

**“May your heart be your guiding key”: The Aesthetic Education of  
*Kingdom Hearts***

**“May your heart be your guiding key”: A Educação Estética de  
*Kingdom Hearts***

Tiago Clariano

University of Lisbon<sup>1</sup>

tiagoclariano@campus.ul.pt

**Abstract:** “May your heart be your guiding key” is a motto for the RPG videogame series *Kingdom Hearts* (2002—). This phrase is usually said before characters embark on journeys and its grammar implies an element of uncertainty, which depends on the fatalistic questions the plot raises. This uncertainty creates a tension between the individual power of choice imparted by the phrase and the big scheme of the plot.

The power of choice has been a self-determining plot device in the literary genre of *Bildungsroman*, where choices have moral and psychic implications for the characterization of the protagonists; as Franco Moretti states, “the *Bildungsroman* attempts to build the Ego, and make it the indisputable centre of its own structure” (1987). In *Kingdom Hearts*, the main characters are seen deciding between certain scenarios which are fated to lead to the unavoidable Keyblade War and the plot that brings together the many games in the series focuses on breaking this cycle. *Kingdom Hearts* works as an immersible form of canon for Disney, Pixar, and Square-Enix and, as such, it entails the player to make choices based on a deep contact with these worlds, plots, or characters, thus making their hearts guiding keys.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics; Videogames; Aesthetic Education; Literature; Canon Formation.

**Resumo:** “May your heart be your guiding key” é uma máxima recorrentemente dita na saga de videogames *Kingdom Hearts* (2002—). A frase costuma ser dita antes da partida para determinadas jornadas e a sua gramática implica um elemento de incerteza que depende das questões fatalistas levantadas pelo enredo. Esta incerteza gera uma tensão entre o poder individual de escolha que a frase solicita e o grande plano do enredo.

A capacidade de escolher é um dispositivo narrativo para a auto-determinação das personagens no género literário do *Bildungsroman*, onde a escolha tem implicações morais e psíquicas para a caracterização das personagens; Franco Moretti defende que “o *Bildungsroman* pretende construir o Ego e fazer dele o centro indisputável da sua estrutura” (1987). Em *Kingdom Hearts*, os protagonistas têm de deliberar certos cenários que estão condenados a levar à Guerra das Keyblades. O enredo que junta os vários jogos da saga foca-se no romper deste ciclo. *Kingdom Hearts* serve uma forma imersível do cânone da Disney, da Pixar e da Square-Enix e, como tal, leva o jogador a fazer

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escolhas baseadas num contacto profundo com os mundos, enredos e personagens destas produtoras, fazendo dos seus corações chaves que os guiam.

**Palavras-chave:** Estética; Video-jogos; Educação Estética; Literatura; Cânone.

"Love, now a universal birth,  
From heart to heart is stealing,  
From earth to man, from man to earth:  
— It is the hour of feeling."  
— "To my sister", William Wordsworth

## 1. Introduction: May your heart be your guiding key

This essay aims at a case study of reading a video game as if it was literature or playing literature through the means of a videogame. This in-betweenness is due to *Kingdom Hearts* being a fictional form that constantly refers to other fictional forms, recognized as animated movies, which, on their behalf, refer to literary artworks (tales, stories, myths, and novels). As such, this sentence, "May your heart be your guiding key", was chosen as a means of analyzing these relationships between the reception of literature and the reception of a video game, following the case of the *Kingdom Hearts* series. It will be sustained that, such as literature, video games entice a further process of choice in their players, and *Kingdom Hearts* is seen as a good example because of its constant reference to an aestheticization of a certain canon, using the Disney and Pixar movies it constantly refers to. In this sequence, the phrase "May your heart be your guiding key" stops being a mere plot device to make characters do what they think is best in the face of great danger and becomes a commentary on what to do after reading or after playing: choosing what to do afterward.

*Kingdom Hearts* is a diegetically driven hack and slash Japanese-styled RPG that focuses on the story of Sora, who needs to escape from his home and leave his family and friends behind because his world, the Destiny Islands, is engulfed by something called the Darkness. This engulfment is akin to the one that happens to the land of Fantastica in Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story*, where the Nothing (a manifestation of the humans' disbelief in imagination and fantasy) is swallowing the world, replacing it with nothing itself. Sora receives a key-shaped sword called the Keyblade and becomes friends with Donald Duck and Goofy, while traveling through other worlds the Darkness is also about to engulf, these worlds being the worlds of Disney and Pixar movies, and some Square-Enix games. So, in the first game, we can see Sora interact with the characters, movies, and plots of Disney's *Alice in Wonderland*, *Tarzan*, *Hercules*, *Pinocchio*, *Peter Pan*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Winnie the Pooh*, *Aladdin*, and Henry Selick's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. This is the trademark character of *Kingdom Hearts*, the pretension to fuse the Japanese Anime and Manga driven visual language with the Occidental Disney ones; as such, it stands on the top of a very contrived transnational, transmedia and crossover-based building. It is not that these languages weren't already in tandem: Disney's *Lion King* was highly influenced by the Japanese animated TV series

*Kimba the White Lion*, and the evolution in the designs of the Disney princesses have become more and more influenced by the Manga and Anime styles, noticeably, Elsa's eyes in *Frozen* have high dues to pay to the recurring style of drawing eyes in the Anime. *Kingdom Hearts* seems to crown and couple the styles cultivated by these different aesthetics.

