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Review

Video Game Characters and Transmedia Storytelling: The Dynamic Game Character (2023) by Joleen Blom. A Book Review

Gia Coturri Sorenson

Abstract

A book review of *Video Game Characters and Transmedia Storytelling: The Dynamic Game Character (2023)* by Joleen Blom.

Keywords: Transmedia, Narrative, Characters, Video Games, gameenvironments

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Game studies is a particularly interdisciplinary field, and many researchers find ways to mingle a variety of critical and disciplinary lenses when they study games, the act of gaming, and the industry itself. Joleen Blom's book *Video Game Characters and Transmedia Storytelling: The Dynamic Game Character* is no exception, and the fields she merges fit together nicely. As she writes in her introductory chapter, Blom (2023, 13) combines game studies, transmedia storytelling, and Japan studies; furthermore, she utilizes the techniques of close reading/playing throughout to illustrate her argument (2023, 25). Her multidisciplinary approach allows her to create a wide-reaching argument and to illustrate her points through a variety of games.

Blom is preoccupied with the role of player choice and how various decisions can

impact how characters and narratives develop. However, she does not merely focus on playable characters; instead, she studies how players can impact non-playable characters and how the West's emphasis on having character-driven narratives can create tensions when stories are shifted from one format (e.g., a game) to another (e.g., a television series). Her first chapter lays out her branching argument and provides a good introduction to transmedia storytelling. She understands that her readers will come from diverse scholarly backgrounds, so she provides foundational descriptions and definitions for all the fields that appear in the book. For instance, aware that her audience may not have a literary studies background, she describes reader-response-aware close readings and playings (2023, 25-28) so her readers can better understand how she is situating her examples. Her multifaceted approach expands how scholars understand and approach games, and I appreciated seeing how other fields analyze games. However, I did find that her analysis was often surface level, which may be a product of the book's organization.

Each chapter of the book can be taken separately, should the need arise. Each chapter begins with an abstract and keywords and ends with a contained bibliography; she repeats summaries as needed, which is useful when reading the book in chunks but repetitive when reading the text in its entirety or when reading two parts that examine the same game. Still, this format means that readers get frequent reminders of Blom's overarching arguments and can see how each part of her argument unfolds slightly differently given her chapter's particular focus. After her introductory chapter, her text unfolds logically. She moves to "[c]haracters in contemporary media" (2023, 41), "[h]ow the dynamic game character develops" (2023, 69), "[s]trategies to control a character's transtextual identities" (2023, 97), "[p]arasocial relationships with non-playable characters" (2023, 125) and "[t]he construction of transmedia game characters" (2023, 151). Her final chapter briefly

looks to the future and hypothesizes about what might come next. Throughout, Blom offers strong commentary on the current gaming ecosystem and how our current system arose. Her views of the future are understandably vague, but she does offer routes for future research including affective economics and how dynamic game characters will blur the lines between fiction and reality as they spread to new media via VTubers, voice assistants, and other quasi-human formats.

Each chapter uses two or more games as touchpoints, though she additionally refers to an array of games, films, television shows, and literary texts to supplement her main texts. She does not assume her audience has played every game she mentions and always provides useful signposts for each game. She summarizes when necessary, provides genre markers or important marketing techniques as relevant, and so on. However, her broad strokes approach does have downsides. For instance, she blithely refers to *Persona 5* (2016) as a dating simulator game equivalent to *Dream Daddy* (2017) in her introduction, a point that she better explains in her fifth chapter but which might confuse readers who have experience with either game. There are also some minor errors scattered throughout the text that do not strictly undermine her argument but might cause her readers to pause. In her chapter discussing *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020), she includes the visitor Flick in a list of popular villagers, seeming to suggest that players can have him move to their islands. While this is a minor issue, her inclusion of Flick as a potential villager surprised me so much that I found myself wondering about potential errors in her analysis of games I knew less well. Overall, the book's format will work well for certain cases (particularly for graduate-level classes), but I found it unsatisfying. I finished chapters almost always wanting more, and I was often left with big questions that I did not know how to answer.

For instance, her close reading of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* does not address certain player choices that might complicate her argument. Blom (2023, 93) argues that villagers function according to set scripts and that players have no “creative agency over these dynamic game characters.” Her argument is fair, but she does not discuss moments in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* when players do have creative agency over villagers. Given that players can decorate villagers’ houses, update their catchphrases (which has been a gameplay element since the franchise’s first game), and even influence their clothing, how is Blom’s premise impacted? I found myself feeling that the infinite repetitive loops might be more complicated than she indicates, but I could not apply her analysis to the choices players make in relation to their villagers. While no book can fully address every aspect of a text, I found her close readings simplistic; Blom draws attention to important elements in the games she analyzes, but she does not always leave room for nuance.

Overall, this is a strong introduction to transmedia storytelling, and she makes excellent arguments about dynamic characters. Blom’s book would be a useful addition to graduate classes discussing games, agency, and transmedia narratives; with some support, advanced undergraduates could also use the book easily. The ability to read sections of the book independently make it useful as well, as classes cannot always read entire monographs. Established scholars will appreciate the author’s concise summaries of games and research as well as the book’s navigability. The multidisciplinary appeal of Blom’s book means that scholars from almost any background can find an entry point, though some may get more mileage out of it than others.

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