concept over multiple disciplines. His book covers the definition of the character over the course of ten chapters, in which he discusses youth, psychiatry, semiotics, manga, novels, the difference between art and *kyara*, the *kyara*'s creation power, the *kyara* and *moe*, the *kyarakutaa* as fiction, before he discusses the question 'what is a character?' in the book's final chapter.

Using Itô's distinction between the *kyara* and the *kyarakutaa*, Saitô points out that, for Itô, one of the most important aspects of the *kyara* is its traversing nature. Saitô argues that the *kyara* has the power of *toujiseisonzaikan*, the 'same presence' that does not come from individual works, but comes from its appearances in multiple works, different derivative works, and withstands a variety of codes. It is why the *kyara*'s traversing nature is its most essential elements (2014, 108).

Saitô also uses Azuma's idea of the character's *geemuteki rirarizumu* to explain that characters are the persona who lives many different lives and die many different deaths, as an essential element to the *kyarakutaa* that contrasts them to human persons (2014, 108 - 109). He therefore concludes that the essential element of the *kyarakutaa* is its *tensou kanou*/*fukuseifukanou*, its possibility of transferring and the impossibility of reproducing (109). This refers to characters being able to move from one work to another but never being entirely the same character—something which Bertetti (2014) also argues. In contrast, the *kyara*'s essential element is the exact opposite: *fukusei kanou*/*tensou fukanou*, the possibility of reproducing, but the impossibility of transferring (Saitô 2014, 109). This statement refers to the idea that the *kyara* live a non-world existence and cannot develop as characters. As a result, the *kyara* dwells in a network where it is constantly repeated (reproduced) as it moves from work to work like a phantom with the constant same existence, but due to its lack of development with a personality set in a world, the *kyara* cannot be transferred (110).

Discussions on the *kyara* and the *kyarakutaa* are slowly appearing in English articles. Sandra Annett (2015, 165) for example, describes the appeal of the characters in the Vocaloid media mix strategy, and describes how these characters work as *kyara* in the current media system. Her work seems to be geared towards Western academics unfamiliar with the concept of the *kyara*, and who are likely unable to read or speak Japanese. She describes the distinction between the *kyara* and the *kyarakutaa* as follows:

> *Kyara* can be distinguished from both fully rounded literary or cinematic characters (*kyarakutaa*) and the simple, one-dimensional brand mascots copyrighted and disseminated by major corporations. As evolving image-constructs that thrive on fan adoption, *kyara* cross the planes between psychologically rounded subjects and flattened symbols, between official and unofficial realms of product circulation, between licensed merchandise and free-for-all repurposing on the Internet (2015, 164 - 165)

Annett points out that *kyara* are "more akin to surfaces that facilitate the play of desire" (169) in the sense that they do not necessarily have an established personality and that their visual appearances is largely exaggerated. However, as she points out, their lack of uniqueness make them also very mobile across media, appearing in manga, anime, light novels, games and more (170).

In his book on the role of anime and television within the Japanese media mix, *Anime Ecology* (2018), Lamarre describes the function of characters in *anime*, describing how the character switches semiotic codes within the different segments of an *anime* episode. He explains that the back-and-forth traveling of the character between media causes it to become the embodiment of 'code switching' (214). The character has to adhere to the distinct properties of the medium in which it materialises. Additionally, within a single medium, the character also has to conform to formal codes and conventions of the different segments in which it appears. For example, when a character appears in a television series, and then later in an advertisement on television, the character has to adhere to the codes of the advertisement to sell something, whereas in the television series it has to adhere to different codes to tell a story. The constant switching between media and coded segments causes the character to attain a dual nature; it is autonomous from any given medium, as it does not rely on any medium in particular to come into being, while it also always needs a medium in which to materialise (217).

Recently, Wilde (2019) has summarised the discussion on the different character phenomena in Japan in an extensive literary overview, similarly to this chapter. It would be excessive to repeat the same works upon which he draws, and so I will only highlight the information in which Wilde clarifies the *kyara* and the *kyarakutaa* distinction, providing additional information on the character discussion to help the article's Western readers understand the omission of story in the *kyara*.

Wilde points out, for example, that the 'pre-narrative' state of the *kyara* is not rooted in the lack of any narrative information, but is based instead on the overabundance of competing and incoherent information between the appearances of the character (5 -6). *Kyara* function as nodal points where multiple appearances of the character intersect:

> They essentially function as hubs, interfaces, or intersections for diverging ›games of make-be-lieve‹. These games, in turn, are often forms of aesthetic, medial, social, and especially diegetic *recontextualizations*. Consequently, every *kyara* could also be addressed as a »meta-narrative nodal point« (*meta-monogatari-teki na kes-setsuten* メタ物語的な結節点, AZUMA 2007: 125). *Kyara* can easily be placed back into heterogeneous narrative contexts (as contingent *kyarakutā*) (2019, 7).

The distinction between *kyara* and *kyarakutaa* is in other words not necessarily clear-cut, but moves over a spectrum on which sometimes the character functions more akin to a *kyara* and sometimes more akin a fully-fledged *kyarakutaa*. The main difference, however, between the two concepts still seems to be the mortality of the character—that is, the character only has a single life in which it will be born and in which it will die. As a result, the character has many iterations that eventually move towards their own death. That does not mean that the character itself dies, rather, it means that that particular iteration of the character has died. The character can always iterate anew in another work, in another medium, in another life.

The *kyara* is not a concept unique to Japanese culture, on the contrary, characters such as Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny (see Urrichio and Pearson 1991) show that the *kyara* exists in

Western culture as well. Tosca (2003) and Aldred (2014) also ascribe game characters' capability to hop from one game to the next game (or from one medium to the next) to the characters' iconicity. The *kyara* is just less acknowledged, and perhaps even wilfully ignored, because the West seems to be more focused on the coherence of characters. The *kyara* belongs to a discourse of contemporary media practices that focuses primarily on the proliferation of characters—without the necessity of story coherence—whereas the other discourse of contemporary media practices, from the West, is more concerned with the idea of continuity and coherence of characters within stories. That is, there is a romantic strive for fidelity, with transmedial storytelling as a phenomenon of that ideal.

2. The Multiplicity of Characters

In chapter two and in this chapter, I have extensively discussed the literature engaged with characters from different points of view: a 'general' point of view, a point of view from the field of game studies, and a point of view from (trans-)media studies. These discussions bring a few conceptual problems to the fore, some of which I will point out here. Of course, there are more conceptual problems than the ones I discuss here, but the problems that I focus on have a direct relation to the challenges that the dynamic game character brings to the table, which I will discuss in chapters seven and eight.

The conceptual problems with the phenomenon of characters can be listed as follows, in no particular order:

- As pointed out by Thon (2019), there is a tension between transmedial and medium-specific perspectives on what characters are. 'Character' in game studies, for example, tends to overlap with the term 'avatar'. In literary studies, the character is divided between a structuralist perspective that considers the character to be solely a textual construct, and the humanistic perspective that treats the character as persons. In Japanese studies, there is a concrete distinction between the character as a human-like figure and the floating icon, the *kyara*.

- The underlying assumption that characters are inherently part of a story. This assumption might derive from literary studies, which initially dominated the discussion on characters, but, as recent transmedial perspectives on characters—both from Japan and from the West—show, characters are not necessarily defined by any story specifically. They hop from one story to the next, and can even exist without stories (but perhaps not necessarily develop as persons).

- In transmedial perspectives, there is friction about the identity of the character as it exists in multiplicity in the character ecology: the character appears as if it is the same character, but does not necessarily have the same identity as another of its appearances. It exists as many. This focus on identity is especially visible when comparing Western theories on characters to Japanese theories on characters. Both derive from the inconsistency between character appearances, but whereas Japanese theory primarily pays attention to the proliferation of the character to explain the different identities of a character, Western theories focus on a strive for narrative continuity between character appearances in order to form a single

coherent identity.

In the rest of this chapter, I therefore propose a model to address the conceptual problems explained above. This model aims to represent the meaning-making process of the cultural understanding of the multiplicity of characters, their coherence and (lack of) continuity, as well as the medium-specific representational material in which they manifest. I will explain this model in the following ways: first, I will provide a general definition of character. This definition is not mine, I borrow it from Frow (2014). His definition addresses the ontological discontinuity between character and person, as discussed in chapter two, which allows the definition to remain open to the peculiarities of the conceptual problems that come with the concept of character. Next, I will propose the model, which I call the *multiplicity model*. The model consists of three different elements: the archetype, the immaterial character and the indicator, and the manifestations of the character in the local works embodied by representational material.

The Character as Quasi-Person

Over the course of his book, Frow (2014) provides several descriptions of the phenomenon of character but does not provide a concrete definition. Instead, the descriptions that he gives pertain to the ambiguity of the character that can mean different things depending on the perspective one uses to look at the phenomenon. Frow's discussion about the character is not focused on the nature of the character—what they are—but rather he focuses on the construction of the concept of character, and he describes the dependence of its construction on the historically and culturally changing understanding of persons.

When Frow approaches a concrete definition, he considers characters to be *quasi-persons*:

> Our recognition of the kind of thing fictional characters are depends on our prior knowledge of the kind of thing persons are. We understand characters as quasi-persons. But the modeling goes the other way as well: our understanding of persons is, in part, shaped by our experience of dealing with fictional characters. Both fictional characters and kinds of persons are models of an aspect of the world, schemata which generalize and simplify human being in conventional ways and make it available to understanding and action. (2014, 107)

Another description that he gives is of the character as a figure: at once a "figure of speech and of figural representation, the figure that stands out from a narrative background and, more generally the human shape or form" (8). Here he illustrates the character as belonging to language, as a representation, as part of a story—but not only in stories—and a general human-like form.

Frow establishes concept of the character on the recipients' cultural understanding of persons, but also acknowledges that characters are constructed within texts (2014, vi). He argues:

> Character is not a substance but the literary or dramatic or filmic instance of an operation within a social assemblage, by means of which the reader is inscribed into the terms of a particular formation of personhood. It is a moment of an apparatus for the mobilization of subjectivity within the terms of an ethical or legal or religious or civic mode of action and understanding. (2014, ix)

According to Frow, the character depends on a prior category of human being, the person. The

concept of the person is formed by, as Frow states: "a rich set of changing socio-technical practices which distinguish human from non-human being and bring together religious, legal, medial, ethical, civic, and socioeconomic taxonomies in a single point" (2014, 71). How a someone becomes a person depends on the socioeconomic practices dependent on the culture and the position of that culture. For example, in the Roman Empire, Roman law allowed an individual to have multiple *personae*, multiple persons depending on that individual's legal role in society (Frow 2014, 76). In Christianity, every human being was considered a person so that everyone became qualified to receive divine judgment (2014, 77).

The reason why I prefer Frow's descriptions over any concrete definition is because it points out the different persuasions that come with the phenomenon. It is an understanding of character as depending on the prior concept of a person that is itself constructed via socio-technical practices which grant certain human beings a particular formulation of personhood. Furthermore, as Frow also points out, any theory about characters is to some degree typological, "invoking a limited range of kinds of person subsuming actual named characters" (2014, 107). Such a problem is, however, unavoidable, and defining the phenomenon of character provides at least a working premise on which further uses of the character in specific media can be analysed. As stated in chapter one, to Frow's description, I add Itô's description of the character, who describes characters as *toujoujinbutsu*, '*dramatis personae*' (2005, 117), with specific personalities that give the impression of a continuous existence in which they are born, grow up, develop and die (2005, 120). Therefore, based on Frow's Itô's and descriptions, I use the following working premise for the phenomenon of character:

> A character is a *quasi-person*: a pattern of writing or imagining that readers understand as a person-like figure who, in the work in which they appear, gives the impression of a continuous existence in which they have a (daily) life in which they were born and in which they will die.

Now that I have a working premise of the phenomenon of the character, I will explain the multiplicity model.

The Multiplicity Model

The impression that characters have a continuous existence is, as I have shown, a theoretical ideal for which Western theories of character in particular strive, rather than an actual rationale since characters in the contemporary media landscape appear in multiplicity. Their identities are incoherent, narratively discontinuous and sometimes even conflicting. This means that in the character ecology, the existence of a character is ultimately a paradox. Because characters are thought of as somewhat person-like, they give the impression that they have a coherent existence. However, they simultaneously appear in works that do not necessarily make continuous sense in relation to each other, even without taking derivative works into consideration. Furthermore, many scholars have argued that even characters within a single work are necessarily incomplete (Eder 2010, 11; Reicher 2010, 119; Vella 2014, 15; Wilde 2019, 5). Therefore, I argue that a character exists in the character ecology as a multiplicity spread over multiple works.

The multiplicity model represents the meaning-making process of the cultural understanding of this multiplicity, as characters proliferate over a variety of works which do not characterise them as a coherent entity. The advantage of the model lies in its adaptability to each individual character:

it takes into consideration the medium-specific representational material, and simultaneously displays a set of consistent elements that constitute the meaning-making process by which the interpreter considers a figure a character.

The multiplicity model consists of three interdependent elements: the archetype, the immaterial character and the indicator, and the manifestation(s). Figure 1 shows a visual representation of the multiplicity model. I use three different characters to illustrate how the archetype, the immaterial character and its indicator, and the manifestation (M) constitute the meaning-making process in each individual case. Additionally, the introduction of the model in this chapter allows me to discuss the challenges each character brings in the textual configuration of its identity in chapter five, *Manifestations and The Problem of Identity*. The characters are: Sherlock Holmes, who first appeared in Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), Link from Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda* series (1989–present), and the Chocobo, a recurring character species in the games of Square Enix (1987–present).

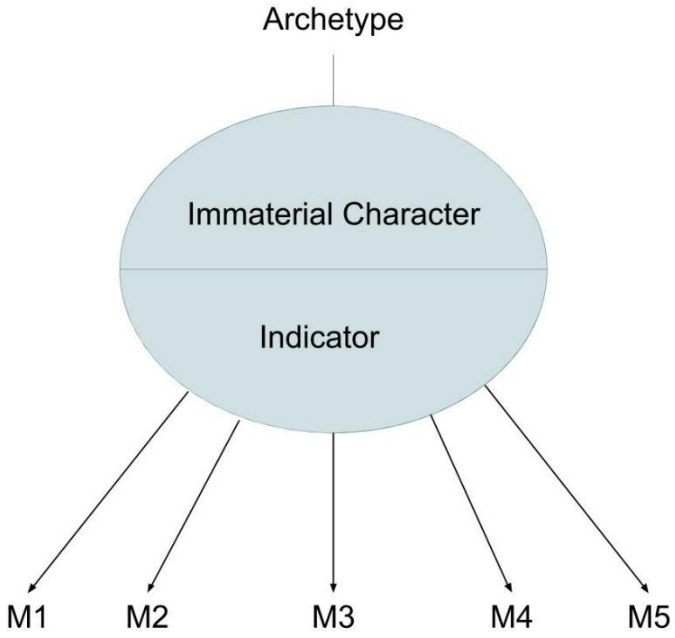

Figure 1: The multiplicity model

The Archetype

Characters are often seen as fitting into recurring patterns that seem to go back into human history, and the existence, nature and longevity of these patterns have been the subject of much study, as for example Frow's (2014) work on characters demonstrates. These patterns can be called a, formula, a model, recipe, style or rule according to which characters are expected to behave. In the case of characters, the term 'archetype' is suitable to describe the person-like figures that iterate in these archaic formulas.

The archetype tends to be associated with the field of analytical psychology, also known as Jungian psychology. Carl G. Jung (1959), known for his work on the collective unconsciousness and the concept of the archetypes, describes archetypes as pre-existent motifs dwelling within the

collective unconsciousness. The collective unconsciousness is a realm, "a psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature" (1959, 43) that all individuals from a particular culture inherit and access. The collective unconsciousness consists of unspecified and unrealised elements. According to Jung, archetypes are unspecified elements that change once they take on a specified shape and are perceived in that shape (5). Essentially, the collective unconsciousness is made up only of archetypes which are then encountered everywhere, but only in their manifested shape (42).

The archetype also appears in other fields. According to Jung, the concept of the archetype appears in psychology, comparative religion and in the field of mythological research, where they are known as 'motifs' (1959, 42). In the field of literary studies, Régis Boyer (1992) critiques Jung's description of the archetypes, arguing that it runs the risk that all behaviour is reduced "to a reflection of a known and recognizable (archetypical) element in the collective psyche" (116). Reducing every element encountered in literary works to a familiar pattern gives the impression that every manifestation of the archetypical element develops in the exact same manner as defined by the archaic formula. This is exactly what Propp (1928) does when he identifies the seven broad character functions according to which every character from a fairy tale can be categorized. He reduces them to their actions, and a set of behavioural patterns is then assigned a specific category, e.g., the helper, the villain, the hero, etc.

Instead, manifestations can relate to the archetype in several ways. Boyer states that "any tale worthy of literary expression can be linked to one or more archetypes" (1992, 110). Although Boyer does not directly speak of characters but of stories, he connects the meaning of the concept of the archetype to three connotations: the prototype, the ideal model and the supreme type. The prototype is an element that brings about the explanation of its successors that appear in other works. Boyer states: "it is a fundamental symbol that acts as a kind of matrix for repeated representations of itself" (1992, 112). For characters, Sherlock Holmes can be considered the archetypical prototype of many characters that came after him. Not only in terms of being a great detective, but also in terms of being an extremely intelligent and hyper-observant, eccentric (typically male) protagonist using his ability of deductive reasoning to uncover mysteries. This archetype appears in characters such as Gregory House from the medical drama series *House* (2004-2012), or Gill Grissom from *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (Zuiker 2000 - 2015) to name only two.

The ideal model is similar to the prototype but with a status of value (Boyer 1992, 112). It is the model image with admirable qualities and virtues to which we refer even when it is not the first depiction of this archetype. A character considered to be an ideal model functions as the personification of the archetype. For example, the fictional character Arsène Lupin, created by Maurice Leblanc and who first appeared in 1905, is perhaps the personification of the archetype of the gentleman thief. According to Boyer, history plays the primary role in the establishment of this archetype (114).

Lastly, Boyer proposes the supreme type, the archetype to have an almost divine, god-like status, and the most difficult archetype to define. He describes it as follows:

> The absolute, the perfect image, that transcends particular circumstances because it goes straight to the essential point wherever once chooses to tap it whether the context is fictional, religious, or mythical. […] An ideal world where only archetypes can develop; the divine Creator makes them move from that universe to the physical universe, where they are incarnated in people and concrete objects. Thus all creatures have a spiritual double that connects them to God the creator and gives them an underlying nobility and dignity. (1992,

114)

As seen from Boyer, the archetype in literature studies seems to be particularly associated with narrative structures. John Cawelti (1976) also discusses the archetype as narrative structure. He proposes archetypes as literary formulas, considering them structures "of narrative or dramatic conventions employed in a great number of individual works" (5). He distinguishes between two usages of literary formulas: the first refers to patterns of cultural convention, specific to culture and period (5). The second refers to plot types. Plot types function as recipes for narratives that are not limited to a culture or period. They consists of general structures in narratives with series of events that follow each other in a specific way, like the plot of 'boy-meets-girl' (5). Umberto Eco (1979, 19) calls the recurring stock situations that inform stories *topoi*, considering them to be intertextual support for the reader (or interpreter) to make sense of narrative situations (31). The reader goes outside of the main work—goes on *inferential walks* (31)—in order to obtain this kind of intertextual support by building up a repertoire of *topoi* that they then can recognise (119).

As shown, the archetype in literary studies tends to be connected to archaic formulas in stories, whereas Jungian archetypes favour personality and behaviour via human-like figures. This juxtaposition bears similarities to the juxtaposition between the humanistic position and structuralist position in literary studies as discussed in chapter two.

For the multiplicity model, the archetype functions as reoccurring structural patterns in the shape of person-like figures. Iterative patterns evolve with every appearance and manifest differently in each character. For pragmatic reasons, I add labels to archetypes—such as 'hero', 'princess' or 'silent protagonist'—in order to be able to discuss the pattern, but I strongly emphasise that these should not be understood as fixed archetypical categories, because that weakens the patterns' progression as textual elements. And, just as Boyer argues, it simplifies these characters to these categories, while ignoring the variety in which characters come. This would essentially reduce the characters to stock characters, clichés with a fixed set of traits and behaviours.

The archetype in the multiplicity model can be used to describe the different motifs that appear and reappear in characters over multiple courses of works. These archetypes are not fixed, but are iterative and evolve as the character proliferates. Some of these archetypes are specific to a particular type of genre, others are particular to the medium, some are particular to both. For example, let me describe how the archetype appears in Link from *The Legend of Zelda* (*LoZ*) series: besides representing the archetype of the hero as identified by Propp (1928) and Joseph Campbell (1949), Link is also the archetype of the silent protagonist particularly present in digital games. Link does not speak in the *LoZ* games. He tends to grunt or nod instead. In *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (*BotW*) (Nintendo 2017), the player sometimes gives the opportunity to have Link respond via a fixed set of dialogue options, but Link never actually delivers the speech: he nods or grunts, and the other character responds with their own speech *as if* Link actually responded with the dialogue the player chose, but this delivery remains in the player's imagination.

While Link tends to be silent in almost every work in which he appears, sometimes a character belongs to different archetypes depending on the work in which they appear. The Chocobo is, for example, a character so dispersed across a variety of works that certain works represent the Chocobo more akin to a *kyara* in which it mainly functions according to its ludic role. For example, in the *Final Fantasy* (*FF*) series, the Chocobo sometimes function as hostile enemy species, such as in *FF VII* (1997) or *FF X-2* (2003). In the works such as *Hataraku Chocobo* [Working Chocobo] (Square 2000), or *FF XIV: A Realm Reborn* (Square Enix 2013 - present), the Chocobo

functions as a mount or a pet. In these games, the Chocobo is a cliché, having a fixed set of traits and behaviours reduced to its ludic role of enemy, mount or pet.

In other works, the Chocobo is more on the spectrum of a quasi-person than just a function of the game. Works such as *Chocobo no Fushigi na Dungeon* [Chocobo's Mysterious Dungeon] (Square Enix 1997) and *Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo Tales* (H.a.n.d. 2006) depict the Chocobo as an individual, as the player-character with its own personality and motivation for experiencing the events in the narration of the game. Within these games, the Chocobo belongs to the archetype curated over the variety of works of the *FF* series and the *Chocobo* series. For example, *Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo Tales* presents Chocobo as an orphan who lost his parents in a war, and after an event where he releases an evil demon, he goes on a journey during which he is revealed to be the descendant of a Warrior of Light. A Warrior of Light is a recurring motif within the *Final Fantasy* series in which heroes, chosen by the crystals, legendary objects, to embark on a journey to save the world from its doom. The character then represents both the archetypical hero, but also represents the archetype of *Final Fantasy*'s Warrior of Light.

As an iterative motif, the archetype is inherently abstract and inherently intertextual, which informs the interpreter to make sense of characters over the course of a great number of works, while these formulas also remain autonomous from a specific work. It is up to the interpreter to recognise these formulas. Therefore, an interpreter with less cultural knowledge or experience of a certain formula will less likely recognise the formula in a character, but they will start recognising these motifs as they build up their *repertoire* of motifs by consuming, reading and interpreting gradually more works.

The Immaterial Character and the Indicator

The second element in the model consists of the immaterial character and its indicator. The transition from the archetype to the immaterial character is a two-step process: the reader first needs the indicator to understand its reference to the immaterial character before they can recognise the archetype in that character. Even more so than the connection between the archetype and the immaterial character, the immaterial character and the indicator cannot be separated, whereas the reader can theoretically interpret a character without an archetype if their repertoire is not large enough yet to recognise the archetype. This means that the connection between the immaterial character and the indicator is bilateral—that is, it is impossible to discuss one without the other. For pragmatic reasons however, I will discuss the immaterial character and indicator individually, but will not be able to mention one without mentioning the other.

The immaterial character is not yet embodied in any particular medium. Similarly to the archetype, the immaterial character resides in an unspecified, abstract realm as a yet-to-be-embodied existence. But, in contrast to the archetype, the immaterial character points to a specific quasi-person. That is, the immaterial character is the figure that has yet to be packed in representational material.

I base the idea of the immaterial character on Steinberg's account of the character in the media mix. Within the media mix, Steinberg identifies two attributes to the concept of the character. The first attribute is the character's mobility, that is, its movement between media, its appearance and re-appearance over a variety of works (2012, 83). The second is its communicative aspect. Characters are not limited only to their material instances (the manifestations), but they are also abstract (84). Steinberg assigns the character a double nature as a material and an immaterial entity at once (2012, 194). As discussed previously in this chapter, being an immaterial entity, or an

'abstract' or 'virtual' entity (see Deleuze and Patton 1994; Steinberg 2012, 194) keeps the character open to new and subsequent transformations that can become realised in various representational material to different effects.

Let me explain the immaterial character as follows: someone can refer to a specific character without concretely describing it. The proper noun 'Sherlock Holmes' can at once refer to all of its manifestations, to none, or to a specific number of them. The proper name does not even have to refer to the first manifestation of Arthur Conan Doyle's character. Rather, the name 'Sherlock Holmes' can perfectly well be stated by someone without the necessity to identify *which* Sherlock Holmes that person speaks about. The conceptual existence to which someone can refer, lacking any concrete components, is the immaterial character. Nevertheless, in order to refer to the immaterial character, one needs an *indicator*, a signifier to refer to something abstract (figure 2). The immaterial character and the indicator are therefore bilateral: without an indicator to refer to the existence of an immaterial character, the immaterial character will not exist. Vice versa, without an immaterial character to accompany the indicator, the indicator will carry no meaning.

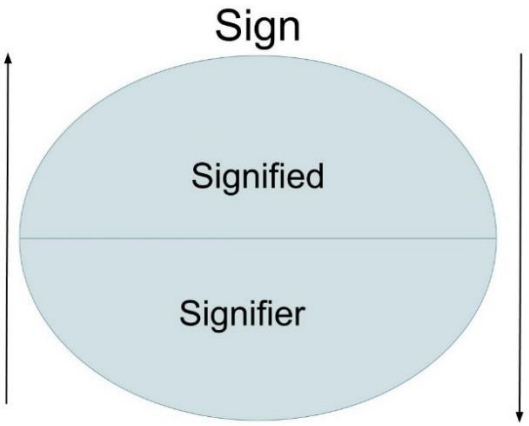

Figure 2: An image of the linguistic sign model by de Saussure.

The immaterial character and its indicator brings to mind de Saussure's sign model, designed to analyse the nature of the linguistic sign (de Saussure 1916; Nöth 1995, 59). Saussure's bilateral sign model consists of three terms. In English, these are the *sign*, the *signifier* and the *signified*. According to Saussure, a sign consists of a concept and a sound-image. De Saussure later introduced the terms signified (the concept) and the signifier (the sound-image) (Nöth 1995, 59). The image which de Saussure uses to describe the sign represents an ellipse, which stands for the sign as a whole with two sides, the concept and the sound-image (image 2). The signifier is the sound and/or image that is used to refer to a concept. The arrows stand for the 'psychological association' between the signifier and the signified (Nöth 1995, 59). The sign model describes the meaning when a specific sound or image is used to invoke a concept in someone's mind. A common example for this model is the Latin sound sequence '*arbor'* to refer to the concept of 'tree' (Nöth 1995, 59). Intrinsically, '*arbor*' as the sound-image means nothing, neither as a piece of writing nor as sound, but by allocating a specific concept to the sound-image, the idea of a tree, obtains the sign as a whole a specific meaning.

Applying de Saussure's linguistic sign model to the bilateral relation between the immaterial character and the indicator, the immaterial character comes to function as the signified, and the

indicator as the signifier (figure 3). Together, they make up the sign in order to refer to the conceptual existence of the character—but are not the character itself *per se*. The sound-image 'Sherlock Holmes' does not need a specific manifestation of Sherlock Holmes in order for the interpreter to understand that it refers to the immaterial aspect of the character. That said, if, for example, someone unfamiliar with Latin hears or reads the word '*arbor*', they are likely not able to recognise that it points to the signified of 'tree'. The sign is culturally learned. For specific interpreters unfamiliar with the character Sherlock Holmes, the indicator might not refer to anything at all, they might not even recognise it as a name used to indicate a person (or person-like entity). Or, the person might only be familiar with a certain manifestation of the character, and not with others. Thus, the immaterial character is not only an abstract, to-be-realized entity of a specific character, it also functions as the repertoire individual to each interpreter.

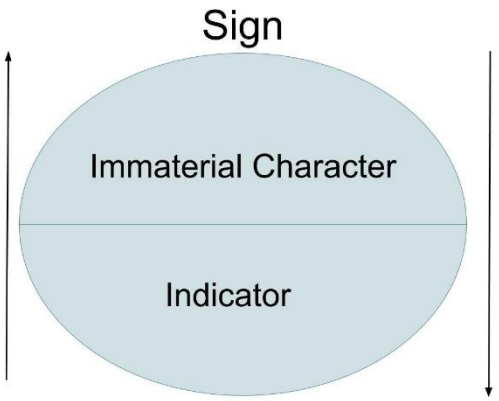

Figure 3: The immaterial character and the Indicator.

The immaterial character, in order to be invoked in the interpreter's mind needs at least one sound-image to function as an indicator, however both indicator and immaterial character are inconsistent. Sherlock Holmes is, for example, referred to in the 1980s animation series as *Sherlock Hound* (Miyazaki and Mikuriya 1984), a pun on the appearance of the character as an anthropomorphic dog. In *Miss Sherlock* (J. Mori, Yusuke, and Matsuo 2018), Sara Shelly 'Sherlock' Futaba, having the appearance of a modern Japanese woman, only uses the name 'Sherlock' as a nickname, but this is enough to invoke the immaterial character of Sherlock Holmes. Philippe Hamon (1972) demonstrates the inconsistency of the character's indicator and immaterial character, using de Saussure's sign model, as follows: the character can be defined as a double articulated morpheme, the smallest meaningful unit in language, manifested via a discontinuous signifier (*signifié discontinu*) to refer to a discontinuous meaning (*signifiant discontinu*) (1972, 96). The discontinuous signifier refers here to the indicator, and the discontinuous meaning refers to the immaterial character.

According to Hamon (1972), the discontinuous meaning refers to the process of characterisation of the character constructed over the course of the work (98). During the characterisation process, the reader acquires gradually more information about the character through scenes in the work using the character's name and substitutes (98). What he refers to is that the character is not a constant rigid concept, but a changing individual over the course of the work. Applying this idea of the discontinuous meaning over multiple works, the immaterial character is not continuous either, but by nature discontinuous. The Chocobo, for example, can be

the protagonist from *Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo Tales* (2006), but can also refer to the enemy species of *FFVII* (1997).

The indicator to the immaterial character is also discontinuous. Hamon explains that in a single work a character is presented through a variety of discontinuous signifiers, such as "je/me/moi" [I/me/my] for an anonymous narrator, or "il/Julien Sorel/le jeune homme/notre héros/etc." [he/Julien Sorel/the young boy/our hero/etc.] for a normal character in a roman novel (1972, 96). Over the course of a variety of works, the indicator changes. Sherlock Holmes can become 'Sherlock Hound' or 'Sara Shelly 'Sherlock' Futaba'. Even within these individual works, the character Sherlock can refer to themselves as "I/my/mine", or be referred to as "he/she/'high-functioning sociopath' [11] ". This is particularly important to point out when discussing game characters, as games sometimes offer the player the ability to change the name of the character before the start of the game. For example, although the games suggest the name 'Link', the player can this to another name in games like *LoZ: Oracle of Seasons* (Capcom 2001) and *LoZ: Oracle of Time* (Capcom 2001). This has no actual consequence for the rest of the player's game play, and the character themselves also does not change, except for the player's experience, in which the player has obtained a (limited) amount of agency over the indicator towards the immaterial character.

It should be pointed out, however, that the indicator does not have to be a proper noun, since the sign model by de Saussure specifies the sound-image. Theories from Japan particularly have demonstrated the importance of the visual icon. It is specifically in the discussion about *kyara*, the floating icon that functions as some sort of 'proto-narrative' kind of character (see Itô 2005; Wilde 2019), where the importance of the image lies in referring to the immaterial character. As discussed in the first part of this chapter, even the *kyara* is a discontinuous signifier as it does not always have the same shape, but rather operates as network containing family resemblances (see Wittgenstein 1953) which share traits without a *specific* trait that defines the icon. For example, the indicator of the Chocobo takes on many shapes and appearances, most often that of a bird, but not necessarily: in *Final Fantasy XIV* it has a more 'realistic' bird-like appearance, whereas in the *Final Fantasy Fables* series, it has a cute, cartoon shape with big eyes. Most of the time, the Chocobo is yellow, but black Chocobos also exist. These are all birds, but the character Chocolina from *Final Fantasy XIII-2* (Square-Enix 2011) has the ability to take on a human form, which resembles a (sexualised) female human-like figure with feathers.

The immaterial character and its indicator do not constitute the character on its own; the bilateral element indicate in the meaning-making process of a character how interpreters make sense of a specific conceptual character. The immaterial character is at once all the manifestations in which a character can appear and none of them. This abstract quality of the character, and the discontinuity of the indicator and immaterial character, makes the meaning-making process of the character inherently individual: not every empirical interpreter will have seen all the works in which Sherlock Holmes appears, and neither will every interpreter recognise the indicator referring to the immaterial character.

Manifestation of the Character

A common critique of de Saussure's sign model is that he excludes the referential object, because he does not take into consideration the objects in the world to which the sign he describes refers (see Nöth 1990, 61). In contrast, Steinberg's distinction between the immaterial and material aspect

[11] This is how Sherlock Holmes in the BBC series *Sherlock*, played by actor Benedict Cumberbatch, refers to himself.

of the character does include the referential object: the material aspect of the character is the realised incarnation of the character constituted by the local representational material of a specific work. This realised incarnation is "embodied by each medium in a distinct way" (Steinberg 2012, 84), and is specified and can be distinctively identified. This referential object I call the character *manifestation*.

In the local works, where the character becomes embodied by representational material, it becomes possible for interpreters to describe the particular manifestations of the characters. It is also on this local, tangible level that interpreters perceive the multiplicity of the character's existence within the character ecology. Link from *LoZ: BotW* is a different Link than the Link from *LoZ: Twilight Princess* (Nintendo 2006), they are the same character but do not have the same identity. In the model I have ascribed these manifestations the variable 'M' followed by a number (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc.) (image 1) to indicate that these manifestations are two different entities.

There are several means to distinguish between the different identities of Link in *LoZ: BotW* and Link from *LoZ: Twilight Princess*. For example, the first indication is that the character appears in two different game works, although that does not necessarily exclude that it could be the same identity. Another indication is in the games' stories. The stories do not seem to acknowledge the existence of both manifestations as the same identity. And, another indication is Nintendo's official book on the series, *Hyrule Historia* (Miyamoto, *et al.* 2013), which states that the heroes in their games all share the same name, some are even the same person, or belong to the same line of familial descendants (68). The problem here is that although multiple manifestations point to the same immaterial character, the manifestations themselves do not necessarily relate in a sequentially continuous sense to each other. Some of these heroes are 'the same Link' or 'the same person', yet in other cases they are not.

Character manifestations tend to iterate, building on previous manifestations, while simultaneously reconstructing the character anew. As a result, there is little coherence between manifestations and they do not make sense in a sequentially continuous way. The lack of coherence is challenging to interpreters because, as Frow also stated, the character operates in a social assemblage embedded in a particular formation of personhood so that the interpreter will consider it a character (2014, ix). Yet, as I have demonstrated throughout this chapter with both theoretical and empirical means, characters are not the same persons in all the works in which they appear.

The challenges that this brings relate to the control of the character's identity: when not every character manifestation is the same person as another manifestation, yet the interpreter recognises this as the same character because it points to the same immaterial character, then who or what controls the identity of the character? This question relates to one of the main questions of this dissertation: how is the identity of a dynamic game character constructed? In order to answer this question, I first need to explain the mechanisms of control that attempt to construct the identity of characters in general within the character ecology. Hence, in the next chapter, 'Manifestations and the Problem of Identity', I will explain the manifestation and the challenges that come along with them in more detail.

3. Summary

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first discusses the appearance of the transmedial character in contemporary transmedia practices in the West and in Japan. The main distinction between the character discussed in the West and discussed in Japan is that the former focuses on coherence and some sort of core essence to conceptualise the nature of the character. The latter

seems to find the solution to the incoherence of character appearances in a description of character proliferation and how the character moves from one medium or story to the next medium or story, which leads to a conceptual distinction between the *kyara*, a semiotic icon, and the *kyarakutaa*, a *dramatis persona*.

I have been arguing that there exists a tension between transmedial and medium-specific perspective on what characters are, there exists an assumption that characters belong inherently to stories, and there exists a friction about the identity of the character that exists in multiplicity. Based on these conceptual problems I provided a definition of characters as quasi-persons and introduced the *multiplicity model*, a model that represents the meaning-making process of the cultural understanding of characters in their multiple existence, which allows for the explanation of the characters' coherence and (lack of) sequential continuity, and the representational materials in which they manifest. I discussed the three different elements of which the model consists: the archetype, the immaterial character and its indicator, and the manifestations of the character.

In chapter five, 'Manifestations and the Problem of Identity', I explain the challenges that occur in the inconsistency between character manifestations as the identity of the character is policed by top-down mechanisms of control, such as the author-function, ownership, and canonisation. In chapter six, 'The Construction of Game Characters', I explain character manifestations in games, and how the player comes to understand the entity in the game as a character.

Chapter Five
The Challenges of Manifestations and their Identities

In the previous chapter *The Immaterial Character*, I identified three conceptual problems with the concept of the character. First, there exists a tension between transmedial and medium-specific perspectives on character. Second, the character is assumed to be always part of a story. Third, and most relevant to this chapter, the identity of the character is based on the premise—primarily in the West—that it has to be a coherent entity via narrative continuity between works. These conceptual problems affect how the reader—or interpreter—understands and interprets the identity of the character over a course of works. Additionally, authoritative figures attempt to police the reader's interpretation of the character's identities through a variety of top-down venues of control. The process of how character identities are controlled top-down is important in understanding how the identity of a dynamic game character is constructed because, as I will explain in more detail in chapter eight, the dynamic game character causes tension in a character's identity within the character ecology, since the player obtains agency within a work created by these authorities to affect the dynamic game character's identity. This is in contrast to non-cybermedia works in which the reader cannot influence identity of the character within the work itself.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part explains why the fallacy of narrative continuity is of importance as an attempt to police the reader into interpreting a certain version of a character as normative, while other versions with different identities of the same character are cast aside as heresy. This part then addresses three venues of control instituted top-down by different forms of authority to police the character's identity: the author-function, ownership and canonisation. I describe these venues separately from each other, but they are far from distinct, and influence each other greatly. The goal of this part is to point out not only how these venues of control work, but also to show how the premise of narrative continuity on which these venues operate fails to deliver their promise of the character as having a singular, coherent identity.

As explained in chapter three, 'On Method', I do not include empirical players or readers in the equation. While I agree that empirical readers and players provide valuable insight in how they engage with top-down control over character manifestations, my focus on the top-down approach itself shows that the concept of reader-response theory—including Roland Barthes' notion of the death of the author (1967)—should be revisited in the age of contemporary transmedia practices. In these practices, the line between the reader and the author is not only blurred more than before, but authorities are also in constant negotiation with the users of their works as these authorities give the user the impression that they have agency over the authorities' works, while simultaneously struggling to keep control over their works based on archaic venues of control. It is therefore important to understand what these authorities do in their attempt to control the characters' identities and police the reader's interpretation of these character manifestations, and how they fail to uphold this control.

In the second part of this chapter, I map the textual organisation, a constellation between the manifestations of three different characters: Sherlock Holmes, Link and Pikachu. This

constellation includes the semiotic references to different character manifestations, and aims to show how individual character's identities are controlled by the different venues in the wider character ecology consisting of multiple manifestations of that character. I have chosen the characters based on the differences of control over these characters. Sherlock Holmes belongs to the public domain and is therefore not any authority's property, whereas Link and Pikachu are both entirely owned by The Nintendo Company. Although I used Sherlock Holmes and Link in the previous chapter, I deliberately switched from the Chocobo to Pikachu for two reasons. First, switching to Pikachu allows me to show how a single company can use different venues of control over different characters. Second, although Nintendo has a variety of iconic characters they use to represent the company (such as Link or Mario depending on the discourse), the company seems to have a particular preference for Pikachu. While I omit the reasons why Nintendo might have this preference to Pikachu, Pikachu appears even in 'real life' situations such as being the host in a Pokémon cafe, or appearing in a 'Pikachu Parade'[12] organised by Nintendo in which a horde of Pikachu dance together at different settings in the city of Yokohama in Japan.

1. The Challenge to Character Identities

In chapter four, 'The Immaterial Character', I pointed out that Western theories about characters focus on a strive for narrative continuity between character manifestations to form a single coherent identity, whereas, in contrast, Japanese theories explain the incoherence between character appearances through the dichotomy between *kyara* and characters. In particular, the theories that strive for narrative continuity—the kind of coherence where the identity of a character between stories is the same—attempt to 'repair' the inconsistencies between the different manifestations by reinforcing the idea that the 'same character' must have the 'same identity'. However, this kind of perspective falls into the fallacy of considering characters to ontologically adhere to the idea of personhood, while in practice, characters' existences are ontologically different from persons. As proposed by Frow (2014), characters are, as quasi-persons, "at once ontologically discontinuous […], and logically interdependent" (vii), and depend "on our prior knowledge of the kind of thing persons are" (107). The ontological discontinuity and logical interdependence is cause for friction, because although a character manifestation might be 'the same character' as another character manifestation, they do not have to share the identity; they can be completely different persons.

The reader can discern between different identities of a character and perceive the manifestations as different persons whether the reader likes it or not. As explained in the previous chapter, the indicator is discontinuous and relies on the reader to recognise the manifestation and link it to the immaterial character. However, even when a reader recognises a manifestation and links it to the immaterial character, they might not be willing to accept that manifestation being the same character as another manifestation of that character. Recognising and accepting character manifestations are two different actions. Let me share an anecdote of a friend of mine who is a huge fan of the superhero character The Flash. At the time, she was furious about the manifestation of The Flash, in the movie *Justice League* (Snyder 2017) played by actor Ezra Miller. According to my friend, this character "was not The Flash". *Justice League*'s manifestation of The Flash did not adhere

[12] If people want to attend the Pikachu Parade in August 2020, they have to sign up in advance: https://www.pokemon.co.jp/ex/pika_event/?event_main002=msign.

to her idea of how the character was supposed to be. She believed that the movie did not show what the character was supposed to look like, how he should act, and moreover, the choice of actor was wrong. She compared this manifestation of The Flash to the manifestation that she did like, played by actor Grant Gustin in the *Netflix* television series *The Flash* (Berlanti, *et al.* 2014), who she considered to be the "real Flash".

What was interesting to me was not her argument for which Flash was more truthful. Clearly, she was a fan of the Flash played by Grant Gustin, while Ezra Miller's performance was not up to par in her eyes. Of interest to me was her distinction between the manifestations of the character where she perceived one as the 'actual' character, and the other as an untruthful version. Grant Gustin's version adhered to her perception of the 'real' Flash, because her imagination of the Flash was constructed by the Flash manifestation of Grant Gustin. Ezra Miller's version was rejected. She seemed to look for a truthful identity, a 'real' The Flash character. Yet, here there were two manifestations of the same character, but without sharing the same identity. She did not accept the manifestation of the character played by Ezra Miller, but she did recognise him as The Flash. Even when character manifestations are adjusted, twisted and changed in the process of their reconstruction in another work, the readers' ability to interpret a manifestation to be a specific character overrides their conviction to accept it as a character. That is to say that in order for a discussion about whether or not a manifestation belongs to a specific immaterial character, the reader first has to infer from the work signals to connect it to the immaterial character.

The identity of a character is complex and not fixed to a core trait or set of core traits, because every manifestation can have or lack a trait that other manifestations do or do not have in a configuration specific to that manifestation. Bertetti (2014) explains the complexity of a character's identity in an extensive typology in which he uses the Aristotelian dichotomy between actant and character to distinguish between a character's existential identity and its fictional identity. Bertetti differentiates on a semiotic level between different kinds of existential and fictional identities, but in general it can be said that the former refers to a discursive identity in which the identities of character manifestations depend on the discourse—a set of works—in which they appear (2014, 2351). Within a specific discourse the identity of the character manifestations are perceived to be (usually) one and the same, so that the character is treated as the same person. I discuss later in this chapter who decides the identity in the discourse and why. The fictional identity refers to the character as an agent who acts within a diegetic world, either as an actor playing in different works or as a set of features to which motivations and skills are attributed, and a level that concerns the values leading up to the character (2349).

It is in a character's existential identity where Bertetti shows the friction between character manifestations in terms of their narrative continuity. To explain a character's different identities over different works, Bertetti proposes a preliminary distinction between characters over a single course of events and multiple courses of events. According to him, characters over a single course of events do not change their fictional identity. After all, they are supposed to be the same being. But he does state that their existential identity changes over time, whereas over the course of multiple events, characters do not have any temporal connection and vary greatly between appearances. Variations in a fictional identity can occur as long as it occurs inside a single universe (a continuous time and space) with no contrasting events between the character manifestations.

Bertetti's typology demonstrates most of all the need for narrative continuity to determine a character's identity over a set of works in which it manifests. This emphasis on narrative continuity is nothing new. It is entirely in alignment with the need for continuous space and time in stories set

in contemporary transmedia practices that focus on relations between different works, and specifically different (story) worlds. In her work on transfictionality, Marie-Laure Ryan (2013) distinguishes between three different relations of story worlds across different works based on Lubomír Doležel's *Heterocosmica* (1998), on expanding possible worlds in literary fiction. The links between story worlds in different works are expansion, modification, transposition, and Ryan adds quotation as a fourth link. Although she does not explain the latter in much detail, expansion and transposition are based on narrative continuity in which a change in events, or a change of time and spatial setting determine how the story world in one work relates to another. An expansion of a work to another suggests the same time and setting and therefore the same world. A modification refers to a counterfactual sequence of events such that one sequence of events cannot have occurred in the same world as the counterfactual sequence of events. And transposition refers to a different spatial or temporal setting in another work. All of these different relations between worlds inherently also imply that the character manifestations that inhabit these worlds have a different identity in one work depending on its relation to another work. For example, the BBC's *Sherlock* television series (Moffat and Gatiss 2010), having a different temporal setting than the original Sherlock Holmes novels, necessarily implies that the manifestation in the television series is its own separate discourse and therefore maintains a different identity than the Sherlock manifestation in the discourse of the original novels.

However, while textual relations between works definitely determine the reader's understanding of the identity of a character, what remains omitted in the scholarly works from Bertetti, Ryan and other scholarly works such as those from Uricchio and Pearson (1991), Denson (2011), and Pearson (2019) is a critical investigation of who determines the identity of a character. Bertetti does note that time and space are important factors for how readers obtain a sense of continuity between character manifestations, but even within a specific discourse in which coherence between these manifestations is assumed, a character does not always have to have the same existential identity that conforms to time and space. The BBC *Sherlock* series only suggests that Sherlock Holmes within that series maintains the same identity, but the special episode 'The Abominable Bride' (2016) implies that this is not always the case.

To explain the multiple identities of Batman, Brooker (2012) has three distinct but coexisting models of continuity. The first model, the *myth*, is a summation of all Batman manifestations. The second model, *brand*, shows that the identity of Batman is determined by a contained and controlled network of works "defined by their current status as Warner Bros. Batman products" (153). On top of that, the third model, *canon*, address that the identity of Batman is controlled by a system of canon that specifies what events of Batman do and do not count (154). These different types of continuity demonstrate that the different identities between manifestations is not only a matter of textual relations between one work and the other work, but also that the configuration of these identities is a question of control. Who creates the discourse in which these manifestations appear? And, who determines the configuration of these identities?

The configuration of character manifestations over different works and in different discourses through which the reader interprets a character's different identities is inherently a question of control over the character ecology. Therefore, in order to understand how manifestations relate to each other, and how the reader comes to interpret manifestations as specific identities, it is crucial to not only investigate how works in which the character appears relate to each other from a narrative continuity perspective (prioritising story coherence), but the process of how character identities are controlled and policed should also be put under scrutiny.

This process is important in this dissertation, because in order to understand how the identity of a dynamic game character is constructed, and how the dynamic game character influences the character ecology, it is necessary to explore how the identities of characters in a character ecology tend to be policed before explaining how a dynamic game character's identity influences the friction.

How the reader makes sense of the configuration of character manifestations and their identities occurs from a top-down approach via three different venues of control: *authorship, ownership* and *canonisation*. All three of these venues are in constant negotiation to determine the identity of the character, wrapped up in a continuous process to police the construction of the constellation of different identities of manifestations in the character ecology. As discussed in chapter three, 'On Method', I purposefully omit discussing audiences and their activities in contemporary transmedia practices except for those moments in which scholars point out where fan culture specifically interferes with the creation of the character. This is not to say they fans do not participate in the policing of a character's identity. The backlash on Sonic's design in the upcoming *Sonic the Hedgehog* movie (Fowler 2020) is an example of the influence fans can have over character manifestations (see Jackson 2019). Rather, my approach focuses on how authorities, controlling the manifestations of 'official' works, attempt to influence the reader's interpretation of a character's identity through a variety of venues in which the authorities attempt to control the relations between works, and therefore between character manifestations and their identities.