The overarching plot of the series—the narrative elements that help illuminate what's happening in each game—has to do with the prevention of the Keyblade War, a war fought among Keyblade wielders. In *Kingdom Hearts X Union Cross*, a prequel launched in 2016 that accounts for the first narrative segments of the bigger scheme of the plot, the Master of Masters and his Book of Prophecies are presented, and the plot revolves around the last page of this book, which states "On that fated land, a great war shall transpire. Darkness will prevail, and light will expire." The Master of Master's apprentices, the Six Foretellers named after the seven deadly sins—Ira, Invi, Ava, Gula, Aced and Luxu—become worried about their precious Light's foretold dismay and ask him about ways to prevent these events from happening. To their worries with this inevitability, the Master of Masters answers with the phrase "May your heart be your guiding key". This recurring answer creates a pattern and a relation between the last phrase of the Book of Prophecies (which was written by the Master of Masters) and the way the Master intended his apprentices to react to it: both sentences are imputable to the Master of Masters and while the prophecy has a dogmatic and unquestionable tone, its juxtaposition with "May your heart be your guiding key" almost makes this second one sound paradoxical. The only time the Master of Masters gives a further explanation of what the sentence means is while explaining the Keyblade War to Invi, saying:

Change can be hard but things need to keep moving forward, and you need to keep up. Now that you know what the future holds, Invi, what does your heart say? May your heart be your guiding key, I say it all the time, you ultimately need to do what your heart feels is right. (*Kingdom Hearts X Back Cover*, 2019 [2017])

Here, the Master seems to allow a glimpse upon his further interests in the Keyblade War, as he describes it as a form of change, "but things need to keep moving forward". Besides that, while rephrasing "May your heart be your guiding key", he adds more density to the meaning of the phrase: while the original form of the phrase "May your heart be your guiding key" requires the inquiry of some imprecise concepts such as: Under what circumstances? How can a heart be a guiding key? And to what door?, the Master's rephrasing brings forth other opaque concepts such as "need", "feel" and "right" that overcomplicate the already difficult to assimilate statement. Seeing as all these terms would require a deep philosophical inquiry, this essay will take the word heart in this sentence as a replacement for sensibility, akin to Wordsworth's usage of the word in the verses chosen as epigraphs "From heart to heart is stealing (...)/ It is the hour of feeling."

There is, of course, a similarity between this phrase and *Star Wars*' "May the Force be with you" that demands some attention; however, the sentences need to be distinguished, even after noting their similarities as declarations of possibility or hope for

the best possible outcome. According to Yoda, in *Star Wars*, the acquisition of the Force relies on a process of unlearning what is learned; during the practice, Yoda also adds "just do, no try", implying there is no process of trial and error while learning how to wield it (which also makes the idea of practicing or training the Force unviable). Obi-Wan Kenobi proceeds to explain that the Force is the "energy that surrounds what is alive", which is an interesting pantheistic concept that seems to presuppose empathy for beings that are alive and by what is created by nature. While the Force is said to be everywhere, like Mana or God, to wield and control it requires a specific sort of training, which is a kind of education or nurturing. On the other hand, a heart is not something that we seemingly need to train to hold, and in that sense, it's part of our natural equipment. Even though the Master's phrase about the heart was shared among Keyblade Wielders, the distinction between wielders and non-wielders is never manifest: the phrase pertains to everyone who has a heart—which is an important distinction from *Star Wars*' "May the Force be with you", that assumes the receiver end is endowed with the Force.

In a game series about acquiring the ability to change what is deemed as inevitable, dogmatic phrases seem to be a way of making characters doubt their ability to effect the plot: when reading the last page of the Book of Prophecies, the Foretellers felt impotent upon learning that "light will expire", and bearing in mind this inevitability, how can the Master of Masters tell them "May your heart be your guiding key"? This sentence, then, creates a crucial tension between its utterance and its context: facing the inevitability of an apocalyptic war, this phrase comes as a palliative for the hard times that are about to unfold, but also as an incentive to find and follow one's aesthetic preferences. The tension arisen is between fate and the ability to choose: if destiny is sealed like a thick steel door, how can your heart work like a guiding key?

The main argument of this essay will explore how the Master of Masters' phrase is an incitement to aesthetic education, through the consumption of other art forms that are referred to during the *Kingdom Hearts* series. To do so, some attention will be paid to the difficulty in describing the plot of this videogame series, due to the manifold narratives it brings together from the different Disney and Pixar assets it moves. It is through this manipulation of assets from different artistic sources that *Kingdom Hearts* builds its world, in constant reference to movies, series and even videogames, thus, forming an immersive canon for these companies. The reference to other artworks, together with the Master of Masters' advice "May your heart be your guiding key", *Kingdom Hearts* becomes a kind of *Bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age novel, both for the main character, Sora, and the player.

