

A Ludo Mix Perspective on Dynamic Game Characters

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A media mix is a commercial strategy to spread content across a variety of media to stimulate the consumption of these media with the character at its heart, and is particularly common in Japan. Steinberg (2012) puts it as the “cross-media serialization and circulation of entertainment franchises” (vii). It has its own history and development alongside of what we know as media *convergence* in the European and North-American hemisphere (the “West”) (ibid.). In the West, a common label used for the phenomenon of convergence culture is ‘transmedia storytelling’ (Jenkins 2006, 2007).

Scholars such as Ôtsuka (1989, 2010), Gô (2005, 2011), Azuma (2001, 2007), Saito (2000, 2014), Lamarre (2009, 2018), and Steinberg (2012) discuss characters primarily in terms of their manifestations in *manga* and/or *anime*. Despite Japan’s dominant presence in the global game market, games in the media mix (known as *geemu*) are primarily discussed in terms of their role and historical development in the media ecology of Japan, and their global connection to the West (Allison 2006; Consalvo 2016; Kohler 2016; Picard Forthcoming, 2013; Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015; Steinberg 2015). However, little attention is paid to the contribution of the character in digital games, although games increasingly occupy the focal point in the consumption model of the media mix, which we can call a ludo mix. It is not uncommon for a game to be the center of a media mix with recent examples being *Nier: Automata* (PlatinumGames 2017), *Persona 5* (P-Studio 2016), *Pokémon: Sun and Moon* (Game Freak 2016), *Final Fantasy XV* (Square Enix 2016), or *Danganronpa* (Spike Chunsoft 2010 – 2017).

Games tend however to cause friction in transmedia- or crossmedia strategies the media- and ludo mix or transmedia storytelling. This friction is usually dismissed by relegating games to peripheral, ancillary elements of and gateways to a transmedia story world (Aarseth 2006; Bateman 2014; Evans 2008; Harvey 2015; Wolf 2012). According to Aldred (2012), game characters especially tend to cause issues in movie-to-game cross-media transfers, because they have to act as the embodiment of players in the game world, while simultaneously function as film characters transported to the game.

Dynamic game characters are a type of game character with a development structure that branches into different outcomes, which are undetermined until the player actualizes one or more possibilities that steer the direction to a specific outcome. The actualization of these possibilities has structural consequences for the manner in which the player continues to traverse the game, as games will indicate that the player directs the development of the character to a certain path, thereby closing of another path. The outcome is not necessarily clear to the player until they have actualized it. This means that the player, as an integral part of the character's development, has a certain amount of creative agency over the identity of that character.

Dynamic game characters therefore provide an additional complication to the disturbance games already tend to cause in transmedia- and crossmedia strategies. This paper will argue that dynamic game characters cause additional friction because they accelerate the multiple identities of that character within a single work over which the player has a certain amount of creative agency, while commonly the proliferation of characters and their multiple identities spreads over a body of works. Usually, authors, publishers, developers, and even fans tend to sustain a character's continuous identity via methods such as canonization, which works as a socio-economic process for social interpretation of content (Backe 2015; Bertetti 2014; Harvey 2015; Rosendo 2015). However, the multiple identities dynamic game characters supply in a single work are difficult to sustain in a media- and ludo mix. As a result, the dynamic game character is pushed to a peripheral position in the network of the media mix in which it appears, and the player is only given an illusion of creative agency.

This paper examines the tension created by dynamic game characters in media- and ludo mixes as a result of games conveying an illusion of creative agency over the identity of the character to the player, while the dominant identity of the characters is (for commercial reasons) presented in the media mix' other, non-ludic media platforms. This paper will engage with the question: how do dynamic game characters create tension in media- and ludo mixes?

In order to discuss the issues created by dynamic game characters within character-oriented commercial strategies, this paper draws on *Persona 5* as an illustrative example of a media mix with a game at its center. Besides the central game, the *Persona 5* media mix consists of the following works: the game's story has been adapted into a *manga* serialization (Murasaki 2016 – present), an *anime* television series (Ishihama, 2018 - present), and in an original drama cd called *Persona 5: The Night Breakers* (2016). The characters also appear in a rhythm game, *Persona 5: Dancing in Starlight* (P-Studio 2018), in the dungeon crawler game *Persona Q2: New Cinema Labyrinth* (P-Studio 2018), and the main character appears in the crossover fighting game *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (Bandai Namco Studios 2018). The characters are also sold in non-narratives as merchandise. The paper's approach will be based on reader-response theory (Aarseth 2003, 2007; Barthes 1977; Eco 1979; Iser 1978; Rosenblatt 1938) to demonstrate how the player constructs the identity of the dynamic characters in the central game

against the construction of the characters in the other non-ludic media, specifically in the *anime* and *manga*.

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