These venues are not without their own challenges. As I will point out, the constant negotiation within and between the different venues might attempt to police the constellation of character identities, but upon a closer critical view, these venues hold up little to scrutiny. In the following segment, I first discuss the role of the author, and then role of the owner. These are two seemingly similar roles that can converge but, as I discuss, we should perceive them as two different entities with entirely different functions. In the later part of the segment I will discuss their role in canonisation.

The Author-Function

In chapter three, 'On Method', I discuss Barthes' argument of the death of the author for the construction of the reader-response approach I maintain within this dissertation. In reader-response theory, the discussion of the author seems to have become an irrelevant matter, because the reader can come to an interpretation of a work regardless of the author determining or legitimising that interpretation. However, as Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2019) points out:

> The question of the reader-author struggle must be revisited, given that in this digital age, more people than ever before are writing for work and during leisure, readers connect with one another in powerful networks, lines between readers and writers blur, definitions of what counts as text are negotiated and reconfigured in hybrid multimodal and multilingual constellations, and texts and people circulate across asymmetrical trajectories (154).

Ebony refers specifically to writer J. K. Rowling's tweet that commented on the backlash after the announcement that the character Hermione in the theatre play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (Thorne 2016) of the Harry Potter franchise would be played by a black actress: "Canon: brown eyes, frizzy hair and very clever. White skin was never specified. Rowling loves black Hermione" (Rowling 2015).

Rowling has a history of revealing details about the identity of her characters outside of the

original *Harry Potter* book series in paratexts, such as stating that Dumbledore is gay, and expressing doubt about having Ron and Hermione marry instead of Hermione and Harry. According to Thomas (2019, 155), Rowling's statements and the backlash from fans shows the extent of the ownership fans felt they had over the *Harry Potter* narrative landscape. However, I would add that Rowling's statement also reveals the ownership Rowling seems to grant herself over the reader's interpretative agency. While the tweet above shows that Rowling is happy with any kind of racial interpretation about Hermione from the reader, she assumes the position that what is the core of the Hermione ("Canon: brown eyes, frizzy hair, and very clever"). For Rowling, the reader themselves then only has the agency to interpret what the author does *not* claim to be the core of the canon.

Among the reader-response theorists from the 1960s and 1970s, Michel Foucault (1969) describes the relevance of the author to identify a work as a work. Like Barthes (1977), Foucault assumes the position that the author is dead, but instead of arguing for the many different meanings a work can have, Foucault instead points to the function the author has in ascribing a discourse. In his 1969 article 'What Is an Author?', Foucault clarifies that the author of the work is not the same as the individual, instead he argues that the function of the author (the 'author-function') is to serve as a group of classification bringing together a set of works, a discourse that can be identified as such:

> The name of the author remains at the contours of texts -separating one from the other, defining their form, and characterizing their mode of existence. It points to the existence of certain groups of discourse and refers to the status of this discourse within a society and culture. The author's name is not a function of a man's civil status, nor is it fictional; it is situated in the breach, among other discontinuities, which gives rise to new groups of discourse and their singular mode of existence. (1969, 19)

The author shapes a specific discourse in which a set of works are grouped together implying "homogeneity, filiation, reciprocal explanation, authentication, or of common utilization" (1969, 19). Foucault (1969) identifies four characteristics of the author-function that support a discourse in order to separate it from other discourses:

- The author-function is an object of appropriation. When ownership and copyright were established (end of 18th, beginning of 19th century) the author gained the right of ownership over the work in that it is lawfully recognized that they possess it as a product. (1969, 20)
- The author-function is not universal and constant. An example that Foucault gives is that there was a time that scientific works were only considered truthful and valuable if they contained a name, whereas now the value of scientific work is ideally determined by the quality of the work (shown, for example, by the prevalence of double-blind peer review). (1969, 20)
- The author-function does not come to be via the attribution of a work to a single individual, but "results from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call an author" (1969, 22). Foucault argues that the norms that are used to attribute a work to an individual author has, in literary criticism, almost a holy dimension derived from Christian traditions.

These norms of authenticity concern a process in which a specific quality of their works, a certain conceptual or theoretical coherence, a stylistic uniformity, and the author as a historical figure are attributed to the author as a single entity.

- Lastly, the author-function contains a plurality of egos inside the work divided between "a unique individual who, at given time and place, succeeded in completing a project, […] an instance and plan of demonstration that anyone could perform provided the same set of axioms, preliminary operations, and an identical set of symbols were used". (1969, 23)

It is in the author-function that an explanation for Rowling's sense of ownership over the reader's agency over character interpretation can be found. Ascribing to the author a holy status, the author becomes the figure that can determine the existence and, therefore, the identity of the character. The reader themselves then judges their understanding based on the fallacy of authorial intention. That is, if the author assigns the character to be a certain way, in the original work or in paratext, the reader puts the author's claim above their own interpretation and assumes that the author is right, because the author is the creator of the character, its "author-god" (Barthes 1967).

The idea that the existence of the character is causally related to the author is known as 'creationism'. Stuart Brock (2010) describes creationism about character as "the view that *fictionalia* are created not by God but by the authors of the novels in which they first appear" (338). Theological creationism is the counterpart of creationism about characters, and has been used for centuries as a psychologically satisfying explanation to clarify the existence of the earth with the view that the Christian God created Earth and humanity (2010, 337). The author of the character and God share in the view of creationism a similar position. But while the author-function might seem satisfying to some to explain the identity of the character, Brock counters the idea that the existence of a character is causally related to the author because it suffers from the same problem as theological creationism: "the purported explanation is more mysterious than the data it seeks to explain" (2010, 338).

Brock's argument against creationism is only an argument against the idea that characters are causally related to their author, not that they are not created by their author at all (343). The view is the difference between the idea that the author can describe a character in a certain context and the author causing the character to exist at all. David Friedell (2016) counters Brock's view against the fallacy of the causal relation between author and character, because Brock's view is "not a knockdown argument" (Brock 2010, 362). According to Friedell, the existence of characters depend "in some way on authorial intention" (2016, 132). In Friedell's view, if the author of a character says something about that character, then that is true: "[i]f Doyle intended for Watson and Holmes to be one character, then they are" (2016, 132). Friedell justifies his claims stating that if the author intends to decide how characters are, the corresponding interpretation of the reader has to be legitimate, to which he seems to mean "consistent with literary and linguistic constraints" (133).

The problem with Friedell's claims in a character ecology are twofold: first, he does not take into consideration multiple authors (see Friedell 2016, 137), and, second, he grants the author-function value with, as described by Foucault, an almost holy dimension derived from Christian traditions. His view on the causal relationship between the author and the character does not explain how both a black and white Hermione can exist in the same work, nor how Rowling can

assert that Dumbledore is gay in a paratext, while none of the 'official' works in which she was involved explicitly make his sexuality clear—it is entirely ignored. Even without taking empirical fans into consideration, Friedell's claims do not hold up to scrutiny, because he does not take into consideration the constant negotiation between multiple forms of control.

In contemporary transmedia practices, the idea that a single author creates a work in order to give an impression of authority and authenticity to the discourse carries less weight when entire teams and companies are behind the production of a work, like in game development. Games are usually created by a team rather than a single author. Big companies like Nintendo, Rockstar Games, Atlus, Square Enix and Electronic Arts tend to have multiple teams that are all involved in different games. Even so-called indie games—games created by independent developers—are much more likely to be produced by a group than by a single person. Take *Hollow Knight* (Team Cherry 2017) for example: despite that there are 'only' three creators involved,[13] the authors go by the singular name of Team Cherry, indicating the same process as Foucault's author-function: the attribution of the game is not to a single individual, but to an entity called an author. In this case, Team Cherry maintains the author-function rather than any of the individuals involved in the actual creating process. The contention does not go away, but rather the problem is redirected to attributing the appropriation of the work to a single institution—even though institutions consist of multiple persons.

The idea that an author can determine a character's identity creates an even bigger friction once the author of a work becomes involved in multiple 'official' discourses, creating different manifestations of the same character in the process. Writer Margaret Atwood, for example, is involved as a consulting producer in the writing of the television series *The Handmaid's Tale* (Miller 2017), based on her novel of the same name (Atwood 1985). The character Aunt Lydia from the television series bears a slightly different identity than Aunt Lydia from the novels. In the sequel to the 1985 novel, *The Testaments* (Atwood 2019), Aunt Lydia is revealed to have been a family court judge prior to the establishment of the country Gilead (former USA), whereas in the series, Aunt Lydia is known to have been a lawyer. Both manifestations are Aunt Lydia, but which manifestation is considered to have a more official, or 'truer' value than the other? The friction is that Atwood's presence as the author grants both manifestations a sense of authenticity, but when the authenticity of a character identity depends on the author-function, and two or more manifestations bear that status, the author-function fails to deliver both discourses in which the character appears a sense of truth and value.

In this venue, the author-function acts as an authority to create specific discourses in which manifestations of the character over a series of works is to be interpreted by the reader to be a single coherent identity. This allows particular manifestations to be differentiated from character manifestations in other discourses to which different authors are assigned. However, issues arise once the authorial intent is considered to be causally related to the identity of the character (Hermione can be both black or white because Rowling says so), when multiple authors are involved in the creation of a single manifestation, or when the author-function grants multiple different identities the same status.

Ownership: Character Merchandising

Ownership is another venue through which authorities differentiate between discourses with

[13] See http://teamcherry.com.au/about/.

different character identities. Foucault assigns ownership originally to the author-function, but this particular feature is outdated in contemporary transmedia practices. The author of the character and the owner of the character are more likely to be two separate entities than the same entity. Evans (2012, 111) for example points out that, aside from the agency of individual production, forces at an institutional level also contribute to the creation of multiple Sherlock Holmes manifestations. The BBC *Sherlock* television series was created by screenwriters Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat who, despite their author-function, do not have the intellectual property (IP) rights over the character manifestations, as these rights belong to the BBC. As the property owner, the BBC funds and broadcasts the series, and simultaneously keeps a specific in-house style to which the character manifestations are subjected; the Sherlock Holmes manifestation within this discourse has to adhere to the BBC's agenda that attempts to maintain its public service purposes whilst competing in a global television market (Evans 2012, 111).

Ownership is important to contemporary transmedia practices, because it provides opportunity to produce and control a character's identity via *character merchandising*. Explaining the term, Steinberg (2012) states: "[n]arrowly defined, character merchandising is the copyright business; it is the business of creating contracts and gaining income through selling or leasing the rights to use a character image" (41). That said, character merchandising is far from a new practice. He traces the business back to the 1950s with Disney's presence being responsible for the legal framework in Japan (41). According to Janet Wasko (2001), Disney considers itself the largest worldwide licenser of character merchandise, but is essentially no different from "other copyright holders of film and television properties". Via veto power, the company tries to control the *characterisation process* of the character manifestations in multiple discourses, which shapes the multiple identities of characters in the process. When the IP holder allows the characterisation process to circulate through the hands of other institutions, the different manifestations emanating from these institutions obtain both distinct features and traits, so that they essentially become different identities, while they simultaneously have to adhere to the ideal of a coherent identity between manifestations.

Character merchandising practices form a site of tension and negotiation where the character's identity is coordinated by multiple parties. According to Derek Johnson (2013), franchises mutated their license-practices "from an intra-industrial franchise with limited cross-platform appeal in the 1980s, to an inter-industrial behemoth that drove excessive conglomerate expansion and corporate reorganization in the 1990s, and finally to a license-supporting partnership between economically and culturally distinct corporate entities" (104). License-supporting partnerships remain a site of continuous negotiation that struggles over territories and unequal power relations (Johnson 2013, 94) which results in the identity of the character between its manifestations in different works being continuously affected by these negotiations.

There are several challenges that arise when the characterisation process is negotiated via the practice of character merchandising. One of them is that character merchandising does not combine well with the strive for narrative continuity in the West. Eco (1979) explains that Superman needs to be easily recognised by an emblematic and fixed nature in order to move between media, but the character is simultaneously subjected to character development typical of the kind of production in which it appears. A character such as Superman finds themselves in a situation in which they are not supposed to consume themselves, since that means they will come closer to their own death and cannot appear in other productions anymore. But, at the same time, the character has to give the impression that it develops as a person (1979, 19). This observation is in

accordance with Brooker's models of continuity. One of the models, the *brand*, describes that IP holders dispose of previous versions of Batman and replace them with newer versions (2012, 154). Each new version provides a new discourse, implying another fixed and stable identity of Batman that develops in a different way than previous versions. Once a particular discourse of the character has been exhausted, developed to the point of no return, IP holders will create a new discourse in which the character operates as a new version.

In the Japanese media mix, IP holders embrace the different images and identities. According to Akinori Nakamura and Susanna Tosca (2019), IP-related products surround the fans so that they can choose whatever product they can or want to consume, while at the same time, the IP holder creates "more touchpoints to newcomers to a ground of products" (4). Having IP rights over specific *kyara*, then, not only allows the IP holder to decide in which discourse the character appears and what kind of identity it holds, but, more importantly, the focus on business and not on narrative continuity provides the IP holder with the ability to expand their products without the problem of the character meeting their own narrative death.

A subsequent challenge is that it becomes hard for consumers to keep track of all the different manifestations and their identities. Johnson (2013, 79) explains that already in the 1970s media entertainment franchises such as Marvel Entertainment and DC Comics noticed with their comic distribution that although continuity between comic issues created a group of potential loyal customers, potential losses on unsold issues revealed that the mass market audience could not keep up with the effort it takes to keep track of what was happening in the comics. According to Johnson (2013, 79), to appeal to the loyal customers who valued continuity, a niche market was created. But what we can tell from critics on continuity between character manifestations is that IP owners constantly negotiate the character's identity between multiple parties, although they also continuously reiterate the character to control continuity.

The third challenge is that IP holders tend to make use of *non-memory* methods to assign more value to a newer identity of a character than an older identity, so that the older identity will be forgotten in cultural memory. According to Colin B. Harvey (2015): "legal frameworks play a crucial role in determining what can and cannot be remembered, and therefore in circumscribing canon, the collectively agreed mythology to which storyworld must ideally adhere" (93). He uses Anna Reading's concept of non-memory methods (Reading 2014, 168; Harvey 2015, 97) to explain non-memory methods in contemporary transmedia practices: "what the IP holder is engaged in, often through licensing agreements with third parties, is an attempt to circumscribe what is and is not canon by excluding certain pre-existing elements but including others" (Harvey 2015, 97). A current example is for instance the newest Spider-Man played by actor Tom Holland. Holland's Spider-Man is part of the so-called Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), a franchise that to date consists of 23 different movies that are all set in the same universe, relying on narrative continuity. Holland is far from the first Spider-Man owned by Marvel Entertainment (now part of The Walt Disney Company). However, previous Spider-Men, such as those played by actors Toby Maguire and Andrew Garfield, are not included in this universe. They are through the technique of exclusion gradually forgotten as *the* Spider-Man. Through techniques such as these, IP holders erase previous character identities so that the newest version, and the character's newest identity, gains the status of the 'true' character—until another one pops up, that is.

Character merchandising essentially creates a paradox on an institutional level: the character becomes dispersed over a variety of media works in the hands of multiple parties involved in the character's characterisation process such that the character ends up in different discourses

owned by different institutions. Even when the character has a specific entity within a specific discourse, the character can only develop so much before they meet their own end, and the IP owner must—if they want to continue using the character for profits—ultimately renew the character in another discourse. To keep the newest version of the identity of a character alive, the IP owner tends to turn to non-memory practices to have the previous character be forgotten in cultural memory. When the IP holder tries to keep the identities of characters that they find most relevant alive for as long as possible, this inevitably results in multiple manifestations in which a character has different identities depending on the discourse, and in which the identities of the characters are nothing more than commodities to pass around in order to obtain profit.

The Concept of Canon: Canonisation

The third venue is canonisation: the process of creating a canon. The strive for narrative continuity between character manifestations leads almost inevitably to a discussion of canon that, as Brooker (2012) discusses, determines which events 'actually' happened, and therefore what a character's identity 'actually' is within the complexity of discourses in which the character appears. Canon formation about a character's identity is ultimately a struggle of control over the character's characterisation process between two or more parties. Both Brooker (2012) and Harvey (2015) describe canon as a set of works carefully constructed by means of including and excluding specific works so that a character appears with a stable identity. However, the formation of who determines the official identity of an 'official' or 'actual' identity of a character in the character ecology of contemporary transmedia practices and how that is determined is vague, and should therefore be held up to scrutiny.

In order to understand how a character's identity is formed through canonisation, it is important to understand what a canon is, and what the mechanisms behind canon formation are in contemporary transmedia practices. Addressing the debate of canon in the age of digital media, Hans-Joachim Backe (2015) presents three major topics relevant to the issue that the concept of canon poses to characters in a transmedia ecology: the historical development of the concept of (literary) canon within Anglophone and Germanophone contexts, the mechanisms of canon formation, and the challenge digital media pose to the concept of canon.

Backe (2015 4) explains that it would be misleading to discuss the concept of canon as a monolithic phenomenon—as in Harvey and Brooker's discussion—because the term has a plethora of meanings ascribed to it that stretch over many branches of knowledge. According to Backe, canon has had historically a shift in usages, the most influential of which being when it became used to refer a set of sacred texts for particular religious groups where the "additional meaning of the term reflected back on its general usage, which came to be associated with unquestionable authority and the totality of knowledge on a subject, outside which only heresy remains" (2015, 6). From this point on, canon emerges as a monolithic and static phenomenon that authoritatively determines the interpretation of a selected set of works as 'official'.

Instead of scrutinising the problematic authoritative aspect of a canon, the German approach in academia to canon focuses on understanding the mechanisms of canon formation as a "complex, interdependent system of the production, distribution, reception, and evaluation of literary texts" (2015, 10). Backe utilises the *invisible hand* concept applied by Simone Winko (2002) to describe the uncoordinated actions within intentional collaborations that construct a canon (Backe 2015, 11). The process of the construction can be distinguished between two kinds of actions, micro-actions and macro-actions, which cooperatively form a canon. The former are actions by

individuals and the value judgments they place on a text, ranging from "an author's choice of literary allusions" to "a professor's selection of works for a course syllabus" (Backe 2015, 11.). The latter refer to so-called groups of 'agents' of the canon: institutions that carefully curate and preserve the canon so that the works within this canon obtain value as masterpieces (11).

The existence of groups all trying to create a monolithic canon causes multiple canons to appear at the same time (Winko 2002; Backe 2015). Despite the fact that Sherlock is a character who belongs to the public domain, when the character is used by groups creating their own manifestation of the character, the characterisation process of that character becomes intellectual property carefully curated and maintained by these groups. Yet, despite the fact that the character is the focus of the canon, what in turn also happens is that these groups create their own group-identity:

> As canon always reflects the choices by its group and so reinforces the group identity, each group tries to establish its canon as a normative, singular canon for the whole system to assert its own role in the system. (Backe 2015, 12)

These groups establish their own identity along with that of the character; the character becomes a distinctive label to represent these groups, allowing them to become significant within the character ecology. The character that represents them also has to conform to the brand these groups wish to express. An example would be Disney. Given Disney's appeal to young audiences, the company will likely not produce any overly violent or pornographic character, since that does not conform to the identity the company wants to present, which, in turn, shapes certain expectations about character manifestations produced by this company. For example, only recently (at the time of writing), Disney's *Donald Duck* magazine in The Netherlands drew an LGBTQ+[14] couple in one of its comics after a request by a ten-year old girl in the national news program for children, *Het Jeugdjournaal*. The couple only functioned as background characters, but it was nonetheless surprising enough that it became a topic of news in the national newspapers (Benjamin 2019).

The concept of the invisible hand is present in all layers of an institution, in which multiple groups attempt to pluck away at a canon that the institution proclaims as a normative one, so that multiple discourses, each with their own canon and own 'official' version of a character, can exist. BBC's Sherlock was not the first Sherlock BBC created. The BBC had already released the television series *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Cox 1984) that ran from 1984 until 1994 with actor Jeremy Brett, portraying a Sherlock Holmes in his mid-fifties set in Victorian Britain like Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. Neither one of these discourses is more official than the other, rather they exist separately with each being a canonical discourse on its own next to the other.

The final point Backe (2015) makes is the problem of electronic media challenging canonisation. As Backe notes, the invisible hand is applicable to digital texts too, and he identifies three key aspects in which digital media challenge the process of canonisation:

> First, dynamic networks texts can produce countless paratexts and text versions, which makes it difficult to select a single, authoritative instance of a text for canonization. Second, digital art is, to an even greater degree than twentieth century mass media, open to the influence of and reconfiguration of recipients. Third, many digital artifacts have to be completed through interaction. (2015, 20)

[14] LGBTQ+ stands for: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and more.

Backe (2015) explains in detail that the concept of canon suffers from many flaws. Canon is far from being a static phenomenon, but rather is constantly in flux, and has always been in flux even 'only' inside forms of traditional literature. As both Backe (2015) and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2019) also suggest, digital media, such as games, pose another challenge to canonisation: they produce countless works, are constantly being re-written by recipients so that the distinction between author and reader becomes even thinner, and are 'read' by non-trivially traversing through it. In other words, 'canonisation' is much more suitable to the concept of canon than the term 'canon'.

That does not mean that owners, authors or producers of these digital works do not attempt to create a canon. A concept popular within the building of (transmedial) worlds is the idea of a 'Bible' used to preserve narrative consistency (Wolf 2012, 201). Nieves Rosendo (2015, 60) notes that in the case of major franchises such as *Star Wars* and *Halo*, producers endorse a set of works to represent the official world of those franchises, and everything outside of their authority is dismissed as unofficial. The concept of the Bible retrieves the exact meaning as canon had previously: a set of sacred texts "associated with unquestionable authority and the totality of knowledge on a subject, outside which only heresy remains" (Backe 2015, 6). Yet, Harvey (2015, 114) also shows the irony of the Bible, using the *Halo* franchise as an example: the producers constantly attempt to fix the mythology and its canon, even when the story world has already been established, thereby including and excluding different works. Their attempt to create a fixed canon reflects what a canon actually is: canonisation, a process constantly in flux.

The identity of the character is subject to canonisation. A character's identity is in a constant flux, never really determined, never finished as multiple groups and individuals negotiate, debate and enforce a character's identity repeatedly. Eco (1979, 116) argues that a canon implies that the character belongs to the continuous present. A canon promises the development of characters in a linear way over the course of a series of works, but, at the same time, any development leads to the end of the character. That creates the paradox that if the character ends, it should not be able to continue existing in other works, and, if it does, it dissolves any sense of narrative continuity. The character can therefore never fully develop, because it cannot reach its death. It will just iterate anew in a new identity brought forward as the new normative, ready to develop again. The character's characterisation process is therefore not a process that will likely reach an end, but exists constantly on a site of negotiation.

Just like the other two venues, the concept of the canon is flawed. A canon allows invisible hands to operate in a field of hierarchy in which they place value judgment on certain manifestations of a character. They attempt to police the reader to interpret certain manifestations as the only truthful manifestations of that character while other manifestations are set aside as a heresy. Canon provides a promise to reduce the complexity of a character's identity to a single coherent existence, but as it is influenced by many invisible hands containing their own agenda, providing their own version of the character's identity, the canon creates what it promises to avoid: an identity that cannot be brought to a core.

2. A Textual Organisation

Up until now, I have shown three venues through which a character's identity is policed, controlled and negotiated in a constant process. In order to understand the characterisation process of a character over multiple works, I propose in this part of the chapter a constellation that maps the textual organisation of the discourses controlled by the invisible hands trying to create and maintain

the identity of the character as a static singular being. To do so, I propose three schematics: Sherlock, Link, and Pikachu. Each character shows a different constellation, allowing to me to demonstrate how the three different venues of control operate per character.

I am far from the first one who has attempted to show a map of the textual organisation of related works. For example, as discussed in this chapter, Ryan's (2013) model of transfictionality shows four different forms in which story worlds tend to grow. Another work that concentrates on the distribution of intellectual property and canonisation inside the ecology of contemporary transmedia practices is by Eder (2015). For his textual organizations, he proposes four strategies in which transmedial multitexts (constellations of works) are produced and distributed: multiple exploitation, supplementation, integration and participation (2015, 75).

The model that I propose is meant to incorporate both the semiotic references between works as well as the control that invisible hands employ to determine the character's identity in the character ecology. The advantage of this model lies in its adaptability to each character's individual situation that allows for a deeper understanding of the control over the relation between the distribution of works in which the character appears and the identity of the character. In other words, the model that I propose places the struggle for control over the characterisation process at its centre.

With three different character examples, known from the previous chapter (Sherlock Holmes, Pikachu and Link) I will show the textual organisation of how the identity of these characters are controlled. Each character's constellation has a different structure, but every constellation consists of three layers organised according to the value placed on the works to determine the characterisation process. These elements are: an urtext, discourses and the character ecology.

My reason for choosing one character from the West (Sherlock Holmes), and two from Japan, both from the same company (Link and Pikachu) is as follows: although Japanese media mix strategies do not usually strive for narrative continuity, that does not mean that such an occurrence does not happen. Nintendo's attempt to give the manifestations of Link narrative continuity via their official book on *The Legend of Zelda* series, *Hyrule Historia* (Miyamoto, *et al.* 2013), demonstrates that although the character is originally from Japan, it does not only have to operate according to a Japanese strategy for proliferation. As I make clear in the rest of the chapter, while Sherlock Holmes' constellation operates on the strive for continuity and Pikachu's constellation focuses on proliferation, Link's constellation posits itself somewhere in-between the two other constellations. This provides an opportunity to demonstrate in which different shapes a character constellation can potentially appear.

The Urtext and the Prototype

The reason to identify an urtext in a character's constellation is two-fold. First, an urtext is constantly negotiated anyway in the search for the character's 'actual' identity. Via the author-function, the character's 'origin' or its prototype are determined. Second, identifying an urtext highlights the struggles of the constant negotiation over the character's identity, as it points out the fallacies of fidelity to the prototype, and which forces support this fallacy. An urtext allows for scrutiny of which works that derive from the urtext use what patterns from the urtext in an attempt to adhere to and diverge from it.

In general, the German prefix '*ur-*' refers to what is *original* or *primordial*, or in some extreme cases it even stands for *purity* (see Boyer 1992a; 1992b). In contemporary transmedia practices, the urtext is used to create coherence between works. Harvey (2014; 2015) uses the concept in the

specific case of transmedia storytelling to address its basic assumption of consistency of the story world across all platforms. The urtext in his use then is associated with an authenticity that has an implicit value judgment that places a work that is considered the urtext above all other works. I use the term *urtext* to address the work in which the first manifestation of the character, the *prototype*, appears.

The idea that a character has to adhere to its prototype is an invalid way of reasoning, a fallacy, because it places high value on fidelity to an 'original' along with narrative continuity in the situation of contemporary transmedia practices that cannot maintain neither promise. As discussed, who and what determines the traits of the characters that follow from the prototype is difficult to determine due to the constant negotiation between many invisible hands (Backe 2015). The author-function cannot be used to determine a character's origin, and character ownership creates a paradox as well. Furthermore, the reader themselves can also interpret the character as a different entity than any of these venues ever intended.

The urtext is not a necessary work for the reader to make sense of a character. Uricchio and Pearson (1991, 185) argue that "Batman has no primary urtext set in a specific period, but has rather existed in a plethora of equally valid texts". Brooker (2012, 152) too argues that Batman will survive as a cultural icon even if publisher DC Comics closes down and Warner Bros. stops making superhero films, because Batman is sufficiently embedded in popular culture that the character does not need the comics and films to exist as a cultural reference (2012, 152). Batman can survive because his embedding in popular cultural memory is sufficient enough for him to reconstructed in new versions. Sherlock Holmes has the same status. Eco (1995) points out that Sherlock Holmes' constant iteration grants him a form of citizenship. In the character ecology, the character becomes emancipated from its original work so that the work is not a prerequisite to be able to connect a particular manifestation to the immaterial character, specifically to the character prototype manifestation. One can read a work in which Sherlock appears just fine without ever having read the works of Doyle, but what the urtext shows is that the value as the genesis is attributed to Doyle's work in which the prototype of Sherlock Holmes first manifests.

Sherlock Holmes

The author-function is the primary venue in determining the urtext of Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock Holmes appeared for the first time in a short work titled *A Study in Scarlet* (Doyle [1887] 1888) published in the magazine *Beeton's Christmas Annual*. That work then becomes the urtext in which the prototype of Sherlock Holmes first appears. Doyle expanded the urtext with more works that became part of the urtext, because the author-function assigned the status of 'truthful' to these expanding works. By extending his own oeuvre with expanding works that follow narrative continuity, Doyle acts as the preserver of the identity between the individual character manifestations of Sherlock Holmes in those works. The relation between the works within the urtext are shaped according to Ryan's model of expansion by the same author (figure 4).

Although the urtext does not determine the identity of the character, assigning all these works to a single author gives the works a sense of filiation and homogeneity to an almost romantic ideal. Here hides the fallacy of fidelity to the prototype, because the impression of filiation and homogeneity demands that other manifestations of the character remain loyal to the prototype in the urtext. For example, since the prototype of Sherlock is originally a Caucasian man in 19th century England, many manifestations follow those traits, but the Japanese *Miss Sherlock* (2018) series shows that the character can also be depicted as a Japanese woman living in contemporary Japan.

The latter can then easily be dismissed as not a truthful or 'real' Sherlock, because she does not adhere to the prototype.

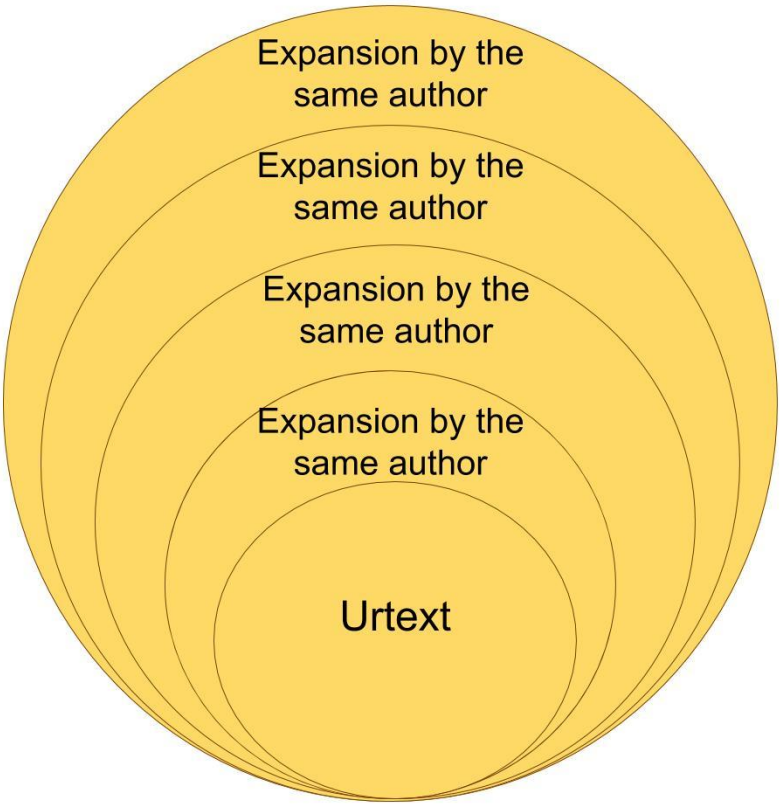

Figure 4: A schematic overview of Sherlock Holmes' urtext written by Doyle, according to Ryan's (2013) model of expansion.

Link

Link's prototype can be traced to a single work: *The Legend of Zelda* released by Nintendo in 1986 in which players controlled a pixelated figure called Link whose goal was to save Princess Zelda from the evil Ganon (figure 8). Shigeru Miyamoto is credited as the author (producer) of the game, and has been involved in almost all of the *Legend of Zelda* games released after the first game instalment (see Miyamoto, *et al.* 2013). Players navigated an overworld that contained eight dungeons, with Link as their player-character. Once they had completed these dungeons, they were allowed access to the final dungeon where Link had to face the evil villain Ganon to rescue Princess Zelda.

The author-function is less relevant to Link than the company of which the character is intellectual property. Nintendo seems to be more concerned with the idea to disperse its characters as much as possible over as many works as possible—as media mix strategies do— rather than being engaged with an urtext to which the characters have to remain loyal. Link's status as intellectual property gives the company the complete control over textual organisation of their characters so that the company, with every manifestation of Link, creates, as Nakamura and Tosca state: "touchground for newcomers to a ground of products" (4). The prototype of Link in *The Legend of Zelda* is not so much the manifestation to which other manifestations have to adhere as the prototype and does not have the romantic ideal of being the authentic character ascribed to it. Rather, it is the first manifestation from which a set of *topoi* derive and appear in the other game

works of the *LoZ* series, although not necessarily so. I will explain this in more detail in the section about discourses.

Pikachu

Pikachu does not have a clear urtext. Game designer Satoshi Tajiri is credited with the first game releases in which Pikachu appears (Kohler 2016), but there exist at least two games in which Pikachu makes its first appearance: *Pokémon Red* and *Pokémon Green* (GameFreak 1996). These games are just two versions of the same game, with only minor differences in which creatures are available in which game. Pikachu's urtext becomes even more complicated when taking into consideration a third version of the same game, *Pokémon Blue* (GameFreak 1996), an improved version of *Red* and *Green.* This game was not only released later in Japan, it was also the version that was introduced in the West together with *Red*. These games only made their appearance in the West after the anime in which another version of Pikachu was introduced, whereas in Japan the games were first released and then later the animation (Kohler 2016). Among the same generation of games, a fourth version was introduced: *Pokémon Yellow* (GameFreak 1998). Created after the *anime* was first broadcasted, it allowed players to have a Pikachu as their starting Pokémon whose happiness players could track and influence.

This cluster of works can be considered Pikachu's urtext and involve the previously mentioned four games—also known as 'Generation I' in the Pokémon franchise (figure 5). Each new generation of games introduces a new layer to the *urtext* (as of November 2019, there are eight generations). These games do not expand the game's diegesis via narrative continuity, but use the formula set in the first generation, re-use familiar game mechanics –such as catching Pokémon with a Pokeball-, and use old and introduce new Pokémon creatures with every new generation. This turns the urtext in a growing and expanding triangle in which each generation is separate, but also grows the game series.

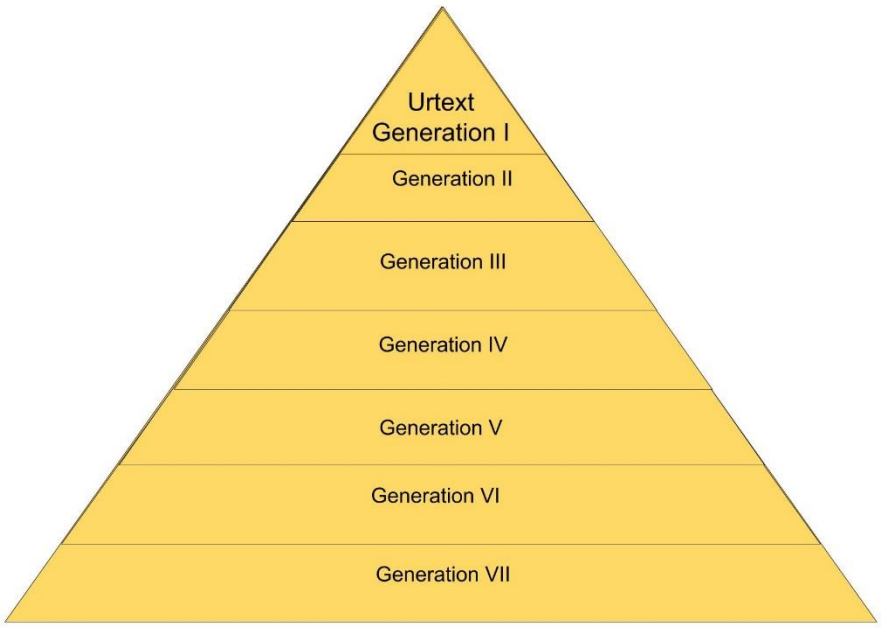

Figure 5: A schematic overview of Pikachu's urtext controlled by Nintendo.

Within this cluster, Pikachu is part of a Pokémon species called 'Pikachu', instead of an individual character. The player can become emotionally attached to the Pikachu entity they caught in the diegesis of the game, and perceive the Pikachu they own in the game as an individual being, but the game initially does not specifically set one Pikachu apart from the other. The games *Pokémon Red*, *Pokémon Green* and *Pokémon Blue* require the player to turn a Pikachu entity from a species into an individual. They can, for example, change the name of the creatures that they own. The default name for a caught Pikachu is just 'Pikachu', but if players change it to, let's say, 'Jerry', the indicator refers to that Pikachu specifically—as an individual—instead of it referring to the whole species. Training the Pikachu also sets it apart from other Pikachu entities, so that its power level is higher than other Pikachu entities. It is only in *Pokémon Yellow*, based on the anime in which Ash's Pikachu is presented as an individual character, that the game refers to a Pikachu individual specifically instead of a species.

Discourses

As explained in this chapter, the three venues of control create different discourses that present their manifestation of the character as the normative character. As I will demonstrate in this section, the relation between these discourses vary per character, since the venues of control are in a constant negotiation and flux.

A short note on the constellation of discourses: it is not my intention to create the illusion of an exhaustive list for each character manifestation or work in which the character appears. I have selected certain examples, based on the pragmatic reason that an exhaustive list will only clutter the constellation and diminish the clarification it means to provide.

Sherlock

Sherlock has spawned a wide variety of manifestations inspired by the prototype created by Doyle. Sherlock's manifestations appear outside of Doyle's novels and short stories as early as 1908 with the Danish film *Sherlock Holmes i Livsfare* [Sherlock Holmes in Danger] (1908) by director Viggo Larsen. These works appear as a different set of discourses where the manifestations of Sherlock Holmes are sequentially connected to each other within that discourse. Each of these series is the property of one or multiple different IP holders. The film *Sherlock Holmes* (Ritchi 2009) is owned by Warner Bros. Studios, the CBS Television Distribution has the right to broadcast the television series *Elementary* (Doherty 2012), the television series *Miss Sherlock* (2018) is owned by the Japanese Nippon Television Network Corporation, and BBC's *Sherlock* is owned by the British network BBC. For this segment about the canons in which Sherlock manifests, I pay special attention to the latter, the BBC's *Sherlock*, a widely popular British television series produced by the BBC, as an example to show that manifestations of Sherlock Holmes, despite being manifestations diverging from the prototype, tend to create their own canon to which they adhere.

Sherlock Holmes' textual organisation of discourses can be shaped in a flower pattern—but one with loose pedals placed over the urtext (figure 6). New manifestations always use *topoi* that move from one discourse to another, some of which they share with other discourses, some of which they do not. Most *topoi* derive from the urtext.

Adaptations especially share familiar elements with the urtext, but also change the character in a certain way, because adaptations work on the premise that they are "creative and recognizable transpositions of other work, or works, adaptation is a kind of palimpsest, and, at the same time, often a transcoding into a different set of conventions" (Hutcheon 2006, 33).

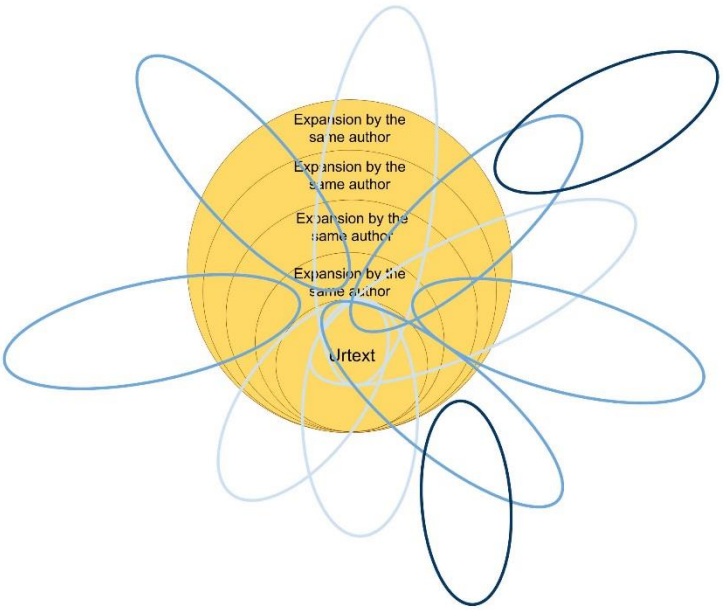

Figure 6: A schematic overview of Sherlock Holmes' discourses controlled by various different IP owners.

Another discourse is the BBC *Sherlock* series, an adaptation that only partially assumes the formula defined by the prototype in the urtext (figure 7). The BBC's Sherlock Holmes is introduced for the first time in the episode called *A Study in Pink*, a play on the name of the novel *A Study in Scarlet* in which Doyle introduced the character for the very first time. In BBC's *Sherlock*, Sherlock Holmes, played by actor Benedict Cumberbatch, is shown to be, as an analogue to the prototype, an eccentric consulting detective often used by New Scotland Yard when they are unable to solve a (murder) mystery. Actor Martin Freeman assumes the role of John Watson, a doctor recently returned from military service in Afghanistan—an intertextual reference to Dr. Watson's prototype who served in the Anglo-Afghan war. Watson becomes Sherlock's flatmate on 221B Baker Street after the first episode, and dedicates a blog to Sherlock's adventures, which we can interpret as an homage to the urtext in which Watson assumes the role of the first-person narrator and is suggested to be the writer of the novels about Sherlock Holmes.

Until now, the series spawned four seasons, each consisting of three episodes of about an hour and a half long. While some episodes are loose adaptations of parts from the urtext such as the episode *The Hounds of Baskerville* of season 2 (2012) based on the third novel *The Hound of Baskervilles* (Doyle 1902), other episodes only refer to the urtext in their titles (e.g., season 3, episode 2 *The Sign of Three* (2014) refers to the novel *The Sign of Four* (Doyle 1890)). The series creates its own thread of events that follow each other's sequences, while referencing the urtext via *topoi* such as the apartment in which Sherlock lives, the characters and the similar roles they play.

Topoi and other intertextual references provide pleasure to the reader with sufficient knowledge of the urtext or other texts in which different manifestations of the characters appear, but the series also follows its own logics within the carefully created course of events even when these diverge from the urtext. For example, as a Christmas special, the BBC released the mini-episode, *Many Happy Returns* (2013), in between season 2 and season 3. The episode tells about the character Philip Anderson, a forensic scientist from New Scotland Yard already introduced in the

first episode of the first season, who does not believe Sherlock Holmes is actually dead, and goes through great lengths in the seven-minute episode to explain his theories as to why Sherlock is not dead. The character does not exist in the urtext, but it does fit logically inside the discourse that the series established.

Even within the single discourse of BBC's *Sherlock*, narrative continuity is precarious. As a New Year's special, the BBC released the episode *The Abominable Bride* on January 2016 in between the end of season 3 and before the start of season 4. The episode is set in the Victorian era, the same setting as the urtext in which the prototypes appear. Initially, this episode appears to be an episode separate from the rest of the series' episodes with the actors Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman portraying a different identity of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson than the rest of the series. Besides a few intertextual references to the urtext, the episode does not seem to be based on any work within the urtext. However, the BBC attempted to 'fix' the double identity of the characters within the discourse by revealing at the end of the episode that Sherlock Holmes had been under influence of drugs to discover how Moriarty could have been capable of faking his own death. This *method of fidelity* allows the episode to give the impression that it remains faithful to the discourse's narrative continuity, while also allowing the producers to break away from the promise of narrative continuity (figure 7).

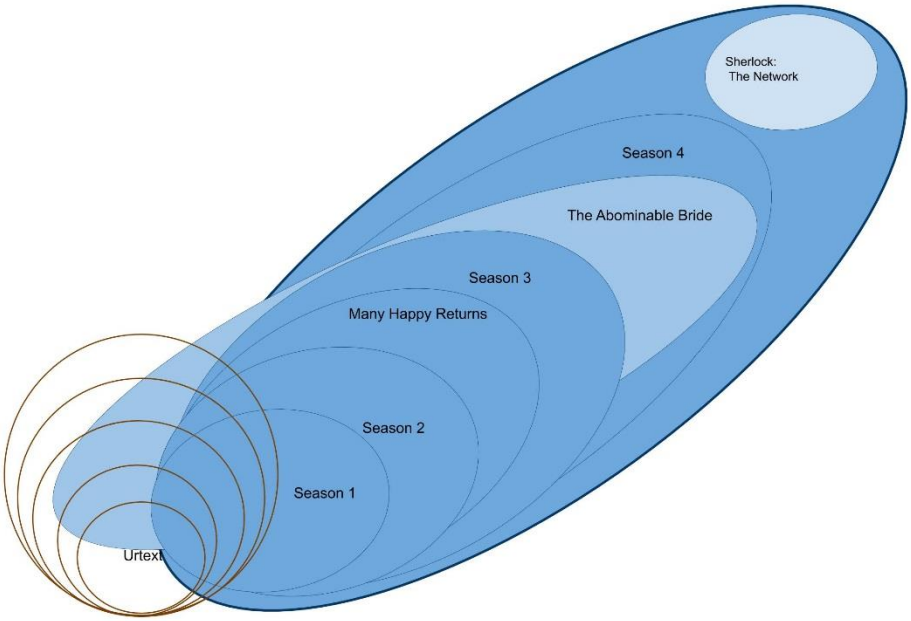

Figure 7: A schematic overview of the Sherlock Holmes' television series (2010 - 2017) discourse controlled by BBC in relation to the urtext.

This kind of constellation with loose petals (figure 6) is most likely due to Sherlock's status as belonging to the public domain, because the multiple discourses are created by multiple authors and owned by a variety of institutions. Since it is the manifestations within a particular discourse that these institutions own, I argue that narrative continuity provides an important impression of coherence so that the character can function as intellectual property to be sold or to be leased to

other parties for gaining income.

Link

Nintendo attempts to control the Link's identity via a constellation in the shape of a chronology (figure 8). The chronology includes only those work that Nintendo considers to belong to the *Legend of Zelda* series that at the moment of writing consists of nineteen games, with a twentieth instalment planned for 2020 (*The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild 2* (Nintendo 2020)).

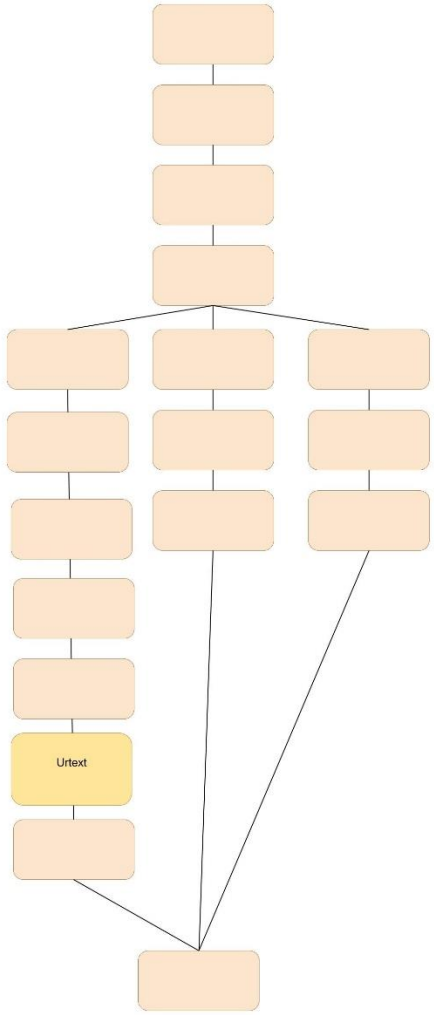

Figure 8: A schematic overview of Link's discourse in the Legend of Zelda series as controlled by Nintendo based on the chronology from Hyrule Historia (2013 [2011]).

Before the 25th anniversary of the *Legend of Zelda* series in 2011, most games within this series lacked any sequential connection to each other. Nintendo relied on a formula and *topoi* that they established over the course of the series before they imposed the chronology on the series to create a sense of narrative continuity between each game work. The formula of the series goes as follows: Link functions as the player-character who has to save the world, usually by rescuing the games' other main character Princess Zelda from the games' antagonist Ganon (also known as Ganondorf). Topoi in most of the games within the series is that the characters are associated with the Triforce,

an artefact consisting of three distinct entities of power. This is considered the most important divine artefact of the game that, and has become the emblem to represent not only the *LoZ* series, but any game in which Link manifests.

At some point, Nintendo created a paradox between the series' game works, and with that the coherence of the Link manifestations. Usually, Link in each instalment was not portrayed to be a character with the same identity between each game work, but the game instalments became inconsistent with Link manifestations. As *Hyrule Historia* (Miyamoto, *et al.* 2013, 41) suggests, in some games the relation between Link manifestations is that of being the 'incarnation' of the hero, in other games, Nintendo implies a constant singular identity between the Link manifestations. The latter can be found in, for example, *LoZ: Oracle of Ages* (Capcom 2001), and *Oracle of Seasons* (Capcom 2001), which use passwords given once players have finished each game. The password allows players to connect the games that turns the narrative into a linear story so that Link's identity becomes singular.