## **2. State of the art of the plot**

The expression "state of the art of the plot" is not innocent: as a game series, *Kingdom Hearts* has been so complicated and so full of plot intricacies that it requires a state of the art to partially understand its plot—one even could argue, from the player's point of view, that this is a game where its plot doesn't matter as much as what happens on the screen. The narrative is obscured, scattered, constantly rectified in the most post-

modern ways imaginable. Sora's journey takes him from his home-world, the Destiny Islands, to Traverse Town, a place where the people whose worlds have been engulfed by Darkness land on. There, he meets Donald and Goofy, who are after the Keyblade Hero, and Sora happens to have just achieved the ability to wield a Keyblade as he escaped from the Destiny Islands. Together, the trio starts journeying through the Disney worlds, to find Sora's friends (Riku and Kairi) and King Mickey.

The plot of Sora's journey bears certain similarities to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, where Wilhelm Meister runs from home with a band of actors, traveling through Germany, while his psychological and social skills are being developed and his apprenticeship is accordingly described. This book has also been recurrently referred to as the prototype for the coming-of-age novel (*Bildungsroman*), where there's a recognizable progression in the development of a certain character, and, in Wilhelm Meister's case, this progression became manifest around the craft of actors. If we keep in mind the worlds Sora is visiting through his journey are, before all, worlds from movies, this journey's structure is not very far from the one in Wilhelm Meister's *Apprenticeship*, and we can deem *Kingdom Hearts* as Sora's coming-of-age novel. Moreover, his new friends, Donald and Goofy, are recurrently recognized as artists or actors in the movies they appear as protagonists: think about Donald's *The Three Caballeros* (1944), where he joins a Mariachi Band, or *Mickey, Donald, Goofy: The Three Musketeers* (2004), where the setting itself is the one of a play, with scenery changes and the protagonists are actors playing Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*. While in the Disney worlds, siding with the protagonists or heroes of said worlds, Sora needs to take decisions and make choices while dealing with actions in the fringes of Light and Darkness, which reveal a specific sort of character development.

While playing as Sora and following his story, the player plays through an authentic *Bildungsroman*: from apprenticeship to mastery, accompanied by artists such as Donald and Goofy, visiting the Disney and Pixar worlds, while playing through the stories of their movies and meeting their characters. *Kingdom Hearts*, through its *Bildungsromanesque* structure, takes the players through an immersive journey into different artworks—think about Akira Kurosawa's "Crows" segment in the movie *Dreams* (1990), where an art student starts wandering through Vincent van Gogh's paintings, meeting the painter himself and having a conversation with him. I'm using the original German word for these artworks as it presupposes the idea of *Bildung*, which has to do with the aesthetico-spiritual development of the main character: the production of a singular and democratic Ego. Jesse Raber distinguishes three ways of *Bildung*, according to specific authors:

First, there is the debased variety of "socially pragmatic *Bildung*" in which the individual's character is shaped according to wholly external imperatives, molded to fill certain predetermined economic or societal roles; the school, from this perspective, is a kind of factory or boot camp. Second, there is a kind of *Bildung*, associated with William von Humboldt and with the "Beautiful Soul" of Wilhelm Meister's *Apprenticeship*, in which aesthetico-spiritual development is wholly inward, as the self seeks harmony and well-roundedness within itself and on its own private terms, concerning itself with society only so far as necessary to guarantee its freedom to follow this path; in this case, the ideal school is a research university

conceived along quasi-monastic lines. (...) Third, there is *Bildung* as conceived by Goethe and Schiller, in which the spiritual development of individuals is seen as inextricable from that of society, so that harmonious personalities depend on harmonious social arrangements and vice versa; here the school is, to borrow a phrase from Dewey, an "embryonic society" where relations are more perfect than they have yet become in society at large. (Raber, 2018, p. 6)

The player finds a coming-of-age avatar in Sora, who visits and reacts to different Disney and Pixar worlds. It can be said that Sora's individual formation is achieved through experiences with art and, if the player finds themselves interested in these artworks, their hearts will guide them to watch, read or play the respective movie, book, or videogame.

Each game in the *Kingdom Hearts* series presents a selection of worlds from the Disney and Pixar movies; this selection constitutes a form of canon, as the movies are selected from Disney's sellers, such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *Toy Story*, and *Frozen*. This selection makes *Kingdom Hearts* stand as a commercial machine sustained by its constant reference and usage of assets from these recognizable movies and tales. The way the series has been packaged and sold also speaks a lot about its commercial ends: over 20 years, it has released ten different titles<sup>2</sup> for ten different gaming platforms.

This game series follows a non-linear narrative where the chronological events don't match the released order of the games. This is akin to Star Wars' mode of storytelling, where the movies' release order does not coincide with the order of the events in the plot. Because of this non-linear mode of narrative, and its scattering among ten titles<sup>3</sup> and eleven different playing platforms, to comprehend the sequence of events means a physical effort along with a financial one: aside from these ten main game titles, eight of these games were re-launched as remixes of the original titles, and four HD remastered collections were released for the most recent playing platforms (Playstation 4, Playstation 5, Xbox One and computer). This stands as either a big problem for the argument of this essay or a great irony about the phrase "May your heart be your guiding key" as, what the sentence seems to give the player with one hand, the capitalistic purposes of the franchise take with the other. While the sentence seems an argument for self-development or self-determination, the games require being bought (along with platforms where they are playable) to be played: a long-time hardcore fan of this series might have had to buy at least nine different playing platforms just to keep up with fragments of the plot that are sometimes deeply rooted in blatant repetitions of previous

