Affect and the Analysis of Transmedial Characters

ABSTRACT: Fans of games and media have generally been analyzed as social communities that invest in particular narratives. Their reception is not just critical, but affective, spanning a wide range of emotions from love and nostalgia to frustration. In this essay, I propose a model of affective reception that attends to both textual representation and affective responses of audiences. By drawing from affect theory, I conceptualize affect as a dynamic process with social, political, and temporal dimensions. I apply this model to the controversy around the playable character Kassandra from Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey, which functions as a case study to show how affective reception works in practice. Ultimately, I argue that to understand contemporary media and their characters, we need to look deeper into these affective responses of different interpretive communities.

KEYWORDS: character, transmedia, affect, fandom

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Protagonist to Empathy Machine: Exploring the Interpretive Communities and Affective Reception of Characters

Nicolle Lamerichs

A COMMON VIEW IS THAT A CHARACTER is an entity in a story world, which audiences empathize with. In his typology of characters in *Reading People, Reading Plots*, James Phelan describes the narrative components of characters as “mimetic” (the character as a possible person), “thematic” (representative of a larger group of people or exemplifying one or more ideas), and “synthetic” (an artificial construct). This typology adequately captures the functions of a character within a single narrative, but one key problem with such an approach is that characters increasingly spill over into different media texts. From Luke Skywalker and Harry Potter to Peter Parker, our media culture is increasingly character-driven. Arguably, audiences do not even need to consume the texts to know these iconic characters. Different versions of characters are continuously presented to audiences—rewritten, reimagined, and rebranded.

Increasingly, narrative scholars have accounted for the complexity of character, and posited theories to capture the different versions of characters. Joleen Blom has posited a dynamic approach to character, including the theorization of their multiple transmedia instances (“multiplicity”) and the co-creation by players as part of their ecology (16). A different networked approach is that of Lukas Wilde who frames transmedia characters as part of complex networks and assemblages (“Transmedia”). These accounts, however, are still largely driven by texts. I would argue that in the contemporary media landscape, we need to turn towards the audience.

Crucially, today’s audiences respond to characters in affective ways, and I would argue that we need to consider and understand these reactions to fully understand this interplay among audience members, feelings, and textual representations. For example, when the trailer of *Sonic the Hedgehog* (2020) was first released, fans were upset, and were quick to post their criticism online. This Sonic was not the cute blue hedgehog that they grew up with. He looked too uncanny, had human teeth and detailed spikes that looked like fur. In a tweet, one user ironically remarks: “Finally someone had the guts to give David Cronenberg control over the Sonic franchise” (@Powerhoof, April 30, 2019). By referring to the popular (body) horror director, this user shows their disdain for the design. Within a week, director Jeff Fowler announced on Twitter that Sonic would be redesigned: “[. . .] you aren’t happy with the design & you want changes. It’s going to happen. Everyone at Paramount & Sega are fully committed to making this character the BEST he can be . . .” (@fowltown, May 2, 2019). Ultimately, the company gave into the pressure of fans.
Another example of how characters are received is *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017) which was criticized by a largely white male audience. The diverse cast of the film, including the main character Rey, was not spared in Tweets and comments. While similar male characters from the *Star Wars* universe are widely accepted by these audiences, Rey was believed to be given too much mastery and labeled a “Mary Sue” (a fan term for idealized, unrealistic female characters with no weaknesses). Reception by fans, then, is not neutral, but embedded in a socio-political reality, leading even to sexist or racist modes of reception (Scott, 2019). Thus, a character is not just a matter of narratives, but of audiences, emotions, and even ideology.

In this essay, I propose to add *affective reception* to a model of character so that it can include both textual representation and affective responses of audiences. I will focus primarily on the affective side of this model. This model is applied in particular to the main character from *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* (2018), referred to henceforth as *Odyssey*. Different affective repertoires shape the interpretation of the game by its fans, including the personal decisions and interactions of players. Finally, I suggest that within narrative studies, a holistic understanding of character is required to fully understand this interplay between audiences, feelings, and narratives.