Nintendo provided some clarity surrounding the confusion of continuity between the works when they released *Hyrule Historia*, a compendium that introduces a chronology between the games released up to 2011. In this chronology, Nintendo implicitly states the amount of control they have over the Link's constellation and identity:

> This chronology merely collects information that is believed to be true at this time, and there are many obscured and unanswered secrets that still lie within the tale. As the stories and storytellers of Hyrule change, so, too, does its history. Hyrule's history is a continuously woven tapestry of events. Changes that seem inconsequential, disregarded without even a shrug could evolve at some point to hatch new legends and, perhaps, change this tapestry of history itself. (Miyamoto, *et al.* 2013, 68)

The chronology introduced by Nintendo splits into three different timelines after the events of *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo 1998), based on whether or not Link would have defeated the evil Ganon. The chronology allows Nintendo to avoid having to adhere to a single linear form of narrative continuity, but can instead choose from *branches*, three different lines of linear continuity, but linear nonetheless.

This form of narrative continuity is however incredibly unstable. The newest instalment, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (*BotW)* (2017), was introduced after the chronology. In the Japanese video game magazine Famitsu (2018),[15] the series' producer Eiji Aonuma and the game's director Hidemaro Fujibayashi responded that *BotW* takes place at the end of the chronology created by *Hyrule Historia.* The catch however was that they did not specify which of the three timelines. Instead, they mentioned that it is up to the player's imagination to decide where the game takes place. It seems that only when the authorities are stuck, because of the paradoxes they inflicted on themselves, do these authorities release the reins and 'grant' the player the agency to interpret Link's manifestations however the player wants.

Pikachu

The urtext in which the prototype of a character appears gives the impression that the character's prototype is established without the interference of any other work(s) that do not belong to the urtext, as if the urtext were an entirely separate work with an almost holy dimension to it, like the

[15] The translation can be found at the website Siliconera (see Wong 2018).

Bible. In practice, especially in transmedia strategies where character proliferation is the norm, the idea that there is a character prototype without the influence of other works outside of the urtext becomes problematic. Take the *anime*-inspired *Pokémon Yellow* (1998), for example. Although it can be argued that season 1 of the *anime* is part of Pikachu's urtext, I have three reasons why I do not include the *anime* in the character's urtext. First, the *anime* was created after the first two games. Second, the *anime* is a different media platform and does not merge well with the games (I explain the challenges of games in contemporary transmedia practices in more detail in chapters six and eight). Third, the diegesis of the games is not presented as the same diegesis as the *anime*.

The Pokémon *anime* series is perhaps, after the core game series, the most important discourse in which a manifestation of Pikachu appears—the series is still running at the moment of writing, and consists of over 1,000 individual episodes. The animation series has two primary protagonists: Ash Ketchum,[16] and his Pokémon, Pikachu. The series follows the adventures of both Ash and Pikachu in which the identities of Ash and Pikachu are continuous between the episodes and seasons. The indicator 'Pikachu' in this particular case of this manifestation refers to both Pikachu as a Pokémon species, but also refers to this individual. In order to distinguish the character however from the rest of its species, the series tend to identify the character by relating it to Ash, usually in the form of 'Ash's Pikachu'.

The animation series follows the core games series closely, but it should not be considered an adaptation. Rather, each new game generation functions as the inspiration for a new season of the *anime*. The *anime* series uses *topoi* introduced in a new generation of game series—such as new Pokémon creatures or new characters—but does not expand the game series at all. The *anime* series expands as a discourse on its own with narrative continuity to create coherence between the different seasons, whereas, whenever a new generation of game works is release, they tend not to expand on the previous game generation via narrative continuity, but use the same formula, similar game mechanics, and Pokémon creatures from previous games to give the impression of a growing series. Pikachu is always present as a creature to catch in all these game instalments, but circulates rather as a *kyara* than as an individual (with few exceptions). Pikachu's constellation can therefore be easiest pictured with the *anime* series in the form of Ryan's (2013) expansion by a single author model placed over the urtext triangle (figure 9).

The *anime* and game series are far from the only discourses that Nintendo maintains. Pikachu appears in a variety of discourses, sometimes as a manifestation in a single work without sequential relation to other works, and sometimes as a manifestation in a series of works that are only related because they use the same formula over and over again, like the *Super Smash Bros.* game series. All these works add another layer to the constellation of Pikachu to the extent that it becomes difficult to discern how exactly these different works are related. It is at that moment that it becomes important to speak of the character ecology, the network in which all manifestations of the character are gathered.

[16] Ash is also known as Satoshi in Japan as a reference to the game series' author Satoshi Tajiri.

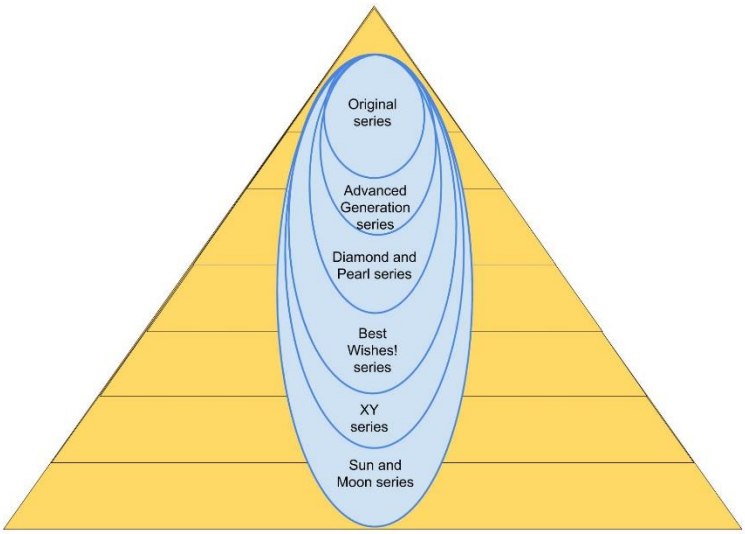

Figure 9: A schematic overview of the relation between Pikachu from the animation discourse and the urtext.

The Character Ecology

In chapter three, 'On Method', I introduced the character ecology as an environment in which characters are always in relation to each other and to different versions of each other. This ecology is in constant flux as every new manifestation shifts the constellation of character manifestations. I base the character ecology on Barthes' (1977) understanding of the *text*, in which works derive from multiple cultures and are constantly in dialogue with each other, and are constantly negotiating.

Despite the fact that I base my understanding of the character ecology on Barthes' idea of the text, the character ecology is tangible whereas Barthes' text is not. His concept of the text resembles my concept of the immaterial character. The difference between the character ecology and the immaterial character is that the former refers to the accumulation of the local representational material through which the character manifests, the works in which it appears, and its manifestations. Technically, all manifestations can be found and mapped in specific constellations, in similar figures as I did in the previous sections. The reader can encounter the character manifestation in the work, see it, read it and/or even hear it. Together they make up the character ecology. Contrasting the character ecology, the immaterial character is abstract. As Steinberg (2012) describes the character as an abstract device capable of communicating between different media, he states that "the character cannot be reduced to any one of its incarnations but must be thought of both in its material forms and in the way it exceeds them. It is this surplus that permits different media and material instances to communicate" (84). The immaterial character refers to that surplus, and can vary per reader on how they perceive the immaterial character depending on their repertoire of knowledge about the character. Both the immaterial character and the character ecology inform each other, and the distinction that I make between them only exists on a theoretical level.

The character ecology resembles the idea of the 'myth' that scholars tend to use. For example, Brooker, using Reynold's concept of the meta-text, considers the myth the summation of all the manifestations of the character, including the gaps left unspecified (2012, 152). He uses the myth as one of his three frameworks to describe Batman's continuity, and considers the myth to belong to everyone, "to the public, to popular cultural memory, to a modern folk culture" (152). For

Eco (1979, 117), the myth is where readers lose their need to reason for the basis of a stable identity and instead give themselves over to the "uncontrollable flux of the stories" that are accessible to the reader who at the same time attempts to hold on "the illusion of a continuous present". Eco's myth frees the character of its constraints to be a fixed identity, yet giving the impression it has a fixed identity in the tangible works that wrap the character in representational material. Eco's myth explains the paradox of the character ecology, in which so many different identities of the character exist that, despite the impression the character ecology attempts to provide, the character is actually in a constant flux of manifestations where there exists no stable identity of that character.

To explain the flux of the character ecology, I will refrain from showing an exhaustive list of works in which the three examples—Pikachu, Link and Sherlock—appear, and rather focus on a few outstanding aspects for each character that demonstrate the struggle of control authorities perform in their attempt to show a certain identity of the character as normative. I discuss Sherlock Holmes' text relatively briefly, reflecting on the character's historical development and status within the public domain. In the case of Link, I will provide a bit more information about Nintendo's attempt to control the discourses inside the character ecology by focusing on a few works that they like to exclude. And finally, for Pikachu's case I will focus a bit more on Pikachu as a *kyara*.

Sherlock

Sherlock's position in the public domain transforms the character ecology in which the character exists as one dominated by a variety of discourses. As I explain in the previous section about Sherlock, the IP holders who own the discourse also own the characters within that discourse, as if the character were a singular static entity. They can sell or lease the rights of the character within this discourse to other parties and, by doing so, hold the capacity to change that character's characterisation process according to their own wants and needs. However, at the same time, there exists no specific control over Sherlock's identity by a single institution within the character ecology, which means that the discourses within Sherlock's character ecology gather mostly around the urtext. The manifestations that appear in these discourses are then judged according to their similarities and differences with the prototype.

Sherlock's identity seemed originally relatively simple, fixed by the author-function as it was, but became transmedial only when invisible hands started adapting the character to other media, or into different stories. Sherlock Holmes has been around for over 100 years—long enough for him to become an archetype, but not long enough for the author-function to have been forgotten— as is the case with old fairy tales and/or myths for which the authors are mostly unknown, or reclaimed as a transposition by specific authors such as the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Andersen. The author of Sherlock Holmes' prototype is still widely known in cultural memory, but rather than to claim that the character only has one author, the character of Sherlock Holmes as it resides in the character ecology contains many different authors each shaping and influencing past and future manifestations of the character.

Link

Nintendo seems to have a preference for controlling exactly how different manifestations of Link are related, and has made several attempts at restructuring the textual organisation when it suited the company better, to the extent that the company has made several attempts to exclude certain manifestations in the character ecology via *non-memory* methods (see Reading 2014, 168; Harvey 2015, 97).

Outside of the core game series, Link appears in games such as the *Super Smash Bros.* series—*Super Smash Bros.* (HAL Laboratory 1999), *Super Smash Bros. Melee* (HAL Laboratory 2001), *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* (Sora Ltd. and Game Arts 2007), *Super Smash Bros. 3DS/WiiU* (Bandai Namco Studios and Sora Ltd. 2014), *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (Bandai Namco Studios and Sora Ltd. 2018)—and *Mario Kart 8* (Nintendo 2014). These games were all published by Nintendo. Occasionally, Nintendo allows Link to appear in games by third-party developers with whom they had a license agreement, such as Bandai Namco's *SoulCalibur II* (Project Soul 2003) (but only on the version for the Nintendo GameCube), and Omega Force and Team Ninja's *Hyrule Warriors* (Omega Force and Team Ninja 2014).

Nintendo is quite clear on when it officially approves of a Link manifestation. Official works show Nintendo's copyright marks and/or Nintendo allows games they approve of to be played on their own console, as is the case with the GameCube version of *SoulCalibur II*, and *Hyrule Warriors*, which is only available for the Nintendo Wii U and Nintendo 3DS consoles. Nintendo likely wants the manifestations of Link in these works to be in the character ecology.

However, despite the license agreements of that time, Nintendo seems to be keen to ignore the following works: *Link: The Faces of Evil* (Animation Magic 1993), *Zelda: The Wand of Gamelon* (Animation Magic 1993) and *Zelda's Adventure* (Viridis Corporation 1994). These three *Legend of Zelda* games developed for the company Koninklijke Philips N.V. (Philips)'s console, Compact Disk Interactive (CD-i), came to be via an exclusive deal between Philips and Nintendo. Chris Kohler (2018) explains that Nintendo struck a partnership with the Sony Corporation in 1988. The engineer Ken Kutaragi would create a Super Nintendo with a CD-ROM drive built in instead of the cartridges that Nintendo previously used. Sony called it the 'Play Station'. Nintendo agreed, but announced in 1991 to partner with Philips instead—much to Sony's surprise. Ken Kutaragi was allowed by Sony to pursue the PlayStation project, and released its standalone console in 1994. Nintendo never released the Super NES CD-ROM System that they collaborated on with Philips. Moreover, giving Sony the initiative to release the PlayStation on its own, Nintendo has inadvertently created its own rival.[17]

As part of the partnership with Nintendo, Philips obtained the rights to create games for their CD-i platform using Nintendo's characters. This provided them with the opportunity to create *Link: The Faces of Evil* (1993), *Zelda: The Wand of Gamelon* (1993), and *Zelda's Adventure* (1994), as well as *Hotel Mario* (1994). These games do not bear any of the Nintendo copyright logos, and they are not available for any Nintendo consoles, not even as ports to newer consoles which regularly happens with older games. For example, the *Legend of Zelda* (1986) can be played on the company's newest console the Nintendo Switch, but Philips' three *Legend of Zelda* games seem to be consigned to oblivion.

Despite that Philips' *Legend of Zelda* games are part of the character ecology, being the IP of a company does not mean that that company necessarily wants the manifestations, resulting from a partnership with a third company, to be remembered as part of the character ecology. That means that although a character ecology technically consists of all manifestations of a character, if no one remembers particular works in which they exist, the ecology shifts again to form another constellation with different relations between works.

Nevertheless, invisible forces can also bring character manifestations back to the forefront again, and canonisation can give new value to otherwise forgotten works and character

[17] A translation of the interview with Kutaragi from which Kohler received this information can be found at Nintendo Everything (Brian 2016)

manifestations. In October 2018, *Beeld and Geluid*, the governmental institution for Dutch media culture, announced the officially recognized Dutch Game Canon, an archived set of games developed in the Netherlands as a record of the Dutch game history (Beeld en Geluid n.d.). *Zelda: the Wand of Gamelon* is the game recognised by the experts to belong to this game canon (Glas and van Vught 2019). The context in which the work and Link's particular manifestation is acknowledged differs from the usual control by Nintendo. However, that is the whole irony of the character ecology. Its constellation is in constant flux, thereby constantly restructured by different forces such that the character ecology will always be "off-centred, without closure" (Barthes 1977, 159).

Pikachu

Pikachu is a character utilized by Nintendo in many works, and for many purposes. Besides the core series and the animation series, Nintendo has several other discourses in which a manifestation of Pikachu appears. Examples would include games such as *Hey You, Pikachu!* (GameFreak 1998), the *Pokémon Mystery Dungeon* series (Chunsoft 2005 – 2016), or the board game *Pokémon Master Trainer* (Hasbro and Milton Bradley 1999). Perhaps more than anything, Pikachu is used as a *kyara* outside any game or narrative contexts.

As previously discussed, Wilde (2019, 13) argues that since the default mode of a character is not bound to any specific incarnation—a premise on which I write this dissertation—the manifestations of the character are more like a role they can don and take off than anything else. *Kyara* from this perspective is what Wilde (2019, 13) calls 'mediated performers' or 'virtual celebrities' that can take on any role—even ones that exist outside a narrative context.

Characters in contemporary transmedia culture can function as *labels* for companies. One of Brooker's (2012) models of continuity proposes the character to be a *brand*. What I speak of is not a form of narrative continuity in which the character is a specific product or service—although they definitely are—but, rather, the character can be used to represent the company, because its proliferation across media as an IP owned entity gives the company the opportunity to have the character constantly associated with them. In the shape of a *kyara*, the character not only represents itself, or a literary theme. Rather it becomes a stand-in for the company that owns them, like a mascot.

More than anything, Pikachu is so closely associated with Nintendo that in its form as a *kyara* it has become Nintendo's mascot to represent the company through its image. As a *kyara*/mascot, Pikachu's image is enough to invoke Nintendo, to represent Nintendo without the company having to provide any narrative context in which the character has to appear. I am not saying here that any other iconic Nintendo characters—such as Link or Mario—are not used in this way, but rather Nintendo seems to use Pikachu in particular cases for which it does not use other IP owned characters. For example, the Pokémon Café (J.R. for Japan Experience 2019) in Tokyo is a café created by Nintendo where consumers can eat and buy food in the style of Pokémon, dominated by images of Pikachu. I am not aware of any cafés officially recognized by Nintendo that do this for Nintendo's other characters. The logo is a Pikachu *kyara* dressed up as a chef. The café itself is filled with merchandise of primarily Pikachu toys. Once consumers are ready to eat, they can order food in the shape of—mostly—Pikachu and, as was the case during my visit, the guests of the café are entertained by the host Pikachu the chef (image 1).

Image 1: The Pikachu host entertains the guests of the Pokémon Café (July 2018) (photo taken by the author).

Since the ecology consists of every work in which the character manifests, then non-narrative manifestations like the Pikachu host of the Pokémon Café are included in the character ecology as well. While it initially appears that a *kyara* is not a quasi-person at all, the *kyara*'s intertextual relations to works in which the character gives the impression that it is a quasi-person should not be excluded. A *kyara* is not *not* a character, as it operates on a spectrum of moments in which it sometimes is more akin to an image and sometimes more akin to a quasi-person. I will discuss in more detail how the intertextual relations between *kyara* and quasi-persons in a work can influence how a character is perceived in more detail in the next chapter when I discuss the game *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment 2016).

In the case of Pikachu, it can be said that while a hamburger with a Pikachu image might only last for a few minutes and therefore functions more akin to an image, the Pikachu host that appeared in the Pokémon Café functions more akin to a quasi-person with whom one can interact, because an actual (very small) person is inside the costume. Pikachu is then not simply 'just' a mascot, representing Nintendo, but has become a character who can fulfil multiple functions, like that of an image, a quasi-person in a diegetic world, host of an actual café, and more. All of these manifestations belong to the character ecology.

3. Summary

This chapter is split into two parts. In the first part I explained three venues of control that form a top-down approach attempting to police the identity of the character in order to bring a certain identity of the character forward as the normative version. These venues were the author-function, ownership and canonisation. I argue that each of these three venues are unable uphold their version of the character's identity as a rigid and narrative continuous entity for the following reasons.

First, the author-function functions as a form of authority to create a specific discourse in which a character manifests distinct from another manifestation in another discourse. However, there are several means by which the author-functions fails to ascribe to a character manifestation the value to be the 'authentic' manifestation. Once authorial intention is ascribed to be causally related to the identity of the character, or when multiple authors are involved in the creation of a character—as is commonly the case in contemporary transmedial practices—or even when the author grants multiple identities of the character the same status value, the almost holy dimension of the author-function fails to maintain the promise of showing the reader the 'authentic' identity of the character.

Second, ownership creates a paradox on an institutional level. Ownership promises character development over the course of multiple works, but cannot uphold that promise because the character will develop at some point towards its own death so that the developer has to reiterate the character anew to maintain the illusion that the character still develops. Furthermore, because ownership is essentially about proliferating the character via selling or leasing characters to third parties, multiple institutions will be involved in the characterisation process, and so the character will end up in different discourses owned by different institutions who all declare their version of the character's identity to be the normative one—until that character too meets its end.

Third, canonisation is a constant process in which multiple invisible hands operate on a strive for narrative continuity in order to depict their version of the character as normative and coherent. Canonisation attempts to police readers into interpreting certain manifestations as the truthful identity of a character while other manifestations are cast aside as heresy. While canonisation promises to reduce the complexity of a character into a single coherent identity, many invisible hands have many different agendas. As a result, what a canon promises to do, it fails to fulfil.

In the second part of this chapter, I used the examples of Sherlock Holmes, Link, and Pikachu to demonstrate how the three venues influence the characterisation process of a character's identity. I demonstrated the influence of these venues by mapping the constellations of these three characters, each consisting of three layers: an urtext, discourses and the character ecology. The mapping of these constellations are not supposed to indicate any final or rigid model, rather these constellations are meant to incorporate the semiotic references of manifestations between works as well as the venues that attempt to determine the character's identity within the overall character ecology. As I showed through the character examples, each character has a different constellation that allows for a deeper understanding about the relation between the distribution of works in which the character manifest and the control that the venues of control employ.

Part III
On Characters in Games

Chapter Six
The Construction of Game Characters

This chapter presents how games constitute game characters. It provides an answer to the question of how games communicate characters. Since this dissertation provides a theoretical framework for the dynamic game character, I deem it necessary to first address the construction of game characters in general before delving into the construction of dynamic game characters. This chapter therefore explains the context and the means of how game characters are broadly constructed so that in the next chapters I can focus on the particular means by which a dynamic game character is constructed.

This chapter is split into six parts. The first two parts are dedicated to the challenges of how games constitute game characters. These parts explain how there is not a single common means by which games communicate characters. It addresses topics such as how games have similarities and differences with other media, and how games can vary greatly from each other, so that even within the phenomena called 'games', the communication of characters can vary greatly as well. I provide a definition of game characters that I subsequently apply to the four case studies I discuss in the rest of this chapter. The next four parts are dedicated to four case studies of game works in which I will provide an interpretation of the means by which these game works stimulate the player to consider an entity a game character. The games are: *Thomas Was Alone* (Bithell 2012), *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment 2016)*, Hollow Knight* (Team Cherry 2017), and *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (Nintendo 2013).

In chapter two, I explained that academic work on game characters discusses characters along three general discourses: the difference between the avatar and the character, the difference between the player-character and the player, and a general description of a game character that argues that games present characters in three different modes: as ludic pieces, as fictional beings, and as the representation of the player. As seen from the previous chapters, academic work on characters in general attempts to explain how the reader comes to interpret characters as characters, but there exists a tension between transmedial and medium-specific perspectives on what characters are. Despite that tension, academic works on game characters lack an explanation for how the player comes to perceive game entities as characters, and specifically those entities over which the player has no direct control (or any control at all). The main question of this chapter is therefore: *what are the different means by which digital games construct the game character so that the player perceives that entity to be a character?* The premise of this chapter is therefore as follows: characters, being a player-constructed phenomenon, need the player in order to be realised, but the games motivate the process with different means to different effects.

On the Approach of this Chapter

This chapter takes two important aspects of characters in general into consideration. First, characters are independent from any medium. Characters are dependent on representational material to manifest, but they do not need any *specific* medium. Just like films, novels, theatre and television series, games are capable of communicating characters, wrapping the character in specific representational material and using culturally-learned conventions so that the player will consider the figure a character. The difficulty, however, is, as I explain in more detail in this chapter, that how

games wrap the character in representational material, and the means and conventions they use, can differ greatly per game. I will therefore do a close reading on four different game works based on the reader-response theory approach explained in chapter three, 'On Method'.

As explained in chapter three, it is difficult to select a corpus when there are so many game works available to choose from. I therefore decided that it is the main question of this chapter that guided the selection of games that I discuss in this chapter. The main criterion for this chapter was variation: each game should have at least one different means by which they stand out from the rest of the corpus in this dissertation in terms of how they communicate characters. *Thomas Was Alone* is the first game I chose based on this criterion, because it lacks the common means of using human-like figures and instead uses quadrilateral shapes. I choose the other games based on my first choice. I explained in chapter three that research on dynamic game characters means that my corpus consists primarily of games that focus on character development, so that other games like racing or fighting games make up less of my corpus than other kinds of games. Since I wanted to show, however, that these kinds of competitive multiplayer games can and do employ means by which the player can infer a sense of characterhood from the figures they perceive, I chose *Overwatch* as a work for this chapter. From there I chose *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*. The game's characters operate as artificial intelligent agents who, combined with the game's real-time mechanic, give the player a sense of autonomy, unlike the characters from *Overwatch* and *Thomas Was Alone*. Finally, I chose *Hollow Knight* to join the four case studies, because the game contains characters who, despite their initial appearance that they are in service to the player to reach the game's end-state, are scripted in such a way that they serve their own goals rather than the player's goal.

I do not claim that my interpretations provide a complete picture of how empirical players could interpret the entities as characters. Rather, I posit the particular elements that I discuss as relevant means by which games signal to the player the entities they perceive to be characters, but not the only means. Nevertheless, there are two dominant means that I leave out of my interpretation: the visual design of the character, the *kyara*, and the stories that some games tell. I made this choice in order to prevent these means to dictate my interpretation and downsize the other means games can use to incite characters into the player. My reasoning for this choice is as follows.

Sometimes the answer to why the player thinks of something as a character is just because it *looks* like a character, which is common for media and platforms in contemporary media culture where visual components dominate. The *kyara*, discussed in the theory chapter, is a relevant example of this way of thinking. In general, the answer 'it looks like a character' is a good enough reason to think of something as a character, but it is also an unsatisfying answer that obviously favours visual displays of characters, and does not cover the different possible ways in which games can invoke characters. In my description how the game invokes game characters within this chapter, the underlying assumption is that in digital games, the *kyara* is already constructed to give the player the impression of a character before the game uses its means to turn the *kyara* into a character—unless I specifically state otherwise, as is the case with *Thomas Was Alone*.

Some of the games, such as *Thomas Was Alone* and *Hollow Knight,* present a story over the course of the game. I deliberately leave the story out of the interpretation of the case studies presented in this chapter. I realise that this is a precarious position, and I have no intention to say that story is not important—it often is. However, in this dissertation, I have been calling attention to the tendency that story and narrative continuity are such dominant forms by which interpreters

make sense of characters that the focus on story and narrative continuity takes over our complete understanding of how the reader comes to infer the existence of a character. As a result, other techniques by which media can communicate characters become subsumed in the focus on story. Although story is perhaps the most important element for a character to develop as a person, story is not the sole element by which the interpreter infers the existence of a character or interpret a figure as a character.

Nevertheless, I also do not ignore the existence of story. In *Thomas Was Alone*, for example, I discuss the narrator, the function that tells the story of the game. This might initially seem to cause friction because, in literary studies, the narrator is known as a function to communicate the narrative discourse—the story—to the reader (Margolin 2012). While story and the narrator are interdependent, they are different concepts; the narrator is not the story itself. As Mieke Bal explains:

> A narrative text is a story that is 'told' in a medium, that is, it is converted into signs. […] these signs are produced by an agent who relates, who 'utters' the signs. This agent cannot be identified with the writer, painter, or filmmaker. Rather, the writer withdraws and calls upon a fictitious spokesman, an agent technically known as a *narrator*. (1999, 8)

The narrator is the one who narrates, the one who engages in the *act* of storytelling, not the story. And therefore narration, along with the narrator, refers to the *act* of character-construction, the techniques and methods that a work employs so that an interpreter may infer from it the existence of a character. By focusing on the narrator, I can focus on the different techniques and elements that are used in the act of storytelling through which a reader can interpret a character in such a manner that I will not have the ever-present focus on the story of the game but also without ignoring the presence of the story.

1. Media Presenting Characters

The reader, player, or interpreter can turn almost anything into a character. There is a plethora of possible means that could make up a character, and not one that is necessarily the primary means. I base this premise on Frow (2014), whose description of the quasi-person treats the character as a schemata of human beings onto which certain conditions apply in order to invoke a (fictional) character. He states:

> The conditions are minimal because we have the capacity to turn just about anything into a quasi-person. Usually a character is a human person; it has a name; it speaks; it is embodied, unitary, and persistent over time; and it performs an action or series of actions on the basis of which we impute intentionality to it. But even those minimal conditions need not all be met. (2014, 36)

This means that it would be futile to list everything that could potentially turn something into a character. Such a description would not only go against the reader-response method I employ, but would also fail to address that games reside, influence, and are affected by a larger character ecology in which different media communicate characters in different but also in similar means, shaped by and shaping the cultural conventions with which readers, audiences, users, players and

more make sense of characters. Frow's description instead suggests that it is more fruitful to describe how games use certain cultural conventions, mechanics and means that allow the player to infer a sense of personhood from the figure (or shape) to interpret it in a character. That is because such a thing stems from the idea that the player has a *repertoire* accumulated over the years of their existence which the player employs based on the signals that the game communicates in order to interpret a figure into a quasi-person.

Frow shows that the schemata resembles the reader in order for the reader to construct the figure as a character. The reader has culturally learned to interpret these conventions to invoke a character rather than that the conventions make a character exist. There are no conditions to the existence of a character in the sense that certain rules have to be there for the character exist, but rather conventions have taught the reader certain means to construct a character. Characters are therefore constructs invoked not only by works or readers, but also by a culture that allows its members to interpret a figure as something like a person with thoughts, feelings, intentions and more, even when it cannot have such states.

Game characters, as I engage with them in this dissertation, are computer-based agents and, like characters in novels, comics or film, have no inherent thought or intention. That is no problem in itself, as Brenda Laurel (1991) puts it: "Computer-based agents, like dramatic character, do not have to *think* (in fact, there are many ways in which they cannot); they simply have to *provide a representation from which thought may be inferred*" (57). This means that when I talk about the feelings, intentions or thoughts of characters, I refer to the representation from which I, as a reader, interpret the existence of a thought, feeling, or intention of the character.

Media Modality

Here I explain the different and similar means by which media communicate characters. Although characters are independent from any given medium, the character is dependent on representational material to manifest. The medium in which characters are presented therefore determines which means and conventions are used and how to turn something into a quasi-person. In media studies, the question of how media represent is a broad one. For the sake of my argument, I will only outline here the problematic notions that follow from how media communicate. Coining the phrase 'the medium is the message', Marshall McLuhan (1964) wrote his argument on media communication well before the rise of the internet of our current twenty-first century digital world. He shifts the focus from the 'content' of the medium to the technology of the medium because, as he argues, the "content of any medium is always another medium" (8). He argues that the message of any existing medium is the change of patterns that it introduces into human affairs, since the nature of the medium determines how humans act and associate with each other (9). Any medium, when first introduced, has certain psychic and social consequences in society, regardless of the content that the medium or the technology produced.

McLuhan's notion is followed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) who discuss remediation, the convergence of media within other media. They specifically point towards the convergence of three technologies—computer, telephone and television—which each appropriate each other and will continue to exist alongside each other to produce different devices and practices within our culture.

Lars Elleström (2010) provides an elaborate theoretical discussion about how media are related to each other by asking the question of what a medium is, which is necessary to understand the interrelations between media. His underlying reason is that that any materiality of art—or, as I

like to put it, any form of expression—depends on the thing that mediates it. He provides a theoretical framework of what different media platforms have in common, and how they differ. Since he considers the concept of 'medium' too broad to define—any definition will never cover all the various notions that lurk behind the word—he divides the notion of medium into subcategories to cover the interrelated aspects of media and mediality. These aspects cannot exist without the other aspects.

Elleström divides the basic aspects of each medium into four different modalities which are the "essential cornerstones of all media without which mediality cannot be comprehended" (15): the material modality, the sensorial modality, the spatiotemporal modality, and the semiotic modality. The material modality refers to the corporeal interface of the medium. The sensorial modality refers to the reception of the interface via sensory faculties. The spatiotemporal modality concerns the experience of space and time via perception and interpretation. And finally, the semiotic modality refers to the interpretation of signs for which Elleström uses Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of signs (see Nöth 1995, 39 - 47), dividing the semiotic modality into three sign functions: the symbolic, the indexical and the iconic.

What is relevant from Elleström's description for characters is the explicit argument that each medium possesses these modalities in some mixture and combination in order to mediate any form of expression. His description of media shows that the brackets between media and their modalities is so ambiguous that no medium is entirely distinct from another medium as to how it can communicate characters. Each medium, such as film, television, literature and even digital games, shares a mix of modes and modalities with another medium, so that some media materialise characters in a similarly to other media, but also have their own distinct properties and specific conventions for how they express these characters.

An awareness of the similarities and differences of media, as well as their specific conventions is important to take into consideration when explaining how a player considers a figure a character, because characters not only have to adhere to the distinct properties of the medium in which they materialise, but, within the boundaries of a single medium, the character also conforms to the formal codes and conventions of the segments in which it appears. Thomas Lamarre (2018) argues that within a single episode of an *anime* television series, a character has to adhere to segments with different codes, such as the opening song to the episode, the ending song, the story of that episode as well as the commercials in between the segments. The character's capability of switching between media and codes of segments prompts Lamarre to consider the character as a platform of hardware (media switching) that is capable of running software (code switching). Although, I would argue that it is not software that the character is capable of running, but rather that it is capable of switching between platforms of media, and within the specific medium also capable of changing between semiotic codes depending on the conventions of the function to which it has to adhere: in the episodes it adheres to the narration of that story, in the commercial it also functions as a construct to sell a product, and in the opening and ending song it announces the start and the end of the episode segment.

In short, although Elleström and Lamarre indicate that 'medium' is too broad a category to lock down, what can be said is that each work, as proposed by Barthes (1977), has its own specific set of constraints, affordances and conventions by which it communicates and represents characters. No description of how each work can stimulate the player to invoke a character will cover all the possible means via which the player infers a sense of characterhood from an inanimate object —and that is even without taking into consideration conventions autonomous from any given

work. Additionally, an attempt to identify and describe all distinct properties with which a character could possibly manifest would be far from fruitful, because it emphasises medium specificity, and focuses on the work instead of what the work does, what conventions and means they use, to have the player interpret an entity to be a quasi-person.

2. Game Characters

Games, whether they can be considered a medium or not, are not an exception to the challenge a medium brings to have the player read a character. Depending on the notion of 'game', they too have certain constraints and affordances that allow them to communicate characters in particular ways. The challenge to how games present game characters is twofold.

Let me clarify first what I mean with the term game character: a *game character* is a first and foremost a *character*, as I proposed in the introduction chapter. It is a quasi-person, an individual to which the game allows the player to infer a life-like existence in which it is born and can die, and to whom the player ascribes thoughts and intentions. A character becomes a *game* character once it is integrated in the game's mechanical system that requires the player's non-trivial effort to progress from one state to another (see Aarseth and Calleja 2015). This means that a game character has a processual nature, so that it has the potential for change when the player progresses the game. That change can be rigid, scripted and set in stone so that a game character may only change in one specific direction.

Zelda from *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (*BotW*) (2017) provides an interesting borderline case, because the game gives the player the impression that the character has potential for change. The game gives the player the goal to rescue Zelda from the evil Ganon and save the world—the usual formula for *The Legend of Zelda* games. When the player finally saves Zelda from Ganon's clutches and meets her, the game's macrostructure ends, however, and this supposed end causes friction with the open-world genre of the game. The designer's solution to the friction between the ending of the game's macrostructure and the supposed open-endedness is to transport Link to the moment right before he went into Ganon's castle to slay Ganon. Every time the player defeats Ganon, Link is transported back to this exact spot. The game never allows the player to actually end the game and have Zelda in a state where she is saved. From this perspective, Zelda is presented as a game character, integrated in the mechanical system, however the game cannot function with her being a game character, and thus she stays at the sign level, forever promising the potential for change but always out of reach.

The second challenge to how games present game characters is that games can vary to a great degree in how they present characters in general, so that also game characters are subject to games' variety in structure and modalities and can therefore not be reduced to a single core. In chapter three, 'On Method', I explained that my definition of characters demands a very specific set of games, such as role-playing games and games that rely on narrative expression, because they tend to focus on character development to a greater extent than game genres which emphasise other activities, such as competition in racing and/or fighting games. Like characters in general, game characters are subjected to the codes of the genre to which the game belongs, but that does not mean that a character in a fighting game cannot give the impression of having a life-like existence. For example, a character such as Link appearing in the racing game *Mario Kart* 8 (Nintendo 2014), in which the player uses the character as an avatar to compete against other players, presents the character as a quasi-person via different means than *BotW*, in which the player

uses Link as their player-character to save the game world of Hyrule.

An extensive account that discusses how games turn entities into characters comes from Daniel Vella (2015), who constructs a semiotic-structural model of the player-character, the figure "that emerges through the accretion of a set of textual signifiers" in digital games (371). Vella uses Uri Margolin's (1986) *Characterization Statements* (CS) to explain signifiers as textual cues with which the reader deduces attributes and traits belonging to a character giving the impression that the character has mental properties and capabilities (Vella 2015, 373). Margolin distinguishes between three different categories of characterisation statements, namely static mimetic elements, dynamic mimetic elements, and formal textual patterns, which Vella applies to the player-character.

Static mimetic elements refer to fixed facts about characters, such as their "name, appearance, customs, habits, man-made and natural setting or environment" (Margolin 1986, 206; Vella 2015). Vella proposes three subdivisions of Margolin's static mimetic elements applied to the player-character, namely the represented elements, the contextual elements, which Margolin had already proposed himself. On top of those two elements, Vella adds the ludic elements. According to Vella (2015, 384), the ludic elements are the vehicles for characterisation unique to games. He identifies:

- *Capabilities and Limitations*. That is, what the players can and cannot do through the character in the game world. (387)
- *Passion*, which he considers "the vulnerability and openness to be acted upon as much as by its capacity to act" (387) so that player-characters can be influenced by other entities.
- *Goals*. These might be self-imposed or set by the player, but there are the ludic goals of the game. (388)
- *Attributes*: statistical values attached to the character, but which need to be able to be compared to other characters. (389)
- *Development*: the capacity for the character's ludic elements to change over time. (391)

Within the category of Margolin's dynamic mimetic elements, which are the mental and verbal acts of the characters, Vella distinguishes between character-actions and player-actions. The former refer to the actions the player-character performs without the need for a player, while the latter points to the actions players perform as themselves within the game world (2015, 394 - 397). Vella points out that for the character to be coherent, both player-actions and character-actions have to match (398).

Lastly, Vella presents Margolin's final and vaguest category: the formal patterns, which focuses on how characters are presented, referring to the "grouping of [narrative agents]; the analogies, parallels, or contrasts between them created by such groupings; repetitions or gradations, and various stylistic features associated with their introduction or occurrence" (quoted from Vella 2015, 399; Margolin 1986, 206). Vella's description demonstrates in extensive detail how games construct and characterise a playable figure from a literary point of view, but I would like to point to a few limitations in his analysis. First, while this is not a problematic issue on its own, his understanding of characters is rooted within the field of literary studies, the dominant discourse on characters and games. This brings the assumption that characters are constructed exclusively via stories, also in games. Although narration and stories might be the most dominant means by which to convey character—perhaps even the most thorough means to characterize characters within a range of media—it is important to realise that such an approach shapes for what kinds of games Margolin's characterisation statements can be used. Vella uses for his analysis the games *The Last*

of Us (Naughty Dog 2010) and *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company 2013), which are two games with strong linear narratives, but does not apply the characterisation statements to games that diverge from this kind of game.

Second, the development element seems to be a meta-element, since it requires the other ludic elements to change and evolve over time, and cannot stand on its own without those elements.

Third, Vella's model only fits the player-character, which means that it does not explain how any other types of figures turn into game characters—which reflects game studies' tendency to discuss primarily those characters over which the player has direct control—and can therefore only be used to explain how the ludic elements attached to the playable figure can potentially turn that figure into a character.

Lastly, Vella's approach to the character as a semiotic construct has the advantage that it approaches characters as constructs created by the player and the game, but has the disadvantage that it does not take into consideration the affordances, limitations and conventions of the games and other media in which they appear. This is noticeable in his application of Margolin's formal patterns for literary works onto digital games. The adaptation of a framework for literary characters onto game characters seems to be inadequate, because the framework lacks any consideration for the variety of structure and modalities via which games can communicate characters.

Ludwig Wittgenstein ([1953] 2009, 36e) explains that language can point to different phenomena using the same word. Using games as an example, he argues that games have nothing in common at all, but are related to each other by family resemblances: a complicated network consisting of similarities and differences but without a core trait (36e). Considering games from this perspective, how can game characters, which rely on games for their materialisation, be expected to have one thing in common in all games? The answer is simply that they cannot. There is not a single common element that games have in order to create a character. As Frow (2014, 36) also states, just about anything can turn into a character. There is not one single convention to which games have to adhere. The question 'what are the different ways a character turns into a character?' is not a question that requires a formal description of which elements constitute a game character, as if there were one particular way that an entity turns into a character, since characters are a construct of both the work and the reader. Rather, with a reader-response theory approach in mind the question is: what is it that different games do so that the player perceives an entity as a character? The premise is therefore that characters, being a player-constructed phenomenon, need the player in order to be invoked, but the games motivate the process with different means to different effects.

Let me provide an example of how a reader-response theory approach explains how the player interprets an entity as a character with a game that is commonly known: chess. Does the game of chess contain characters? Perhaps not, but the distinction between the chess pieces, such as the queen, the bishop, the king, certainly provides a good basis to turn them into characters. There is little that one needs to do in order to assign thought and intention to an inanimate object to give it a sense of life-likeness. For example: the queen refuses to give up, and destroys all attackers who threaten to kill her king. This description is enough to anthropomorphise the pieces and turn them into characters. Indeed, it can be said that the characters of *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (Caroll 1871) are based on an anthropomorphisation of chess. The anthropomorphisation is, however, not done by the game, but is a form of role-playing done by the player. The game of chess itself does not recognise these as characters. In fact, even when I treat them as characters, the game of chess itself will not structurally change. My experience perhaps will,

but not the game itself.

The same interpretive approach can be applied to digital games and stimulated by digital games even when the characters in question are inanimate objects. Interpreting inanimate objects as characters is also something films, novels and comics can stimulate their readers to do, such as Linus' security blanket in the *Peanuts* comics (Schulz 1950- 2000). For games, the companion cube from *Portal* (Valve 2007) provides an example of how games can stimulate the player to infer a sense of characterhood from an inanimate object. The companion cube is an object used in the game to solve the puzzles in the game's test chambers. There are several moments when the game provides the cube a sense of being a character, such as when GLaDOS asks the player to 'take care of it', has to remind the player that the cube is inanimate and cannot speak, or instructs the player that if it speaks the player should ignore it. More importantly however, the player is dependent on the cube. The cube is the player's only ally in solving the puzzles, as each puzzle in the sequences where the cube is present require the cube to be solved so that the player can proceed and escape from GLaDOS.

At the end of the puzzle sequence, GLaDOS tells the player that the cube cannot 'accompany' the player anymore and the player therefore has to 'euthanise' it. This choice of words gives the cube a sense of being alive. For example, in order to euthanise something, it first and foremost has to be alive, as euthanasia is usually considered to be ending someone's life to stop them from suffering. That is exactly what the word ascribes to the cube: it is alive, and the player has to kill it humanely so that it does not suffer. GLaDOS' use of words gives the player at the very least the impression that the cube could be a character.

In the next four case studies, I will provide an interpretation, based on the reader-response theory approach, of how the player infers from the game an entity—be it a figure or a shape—as a character.

3. Thomas Was Alone (2012)

Thomas Was Alone is a puzzle platformer game. Each level contains a different puzzle where the player must navigate one or more blocks into a target the same size as the block the player controls. Solving one level brings the player to another, more difficult level until the player manages to reach the game's end-state.

In contemporary transmedia practices, the image of the character is one of the most important components of the existence of a character. The *kyara* demonstrates that the image itself is enough for the interpreter to infer that the image is a character before any story even happens. Gô Itô (2005, 150) calls the character-image before it enters a narrative the "proto-character-state" that can be consumed outside of its original narrative context (see Galbraith 2009, 125; Wilde 2019, 5). This means that although characters tend to be associated with a story or some sort of narrative situation as the dominant form in which the manifest, a story is not a crucial element for the reader to infer a figure to be a character, especially not when there exists a character-image to support the interpreter to think there is a character. A game such as *Thomas Was Alone* is therefore an interesting case to study how the player comes to interpret the quadrilateral shapes the player directly controls as characters, because the game lacks the visual components of showing the entities as human-like figures.

The game portrays the quadrilateral shapes as characters using three inter-dependent elements: individualised personal names, the extra-diegetic narrator, and the kinaesthetic motion.

These provide a combination of elements from which the player infers the existence characters onto the quadrilateral shapes. In the following paragraphs, I first discuss the character's personal names, then the extra-diegetic narrator, and finish with the kinaesthetic motion.

Individualisation via Personal Name

When the player starts playing the first scenario of puzzles, they only control Thomas, a little red block who can jump. After the player has solved the puzzles of this first scenario, they enter the second scenario during which they are introduced to a second block, this time a tiny orange square who, compared with the red block, does not jump that high. At this point, the narrator states: "Christopher took an immediate dislike to the skinny red triangle. Who the hell did this 'Thomas' think he was?" (image 2). In this one sentence, the narrator introduces the existence of two characters: Christopher and Thomas.

Image 2: Chris meets Thomas for the first time.

While the introduction of a proper name to indicate the existence of a character might be very common in novels in which the presence of a visual figure is usually omitted, *Thomas Was Alone* is not without a continuous visual shapes. They come in different sizes and have different colours so that the player can immediately perceive their difference. However, the different colours and sizes do not make these shapes into different characters, because these shapes do not correspond to the convention in which the character comes in the shape of a human-like figure. As a convention, characters tend to come in an anthropomorphic shape that communicates to readers that they are persons. The *kyara*, for example, operates on this convention, as it invokes the idea of a character while not being a *dramatis persona* itself.

Especially the presence of eyes tends to be important to anthropomorphise figures to give the impression of a human-like presence. Eyes allow characters to express emotion, feelings and even intentions. In discussion about anime, the size of the eyes tend to be the main topic to animate an entity (Condry 2013; Lamarre 2009; 2018), while for Western comics Scott McCloud (1994, 94) considers the abstraction of eyes to allow for greater levels of perception, arguing that abstracted eyes require reader interpretation to construe a sense of life-likeness. Specifically, in media

platforms that are unable to communicate characters via sound or animated motions, such as comics and manga, eyes play a prominent role in anthropomorphising a designed entity. An early example is also the silent movie: actors would wear heavy make-up around their eyes, and would act with the emphasis on their eyes to show certain emotions and feelings, because they could not say them.

The lack of visual elements that signal the presence of a *kyara* makes the proper name the primary means via which the shapes are assigned the status of a character. Frow demonstrates the necessity of a proper name over the course of his book *Character & Person* (2014), but summarises the argument as follows:

> Two of the crucial mechanisms by which the form of the person is constructed are the pronoun system and the system of social nomenclature; these figure crucially in the way person effects are shaped in fictional texts, and in the way the reader or viewer is induced to identify and to relate to the text's quasi-persons. (2014, ix)

Indicators such as proper nouns are therefore crucial to *Thomas Was Alone* in order to give the shapes the impression that they are characters. The game in particular does not only use proper nouns to indicate the blocks, but uses personal, human names, like Christopher and Thomas—and variations on those personal names such as 'Chris'—so that the player is led to identify the blocks as individual characters.

Returning to the scenario in which Chris is introduced: from the previous level, the player knows that the name 'Thomas' corresponds to the red triangle, so when the second proper name 'Chris' is voiced by the narrator, the player will be able to infer that this 'skinny red triangle' (see image 2) implies that the other entity in the game corresponds to the name of Chris. And, as a result, a connection between the game entity and the character described by the narrator is born.

Each time a new character is introduced, the game follows the same patterns: the player suddenly controls a new quadrilateral shape, which could be a small green rectangle or a large blue square, and the narrator immediately introduces a new personal name: John or Claire, for example. More often than not, the player first only controls the new shape and none of the previous shapes are present, so that the player can connect the new shape to the new personal name. And thus, the first indication of individualisation comes to be by the different proper names.

The Extra-Diegetic Narrator

The narrator appears in two modes: in written text and spoken words by voice actor Danny Wallace . Both modes work at the same time; when the player hears the spoken words, they also see it written on the screen. From this point on, I will treat both modes as one, which I refer to as the narrator.

The narrator is a function of a work to communicate events to an audience or readers of a story. According to Margolin (2012) a narrator is a function of the text that is not necessarily occupied by any specific real or fictional entity, but acts to guide the reader in a certain direction:

> A narrator is a linguistically indicated, textually projected and readerly constructed function, slot or category whose occupant need not be thought of in any terms but those of a communicative role. Terms designating this role include discursive function or role, voice, source of narrative transmission, producer of current discourse, teller, reporter, narrating agent or instance. (2012)

The narrator functions to communicate characters, their personalities and the events in which they appear. James Phelan (2005) calls the act of communicating characters *character narration*, in which "an author communicates to her audience by means of the character narrator's communication to a narratee" (1). The author and the audience are positions to be filled in by actual persons. When I read *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Rowling 1997), I do so as an empirical reader, while knowing that the author is J. K. Rowling. On the other hand, Rowling is not the narrator of the book, and nor am I the narratee. These are two functions of the work that allow Rowling as the author to present the text to a recipient.

According to Phelan (2005, 12), character narration occurs along two tracks of "telling functions": the narrator-narratee track, and the narrator-authorial track. The former is where the narrator functions as an interpreter, teller or evaluator to the narratee. Phelan calls these actions the "narrator functions" (12). The narrator only tells of what is happening, but does not enter the consciousness of another character. The latter is where the narrator unintentionally reports all kinds of information to the audience (while not showing signs knowing that the audience exists). Phelan calls this kind of reporting the "disclosure functions" (12).

In literary studies, scholars also use the terms 'focalization', 'filter' and 'centre' to distinguish between the narrator focusing on a specific character during the events of a story, and the narrator describing the thoughts and feelings of these characters. Gérard Genette ([1979] 1980) coined the term focalisation to reformulate the terms 'perspective' and 'point of view' (see Niederhoff 2011). He distinguishes between three types of focalization: zero, internal and external. Zero focalization corresponds to the omniscient narrator, where the narrator knows more than the characters. The internal focalization has the narrator only stating what a specific character knows and nothing more. The external focalisation has the narrator saying less than the character knows ([1979] 1980).