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<sup>2</sup> The titles of many of these games have puns related to Internet acronyms. 2004's "Chain of Memories" spells COM (which is the ending of many website addresses, ".com"), 2010's "Birth By Sleep" spells BBS (Bullet-Board System), 2009's "358/2" has to do with Nintendo DS's dual-screen, hence the "/2", 2012's "3D: Dream Drop Distance" has to do with Nintendo 3DS's 3D rendering potential, 2017's "Final Chapter Prologue" spells FCP, "Firewall Control Protocol". Of course, a title such as "Melody of Memory", which spells "MOM", should be excluded from this pattern, but it stands as an acronym for Master of Masters.

<sup>3</sup> These remixes consist of the repackaging of the same game with few aesthetic differences (re-skins of some enemies, new areas to explore), and some interesting additions (new bosses or endings that further the plot). As such, the Kingdom Hearts remixes consist of a pre-downloadable content era add-on to the game.

segments of the games. Financially, this bears a bigger cost to someone who is interested in following the plot and who cares for the characters presented by *Kingdom Hearts*, as it is hundreds of times more expensive than having to buy around ten different cinema tickets or paying for a Disney+ subscription to keep up with the plot of *Star Wars*. It was only in 2019 that *Kingdom Hearts* got a release that presents a good price-quality relation: the *All-In-One Collection*, which is still around 110€, but available for the four main gaming platforms players use these days. Having this irony between choice and ability to pay in mind, the rhetoric of the phrase becomes one of "do what I say, don't do as I do", as the prospection to choose relies on the abilities to buy and to consume. Only through the suspension of the commercial point of view can we truly appreciate the phrase's incitement to the appreciation of certain art forms.

**Table 1**

*Games' release history and storyworld chronological order.*

Platform	Games' Release Order	Storyworld Order
PlayStation 2	<i>Kingdom Hearts I</i> (2002)	3
	<i>Kingdom Hearts II</i> (2005)	6
	<i>Kingdom Hearts: Re: Chain of Memories</i> (2007)	4
Gameboy Advance	<i>Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories</i> (2004)	4
Mobile Phone	<i>Kingdom Hearts: Coded</i> (2008)	7
	<i>Kingdom Hearts: Unchained χ</i> (2012)	1
	<i>Kingdom Hearts: Missing Link</i> (TBA)	
Nintendo DS	<i>Kingdom Hearts 358/2</i> (2009)	5
	<i>Kingdom Hearts Re: Coded</i> (2010)	7
PlayStation Portable	<i>Kingdom Hearts: Birth by Sleep</i> (2010)	2
Nintendo 3DS	<i>Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance</i> (2012)	8
PlayStation 3	<i>Kingdom Hearts 1.5 Remix</i> (2013)	(3-5)
	<i>Kingdom Hearts 2.5 Remix</i> (2014)	(2, 6, 7)
PlayStation 4 / Xbox One	<i>Kingdom Hearts 2.8 Final Chapter Prologue</i> (2017)	(1, 2, 8)
	<i>Kingdom Hearts III</i> (2019)	9
	<i>Kingdom Hearts: All-In-One Collection</i> (2019)	
Nintendo Switch	<i>Kingdom Hearts: Melody of Memory</i> (2020)	10
PlayStation 5	<i>Kingdom Hearts IV</i> (TBA)	

It is interesting to note that the entity that gives its name to this series, Kingdom Hearts<sup>4</sup>, has never been truly specified: after all this time, players still don't know what Kingdom Hearts is, nor how it works and, for that, it works as a MacGuffin, a plot device that exists for the sole purpose of making the plot move forward. Kingdom Hearts is manifested as a giant heart-shaped moon in the sky. As a proper MacGuffin, Kingdom

<sup>3</sup> The expression "Kingdom Hearts" appears here without italics because it refers to the entity, object, or place in the game—a giant moonlike heart in the sky—, not to the franchise.

Hearts is usually summoned and manipulated by the villains in the final acts of the games—in the overarching plot of the series, this is a required step to re-enact the Keyblade War. According to each villain's intentions, the powers of Kingdom Hearts can be dissected: in *Kingdom Hearts I*, Ansem wished to travel through the worlds that were separated by the Darkness; in *Kingdom Hearts II*, Xemnas wanted to return to a previous state of his own existence; and in *Kingdom Hearts III*, Master Xehanort sought to balance the powers of Light and Darkness. These are manifold powers that are seldom concretized: Kingdom Hearts seems to serve as a means of transportation, as way of returning someone to a previous state of their being, or to entirely change the course of the universe, according to each villain's intentions. However, as their efforts are always thwarted by the protagonists, Kingdom Hearts is never used to its fullest purposes, no one gets to see what it might bring inside. As such, the entity known as Kingdom Hearts has yet to be explored in a clear way; however, some conjectures can be weaved through literary analogies. The fact that it exists at a distance while wished by many of the characters throughout the series makes it akin to Kafka's *The Castle*, whose original title, *Der Schloss*, can mean both 'castle' and 'lock', but the word also bears a profound phonetical similarity with the word *Schluss*, which means 'conclusion', or 'end'. Locks and castles make up for a big part of the aesthetic ornaments used by the games: each Disney world has its own lock and the idea of a kingdom in the titular expression *Kingdom Hearts* presupposes the existence of some sort of monarchy that is ruled by a king or a queen in a castle. Kafka's novel also revolves around a consistent admiration and a feeling of wonder for visiting the castle, with said visit never actually happening: the castle is an unachievable place, surrounded by bureaucracy. This recurring pattern—an unachievable place admired by most characters—might seem arbitrary but it serves as a form of locating *Kingdom Hearts* in a sequence of artworks that bear more or less intentional similarities with one another.