### A Framework for Affective Reception

The interpretation of narratives and characters is not a given; instead, it requires active work from the side of the audiences, as reader-response theory has demonstrated (Iser). To understand a text, an audience member must actively engage in interpretation to contextualize and situate the work, a process of familiarization which Jonathan Culler has described as “naturalization” (62). Readers rely on different repertoires to understand fiction, and personal taste and ideology are a large part of this process. When today’s audiences cannot familiarize themselves with narratives (for instance because they do not fit their world view or taste) it leads to dissonance and emotional responses.

Experiencing characters and media is an embodied phenomenon, one that is deeply related to the identity of audience members (Lamerichs 199–227). Ultimately, affect grounds the identity of active audiences, and even manifests itself as an emotional ownership over the text and characters. Creating fan fiction, collecting merchandise, or editing the ending of a text are all ways to engage with a media product on a deeper level. Studying affective reception, then, is key to understanding both characters and contemporary audiences.

A precise definition of affect is elusive, since different authors have interpreted it as ontological (Massumi), socially constructed (Gomart and Hennion), and embodied (Ahmed; Sobchak). Philosophy has often framed affect as a type of aesthetic touch, a moment in which the subject is “affected.” Affect is particularly theorized by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988), where it is framed as a pre-personal intensity, a bodily state that is independent of the subject that undergoes it. Inspired by this theory, their translator and philosopher Brian Massumi formulates affect as an unqualified bodily state or intensity in which we are touched by an en-
counter with another: an artwork, a human being, a place. The difference between affect and emotion is crucial in Deleuzian thought. Affect has no meaning by itself, but emotions do. “Emotion is qualified intensity,” Massumi summarizes (28).

For the purpose of this study, however, I will bracket this philosophical debate because I am concerned with the common ground that animates it: the experience of feeling, specifically that experience while engaging with narrative. I define affect as a flow of feelings that audiences experience as they process a narrative. Affective reception, then, refers to feelings constructed by audiences through their engagement with a text and its characters. I view affective reception as a process in which emotions are crucial but not fixed. These feelings develop and change over time. Affect is a primary function of fandom, something that fans work towards deliberately and purposefully (Lamerichs). As highly engaged audiences, fans, for instance, prepare to be emotionally overwhelmed (Gomart and Hennion). By revisiting and rewriting favorite narratives, fans explore this emotional intensity further.

Different dimensions of affect are crucial in the reception of characters, in particular the social, political, and the temporal. Firstly, affect is informed by different social contexts. Sarah Ahmed describes affect as an economy “where feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation” (Ahmed 8). This is a powerful way to think through affect as a social process in which feelings are not fixed but flow across actors and spaces. This conception implies that affective reception towards characters is not neutral, but also deeply related to identity. As recent work in fan studies has shown, characters are shunned, discriminated against, exploited, and tokenized by fans and authors alike (Stanfill). These interpretations are based on the interrelations between key identity traits of the characters, such as gender or race, and the corresponding traits of audiences (Pande; Stanfill).

Secondly, the political sphere is part of this social reality. For instance, Pepe the Frog is a web comic character, but his reception by the alt-right and white supremacists has reshaped this character tremendously (Serwer). Similarly, Marvel fans pushed for a revision or cancellation of The Punisher comics after the character’s logo was used by Trump supporters during the January 6, 2021 storming of the United States Capitol. Essentially, they argued that the character had become corrupted after it was adopted as a symbol of hate (Eker). Affective reception based on ideology is often justified by fans as rational or critical reception. For example, some online commentators tried to argue that the scandals during “#gamergate”—a movement that systematically harassed female game developers and critics—were not about hatred, but rather about “ethics in game journalism” (Massanari 334).