In addition to Genette's 'focalization' are the terms 'filter' and 'centre'. Seymour Chatman (1986) explains that focalization describes "the narrator's use of the character's consciousness as the screen or filter through which the events of the story are perceived, and conceived" (191). While the character is not necessarily the narrator of the story, a character does correspond to the narrator-function of the events depending on whether the focalization is zero, internal, or external. Within a single work, the narrator can switch between characters, or not correspond to any of the characters at all. When a character is simply followed in a story—regardless of whether the narrator provides the reader access to its consciousness—it is a function of the text that Chatman calls the 'centre'. When the events are perceived through a character's consciousness, Chatman calls that function a 'filter'.

Although these terms come from literary studies, they are applicable to *Thomas Was Alone*'s communication of its characters. The game's narrator adds two dimensions to the idiosyncrasy of the quadrilateral shapes: it provides them with thoughts and feelings, and it works in alignment with the player's control over the shapes so that what the narrator narrates becomes connected with what the player does as the character.

The narrator in *Thomas Was Alone* appears to function along the narrator-authorial track: it reports the thoughts and feelings of the entities. In *Thomas Was Alone*, however, these filter and centre functions are dispersed over the game and its narration, because the centre function is subject to the player's avatarial control over the entities. When the player only controls Thomas in the beginning of the game, the player does not immediately perceive the centre-function's dependence on their control. The second scenario introduces the player to other characters, starting

with Chris, a little orange block, who takes “an immediate and deep dislike to the skinny red rectangle” (image 2). This is the point where the game shows the player that they can switch between characters. While the player avatarially controls Chris, the game centres on Chris and follows his acts. Thomas is completely outside the border of what the player can visually perceive. When the player switches their control to Thomas, the game brings the player over to Thomas so that they can see Thomas, but not necessarily Chris. In other words, the player’s direct control over the character replaces the centre function.

The filter-function only occurs when the player visually perceives the entity whose thoughts the narrator describes. There is a shifting centre in the characters’ internal focalization. With a few exceptions, this usually means that the player avatarially controls the entity about whom the narrator speaks. The correspondence between the control and the filter function creates the impression that what is happening in the game is in accordance with the events that the narrator describes. When the character Claire is introduced, the ground beneath her collapses and she falls in the toxic water. Via the filter-function, the narrator describes her inner thoughts as Claire knowing that she would die, but the moment the block drops in the water, the narrator reveals that she realises she has superpowers (image 3). Unlike the other characters, Claire does not disperse so that the player has to start anew, but instead she floats. The narrator’s revelation is in accordance with the player’s discovery of Claire’s ability, and at the same time confirms to the player that, indeed, Claire can float.

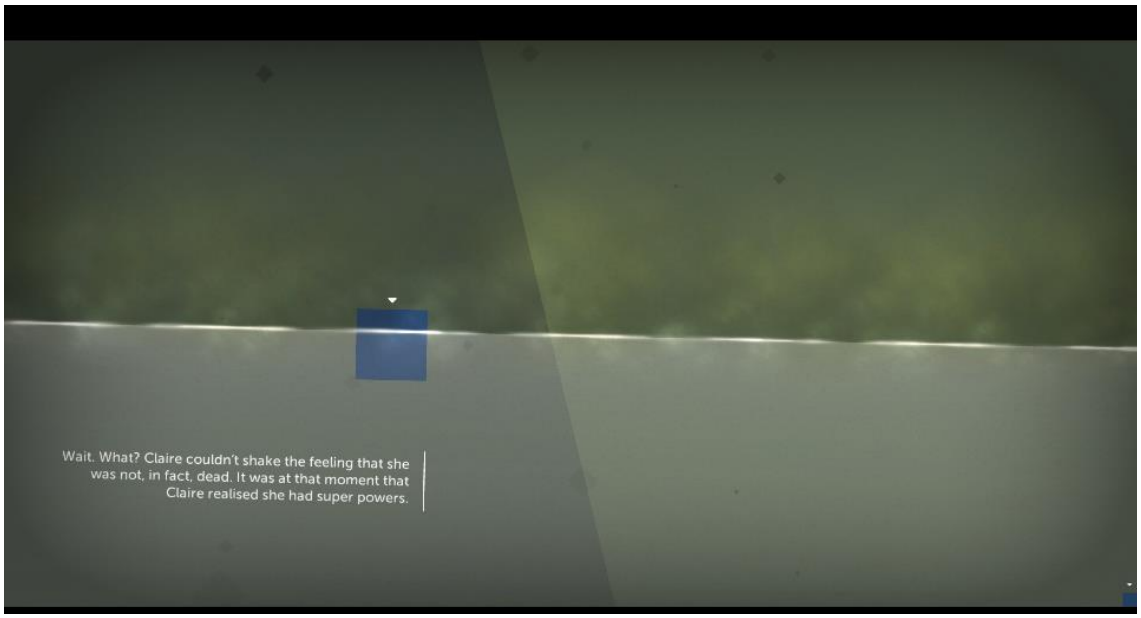

Image 3: Claire discovers she has superpowers.

Kinaesthetic Motion

The narration ties directly into the kinaesthetic motion of the different characters. What the narrator describes, is also what the player notices and even *feels*. Gordon Calleja (2011, 55) relates the term *kinesthetic involvement* directly to agency as the ability where “players perform actions that affect the game world and its inhabitants”. I do not necessarily talk about agency here, although agency gives players the opportunity to discover how a character feels when they directly control that character.

Motion in general is an important design aspect to turn game entities into characters. Robin

Sloan (2015, 153) utilises the Disney company's animation principles to explain how to create lifelike motion in characters. She explains that the company's twelve principles for character animation movement are supposedly grounded in reality and imitate real movements in order to "produce a creative and expressive imitation of reality that would suspend audience disbelief" (154). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word 'animation' refers to both the state of being alive, and to "the technique of photographing successive drawings or positions of puppets or models to create an illusion of movement" (Oxford n.d.). Sloan's use of the word seems to conflate both meanings, where she emphasises the illusion of movement to animate entities in games without the involvement of the player, over kinesthetic control where the player is involved in the acts and movement of the entities.

Katherine Isbister (2006, 203), on the other hand, perceives the player-character to be the core of the player's 'interactive experience', which contains four layers of psychological experience: visceral, cognitive, social and fantasy. The visceral feedback refers to the sensory experience the player has, especially when the entity performs an action. According to Isbister, "[f]acets of this kind of feedback include sorts of physical powers, how it feels to control them and move them, and the general effects that the actions have on the senses" (205). In other words, the feedback of how a character *feels* also provides a description of the character, and in turn invokes the character.

For *Thomas Was Alone*, kinaesthetic motion is one of the primary means to invoke the characters, because the characters lack the visual anthropomorphisation that characters tend to have within contemporary media ecology. The feeling the player receives from the characters is produced by their individual abilities, but also by their differences in speed, sound and how high they jump. Claire, for example, is described as rubbish at jumping, and moves slowly. The player feels this when they control the block. Through this difference in feeling, the game juxtaposes the different shapes so that their own idiosyncrasies become emphasised in relation to each other. Claire might be rubbish at jumping, and the player can feel that, but this is only in comparison with the other blocks, such as Thomas who is described to be good at jumping and falling, and Christopher who might "not be the highest jumper but held his own".

The game furthermore emphasises the shapes' differences through their abilities. Not every shape has a special ability. Thomas, Chris and John, for example, just have different sizes—which for some puzzles are very useful—but characters such as Claire and James have each a special ability that the other shapes do not. Claire's ability to float on toxic water helps the player to get the other shapes across the water if the player places the other character on top of Claire and then moves her to the other side. James' ability to, as the narrator states, "disregard Newtonian Law", has him falling upwards instead of downwards like all the other characters, which again proves to be useful in solving each puzzle in which he appears. None of the shapes move exactly according to any of the other shapes so that once the player has the possibility to control all shapes can feel the unique quirks and abilities each shape has, and from that infer a sense of characterness.

In Short

Thomas Was Alone is an interesting game for the fact that it does not portray its characters as visual figures that look human-like. Instead, the game uses three interdependent elements that allows the player to assign a sense of personhood to the quadrilateral shapes the player controls to solve the levels of puzzles: their personal names, the extra-diegetic narrator, and kinaesthetic motion. Personal names are one of the most important mechanisms for a reader to identify a figure as a quasi-person. The narrator is connected to what the player does in the game, so that what happens

in the game is in alignment with what the narrator says. This allows the player to not only make sense as to how to solve the puzzles and control the shapes, but also enables the player to assign thoughts and feelings to the shapes. Finally, the game's kinaesthetic motion allows the player to feel the difference between each shape. Not only does every shape move, jump and sound different in comparison to each other, some shapes also have abilities that others do not have. These three structural elements combined allow the player to infer personhood from the shapes beyond the game's story and in spite of the game's lack of visual human-like figures.

4. *Overwatch* (2016)

In this section, I discuss how the team-based online multiplayer shooter game *Overwatch* allows the player to interpret avatars into characters through the developer Blizzard Entertainment's transmedia practices within the *Overwatch* franchise.

Overwatch contains, at the time of writing, 31 different heroes for the player to control. The characters function as avatars in the sense that they represent the player, and function as the player's locus of agency to act in the game world. When the player chooses one of the characters, the characters' names are replaced by the player's name so that the individual player is recognisable to another, even when two players use the same avatar. The avatars provide the player the possibility to play the match that suits their style of play (Bartle 1996; Aarseth 2003). Each hero is categorised into one of three different categories—healer, tank or damage—but also maintains their own unique abilities within their category. Although their unique abilities give them an individual flavour, these abilities do not characterise them as individual quasi-persons, because these abilities are nothing more than abilities; they do not provide the character an existence to whom the player can ascribe thoughts and intentions. Theoretically, the avatars can be completely stripped from their personal names, their visual design as *kyara*, and more, and the player could still play the game so long as they have their abilities.

The question then is: how do these avatars turn into characters? I argue that *Overwatch* uses paratext (see Genette 1987) to facilitate the characterisation of these heroes through the transmedia practices Blizzard Entertainment executes in and outside of the game's matches. Genette (1987) introduces the notion of paratext as a textual element that supports the reader in their interpretation of a certain work, "whose existence alone […] provides some commentary on the text and influences how the text is received" (7). Genette places the responsibility of the paratext onto the author (or its associates) who then in a variety of degrees provides certain types of official and unofficial support for the reader's interpretation of the author's work. As explained in chapter five, the example of J. K. Rowling's tweet on Hermione's ethnicity shows that this kind of responsibility provides the author with an almost holy dimension, and can lead to the reader becoming more confused as to how to interpret certain works instead of clarifying that work. Johnathan Gray (2010) expands on Genette's notion into contemporary media practices, considering paratext those additional works that shape the reader, watcher, or audience's expectations of the work to the extent that paratexts such as movie trailers, advertisements for games and such, "shape the reading strategies that we will take with us 'into' the text, […] they provide the all-important early frames through which we will examine, react to, and evaluate textual consumption" (26). Although Gray's additional interpretation of the paratext provides a frame for how to interpret trailers, posters etc., for convergence culture, prior to his work, Mia Consalvo (2007) adapted Genette's concept of the paratext to be specifically applied to games. She argues

that peripheral industries surrounding games function as paratext, which includes game magazines, mods, strategy guides and more to shape the player's experience of the game work.

Hanzo and Genji

Blizzard's method to turn the avatars from the game into characters via their transmedia practices can be considered a paratextual strategy that shapes the player's experience of the game work. Blizzard Entertainment characterises its characters through the comics and movies on their website as paratextual elements that connect to the game work. The comics and movies that I discuss here include the comics[18] Blizzard Entertainment makes available on their website, and the videos that Blizzard Entertainment calls animated shorts, cinematic trailers and origin stories. This excludes gameplay review videos and character introduction videos, because these portray the characters in terms of their usage as avatars in the game's matches.

The videos and comics can easily be read and understood apart from the game, and could therefore not be considered paratext. However, since Blizzard Entertainment is a *game* company, and tends to release new comics and videos at the same time as they introduce new characters, events, or other mechanics to their game, it is questionable to consider the video and comics to be standalone works. More importantly, the game makes intertextual references to the comics and videos often that are more easily interpretable when the player has read or watched these comics and videos. For example, a conversation between two characters randomly occurs at the start of each match, and seems only to be available to the players who use these characters as their avatar within the same team. When two players on the same team choose Genji and Hanzo before the start of a match, the following conversation may occur:

> Genji: It is not too late to change your course, brother.
> Hanzo: You may call yourself my brother, but you are not the Genji I knew. (Blizzard Entertainment 2016)

On its own, the conversation provides little information. The player might initially not even realise that this is a conversation between Genji and Hanzo, because the only indication that this conversation occurs are the characters' voice-overs. When the player realizes that this is a conversation between Hanzo and Genji, they could infer that these two are siblings—which is further supported by the Japanese-sounding names and their broadly 'Asian' appearance— and that they share a troubled past. As to what this past is, what happened between them and why, that remains unclear, and is not resolved during a match.

The player can find the answer to what this conversation refers to in the comics and videos. In this case, one video in particular, *Dragons* (2016) which, in eight minutes, tells of the tragic history between Hanzo and Genji. The video shows Hanzo returning to his home to honour his dead brother. But, while he performs the ritual, an assassin sneaks up to him and questions why Hanzo honours someone he murdered. While they fight, the assassin continues to torment Hanzo, telling him that it was Hanzo's duty to kill his brother who had presumably betrayed his clan. Hanzo performs his ultimate attack, calling forth a dragon with the words "*Ryuu ga waga teki wo kurau*".[19] The assassin

[18] The comics are also available in print, but Blizzard Entertainment usually makes their comics first available for free on their website.

[19] Hanzo's summoning words translate to something like "Dragon, devour my enemies".
The English voice-over of these words says "Let the dragon consume you!".

responds to the attack, summoning another dragon with the words *"Ryuujin no ken wo kurau*".[20] Hanzo remarks that only someone of his Shimada family "can control the dragons", upon which assassin reveals himself to be Genji, Hanzo's brother whom Hanzo thought to be dead. Genji tells Hanzo he has forgiven him for what he has done, and that Hanzo should forgive himself, but also that it is time to pick a side in a changing world. Hanzo responds with anger and attempts to shoot Genji. Genji, however, avoids the attack and leaves Hanzo with the message that he still has hope for his brother.

There are quite a few intertextual elements in the video that the *Overwatch* game uses in order to build the characters of Hanzo and Genji. The video *Dragon* reveals the brothers to have a difficult background, one that might be even more tragic than the player can realise from the game. Other elements include the dragon attacks. Each hero has an 'ultimate attack' in the game that they can use once the player has charged them. Hanzo's and Genji's ultimate attack in the game is—with a few slight changes—almost identical to how their ultimate attack is depicted in the video. Both characters use the same summoning words to call forth the dragons, the dragons look the same, the sound of the summoning is similar, and the types of attack that the summoned dragons perform in the short film coincides with what the player notices in the game. Although the game does not facilitate any character-development, by connecting the game to the comics and short films, the player can perceive Hanzo's and Genji's characterisation process from which they infer a life-like existence and read Hanzo and Genji as quasi-persons.

Blizzard Entertainment's Paratextual Strategy

Blizzard Entertainment's strategy to have the player read the game's avatars as characters recalls Martin Roth's (2013) description of the Naruto fighting game adaptations within the Naruto media mix strategy. Roth explains that the Naruto fighting games facilitate "distinct experiences of the 'Naruto' world" (244), and therefore distinct experiences of the characters. He argues that the characters in the Naruto games can be regarded as *kyara*, seeing as they share the visual appearance with the characters in the *anime*, and therefore encourage emotional attachment. However, although the *anime* stimulates this emotional attachment via story and narration, in the fighting games "the degree of abstract rather requires the player to link the *kyara* to the experience of other parts of the franchise in order to retain or regain this emotional engagement" (250).

Blizzard Entertainment uses the *Overwatch* characters as *kyara* whose appearance in the comics and videos functions as paratextual support to facilitate distinct player experiences which the game itself cannot facilitate. In December 2016, a little over six months after Blizzard released *Overwatch*, the company published the comic *Reflections* (Chu and Montlló 2016). The comic shows Tracer, a character that Blizzard tends to use as their mascot character, running around to obtain a green scarf. When she arrives home, the reader is introduced to a new character that the player of the game had not encountered before: Emily. Emily unwraps the gift Tracer brought and kisses Tracer intimately. From that cosy scene, and particularly the affectionate kiss that comes after the gift, the reader can infer certain information that was previously unknown about Tracer, specifically regarding her sexuality: having a girlfriend can make the reader assume Tracer's sexual orientation.

A genre such as a shooter or fighting game provides little space for character development. I have not found a single indication in the *Overwatch* game that Tracer has a girlfriend, or anything about her sexual orientation. Yet, my perception of her as a character is one who is at the very least

[20] Genji's summoning words translate to something like "Devour my dragon sword".
The English voice-line of these words is "The dragon becomes me".

bisexual. This perception I then take with me as a player to the game, constantly interpreting what the Tracer avatar—whether controlled by me or any other player—does to re-affirm this perception. The development of Tracer, Genji, Hanzo and the other characters occurs outside of the game in the paratext. Their person-like qualities, their development as characters that are born into a life and might possibly die, rely on the stories narrated in the comics and videos. The player then has to link the *Overwatch* avatars to the characters in the comic and short films to experience the avatars as characters.

In Short

A prevalent way *Overwatch* turns its avatars into characters in the game is by their relation to the comics and videos. In these comics and videos, the characters are portrayed as quasi-persons. The player links the character's portrayal to the game, which shows several intertextual references so that the game characters carry the impression that they develop, even when the genre of the game does not fully support such a development.

5. *Hollow Knight* (2017)

Hollow Knight, like many games, gives its characters specific functions that they have to fulfil. However, the game manages to go beyond the player's expectations that these characters will fulfil these ludic functions according to the player's repertoire of game character role functions by subverting these roles, to the extent that they might even work against the player. In this section, I will explain how *Hollow Knight* stimulates in the player certain expectations of the characters and the functions they perform, and then subverts these roles. This way, the game gives the player the impression that these figures exist beyond serving the player within a specific role, but have—as quasi-persons—their own will and agenda according to which they act.

Additionally, this section will also discuss how the player can interpret certain figures as characters that initially only seem to operate according to their ludic function and nothing else. The pieces of information that the game gives the player allows them to attain *additive comprehension* (see Jenkins 2006, 127) to connect the figure that they see to the signs that the game gives them in order to infer that the figure is a quasi-person.

Millibelle's Betrayal

Because game characters are integrated within the game's mechanical system, they function according to the role they were given to lead the player towards a specific goal or the game's end-state. Isbister's (2006, 240) categorisation of social role templates suggests that character conventions dictate how the game characters are supposed to behave according to their function within a given game. *Hollow Knight* has many characters that use a certain convention of a character's social role. It contains characters with supporting roles, such as Cornifer who provides the player with maps of the area, or merchants such as Millibelle. It also contains obstacle characters such as Hornet who the player has to defeat in order to reach their goals, and enemies such as the Traitor Lord. The game also contains allies such as Cloth, who will help the player defeat the Traitor Lord on the condition that the player saves her before battling the Traitor Lord.

Initially, *Hollow Knight*'s characters act according to the function that they have been given, such as an obstacle, enemy, or support. At the same time, the game also manages to provide these

characters their own psyche and agenda that allows them to act outside of their given function when the player performs the right combination of actions, which gives the impression that these entities are characters because they come off as unpredictable beings with thoughts and an agenda of their own that is prioritised over the function the game at first impression gives them.

One of Isbister's social role templates for non-playable characters is the informant/trader, who provides the player with services that they need which ranges from information to trading goods (2006, 248). According to Isbister the player has little investment in these characters besides the basic trading and bargaining. The role seems to be incredibly fixed in the average game experience, and Isbister warns in her game design book that game designers have to keep these characters 'plausible' in the game world and not have them interfere too much with the 'core gameplay'. That means that a kind of character such as a trader serves a very specific function to the player, and is basically not allowed to act outside the template of this function.

In *Hollow Knight,* every time the player-character loses its life, the player has to retrieve the player-character's soul and Geo (the in-game currency). If the player manages to reach the soul and defeat it, the Geo returns to the player, but if the player-character dies again before reaching its soul, the player loses all the Geo they had accumulated until that point. Luckily, the game provides a solution to this problem: the player can save up their Geo at the bank of Millibelle the Banker. The player will not have to worry about losing their Geo at the bank when the player-character dies, but what they do have to worry about is Millibelle.

During my own gameplay, I would regularly deposit some of my hard-earned Geo into Millibelle's bank so that when I had saved up enough I could buy items that I needed to progress through the game without having to worry about losing all the Geo that I had worked so hard to obtain. My money was safe in her care. Or so I thought. The next time I visited Millibelle after I had deposited over 2,500 Geo, she was gone. And so was my Geo. I had no idea where she was, but I found myself quite frustrated with the character. Like the other games I discuss in this chapter, Millibelle contains some signifiers that communicate that she is a character: she is an individual with a name, she is visually an anthropomorphic insect, and she spoke to me with a speech distinct to elderly ladies ("Hello there dearie", and so on). She was already a character before she ran off, but before that action, her primary existence operated on her function as a banker to prioritise me, the player, and support me as I try to solve the mystery of the game. I did not perceive her necessarily as an individual with her own thoughts and intentions. But, by running away, she had intervened on my gameplay.

Eventually, I found Millibelle in a spa bath in an area called 'The Pleasure House'. She started shaking from fear the moment she noticed the player-character, and lied that the Geo was gone because the costs it took her to maintain the bank were supposedly higher than she had expected. When I tried to press her again, she would not say anything else than: "No h-hard feelings, okay?". Clearly, the script had run out. I would not gain any new information about retrieving my Geo. Frustrated, I hit her. All these Geo coins suddenly dropped out of her: there was my money!

What is special about Millibelle is that she fulfils a ludic function that is standardised, but then deviates from the role. Her betrayal characterises her as a character with an agenda of her own instead as a mere function that exists to serve the player. Her betrayal has real consequences for the player's experience in the game. Not only does she take away the Geo the player had to work for, her disappearance also removes the saving mechanism that the game initially promised the player would have. Even after I had retrieved my Geo, I did not get the saving mechanism back, and so every time my player-character lost its life, I would run the risk of losing all my Geo again. I had

to be even more careful, as I could not run the risk of losing the Geo that I needed for the upgrades to my player-character's abilities, since the game had become more difficult as well. Millebelle's betrayal thus allows her to become more idiosyncratic, and hence more of an individual, a quasi-person, than her function as a banker could have given her.

Not all of the game's characters subvert the player's expectations. But, nonetheless, *Hollow Knight* has several characters that defy the initial ludic function the player gives them. The Dung Defender, a character in the shape of a beetle, has the ludic function as one of the game's main bosses. *Hollow Knight* does not contain many boss characters that the player has to beat but, unfortunately for me, the Dung Defender is one of them. If the player wants to pass the Royal Waterways in order to progress the game to its end-state, the player has to defeat the Dung Defender. They can hear the Dung Defender already at the entrance of the beetle's domain as he shouts non-sensible utterances that to my own ears sounded much like a Spanish bullfighter (or however I imagine a Spanish bullfighter to sound like). The Dung Defender attacks immediately on sight, throwing mud balls while simultaneously attacking the player underground and in the air, so that the player has to avoid multiple projectiles at once and only has a small window to attack the Dung Defender. This boss fight took me more attempts than I would like to admit. After the player has defeated the Dung Defender, he collapses and crawls back into the ground.

The game gives the impression that the Dung Defender's function in the game as a boss is over, and he therefore will not appear again. But after the player visits the Royal Waterways again, the Dung Defender will approach them—this time not to fight, but to apologize. He admits that he mistook the player-character for a mindless husk, and realised only after the player defeated him that this was not the case. And therefore, the player will infer that although the Dung Defender's original function is that of a boss to defeat, the Dung Defender's mistake gives the character a person-like existence.

Additive Comprehension

Besides the game characters who show a distinct will beyond their ludic function, *Hollow Knight* also contains characters who initially only seem to operate according to their ludic function as, for example, a merchant, boss, or quest provider. Nevertheless, even in the case of these types of characters, the player can infer from them a life-like existence as quasi-persons when they acquire additive comprehension of the game's world to piece together background information over the characters they encounter.

Additive comprehension is a term Henry Jenkins borrows from game designer Neil Young (Jenkins 2006, 127). It refers to a piece of information given to the player that changes the player's perception of the situation. This concept is useful to apply to *Hollow Knight* in order to describe how the player can infer a sense of characterhood from figures that only seem to fulfil a certain ludic function (and do not act beyond that like Millebelle and the Dung Defender do).

Deep within the game world's Fungal Wastes lies the Mantis Village that contains a chamber in which the Mantis Lords reside. These three lords are optional bosses who the player can challenge to fight. Beating them grants the player safe passage through the Mantis Village, and a gateway to another location in the game's world, Deepnest. Although there are only three mantis lords present, the observant player will notice four thrones, one of which is broken (image 4). This fourth throne suggests a fourth lord, and the fact that the throne is broken suggests a dark past.

When the player gets closer to the Queen's Garden, a location in the game's world that the player has to visit to meet the world's queen, a giant mantis shows up, announced as the Traitor

Lord. He provides no other function at all other than being a main boss, an enemy obstacle that the player has to overcome if they wish to progress the game towards its end-state. However, his name, his vile appearance, and the fact that he attacks the player suggests a connection to the fourth throne of the Mantis Lords.

As soon as the player defeats the Traitor Lord, he bursts open and the orange infection—something that the player encounters throughout the whole game, driving characters mad—spreads out of his skull. At this moment, the Traitor Lord appears as an entry in the game's Hunter's Journal, the compendium that provides information about each enemy the player has defeated. This journal states the following about the Traitor Lord: "Once a member of the Mantis tribe, now cast out and driven mad by infection". This revelation provides the player with additive comprehension, connecting the Traitor Lord conclusively to the fourth throne and understanding that this is the Mantis Lord that betrayed the three other Mantis Lords, thereby giving the figure a sense of a life-like existence than it initially seemed to provide as a boss that the player simply had to defeat.

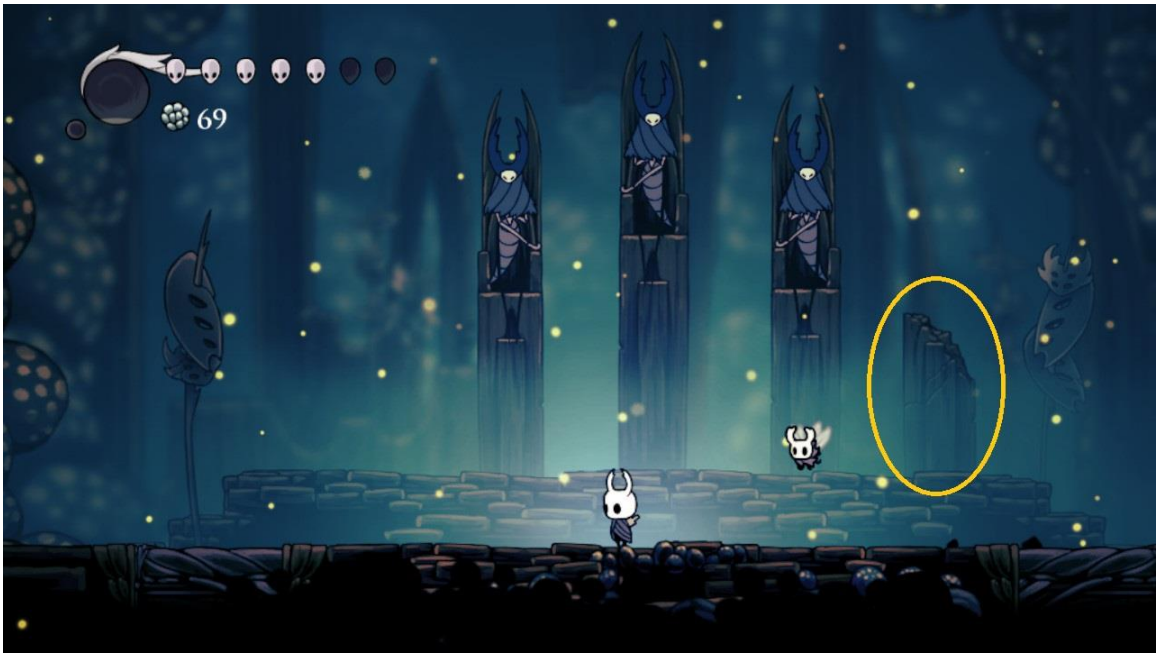

Image 4: The fourth throne of the Mantis Lords' lair is broken.

In Short

Hollow Knight shows its figures as quasi-persons by giving the player the expectation that the characters will act according to the ludic function these characters were initially given, such as being a merchant or a boss, who exist to serve the player in their progress towards the game's end-state. Yet, *Hollow Knight* subverts these ludic functions and defies the player's expectations by having the characters act out of the function: the characters might betray the player or apologise for their previous behaviour. Since it seems that all these characters have their own agenda, beyond serving as a ludic function for the player, the player receives the impression that these characters are quasi-persons.

Not every character in *Hollow Knight* subverts their ludic function, and some act only within the constraints of the function they were given. Nevertheless, the game allows the player to obtain

pieces of information about these characters that the player puzzles together, thereby allowing the player to attain additive comprehension, by which the player can infer a life-life existence from these figures that go beyond their ludic function.

6. *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (2012)

Animal Crossing: New Leaf (*AC:NL*) gives the player the impression that the figures in the game's world are quasi-persons through the game's real-time mechanics, and through the transfer of data between two or more players that connect their game worlds. This provides a form of continuity between the character manifestation that appears in one player's game and then reappears in the other player's game, suggesting that it is the same character.

Villager Autonomy

Having abandoned the game for over a year, my town in *AC:NL* was almost exactly the same as I had left it, but run over with weeds and with fewer flowers. The five or six villagers that were living in my little town before were still there, walking around as if no time had passed. But although they gave the impression little had changed, the villagers were not shy in telling me that I had not been around. My first conversation was with Pompom, a little duck character with an energetic personality. Her immediate dialogue when my avatar initiated a conversation with her was, "Eek! It's the ghost of Joleen! Run away! Run away!". She did not seem to believe that the figure in front of her was my avatar, but as her dialogue went on (my avatar does not actually have any dialogue lines at all) she came to realise that it was really 'me' who had returned to the village. Other villagers responded in similar ways. All of them showed surprise that I had returned. Some would immediately welcome me back, while others would point out exactly how long I had been gone (over twelve months).

AC:NL can be considered a simulation game. Although all games are in some sense simulations (Aarseth 2004; Frasca 2006), Apperley (2006) points out that the genre of simulation games "clearly remediate a 'real' world activity. Within this is often the assumption—or the promise—that the game is 'authentic' to the 'real' activity" (12). *AC:NL* seems to promise some of those 'real world' activities. The player's primary actions involve mostly mundane activities: watering the flowers, designing and decorating their house, catching insects, and talking to the villagers of their town. However, Aarseth (2007) points out that entities not belonging to the real world can also be simulated, such as dragons. He argues that although the dragon Smaug in Tolkien's world is fictional, the dragon in *EverQuest* (Verant Interactive and 989 Studios 1999) is a simulation. The former consists only of signs, while the latter consists of signs and a dynamic model that responds to the player's input (37). *AC:NL*'s characters are far from mimicking any real world entities too. As anthropomorphic animals they might resemble certain entities, such as ducks, rabbits, or lions, but I have yet to see a real lion watering a rose and asking how my day has been.

AC:NL contains about 333 villagers (Animal Crossing Wiki n.d.), characters who can live in a player's village, although only about ten of them can live in the village at the same time. The game also contains ten characters with specific social roles, such as the merchant and real estate agent Tom Nook, providing the player with upgrades to their house, or the assistant Isabelle, helping the player to improve the town. Any character with a special role usually only responds when the player requires something from them, or when a special event occurs in the game such as during New Year's Eve, but villager characters live autonomously and do not require the engagement of the

player to perform actions. They do not have a specific function to fulfil other than populating the player's village, occupying themselves with the mundane activities of fishing, shopping, catching bugs and listening to music.

The game follows the player's time in the 'real' world. When it is for example, Wednesday the 24th of April 2019 at 10 AM for the player, it will be that exact time in the game as well. The time can be manipulated, because the game does not follow any satellite time based on the location of the player. Instead, the game follows the time as set in the 3DS console, which can be changed manually by the user of the console. This means that if the player were to change the time from the 24th of April 2019, 10AM to the 25th of April 2019, 3PM, *AC:NL*'s time will change to that time as well.

Their capacity to instil guilt in me from not having visited for so long can be partially attributed to my own personality as a player, but it also partially lies in the representation of how the game expresses the characters so that the player assigns certain sets of thoughts, intentions and behaviours to these characters. *AC:NL* shows that the characters have a certain autonomy from the player. The characters instilled in me the message that while I was out of the game, they continued to live inside the game world and the same amount of time passed as in the real world. This particular example can be attributed to the time mechanic of the game, but the characters also maintain other sorts of behaviour that gives the impression that they have their own autonomous life.

As I was strolling through town, cleaning up the weeds that had grown all over the game world, villagers Mott and Pompom entered a conversation. I could not tell the topic of their conversation, but they seemed rather animated. I never managed to be in time to overhear any conversation characters have with each other, although the game does afford the player the ability to listen in.[21] The question here is not so much whether or not they actually had a conversation, the relevance lies in the signals that made me think it was a conversation: the animation between Pompom and Mott, as they were conversing, resembled the conversations between my avatar and other characters: when a villager wishes to speak to the player, either an exclamation mark or three red stripes appear above their head, followed with a high-pitched sound.

Continuity

Another means by which the villager characters show autonomy is their habit of moving in and out of the village. Depending on how well the player treats the town and the villagers by keeping the village clean, sending the villagers letters, or constructing public work projects, the number of villagers increases up to a maximum of ten villagers. The simulation is based on the specific paradigm of Japanese society, the *furusato*, the concept of old villages where one lives a rustic lifestyle, completely the opposite of any busy cosmopolitan cities, that summons feelings of nostalgia (see Robertson 1988). These simulation aspects mirror Japanese contemporary ideals of living, and therefore appeal to the player on an emotional level.

When a character leaves town, the first impression is that the character leaves the player's game world. In some cases this impression might be true, but the game world expands each time the player visits another player's town, or when another player visits the player's town. Via a local connection or an internet connection, two or more players can share their data, and enter each other's town. This I did with a friend of mine. As I explored this friend's village, I gathered some

[21] The *Animal Crossing* Wikipedia page lists what kind of conversations villagers usually have: https://animalcrossing.fandom.com/wiki/Conversation.

fruits, bought some furniture, and spoke to some of his villagers. Then I returned to my town. My friend did the same in my town: he gathered some of my town's local fruit, bought some furniture, and spoke to some of my villagers. And he returned to his town. Not long after this encounter, the character Joey from my village announced he would move. I never really liked him, so I said 'yes', and he went. A couple of days later, the same friend whose town I had visited told me that Joey had come to settle in his town. Joey had announced to my friend that he moved from the town of Bloempje—my town—to his town. What had happened was that by exchanging data, the game world of my friend and my game world expanded, merged into a single game world. As a result, both me and my friend experienced a sense of continuity between the characters in my village and the characters in his village: the manifestation of Joey in his town gave the impression it was the same manifestation Joey from my town, and not a manifestation of Joey any other player might have in their town.

The characters are containers of the data transferred between the 3DS handheld consoles and allow the player to notice the data transaction. The Joey that now lives in my friend's town contains, as a computational agent, data of my town, and sometimes shows to my friend that it has this data by specifically talking to my friend's avatar about me or my town. The transfer of data provides a sense of continuity between the character manifestations in one player's game and in the other player's game. The characters show that they lived at a certain time at a certain place and give the impression that they identify with the manifestation that lived in another player's town. Eco's (1995) statement that "[w]hen fictional characters begin migrating from text to text, they have acquired citizenship in the real world and have freed themselves from the story that created them" (126) is also applicable to *AC:NL*'s villager characters. Each villager character has the potential to move and appear in another player's game. When these characters appear in another player's town—on the condition that the players have shared their data—these characters free themselves from the game world and therefore from the player and the player's agency to affect and influence the town and its inhabitants. Appearing in another player's town, these characters give the message that they are free, autonomous agents who decide for themselves if they want the player to influence their lives. It is from this autonomy that the player infers to these figures a life-like existence as quasi-persons, as characters.

In Short

AC:NL gives the player the impression that its characters have an autonomous, life-like existence. The characters show that they have their own will, intentions and thoughts independent from the player. They act as if they are aware of the player's presence in and absence from the game, reminding the player that they have not been visiting them for quite a while. They also move between towns, popping up in another player's town when two or more players shared data, and express that they previously lived in the other player's town. This sense of continuity between manifestations frees the villager characters from the player, showing that they decide for themselves, as quasi-persons, where to live and with which player.

7. Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the different means through which digital games construct characters to answer the main question: *what are the different means by which digital games construct the game character so that the player perceives that entity to be a character?* The premise was that the player

invokes the characters that the games stimulate using different means to different effects. I began with a theoretical explanation for how the constraints and affordances of a medium and its specific conventions determine a medium's presentation of characters, which are both similar to and different from other media.

I followed with a discussion about the challenge of how games present *game* characters. Game characters are the quasi-persons integrated in the game's mechanical system, which requires the player's non-trivial effort to progress from one state to another. But they are, at the same time, subjected to the challenge that games can vary so distinctively from each other in structure and modality such that the construction of characters, and therefore also of game characters, cannot be reduced to a single core. Therefore, in order to give an impression of the different means by which games stimulate the player to invoke game characters, I provided four game works as examples.

Thomas Was Alone uses personal names, extra-diegetic narration and kinaesthetic motion to invoke the characters. *Overwatch* gives each character separate abilities that make sense in the matches of the game world, but the game primarily relies on the developer's transmedia production of the franchise to create the impression that the game's avatars are characters with a life. *Hollow Knight* subverts game character conventions and allows characters to exist beyond their initial functions with an agenda of their own even when that means betraying the player. And *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* gives the impression that its characters have an existence independent from the player through actions such as pointing out to the player when they have not visited the game world for a while, initiating conversations with the player, leaving the town to settle in another, or visiting the player's town at several points in the year.

Chapter Seven
The Dynamic Game Character

In this chapter, I explain the concept of the dynamic game character, a type of game character with a development structure that branches into different outcomes. This chapter is meant as an introduction and therefore only presents the topic and the basic conditions needed to consider a game character dynamic. In the next chapter, I will discuss the strategies dynamic game characters appear in more detail.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section of this chapter is devoted to the introduction of the dynamic game character using my experience playing the *Mass Effect* series. Here I will provide a definition of the dynamic game character. This section also addresses the possibility space, the mechanical structure of games that facilitate game characters to become dynamic, and subsequentially explains the development structure of the dynamic game character, which uses the possibility space to provide for the player a non-trivial role in the characterisation process of these characters. The second section discusses the existence of *rigid* game characters in order to describe how dynamic game characters diverge from them. I will therefore present a brief definition on rigid game characters. The distinction between dynamic game characters and rigid game characters is, however, not as strict as it initially might seem, hence why in the definition about rigid game character I also set up the first discussion about the grey area, using the example of *Nier: Automata.* I will explain this grey area in more detail in the next chapter. The third section ends the chapter by providing the main conditions for a game character to be considered dynamic. It further clarifies how a character is considered dynamic in the structure of the game, as well as providing the conditions on which I choose the dynamic game characters to be discussed in the next chapter.[22]

It is impossible to play all games that exist to find dynamic game characters that possibly confirm or depart from the definition that I describe in this chapter. As I explain in chapter three, 'On Method', I therefore follow Roland Barthes' (Barthes [1966] 1995) and Mieke Bal's (Bal 1978; 1999) approach to create a deductive method in which the researcher first proposes a general theory, and then works gradually down to different species that conform and depart from that proposed theory. The works have to conform to the theory in a general perspective, but should allow the researcher to determine similarities and differences between each work. Such an approach allows me to provide an in-depth analysis of the diversity of the dynamic game character over the course of several games in the next two chapters.

The games I selected accommodate the general overview that this chapter is meant to provide. This means that, on one end of the spectrum, I chose games such as the *Mass Effect* series which contain a large set of dynamic game characters, with a combination of prefabricated and non-prefabricated characters whose development is deterministic. On the other end of the spectrum, I chose games such as *Kingdom Hearts* (2002) with prefabricated characters whose development are deterministic regardless of the player's performance. Other games that I mention in this chapter,

[22] Several paragraphs of this chapter are also in my paper 'Definition and Construction of Dynamic Game Characters in Digital Games' for the academic workshop at the Ropecon conference held on the 26th of July, 2019 in Helsinki, Finland.

such as *Nier: Automata* (PlatinumGames 2017) and *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Studios 2018), fall somewhere in between on the spectrum, as they contain prefabricated characters with indeterministic development outcomes. I will explain these particular concepts in the next chapter as well. It might be that there are games with dynamic game characters which my definition misses. They might show characters that depart from my definition of the dynamic game character. I do not deny that this could happen. This possibility is not something that I necessarily perceive as a limitation, but rather an advantage, because it confirms Barthes' and Bal's arguments that from a theory one can extrapolate different species that conform and depart from the model, which allows for an analysis of the plurality of characters in terms of "their historical, geographical and cultural diversity" (Barthes [1966] 1995, 254). As long as I do not find any games that completely contradict the existence of the dynamic game character, I believe that the examples that I use are sufficient to answer the research question of this dissertation.

Nevertheless, my theory of the dynamic game character is not based on stories or narrative structures, as has been previously the case with character typologies such as those from Vladimir Propp (1928) and A. J. Greimas (1966). As I explain within this chapter, the dynamic game character depends on the mechanical system of the game instead of on the narrative structure of the game. A typology based on narrative will only mean perceiving characters in terms of 'classical' narration. While that is definitely one means by which characters are communicated, characters also have a historical grounding in performance and theatre, where they have been analysed in terms of acting rather than in terms of narration. And, as seen with the *kyara*, characters do not require narrative to exist. Nevertheless, if the mechanical structure of the game incorporates a narrative structure, then the dynamic game character is also incorporated within that narrative structure. In other words, just because the focus of the dynamic game character lies in the game's mechanic structure, does not mean I entirely omit narrative structure, rather that these narrative structures assume a more background role.

Besides the fact that the dynamic game character sidesteps the focus on stories, it also provides other advantages to our understanding of characters in games, and in the broader sense of contemporary transmedia practices (I explain the latter in more detail in the next chapter). The dynamic game character is not limited to the player-character. As seen from chapter two, 'Theory', game studies has primarily discussed characters in three ways: the difference between avatar and character (Bartle 1996; Carr 2002; Isbister 2006; Klevjer 2006; Newman 2002), the dual identity between player-character and player (Tronstad 2008; Calleja 2011; Vella 2015; 2016), and a general description of game characters (Aldred 2012; 2014; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 2008; Linderoth 2005; Schröter and Thon 2014). The dynamic game character is none of these. The dynamic game character diverges from the focus on the player-character, and steps away from the supposed dichotomy between player-characters and non-player-characters.

The player is still at the heart of the game, but a theory of the dynamic game character relocates the focus of the player's agency from being within a single entity, to an agency over a web of characters, over which the player (often) does not have any avatarial agency. Such a theory sidesteps the underlying focus that when the player controls a player-character their agency is limited to the scope of the player-character. Rather, even when the player controls a player-character, the dynamic game character shows how the player affects different kinds of non-player-characters. Even when the player controls no player-character at all, the dynamic game character is applicable in describing how the player influences a web of characters in a game. These advantages become clear in this chapter and the next chapters.

1. The Development Structure of Game Characters

The dynamic game character is a particular manifestation of a character in a game. It is a quasi-person with a development structure that branches into different outcomes, which are undetermined until the player actualises one or more possibilities that influence the direction onto distinct paths with a specific outcome. A dynamic game character is inherently ergodic because the player has to put in non-trivial effort to affect the development towards a certain outcome. The actualisation of these possibilities has structural consequences for the manner in which the player continues to traverse the game, as the game will indicate that the player influences the development of the character onto a certain path, and thereby the closing of another path. The outcome does not necessarily have to be clear to the player until they have actualised it.

Mass Effect 2 (*ME2*) (BioWare 2010) presented me with the following choice: will Shepard destroy Maelon's data to cure the genophage[23] or will Shepard keep the data? In my naivety I choose to destroy the data, because it was corrupted by inhumane experiments on female test subjects of the Krogan species. Little did I realise at the time, however, that this choice would lead to several consequences, especially for one character: Eve. In *Mass Effect 3* (*ME3*) (BioWare 2012), Shepard is tasked with retrieving the female test subjects from Maelon's project. During the mission, Shepard discovers that only one subject, Eve, has survived. Eve is taken aboard Shepard's ship, but she is weak, and she coughs. The ship's doctor, Mordin, explains that in order to cure the genophage he needs Eve. But Eve might not survive the procedures, because of her ill health. Eve insists that she wants to undergo the procedures, and dies due to complications.

'Was there any way to save Eve?', I thought. Was it possible for her to have survived the procedures, or was this an event that the game had set in stone? My search for an alternative led me to discover that in *ME2* I had already determined Eve's future by choosing to destroy Maelon's data instead of keeping it. Without it, Mordin's knowledge was insufficient and he could therefore not keep Eve alive. Had I chosen to retain Maleon's data, Mordin could have used the data and Eve would have lived. My choice resulted in the Krogan faction's support weakening, and Shepard would have to battle the final enemy without their help. This made the final battle a lot tougher than it could have been.

Eve, as well as other characters from the *Mass Effect* series, is a dynamic game character. Her development was undetermined until I, the player, employed non-trivial effort to make certain events happen which influenced her development in a certain direction. When I chose to destroy Maelon's data, I did not realise that the choice would affect her—she did not make an appearance until *ME3*—but, regardless, my choice closed off the direction in which she would have lived, and only left open the path where she would die. I was surprised. This outcome was not what I wanted, but I did not feel up for replaying *ME2* and *ME3* just to change this outcome. I had to live with the consequences of my actions: *my* Eve died.

The mechanical system of a game (see Aarseth and Calleja 2015) enables the player to not only change the state of the game, but to change the state of the character as well. Some characters have a development structure in which the player not only changes their state, but influences the direction in which the character will develop as well. These character's development contains different outcomes that depends on the player's choices and actions throughout the game. I call

[23] A biological weapon in the game's diegetic world that the Turian species developed against the Krogan species to reduce their numbers.

these kinds of characters: *dynamic game characters*.

The Possibility Space of Games

The mechanical system of a game creates a possibility space. Aarseth (1997) addresses the existence of this space when he explains that in a cybertext making certain choices makes a part of the text more and other parts less accessible to its users. With each decision, players actualise one possibility and close another (Aarseth 1997). Tychsen and Canossa (2008) state that a game's possibility space structures the playstyle that players can adopt to facilitate the creation of their player persona. And Bogost (2008) mentions that the possibility space of play in general is all the gestures made possible by its rules. This makes the possibility space sound restricted, because designers structurally determine what is possible and what is not possible, according to Westecott (2009). However, the scope of a possibility space depends on the game. It could be infinite for some and finite for other games. Take, for example, games with a procedurally-generated open world. In these games, players can traverse an endless game world because of the *procedural content generation* (PCG) method implemented so that new (and partially random) content in games is automatically generated. *Minecraft*'s (Mojang 2009) and *No Man's Sky*'s (Hello Games 2016) possibility spaces are infinite, as new content gets generated in a continuous loop. Nevertheless, not every possibility has to be available every time nor do certain rules have to be in effect all the time, because the game's processual nature causes the state of the game to change regularly so that players traverse between different segments—or sometimes even different games.

Let me explain the possibility space with an example. *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (*BotW*) (Nintendo 2017) is an open world game that allows the player to explore and navigate the game world, and generates new content every once in a while. The game is structured in such a way that players can decide where they want to go in that world, how, and when, but the possibilities of doing this are divided into different segments. The most obvious segment is an area called The Great Plateau, which simply functions as a tutorial area that familiarises players with the game's structure, mechanics and rules. Only when the player solves the puzzles in four shrines, scattered around various locations on this plateau, will they be able to leave it. Yet, even this area itself is fragmented, and not all rules and mechanics apply at the same time. For the Keh Namut shrine, the player first has to climb a mountain covered in snow. Soon they will discover that in order to reach the top where the shrine is located, they have to keep the player-character, Link, warm or else he will die. This can be done by finding warm clothes for Link, or by cooking specific dishes that warm him up for a certain amount of time. Once Link is inside the shrine, the player does not have to keep Link warm anymore, but they do have to solve the shrine's puzzle in order to obtain the Cryonis ability which allows players to create pillars of ice from a water's surface. The player cannot perform all actions within the game's possibility space all the time, because the segmented nature of this space causes certain possibilities to be available and other possibilities to be unavailable. In simple terms, different segments allow for different possibilities.

I consider the possibility space, the capacity of potential that the player can actualise, to belong to the mechanical system of a game, which structures the processes within the game and allows the game to change from on state to another. It consists of the rules of the system, the mechanics, and affordances provided by the different segments of a game. The player is the core ingredient for a possibility space's potential to be actualised. As game designer Sid Meier once stated: "A game is a series of interesting choices" (Juul 2005, 19). Although I do not consider all games to have a set of interesting choices, this statement is particularly applicable to the player and

dynamic game characters, because the player has to make interesting choices for the potential of dynamic game characters to materialise and develop.