As of *Kingdom Hearts III*, the first arc of the overarching plot of the series has come to an end with the defeat of Master Xehanort. The defeat of this villain made his Keyblade return to its rightful owner, Luxu, one of the Master of Masters 'apprentices, and the one who was given the role of making sure the eye in the Keyblade would watch and record the events of the future. This opens the second arc of the story, revealed in the *Kingdom Hearts IV* trailer as "The Lost Master Arc". This new arc also seems to bring about a turn in the aesthetics and the canons selected for assets in these games, which, until *Kingdom Hearts III* was based on the Disney, Pixar, and Square-Enix canons. However, with the new trailer, the cited canon seems to be based on unreleased games from the Square-Enix vault, such as *Final Fantasy Versus XIII*, a game that was announced but, through its development stages, was revamped and released as *Final Fantasy XV*.

### **3. Worldmaking**

As it has been said, *Kingdom Hearts*' trademark is the fusion of the Japanese Anime and Manga styles (that originated the *Final Fantasy* saga aesthetics) with the Occidental Disney/Pixar ones. For those ends, the Disney and Pixar movies become visitable worlds with playable plots and constitute milestones in Sora's progress. It has also been said

that it's not all the worlds and plots from the Disney and Pixar franchises, but a selected few. This doesn't happen as a collage of styles, there's something akin to *Star Trek's* Prime Directive, which prohibits the interference in the natural development of alien civilizations: so, Sora, Donald and Goofy are supposed to mingle in worlds such as *The Little Mermaid's* Atlantica or *The Lion King's* Pride Lands. To do so, Donald's magic transforms the crew into different animals, Sora becomes a merman and a lion, Goofy becomes a tortoise and Donald becomes an octopus and a seagull. This might be understood as a variation of the concept of the multi-verse, taking each Disney or Pixar movie to stand as its own universe, however, the way it is inscribed into the overarching plot of the series is written to make us assume it's all the same world, that was separated because of the spreading of Darkness.

In the end of *Kingdom Hearts I*, and, again, in *Kingdom Hearts: Birth by Sleep*, Kairi's grandmother tells a story that sums up the mythology of their worlds:

Long ago, people lived in peace, bathed in the warmth of light. Everyone loved the light. Then people began to fight over it. They wanted to keep it for themselves. And darkness was born in their hearts. The darkness spread, swallowing the light and many people's hearts. It covered everything, and the world disappeared. But small fragments of light survived... in the hearts of children. With these fragments of light, children rebuilt the lost world. It's the world we live in now. But the true light sleeps deep within the darkness. That's why the worlds are still scattered, divided from each other. But someday, a door to the innermost darkness will open. And the true light will return. (2019)

This small legend sums up the entire history of the *Kingdom Hearts* universe: the worlds were once one, but as Darkness spread, the worlds became disconnected, and some were even engulfed—such as *The Sleeping Beauty's* Enchanted Dominion or *Snow White's* Dwarf Woodlands. This is backed up by Chirithy (a teddy-bear-like creature who the Master of Masters created to guide the Keyblade Wielders) in *Kingdom Hearts χ Back Cover*, who introduces the story by saying "Long, long ago, all the worlds were still one. One day this would be called the age of fairy tales." (2019)—these sentences work in a way very similar to the famous saying "Once upon a time...", which usually introduces fairy tales, locating them in an unachievable segment of time. This bestows the name "age of fairy tales" to a time when all the worlds that we recognize as the Disney and Pixar worlds were one: this is a movement needed in order to naturalize the heterogeneous origins of different assets in the same game, as there's always a feeling of weirdness (as per Mark Fisher's definition, the weird has to do with the presence of something where it shouldn't be in the first place [2016]) in seeing Hercules' Phil in the same screen as *Final Fantasy VII's* one-winged angel, Sephiroth, for example. This weirdness has mostly to do with our conception of media and transmediality as each media seems to become territorialized and alien to another one: Winnie the Pooh belongs to the Disney territory and Yuna to the *Final Fantasy* one and stepping over the frontiers of each of these territories seems to be a transgression. However, my point is that this view of transmediality as transgression is reductive to a bigger concept that reunites all fictional worlds and characters, which is imagination.