Thirdly, affect has an important temporal dimension that needs to be considered. The appreciation or rejection of a certain character grows through one’s lifetime. A temporal approach is needed to understand characters and their relationship with audiences. As Ross Garner notes in his autoethnography of music, tastes and affects “fluctuate” throughout our life (94). As a fan grows older, her appreciation for Captain Janeway from Star Trek: Voyager might grow. The opposite is also possible. When J. K. Rowling made comments that were widely interpreted to be transphobic, many fans struggled with their feelings toward her characters, and the values in her stories (Jacobs).
Conceptually, affect is a dynamic process or trajectory. These intensities and impressions can be plotted like a “mattering map” to use Lawrence Grossberg’s term (Grossberg). In his work on affect and fan culture, he suggests that we can chart different intensities at different points of our life through which we make sense of the world and ground ourselves in it. While Grossberg broadly discusses the nodes in such a map, I could envision an approach that placed characters in nodal positions in order to indicate how much they matter to fans and how that mattering is related to the fan’s experiences with the characters over time.

Characters are a central part of this mattering map of our life course—a touch point fans relate to and identify with. Changes in the audience over a life course influence their feelings about a character. As a child, we might have related to a character deeply that we reject as an adult. Moreover, changes in the textual representations of characters, especially transmedia ones, shape the audience feelings toward a character. With each encounter of a new iteration of a transmedia character, the fan’s relationship to that character can grow or be disrupted.

**Case-Study of Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey**

Since 2007, Ubisoft has been expanding on its long-running game series *Assassin’s Creed*, which broke new ground with the installment *Odyssey* in 2018. In the following section I explore this game as a case study of the different dimensions of affective reception, most notably the social and political. The original main game of *Odyssey* is a highly interactive open world that depends largely on the player’s choices. *Odyssey* introduced role-playing mechanics for the first time in the series, including elements of character creation and dialogue choice. While the *Assassin’s Creed* series incorporated playable female characters in some of its earlier editions, *Odyssey* is the first time in the series that players are actively able to choose whether to play as a female (Kassandra) or male (Alexios) character throughout the game. Moreover, players have the option to pursue romances, including same-sex relationships.

When the main game of *Odyssey* was released, queer players praised the main game for its depiction of sexuality and its main character, particularly Kassandra. However, when the downloadable sequel (DLC), *Legacy of the First Blade* (2018) was released, many players were deeply disappointed and hurt. In this DLC, players have to engage in a heterosexual relationship, no matter what choices they have made in the main game. In the conclusion, you even conceive a child. This narrative is meant to convey how the first blood line of the assassins came about from a historical perspective. Having a biological child is clearly the purpose of the plot. After more than 100 hours of gameplay, homosexuality is now presented as a choice that can be undone.

The DLC sparked controversy. Fans were upset about this instance of queer erasure and the message that it sends. When the sexuality of a character is altered in this way, it does not only change their function as a role-model, but actively contributes to harmful discourses around sexual identity. The game made its LGBT+ content seem like an afterthought or an instance of “queerbaiting.” When interpreted at its worst,
the narrative seemed to convey a message in line with anti-LGBT+ movements, like sexual orientation change efforts, namely that any deviant sexuality can eventually be fixed and that queer people can then settle down to have a straight domestic life. Critic Heather Alexandra (2019) writes that the backlash is deserved: ‘It can feel like a slap in the face, particularly if you were playing Kassandra as gay, to have her embrace domesticity, a heterosexual relationship, and motherhood.’

On behalf of the company, creative director Jonathan Dumont offered his apologies on the Ubisoft forum: ‘Reading through player responses of our new DLC for Legacy of the First Blade, Shadow Heritage, we want to extend an apology to players disappointed by a relationship your character partakes in. The intention of this story was to explain how your character’s bloodline has a lasting impact on the Assassins, but looking through your responses it is clear that we missed the mark’ ("A Message"). While the main game gives players the chance to play as a queer character, the DLC engages in queer erasure. This narrative caused the community much grief. LGBT+ gamers reported about their pain on Twitter, the game’s official forum, Reddit, and elsewhere.