The possibility space creates potential for character development in games that actualises when the player engages with the game while making choices and performing actions. The space's shape can be described and visualised by Brenda Laurel's (Laurel [1991] 2014) *flying wedge* for computer-human interaction. Laurel explains that in a drama play, the potential of the play turns into a set of possibilities as the play progresses, and every enactment makes some possibilities more or less probable ([1991] 2014, 84). At the climax of the play, all possibilities are eliminated except for one, which is the final outcome. This is when, according to Laurel, probability turns into necessity (84) (figure 10).

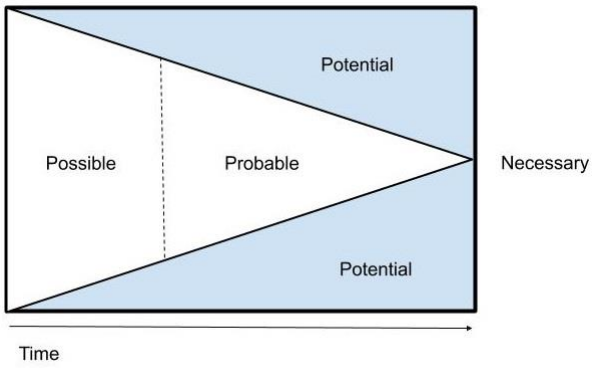

Figure 10: Illustration of Laurel's flying wedge.

Unlike scripted plays however, games can vary per gameplay due to the player's role within the game's mechanical system. As Laurel argues, the shape of potential for computer-human interaction is similar to the *flying wedge* for dramatic plays, but the amount of possibilities changes as the player acts and makes choices (figure 11). As a result, the *flying wedge* can point to multiple directions that vary in outcome. In other words, each player can have a different outcome depending on how they play—which choices they make and which actions they perform.

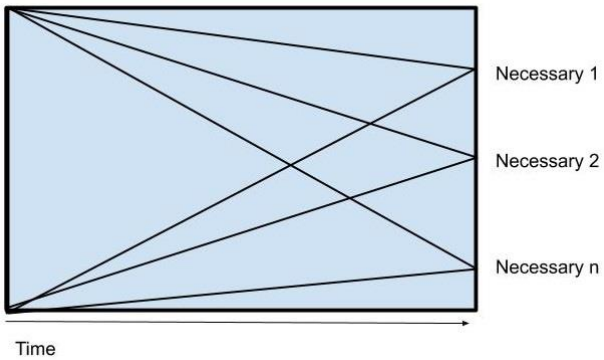

Figure 11: Illustration of Laurel's flying wedge for human-computer interaction.

The possibility space facilitates the development structure of all game characters. The range of that

potential depends on the game's mechanical organisation that administers each individual character's development structure with its own potential. The bare minimum of that scope is that the character must have the potential to manifest in the game. That is, that the game allows the player to engage with the character.

For instance, *Octopath Traveler* (Square Enix 2018) allows the player to choose one main character from eight possible protagonists at the start of the game. The player can choose to encounter the seven protagonists who they did not pick as their main character while traversing the world, and recruit them into a party of two or more characters, but the player can also choose to completely ignore any or all of them. It could be that one player decides not to recruit the character Cyrus, and so that character's potential development will never actualise over the course of the game as a result. Yet, another player might choose Cyrus at the start of the game as their main character. This opens the opportunity to explore the range of potential development this character has to offer. The player can choose to completely pursue the character's range of narrative development, advance the characters abilities, levels and jobs, which help in reaching the end-state of the game if the player wishes to pursue that. When a character manifests in a game, it presents a development structure with a certain amount of possibilities for how it can develop, even if that potential is severely limited.

At the widest range of the scope, games give the player the impression that the character's development structure contains a plurality of potentials and outcomes. For example, *Nier: Automata* (PlatinumGames 2017) has 26 different endings in total. Each ending is an actualised possibility of the development structure of the characters involved. The majority are endings that the player receives when they fail or flee from a mandatory quest and it is just a matter of restarting the specific quest to continue the game. Around five endings provide alternative end-states which are influenced by the decisions the player has made over the course of the game and the completion of the main story quests. It is impossible for the player to actualise all of these outcomes in a single run: for some endings, the player needs to obtain a certain combination of the other endings or, in other cases, a change in decision near the end is enough to change the end-state. It is at the widest range of the scope in which the dynamic game character operates.

The Development Structure of Game Characters

A dynamic game character's development structure is shaped similarly to Laurel's flying wedge for human-computer interaction. The player makes specific choices and actions in a field of potential that, in turn, makes certain outcomes of the development of the character more or less likely. The difference between the shape of the dynamic game character and the shape of the game's possibility space is that the games possibility space includes the development structure of all the game's dynamic game characters, while the development structure of a single dynamic game character is assigned distinctively to that individual character and could potentially end before the game itself has reached its end-state.

The development itself does not happen within a single continuous state, because games change state as they progress over time. The changes of state in games cause characters to switch back and forth between different segments continuously. Each segment declares that the player should expect something different from the characters, which could be exploration, battle, narrative development or something else. In some segments, the character develops more as a game piece, while in other segments it might develop rather as a being with an inner life. To use Thomas Lamarre's term (2018, 217), game characters are in a constant state of switching between codes,

and we expect something different from them within each segment. These segments function as games within the overall game consisting of their own mechanics, rules, and goals that contribute to the game's larger structural process so that players can reach the game's end-state. The sum of the different segments provides players with a plurality of possibilities that not only affect the overall progress of the game, but also contain the potential to influence game characters' development in the process towards the end-state.

A dynamic game character's development structure operates on those available segments that push the character to evolve as a person over time. Kristine Jørgensen (2010), who provides one of the few works about dynamic game characters, describes the growth and development of characters in *Mass Effect 2* (*ME2)* and *Dragon Age: Origins* (*DAO*) (BioWare 2009) through segments such as personal quests and loyalty missions of the companion characters that accompany the player-characters in both games. One of the mechanics that she identifies is the approval rating in *DAO* that "defines how well a companion gets along with the PC. This rating changes depending on the players' choice and actions, as well as how they treat the companion in question" (317). She describes that in *ME2* completed quests and personal missions of the companion characters "will increase their *loyalty* level from normal to loyal. Loyalty unlocks special abilities, decides whether or not a companion is available for romance, and how that companion will perform during the end game mission" (317).

Her description demonstrates that the procedures the player has to perform are constrained within particular segments that allow the player to affect the outcome of the character at the end-state of the game. The loyalty mission is its own contained segment that the player needs to complete for each companion character, such as Garrus, to become loyal to the player-character, and unlock any special abilities they have. The completion of this mission also provides the opportunity to romance Garrus (on the condition that the player-character is considered a female character by the game), which highly improves Garrus' chances to survive the game's final mission. The player cannot perform all of these procedures at the same time, and nor are all rules, mechanics and affordances simultaneously available. Rather, the player operates inside different segments which each contain their own combination of mechanics and rules—some of which overlap with others—and by doing so contribute to the overall development of the character, opening up and closing certain possibilities in the process.

The complexity is that a game character's development is integrated as much in the mechanical system as in the sign element. Schröter and Thon address the complexity of game characters:

> The ways in which characters are represented in contemporary video games cannot and should not be reduced to either interactive simulation or 'predetermined' narration, since, on the one hand it is constituted precisely by the complex interplay between these two modes of representation, and on the other hand, multiplayer games may also employ a third mode, namely that of communication, which entails all forms of communication and social interaction between the players of a multiplayer game. (2014, 47 - 48)

They identify three different modes, connected to the three ways characters are represented in games:

- The *narrative experience* where players perceive characters as fictional beings with

an inner life.

- The *social experience* where players see characters as the representation of other players.
- The *ludic experience* where players consider the character as game components, elements of the game mechanics. (49 - 50)

Schröter and Thon categorise the experience as three different experiences: in the ludic experience, the characters function as game pieces with properties such as health points, speed or special abilities. These abilities determine how useful the characters are for players to progress the game to the end-state. In the narrative experience, the character performs as a quasi-person with a personality and a life in which it can die. The game component and the quasi-person are not the same experience, but they assemble in the same figure that characters identify as a character. For multiplayer games, the characters function as avatars that represent players to other players. It is, however, interesting to note that in many cases these experiences are a single experience. In *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn* (Square Enix 2013) the player at once experiences the characters as an adventurer in the diegetic world, gains experience points in battles to improve the character as a ludic component, and plays together with other players who each control their own avatar character. These experiences do not occur as three separate experiences, but happen for the player as one.

A game's possibility space provides dynamic game characters the opportunity to develop as a being with an inner life while they also develop as a game piece, and vice versa. The development itself is divided into different segments, but these merge in the game's possibility space where the character's development is influenced towards a specific outcome. In *Persona 5* (P-Studio 2016), the protagonist's attributes might structurally be nothing more than numerical value—characterised with semantic meaning—but reaching a specific value in the protagonist's attributes allows players to have the character work a part-time job, or have them develop romantic or friendship relations with other characters that in turn also contribute to the game's characters as a game pieces. These are possibilities that, once actualised, determine the outcome of the character's development.

2. Non-Dynamic Game Characters

Not every game character is dynamic. Within a single game, non-dynamic characters can also exist and can coexist with dynamic characters. These non-dynamic game characters are a rigid type of game character. A game character is rigid when the outcome of the character's development is predetermined regardless of the player's non-trivial effort, because the character lacks the potential to develop in a variety of directions, and its development only follows one path.

The division between *dynamic* game characters and *rigid* game characters might at first sight suggest E.M. Forster's (1927) simple classification of flat and round characters in novels. His classification states that flat characters do not change by the circumstances of the story, and just move through them. Round characters are shown to be characters that develop throughout the story. However, it would be misleading to consider rigid characters identical to flat characters and dynamic characters identical to round characters. Forster discussed literary characters appearing in novels which rely on narration, whereas game characters as we know them today did not exist when he created the distinction. Theoretically, dynamic game characters could be 'flat' by Forster's definition, and still dynamic in terms of a game's structure. But the opposite is more common:

'round' characters that are rigid are quite common in games. Even if they change over the course of the fixed sequences in a game, the game only allows them to develop in a fixed direction towards a predetermined outcome, which does not involve the player's performance within the game.

Riku from *Kingdom Hearts* (Square 2002) is a rigid character. When the player starts the game, they are introduced to the player-character Sora and his friends Kairi and Riku. Kairi is soon kidnapped by a dark force, and both Riku and Sora set out to save her. Sora teams up with Donald and Goofy, and they visit all kinds of (Disney) worlds looking for Kairi. Riku, on the other hand, disappears, and is later revealed to be collaborating with the evil Maleficent, manipulated by her into believing that Sora does not care for Kairi or Riku anymore. The player is forced to battle Riku three times over the course of the game, while Riku is under the impression that Sora betrayed him. Gradually however, Riku comes to realize Maleficent's manipulation, and sacrifices himself for Sora to save Kairi.

A dynamic character develops in such a way that its development structure opens up some possibilities and closes others. Riku, on the other hand, does neither. He does not open possibilities, nor does he close them. The possibility space provides him little development that can be affected by players. He follows the script that he has been given and develops accordingly. Defeating Riku at the beginning of the game during a friendly match does not affect anything else over the course of the game, nor does the order of the worlds that Sora visits to find Kairi affect what will happen to Riku. Those possibilities are set in stone. In other words, Riku is a round character using Forster's classification, because he changes by the circumstances of the game, but despites his 'roundness', his development would have always gone in the direction as I just described. The player has no influence over the direction.

The distinction between dynamic game characters and rigid game characters is, however, not as strict as it initially might seem. I should explain that even if the game gives the impression that the player can affect the direction of a character's development, this character could still be a rigid game character as a *narrative agent* (I will explain the concept of narrative agents in chapter eight). *Nier: Automata* might contain 26 different endings, but there are only a four endings that do not lead to a 'game over' screen. These endings—named A, B, C, D and E—are also not different endings, but rather they announce the end of a certain part of the game. If the player wants to reach ending B for example, they first have to finish playing the game once so that they will reach ending A before they can reach ending B (figure 12). However, ending B is not a different ending, but is the same ending as ending A, but played with a different player-character. In ending A, the player has 2B as their player-character, whereas in ending B the player has had 9S as their player-character, but both characters have the same outcome in both ending A and ending B.

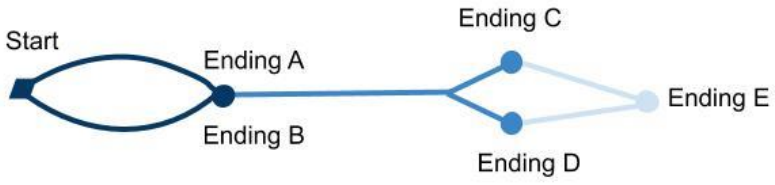

Figure 12: Diagram of *Nier: Automata*'s five endings.

Only ending C and D provide some dynamicity to the characters' outcome, but even this dynamicity is limited. Whether the player receives ending C or ending D is only decided during the final battle (which only takes about 10 minutes), and depends on the player's choice for whether they will

control 9S or a third character, A2, during the final battle. In the course towards one of these endings, the character 2B will inevitably die before either ending is reached, and therefore she has a linear and continuous development that does not change depending on the player's choices. The player has to win the final battle in order to receive either ending, so if they win directly controlling 9S, 9S will kill A2 and accidentally falls on 2B's sword and dies too. This is ending D. If the player wins directly controlling A2, A2 hacks 9S to save him from corruption, and sacrifices herself to save the world. This is ending C. Despite that these are two seemingly different endings, however, the player can achieve the final ending E after they have received both endings C and D. In this final ending, characters Pod 042 and Pod 153 voice their wish that A2, 9S and 2B could have lived and decide to rebuild them.

Nier: Automata gives the impression that its characters are dynamic, because the game implies that it has several different endings. However, what the game actually does is stack endings on top of each other, as certain endings can only be reached when other endings have been achieved. When the player reaches the final ending, ending E, the player will have had to play through rigid endings and paths (albeit not linear). Both endings C and D are then negated, because the player will have to have reached both in order to reach ending E, which will always, inevitably and regardless of the player's choices throughout the game, result in the same rigid scene in which Pod 042 and Pod 153 decide to rebuild A2, 9S and 2B. As *narrative agents*, these characters are therefore not dynamic, but rigid game characters, because the game's structure will always end the same when the player reaches the final end. That said, they can be dynamic game characters as *ludic agents*—which I explain in further detail in the next chapter.

3. The Conditions for Dynamic Game Characters

For a dynamic game character to be *dynamic*, it first of all requires player input. But this does not necessarily have to mean that the player needs to have an avatarial relationship with the character. Vella (2014) differentiates between two different dynamic mimetic elements (see Margolin 1986)—actions performed by the character that tells something about their personality—in games: character actions and player-induced actions. He discusses distinctively the player-characters. As a result, the distinction between character actions and player actions relies on the player's avatarial relations with that character. This means that the character actions describes actions the character performs independently of player input, and the player actions refer to actions that the player makes the player-character do. The latter is at the basis of the thesis in Vella's work (2015) on the player's involvement in the body of the playable figure where he discusses whether the player actions are the player's or the character's actions. For the argument of this dissertation, I assume Vella's statement that the player actions are "being perceived by the player as being her own as much as they are the character's" (2014, 13). The player's actions could be actions that contribute to a player-character's development structure to be dynamic, however, focusing on the player-character assumes that only once players have an avatarial relationship with the character can the character be dynamic, yet that would put a substantial limitation on how to understand game characters in general.

Player-induced actions also do not necessarily have to affect the game structurally. I could choose to have Arthur from *Red Dead Redemption 2* (*RDR2*) (Rockstar Studios 2018) continuously eats steak, and therefore I could characterise him as someone who eats steak a lot, but on the structural level of the game nothing changes. Indeed, the steak fills Arthur's core attribute so that

his health stays high, but so do most other foods in the game. These actions do not have the player steer the character's development in a direction that the game structurally acknowledges as a path that could be different.

Actions such as killing an innocent person on the street are taken into consideration by the game to structurally affect Arthur's development and outcome. Stealing, killing or refusing to help characters lowers Arthur's reputation bar which, as a result, makes other characters flee if they see him. Killing innocents registers as negative actions, and the response is that characters become afraid of Arthur, while actions that the game registers as positive prompts characters to give him rewards, prices in stores are lowered, and more outfits are unlocked.

In *RDR2*, the character's dynamicity is measured by a reputation bar that affects how Arthur dies (he will die regardless of what the player does). When he has a good reputation, Arthur dies in peace while looking at the sunset. With a bad reputation, he will be shot to death by his former gang mate. The reputation bar is merely the visual measurement of Arthur's characterisation process, but the responses from characters fleeing and Arthur being shot to death instead of having a peaceful death are structural consequences, showing the game acknowledging that the character develops in a certain direction.

Dynamic game characters are not limited to the player-character only. At the beginning of this chapter I described the death of Eve in *ME2*. Eve is not a player-character, but one of the many characters involved in Shepard's journey to save the galaxy. Although Shepard is the player-character and is the one through whom the player makes decisions and performs actions, these actions have structural consequences for non-player-characters as well. My decision to destroy Maelon's data was a decision attributed by the game to Shepard, but resulted in Eve's death, and consequently weakened the Krogan's support in the final battle. Eve's death could have been avoided, she could have lived, she could have had little Krogan children, and she could have raised the support of the Krogan to help Shepard's mission, but my choice to destroy Maelon's data influence her path towards a different outcome.

Despite the choices and actions that can affect a character's characterisation process, most games appear to only account for a certain set of outcomes. A game does not just arbitrarily create the outcome of a development, the possibilities in which a character can develop and the possible outcomes of the character's development are limited. It is just up to the player to realise which outcome they will obtain. In *RDR2,* Arthur will not survive his tuberculosis, there is no medicine regardless of what the player does. How he dies, however, can be influenced by the player, although there are only four outcomes in total.

Visually, each dynamic game character's development structure can be pictured as a tree, but how the tree is structured can be different per character. The tree and its branches are already outlined, and contain the outcomes towards which the dynamic game character can develop. The player advances the direction with choices and actions they can make in the game, facilitated by the game's possibility space. Whenever the player makes a choice that pushes the development into a certain direction, the branch opens up to other branches that the player can pursue. When the player makes a choice, they actualise a possibility that directs the development of one or more characters towards a certain outcome. In doing so, they can steer the development to alternatives with other outcomes, but also close off these possibilities.

Overall, to consider game characters dynamic they must meet three conditions:

- The player effectuates the direction of the character's development onto certain

paths by her choices and/or actions in the game.

- The choices and actions the player makes have at least one consequence for either the development of the character and/or the state of the game.
- The outcome of the character's development is undetermined until the player affects the direction towards a single possible outcome.

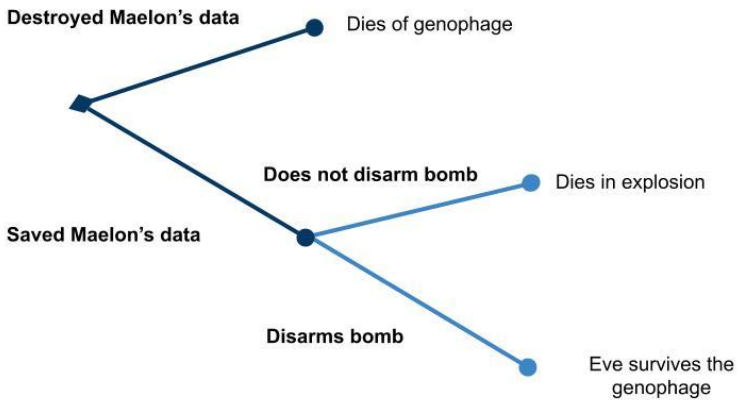

Figure 13: A diagram of Eve's development structure.

Figure 13 shows a simplified diagram of Eve's development structure. Eve's death as a result of complications in *ME3* is just one of the directions in which she could have developed. Figure 13 also shows that she could have lived, on the condition that the player saved Maelon's data. Alternatively, yet another direction is that she could have lived, but die later in the game if the player does not manage to dismantle an enemy bomb. The player is the one to steer Eve's development structure towards a certain direction by making a variety of choices and actions (e.g., whether they destroy Maelon's data or not, whether they are successful in disarming the bomb, etc.), and the results determine the outcome of Eve's development as a consequence.

Combining Eve's development structure with Laurel's flying wedge for human-computer interaction, figure 14 visualises how my choice to destroy Maelon's data turned the possible towards the probable directly in the necessary outcome in which Eve died due to complications of the Genophage. Had I chosen to save the data, I would have stayed longer in the area of the probable until I would have failed or succeeded in disarming the bomb. Two out of three outcomes would have resulted in Eve dying, albeit in different situations and due to different choices. Which outcome eventually becomes necessary is all up to the player. Before that, each outcome, each path are all just possible, written in the game's possibility space before the player takes up their task of influencing the character's characterisation process.

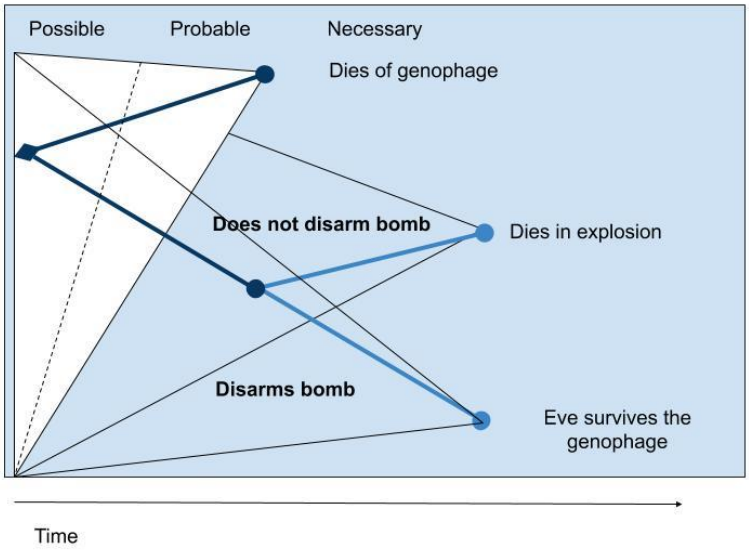

Figure 14: Diagram of the path in which I influenced Eve's outcome with Laurel's flying wedge for human-computer interaction.

4. Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the dynamic game character: a character that responds to how the player plays the game. The player has to act in a certain way so that the dynamic character's development is influenced in one direction and not in another. The player participates in the construction of the character through the repetition of actions and choices until the character development has reached a certain outcome. The player becomes part of the character's construction—that is, its characterisation process—so that the outcome of the dynamic character's overall development belongs as much to the player as it does to the game.

In this chapter I mentioned several of these topics that I will discuss in more detail in chapter eight. For example, the distinction between dynamic game characters and rigid game characters is not as hard-lined as it seems, because game characters can present their dynamicity as *ludic agents*, as *narrative agents*, and as *performative agents*. Similarly, I have also not discussed in depth how the player influences different kinds of dynamic game characters, and what kind of friction these dynamic game characters cause to the character ecology. In the next chapter, I therefore discuss in what kinds of different strategies dynamic game characters appear by discussing several examples in which the player influences the characterisation process and with that the character's identity. On top of that, I will explain how those different strategies create different kinds of frictions for the character's identity within the broader character ecology.

Chapter Eight
The Characterisation Process of the Dynamic Game Character

This chapter describes dynamic game characters appearing in a strategy of contemporary transmedial practices. The chapter discusses the player's creative agency over the characterisation process, the migration of the dynamic game character between games and other media platforms, and the influence this migration has on the dynamic game character's identity. The discussion of these topics will be carried out through the analysis of several empirical examples: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2017), *Persona 5* (P-Studio 2016), the *Mass Effect* series (BioWare 2007–2012), *Façade* (Procedural Arts 2005), *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (Nintendo 2012), and *The Sims 4* (Maxis 2014).

The chapter is divided into seven sections. The first section explains the selection criteria and provides a theoretical background to the concepts and terms I use in this chapter. In parts two through six, I analyse the different empirical case studies. This is in order to demonstrate how the dynamic game character's characterisation process involves a variety of media. The seventh part explains the consequences of the dynamic game character's transmedia manifestations for its identity and clarifies how the dynamic game character influences the character ecology.

1. The Selection Criteria

As discussed in chapter four, 'The Immaterial Character', and chapter five, 'The Challenges of Manifestations and Their Identities', character manifestations not only derive their construction from the character ecology, but each (new) character manifestation also influences that same character ecology, so that the ecology is in a constant state of flux. Since dynamic game characters have multiple outcomes, unlike character manifestations in non-ludic works, how the identity of the dynamic game character is constructed is a question that requires a perspective that takes the character ecology in which the character resides into consideration. Therefore, I will discuss in this chapter their influence on the character ecology with the question: how does a dynamic game character affect the character ecology?

The aim of this chapter is to contextualise the phenomenon of the dynamic game character. That is, it aims to show in which strategies dynamic game characters appear. I specifically use the word 'strategies' instead of 'game structures' to emphasise that although the dynamic game characters are initially constituted by games, the construction of their identity can be a process designed to occur over multiple media in which the configuration of the character is constantly rearranged by multiple invisible hands to control the character's identity.

Selection Variables

I show the different strategies in which dynamic game characters appear through a variety of empirical examples, games that I have played and analysed according to my *reader-response theory* method, as explained in chapter three, 'On Method'.

I selected the game examples based on two variables: the structure of the dynamic game character's development is either deterministic or indeterministic, and the dynamic game characters are either prefabricated or non-prefabricated.

Deterministic development structures for dynamic game characters follow predetermined paths which the designers created manually within the possibility space, allowing players to influence the character onto one of those paths. Indeterministic development structures are instead shaped by scripts, sets of rules encoded in the game's possibility space, which provide for a set of potential actions and behaviours for the dynamic game characters, according to which they develop.

Prefabricated dynamic game characters are those whose identity the designers established before the start of the game, such as Link from *The Legend of Zelda* series, or Joker from *Persona 5*. Non-prefabricated dynamic game characters, by contrast, are made by the player before the game begins, such as Shepard in *Mass Effect*, or Sims in *The Sims 4*.

I use these variables to demonstrate the different strategies in which dynamic game characters appear. The *characterisation process* of a dynamic game character, that is the development of the character's identity, is a configurative practice in which the player has a certain amount of creative agency over the character's development. But the characterisation process is simultaneously an interpretative practice in which the player's creative agency guides the player in their interpretation of the character over the process.

The creative agency over dynamic game characters is primarily situated in the mechanical processes that direct onto which path the player will influence the character. The game structure provides the underlying basis that facilitates the characterisation process of the dynamic game character. In non-cybermedia, an author creates a character usually within a story before any reader consumes that story, hence why characters are usually thought of as schemata existing only within stories causally created by their authors (see Brock 2010). However, some games afford the player a template, a blueprint that can be 'filled' in as a character by the player. Games such as *Diablo III* (Blizzard Entertainment 2012), *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware 2015) or *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe 2016) allow the player to configure the playable figure before the start of the game. Or games such as *The Sims* series (Maxis 2000–2019) where the player can create human-like figures before they play the game. Some of the choices that the player makes in the configuration of the character then shape the possibility space such that the space's potential narrows before the player even starts (see Laurel 1991).

The paths onto which the player can influence the dynamic game character have multiple branches, but these branches are either manually prescripted by the designers or prescripted in the game's code to automatically generate potential situations that can affect the dynamic game character's outcome. An *otome* game such as *Hakuoki: Memories of the Shinsengumi* (Idea Factory 2013) has clear prewritten paths on which the player only affects the direction to which the characters develop via prescripted choices at certain moments in the game. An open world game such *Red Dead Redemption 2* (*RDR2*) (Rockstar Studios 2018) will have non-playable characters operating on scripts that prescribe the rules on which they act, and a routine they follow to give the player the impression they act independently until the player intervenes so that another script activates.

Too many variables would make the game analysis too complicated. Two variables on the other hand provides four categories: [prefabricated/deterministic], [non-prefabricated/deterministic], [prefabricated/indeterministic] and [non-prefabricated/indeterministic]. This allows me to discuss:

- How games afford the player creative agency over the character's characterisation process within its determined structure.
- How the dynamic game characters are formed throughout the characterisation process as specific kinds of agents (see Pinchbeck 2009).

I do not claim that each game only falls in a single category, but the categorisation is a working categorisation and works as a continuum, with [prefabricated/deterministic] on one end to [non-prefabricated/indeterministic] on the other. I will explain how the dynamic game character develops in the characterisation process as a ludic agent in games that contain characters of the [prefabricated/deterministic] end of the continuum, and as I gradually go towards the [non prefabricated/indeterministic] end, I will explain how the dynamic game characters develop as primarily narrative agents compared with how they primarily develop as performative agents.

Agents, as explained in the literature review, are not characters per se, but entities that act and have impact on the progress of a situation. Dynamic game characters are therefore agents as well. However, instead of claiming that they are either *ludic* agents, *narrative* agents, or *performative* agents, my perspective is that they are all at once. There exist dynamic game characters whose characterisation process operates primarily on a ludic structure with a rigid narrative that the player cannot affect, such as *BotW* (2017). There also exist dynamic game character whose characterisation process operates primarily on narrative structures so that the character develops as a narrative agent but not as a ludic agent, such as *Erica* (Flavourworks 2019). And in cases such as *Façade* (2005), the characterisation process is dominated by performative agents.

For some categories it is harder to find empirical examples of dynamic game characters than others. Every category therefore contains more than one game work to discuss one or two particular dynamic game characters. For the [non-prefabricated/deterministic] and [non-prefabricated/indeterministic] categories, I selected two game series (figure 15). For the [non-prefabricated/deterministic] category I selected the *Mass Effect* series. And, for the [non-prefabricated/indeterministic] category I selected *The Sims* series, with *The Sims 4* as the main game generation. For the other two categories, I selected two games in order to demonstrate how even within a single category, two games can configure the characterisation process in such a way that they emphasise different frictions to depict a dynamic game character. The [prefabricated/deterministic] category is the one in which most game characters (and with that most dynamic game characters), appear. This is likely due to characters being historically dominated by rigid story structures. I therefore selected two games: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017) to show how such a game structure facilitates the characterisation process in which the ludic agent primarily develops, and *Persona 5* (2016) as a game in which the narrative agent dominates. For the [prefabricated/indeterministic] category, I selected two games to juxtapose in order to show how developers engage with the friction of a high (creative) agency and unpredictability of the player, namely *Façade* (2005), and *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (2012) (see Figure 15).

	Pre-fabricated	Non Pre-fabricated
Deterministic	*LoZ: BotW*	*Mass Effect* series
	Persona 5	
Indeterministic	*Façade*	*The Sims 4*
	Animal Crossing: New Leaf	

Figure 15: Table of Case Studies

Story Structures in Games

As I have argued over the course of this dissertation, characters are not bound to any specific story, and can even exist without any story. That is not to say that I do not talk about narrative games at all, rather, since even in games characters can be discussed without the necessity of stories, I emphasise the continuum of categories in which dynamic game characters develop. One, or perhaps two, of these categories could be considered narrative games, but the goal of this chapter—and my dissertation in general—is not to challenge the idea of stories in games, but to discuss the conceptualisation of dynamic game characters. However, I do not think that narrative and play are incompatible. To discuss dynamic game characters that operate primarily as narrative agents, I will use Hans-Joachim Backe's (2012) concepts of the *macrostructure* and *microstructure* with which he demonstrates how games combine the rigidness of narrative structure with the openness of play. Using Mieke Bal's terminology of the fabula (Bal 1978; 1999), and Roland Barthes' (Barthes [1966] 1995) distinction between cardinal functions and catalysers, Backe distinguishes between three distinct structural levels in a digital game to explain how computer games combine the rigid structure of narratives with the open structure of play: *paida* (Caillois [1958] 1961), the *microstructure* and the *macrostructure*.

Backe explains that games contain a substructural level for free play or paida. This level "allows the player to experiment with rules and game-world, which produces endless variety of play that constitutes the game's events and the catalyzers of its fabula" (2012, 254). Free play allows players to create a series of connected events (see Bal [1978] 1999) that have the status of fillers (Barthes [1966] 1995) in the fabula. These events do not open or close a sequence of events, but can provide additional meaning. The second level is that games contain a microstructure that provides goals acting as cardinal functions on a narrative level "by identifying singular, meaningful situations with potentially relevant outcomes" (Backe 2012, 254). That is, the microstructure provides events that consequentially connect to other events in order to develop the fabula. Finally, Backe argues that the third level is the macrostructure, which connects the events of the microstructure (254). According to Backe, the logic of the rule-based system of the game and story-logic allows for "goal-oriented play situations (microstructures) in a way that results in a meaningful fabula" (2012, 254).

The distinction that Backe proposes allows me to discuss the narrative structures games can adopt, in which the narrative agent dominates the dynamic game character's characterisation process, without needing to discuss the combination of narrative and play in games.

Transmedia

The characterisation process of the dynamic game character is initially determined by the game's structure. However, when I speak of a strategy in which dynamic game characters appear, this

includes the other media that affect the characterisation process of the dynamic game character in the character ecology. After all, in contemporary transmedia practices, the identities of characters are, more often than not, developed over multiple works across a variety of media. The dynamic game character is no exception.

For some categories, it is easier to find dynamic game characters than for others. This limitation I will discuss in more detail in each empirical case study, since the structure of the dynamic game character influences if and how the character becomes transmedial. Since it is nearly impossible to keep track of or read all the possible manifestations of a character in a character ecology, especially when there is more than one franchise or media mix to include, I selected for each case study one or two particular transmedial manifestations of the dynamic game character. I discuss the particular reason for their selection in each case study, but in general each manifestation was selected according to the following criteria:

- I checked if the dynamic game character had any transmedial or trans-game manifestations at all. If it had only had a manifestation in a particular work, I selected that work.
- If the manifestation dominated a particular work or series of works, I selected that work.
- Since games in contemporary transmedial practices, and in particular the media mix, emphasise the visual design of characters, I selected manifestations with a visual design component.
- If I could find a manifestation of the character in a non-cybermedia work, I selected that work to juxtapose it to its cybermedia manifestations.

I have to note that the games that I discuss take on a prominent spot in the character ecology. However, that is not to say that these games are necessarily the original 'source work' for all the characters that appear in that particular work. Link's prototype manifestation, for example, was *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo 1986), but his manifestation in *BotW* does influence the character ecology in the shape of his subsequent manifestations in *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (Bandai Namco Studios and Sora Ltd . 2018), and *LoZ: Breath of the Wild 2* (Nintendo forthcoming 2020). *Persona 5* might be the source work for Joker, but it is not for Igor, who initially appeared in *Megami Ibunroku Persona* (Atlus 1996). I therefore sometimes only refer to a certain game as a 'source work' when the dynamic game character initially appears in that work as the character's urtext, a term I explained in chapter four, 'The Immaterial Character'.

There are quite a few advantages to taking the dynamic game character's manifestations into consideration. Analysing dynamic game characters through their transmedial appearances allows me to perceive how invisible hands use the three venues of control, as discussed in chapter five, 'The Challenges of Manifestations and their Identities', to regulate the characterisation process of the dynamic game character outside of the game(s) in which it appears. It also provides the opportunity to discuss a variety of strategies that attempt to police the identity of the dynamic game character. Simultaneously, it shows the influence the dynamic game character has over the character ecology in which it appears, how it affects other manifestations, and what kind of influence it receives from its other manifestations.

Virtual Environments

The case studies from section two until section four (*Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, Persona 5* and the *Mass Effect* series) are games with determined cardinal functions (see Barthes ([1966] 1995). These cardinal functions will happen no matter what, but their outcome changes depending on the choices the player made for the dynamic game character. The case studies in section five and six (*Façade*, *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*, and *The Sims 4*) are indeterministic, where the strategy in which they appear is undetermined; there is no *intrigue* (see Aarseth 1997, 112) written in the game to which the dynamic game characters have to adhere. There is no macrostructure embedded in the game with cardinal functions that will occur no matter what the player does. There exists no authored narrative structure in these events, unlike the macro/microstructure in games where the player has certain agency over the events and narrative progression in the prescribed narrative structure, the player has no influence over the narrative structure where there is none.

Instead, the case studies in section five and six are the kinds of games that have been discussed before as 'virtual' environments, game environments that are neither imagined nor narrated (Aarseth 2007; Jørgensen 2013; Klevjer 2017). Aarseth (2007) argues that the idea of fiction is problematic when it comes to game content. He distinguishes between fictional and virtual elements, considering fictional elements made out of signs whereas virtual elements are made out of signs and a dynamic model that specifies its behaviour and respond to the player's input (2007, 36). Jørgensen (2013) explains that a fictional world can be a "world representation or an imaginary construct in the appreciator's mind based on the presence of props" (64), the latter of which she bases on Kendall Walton's theory of make-believe (1990). Since the world is created by someone's imagination, and thus constructed by the act of imagination, the fictional world is therefore artificial (Jørgensen 2013, 64). Regardless, however, Jørgensen points out that this does not make a game world and a fictional world identical. She states that "[a]s representations, gameworlds reflect the game system and work according to a logic that promotes ludic consistency and not fictional coherence" (2013, 65). Whereas a fictional world reflects "an imaginary reality that expects appreciators to use their imaginations to complete the reality of the fiction" (2013, 65). This is not the case for gameworlds, whose reality the player does not have to fix, although Jørgensen adds that a number of game worlds can have features that can work as props, so game worlds could be experienced as fictional worlds (2013, 65).

Against the view that virtual environments are not imagined (Aarseth 2007; Jørgensen 2013), Klevjer (2017) proposes that virtual game environments can actually be used as a medium for the diegetic imagination, because the position from which one centres oneself transform a non-actual possible world in their actual world. According to Klevjer: "In diegetic fiction, we re-center our position, thereby evoking an alternative world as being our actual world. The things that we imagine are not just pretended events, but pretended real events" (Klevjer 2017, 7).

Klevjer struggles with the same fallacy as the scholars from the structuralist position and the humanistic position discussing characters: he recognises the concept of the character as a quasi-person, but conflates the idea of a character with the impression that the character has to be ontologically identical to a person in order to count as a person. As pointed out in chapter two, 'Theory', Frow explains that the problem to recognizing characters as quasi-human beings is "that characters and persons are at once ontologically discontinuous (they have different manners of being) and logically interdependent" (2014, vii). Klevjer's quest to make sense of characters in the sense that they could come alive as real people by having the player engage in diegetic imagination uncritically assumes the position that persons are ontological givens, instead of being the result of

a particular socio-historical construction of personhood that is partially "made out of the same materials as fictional characters" (Frow 2014, vii).

Since characters are ontologically discontinuous from persons, it is not fruitful to discuss their status as if they are simulations of persons. Rather, since dynamic game characters are influenced by the player's input, they are already partially virtual. Like any other game character, the dynamic game character is simulated in the sense that it occupies a virtual world in which the player makes decisions that logically affect both the character and the world. They do not represent a person, they represent themselves. That is, a character is always already a representation of itself. This counts for characters, game characters and dynamic game characters.

Script

The case studies of dynamic game characters in section five and six operate on *scripts.* In performance studies, scripts are understood as patterns of doing as "potential manifestations previously encoded in manifestations of doing" (Schechner 1988, 69). Dynamic game characters embedded in indeterministic game structures, where they live in a simulated environment rather than a narrated environment, perform predominantly as performative agents whose behaviour is structured by a script.

Discussing the notion of drama performance, Schechner (1988, 69) explains that prior to the current understanding of script as written words on which actors base their acting, scripts were generally considered as patterns of doing. He considers them to be "something that pre-exist any given enactment" (1988, 68), whereas drama is a specialised form of scripting (1988, 69). Before it became encoded patterns of the written word, scripts, as Schechner argues, were understood as *potential manifestations* previously encoded in manifestations of doing (69): actions and behaviours that had the possibility to occur, because their potential has been carved out in previous occurrences of behaviours and actions. Script guides not only theatre, but also play, games, sports and ritual (Schechner 1988).

I will abstain from discussing the notion of performance within this dissertation. Performance studies and the notion of performance stir as huge of a debate as the notions of play and games, and it goes far beyond the scope of this dissertation. Instead, I will use Schechner's notion of *script* to discuss the simulated environment in which dynamic game characters can exist.

It can be said that digital games always already operate on a script, because they have been programmed to function in a certain way, but it is specifically *artificial intelligence* (AI), the simulation of human intelligence in machines, in which scripts are used to determine the behaviour of the AI. Some of these AIs are personified, modelled as figures in human form akin to characters. The idea behind AI characters is that modeling computer-based agents after *dramatis personae*, characters help users to understand the use of the computer, but also because structuring their behaviour and thoughts is already there (Laurel 1991, 145). As Laurel states, every culture has a notion of dramatic form where people distinguish between real-world people and characters within these dramatic forms (145). Using the notion of character allows designers to select traits appropriate for the particular set of actions the AI character has to do (145) without going to the uncanny valley (see Mori 1970; 2012) in which the character gives the impression that it should be a human person but fails at doing so.

One of the first man–machine communication programs developed to have the human interactor understand the computer is Joseph Weizenbaum's *ELIZA*, an experimental computer program for natural language processing, in 1966. The persona of this computer program became

Eliza, a therapist. Apparently, discussions users held with Eliza were so persuasive, that some users feared he created an actual person (Weizenbaum 1976, 189; Murray 1997, 70). ELIZA did not have a built-in contextual framework through which it could make sense of what was going on in the world. Instead, the program was supplied by what Weizenbaum calls a 'script', "a set of rules which permitted the actor [ELIZA] to improvise on whatever sources it provided" (1976, 188). According to Weizenbaum, ELIZA functioned as an "actress who commanded a set of techniques but had nothing of her own to say" (188). ELIZA primarily responded, but did not act on her own, nor did she develop as a character, since she was never programmed to do so, her script only involved replying to the user in a manner that corresponded to a (female) therapist.

Weizenbaum's script can be understood as a specialised form of 'script' as patterns of doing as proposed by Schechner (1988). Unlike dramatic scripts, AI scripts are not written words to be acted out by human actors, but function as a set of pre-written rules that shape the behaviour and actions of the computer-based agent to perform. When applied to dynamic game characters in non-deterministic game structures, scripts function as a set of rules encoded in the game's possibility space, which provide a set of potential actions and behaviours for the dynamic game character according to which they develop. The player has the agency to affect the potential for these scripts to occur and, in doing so, influences the direction in which the dynamic game character develops. The characters dominated by these scripts can be understood as a performative agents.

2. *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017)

This section explores Link in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (*BotW*) (Nintendo 2017) as a dynamic game character, who is primarily dominated by his function as a ludic agent. *BotW* is in many ways like its predecessors. As stated in chapter five, 'The Challenges of Manifestations and their Identities', *The Legend of Zelda* game series reuse *topoi* (see Eco 1979, 119), iterative stock situations, to provide intertextual support between game instalments that Nintendo carefully constructed over the past 25 years.

In another way, *BotW* differs from the previous instalments in the game series. Unlike the other games, *BotW* belongs to the open-world genre whereas previous instalments (except for the first instalment) were linear in their structure. In previous game instalments such as *Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo 1998), *The Wind Waker* (Nintendo 2002), or *Twilight Princess* (Nintendo 2006), the player follows a rigid narrative direction which changes relatively little per playthrough. Open world games on the other hand supposedly allow the player to move freely through the landscape of the game world, not constrained by the rigid structure the player has to follow in order for events to unfold. *BotW* suffers, however, from similar challenges that some games of the open world genre such as *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Studios 2018) suffer from: in order to have the characters and the world develop from one state to another, developers tend to integrate quests that the player has to carry out (Aarseth 2005). *BotW* displays this when Link explores the world of Hyrule by moving freely wherever the player wants, but the character is also tasked from the beginning of the game with a quest to save the world. As Zelda immediately informs him after he wakes up: "*Link… You are the light—our light—that must shine upon Hyrule once again. Now, go…*". The *topoi* iterate in this game as well: Link needs to save Hyrule one more time—again.

When the player sets out to save Hyrule, there are a few events that they have to tick off. First, the player has to finish the game's tutorial segment which consists of several objects and abilities that Link needs to acquire in order to travel to the rest of the world. Once the player

manages to get out of the tutorial space, all they have to do to save Hyrule is to have Link go to the castle where evil Ganon hides and defeat him. Little else is necessary, but to defeat Ganon while Link is at his weakest with little to no help is extremely difficult, and will likely provide little pleasure for the player intending to explore the world of Hyrule.

BotW is on these two points simply put a quest game. Aarseth (2005) explores the different types of quests and how they structure gameplay, which often bear structural similarities to 'narrative'. He defines a quest game as:

> A game with a concrete and attainable goal, which supersedes performance or the accumulation of points. Such goals can be nested (hierarchic), concurrent, or serial, or a combination of the above. (2005, 497)

According to Aarseth, quests come in a number of combinations, but primarily in three basic quest game landscapes: a linear corridor, the semi-open hub, and the open landscape (2005, 499). *BotW* seems to be akin to the open landscape once the player has escaped the plateau (which instead bears similarities to the semi-open hub). Once the player is in the bigger world, they can choose to accept and finish quests as they like. There is not necessarily any quest that the player has to do, but there are many quests that the player could possibly do.

BotW's open landscape structure has a hierarchical structure that contains of one main quest, a few secondary quests, and several tertiary quests. The main quest is that Link will have to defeat Ganon eventually in order to save Hyrule. Then there are 'secondary' quests, important for the game's main quest: Link has to free the deceased champions Daruk, Mipha, Urbosa and Revali from the influence of Ganon, since their Divine Beasts (the machines they used prior to their death) now wreak havoc on Hyrule. These five quests make up the game's cardinal functions: they constitute the skeletal framework of the quests of the game and allow the player to change Link and Hyrule as they complete the quest. Tertiary quests are quests that do not cause any structural changes in Hyrule's world, and mainly provide Link with additional items, such as protective clothing, weapons or food. Despite the hierarchy, the player does not have to fulfil any quest at all. The open-world structure of the game allows the player to ignore all quests, even the main quest. However, although the player can completely ignore any quest, every event, every mechanic is built around the main quest and the secondary quests so that the game will constantly remind the player what they want from the player: save Hyrule!

Save Hyrule!

The most potent method to severely weaken Ganon is to find and free the Divine Beasts through the game's secondary quests. Each Divine Beast has a former champion, a deceased owner who helped Link in their first attempt to defeat Ganon but unfortunately failed and paid with their lives. As the player sets out to free these beasts from their corruption, they gradually learn of what happened to these champions prior to the events of the game via cut-scenes, dialogues with characters, and items such as letters or diaries. The order in which the player takes on these quests matters not, as the only requirement of the open landscape (Aarseth 2005) is that the player travels to the specific places in the game world where the quests are located.

One such a secondary quest is found in Zora's Domain, a kingdom of water where the Zora species live. Here, Divine Beast Vah Ruta causes chaos amongst the Zora people, threatening to flood the lake they depend on. After Link frees the beast from its corruption and consequentially

frees former champion Mipha's spirit from being trapped, Mipha's spirit grants him with a new power called *Mipha's Grace.* For Link as a ludic agent, Mipha's Grace is incredibly convenient, since it allows Link's health to refill when he runs out of hearts. This means, for example, that if the player jumps from a place too high, or is unable to take a direct attack that would drain Link's health bar, Link would be immediately revived so that the player can continue without having to start from their previous save. However, as a narrative agent, Link does not develop. Although his memories of Mipha return to him after he has freed her from Ganon's claws, these memories are rigid: no matter how the player performs, the memories will always be the same. For Link as a narrative agent, the only difference between the player completing this quest or not is whether or not Link's memories about Mipha will return, but they do not result in any significant structural changes within the game that change the outcome of Link's characterisation process.

Abilities that Link receives in the game's main quests allow the player to play with more ease and take on greater challenges. In this perspective, the hierarchy of the game's quest structure in the game aligns with the ludic development of Link: as the player chooses to unfold the game's secondary quests, they obtain greater rewards to develop Link in the ludic structure of the game.

Tertiary quests, quests that in the game's overall structure can be considered the catalysers—the fillers, so to speak (see Barthes [1966] 1995)—that provide an additional enhancement to the development of Link as a ludic agent. At the start of the game, Link's health bar contains three hearts, and the stamina orb is comprised of only a single circle. This circle depletes when Link runs or climbs. So, with fewer circles, Link might be unable to outrun an enemy who could defeat him with a single hit. The Silver Lynel, for example, is a fast and powerful enemy determined to go after Link once it spots him, and is incredibly difficult to defeat. More stamina, and perhaps more importantly, more hearts, make it much more likely that the player will succeed in defeating such a powerful enemy.

The player can obtain hearts and stamina primarily by obtaining spirit orbs. These spirit orbs can be obtained in shrines, spread out all over the game world for the player to discover. Inside the shrines are challenges to complete. Upon completion, the player is rewarded with one orb. The player can trade four spirit orbs at a Goddess Statue for an additional heart or additional stamina. By continuously completing these challenges, the ludic agent of Link evolves and becomes stronger so that challenges like the Silver Lynel or defeating Ganon become more and more probable.

Furthermore, the player is able via smaller quests to obtain clothing that grant Link extra abilities. Link's clothing, in contrast to weapons, are permanently in Link's possession and cannot be destroyed. The Zora's Armor, for example, provides Link with the ability to dive in water. The female Gerudo clothing makes him resistant to the desert heat, but also grants him passage to Gerudo Town—a town that only allows women inside.