One of Charles Baudelaire's most renowned interventions on the *Salon 1859* was published as the text "The Government of Imagination", where the faculty of imagining is described as a storage of images and signs which are apt to be reordered by the decrees of the ruling imagination:

The whole visible universe is but a storehouse of images and signs to which imagination will give a relative place and value ; it is a sort of food which the imagination must digest and transform. All the powers of the human soul must be subordinated to the imagination, which commandeers them all at once and the same time. (Baudelaire, 2004, p. 630)<sup>5</sup>

This "univers visible" stems from myths to stories, images, and collective memories and joins them as fragments that can be manipulated through imagination—any idea that's aestheticized in a form that's recognizable to people. It follows that the collective works of Disney, Pixar, and Square-Enix are now renowned parts of this storage and *Kingdom Hearts* results from the mobilizing effects of imagination, creating a new aesthetic form that combines them in a *Cadavre Exquis*. Even though this storage for imagination can account for potentially anything, it's not all Disney and Pixar movies that are included: there's a selection for each *Kingdom Hearts* game, and said selection chooses what is deemed the best of each of these companies' works. William Humberto Huber and Stephen Mandiberg's article on "Kingdom Hearts, Territoriality and Flow" makes a good case study of the way the world of The Pirates of the Caribbean movies was adapted or "retranslated":

Port Royal is a world created and only appearing in *Kingdom Hearts II*. It is a translation of Pirates of the Caribbean the film, which was of course an adaptation of the Disneyland ride Pirates of the Caribbean. The ride takes you through the idealized Caribbean tale of pirates attacking a town, taking gold, chasing women, auctioning off women, and going back to their booty cave. The film was a translation of the ride and adds the themes of 802 coins of cursed Aztec gold, a cursed, undead crew of the Black Pearl with its exiled captain, Jack Sparrow, while transmediating the elements of the attack on the walled city, scenes of piratical debauch, the jailing of captured pirates, and so on. The film also adds entire sections about British Imperialism and the East India Trading Company, and then Davy Jones' Locker, the Flying Dutchman and the global network of pirates as resisting modernity in the sequels. This is translation from a narrativized navigable space -- the theme park ride attraction -- to a narrative system of representation in the film, is then retranslated as a narrative interactive space configured as an explorable and playable world in *Kingdom Hearts II*. (Mandiberg, 2009, p. 7)

As tales never lose in the telling, there's something wonderfully creative about the ability to turn a roller-coaster into a movie and then adapting its world into a videogame setting. This has been the most common mode of storytelling, creative writing, or art production: changing the settings, the dialogues, adding, or fusing characters constitute ways of changing, redirecting or producing new forms of meaning. Take Hans Christian

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<sup>5</sup> Tout l'univers visible n'est qu'un magasin d'images et de signes auxquels l'imagination donnera une place et une valeur relative ; c'est une espèce de pâture que l'imagination doit digérer et transformer. Toutes les facultés de l'âme humaine doivent être subordonnées à l'imagination, qui les met en réquisition toutes à la fois.] (1868, p. 274)

Andersen's original *The Little Mermaid* and its Disney adaptation: characters were added (Sebastian, the Jamaican crab, and Flounder, the flounder, among others), plot points were removed (Ariel doesn't feel like she's walking on sharp knives when on land), decisions were made to make the tale aesthetic and apt for the current grand public (such as adding songs with choruses that become earworms and are continuously sung in other media—God only knows what we have been through with *Frozer's* "Let it go"). These sorts of decisions are recurring in the histories of art and literature; in an essay called "The Truth of Masks", Oscar Wilde writes:

A great work of dramatic art should not merely be made expressive of modern passion by means of the actor, but should be presented to us in the form most suitable to the modern spirit. (Wilde, 1891, pp. 225-6)

Which means that a simple adaptation to the stage or the screen isn't enough, it's never a simple repetition of the original text: each epoch has its own standards of taste and artists tend to be the greatest interpreters of said standards. In this case, as Disney wanted to sell *The Little Mermaid* to a younger audience, it wouldn't make sense to keep such violence as the feeling of sharp knives on the mermaid's feet as she walked on land. To make the little mermaid (the character) animated, colorful, friendly with the inhabitants of under the sea—such as the added characters of Sebastian and Flounder—is to make her aesthetically catered to a specific epoch in the continuum, while removing what could be seen as ill-tasted (such as the gratuitous violence of her curse in Andersen's original could have been interpreted). Another kind of example would be Orson Welles' transposition of Kafka's *The Process* to the big screen in 1962, where the ending is changed from the book to the movie: in the book Josef K. willfully accepts his death, while in the movie he shouts at his executioners calling them cowards for not being able to kill him with their own hands. Welles explained his direction in an BBC interview:

To me that ending is a ballet written by a Jewish intellectual before the advent of Hitler. Kafka wouldn't have put that in after the death of six million Jews. It all seems very much pre-Auschwitz to me. I don't mean that my ending was a particularly good one, but it was the only possible solution. I had to step up the pace, if only for a few moments. (Welles, BBC interview, 1962)

This is the sort of change suggested by Wilde in his argument about presenting "the form most suitable to the modern spirit", which demotes some authority from the artwork from which a subsequent artwork is derived, renewing its interest in a way only true artists are capable of. This means that adding Sora, Donald and Goofy to the world of *The Little Mermaid* is in no way a sign of disrespect to the original artwork—in this case, the original is already Disney's derivation from Andersen's tale—on the contrary, it's art's most recurring procedure: changing details in previous chains of the sequence to make it move forward, adding to it, while paying small tribute to it. In the many videogames of *Kingdom Hearts*, the player and the main character dive into the worlds and plots of these movies, helping their respective main characters achieve their goals, while stopping the interference of the villains, and, likewise, Darkness.