While Ubisoft initially won the respect of queer gamers with their choices and role-playing mechanics, this respect quickly ran sour and made many doubt the game in hindsight. One player commented on Reddit: “So no matter where your stance on this is (although, I can't understand why anybody would be “anti-choice”) surely you can at least understand why people are upset that Ubisoft has completely mislead the player base? It's dishonest at best, and straight up false advertising, and pretty hurtful towards LGBT players at worst.” The idea that Ubisoft engaged in false marketing and tricked players is prominent on Reddit. In this discourse, Odyssey is part of a wider story, in which Kassandra is just revealed to be a gimmick, a tool. This view ties in with wider ideas about characters, who are increasingly less tied to narratives and more to business models and a creative economy on their own right. In such a reading, Kassandra is just another idea to sell to queer players, but quickly dismissed in transmedia byproducts.

The fact that Kassandra is the avatar of the game feeds into these responses. Avatars are very personal characters that players use to navigate through a game world. The way the avatar is perceived and interacted with shapes how audiences interpret the character (Banks, 2017). Kassandra is the character that players most likely empathize with the most since they partly construct her. She can be played queer, and her queerness is not just in the margins. In other words, the narrative structure of the original was largely open-ended. The closed narrative of the DLC, which decided for players who Kassandra was, made the audience feel cheated and “queerbaited.” It disrupted their understanding of a character that they helped create and that they felt reflected their identities and choices.

This tension between narrative, play, and personal reception of Kassandra is an example of affective reception that is innately tied to the main character. This is not just any character, but an avatar that leaves space for a player’s interpretation and input—a character that is always becoming. Games, after all, are interactive and defined by a player’s actions, choices, skills, and control. They have also been described as “ergodic,” meaning that players traverse them in a personal way by making mean-
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When Odyssey took away this open element of choice and settled on a particular, closed idea of who Kassandra was, it generated negative affect and narrative dissonance.

While Odyssey was initially praised, its later installments shifted the affective discourse from empowerment and identification to distrust and grief. Affect is not stable in this case, but dynamic, partly because the narrative is part of a larger story-world. Moreover, affect inherently has political and social dimensions, because what this narrative represents is not detached from social and political discourses on, for instance, queer identities.

Conclusion

In this essay, I proposed a model of affective reception, pairing affect and textual response, to analyze fictional characters. Affect is not a neutral force or a fixed set of emotions in this model, but dynamic by nature. Most crucially, while these responses may be provoked by narratives, they have social, political and temporal dimensions.

As we have seen in this essay, characters can raise strong affects from their audiences. From Sonic to Kassandra, fans voice their passion and nostalgia for characters, as well as their dislike. This is related to our current media climate, which is highly character-driven. Transmedia superheroes, avatars and mascots such as “Baby Yoda” are purposefully designed to evoke our empathy and to interact with us in pleasant, marketable ways. They are empathy machines. In the case of Odyssey, this empathy and identification also led to conflict when the narrative no longer matched the sentiments and choices of many of the players.

Affective reception is one way to study the complicated responses that different interpretive communities have to characters. These narratives do not exist in isolation but are part of our culture. Representations mean something to audiences, and generate strong feelings, whether good or bad. To consider character, then, means to consider intimacy, emotional ownership, grief and pain. The study of character is not merely the study of narrative representation, but also of audience's affective responses to them.

Works Cited


Ludography

On the Affective Reception of Characters: A Response to Nicolle Lamerichs

Nieves Rosendo

NICOLLE LAMERICHS PROPOSES A HOLISTIC CHARACTER analysis model based on affective theory. This model addresses not only the textual dimension of the characters, but also their social, political, and temporal dimensions. Lamerichs calls it a model of affective reception and its object is to analyze characters, especially contemporary ones, taking into account their general tendency to appear across different media and games. As a case study, she proposes the controversy generated around the playable character of Kassandra, from Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey (2018). In this response, I endorse adding the affective response as key to the study of transmedial characters, but I want to re-examine the choice of a single-medium character as a case study and the relationship of this model with the textual dimension.