Using Laurel's flying wedge for human-computer interaction (1991) to describe the development that Link as a ludic agent goes through, I argue that with each power that the player obtains in the game's secondary quests, with each spirit orb that the player obtains, and with each outfit that the Link can wear, the possibility of what Link could do turns probable, and at some point necessary. When the player has finished all secondary quests, there is only the main quest the player can undertake: defeat Ganon and save Hyrule. However, the irony is that the final quest will never actually be finished. Once the player manages to defeat Ganon, save Princess Zelda and save Hyrule, the game places Link in front of the castle right before he entered to defeat Ganon. A star on the player's save file will be the only indication that the player managed to defeat Ganon, but the open landscape of the game never acknowledges it. The game world stays in the state of openness,

impossible for the player to develop the world beyond the state of being in danger by Ganon.

Link's Migration

I have extensively discussed Link's manifestations in chapter five, 'The Challenges Manifestations and their Identities'. Within chapter five, I concluded that Nintendo attempts to control Link's transmedial identity by structuring the character's constellation in the shape of a three-branch chronology, imposing a linear form of narrative continuity on the character. In doing so, Nintendo creates a paradoxical relationship between Link's manifestations that do not make continuous sense. With *BoTW*, Nintendo tries to avoid the paradox as much as possible. According to the game's director Fujibayashi, the *BoTW* takes chronologically place at the end of the timeline, but he puts the responsibility on the player's to imagine in which of the three branches the game is set (Famitsu 2018).

At the moment of writing, *BotW* does not have a manga or anime adaptation, unlike previous games such as *Ocarina of Time* (1998), or *Twilight Princess* (2006). However, a sequel to *BotW* called *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild 2* has been announced (expected, at time of writing, probably in 2020), and may give an answer to the open ending of *BotW*. Additionally, *BotW*'s Link can also be found in *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (Bandai Namco Studios and Sora Ltd. 2018) where—as is custom since the *Super Smash Bros.* franchise's first instalment—Link serves as an avatar with affordances for the player to battle against other players, and the game does not seem to have a structure in which Link develops as a ludic nor narrative agent. Whether *BotW*'s Link manifestation remains only as a character limited to game works, I cannot say; only time will tell.

3. *Persona 5* (2016)

In this section, I discuss the nature of Joker and the so-called *confidant* characters of *Persona 5* (P-Studio 2016). I focus specifically on the game's *system of affection* (SA) in which the player creates relationships between Joker and the *confidant* characters in order to demonstrate how the player influences these dynamic game characters as narrative agents within the game's microstructure.

After an incident in his former hometown during which Joker is unjustly accused of harassing someone of high influence, he is put on probation and transferred to Shujin Academy in Tokyo, where his criminal past is soon revealed, causing students and teachers to shun him. Soon a mysterious application pops up on his phone: the Metaverse Navigator. Joker deletes the application, but that night in his dreams, he is transported to the mysterious Velvet Room where the room's attendant Igor tells Joker that destruction awaits him. The only way to avoid this destruction is to become rehabilitated into a free man again by getting rid of those corrupted persons in the world who deprive others of their much-needed freedom. Joker initially sets out to free the world from corrupted persons by himself, but is soon joined by other characters. They call themselves *Kaitoudan*, or, in English, Phantom Thieves of Hearts, a vigilante group that roams the palaces of the shadow world with the goal of stealing the treasure from those corrupted individuals to reform their hearts.

Persona 5 contains a rigid narrative structure. The cardinal functions of the game's macrostructure determine certain events in the game that will happen regardless of how the player performs. The player cannot determine who actually joins the *Kaitoudan*, nor can they determine if a character leaves the group. For example, the player cannot stop Goro Akechi from joining the group, nor can they stop him from betraying and leaving the group. As long as the player progresses

through the game, these events will happen no matter what the player does.

Persona 5 corresponds to the traits commonly associated with Japanese role-playing games (JRPG). According to Schules *et al*. (2018, 114), JRPGs are associated with confinement to the world, defined characters, anime/cartoon style art, limited narrative choice/singular story, fantasy world. *Persona 5* seems to exhibit all of these traits, as it is clear who the characters are, why they do what they do. The game also shows a drawing style associated with the fantasy worlds of *anime* and *manga*, and the player cannot change the game's macrostructure. Yet, some game characters can still be dynamic even when they adhere to a rigid programmed setting. The different segments games consist of allow characters to not only be dependent on a game's narrative structure, but also let the player develop these characters within these segments that subsequently affect the characters in other segments. *Persona 5* deploys segments in which the player developed its characters as ludic agents, but the work additionally provides segments that allow the player to develop even more characters as narrative agents.

In tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs), characters are created on a character sheet, and their abilities and subsequent skills are generally quantified and change depending on the level progression of the character. The TRPG's digital offspring, computer role-playing games (CRPGs), regulate the ludic development of game characters in a similar formal levelling system that determines the character's attributes and skills in terms of numerical value, often with semantics to cover the quantified aspect of these ludic elements. In a CRPG like *Persona 5,* the attributes of the player-character (called *social stats*) characterise him in five different aspects: guts, knowledge, charm, kindness and proficiency. The semantics of the ludic attributes pose as characterisation to give meaning to the numerical value attached to the character so that it does not only come off as a ludic agent. When the meaning that is given to the quantified attribute corresponds to a change of state in the game, such as receiving certain accessibilities that players did not have before, it gives the impression that the character develops. As Joker's attributes change value in *Persona 5,* the player obtains accessibility to new segments in which the character can operate: a change in the charm attribute from 'charismatic' to 'debonair' allows players to continue to develop the relationship between the protagonist and Makoto Niijima. Or having achieved the combination of 'empathetic' in kindness and 'masterful' in proficiency, the player can get a part-time job in Crossroad Bar, which gives the most profit in terms of money. Both segments support the player to the end-state of the game: the player will receive benefits from these situations, like more in-game money to spend for items and gear, or they will obtain more skills for the player-character and/or other characters that can help in the battle segments. In other words, as the player develops the player-character as a ludic agent, the character's development is shown as the development of a quasi-person.

Developing *Confidant* Characters in Persona 5's System of Affection

This section focuses in more detail on the development of the so-called *confidant* characters as dynamic game characters, the characters with whom the player affects the relationship between them and Joker. The specific segments in which the player develops these relationships, I call the *system of affection* (SA). I will explain the SA in detail in the next chapter as a process to make game characters dynamic. In the SA, the player is able to affect the individual development of the characters as a narrative agent. It provides the player with the opportunity to create the character's individual fabula on the level of the microstructure within the game's overall dominant macrostructure.

The SA is a ludic process, procedural in nature, that simulates the establishment of relationships between characters. These relationships are embedded in the game's possibility space that the player affects through their choices and actions. Usually the relationships are of a romantic nature, but can also be unromantic. I base the SA on Peter Kelly's (2015) identification of a game's ludic romance system as a system of courtship in *Dragon Age 2*. Kelly (2015, 47) considers ludic romance system one in which the characters are integrated, bound to the game and its rules so that the player only has to execute a specific strategy in order to successfully woo a non-player character. He argues that the player cannot intrinsically escape this strategy, because it is baked within the systematic processes of the courtship.

*Persona 5'*s SA presents itself as a so-called *confidant* mechanic, or *koopu*[24] in the Japanese version. The characters embedded within this process are called *confidants*. As the player-character, Joker assumes a primary role within the game: all the relationships that the player can influence are the relationship between Joker and the confidants, but not the relationships between the confidants since that is rooted in the game's macrostructure.

The game's *confidants* can be divided into four different types through which the SA emerges: optional party members, mandatory party members, optional non-party members and mandatory non-party members (see figure 16). When I played the game, I focused mainly on the development of the relationship between Joker, Ann Takamaki, Ryuji Sakamoto and Yusuke Kitagawa. Here I will focus on the relationship between Ann and Joker. The player can influence the relationship between Joker and Ann right after Ann joins the *Kaitoudan* in which Ann's confidant rank starts—like any other *confidant* character—at rank one.

Party & Optional	**Party & Mandatory**
Makoto Nijima	Morgana
Haru Okumura	Goro Akechi
Yusuke Kitagawa	
Ann Takamaki	
Ryuji Sakamoto	
Futaba Sakura	
Non-Party & Optional	**Non-Party & Mandatory**
Sojiro Sakura	Igor
Chihaya Mifune	Sae Nijima
Justine & Caroline	
Munehisa Iwai	
Tae Takemi	
Sadayo Kawakami	
Ichiko Ohya	
Shinya Oda	
Hifumi Togo	
Yuuki Mishima	
Toranosuke Yoshida	

Figure 16: *Persona 5*'s mandatory and optional Characters for the SA.

Strategies such as choosing the best dialogue option, progressing their social statistics, or providing

[24] コープ, short for cooperation.

the *confidant* characters with items they like enable the player to successfully court a character, but they also allow the *confidant* character to develop as a narrative agent, and simultaneously to develop as a ludic agent. If the player wishes to progress the relationship with Ann to the second rank, the strategy is that they have to reach 'considerate' (the second level) in the Kindness category of the player-character's social stats. As the player progresses through Ann's ranks, Ann will develop simultaneously as a ludic agent and as a narrative agent. She will get past her worries about her friend Shiho. She also starts taking her modeling career more seriously, and manages to overcome her struggles with a competing model. After rank nine, the player can choose to have Ann become Joker's girlfriend, making the relationship one of romance or one of friendship depending on the choice of the player. As the player raises the relationship between Joker and any party member, these party members will obtain skills useful for battle segments: they will be able to perform follow-up attacks, or save the player-character from fatal attacks. Each party member will also obtain their own unique abilities—reinforcing that each character is an individual in their own right—such as Ann's ability to have the player negotiate with an enemy again if they fail.

Optional non-party *confidant* characters function similarly to the optional *confidant* characters. Progressing through Tae Takemi's ranks, Joker takes part in her clinical trials as a test subject. As their bond deepens, the player will discover that the trials are an attempt to get her credibility as a doctor back that she unjustly lost a few years prior to the start at the events of the game. Although Tae Takemi will not participate in the battle segments like any optional non-party confidant, deepening the bond with her does provide rewards for the player. The player will be able to purchase more healing items, or the prices will drop as the player raises Tae's rank. All of these are beneficial for the battle segments, since the player needs to defeat boss enemies in order to reach the game's end-state. Spending time with her also raises the Joker's Courage in the social stats so that the player eventually is able to perform activities or spend time with characters for which Joker's Courage statistics have to be a particular level (depending on the character and the activity).

Mandatory *confidant* characters function like Barthes' cardinal functions, because they are pivotal to the game's overall macrostructure. The game will progress the ranks automatically when the player plays through the game regardless of what the player chooses and how they perform. Akechi Goro, for example, will always betray the *Kaitoudan*, because his betrayal is crucial to the game's rigid narrative. By betraying the *Kaitoudan*, Joker and the rest of the characters discover Akechi's connection to Shido, the person who harassed Joker prior to the events of the game, which in turn sets in motion the *Kaitoudan's* final heist to discover the true culprit of the dangerous happenings in the game's story.

The benefits that the player receives from mandatory characters help the player during their gameplay. Progressing through the ranks with Igor gives the player the opportunity to use and create more personas, the manifestations of one's inner thoughts the player uses to battle, but these benefits are rigid: the game is designed so that the player will receive these benefits no matter how they play. Instead, as mandatory *confidant* characters, these characters are primarily important as narrative agents, crucial to the game's macrostructure, whereas the optional characters function as catalysers who allow the player to influence the game's microstructure.

Flexibility and Rigidity in the SA

The game's SA has a rigid structure, one that the player cannot avoid if they decide to develop the *confidant* characters. At most, the player's agency to develop Joker and the *confidant* characters as dynamic game character lies within the possibilities of the SA, but even this system has its

constraints. As Kelly (2015, 47) also argues about the ludic romance system, the characters within the SA are integrated and bound to the game's structure and rules so the player only has to execute a specific strategy to successfully develop the relationships between Joker and other characters. It is more about figuring out what each individual *confidant* character requires and then executing those procedures to the extent that the player can potentially try to optimise their strategy to gain rank ten for all *confidant* characters if they play the game once. This strategy is explained by the developer, Atlus, in a strategy guide (Kadokawa 2016) (in Japanese) with a chapter entirely dedicated to the strategy the player has to execute in order to obtain the maximum rank for all *confidant* characters.

Within the SA, the player is able to create their own fabula, but even that fabula is hard-coded within hetero-normative structures. Joker can only have a romantic relationship with the female *confidant* characters, and these characters pertain to the male gaze (see Mulvey 1975). For example, *confidant* character Sadayo Kawakami is Joker's home school teacher, but works as a maid complete with French maid uniform at night, calling those who call her services her 'master' in a cutesy voice. It is therefore difficult for the player to ignore the game's preferred reading (see Hall 1973, 103). The player can only slightly influence the script of the characters. They can influence the response of the characters during a bonding event, for example. But even these responses only differ in whether the characters are enthusiastic or *super* enthusiastic. It is still possible for the player to maintain a negotiated position against the dominant mode of reading, but that would mainly require not developing these relationships between Joker and the *confidant* characters, thereby ignoring the characterisation process of the *confidant* characters as dynamic game characters.

Despite these constraints, *Persona 5*'s SA demonstrates that the game's macrostructure is not linear, but simply rigid. In between the cardinal functions, the player is able to construct their own fabula via the catalysers that the SA provides them with so that they can influence the characters as both narrative and ludic agents. The former manifest in the SA by letting the player influence with whom Joker will have a particular bond, what kind of relationship they have with certain characters, and how strong that bond will be. The latter manifests as benefits: the stronger the bond, the stronger Joker and the optional *confidant* party member become.

Dynamic Game Characters in *Persona 5*'s Media Mix Strategy

This section discusses Atlus' adaptation strategy of *Persona 5* in order to highlight how Atlus, the Intellectual Property (IP) owner, influences *Persona 5*'s dynamic game characters in the character ecology by focusing on how derivative works—officially recognized by Atlus—depict the SA. This allows me to answer what the nature of *Persona 5*'s dynamic game characters is.

Being in a media mix strategy, the *Persona 5* characters proliferate over a variety of media. In several chapters in this dissertation, I argue that Western theory on contemporary transmedia practices tend to focus on a strive towards narrative continuity, whereas Japanese theory tends to focus on character proliferation. As I explain in chapter five, 'The Challenges of Manifestations and their Identities', the venues of control over characters identities in Japanese media mix strategies tend to be established on the characters as intellectual properties. As intellectual property, characters proliferate so that fans can choose which product they want to consume, while at the same time the IP owner creates "more touchpoints to newcomers to a ground of products" (Nakamura and Tosca 2019, 4). *Persona 5*'s media mix strategy functions according to this idea, and maintains multiple touchpoints through which consumers can experience the IP

owner Atlus' products. Simultaneously, as IP of Atlus, Atlus has the control to police the *Persona 5* characters' identities.

Atlus recognizes two official *Persona 5* adaptations: the *Persona 5 manga* series (Murasaki 2017a; 2017b; 2018a; 2018b), and the *Persona 5 anime* series (Ishihama 2018). I use Linda Hutcheon's (2006) definition of adaptation: a product, somewhat of a re-mediation, that translates content from one medium to another "in the form of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system (for example, words) to another (for example, images)" (Hutcheon 2006, 16). Signs that indicate that Atlus recognises these series as the official adaptations are for example the word *gensaku* [original source] on the cover of each manga volume, and Atlus' logo that appears both on the manga cover, and in the anime series.

Both adaptations follow the game's macrostructure with slight variations—since an adaptation is always a modification of the original work. The *manga* and *anime* series remain faithful and equivalent to the source work, granting the source work the status of "axiomatic primacy and authority" (Hutcheon 2006, 16). However, neither the *manga* nor the *anime* series show a hint that they acknowledge the source work's SA. *Confidant* characters are not introduced as *confidant* characters. The adaptations do not even slightly hint at the mechanical nature of the cybermedium of the source work at all. They are only adaptations in so far as they follow the game's macrostructure—its cardinal functions—but refrain from showing the SA through which the player has the agency to influence the development of the characters.

Although Atlus' official adaptations do not seem to acknowledge the game's SA, Atlus grants IP rights to *manga* magazines that do recognise the game's SA within their comics. In Japan, merchandise stories such as Animate sell fan magazines that received the copyrights to use the *Persona 5* characters in their *manga*. The *Persona 5 Dengeki Comic Anthology* (DengekiComics 2017), and *Persona 5 Comic Anthology* volumes one (DNA Media Comics 2017a) and two (DNA Media Comics 2017b) *are* such a *manga* magazine. Despite the magazine's acquisition of copyright to use the characters, Atlus does not recognise this magazine as an official adaptation, refraining from using Atlas' logo on the cover or the word *gensaku*.

The *manga* magazines consist of several short comic stories written by a diversity of authors. These authors write 'what-if' stories, short stories focusing on background explorations, additional information about the relationships between Joker and the *confidant* characters (or between the *confidant* characters) that the game does not provide. These stories function as satellites to the game's cardinal functions. They fill in the narrative space but do not change the game's macrostructure. For example, the *Persona 5 Anthology* volume 1 presents the story *Na mo Shiranu Kafetomo* [My café buddy whose name I do not know]. This story describes the encounter between Goro Akechi and Tae Takemi in café Leblank where Joker lives. This story does not occur within the events of the game, and there is no hint of it in the scripted sequences within the source work's SA between Tae Takemi and Joker, and between Joker and Goro Akechi.

The volumes also contain pastiche and parody stories making fun of the SA, particularly about the possibility that Joker can court up to nine female characters over the course of a single gameplay, and the requirements he needs to fulfil in order to date all of them simultaneously. *Yonkama*, four panel comics usually used for jokes, are used to make fun of the game's possibility to have Joker date nine female characters. The *yonkoma Saigo no Kotoba* [Final Words] depicts Joker tied up and hanging from the ceiling surrounded by his female teammates, Ann, Makoto, Haru, and Futaba. On the right of the first panel is written "*Uwaki ga BARE da*" [Infidelity EXPOSED]. Joker's infidelity has been revealed. When Ann tells him that he is the worst of all in dating all four

of them, Joker delivers the punch line: she is wrong, he had been dating *nine* women.[25]

It is in magazines like these, which obtained the copyright to use *Persona 5* characters, that an acknowledgment of the source work's SA can be found. Nevertheless, the adaptation of the SA within these magazines only reside on the level of convention. As Aarseth (2005) concludes about the friction between games and media with narrative affinity: "cross-media transfer happens relatively smoothly between forms that are alike, such as books and films, and less so between forms that have strong structural differences, such as amusement park rides, games, and narratives" (210). This friction also occurs between the adaptation of the game to the *manga* magazines; the short stories and *yonkoma* parodies acknowledge the SA, but as non-cybermedia, they have no mechanical system to incorporate the SA in a single work. Instead, the exploration of the character's relationship with Joker is spread over a multiplicity of stories.

What is striking is that the *Persona 5* media mix strategy suggests that when dynamic game characters are the focal point of the strategy, that is, when a game with dynamic game characters is the original source work, the developer seems to be relatively comfortable with the exploration of multiple identities of the character in peripheral non-cybermedia that legally obtained copyrights. The distribution of copyright to these magazines allows the developer, in a form of invisible hands, to police how these magazines depict the source work's characters. As catalysers, the stories of these magazines fit neatly into the game's macrostructure and acknowledge the game's SA, either in 'what-if' stories or in parodies. That said, these magazines do not defy the game's macrostructure at all. All characters correspond neatly to the identities that the game constructs and allows the player to play with. These magazines allow explorations of Joker's romantic relationships with the female *confidant* characters, but do not depict any queer readings. In case the player wants to see an alternative identity, an oppositional reading to the identities that the source work constructs, they will have to resort to *doujinshi*, fanfiction magazines or other derivative works that have not obtained any legal copyrights to use the characters.

Within the constraints of the owner's reach of intellectual property, the proliferation and migration of *Persona 5'*s dynamic game characters do not cause friction. This accurately corresponds to the media mix' theory where the proliferation of the character is the focus instead of the strive for continuity between character appearances as discussed in Western theory. The nature of Joker and the other *confidant* characters are ones in which their identities outside of the original source work are only accepted by the IP owner so long as they adhere to the source work. The developer demonstrates this condition by refraining from acknowledging the character's dynamicity in their own official adaptations, and only allowing the exploration of the dynamic game characters' identities in peripheral non-cybermedia that have legally obtained copyright use as long as this exploration corresponds to the heteronormative identities the player constructs in the game. This means that, although the developer allows multiple readings for the dynamic game characters, these multiple readings are preferred readings, which assigns to the urtext an almost holy value and truthfulness that proclaims character manifestations—even as they proliferate through multiple media and have different identities—are only accepted by the owner so long as they correspond to the characters' urtext.

[25] I originally wrote the short analyses on the stories *Na mo Shiranu Kafetomo*, *Morugana Kagehika*, and *Saigo no Kotoba*, for the article 'Manifestations of Characters in the Media Mix', to be published in the *Comics/Games 2018* open access publication.

4. The *Mass Effect* Series (2007 – 2012): Who is Shepard?

This section discusses the ambiguous identity of Commander Shepard, the player-character of the *Mass Effect* series (2007–2012). The games that this section covers are *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007), *Mass Effect 2* (BioWare 2010), and *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare 2012). I focus on Shepard, a non-prefabricated and deterministic player-character. Shepard is a narrative agent that the player develops over the course of a rigid set of narrative events in the game(s) which influence not only the outcome of those events, but the outcome of Shepard's characterisation process as well.

The *Mass Effect* series follows the journey of Commander Shepard, who travels through the galaxy with their crew made up of different species, such as the drell, hanar, krogan, salarian, and turian. Shepard is a soldier in service of the Systems Alliance, the representation of humankind on Earth and its colonies on other planets. The character initially works on the Alliance's starship Normandy as an executive officer, but after they become the first human to join the Spectres, an elite group of agents, they become the Normandy's captain. Over the course of the series, Shepard discovers the goal of the Reapers, a secretive machine race that attempts to eliminate sentient life in the galaxy in a continuous cycle over many millennia. It becomes Shepard's mission to save not only humankind, but also the other races that populate the galaxy.

Certain events in this game are rigid and will happen regardless of the player's actions and choices. For example, Shepard will become a Spectre, discover the Reapers, and will have to attempt to save all the races of the galaxy. These rigid events are the cardinal functions (see Barthes 1966) of the narrative structure of the games, However, the outcomes of these cardinal functions depend on the player. As Backe puts it:

> In any text that is supposed to produce a coherent story, there has to be the deep structure of Barthes' cardinal functions. Even in a nonlinear campaign, a skeletal structure of narrative exists in the form of predetermined key points of the story, i.e. some textons will always be used in scriptons at the beginning, ending, or some crucial key point in between. Nonlinearity in games manifests itself, structurally speaking, in allowing the player agency over the outcome of a cardinal function, in determining one of several possible paths. (2012, 248)

In determining the outcome of the cardinal functions, the player effectively shapes an alterbiography of Shepard and other characters (Calleja 2011, 96). Backe adds to his description of non-linear narrative structures in games: "While it is true that a non-linear text does not have one fabula, it seems more logical to consider it—in allusion to Aarseth—a machine for the selection between several fabulas" (2012, 248). The autobiography that the player shapes over the course of the Shepard's characterisation process in turn influences the game's fabula. And, vice versa, the shaping of the fabula creates Shepard's autobiography. This inter-dependency between fabula and identity turns Shepard's characterisation process into a process that operates on the game's narrative structure so that Shepard develops as a narrative agent.

Shepard is a character that contains a multitude of potential identities. Using Laurel's *flying wedge* for human-computer interaction (1991, 72) that I presented in the previous chapter, 'Dynamic Game Characters' (figure 17), from the moment the player starts the game, the game confronts the player with possibilities with an abundance of potential and outcomes. As the player makes certain choices, that potential turns into probable events, and certain outcomes become less probable or are eliminated, and other outcomes become gradually more likely to happen. Shepard's characterisation process is embedded in the game's possibility space akin a blueprint, a design plan

for the narrative agent through whom the player carves the character's identity over the course of the game(s). The game's possibility space allows Shepard to function as a blueprint. The blueprint contains the potential for how Shepard could develop, which requires the player, allowing the player to become part of the characterisation process as Shepard's identity gradually reaches a certain outcome.

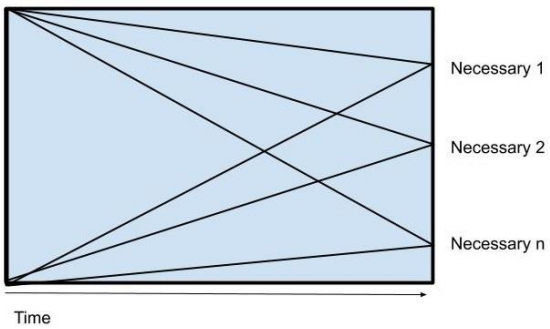

Figure 17: Illustration of Laurel's flying wedge for human-computer interaction ([1991] 2014).

The player starts filling in Shepard's blueprint from the moment they start the game. In the character-creation mode, the player primarily chooses Shepard's non-ludic attributes: their gender (male/female), their first name, physical appearance, their background, their psychological profile, and military specialization. These attributes will not change over the course of the game, but some of them do influence the game. In *ME2* and *ME3*, the player is offered an additional choice at the start of the character-creation mode: they can choose to import data from the previous game instalments to the new game. This data is primarily expressed in Shepard's identity. When I transferred data from *ME2* to *ME3*, the game presented me with a list of choices that I made within *ME2* (see image 5).

When I chose to import my Shepard from *ME2* to *ME3,* the game transferred her appearance, skills, level, reputation and previous plot choices to *ME3* (image 5). By importing this data to the other game, the choices I made in *ME2*, unbeknownst to me, bore major consequences across games. Destroying Maelon's data in *ME2* resulted in Eve's death in *ME3*. Creating a romance between Shepard and Garrus in *ME2* and rekindling that romance in *ME3* provided me a Shepard that had hopes in the future to start a family with Garrus once the war against the Reapers was over. As the choices I made affected Shepard's characterisation process, Shepard's identity became gradually less ambiguous and more determined, so that as a result, I, the player, did not only determine the game's fabula, but I also became a structural part of Shepard's identity.

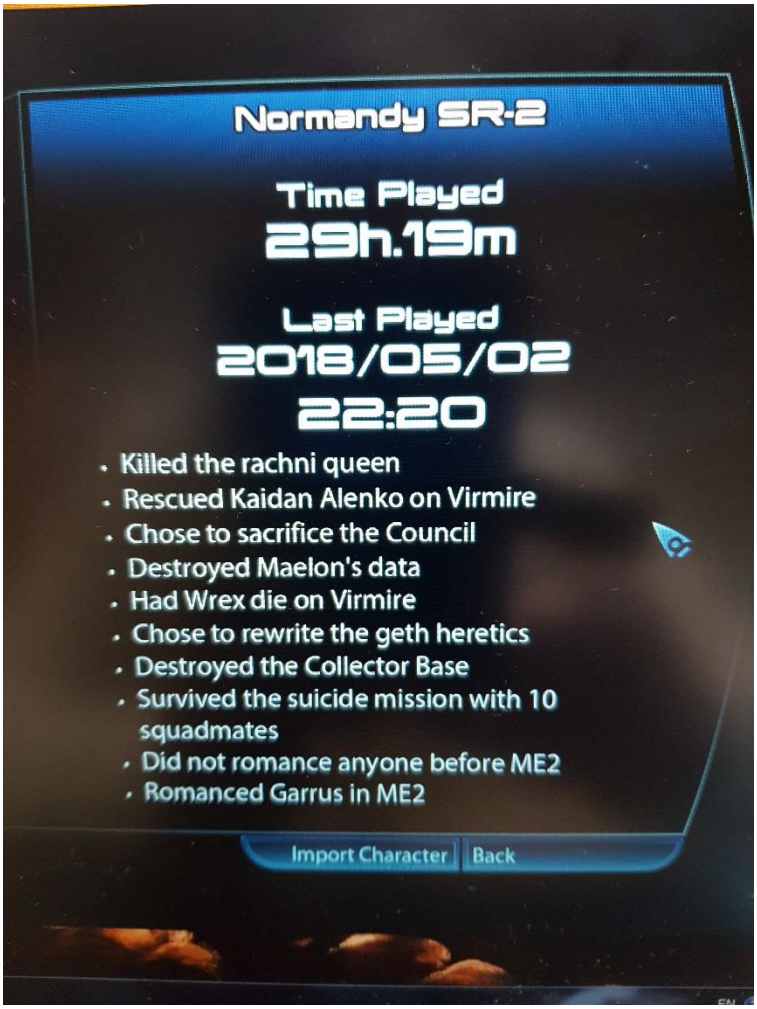

Image 5: The list of choices that I made in *ME2* to be transferred to *ME3* (in-game screenshot taken by author).

Shepard's Reputation Mechanics

Shepard's development as a narrative agent is supported by Shepard's integration in the game's possibility space as a ludic agent. I will therefore analyse in this section the main mechanism that the player uses to affect Shepard's characterisation process into a certain outcome in order to explain the co-dependency between Shepard as a narrative agent in the game's macrostructure, and Shepard as a ludic agent within these mechanisms. I will explain these mechanics in broad terms—unless otherwise stated—since every game instalment contains these mechanics but with different characteristics.

Each game contains a mechanism by which the player affects Shepard's reputation. In *ME* and *ME2*, Shepard's reputation is measured along a so-called morality system that measures Shepard's Paragon reputation on one end, and the character's Renegade reputation on another. Paragon tends to involve dialogue and actions that are considered to be benevolent, while Renegade dialogue choices and actions are ruthless and more cold-blooded. In *ME3*, the system is slightly different. Shepard gathers points on two different scales, one for Paragon and the other for Renegade. The results are however relatively similar to *ME* and *ME2*: a Shepard with a Paragon reputation is perceived as honourable and heroic by other characters, in contrast with intimidating and fearsome with a Renegade reputation.

The player accumulates reputation primarily via the game's dialogue system in segments in which the player alternates between scripted scenes and dialogue trees. A common dialogue tree usually consists of tree replies: a Paragon reply, a Renegade reply, and an investigative reply. The latter does not forward the scene, but allows the player to obtain more information about the topic of discussion. The replies decide Shepard's action within the scene. If the player chooses a Paragon reply, Shepard might deflect a crisis, while a Renegade reply has Shepard intimidate another character.

Each reply adds the amount of Paragon or Renegade points Shepard has. While it influences how other characters perceive Shepard, Shepard's reputation also opens up paths other than the usual Paragon, Renegade or investigative reply beneficial to the progress of the game. When Shepard in *ME2* is asked by Aria to protect the Patriarch, Shepard can put the Patriarch into hiding, much to the Patriarch's dismay, but enough Paragon or Renegade points provides the player with another possibility. In my case, as my Shepard had enough Paragon points, I chose an alternative option where Shepard offers to handle the assassins that threaten the Patriarch in his name so that the Patriarch keeps his reputation. Too few points on either scale does not mean that the player cannot progress the game further, but rather, the event might not play out in as beneficial a way to the player as it could have.

Despite the player's agency over Shepard's actions, the cardinal functions remain rigid. The player can only influence the way in which the events unfold, but they might not have the result the player wants. According to Laurel ([1991] 2014, 112), the authorship of the interactors with the computer is typically under constraints, because the designers of the game provide for what can happen. This is specifically in the case of the *ME* series in which no event is arbitrary, and every choice has a determined consequence. In some cases, the player's choice bears massive consequences, as with Eve's death. In other cases, certain events becomes particularly hilarious because the player's choice causes the game's structure to unfold in a path that the player did not intend for it to develop. When I played *ME3*, I was set on having my Shepard romance Garrus, but I almost failed my own goal during an event between Shepard and the ship's communication specialist Samantha. When Shepard was in her own cabin, I chose to have her call over Samantha to play a match of chess. In the dialogue tree I chose to have Shepard offer Samantha a shower, but I did not understand what that offer implied. During Samantha's shower, a conversation between Shepard and Samantha occurred in which Shepard asked if Samantha was planning on going on a hot date with someone, to which Samantha responded that it depends if *she* is interested. Only by that point had I figured out that this was a scene which could create an outcome in which Shepard romances Samantha—far, far away from what I had intended. Shepard can only have one romantic partner in *ME3*, and a romance with Samantha would therefore close the path to a romance with Garrus. The dialogue tree showed up: does Shepard join Samantha in the shower or decline the invitation? I choose to decline the invitation. My Shepard gave Samantha a quick reply: "Good luck with that date!". Samantha looked a bit disappointed, but at least my original goal was still attainable.

Shepard's characterisation process as a ludic agent feeds their characterisation process as a narrative agents, the latter of which dominates the game. As Shepard's reputation grows in a certain direction, the outcomes of that direction become gradually more probable until the player reaches only one. In my case, Shepard's identity was the result of the outcome in which a female Shepard had a high Paragon reputation, romanced Garrus, and was implied to survive the war against the Reapers. While this outcome is not the only possible identity Shepard could have, it was the identity

of *my Shepard*.

Shepard: A Transmedial Character?

In this section, I discuss BioWare's attempts to accommodate the player's agency in *ME* series into the *ME* comics to depict how invisible hands such as the developer's engage with the player's role in Shepard's characterisation process. The *Mass Effect* franchise contains several novels and comics about the world depicted in the game series. These non-cybermedia lack the mechanical structure that the game series contain so that they cannot incorporate the player's integral role in the characterisation process of Shepard. By discussing Shepard's appearance in the *ME* comics, I can propose how Shepard, as a dynamic game character, influences the character ecology in which they reside, while the character is simultaneously under the constraints of invisible hands that attempt to influence the character ecology.

The *Mass Effect Omnibus Volume 1* (Walters *et al*. 2016) and *Mass Effect Omnibus Volume 2* (Walters and Barlow 2017) convey the background stories of the companion characters which occur either at the beginning of the events of the *ME* series, or the events in-between the different game instalments. At first sight, the comics follow the rigid structure of Henry Jenkins' (2006) description of transmedia storytelling: the medium of the comic contributes something unique to the overall world of *Mass Effect* by depicting events that the game series only hinted at happening. However, these comics do not contribute anything new that the player did not already know from the game series. For example, the player knows that Thane's wife Irikah was murdered in revenge. That is not something new, but the comics just answer in detail *how* she was murdered. And even this information is limited, because they only describe the aftermath in which Thane describes his wife's death as: "What they did to her. Unspeakable acts" (Walters and Barlow 2017). In other words, although the *ME* comics flesh out the *ME* world and make it more detailed, they do not *expand* the world.

Shepard does not manifest in these comics as the main character.[26] In the comics, Shepard's appearance is limited to two constraints: first, Shepard's body is never clearly depicted and, second, Shepard's gender is never clearly stated. The volumes seem to go to great lengths to avoid any indication of Shepard's gender. I have not found any pronouns that reveal the character's gender, nor does the character's proper name reveal the gender; Shepard is only addressed by other characters as either 'Shepard' or 'Commander Shepard', or occasionally as 'my friend' or 'the commander'. It is the same for the Shepard's physical appearance, as the comics seem to avoid depicting the body as much as possible. An example is in *Volume 1*, which shows the events of how Liara T'soni tries to obtain Shepard's body after Shepard disappeared in the explosion on the ship the Normandy. These events occur chronologically between the end of *ME* and before the start of *ME2*. When Liara finally discovers Shepard's body, the body appears to be in a coffin and is not shown at all. Although this might make sense in terms of the diegesis, since the body is in the coffin in order to be transported, the same avoidance of visually depicting appears all over the two omnibus volumes: whenever Shepard's body is shown, it is either hidden away or the body is beyond recognition.

The comics contain indicators that point to Shepard's immaterial character, but Shepard never becomes a manifestation in the comics. Instead, the indicators only refer to the game's blueprint, to how Shepard can potentially develop through the rigid events in the game, for which

[26] The exceptions are *Mass Effect: Genesis* (*Mass Effect: Genesis* 2011) and *Mass Effect: Genesis 2* (*Mass Effect: Genesis 2* 2013), which are stated to be 'interactive backstories' in Electronic Arts' distribution platform Origin.

the player is needed. Without the player, no concrete identity of Shepard will emerge in the game series. This means that Shepard's appearance in the comics requires—even depends on—the player to project their Shepard onto the comics' indicators of Shepard. What the indicators do is stimulate the player to substitute the blueprint with the manifestation of Shepard they created over the course of the characterisation process in the game.

BioWare's omission of a Shepard manifestation in the *ME* comics is a strategic choice. BioWare takes a different approach with the comics of their other game series, such as *Dragon Age* (2009–2014). In *Dragon Age: Origins* (*DA:O*) (2009), the player takes the role of the Grey Warden which refers to the character's function as a warrior. Similar to Shepard, the player can control the character's appearance, skills, and influences the character's overall characterisation process throughout the game and, as a result, also controls the events and characterisation processes of the Grey Warden's companion characters Alistair and Morrigan.

Dragon Age Omnibus (Gaider and Freed 2016) portrays a single outcome of the events in *DA:O* and its sequel *Dragon Age II* (*DAII)* (2011). The Grey Warden is completely absent in the outcome the omnibus depicts. After the archdemon is killed in *DA:O,* one of the possible outcomes is for Alistair to become king of the world Ferelden, but he can also become a drunk, stay a Grey Warden, or be killed in battle.[27] This outcome is carried over to the sequel game. The comics portray the adventures of Alistair as king of Ferelden, in which he tries to find his father. Alistair is eventually able to find his father with the help of his companions Isabel and Varric, but due to the evil doings of the wizard Aurelian Titus, his father unfortunately succumbs to his wounds and dies. These events are not hinted at in *DA:O*, nor do they fill in events in between the series' individual instalments.

The *DA Omnibus* expands the world of *Dragon Age*, because it contributes a new story to a particular selected outcome of *DA:O* and *DAII*. However, BioWare's decision to depict one specific outcome of this game series canonises the events of the series by which they imply, as authority, that Alistair becoming king is the truthful and authentic outcome of that character's characterisation process in the game series. This is something BioWare seems to avoid in the *ME* comics. BioWare does not expand *ME*'s world, but they also do not force any canonisation on the player of the games.

To enable the player to substitute the indicator with their Shepard manifestation is a tricky business. BioWare avoids any concrete expansion of the world, it does not develop any of the characters more than the game already indicates. Shepard is only an imagined character in the comics, whose manifestation relies on the player's involvement over the course of the characterisation process in the game, and their capability to project their Shepard onto the indicator in the comics.

The nature of Shepard's identity is not one that depends on the continuity of the character's identity between the game instalments and comics, but one that relies on the player's influence over Shepard's characterisation process. The player could go through this process once per game, or as much as they want, and create a different manifestation of Shepard each time. The player's involvement in Shepard's characterisation process in the game establishes concrete manifestations whose identity the player then projects onto the comics. This involvement gives the false impression that the developer, as some benevolent author, grants the player the agency to imagine Shepard into the comics however they want, but what the author actually provides is a preferred reading (see Hall 1973), a dominant reading in which the reader can only infer Shepard as a character in the comics that they have helped construct in the game series in the first place.

[27] For all the possible endings, see https://dragonage.fandom.com/wiki/Epilogue_(Origins).

The player's supposed agency comes at the cost of the character's characterisation process. The player's influence over Shepard's characterisation process—and subsequently over the companion characters of the *ME* series—causes that these characters and, most of all, Shepard cannot develop outside of the game series when the developer chooses not to subject these characters to a specific outcome. As a result, the Shepard manifestations that are within the authority of BioWare's invisible hands, do not develop outside of their original game works. As much as they are a dynamic game character inside the *ME* game series, they can be considered dead characters outside of these games.

5. *Façade* (2005) and *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (2012)

It is perhaps characters who are premade and in an indeterminate game structure through which they develop that are less likely to appear prominently as dynamic game characters. The games in which they exist maintain a peripheral position to game genres where the characterisation process happens primarily as narrative and ludic agents such as role-playing games or *otome* games. A reason for the lack of prominence of these kinds of dynamic game characters is, as I suspect, because the understanding of characters is primarily rooted within non-cybermedia works that have more affinity with narratives such as comics, films or novels. These kind of works narrate characters in primarily rigid manners in which the development of the prefabricated character is determined within that single work.

To have a prefabricated character with a flexible development within a single work creates a certain tension between the understanding of characters as coherent entities within (at least) a single work, and the flexibility that a single work allows. I will discuss that tension using *Façade* (2005) and *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (2012).

Premade characters in a flexible structure need to be written in such a way that they can adapt to the flexibility required from them within a single work while simultaneously they have to maintain an established identity that evolves. Dynamic game characters in this strategy call for games in which the above requirements have to be prewritten by the game designers, which is an incredible strain on the designers. According to Mateas and Stern (2005), the designers of the "first-person, real-time, one-act, interactive drama" *Façade* (2005):

> [Agency is] the most challenging to implement, exactly because it requires the system to dynamically assemble a story structure that incorporates the unpredictable actions of the player. This suggests that stories with *looser*, *sparser* event structures (plots) will be easier to implement in an interactive medium (require less generativity). (2005, 1)

Their solution to the tension between game and story is to reconstruct the interactions in a world in terms of social relations between player and characters, in which the player's affinity is organised around a numeric score (2005, 2).

The characters in *Façade*, Grace and Trip, are semi-autonomous. They consist of long-term autonomous behaviour (like starting to fix drinks for the player on their own), and, according to Mateas and Stern, thousands of joint dialogue behaviours to adapt to the player's agency within the game (2005, 4). In this game, the player has local agency and global agency. Local agency refers to the player's actions which immediately cause a reaction from Trip and Grace (2005, 4). When I told Grace I met Vince, her former boyfriend, on my way, Grace immediately responded shocked, before

she pulled herself together. Global agency refers to the ending of the game, and particular actions by the player that cause a specific ending. When I continued to talk about Vince, Trip ejected me from the apartment, which ended the game.

Designers Mateas and Stern call *Façade* an 'interactive drama' rather than a game, implying that it is a drama that responds to the player's input without the need for human-to-human interaction (see Aarseth 1997, 48). However, drama, as Schechner argues (1988, 69), works with a specialised form of script, written beforehand and which determines the course of the drama. Although *Façade* works on an encoded script, this script does not determine the direction of the outcome. Rather, *Façade* resonates more with *commedia dell'arte*, the improvisation theatre not dominated by the written word (see Tuomola 1999, 170) but theatre that used predefined rules for improvisation that guided how the actors could behave and what they could and could not do around the performance's plot. According to Mika Tuomola (1999, 170) improvisation in *commedia dell'arte* operated on predefined and clear rules of representation. Each character could only do certain things. John Rudlin (1994) states that the improvised dialogue (and behaviour) worked on known structures called *mecchanismi*, or mechanisms (55).

As dynamic game characters, Trip and Grace are semi-autonomous digital entities. Or, rather, artificial intelligence-based characters who use scripts that allow the player to interact with them. The player can influence which direction the *intrigue* (see Aarseth 1997, 112) will go, but those directions, and the conversations the player will have, are encoded within the game's possibility space. That is, the player will be unable to have the characters behave or act in a way that has not been written in the scripts. I tried to tell Trip and Grace three times about a drunken night of mine, but they never responded to that input. After the third attempt, Trip told me to leave their apartment, staring at me, unresponsive until I left.

Façade does not take longer than twenty minutes to play through, and the player has to restart the game from scratch if they want a different outcome. This might suggest that prefabricated dynamic game characters in indeterministic structures can only exist in games that quickly end as it requires a tremendous amount of script to account for the unpredictable actions of the player. However, as I will discuss in the next section, prefabricated characters in indeterministic structures can also appear in games that do not end so quickly when the script runs out—on the condition that the game limits the unpredictable actions of the player (or perhaps, rather, sacrifices these actions for the AI).

Animal Crossing: New Leaf

Such a game is *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (*AC:NL*) (2012), which I also discuss in the chapter six 'The Construction of Game Characters'. In that chapter, I argue that *AC:NL* manages to construct its game characters on their autonomy. The characters give the impression that they have a life independent from the player, without the player even having to be present in the game.

AC:NL is not a game that has an ending, it does not have an intrigue around which the dynamic game characters will act. The scripts embedded in the game emulate daily life based on the idealistic idea of the *furusato*[28] where the dynamic game characters live a rustic lifestyle that includes actions such as fishing, catching bugs, shopping on a small street, visiting a museum, and celebrating events such as Halloween or Christmas together in a small town. As long as the player

[28] As I stated in the chapter on 'The Construction of Game Characters', *furusato* is the idealistic notion of old villages where one lives a rustic lifestyle, completely opposite to busy cosmopolitan cities, that summons feelings of nostalgia (Robertson 1988).

continues to play in the game, the daily life the game simulates will continue.

Each villager, the AI characters in town, has a predetermined personality, suggesting a certain normative behaviour for male and female genders. For male characters the personality types include cranky, lazy, jock and smug. The personality types for female characters include: snooty, normal, peppy and *uchi* (blunt and tomboyish) (see Nintendo 2012). Each character only has one personality type, which functions as the primary script that determines the character's behaviour and responses to the player. For example, characters with the *uchi* personality type are scripted to wake up at 11AM. Before that time in the morning, the player will not be able to engage with them, whereas a lazy personality type will wake up at 9AM. Characters of the snooty personality types will find it hard to get along with characters of the jock personality type, due to the latter's indifference to fashion and physical appearance.

The player is unable to change the personality type of the villager characters. However, what the player does have is the agency to change each character's level of friendship towards the player in the game's *system of affection*. The player can theoretically befriend every character within the player's village and two special characters, who are always present in any *AC:NL* version and have jobs: Brewster, who tends the coffee store, and Sable, the seamstress who owns a tailor shop with her sister Mable.

The player can increase the villager characters' friendship towards them through different means, such as sending them presents or fulfilling their requests. For example, Lopez in my town asked me to request six town signatures from characters in other villagers. However, the player is not shown how the characters' friendship towards them is growing in any statistical way. The player can only guess from small social cues that the villager characters warm up to them, such when they give the player unexpected gifts.

The player's agency over prefabricated performative agents seems to be quite limited. *Façade* shows that there is a tremendous challenge for the game designers to account for all the unpredictable actions if the designers want to give a high amount of agency to the players. *Façade* does not account for all the player's unpredictable actions, and only allows the player to talk about those topics that the designers did predict and code in the game, and additionally the game takes only twenty minutes to play. *AC:NL* shows that prefabricated performative agents can exist in an open world, but this is at the expense of the player's agency over these characters: the player can only influence the character's development outcome in the character's relation towards the player, but has little agency over anything else.

***Animal Crossing*'s Transmedial Appearances**

Façade does not have any official transmedial adaptations, since the game is not part of a franchise, but the characters from *AC:NL*, as is common in media mix strategies, are dispersed over a variety of media. The *Animal Crossing* game series has been around since 2001 since the release of *Doubutsu no Mori*[29] (2001). In these games, the player always inhabits a player-character in a town[30] in an open-ended simulation game. Each new *AC* game iterates characters such as Tom Nook, Sable and Mable, and Pompom anew, though the characters do not address the existence of their manifestations in the others games. In every game it is as if the player has never met them before. The player recognises these characters from previous instalments in the series not only by their visual design and their names, but the characters also employ a variety of *topoi*, recurrent textual

[29] *Doubutsu no Mori* is the official Japanese title of *Animal Crossing*.

[30] With the exception of the forthcoming *AC: New Horizons* (Forthcoming March 2020) taking place on an island.

stock situations (see Eco 1979, 119). Tom Nook for example is, until *AC:NL*, the shop owner of the town, and in *AC:NL* he becomes a real-estate agent, who is still trying to sell the player as much objects as possible like he did in the previous game instalments of the series.

Besides several games, the *AC* series has also been turned into a manga serialisation called *Doubutsu no Mori: Hohinda Mura dayori* [Animal Crossing: It's Hohinda Village!] (2001–2015), by CoroCoro Comics, a monthly manga magazine aimed at elementary school boys. The serialisation is drawn by *mangaka* Abesayori with (currently) twelve volumes. Each of these volumes have been officially licensed by Nintendo, the developer and IP owner of the *AC* games. The *AC* volumes maintain the same strategy as the *Persona 5* magazines that are licensed by Atlus and contain background stories, parodies and *yonkoma* jokes. Albeit (seemingly) written by only a single author, the *AC* volumes contain short funny stories and *yonkoma* based on events in the *AC* games. For my analysis, I look at the most recent publication, volume 12 (Abesayori 2015). The manga fabricates Sayorin as the protagonist, who functions as a stand-in for the player-character, in all the stories in the volume.

Several stories depict Sayorin as the mayor of Hohinda town based on the scripts of *AC:NL*. The *yonkoma* make fun of mechanics and situations in the game. It is, for example, quite a task to get enough *bells* (in-game currency) to upgrade the player's house, to buy tools or clothes, or to build town projects. The *yonkoma Ohana no Kisetsu* [Flower Season] plays right into this situation: Sayorin tries to grow rare flowers. Upon the sight of a floating balloon with a gift attached, she becomes tempted to follow it, but holds back and tends to the flowers. Then immediately when she spots a rare beetle, she runs right after it, while screaming: "[this insect] is worth 2,500 bells!". She destroys the flowers as she runs straight through them—a mechanic that is also in the game.