#### 4. Canons and choices

I've tried to argue that the selection of Disney and Pixar movies and Square-Enix games, whose assets are repurposed to serve *Kingdom Hearts'* ends, constitutes a way of canon formation. In *Pleasure and Change: The Aesthetics of Canon*, Frank Kermode makes the following argument:

(...) we make lists, canons, of what we decide is valuable, and these, in the interests of that humanity, we may press on other people, our successors. Some of the reasons we give for doing so may be false or self-serving, or at any rate fallible. But the cause is a good one. And pleasure is at the heart of it. (Kermode, 2004, p. 31)

Kermode's point is to denounce the subjectivity implied in each canon that's created, it's a list of valuable references. Kermode's argument works in tandem with David Hume's point about conformity between a reader and her favorite author in "Of the Standard of Taste":

We choose our favourite author as we do our friend, from a conformity of humour and disposition. Mirth or passion, sentiment or reflection; whichever of these most predominates in our temper, it gives us a peculiar sympathy with the writer who resembles us. (Hume, 2004 [1757], §29)

**Table 2**

Works cited in *Kingdom Hearts*.

Disney / Pixar	Square-Enix
Steamboat Willie (1928)	Final Fantasy (1987)
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937)	Final Fantasy VI (1994)
Pinocchio (1940)	Final Fantasy VII: Crisis Core (2008)
Fantasia (1940)	Final Fantasy VIII (1999)
Dumbo (1941)	Final Fantasy IX (2000)
Bambi (1942)	Final Fantasy X (2001)
Fantasia (1942)	Final Fantasy X-2 (2003)
Cinderella (1950)	The World ends with you (2007)
Alice in Wonderland (1951)	
Peter Pan (1953)	
Sleeping Beauty (1959)	
One Hundred and One Dalmatians (1961)	
Winnie the Pooh (1977)	
Tron (1982)	
The Little Mermaid (1989)	
The Beauty and the Beast (1991)	
Aladdin (1992)	
The Nightmare Before Christmas (1993)	
The Lion King (1994)	
Toy Story (1995)	
The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1996)	
Hercules (1997)	
Mulan (1998)	
Tarzan (1999)	
Monsters, Inc. (2001)	
Lilo & Stitch (2002)	
Pirates of the Caribbean (2003)	
The Three Musketeers (2004)	
Chicken Little (2005)	
Tangled (2010)	

Disney / Pixar	Square-Enix
Tron: Legacy (2011) Wreck-It-Ralph (2012) Frozen (2013) Big Hero 6 (2014)	

Forwardly, it's Hume's kind of choices that preside over the formation of a canon. In *Kingdom Hearts*, the many worlds that are visited and the assets that are taken from other games work in a very similar way to canon formation: a selection of pre-existing artworks made by the series 'directors (Tetsuya Nomura's team) that informs a list of references.

Three things can be derived from the presiding subjectivity to canon formation: there are many kinds of lists that can constitute canons (Harold Bloom's selections, *Norton Anthologies*, books called "poet x's greatest poems" or "the best tales of writer y", and the list would go on, to the point of including videogame collections, such as *Sonic's Mega Collection Plus* [2002]...); canons aren't supposed to be followed as authoritative lists that exclude what they don't contain, or that legislate what's appreciated, but as expressions of personal or collective suggestions pertaining artworks; and the readers of a canon have the freedom to choose what they want to read about based on their own values. The worldmaking of *Kingdom Hearts*, constitutes a way of canon formation, but the players need to go through each world to finish the game, having only the power of choosing the order of the sequence. Through the re-mediation of Disney and Pixar movies to videogames sceneries, a new aesthetic form is created that requires the immersion of the player in these movies 'worlds through third-person role-playing, working as both a menu and an appetizer that might move players to watch the original movies, furthering their own personal aesthetic interests.

My point is that through playing through Disney movies and meeting *Final Fantasy* characters, the players might be incited to know more about them, and the appreciation of these artworks is a choice that happens after playing *Kingdom Hearts*. Yes, it is also a big commercial plot to make people consume more, but the appreciation or consumption of Disney and Pixar movies or playing *Final Fantasy* videogames is, by itself, a way of furthering the players 'abilities to choose what to do after playing. In a paper called "Aesthetic Choice" (whose title I find tautological, as a choice usually follows an aesthetic inclination), Kevin Melchionne writes:

(...) ongoing aesthetic choices are good when they are part of a good aesthetic plan or project. If an aesthetic heuristic is like a rudder for the drifting chooser, then the aesthetic plan is like a motor. Plans align small choices with larger purposes out of which one builds an aesthetic life. Through plans, choices can lead to acuity of discernment in one area rather than another. Our interests and satisfactions grow into competency and discrimination in genres, movements, and artists.

Plans are often embodied in lists (or queues as Netflix terms them). On customized lists, readers, viewers, and listeners capture ideas for future experience. Through

the list, choices can become a plan or project for future aesthetic activity.  
(Melchionne, 2017, p. 296)

Rephrasing my previous argument through Melchionne's words: as a canon of Disney and Pixar movies, *Kingdom Hearts* constitutes a customized list from where "[players] capture ideas for future experience".