Unlike the *Persona 5* magazines, the *Doubutsu no Mori: Hohinda Mura dayori* magazines do not do that much relationship exploration. The story *Nakayoshi Barentain* [The Valentine of Good Friends] hints at the relationships the player can create between the player-character and other characters, but the story is primarily written in a funny tone with a moralistic message: do not become friends just to get something from them. The reason for the lack of exploration is likely because of the target audience. While *AC:NL* is rated 'E' for 'Everyone' in the West, *Persona 5* is rated 'M' for 'Mature 17+'. A magazine aimed at elementary school boys is less concerned with the depiction of relationship developments between characters than a magazine aimed at (young) adults.

The character's visual design and simple personalities—which the player cannot change over the course of the game—and *topoi*, make it easy to transfer the characters from one work to another without needing to connect one manifestation of the character to another. The *AC* characters follow a common pattern in media mix strategies: they are recognizable as the same *kyara* but do not appear as the same coherent character (Itô 2005; Wilde 2019, 7). No villager character acknowledges their manifestation in the other game instalments, but they do draw upon previously established designs and *topoi.*

The relationships that the player can create between the player-character and the villager characters are barely addressed. This means that the scripts that turn the *AC* villager characters into dynamic game characters do not translate to the character's manifestations in non-cybermedia. However, I have to add that as performative agents, *AC:NL*'s characters are limited. Whereas *Façade* is unable to accommodate unpredictability of the player's agency, *AC:NL* tries to trim the player's agency to such an extent that it limits how dynamic these dynamic game characters can be. It might be due to the case studies I was able to find that matched the criteria of having prefabricated

characters within an indeterministic game structure, but it seems that this particular combination is the most difficult to accommodate due to the unpredictability of the player's behaviour if the designers want to provide the players with a high degree of agency.

6. *The Sims 4* (2014)

The Sims 4 (2014) is, as the title suggests, the fourth instalment of *The Sims* series. Just like *AC: NL*, *The Sims 4* is a simulation game where the player controls a neighbourhood of virtual figures, the Sims. Sim characters are non-prefabricated and have an indeterministic structure. Series creator, Will Wright, calls *The Sims* an interactive dollhouse, one that parodies consumerism (Seabrook 2006). The player is capable of influencing semi-autonomous characters as they live their virtual lives. There is no particular goal towards which the player has to work; they can decide their own. This makes the Sim characters dynamic game characters mostly dominating as performative agents.

Celia Pearce (2006) states that part of why it is interesting to look at *The Sims* (Maxis 2000) is because it represents "an abdication of authorial control, or more accurately, a shift in the definition of author". As discussed in chapter five, 'The Challenges of Manifestations and their Identities', the concept of character suffers from its connection to the author-function: the character's identity is not only shaped by the author-function as an invisible hand, but its entire existence suffers from the fallacy of creationism. That is, the character is considered to be an abstract object that causally depends on authorial intention (see Brock 2010; Friedell 2016). Only if an author intends there to be a character, the character will exist.

If creationism is taken at face-value, then the Sims are not characters because they have no explicit author who prefabricates them before they are consumed by the player. It is my premise that our understanding of Sims as characters is challenged because of the delegation of authorial control. The figures in *The Sims* series stretch the concept of characters. They can be considered dolls, and since dolls can become characters, and characters can—as they are taken out of their stories—become dolls, the difference between the two terms is more a matter of perspective than a conceptual matter. Therefore, the position that I adopt, and have adopted over the course of this dissertation, is that Sims are characters, because they function as "models of an aspect of the world, schemata which generalize and simplify human beings in conventional ways and make it available to understanding and action" (Frow 2014, 107) from which the interpreter can infer a sense of personhood.

What I discuss in the following sections is not so much whether the Sims are characters, but rather *how* they are characters. And, more relevant to this chapter, *how* they are dynamic game characters. In the following sections, I discuss the idea of authored characters, and the fallacy of the causal relation between author and creator through the example of my own Sim character, Sterre, who I created in 'Create a Sim' mode. I will then turn to a description of my gameplay to describe how Sterre is a dynamic game character, functioning as a performative agent. I will end this case study with a discussion about the recurring appearances of the Sim characters in the game series, reflecting on the friction Sim characters generate in the strive for narrative continuity between character manifestations.

The Create a Sim Mode

Characters are created: they are schemata who are authored. However, as Brock (2010) argues, a character's existence is not the causal consequence of the author's intention to create an individual

that is identified as a character. *The Sims* series specifically rattles the fallacy of the causal author-character relationship, because it does not relate the existence of a character to a specific author. Rather, the series provides a possibility space that allows the *player* to create and develop Sim characters in combination with and dependent on the game's *script* established by the writing and the programming.

For my case study, I created only one Sim.[31] *The Sims 4*, like all instalments in the series, allows the player two choices: play with an existing family unit, or create their own Sim characters in the Create a Sim mode that each *The Sims* generation has. The Create a Sim mode is incredibly extensive. The player chooses the Sim's name, their voice, how they walk, their physical appearance, aspirations and traits. It also offers LGBTQ-friendly options, which determine the Sim character's in-game affordances: the player can not only choose the sex of the Sim (male/female), their skin colour, and determine their starting age (toddler/child/young adult/adult/elderly), but—since a patch in October 2016—the player can also customise the Sim character's gender. Regardless of the Sim's sex, the player can determine the Sim's physical frame (masculine/feminine), clothing preference (masculine/feminine), pregnancy options (able to become pregnant/impregnate others/infertile) and mode of toilet use (standing/sitting). The player can choose all these different options to create Sim characters, thereby becoming their author.

The Create a Sim mode is at once the most authorial moment the player has, and the place where they shape the script for the character's dynamicity. The player has the power to create a Sim, and can adjust their affordances and limitations in such a way that it affects the Sim's development and eventual outcome. A Sim with an aspiration to become a painter extraordinaire will have different goals to meet than a Sim character with the aspiration for a big happy family. The traits will affect how fast the Sim character will need to engage in certain activities. And the gender customisation options allow the Sim characters to have certain inherent traits that influence their romantic connections to other Sims.

For my case study, I had a particular goal in mind: I wanted the character, who I called Sterre, to become a spellcaster, *The Sims 4*'s version of a witch. It was particularly Sterre's traits and aspiration that were most important to me. It was impossible to choose an aspiration that had anything to do with becoming a spellcaster, so I chose that Sterre aspires to become a painter extraordinaire. I then selected three other traits that I thought would help with this aspiration: creative, goofball and outgoing. Based on these traits, the Sim character obtains certain natural qualities and aptitude. For example, a goofball Sim will be playful faster, but they also demand to do more fun activities or else their needs bar will drain, and they will become grumpy and refuse to carry out certain tasks.

In the Create a Sim mode, the player creates a causal relationship between the Sim character and themselves as the author, but this authorship is derivative: the player can only create the character within the limitations of the game's possibility space. Without the *Island Living* expansion pack, I would not be able to create a mermaid Sim character no matter how much I wished to. And, even if I do create a mermaid, I cannot create a mermaid/vampire hybrid Sim. Even when I would be able to manage to have a vampire Sim character and a mermaid Sim character give birth to a baby, the baby will be either a vampire or a mermaid—over which the player has no control either.

[31] In addition to the basic game, I own three expansion packs: *Island Living, Get Famous,* and *City Living*. I also have the game packs *Vampires, Magic Realms*, and *Parenthood* installed. These additions provide new world in which the Sim characters can live, new mechanics, additional clothes, furniture and more.

The Life of a Sim

The moment the player releases their Sim character into the world, they lose any derivative authorship over the character; the Sim's existence is not causally related anymore to the author-player. The player's agency to give orders to the Sim characters gives the illusion that the player can decide exactly how the Sim character will develop, but the combination of the character's aspirations, traits, needs bar and scripted events turn the player more into a facilitator of the character's characterisation process than a puppet-master deciding what the character will and will not do. I will provide four brief examples for this: my own quest to turn Sterre into a spellcaster, the influence of the mood on the character's willingness to conduct my orders, scripted events the player cannot avoid happening, and the response from other Sim characters.

As soon as I had created Sterre and placed her in an apartment, I sent her out to the portal in the neighbourhood Glimmerbrook, which would send her to the Realm of Magic where the sages live to turn her into a spellcaster. Sterre's transformation did not change her drastically. She has the same needs as any other normal Sim (vampires and mermaids have different needs), but I gained access to the spellcaster perks menu and spellbook. The perks menu gives the spellcaster Sim additional advantages depending on their spellcaster level. The Sim can obtain magical experience in a variety of ways; the player can order them to practice magic, to ask another spellcaster for help, to read tomes and books, and to summon a familiar. In this aspect, the Sim's characterisation process happens primarily when they are functioning as a ludic agent. By developing the Sim's statistics, such as obtaining more experience in a certain skill like magic, the character gains access to additional abilities, skills and perks.

The needs bar plays a nontrivial role in the dynamicity of the character. It tells the player what kinds of activities the Sim needs to do in order to stay happy. The player wants to keep the meters in the needs bar raised, because unfulfilled needs influence the character's mood, or worse. The script of the game dictates that the Sim's needs have to be fulfilled otherwise the player will face consequences that influence the development of the character. Sterre is particularly inclined to become stressed, since her 'fun' bar drops fast. If the fun bar is too low, I cannot order her to do anything—she simply ignores my orders and either watches television or reads a book. If she goes to work stressed, her performance at her job will drop, she will not be promoted, or might even be demoted and fired. This in turn could make the character sad, that will also affect their performance in other aspects; the player will be denied the orders to kiss the Sim's lover, and other orders such as 'complaining about problems' will become available.

The game's script become particularly prominent when the player has little to no influence at all over the event that manifests. Their jobs calling, festivals happening, or vampires that sneak into the apartment are events in the game's script that the player cannot predict. I had no means to predict the arrival of the vampire, sneaking into Sterre's apartment. I tried to order Sterre to stay in bed, but the vampire Sim's hypnosis powers nullified any order I gave (image 6). After this event, I was stuck with a Sim who had not only overslept so that she was late for work, but who also felt uncomfortable for the next 24 in-game hours. She did not get that promotion, she did not want to practice her magic spells, she did not want to do anything at all but be grumpy and complain. All I could do was just wait until she felt better again.

What the player also cannot influence is how Sim characters react to each other. Sterre became intimately involved with spellcaster sage Morgyn. Usually, Morgyn would respond well to Sterre, as I ordered Sterre to chat with them, flirt, and encourage them. It was, however, during an activity that did not involve Morgyn and Sterre directly that Sterre's behaviour influenced Morgyn

negatively. Sterre had just obtained the spell 'infatuation' that allowed her to force to Sim characters to become obsessed with each other against their will. I could not resist the temptation to use this spell on Sterre's landlord Ayako. The moment after Sterre put the spell on Ayako, Morgyn responded negatively to this mischief—much to my surprise—and started shouting at Sterre, his affection for her decreasing.

Image 6: Sterre hypnotized by vampire Caleb (in-game screenshot taken by author).

Authored Characters and Performative Agents

Pearce (2006) observes that *The Sims* shifts the definition of 'author'. The player has in *The Sims 4* a different authorial role depending on the mode they are in. In Create a Sim mode, the player becomes the character's creator, taking on the role of an author and deciding how the Sim characters will look like, what their personalities will be like and how they will likely behave. This kind of authorial agency is derivative, not almighty. The player can only create a Sim within the constraints of the game's possibility space. In the Play mode, the player loses their derivative agency, because the Sim characters are semi-autonomous AI characters that can perform simple activities without the player's involvement, but they do need the player to develop as characters. The authorial role that the player in this mode occupies is that of a facilitator. The facilitating agency allows the player to influence the Sims to perform certain acts. Although the player can usually influence the Sims with orders, the player has no absolute control over the semi-autonomous beings: the player cannot prevent certain events from happening, nor can they control how the Sim characters respond to events, what they want, need, or how they behave. The Sim characters are being authored, but, as Brock (2010) argued, are not causally related to their author.

No character can exist without being authored, but usually authorial control comes in the form of an author who decides the character's identity without the reader/watcher/audience's involvement over their development. However, no dynamic game character can develop in the

game without being authored by the player. The player's active role in the dynamic game character's development does not provide the player with authorial control, they do not author the dynamic game character in the form of an almighty author. Rather, they have agency over the character, and that agency is embedded in the game's possibility space.

The lack of cardinal functions in *The Sims 4* are made up by the existence of scripts, the possible manifestations of patterns of doing embedded in the game's possibility space. *The Sims 4* is not unlimited, and only certain events can occur. I doubt a mermaid Sim would have entered Sterre's apartment to suck her plasma (a reference to blood), because the game's possibility space only allows vampire Sims to perform these acts. These scripts in the possibility space determine how the player can act. They can influence the Sims with orders, usually without the Sim character being able to protest too much, but the Sim itself is not without agency: scripts allow them to act on their own—deviating from the player's orders—or the script acts on them with vampires or other Sim characters working against their wishes. The Sim characters thus function more like performative agents: their scripted behaviour is permeated by the player and the possibility space that allows the player to influence their development.

Serial Sim Characters?

Ever since the first instalment in the series was released, *The Sims* series has contained prefabricated Sim characters. For example, I recognised the vampire sneaking into Sterre's apartment immediately as Caleb, one of the prefabricated vampires that came from *The Sims 4: Vampires* game pack. My tentative hypothesis was that Sims in *The Sims* series were unable to cross transmedially, because the player is the initial author of these characters in the Create a Sim mode, however, the prefabricated characters do tend to migrate. They migrate trans-game as recurring or, perhaps more accurately, as serial figures. In this section, I will reflect on the friction Sim characters generate in the strive for narrative continuity between Sim character manifestations.

For the player who has played all the standard generations of *The Sims* series (expansion packs not included), Bella Goth is a familiar name. Bella Goth, together with her husband Mortimer Goth and their first child Cassandra Goth, first appeared in *The Sims*, and reappear in all the series' instalments.[32] Before the start of *The Sims 2* (Maxis 2004), Bella and Mortimer had one more child: Alexander Goth. However, Bella herself is not playable as she has gone missing after an alien abduction. The memories that Mortimer, Cassandra and Alexander have primarily involve Bella. In *The Sims 3* (Maxis 2009), Bella Goth appears as a child, named Bella Bachelor, and Mortimer Goth—he too being a child—lives right across the street. Their relationship is that of best friends.

In *The Sims 4*, Bella is seen together with her family again. She lives together with Mortimer, Cassandra, and Alexander in a large mansion in Willow Creek. According to the *The Sims Wiki* website, Maxis seems to suggest that this Bella is an alternate version of Bella in the previous generations (Fandom n.d.). Bella's different (dis-)appearance in the series before *The Sims 4* suggests a timeline, or rather, a form of narrative continuity, as she never initially appears in each game generation in an age that collides with her appearances in other game generations.

The tension that Bella's manifestation causes brings to mind Shane Denson's (2011)

[32] I exclude the console installments of *The Sims* series, since Maxis, the developer, created the series initially for the computer. The console installments operate as peripheral stand-alone versions, based on the series. For example, the player can buy all kinds of expansion packs for *The Sims 2* for the PC, but no additional content packs for *The Sims 2* console version exist. I also exclude the peripheral PC installments such as *The Sims Medieval* (Maxis 2011) that do not function as expansions, but as stand-alone games.

description of the tension between the series character and the serial figure. He explains that there exist two types of seriality in stories: “1) a linear form of serial progression, continuation, and development; and 2) a non-linear form of serial 'concrescence,' snowballing accumulation, or compounding sedimentation” (2011, 536). In the former seriality, the series character appears as “a figure that unfolds within a continuing narrative (in a soap opera, a novel series, or saga, for example), tending to take on an increased psychological depth and/or ever more complex social involvements in the course of this development” (536.). In the latter seriality, the serial figure appears as “a stock character of sorts, who appears again and again in significantly different forms of adaptation, contexts, and in various media” (536). In the case of *The Sims* series, however, the difference between the friction of Bella’s appearances and Denson’s description of the friction between the series character and the serial character is that Denson describes the appearances of characters within rigid works, works that have already been written by an author, whereas Bella’s appearances exist over a series of works that are entirely flexible. Her migration from game to game in the series more closely resembles that of a *kyara* than the serial figure.

Even when Bella is only considered as a serial figure, Denson’s idea of “the traces of previous incarnations” (2011, 573) are not up for scrutiny. Roberta Pearson (2019) uses Denson’s ‘traces of previous incarnations’ as ‘points of contact’ to explain the cohesion between character manifestations only works for Bella before the player starts playing the basic game of all generation. When these games remain untouched by the player, the Bella manifestations between game generations give a sense of narrative continuity. But any Bella manifestation that appears in a game the player actually plays in the Play mode gradually loses its coherence with the Bella manifestations in previous game generations. The moment the player plays the game—any game generation—Bella and her family will function the same as any other Sim. The player can leave the family alone so that the player becomes barely or not at all involved in Bella’s development, but she still develops nonetheless at least in terms of age. Even when the player does not play with them directly, all Sim characters will age regardless of the player’s direct involvement with them. They will also appear in several places within the game, and the Sim characters that the player controls can still engage with the Sim characters the player does not directly control.

Maxis assumes the author-function to determine Bella’s existence and identity. Her so-called ‘alternate version’ in *The Sims 4* suggests an excuse to keep up the usual strive for narrative continuity. Maxis’ attempt to describe that they created an ‘alternate’ version of Bella seems to go entirely against the nature of their own game. First, Maxis assumes the paradoxical position that there exists a causal relation between them as the author and the existence of Bella. Second, and subsequently, their attempt for coherence in Bella conflicts with the nature that the game series grants her: Bella’s existence as a character has always already been plural within a single game. Like any other Sim character, Bella functions primarily as a performative agent, based on the game’s script and the player’s manipulation of that script. The work itself is incredibly flexible—that is, there is no rigid way that Bella will develop as a character. Her identity is not rigid, but entirely flexible. Her characterisation process differs per player. Maxis’ attempt to give Bella some sort of coherence within each game generation thwarts the plural existence she has in each individual game work.

7. The Dynamic Game Character in a Character Ecology

This section explains the consequences of contemporary transmedia practices on dynamic game characters in the character ecology. As explained in chapter four, ‘The Immaterial Character’,

characters have three aspects to them: the archetype, the immaterial character and the indicator, and the plurality of manifestations. In a character ecology, the identities of these characters are constantly shifting. Invisible hands attempt to police the configuration of the manifestations of the character through three venues of control: canonisation, authorship and ownership. In the West, the configuration is preferred to be one of narrative continuity to give the impression that the identity of the character makes linear sense. In Japan, the media mix tends towards an approach that is based on coherence of character proliferation and intellectual property. So long as the manifestations of the character conform to the character owned by the IP owner, the configuration of the character does not have to make coherent sense in terms of narrative continuity between character manifestations. This difference in tendencies between strategies in Japan and the West should, however, not be read as a clear-cut conceptual dichotomy. As I clarified over the course of these chapters, exceptions to these tendencies do exist, such as *The Sims* and *The Legend of Zelda* series. These tendencies are nothing more than inclinations and preferences that the West and Japan exhibit in current contemporary transmedial practices, instead of a conceptual cultural uniqueness to either.

Summary of the Case Studies

Link in *BoTW* as a dynamic game character is primarily dominated by the ludic agent, while the narrative agent is rigid. The player develops the dynamic game character by cardinal functions that give him extra abilities such as Mipha's Grace. *BoTW* has been created within Nintendo's existing, imposed chronology on the different Link manifestations in order to create a form of narrative continuity between the different manifestations in the different games. *BoTW*'s Link is not specifically placed within this chronology. Instead, the designers purposefully do not say which of the three timelines in the chronology this Link belongs. It seems that the imposed narrative continuity on the Link manifestations creates a paradox: now Link's identity is perhaps more ambiguous than before.

Persona 5 contains the same criteria as *BoTW,* but the dynamic game characters dominate as narrative agents. The game maintains a rigid macrostructure, but, just as with Link in *BotW*, the characters dynamicity comes to the fore in the game's microstructure. The player is able to affect Joker's characterisation process in, for example, the game's SA. The microstructure allows the player to influence the characters both as narrative and as ludic agents. The narrative agent, for example, dominates the game's SA, in which the player can influence with whom the player will have a particular bond. The SA also allows the player to develop the characters as ludic agents: the stronger the bond between the player-character and a *confidant* party member, the stronger Joker and that party member will become.

In a media mix strategy, characters tend to exist independently of any work in particular. However, the proliferation of the characters in the *Persona 5* media mix strategy paints a different picture: the official *manga* and *anime* adaptations follow the game's macrostructure, but completely ignore the game's SA. Although *manga* magazines with IP licenses that explore the game's SA exist, their explorations of the relationships between Joker and *confidant* characters correspond to the preferred readings of the source work, thereby suggesting that the player has to adhere to hetero-normative relationships of the game. Oppositional readings, or queer readings, can be found in other derivative works without copyright to use the characters.

The *ME* series contains a macrostructure with malleable cardinal functions in which Shepard's characterisation process operates as a blueprint through which the player shapes the

character's identity over the course of the game series. From this perspective, Shepard initially seems to function primarily as a narrative agent. However, the ludic agent also shapes what the game's possibility space allows the blueprint as a narrative agent: a female Shepard can romance Thane or Garrus, but cannot romance Jack. Furthermore, Shepard's reputation points (Paragon/Renegade) affect the player's choices to enter, dismiss, or create a conflict that in turn affect the outcome of the game's macrostructure.

The amount of agency the player has over Shepard's characterisation process has placed the invisible hands in jeopardy. The *ME* comics depict Shepard only on the level of the indicator. Any indicator conceals Shepard's identity so that no concrete manifestation of Shepard emerges. The player has to imagine the character, and substitute the indicator with their manifestation of Shepard they created over the course of the characterisation process in the game.

Hiding any information that could reveal anything about Shepard is in stark contrast with Bioware's other strategy in which they choose to depict specific outcomes for their dynamic game characters in the comic book series of their game *DA: Origins*. Doing so, BioWare canonises the series, giving their depiction of the dynamic game characters' outcome the status of the 'truthful' outcome.

The final examples were games with an indeterminate structure, in which the dynamic game characters dominate as performative agents whose characterisation processes work on scripts rather than on a determined micro- and macrostructure.

Prefabricated characters in a flexible structure provide the challenge that they have to be written in such a way that the player's agency over this flexible structure accounts for the player's unpredictable moves while, at the same time, the identity of the established identity of the character should evolve. *Façade* handles this challenge by having a script that allows for a potential set of actions from the dynamic game characters Trip and Grace that will be activated by the player's input. However, not any kind of player input will work, only those that the designers were able to predict. From this perspective, Trip and Grace resonate *commedia dell'arte* that operates on *mecchanismi*, predefined and clear rules of certain representation. The *mecchanismi* in the game's possibility space have Trip and Grace dominate as performative agents whose development structure goes into a certain direction as they respond to the player's input accounted for by the game's scripts.

Since it takes a huge amount of dialogue and scripts to account for the player's unpredictability, another strategy to handle performative agents is to limit the player's agency over the dynamic game characters. *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (*AC:*NL) restricts the player's agency by having the characters pre-defined personalities that the player is unable to influence. What the player can influence, however, is the level of friendship between their player-character and the other characters to a certain extent.

The characters from *AC:NL* are dispersed over a variety of *AC* games and non-cybermedia—a common pattern in media mix strategies. The relationships that the player can develop in *AC:NL* are barely acknowledged within the franchise's *manga*, so it can be said that the dynamicity of the characters in the game does not translate to their manifestations in the existing non-cybermedia that I analysed. The characters are primarily recognisable as *kyara*, but do not give the impression that they are the same character manifestation.

The examples of *Façade* and *AC:NL* suggest that prefabricated characters in an indeterministic structure are likely the most limited strategies in which dynamic game characters currently exist, because it is difficult to accommodate the unpredictability of the player's agency.

Façade is unable to accommodate the player's agency, whereas *AC:NL* constrains the player's agency over the performative agents to such an extent that the script does not allow these characters to develop any further than their friendship level to the player-character.

Our current understanding of characters is primarily rooted within this idea that character manifestations within a single work are created by an author-function that determines the behaviour and development of these characters within the work. Theoretically speaking, a dynamic game character operating with AI that accommodates to a player's high amount of agency—and therefore a high degree of unpredictability—likely goes beyond our current understanding of characters in which they are, within a single work, predictable and authored. That is, could we say that something is still a character when they are not stipulated by some form of authority, and instead seem to adapt onto them their own agency with a will of their own as if they are actually living beings?

It is the semi-autonomous AI characters from *The Sims* series that demonstrate the tension of the supposed causal relation between author and character. The scripts written in *The Sims 4*'s code make up the lack of cardinal functions, and allow the Sim characters to function primarily as performative agents over whose characterisation process the player has agency to influence the Sim characters' characterisation process in a specific direction. The game allows the player to take on two different authorial roles. In Create a Sim mode, the player becomes the character's creator, an author, but this agency is derivative and the player cannot create Sim character outside of the game's possibility space. In the Play mode, the player's authorial role is that of a facilitator. Their facilitating agency allows the player to influence the characterisation process but does not give them full control over the semi-autonomous AI characters.

Due to their performativity and the agency the player has over the Sim characters, *The Sims* series initially does not seem to police the identity of game characters. However, although the series does not transmedially migrate its characters to non-cybermedia, Maxis has been using Bella Goth as a serial figure. With points of contact to create a form of cohesion, Maxis attempts to establish narrative continuity between the appearances of Bella Goth over the game generations. This forcing of a causal relation between her manifestations causes friction with the mechanics of the game and alienates the player. The moment the player appears, scripts and the player's influence over Bella Goth cause any points of contact between Bella's initial manifestations to become less and less coherent. From this perspective, Bella Goth functions more akin to a *kyara*, but Maxis' attempts to police the textual organisation between Bella's manifestations seems to be much more focused on this strive for narrative continuity than on the player's agency to be a vital part in Bella's characterisation process.

How Does a Dynamic Game Character Affect the Character Ecology?

Here I will answer the question I posed at the beginning of this chapter: how does a dynamic game character influence the character ecology? As discussed in chapter four, 'The Immaterial Character', without taking dynamic game characters into consideration, the manifestation of a character (M) allows invisible hands to organise the character's identity over multiple works through different manifestations (M1, M2, M3 and so forth) (see figure 18). Each manifestation is then structured by invisible hands in a specific configuration that promises some kind of coherence in the character's identity. This configuration usually happens over multiple non-cybermedia works, although games are also part of the process of this configuration.

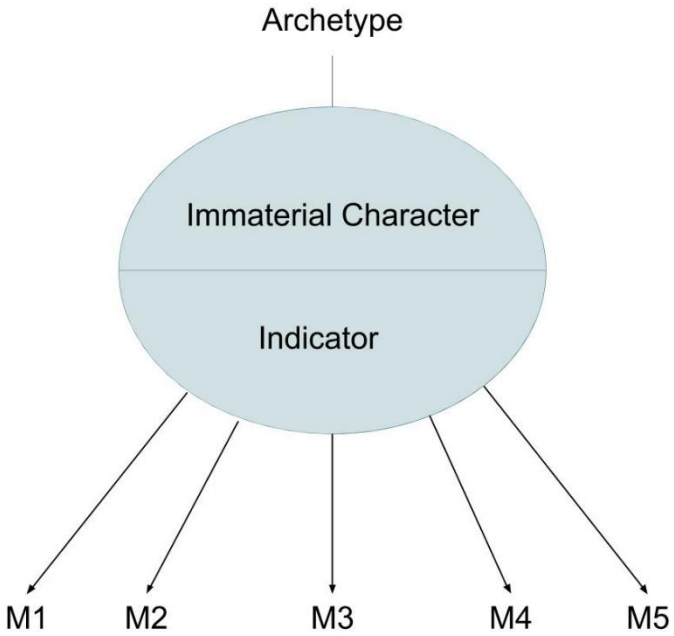

Figure 18: Model of character manifestations (M).

The dynamic game character trifles with the construction of the character's identity over multiple works, because invisible hands structurally create multiple identities within the game and provide the player creative agency to actualise one of these identities. The identity of the dynamic game character becomes infused with the player's influence over the characterisation process of the character. From this perspective, the dynamic game character enters the character ecology with the promise of flexibility and creative agency for the player who engages with the character. The immaterial character becomes infused with the player's own experiences in the character's characterisation process with the 'permission' of the invisible hands.

Although the player does not have authorship over the characters, the player has become a vital part in the character's characterisation process such that, as a result, it becomes impossible to think of the dynamic game character's identity without taking the player into consideration. The player does not just imagine the identity of the character, but effectively shapes the character's identity. This means that digital games are capable of accelerating a dynamic game character's identity within a single work, unlike more 'traditional' non-cybermedia in which a character's identity is constructed over multiple works. Instead of having manifestations M1, M2, M3 and so forth, whose configuration is spread over multiple works and which determines the coherence of their identity within the character ecology, the dynamic game character's manifestations instead all gather within a single work. In other words, the dynamic game character contains a plurality of identities of which one manifests in the work only through the player. Therefore, the manifestation of the dynamic game character becomes Mx (see figure 19).

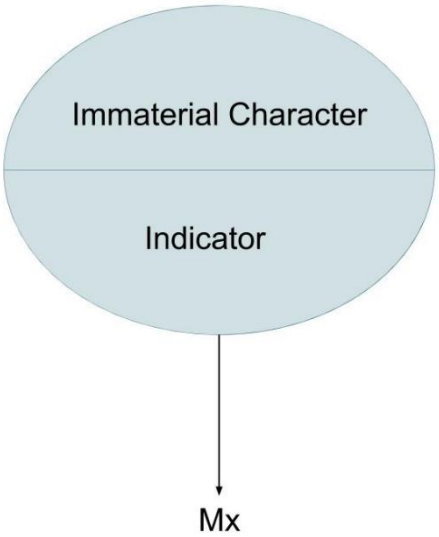

Figure 19: Model of dynamic game character in a single work.

I would have preferred to stop my analysis with the statement that dynamic game characters open up the character ecology to embed invisible hands and consumers within a relationship of equality to shape characters sharing the position of the author alike, but my research shows otherwise: the player's agency over dynamic game characters suffers once dynamic game characters become transmedial. Since the player produces a concrete manifestation of the dynamic game character, there is this idealistic implication that the dynamic game character has no definitive manifestation, that there is no official identity. After all, the work itself allows all different kinds of identities and grants the player the agency to operate within the characterisation process of the character. However, as the analyses in this chapter show, invisible hands have the tendency to create and maintain the illusion of coherence in a dynamic game character's identity, as they try to structure the configuration of the dynamic game character over the course of multiple cybermedia and non-cybermedia works.

In contemporary transmedia practices, the configuration of the character constantly shifts, thereby affecting the identity of the character as if it were a coherent entity. The idealistic effort to give the impression that characters are coherent entities, instead of schemata that transform both within a single work and over the course of multiple works, stimulates a constant fight of control over the characters' identities. This fight happens across archaic venues of control such as the author-function, which takes on, in some cases, a religious aspect (creationism, with the author as the character's creator who determines the path the character walks), ownership and intellectual property to determine creative agency over the characters, and the canonisation of these characters.

The invisible hands' meddling with the dynamic game character's configuration to determine their identities over multiple media platforms breaks the 'permission' of the player's involvement in those characters' characterisation processes. While the games with dynamic game characters promise the player creative agency over these characters, the moment these characters are transferred to other works—even other games—the player's creative agency is sacrificed for an illusion of coherency. Although it can be said that this might be because non-cybermedia cannot structurally support dynamic game characters, it is necessary to take a step back from the issue of media affordances and constrains. Rather, I stress that there is always more than one choice involved in transferring dynamic game characters from one work to another. These choices include

decisions on how to portray dynamic game characters in other media, which specific character to portray, which events from the game to involve in the character's transfer to other media, which outcome of the character's characterisation process to start a story from, and so on. Yet, the most important choice is the decision to transfer the dynamic game character from one medium to another at all, thereby taking away the promise of creative agency over the character, reducing the player's experience in the process to fit a dominant reading as determined by an institutional authority. That is, I argue, the danger of transmedia.

Chapter Nine
The System of Affection

This chapter presents the *system of affection* (SA) as a process by which game characters become dynamic so that the player obtains creative agency to influence these character's characterisation process into a certain direction until the character has reached a specific outcome. The SA concerns the particular segments in which the player creates bonds between characters. This chapter explains the processes that shape the relationships between dynamic game characters, and explains the strategies—the sets of actions—that the player must execute to create these relationships successfully.

In his article on narrative rules, Backe (2012) presents three means through which the player has agency over the game's macrostructure (as explained in chapter eight): decision-making, performance, and the avatar design (255). "[B]ased on the means by which players can participate in and influence an interactive story" (2012, 255), he distinguishes between eight different types of agency through which the player either has dynamic or static agency on one or more of these three means. Although Backe explains the overall outcome of a game, and I discuss the outcomes of the characterisation processes of individual characters, the means by which the player has agency over the dynamic game characters and the game's macrostructure are, not surprisingly, similar, since the possibility space that the game offers operates on the same means.

In the previous chapter I showed through the case study of *Persona 5* (P-Studio 2016) that the player has creative agency over the game's dynamic game characters not only by the means of decision-making, or the performance and design of the avatar, but by a fourth means: the *system of affection*. As I demonstrated using *Persona 5*, the SA even allows game characters who appear in a game with a rigid macrostructure to become dynamic in the segments of the game's microstructure. Therefore, in this chapter, I will explain in more detail how the SA provides the player the creative agency to create meaningful bonds between two or more characters.

The first section of this chapter is dedicated to the explanation of what kind of process the SA is and is not. In the second section, I explain the different kinds of dynamic game character relations that the player can influence. The third section explains the conditions to which the player has to adhere before they can start influencing the relationships. The fourth section describes the procedures the player has to carry out to influence the relationships. Finally, the fifth section describes the positive and negative implications of the SA on the representation of a relationship.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to the SA as I present it here. Some of these limitations, I have already explained in chapter three, but I consider it necessary to emphasise them here again due to the procedural nature of the SA attempting to convey illusive concepts of affection.

The amount of games that I use as examples is, of course, limited. As presented in chapter three, Barthes explains that when faced with millions of narratives, one is "obliged first to devise a hypothetical model of description […] and then gradually to work down from this model to the different narrative species which at once conform to and depart from the model" (Barthes [1966] 1995, 253 - 254). It is therefore possible that I do not cover all the procedures, actions or shapes in

which the SA can come, but another version of the SA will only invalidate this theory if it fails to conform my theoretical description of the SA.

The theory on the SA covers how the game structurally encourages the player to influence relationships between characters. This means that I do not make any formal claims about the structure of the SA itself, but rather that I describe how the game motivates the player's meaning-making process by giving them creative agency to influence structurally the outcome of the characters within a process about creating relationships.

The body of works that I describe do not include multiplayer games. It includes exclusively singleplayer games, because the SA is about the relationships between characters that the player influences, and not between empirical players. For example, although the player in *Pokémon Go* (Niantic 2016) can give gifts to other players to increase friendship levels between players, this exchange is outside the scope of this dissertation.

Furthermore, since I do not discuss empirical players, I have not conducted any measurements on their emotional investment and experiences. Rather, using reader-response theory, I look at how the game structurally motivates the player to obtain or refrain from certain emotional investments and experiences.

The representation of characters in terms of gender diversity, race, queerness and sexuality is of high importance, but my dissertation does not cover such a topic, and therefore neither does my theory of the SA. That is not to say that the SA as I present it here cannot be used for such topic. Indeed, I think that using the SA in an analysis about representation is highly useful to identify how the simulation of relationships in character fail or conform to normative standards that exclude a variety of representation of characters. I point to these challenges already in this chapter as to how they are embedded structurally in the game's possibility space.

1. The System of Affection

The *system of affection* is a ludic process, inherently procedural in nature, which allows the player to create and shape relationships between dynamic game characters. These relationships are embedded in the game's possibility space, and the player affects these relationships by executing specific sets of actions—procedures that differ per game. Peter Kelly (2015) argues that love and romance as two esoteric concepts prove too ambiguous for structural systematic game design, but that has not stopped game designers from attempting to simulate something so elusive (47). He identifies the simulation of love in the game *Dragon Age 2* (BioWare 2011), calling the simulation of love the game's ludic romance systems as a system of courtship, but also as a system in which the game characters are integrated and bound to the game and its rules so that they only have to execute a certain strategy in order to successfully woo a non-playable character (2015, 47). Kelly argues that this strategy cannot be avoided, because it is baked into the systematic processes of the courtship.

Kelly's ludic romance system serves as the springboard for the SA. However, there exist many other elusive and complex relationships between humans that games can also present in their structural systematic game design, such as friendship, rivalry, hate, companionship, reputation and more. Both a character's reputation and their affection to another character give the impression of the character as a quasi-person with a life-like existence. The difference between reputation and the SA is that the former affects a group of characters or units (a country, a race, a faction, etc.), while the latter concerns the relationships between two characters on an individual level. In *World*

of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) for example, reputation is a prominent mechanic that provides or denies players' access to certain factions and resources. Whereas in *Persona 5*, the bond is always between Joker and another individual out of the group of *confidant* characters, but never the group as a whole unit. The SA is not solely a system of romance, but a structural process that can bring about a variety of relationships, which could be love or friendship, but that can also bring about the lack of affection, such as rivalry or antagonism. However, because reputation concerns factions, the SA excludes games that ask the player to increase their reputation with different factions or groups, such as *Civilization V* (Firaxis Games 2010), and covers only games that presents relationships between individual characters.

The player does not directly control all the characters involved in the relationships even if the player has a player-character they directly control. As explained in chapter seven, dynamic game characters are only influenced by the player so that their characterisation process moves towards a certain direction, but the player does not have the kind of creative agency that allows them to command the characters into certain relationships with each other. Instead, the SA is a process for which players need to execute a certain set of actions to complete the process. Just giving characters the command to like each other does not resemble a process, nor does it give the illusion of characters having their own personality and a free will, which is, as I explain in chapter six, vital for the player to perceive game entities as characters.

A distinction can be made between games in which the SA functions as the core mechanics and is part of the game's macrostructure, and games in which the system functions as part of the game's secondary mechanics, in which they are part of the game's microstructure that eases the player's progression in the game (see Sicart 2008). The former refers to games in which the establishment of a relationship with a character is the desired end state of the game. These kinds of games include dating simulators such as *Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side* (Konami 2002), *Dream Daddy* (Game Grumps 2017), or *Hakuoki: Memories of the Shinsengumi* (Idea Factory 2013), but also exists in the puzzle-oriented game *Catherine: Full Body* (Studio Zero [2011] 2019). The latter can be found in such as *Eiyuu Densetsu: Sen no Kiseki*[33] (Nihon Falcom 2013), *Mass Effect 2* (BioWare 2010), *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe 2016), or *Fire Emblem: Awakening* (Intelligent Systems & Nintendo 2012). The player does not have to develop relationships in these games, but it will be profitable for their gameplay performance if they do.

The SA is not bound to a particular genre.[34] It appears in games that are oriented towards character development, and which have at least some role-playing elements. But the SA's existence does not determine the game's genre. For instance, the genre known in the West as visual novels[35] does not consist of only dating simulators, as the adventure game *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* (Capcom [2001] 2005) suggests. Nor does the existence of the SA in a game transform that game's genre. The *Fire Emblem* (*FE*) game series did not have an SA until the introduction of *FE: Awakening*'s 'Marriage and Children' system (Nintendo 2012b) that revived the series from its slump. This game, like the rest of the series, focuses on tactical strategic gameplay combined with developing its characters in terms of level, strength and power. The SA became part of the strategies the player

[33] In the West, this game is known as *The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel* (Nihon Falcom 2015).

[34] Used here as a set of conventions and expectations (see Ryan 2003).

[35] In Japan, the genre of the *visual novel* does not exist as such. Games known in the West as visual novels, such as the *Ace Attorney* series or *Hakuoki*, are categorised respectively as adventure games and romance games. The national Computer Entertainment Supplier's Association in Japan does not mention the existence of visual novels, but places the game *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney – Spirit of Justice* (Capcom 2016) under the genre 'adventure' (CESA 2017, 154).

can utilise to reach the desired end-state, but is not a goal the player has to attain in order to reach the game's end-state—unless desired by the player themselves. That said, the SA has become by now such an important element of the *FE* series that the SA in the latest instalment, *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (Intelligent Systems & Koei Tecmo 2019), has become a vital part of the characters' characterisation processes from the start of the game. For example, the player has to choose a house (faction) to join: Golden Deer, Blue Lions or Black Eagles. The choice of house determines whose side the player will be on in the upcoming war, but also influences the characterisation processes of all individual characters caught in the game's SA. It will become more probable for characters in the faction who the player did not choose to die in the war, but those within the house who the player did choose will (with the exception of one or two of them) survive the war. If the player chooses either Golden Deer or Black Eagles, the Blue Lions' leader Dimitri will not survive the war, but choosing the Blue Lions opens the path to have Dimitri survive.

The brief example of *FE: Three Houses* shows that the SA is designed to be character specific. That is, the characterisation processes of two characters within the SA can vary distinctively per character. A game in which one character's characterisation process within the SA is mandatory can also contain characters whose characterisation process in the SA is optional. *Persona 5*, as discussed in the previous chapter, is such a game. While the player automatically levels up Sae Nijima's and Morgana's *confidant* rank, the player has to purposefully progress the *confidant* ranks of, for example, Ann Takamaki and Ryuji Sakamoto. Nevertheless, games do have the inclination to have a large quantity of characters with the same structural characterisation process within the SA. While Dimitri is not a character the player can recruit when they have chosen the Golden Deer or Black Eagles as their house, (almost) all members of his house can be recruited into the player's chosen house. In order to develop relationships between the player-character and other characters, the player will have to develop the player-character's skills, complete quests for the other characters, and the game's various segments allow the player to have multiple characters bond with each other as they cook, dine and have tea parties together.

2. With Whom Do Characters Form the Relationship?

Games such as *Persona 5* and *FE: Three Houses* contain a player-character as the player's locus of agency within the game world through whom the player influences the relationships between characters. However, the SA does not require the player to have a player-character in the diegetic world to progress the relationships between characters. The SA allows the player to influence three kinds of entity-relationships: the player-character with another character, the non-diegetic player with a character, and a character with another character.

In this section, I will look closely at these different kinds of dynamic game character-relations that the player can influence.

Player-Character and Character

As discussed in chapter two, the tension between the player and the avatar the player directly controls has been a topic of much debate. I keep the theory on this debate very brief in this chapter because it is not my intention here to revisit or restructure the concept of the player-character.

It is not until Rune Klevjer (2006), who considers the avatar as the extension of the player in the diegetic game world, that a consensus on the concept of the avatar became relatively stable.

However, Klevjer states that the avatar is not a character, as he considers a character to be an agent independent from the player, and the avatar anything but that:

> The more an avatar takes on behaviours that reflect either its own agency or which emerge as passive responses to forces and agents in the environment, the less it functions as a prosthesis to the body-subject, and the more its status as an avatar is being weakened. (2006, 94)

Daniel Vella (2015) takes up the tension between the avatar and the player, and introduces the concept of the playable figure, the entity that the player directly controls. This figure becomes a player-character when it obtains a dual nature of being the game component the player directly controls and a character constructed by the player. He states: "the player-character is the textualization of the enacted ludic subjectivity resulting from the player's engagement with the gameworld as determined by the frame of the ludic subject-position" (2006, 384).

In an SA in which the player influences the relationship between the player-character and other characters, there exists a continuous tension between these characters forming a relationship. The relationship between the player-character and another character is as double-natured as the player-character itself. It is simultaneously a relationship between the player-character and another character, and between the player and a character. Certain games gear more towards giving the player the impression that the player influences relationships between them and a character, whereas other games gear more towards a relationship between the player-character and other characters. *Persona 5*, for example, continuously shows the player-character, Joker, in third-person perspective, the other characters continuously address him. This game's SA is, from this perspective, more focused on Joker as a character than Joker as the player. On the other hand, a game such as *Summiko Gurashi: Koko ga Ochitsukundesu* [Corner Dwellers: Here it is Calm] (Nippon Columbia 2015) engages with the anthropomorphised animals and food times via an avatar in the shape of a hand, bringing them food and petting them. Without the presence of a human-like figure, the player infers that it is them with whom the pets engage.

The tension between the SA addressing the player and addressing the character can also shift within a single game. In *Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu!* and *Let's Go, Eevee!* (Nintendo 2018), played on the Nintendo Switch console, the player normally controls a player-character with very little personality who hardly talks (if at all) from a third-person perspective. The player can enter a segment called 'Partner Play' in which they can bond with either their Pikachu or Eevee Pokémon. The third-person perspective turns into a first-person perspective, the player-character disappears from the screen, and the Pikachu or Eevee gaze directly at the player, addressing the player instead of the player-character. The Partner Play segment is not just a matter of switching perspectives. More importantly, the segment allows the player to pet the Pokémon by touching the screen of the Switch console—without the presence of an avatar in the shape of a hand—giving the impression that the player touches the creature directly without the interference of an avatar replacing the player.

A similar shift in perspectives also occurs in *FE: Three Houses* during the tea-time segment, also on the Switch console. The player, normally controlling player-character Byleth in third-person perspective, finds themselves in a first-person perspective when Byleth drinks tea with one of the (many) students. The other character will gaze directly at the player without Byleth's body present and, although the player cannot use the touch screen to directly touch the characters, the player is

given the opportunity to perform the 'observe' action. During this action, the player controls the camera's gaze—presumably Byleth's—to look at the other characters from different angles. This tends to make the other character slightly uncomfortable, as they make remarks on this action, asking if they have something on their face or why their teacher is so close to their face.

This direct gazing is an aspect common in *otome* and *bishoujo* games, dating simulators aimed at (heterosexual) women and (heterosexual) men. The characters usually gaze through the screen, as if they look directly at the player who takes on the role of the games' main character, with whom these characters are supposed to bond. Especially the design of these games' main characters can stand out. *Angelique* (Ruby Party 1994), generally considered to be the first *otome* game (Lee 2018), has the main character Angelique visually depicted whenever she speaks. However, *otome* games nowadays tend to visually obscure the main character via the first-person perspective in which the player sees the other characters, but not the main character herself. In *Hakuoki: Memories of the Shinsengumi*, the player only sees the main character Chizuru in special static scenes, and in *Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side*, the player only sees the main character when they have her as a ludic agent level up via club activities, homework or part-time work. The obscurity of the main character can go to such an extent that some *otome* games omit the eyes of the main character whenever she is visible. This is for example the case with Tsukiko Yahisa in the original versions of the *Starry Sky* game series (Honeybee 2009). Seeing as how eyes function—especially in Japanese popular cultural works (Condry 2013; Lamarre 2009; 2018)—as primary features in giving a sense of personhood, the absence of the eyes suggests strongly that the main character is meant to substitute the (female) player who fills in the main character's personhood for her.

Non-Diegetic Player and Character

Although it is hard to find games that address the player as a non-diegetic entity, one such game can be found in the *Tamagotchi* (Bandai Namco, 1996). The *Tamagotchi* was originally released in Japan, and subsequently in the West in 1996. Now, over twenty years later, the hype has subsided, but the *Tamagotchi* itself has not. New versions of the game are still released—primarily in Japan—and has more functions than its first version in which the player takes care of the pet by feeding and cleaning its faeces. *Tamagotchi Mix* (Bandai 2017), for example, has features such as fortune telling and having the pet characters marry and have a child.

Allison describes *Tamagotchi* as "[s]imulating petdom—sprouting a lifelike image of a pet that users interact with as if it were alive" (Allison 2006, 164). She states that the designer Yokoi Akihiro intended the bond between owner and *Tamagotchi* to develop over the chores the owner has to perform in order to take care of the pet (2006, 166). Since the game is meant to be brought wherever the player goes, the player will find the *Tamagotchi* constantly invading their lives, as the pet demands the player to take care of its needs even when the player cannot do so (2006, 175).

The dynamicity of the pet stems from how well the player takes care of it. If the player manages to keep up with its demands, it will develop into an adult with an easy-going personality, and approvable characteristics such as high intelligence, cheerfulness and independence. If the player does not manage to keep up, they will influence the character into the outcome of having a lazy, weird and dull personality (2006, 173). In other words, the bond that the non-diegetic player shares through taking care of the *Tamagotchi* is reflected in the personality the character eventually develops.

Character and Character

When the player affects the relationship between two (or more) dynamic game characters who the game does not put forward as the player's player-character, the player's creative agency is limited to the role of a guide. They can influence the direction their relationship will go, but unlike the player-character, they do not share their existence with these characters and therefore have no control over the will of these characters. I explained this characterisation process in detail with *The Sims 4* (Maxis 2014) as the case study in the chapter eight. Since the player is only the facilitator, even when they attempt to guide two characters towards a specific relationship, they cannot completely control how that relationship will turn out. That uncertainty is what makes the SA a ludic process which the player has to manage constantly.

In *FE: Awakening*'s SA, called 'marriage and children system', the player dons Calleja's (2011) external, omniscient controller who controls these characters as miniatures (60). The player influences which character connects to which by pairing them together in combat. If they have done this often enough, the player can proceed to raise the relationship in the 'support' interface of the game in which a scripted narrative scene will play between the characters. The nature of the relationships is limited to either friendship or romance. Once the player has established a relationship between characters of rank S—which stands for marriage—the player can only raise the relationships between characters who are married and other characters to that of rank A, friendship.

FE: Three Houses has extended the player's creative agency in the SA from *FE: Awakening* to not only be able to stimulate the growth of the characters' relationships within the battle segments, but also to segments in which the player-character has to be present for two other characters to bond. Although the tea-time segment is specifically for the bonding between player-character and another character, the player invites two characters to participate in the lunch-time segments and the choir-singing segments which results in a raise of their bond towards the player-character Byleth, and towards each other. Once their bond level has been raised high enough, the player is alerted and can activate the scripted scenes between the two characters to proceed their relationship to the next rank, rank A. The player can continue to influence this relationship so that it will reach rank S (marriage) after the war in the diegetic world is over.

Another example of the player's agency over two character's relationship outside of the *Fire Emblem* series can be found in *Mass Effect 3*. The *ME* game series does not provide the player the agency to influence the relationship between characters beyond their player-character Shepard, except for the romance between Garrus and Tali. All the player has to do is to make sure that Shepard will not become romantically involved with either one of them in *ME3,* so that at some point in the game's progression, Shepard will walk into Tali and Garrus in the ship's main battery discovering them in the act of whispering sweet nothings to each other.

The effect of the different kinds of relationships is that while in the player-character/character, and non-diegetic player/character relationship is that the player plays a role in those relationships, effectively participating in them. Whereas, in character/character relationships, the player is placed outside of that relationship. While they might be the facilitator of such relationships, they do not occupy the role of participants in those relationships.

3. The Conditions of the System of Affection

The possibility space determines the possibilities and constraints of the SA within which the player can facilitate dynamic game characters' relationships to occur and develop. In some cases, certain conditions apply to some relationships, which the player has to adhere or fulfil first before they can influence the relationship between dynamic game characters. These conditions come in the terms of parameter, gender and sexuality compatibility, and resources that determine if and how the player has creative agency over certain characters within the SA. These conditions are set before the player can even execute the procedures to develop a relationship between characters.

The Player-Character's Statistics

Certain player-characters have parameters or statistics attached to them as ludic agents. By changing the values of these parameters, *confidant* characters with whom the player-character has the possibility of bonding with become available in the SA. For example, in *Persona 5* the player can raise Joker's *social stats,* which include the attributes knowledge, charm, guts, proficiency and kindness, through sets of actions such as eating a giant-sized hamburger or studying. Not only are the values of these attributes numerically shown, the description of these attributes also changes when the player raises the value of them in the parameter. Joker's knowledge attribute, for instance, will change from 'oblivious' with numerical value one to 'learned' with a value of two. Only if player have raised the knowledge attribute to a value of three, so that Joker is characterised as 'scholarly', will the SA of the character Makoto Niijima become available. The change in value allows the parameter to fulfil two functions: structurally, the social stats set certain conditions for specific characters to become available, while it simultaneously represents the growth in Joker's personality.

In *Persona 5*, not fulfilling the condition to have a *confidant* character become available in their SA only results in the player not being able to influence the relationship between Joker and this *confidant* character. However, in *FE: Three Houses*, the consequence of not having high enough statistics to recruit a character in their house will result in the death of those characters. The player can only influence the relationships between characters when both characters are part of the player-character's house, so the player has to recruit them first. In order to recruit characters, the player has to fulfil the required value of the player-character's attributes. The attribute and the required value vary per character. When the player wants to recruit Felix into their house, the player-character Byleth needs to have a value of 15 in Speed and a Sword proficiency of level B. Meanwhile, Sylvain requires Byleth having a charm value of 25, and a Reason proficiency of level C. However, if Byleth is female instead of male, the player can immediately recruit Sylvain into their house. This immediate recruitment reflects Sylvain's personality as a skirt-chaser who is known to woo any woman he meets, and in his conversations with the female Byleth tries to do no less.

Compatibility: Gender and Sexuality

Gender and sexuality often function as statistical values of a character in an SA which determines the availability of certain relationships between characters, particularly those of a romantic nature. Kim Johansen Østby points out that *ME2*, for example, does not allow any homosexual romances (2016, 407). Østby explains that the *Mass Effect* series' heteronormative focus is reflected in many of the available romances (2016, 406). He distinguishes between the "public game", which every player will encounter and which portrays a heteronormative reading, and the "private game", which some players choose to see, in which the player moves more into queer territory (2016, 407). Although in the first ME (2007) game, the player can romance the character Liara T'Soni regardless

of Shepard being male or female, in *ME2* Shepard cannot connect in a romantic way with the female characters who are available in the SA for the female Shepard. In turn, the male Shepard cannot romance any male character within *ME2*.

The SA promotes dominant heteronormative readings regarding sexuality and gender when these phenomena become structural, statistical values. In games such as *Shin Megami Tensei Persona 4* (Atlus 2008)*, Persona 5, FE: Awakening* or *Eiyuu Densetsu: Sen no Kiseki*, the player-characters can only pursue a romance with characters of the opposite gender, and friendships with characters of the same gender. Even in cases in which the player can create same-sex couples, these games can structurally punish the player for creating such relations, or never make these same-sex romances actually explicit. For example, *FE: Fates* (Intelligent Systems 2015) has a similar 'marriage and children' system as *FE: Awakening*, in which the player will be rewarded with children characters from every couple they manage to get married. These children are important to the game, because not only do they provide additional narrative experience, they also function as powerful units for the games' battle segments. Although *FE: Fates* allows the player to develop a romantic connection between the character Niles and the player-character Corrin, if Corrin is a male character, Niles' child Nina will never be born. The player will not only miss the narrative experience Nina brings to the game, but they will also miss one of the possible strongest archers on the battlefield.

Some games enable the player to influence a romantic relationship between same-sex characters, but the game might not explicitly state the romantic nature of that relationship. *FE: Three Houses* only allows the male player-character to have an explicit romantic connection to one male character, while the female player-character has five female characters available for romance in the SA. The male player-character can technically reach rank S with one of the other male characters, Alois, but the relationship seems to be more platonic than romantic as they do not get married and Alois considers himself the player-character's "most faithful ally" or "big brother", instead of a lover or spouse.

That is not to say that the SA is aimed towards heteronormative standards only. *Dream Daddy*, for example, only enables the player to influence same-sex couples, but also allows the player to choose if their late spouse was a man or a woman. Rather, gender and sexuality, when they are implemented in a SA as values that open and close paths, become structural choices that designers intentionally put in or leave out that reveals the pattern of preferred readings (see Hall 1973) stemming from a normative cultural understanding of how relationships work in that society. The SA is therefore a mechanism that demands scrutiny with regards to the topic of representation of diversity in games[36].

Resources

Games can put a limitation on the availability of a character in the form of resources. In games such as *Persona 4*, *Persona 5*, *Sen no Kiseki*, and *Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side*, the player cannot freely engage with all the characters without sacrificing the development of a relationship with other characters due to a limited number of resources they can spend on the development of a

[36] Unfortunately, the topics of (gender) representation and sexual diversity are beyond the scope of this dissertation. In order to avoid any generalised statements about the representation of characters in terms of queerness, masculinity, feminism, or differences between Japanese and Western games, I kindly suggest works from experts on games and representation such as Østby (2016), Shaw (2014), or works such as *Feminism in Play* (K. L. Gray, Voorhees, and Vossen 2018), *Masculinities in Play* (Taylor and Voorhees 2018) or *Queerness in Play* (Harper, Adams, and Taylor 2018).

relationship. In *Eiyuu Densetsu: Sen no Kiseki*, the player can only influence the same number of characters as the number of *bonding points*. When the player has two bonding points, they can spend this on two characters (one bonding point per character) even if there are three or four characters available for the player to spend their points on. This game does not allow the player to completely develop each character's bond with the player-character Rean, and instead the player has to choose strategically whose relationship they wish to influence and develop. Other games are a little less conspicuous in their use of resources. *Persona 4*, *Persona 5* and *Tokimeki Memorial*'s resources are days. In *Persona 4* and *Persona 5*, the player has to decide strategically if they want to traverse dungeons in order to progress the games' macrostructure, raise the player-characters' statistics, or spend their days progressing the player-characters' relationships with other characters. A day not dedicated to these characters is a day lost on the development of their relationships with the player-character.

Another resource is the characters themselves in the SA, based on the normative presumption of monogamy. When romance is an available kind of relationship, games tend to either allow the player a monogamous relationship with another character, or the games punish the character for pursuing more romantic relationships. In *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009) for example, the player can pursue a romantic connection with Alistair and Zevran. However, at some point the player has to choose between either of them: Zevran will let the player know that he is fine with the player having two romances going on, but states that Alistair is not fine with it so that the player has no other option but to choose between them.

The characters themselves are such an important resource in the SA that the attempt of getting all romantic connections the possibility space offers can become a goal on its own. Tosca and Klastrup (2020) explain that in *otome* games:

> The Otome [*sic*] reader is not so much choosing different endings and plots but the gluttonous desire to explore *all* the possible character routes. In fact, most players are invested in going through a lot of the routes (if not all) and are vocal about discussing favourite "renderings" of the same plot points, as well as to whose point of view they prefer, since romancing the different men encourages the heroine to show different sides of herself. (2020, 106)

Tosca and Klastrup's argument focuses on the empirical players' experience and use of the game—a topic I do not cover, as explained in chapter three. Their argument of the players' gluttonous desire to explore all different kinds of romantic relations with characters can also be found in the structure of the game and can even be encouraged by authoritative institutions such as the game's developer or publisher. *Persona 5* lets the player to pursue a romantic connection between the player-character and all female *confidant* characters. This is hard to pursue, because the player has to take into consideration the limited number of days they have to influence the *confidant* characters. An answer to that hardship comes from the publisher Kadokawa—also the publisher of the *Persona 5* manga and anime—which released the official strategy guide of the game with a chapter completely dedicated to telling the reader how to bring all the *confidant* relationships to their maximum level (Kadokawa 2016).

Another example of how games engage with characters as limited resources due to the normative standard of monogamy is *Stardew Valley*, which lets the player engage in serial monogamy. The player can only have a romantic connection to one character at a time. Even if the

player-character has a spouse, they can divorce them. Thereafter, the player-character will only have negative conversations with the ex-spouse, but at least the player can then attempt to influence the player-character's connection with other characters into a romantic connection. If the player desires to explore all characters as a romantic option, they will have to invest repeatedly in different characters, marry them, divorce them, and repeat the same sets of actions over with another one.

4. Procedures in the System of Affection

The procedures in the SA are the sets of actions that the player has to perform repeatedly in order to influence the relationship between characters in specific ways to specific effects. These effects can vary per character. While some characters might enjoy certain gifts, the same gift might not work for another character. The next section discusses which procedures games with an SA offer the player to influence the relationships between dynamic game characters.

Transactions

Transactions come in the form of players giving items or objects in order to change a character's affection. The player gives an object of a certain value to the character whose affection they wish to change so that the character's parameters might rise or decline. This depends on the character. In *Stardew Valley*, the player has to learn by trial and error every character's taste in specific items. If the player wishes to influence the relationship between the player-character and Elliot in *Stardew Valley* into a romantic connection, they will have to consistently give him items such as lobsters, duck feathers or squid to raise his affection, whereas leeks, pizza or quartz will have the opposite effect.

The tension between dynamic game characters' function as a ludic agent and the game's encouragement to perceive the figures as quasi-persons becomes especially visible during transactional procedures in the SA. The minimalism of the transaction procedures simplifies elusive concepts such as love and friendship to a simple transaction between subject and object: just put in as many things as you can and eventually the object comes to like you. While the player cannot completely determine exactly how the character will respond or which direction the characterisation process will go, because there are many different procedures influencing the dynamic game character, once the player has learned the preferences of the characters, it is simply a matter of giving the items on a consistent basis to raise the statistics of the ludic agent. Thereby, the impression of the character as a quasi-person decreases, since they do not uphold the illusion of being a fickle person-like entity with their own agenda anymore.

Quests

Quests tend to come in the form of requests by or favours for characters which the player must complete in order to influence the relationship between two dynamic game characters. The actions the player has to execute can be as simple or as complex as the quests require, but they all share a common objective: to progress the relationship between characters in a positive direction. In *ME2*, Miranda's request involves helping to escort her sister to a safe location by distracting enemies. The player traverses a maze-like area and takes down enemies by actions such as running, kicking,

shooting and more. These actions do not directly affect Miranda, but after the completion of the quest, Miranda's 'loyalty' status changes from 'neutral' to 'loyal'.

In *The Outer Worlds* (Obsidian Entertainment 2019), Parvati asks the player to have her meet Junlei. In a later quest, Parvati asks the player find her sweetheart cakes for her date with Junlei. This specific request is nothing more than a transaction, but obtaining the items requires the player to execute further actions. They have to find the place where the cakes are, and possibly fight enemies.

Pair-Ups

The *Fire Emblem* games *FE: Awakening*, *FE: Fates* and *FE: Three Houses* offer the player a particular mechanic to increase the characters' bonds. Whenever the player pairs two characters in the battlefield segments so that they support each other during battles, their affection towards each other increases until the game lets the player know the player can activate a scripted scene to raise the characters' bond level.

Character-Targeted Dialogues

Character-targeted dialogues come in the form of a 'dialogue wheel' in which the player has the choose options that could lower or raise the character's affection towards the player-character. These options consist of dialogue answers, actions that the player-character can perform, or both. In the *Mass Effect* series, for example, Shepard's dialogue wheel most often consists of answers, but occasionally, the Renegade and Paragon options refer to actions Shepard can undertake, such as intercepting someone to avoid a fight.

In *otome* games, which have an SA as their core mechanic, character-targeted dialogues influence the direction of the macrostructure to a certain outcome. In *Hakuoki: Memories of the Shinsengumi,* if the player wants a positive outcome to their player-character's relationship to Harada, the player is required to choose options that meet Harada's belief that the man should always protect the woman. This means that when the player-character Shizuru is attacked, instead of standing up for herself, the player will have to choose the option to give up so that Harada can come to her rescue.

The kind of dialogues that belong to the game's core mechanics function as decisions that open or close a direction in a character's characterisation process which mean that as the character reaches outcome of the characterisation process, so does the game reach its end-state. In *Catherine: Full Body* ([2011] 2019) the player has to respond to questions such as "does life begin or end at marriage?" every time after solving a puzzle. To this question they can either select the answer "it begins" or "it ends" which will then affect the so-called 'karma-meter' in a certain direction. This karma-meter provides feedback on whether the player-character Vincent becomes more affectionate towards Catherine, Katherine or Rin. The accumulation of these decisions makes some outcomes more or less probable until the player has reached the necessary outcome of the game's end-state.

Games that have an SA as a secondary mechanic, such as the *Mass Effect* series, have dialogue wheels in which the decisions affect the characters only, but not the overall macrostructure of the game. When the player-character Shepard talks with Garrus about his time in the navy the player can steer the conversation in such a way that the dialogue wheel opens the possibility to have Shepard say that she and Garrus "could ease stress together". Garrus responds that he did not expect his commander to want to spar with him. In turn, the dialogue wheel gives the player the

possibility to let Shepard respond that she does feel like actual sparring, or they can select to make her refer to some action between the sheets. The latter opens up Garrus for a romantic relationship with Shepard, but the end-state of the game remains unaffected.

Time as a Procedure: Waiting and Showing Up

Time translates to two kinds of mechanisms in a SA: waiting, and attending to the character at a specific time. Sicart describes mechanics as "methods invoked by agents for interacting with the game world", an instrument of agency that presents a specific set of purposes (2008), but games that attempt to convey a concept as elusive as affection by means of time can show the fickleness of love by having the player attend to the character's desires to have the player wait or show up at specific moments. I provide examples of these two mechanisms in the following paragraphs.

Roland Barthes describes poetically the frustration love can bring when he asks: "Suis-je amoureux? – Oui, puisque j'attends" (1977, 49). Am I in love? – Yes, because I am waiting. To be in love is to wait for the other, to be the one who waits. While waiting in the SA does not only encompass romance, waiting in games can occur through two different forms of time: diegetic time in the game and in 'real-life time' as it passes in the world of the empirical player. The latter brings waiting into the player's daily life, subjecting the player to the whims of the characters when they call for attention, such as the *Tamagotchi*. In games in which the player has to wait in the diegetic world, the waiting tends to be bound to the player's progress of that game. In *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010), the player has to progress the game's macrostructure to obtain opportunities to influence the relationship between Madison Paige and Ethan Mars. Any waiting that the player-characters have to do is simply rigid within the game's macrostructure.

In *Mass Effect 2*, in which the SA occurs on the level of the game's microstructure, the waiting depends on how fast the player proceeds with the characters' quests. If the player wishes to obtain Garrus as Shepard's boyfriend, they have to finish several priority quests to receive opportunities in which they can lead the character to that status. Nevertheless, some of Garrus' quests do not become available until the player has proceeded the game's macrostructure, so it cannot be said that the waiting in the game's microstructure is entirely independent from the game's macrostructure.

Barthes hints that waiting for a beloved one means waiting for the other to appear. In games, this is translated to game mechanisms in which players are expected to appear at a given time. In *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (2013), the villager characters may ask the player-character to visit their house at a given time. This time is synchronous to the 'real-time' of the player in the sense that the player's 3DS console reflects the player's time in their daily life.

In the diegetic time of the game world, the player has to appear at the right time of that world. In *Stardew Valley*, time runs continuously: one minute of the player's time spent playing is one hour in the game's diegetic world. Some characters give the player appointments to show up at a specific time if the player wants to unlock scripted scenes to raise the characters' affection. For example, the player can discover that Elliott is usually in the saloon between 3PM and 10PM. If they enter the saloon when Elliott has four hearts in their affection towards the player-character, Elliott proposes a toast and the player can decide to what they toast. Depending on the player's choice of answer, Elliot's affection for the player-character can rise or decline.

By taking away the player's agency to execute an action, games stimulate in the player an experience of the frustration of having to wait for the object of their interest. At the same time, waiting and showing up is part of the player's creative agency to influence the relationship between

characters. The player infers the character to be a quasi-person, because this character seems to have their own will and fickleness whom the player can only influence by waiting or showing up.

5. Positive and Negative Implications

As pointed out earlier in this chapter, the SA has a tendency to promote preferred readings which are dominant in society regarding the relationships between persons, especially when they are of a romantic nature. Simultaneously, the SA provides the player with benefits that come in a variety of shapes, providing support for the player as they try to reach the end-state of the game, or providing them with narrative experiences that they can enjoy.

In the final section of this chapter, I delve deeper into the benefits and limitations of the SA. This is important for the understanding of the characterisation process of dynamic game characters, because dynamic game characters give the player the impression that they have creative agency over the character. However, the player is actually a facilitator bound to the constraints the developers placed on the game such that they might not be able to influence dynamic game characters outside of normative standards.

The Good: Meaningful Experiences

Primarily, the SA is a process that benefits the player's progression throughout the game. Even when the player does not manage to reach the maximum rank of a *confidant* character in *Persona 5*, they will receive benefits such as new abilities for the ludic agents, or *persona* monsters to use which open up new possibilities to smoothen the progress towards that game's end-state. Or, even when the progression of a relationship with a character does not (immediately) lead to new abilities, the SA can still be beneficial in terms of performance and rewards. In *FE: Awakening*, the better the relationship between each character is, the better their performance in battle events. Characters will block attacks aimed at the other, and there is a greater chance they will critically hit the opponent.

Perhaps more importantly than simply being beneficial to the player's progress through the game, the SA provides the player with meaningful experiences when they have devoted time and emotional investment into a relationship between characters. As explained in chapter eight, completing Ann's bond with Joker causes Ann to become at peace with her inner self, and become Joker's girlfriend in turn (if the player wishes to). Katherine Isbister states that "game designers use dynamic and reactive engagement with these other characters who populate a game's story world to add to the emotional palette of games as a medium" (Isbister 2016, 20). Since the player has had to invest much time into progressing this connection, the completion of Ann's connection with Joker is meaningful to the player. In games with rigid narratives, the additional scenes the player receives through their engagement with the game's SA gives them a form of creative agency in the game's microstructure. In *Eiyuu Densetsu: Sen no Kiseki* and *ME2*, the player-characters share a final intimate moment with the character they have the closest bond with before the game enters its final segments. These scenes transform the player's creative agency and the amount of time and effort they had to invest using that creating agency into a meaningful experience.

As Tosca and Klastrup (2020, 106) clarify in their discussion of the players of *otome* games, the relationships on their own are also meaningful experiences to the player. Connecting different characters lets the player explore "a network of stories, a myriad of parallel worlds which together make sense as a whole and are sources of narrative pleasure and delight" (2020, 106). The player

can completely ignore the SA in the *Mass Effect* series, but having Shepard connect in affectionate ways to their crew shows different sides of both Shepard and the characters involved in the SA, which can be a pleasure to the player. The downloadable content (DLC) *Citadel* I bought for my *Mass Effect 3* game provided me the creative agency to have my Shepard, involved romantically with Garrus at the time, in an extra segment in which she and Garrus danced together. This segment provides little to no benefit at all to the progress of the game, but it was meaningful to me as a player to see them together in what I considered to be a delightful scene.

The SA also provides the player a means to engage with a form of care towards the characters. Just like the *Tamagotchi* and *Pokémon Sword* and *Shield* (Nintendo 2019) simulate petdom, these games provide the player the creative agency to foster intimacy with their virtual pets through taking care of them. If the player wants to raise a Pokémon's friendship towards them, they have to put effort into making sure the creatures do not faint in battle. This game also provides the player with the possibility to set up a camp during which the player can play (in first-person perspective) with the creatures, or cook curry meals for them. The meals not only cure any ailments and give them their health back, but also give them experience points and raise their friendliness towards the player-character. More friendliness in turn provides benefits in battle and special moves, and, for Pokémon such as Eevee, high friendliness is even a requirement for the Pokémon to evolve into an even stronger creature.

Tentatively, I would say that dynamic game characters encourage emotional investment from the player, because the player not only puts in non-trivial effort to develop the relationship between multiple characters, but also has to manage the uncertainty that they might not be able to progress a relationship between characters at all, or that that the effort might fail. The emotional investment that the player devotes to fostering these kinds of relationships and intimacies between dynamic game characters builds ground for meaningful experiences from which the player can derive pleasure.

The Bad: Executing the Correct Strategy within Normative Standards

The SA is a process designed to benefit the player. But, because it systematises elusive phenomena such as love, friendship or just connections between human beings in general, the SA has unfortunately inherently preferred readings to which it subjects the player. Kelly (2015) argues that there is always a 'correct' way that simplifies the development of a relationship to a few predetermined steps:

> Presented as a system of courtship in which the player must select the "correct" dialogue options and actions to successfully woo the Non-Player Character (NPC), *DA2* essentially infers that to romance another character one need only execute this strategy. This inference is not at the surface level of the narrative, but rather baked into the systematic processes from which it cannot intrinsically escape. (2015, 47)

Games with an SA face the problem that they easily reduce the elusive and unpredictable phenomenon of human connection to simply a strategy that the player has to carry out to win in a systematic process. As long as the player carries out the correct actions, pushes the right buttons, or chooses the right dialogue option, they will win the affection of the other character repeatedly. These actions resemble codes developed in society to communicate feelings of affection, such as giving gifts or showing up at someone's birthday party, but, unfortunately, it seems that in games

with a SA, the procedures the player performs miss the complexity of these relationships. Giving someone a gift might not always make someone like you better, there is not always a correct answer, and not everyone can be made to like each other.

Based on Jenkins' (1992) observation of masculine fan practices, Kelly argues that a ludic romance system is "bound within a set of logical parameters and characterized by strategic navigation, ultimately an exercise in masculinity" (2015, 59). The SA too is bound within a set of logical parameters that the player influences, which becomes a masculine practice that takes away the focus on an emotional experience and replaces it with logic towards elusive phenomena of affection.

The rewards the player receives for making connections between characters to smoothen the progress of the game also gives the impression that connections between human beings are important simply because one can gain something from them. In games, the relationships between characters reward the player often with useful items or new abilities. However, perhaps the worst offender of the reduction of human connection in terms of rewards are the achievements some games award the player for making (romantic) connections between characters:

> Of all the quantifiable measures of romantic shortcomings in the system, the Romantic achievement may be the greatest offender to romantic authenticity. The implication here is that the experience of love (albeit in a digital context), even if played for its own merits and emotional rewards, is capped off with a reward for your time well spent. (2015, 60)

In *ME2*, the player receives the Paramour achievement once they manage to establish a romantic relationship with a compatible partner, and in *Sen no Kiseki* the player receives the 'R is for Romance' achievement once the player-character established a strong (romantic) bond with Alisa. These achievements do not support the player in their progress of the game; instead, the player collects these trophies in their public accounts for other players, showing off their success. The emotional investment the player puts into influencing these relationships becomes, then, nothing more than a quantifiable reward.

The process of obtaining a relationship through a systematic process also structurally emphasises the obtaining of the relationship above the maintenance of it. Although for *otome* game players the exploration of multiple (romantic) relationships lets them experience more sides of the characters, games such as *Persona 4*, *Persona 5*, *Sen no Kiseki* and the *ME* series demonstrate that they are more focused on the process of obtaining a relationship than the process of maintaining one. This might be because normative standards in society dictate how a relationship should be obtained and proceeded step-by-step into marriage, and even reduce them to universal story archetypes like 'boy meets girl' (see Cawelti 1976). Or, perhaps because the maintenance of a relationship over a long amount of time requires more effort and less romance than achieving one. Nevertheless, despite my best assumptions to interpret the reasons for this focus, it is necessary that in order to make concrete arguments about this claim, the portrayal of relationships in more media than solely games should be taken into consideration.

The games discussed thus far do not allow for open relationships or polyamorous relationships in their SA. These games tend to allow multiple friendships, but do not allow for multiple connections of romantic nature. In *otome* games such as *Dream Daddy* or *Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side*, the game ends once the player has successfully wooed a character. In *Dragon Age: Origins*, the player is forced to choose between either Alistair or Zevran. *Stardew Valley* takes

the player's gluttonous desire to explore all possible romances to a new level: not only can the player-character divorce their spouse, they can also have their ex-spouse drink a potion that make them forget their marriage to the player-character so that the player-character can marry another character. More strikingly, any children from the previous marriage will turn into doves and fly away, making room for new children.

Despite my belief that dynamic game characters in the SA encourage emotional investment from the player, laying the groundwork for meaningful experiences in terms of simulating human connections, I am also convinced that the SA demonstrates the limit of the player's creative agency over dynamic game characters. The SA highlights that the player is but a facilitator, only able to influence the relationship between dynamic game characters under normative constraints. These normative constraints show the preferred readings of the institutional authorities, among which are the designers and developers of the game, so that even when the player is promised to have creative agency over affectionate relationships between dynamic game characters, this creative agency does not extend beyond what a heteronormative society expects from human connections.

In the previous chapter, I argued that the illusion of creative agency is broken once the dynamic game character migrates to a non-cybermedium. In this chapter, I add to that argument that the promise of creative agency is already shaking in the SA within game works. Designing the relationships between dynamic game characters to conform to normative standards reduces the player's experience to suit the dominant meanings institutional authorities have encoded. Therefore, meaningful experiences that can be derived from creative agency but which go outside of the normative constraints are being ignored, and the complexity of human connections are even further diminished by a systematic, structural process that prizes logic over complexity regarding elusive phenomena such as love, friendship and other kinds of human connections.

6. Summary

This chapter presented the system of affection as a process by which game characters become dynamic. The SA is a ludic process, inherently procedural in nature, that allows the player to create and shape relationships between dynamic game characters. The player affects these relationships by executing specific sets of actions—that is, procedures that differ per game.

The SA is a good system to create the illusion that dynamic game characters have agency, because the player cannot directly control the relationships between them, but can only influence them indirectly. I therefore repeat that it is important that the SA resembles a process, because just giving characters the command to like each other does not give the illusion of characters having their own personality and a free will.

The SA allows the player to influence three kinds of relationships: the player-character with another character, the non-diegetic player with a character, and a character with another character. The connection between player-character and another character is simultaneously a relationship between the player-character and another character, and between the player and a character. The relationships between the non-diegetic player and a character are pervasive, invading the daily life of the player, as the character demands attention. And, in the connection between two characters, the player has the role of a facilitator, they are not participating in those relationships, but only guide them.

Certain conditions apply before the player can influence the relationships between characters. These conditions come in terms of parameters involving the player-character, gender

and sexuality compatibility between characters, and resources. These conditions determine if and how the player has creative agency over certain characters in the SA.

The procedures that the player must perform repeatedly in order to influence the relationships between characters to different effects include transactions, quests, pair-ups, character-targeted dialogues, and waiting and showing up.

The SA comes with both positive and negative implications. From a positive perspective, the SA is not only beneficial to the player in terms of smoothing the progression of the game, but it also allows for meaningful experiences in which the player has devoted time and investment into the relationship between characters and from which they derive pleasure. Dynamic game characters in the SA encourage emotional investment because not only does the player put in non-trivial effort to develop these relationships, but they also have to manage the uncertainty of not knowing if these relationships will occur.

The negative implications, however, are numerous. The SA reduces the elusive and unpredictable phenomenon of human affection to simply a strategy in which the player only has to carry out the procedures in the correct way to win over a character's affection. It emphasises the gaining of a relationship over the maintenance of one. The rewards coming from these connections give the idea that relationships only exist to be useful, and can even become trophies that the player just uses to show off to other players. Moreover, the SA promotes preferred readings stemming from normative standards in society regarding gender, sexuality and the kinds of relationships human beings have with each other. These limitations, placed there by design, diminish the player's creative agency over meaningful experiences that go beyond heteronormative standards.

Chapter Ten
Conclusion

In this final chapter, I reflect on this research by revisiting the aim of this research, repeat the main argument of this dissertation, summarise this research's contributions, and provide several suggestions for future perspectives based on this research.

1. Aim of the Research and Research Questions

The aim of this dissertation was to create a theory of the dynamic game character. I based the research question and its constituent sub-questions on Heidbrink's (2010) general notion of theory that "builds a model or draws a set of descriptive explanatory propositions that claim a systematic relation to a defined object of interest (85). Her subsequent explanation for the position of characters within a theory describes that research on characters repeatedly asks "what characters are […], how they can be defined[…], what they are made of […], how they are constructed […], what functions they fulfil within different media contexts […], and how to explain the coherence-effect that characters reveal" (2010, 85). I therefore proposed the following research question and sub-questions:

What are dynamic game characters?

1. What is the distinction between game characters and characters in other media?
2. What are the different means by which a game entity turns into a character?
3. What constitutes dynamic game characters?
4. How is the identity of a dynamic game character constructed?
5. How does a dynamic game character influence the character ecology?

I focused on *game works* that belong to the general class of cybermedia. These game works are digital artefacts with a processual nature that communicate characters, released within the discourse of contemporary transmedia practices (2000–2019). I attempted to have as diverse a corpus as possible, but because I focused on dynamic game characters for which their characterisation process into a certain outcome was of the most vital importance, genres that focus on the development of characters dominate my corpus. These kinds of games are primarily designed to be single-player games, although, unless specified, I excluded multi-player games completely throughout my analyses. Since this dissertation places dynamic game characters within a larger character ecology, the sphere in which characters are constantly produced and reproduced, I also used non-cybermedia works as an addition to the body of game works to demonstrate how dynamic game characters influence the character ecology.

Based on a reader-response theory approach adapted to suit cybermedia, I used the concept of the player to critically assess how they shape the identities of dynamic game characters. Since the dynamic game character is *dynamic*, the challenge is that the player might never be able to discover all the possible outcomes and nuances of the dynamic game character's characterisation process. This research focused on the available structures which enable the existence of dynamic game characters. It paid attention to the mechanical systems of the game works with the player at

its centre taking an active part in shaping the identity of the character. Since the player is at the heart of the meaning-making process of dynamic game characters, this research approached characters as a player-constructed phenomenon in which the game character requires the player in order to be invoked, but the game does encourage the meaning-making with different means and to different effects.

I made several suggestions that follow Heidbrink's general notion of theory with the role of the character in that theory—that is, what dynamic game characters are, how they can be defined, how they are constructed, what functions they fulfil in different media contexts, and how to explain the coherence-effect they reveal—over the course of the chapters in this dissertation. However, my theory of dynamic game characters became a theory that accentuates the relevance of the dynamic game character in the struggle over interpretative authority through the definition and construction of the dynamic game character, and the challenges it brings to the meaning-making process in contemporary transmedia practices. I presented the theory on dynamic game characters in the introduction, but I will present it once more here.

Dynamic game characters are a type of quasi-person in digital games whose development consists of multiple outcomes. Digital games accelerate a dynamic game character's identity within a single work, unlike non-cybermedia in which a character's identity is constructed over multiple works. They challenge venues of control, such as the author-function, ownership and intellectual property, because the player has creative agency over the dynamic game character's characterisation process within a single work. However, once dynamic game characters transfer to other works, authoritative institutions break the player's participation in their development. These transfers sacrifice player participation to create the illusion of a coherent identity between the manifestations of the character over multiple works.

2. Contributions

Over the course of this dissertation, I made several statements and arguments which led me to the main argument of this dissertation. Because I think these statements and arguments contribute theoretically to game studies, media studies and Japanese studies, they are therefore worth summarising.

The concept of the character has been discussed as early as Aristotle. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the character has primarily been discussed as a facet of the narrative discourse in literary studies. The debate surrounding characters reached its height during the 1960s and 1970s when the psychological approach that saw characters as human beings led to a structuralist position that saw characters as signs or structures of the text. The structuralist approach was then met with a humanistic approach that deals with characters on the basis of textual analysis, and hermeneutics that put the reader's interpretation at the heart of the concept of the character.

At the beginning of game studies, game characters were primarily discussed in terms of the difference between the avatar and the character, focusing on the question of whether or not the entity that the player controls is a character. This focus eventually shifted towards debates about the player-character, where the convergence of the identity of the player-character and the identity of the player is the main interest. A reason I believe that this interest in the player-character is important is because the player-character seems to be distinct from characters in other media, such as literature, comics, films, theatre and more because the player has direct control over them,

whereas in non-cybermedia they do not.

I pointed to three conceptual problems with the phenomenon of the character. First, there exists a tension between transmedial perspectives and more medium-specific perspectives on the nature of the character. Second, there also exists an assumption that characters are inherently part of a story, but as the transmedial perspectives on characters from both Japan and the West show, characters are not defined by any story specifically. They migrate from one story to the next, and can even exist without stories. Third, in transmedial perspectives on characters, there exists a friction about the characters' identities, because they exist in *multiplicity* within the *character ecology.* The appearance of a character in one story or medium might seem to be the same character, but that does not necessarily mean that this character has the same identity as in its other appearance. This focus on identity became especially visible when I juxtaposed Western theories on character to Japanese theories on character. Here I wish to specifically point out that Western theories focus on a *strive for narrative continuity* between character appearances to give the idea that the character has a single coherent identity, whereas Japanese theory pays attention to the *proliferation of the character* to explain the different identities of the character.

I drew attention to Frow's (2014) argument that the tension between thinking of characters as pieces of writing or imagining them as person-like entities comes from the prior knowledge of what persons are. Since he argues that characters and persons are at once ontologically discontinuous but logically interdependent, he roots the understanding of character in the taxonomies of personhood, describing the character as constructed in a specific moment of time "within terms of an ethical or legal or religious or civic mode of action and understanding" (2014, ix). He therefore considers characters to be *quasi-persons*, established on the recipient's understanding of what a person is while simultaneously constructed within a work (2014, 107). This definition of the character is the premise on which I built my theory of the dynamic game character.

To address the conceptual problems, I proposed the *multiplicity model*. This model aims to represent the meaning-making process of the cultural understanding of the multiplicity of characters, their coherence and (lack of) continuity, as well as the medium-specific representational material in which characters manifest. The model consists of three interdependent elements: the archetype, the immaterial character and the indicator, and the manifestation(s). The *archetype* functions as reoccurring structural patterns in the shape of person-like figures. In the model, the archetype is used to describe the different motifs that appear and reappear in characters over multiple courses of works. These archetypes are not fixed, but are iterative and evolve as the character proliferates. The second element is a bilateral element consisting of the *immaterial character* and the *indicator*, which I based on de Saussure's bilateral sign model (de Saussure 1916; Nöth 1995). The immaterial character, as the signified, refers to a specific quasi-person who has yet to be embodied by representational material. The indicator refers to the discontinuous signifier used to refer to the immaterial character. The final element is the *manifestation(s)* of the characters. The manifestation is the character embodied by representational material. It is on the local, tangible level of the character's manifestations that interpreters perceive the multiplicity of the character's existence within the character ecology.

The configuration of character manifestations over different works and in different discourses through which the reader interprets a character's different identities is inherently a question of control over the character ecology. How the reader makes sense of the configuration of character manifestations and their identities occurs through a top-down approach via three different venues of control: *authorship*, *ownership* and *canonisation*. All three of these venues are

in constant negotiation to determine the identity of the character, wrapped up in a continuous process to police the construction of the constellation of different identities of manifestations in the character ecology.

Authorship creates specific discourses in which manifestations of the character over a series of works are to be interpreted by the reader to be a single coherent identity. This allows particular manifestations to be differentiated from character manifestations in other discourses to which different authors are assigned. However, issues arise once the authorial intent is considered to be causally related to the identity of the character, when multiple authors are involved in the creation of a single manifestation, or when the author-function grants multiple different identities the same status.

Ownership in contemporary transmedia practices provides the opportunity to produce and control a character's identity via *character merchandising*. Character merchandising essentially creates a paradox: the character gets dispersed over a variety of media works in the hands of multiple parties involved in the character's *characterisation process* such that the character ends up in different discourses owned by different institutions. Even when the character has a specific entity within a specific discourse, the character can only develop so much before they meet their own end, and the intellectual property owner must—if they want to continue using the character for profits—ultimately renew the character in another discourse.

Finally, the strive for narrative continuity leads almost inevitably to a discussion of canon that determines which events 'actually' happened, and therefore what a character's identity 'actually' is within the complexity of discourses in which the character appears. However, a character's identity is in a constant flux, never really determined, never finished as multiple groups and individuals negotiate, debate and enforce a character's identity repeatedly. This results in a flaw in which the idea of a canon promises to reduce the complexity of a character's identity to a single coherent existence, but as it is influenced by many invisible hands, authority figures, primarily franchises and big corporations containing their own agenda, providing their own version of the character's identity, the canon creates what it promises to avoid: an identity that cannot be brought to a core.

These three venues influence the characterisation process of the character, creating a textual organisation in which the character's identity is policed, controlled and negotiated in an ongoing process. In the textual organisation of the character's identity, I distinguished between the *urtext and the prototype*, the *discourse*, and the *character ecology*. The urtext is used to determine the character's origin, its prototype, to which manifestations of that character have to adhere. In the discourses, manifestations of the character are presented as the normative character, preferably one with narrative continuity between the manifestations within that discourse. Finally, in the character ecology, all manifestations gather. This ecology is in constant flux as every new manifestation shifts the constellation of character manifestations, and thus the ecology does not contain any stable identity of that character.

Characters are independent from any given media, but always need a medium or representational material to manifest. When games encourage the player to invoke a character, they use conventions known from media other than games, as well as conventions specific to games. This is important for the manifestations of characters, because the reader has culturally learned to interpret these conventions to invoke a character, rather than that the conventions make a character exist. Characters are therefore constructs invoked not only by works or readers, but also by a culture that allows its members to interpret a figure as human-like with thoughts, feelings,

intentions and more.

Game characters, that is, quasi-persons in digital games, are the figures integrated in the game's mechanical system, which requires the player's non-trivial effort to progress from one state to another. But they are, at the same time, subjected to the challenge that games can vary so distinctively from each other in structure and modality such that the construction of characters, and therefore also of game characters, cannot be reduced to a single core.

A *dynamic game character* is a particular manifestation of a character in a game. It is a quasi-person with a development structure that branches into different outcomes, which are undetermined until the player actualises one or more possibilities that influence the direction onto distinct paths with a specific outcome. A dynamic game character is inherently ergodic because the player has to put in non-trivial effort to affect the development towards a certain outcome. The actualisation of these possibilities has structural consequences for the manner in which the player continues to traverse the game, as the game will indicate that the player influences the development of the character onto a certain path, and thereby another path closes. The outcome does not necessarily have to be clear to the player until they have actualised it.

Dynamic game characters sidestep the focus on stories, and also provide other advantages to our understanding of characters in games in the broader sense of contemporary transmedia practices. This type of character does not divide game characters in terms of the player's locus of agency within a single entity like the avatar or player-character, but relocates the focus to an agency in which the player influences a web of characters. The dynamic game character avoids the implicit focus that when the player controls a player-character their agency is limited to the scope of the player-character. Rather, even when the player controls a player-character, the dynamic game character shows how the player affects different kinds of non-player-characters. Even when the player controls no player-character at all, the dynamic game character is applicable to describe how the player influences a web of characters in a game.

In discussing the consequences of contemporary transmedia practices on dynamic game characters in the character ecology, I came to argue that our current understanding of characters is primarily rooted within this idea that character manifestations within a single work are created by an author-function that determines the behaviour and development of these characters within the work. Dynamic game characters influence the character ecology by accelerating the character's identity within a single work, unlike non-cybermedia in which a character's identity is constructed over multiple works. The dynamic game character interferes with the construction of the character's identity over multiple works, because invisible hands structurally create multiple identities within the game and provide the player with creative agency to actualise one of these identities. The identity of the dynamic game character becomes infused with the player's influence over the characterisation process of the character. From this perspective, the dynamic game character enters the character ecology with the promise of flexibility and creative agency for the player who engages with the character. The immaterial character becomes infused with the player's own experiences in the character's characterisation process with the 'permission' of the invisible hands. What happens is that the dynamic game character's manifestations all gather within a single work through the player.

However, against this sunny view of the player's agency over the dynamic game character, I also criticised this view because the player's agency over dynamic game characters suffers once dynamic game characters become transmedial. There is an idealistic implication that the dynamic game character has no definitive manifestation, no 'official' identity, because it is the player who

produces a concrete manifestation of the dynamic game character. However, invisible hands have the tendency to create and maintain the illusion of coherence in a dynamic game character's identity, as they try to structure the configuration of the dynamic game character over the course of multiple ludic and non-cybermedia works. Their meddling with the dynamic game character's configuration breaks the 'permission' of the player's involvement in those characters' characterisation processes. While the games with dynamic game characters promise the player creative agency over these characters, the moment these characters are transferred to other works, the player's creative agency is sacrificed for an illusion of coherency.

The *system of affection* (SA) is a ludic process, inherently procedural in nature, which allows the player to create and shape relationships between dynamic game characters. This process is beneficial to the player's progress through the game and provides the player with meaningful experiences when they have devoted time and emotional investment into a relationship between characters. However, simultaneously, the SA systematises elusive phenomena such as love, friendship or just connections between human beings in general, and so unfortunately has inherently preferred readings to which it subjects the player. Moreover, to the argument that the illusion of creative agency is broken once the dynamic game character migrates to a non-cybermedium, I added the argument that the promise of creative agency is already shaking in the SA within game works. Designing the relationships between dynamic game characters to conform to normative standards reduces the player's experience to suit the dominant meanings institutional authorities have encoded. Therefore, meaningful experiences that can be derived from creative agency but which go outside of the normative constraints are ignored, and the complexity of human connections are even further diminished by a systematic, structural process that prizes logic over complexity regarding elusive phenomena such as love, friendship and other kinds of human connections.

3. Suggestions for Future Research

Here I will sketch a few directions in which my research can be taken.

Fanfiction and Derivative Works

A path purposefully omitted from this dissertation, but worthwhile to explore, is how dynamic game characters affect the creation of fan fiction and other kinds of derivative works. I concluded in chapter eight that the danger of transmedia is that authoritative institutions take away their promise of agency over dynamic game characters from the player. Nevertheless, it is important to explore how empirical players and/or fans engage in this struggle for interpretative authority. For example, the *doujinshi* [fan magazine] *Perusona 5 Unofficial Fanbook: Futaride Aruita Ano Hi no Hoshizora: Joker X Goro Akechi* (2017) [*Persona 5: Unofficial Fanbook: Walking under that Day's Starry Sky: Joker X Goro Akechi*] by Banyu depict a queer reading of the relationship between Joker and Goro Akechi, whereas the official manga and anime adaptations of *Persona 5*—as I explained in chapter eight—correspond only to the relationships as originally depicted in the source work. This example shows that fans do offer counter-works to the limitations of the player's creative agency over the dynamic game characters, and are therefore important to take into consideration for future research on dynamic game characters.

Another way to explore how fans engage with the struggle for interpretative authority is through derivative works other than written texts like fan fiction, such as the practices of *détournement*, in English called remix practices. Fanny Barnabé (2019) offers a study on how

creative remix practices use digital games as the materials for derivative works such as mods, let's play videos, machinimas and more. The popularity of, for example, let's play videos make these kinds of derivative works a fertile ground for studying how empirical players and fans engage with (their agency over) dynamic game characters.

Artificial Intelligence Characters

As pointed out by Nicolle Lamerichs (2019), voice assistants, such as Apple's Siri, Google Assistant and Amazon's Alexa, using artificial intelligence (AI) become increasingly more visible and more relied upon in our society. Just like characters, these voice assistants operate on our prior knowledge of what persons are. One particular example that blurs the boundaries between AI, voice assistants, and characters is Vinclu's Gatebox, which contains the visual character Azuma Hikari,(Gatebox n.d.) who functions as the user's personal assistant operating on the *moe* trope of the user being her *master* who she serves in her daily life. What these voice assistants suggest is that instead of there being a clear separation between persons, characters and AI, there is a spectrum of human-like phenomena that each are used for different purposes and to different effects. I believe that exploring voice assistants, or human-like figures using AI, not only helps our understanding in how they change the perception of characters, but that, taking dynamic game characters into the discussion, dynamic game characters can help us understand how human society perceives and engages with human-like artificial intelligence.

Representation of Gender, Sexuality, Race and Queerness

It would also be highly interesting to study the representation of gender, sexuality, race and queerness in dynamic game characters. Especially because the dynamicity of these characters suggests that the player has the agency to shape and create them however they want. But, due to their limited influence over the characterisation process of dynamic game characters, it would be invaluable to see how these characters are represented in terms of gender, sexuality, race and queerness, and over which of those aspects the player actually has agency. For example, at their initial release, *Mass Effect* (2007) and *Mass Effect 2* (2010) only had a white male Shepard on the cover of the hardcopy. *Mass Effect 3* (2012) has a reversible cover with on one side a white male Shepard, and on the other side a white female Shepard. And, as I pointed out in chapter nine, Østby (2016) demonstrates that while there are optional queer romantic relationships, these only exist in the private sphere of the game, while the public sphere—the segments which every player experiences—the game is heteronormative in terms of its relationships between characters. Despite the fact that the player has the agency to influence dynamic game characters onto certain paths, the lack of diversity in how these characters are represented, and how the player has agency over their representation, shows the limitations embedded in the dynamic game characters' characterisation processes. It is therefore of relevance how more games with dynamic game characters represent gender, sexuality, race and queerness.

Emotional Engagement

Another path to explore is how players engage emotionally with the possibilities, consequences and the results of the outcome of the characterisation processes of dynamic game characters. It can be said that we care about characters, because they are akin to persons, because they are *quasi-persons*. They are schemata of human beings (Frow 2014, 107), and they remind us of ourselves and of others. Especially characters that the player has invested time and effort into become important

elements about whom the player cares. I am not saying that dynamic game characters are the only type of characters players can care about. Of course, the amount of novels, films, televisions series and more saturated with characters show that they are not. However, what I do argue is that dynamic game characters have the potential to let the player care about them because the player is partially responsible for their characterisation process, in which they invested time and energy. Eve's death in *Mass Effect 3* affected me to such an extent that I went out of my way to see if there was even a slight possibility that I could reverse the outcome. Or, a game such as *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (2019) has the player invest in its characters and kills the characters who the player did not manage to recruit into their house—an outcome the player could have prevented.

Japanese Games

I initially started this research aiming to bridge the gap between Japanese studies and game studies. However, this goal proved too ambitious, and I had to narrow down the scope to the topic of (dynamic) game characters. I managed to use Japanese theory on characters and games to inject the knowledge into game studies, which can benefit from knowledge about characters and games outside of their Western perspective. As Rachael Hutchinson explains, Japanese studies and game studies are able to benefit from each other (2019, 254-255). She argues that Japanese studies can benefit from research on games because "[v]ideogames provide a wealth of information about contemporary Japan, and how 'Japan' is represented in art today" (2019, 254). And, she argues that game studies benefits from studying Japanese games as Japanese games, because "[v]ideogames as objects can be studied for their ludic properties as well as those elements that anchor the game in a specific culture and reflect a certain way of looking at the world" (2019, 255).

Although I might not have been able to bridge the gap between the two fields to my full satisfaction, a possible path to take from this research is to see how Japanese games present dynamic game characters. Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs), for instance, are described by Schules *et al*. (2018) to be known for their "limited narrative choice", "defined characters", and "confinement to world" (114). They state that gaming site *Extra Credits* claims that JRPGs tell a story, while Western role-playing games place players in a story (2012; Schules *et al*. 2018, 114). However, my case study on the JRPG *Persona 5* (2016) in chapter eight showed that the player does have—at least in these contemporary examples—creative agency over rigid stories in the games' microstructures. The dynamic game character allows for much more nuanced descriptions in terms of where and how games from Japan and the West grant the player agency, rather than just stating it to be a rigid dichotomy in the structure of games from Japan and games from the West.

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