## **5. Conclusions: The heart as a guiding key**

It is now time to read the phrase "May your heart be your guiding key" considering the previous arguments. There are two kinds of choices implied in *Kingdom Hearts*: the narrative ones, related to characters, which are static as their point is to make the plot move forward, and the player's ones, which follow from the player's taste and have to do with their own playing style or with what they do after playing. As such, "May your heart be your guiding key" might constitute a huge irony regarding the inevitability of the events that happen in *Kingdom Hearts*, but it also works as the bestowing of a gift to the player. Another of the Master of Master's phrases has to do with the inevitability of the plot and seems to nod at the player: "You have to focus on what comes after, there's no use thinking of ways to change what's going to happen." (2019 [2017]).

It is interesting to note that the first trailer for *Kingdom Hearts IV* opens with the lines "If this isn't the ending you desired— if it brings you despair— then leave this world for another. Your options are endless." which also work in a twofold way: a narrative meaning (following Sora's tragic fate in *Kingdom Hearts III*) and a message to the players about their ability to choose something else. This brings us back to Baudelaire's idea about the storage of images that constitutes the visible world and from which imagination selects and moves fragments to create new forms. In Frederick Baiser's book *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, a programmatic text for the German Idealism appears with no author attributed, having been ransomed from Hegel's writings, but seemingly indicating to be a copy of someone else's work, where one can read: "Unless we make ideas aesthetic, i.e., mythological, they will have no interest for the people." (1966: 5), and that's precisely what *Kingdom Hearts* does while constantly referring back to the Disney, Pixar and Square-Enix canons, which, in their own ways, take from previous artworks, creating recognizable patterns, such as those that happen between Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen* (1844), Disney's *Frozen* (2013), and its iteration in *Kingdom Hearts III* (2019), while still recognizing that some creative liberties were taken in the cinematic and game transpositions. These liberties shouldn't be seen or deemed as transgressions, but as the most recurring method in the History of Art: the employment of the elasticity of imagination. This elasticity was predicted by Oscar Wilde's argument for presenting Shakespeare in "the form most suitable to the modern spirit", an argument that's forwardly aestheticist, desiring for the continuation of the cycle of repetitions and adaptations of the Shakespearean texts. As it is known, Wilde's intentions were primarily aesthetic: if we could picture his own version of Maslow's pyramid of needs, it would be topped by the question "does it have artistic interest?"

It has been a point in this essay to relate *Kingdom Hearts* with the concept of Aesthetic Education. The bases for this argument have been the interartistic relationships between this videogame series and the immersive canon it provides for the players. By selecting and making playable the worlds of many Disney and Pixar films, *Kingdom Hearts* helps educate the player on the history of these companies' productions, specifically the most successful ones. Raber concludes her book on *Progressivism's Aesthetic Education* agreeing with Stanley Cavell's arguments in *Must we mean what we say?*:

The aim of aesthetic education, for Cavell, is to find one's own voice in these matters, to become a full participant in the conversation of aesthetic judgment, which is a precondition for "full citizenship" in a culture, for full involvement in the discourse about who "we" are. (...) Thus, Cavell's aesthetic education becomes a necessary supplement to conceptions of democracy, such as Dewey's, that are based on recognizing people's voices. (Raber, 2018, p. 195)

This essay's argument has been about this sort of education: the aesthetic one, that allows for the sharing of interests, and that guides individuals to self-determination, to develop their own voices in the conversations of democracy. All of this is intertwined in *Kingdom Hearts*: its transmediality blurs frontiers between franchises and distinct forms of media; Sora's concern with creating bonds between characters and worlds connects what was once separated; the constant references to hearts as analogies for sensibilities also involve some form of self-determination, take Roxas' (the main character in the Nintendo DS title *Kingdom Hearts 358/2*) phrase "My heart is mine, no one else's" for example, which isn't as much an expression of property as it is one of the desire to become an individual<sup>6</sup>. Through the creation of a composite aesthetic form, *Kingdom Hearts* remembers the players of their power to choose what to do after playing, giving them a list of references that delineates a plan that should be followed according to the player's own interests. Sharing hearts is sharing sensibilities and preferences and this analogy for the opening of hearts incites the creation and further sharing of each player's personal canons, and that's Aesthetic Education at its best.

In face of certain destruction, with the foreseen arrival of the Keyblade War, the Master of Masters urges his disciples to follow their own hearts and make their own choices, by saying "May your heart be your guiding key". The Keyblade War presupposes the end of the *Kingdom Hearts* universe, in the same way any videogame is bound to end, with more or less of a *denouement*. The Master of Masters' phrase commends the player to choose the next work of art to consume, as is recurring in *Bildungsromans* that it's works of art that in some way condition the self-determination of any individual. To give the power of choice through a videogame is what is intended with "May your heart be your guiding key".

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<sup>6</sup> Roxas is an anagram for Sora with an X added: his character is based on this idea that he is a "Nobody" of Sora and, throughout the series, his objective is to become his own self, distinguished from Sora. Nobodies are a category of characters in *Kingdom Hearts*, they are shells that look like their original versions, but that supposedly have no hearts.

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