It is a fact that character mobility between different media has increased in an unprecedented way during this century. As Lamerichs points out, there is a general tendency to build character-driven stories and, at the same time, both new and established characters appear more frequently in more than one medium. This is precisely the definition of so-called transmedial characters. Scholars have given considerable productive attention to these phenomena (see Kinder; Uricchio and Pearson; Margolin; Jenkins; Saint-Gelais; Ryan; and Bertetti). I’ve discussed the issue of how audiences recognize transmedial characters and how they revise their conceptions of these characters as new iterations introduce new traits (Rosendo). Lamerichs’ proposals build on this work by Grossberg, Scott, and Ahmed, as well as her previous research (Lamerichs). Thus, studying a character solely as a story world entity is not sufficient. Lamerichs’s affective response model can bring a new perspective to the study of transmedial characters in terms of the key traits that define them and help them to be identified by the public. Those key traits could change through time, as the appreciation of the character by the fan base could change too, as the author points out in the cases of Sonic the Hedgehog and The Punisher. Due to the fan pressure, the representation or even the existence of the character could change.

I would like Lamerichs’s proposal to define more accurately the importance of the textual dimension and its relationship with the affective one. The affective response to the textual construction is what gives us a real measure of that response’s influence on the development of the characters. The affective response is the footprint left by the fans in the history of that fiction, which in the future will be the footprint of a historical, political, and social context. One cannot exist without the other, as we have seen in some of the examples proposed by Lamerichs. The text—understood as something that can evolve over time—is the crime scene that helps us to outline the character and the contributions of the audience about her. In short, the affective response of the fans can provoke significant changes in the development of the characters that have their reflection in the textual dimension as a primary source. For that reason, the relationship between these two dimensions—textual and affective—should be more precise in the proposal.
The example proposed by Lamerichs depicting this relationship is complicated, because the character does not appear again in the series nor in other media. We are not talking here about a transmedial character, but rather a transmedia franchise. Still, the affective response model could be applied to trace Ubisoft’s reaction in the following chapters of the series. For instance, in Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla (2020) there are compelling characters that share with Kassandra some key traits. This brings us to the importance of *seriality*, one of the principles of transmedia storytelling. In the proposed case, both the previous and the later installments of the series contextualize the audience’s response and expectations.

This model therefore has a transmedia perspective and can contribute to the answer as to why transmedial characters are recognizable by the audience in addition to their name or IP. From the perspective of the specificity of video games, without forgetting that they are part of this predominant aesthetic of transmediality, the model can help to complement dynamic models, and answer the question of why certain characters from the world of video games have lent themselves to more satisfactory adaptations to other media.

This ongoing proposal enriches the study of the development and evolution of characters in the contemporary media field, offering a new tool for our better understanding of the relationships between the industry and the audience. The affective response model could provide answers to the dynamic changes and evolution of new and old characters in their path through different media.

**Works Cited**


NIEVES ROSENDO OFFERS AN INSIGHTFUL response to my work. We share a similar understanding of transmedia and seriality, and I am indebted to the scholars that she adds who paved the way for this field to grow. I provided this framework as a starting point, and that is all I can do in a short, tantalizing essay. I agree that exploring a transmedia character can be done in many ways, depending on our understanding of the concept. For this particular issue, I have investigated one case and franchise, and the tension between its products. The tip of the iceberg, perhaps, but I am confident that it gives a sense of direction and stimulates readers to consider different facets of characters, narratives, and reception.

That the case-study primarily explores a game and its DLC is one particular perspective on transmedia. In a longer article, I would have loved to explore investigate Kassandra as a transmedia character fully, for instance by including merchandise and other official texts, and how they position the character. Such a study could have indeed paid attention to different avatars of Assassin’s Creed as a franchise, and explored their developments, traits, and possibilities over time. My goal was to foreground the tensions in affective reception, and I believe that I succeeded. I do believe that such transmedia readings are central. A different case might have foregrounded transmedia qualities more, but not the different tensions and affects that emerge as a result of convergence culture.

Transmedia is not just what companies create, but also consists of the activities of fans and other audiences. In a longer piece, it would have been fantastic to dive into this perspective as well. One can also read my previous work to get more acquainted with these concepts as well as the circulation and remixing of characters, for instance in cosplay or fan fiction. Note that medium-specificity also returns through the back door. The medium of a source-text can play a central role and shapes audience engagement, particularly in the case of gaming. In terms of affective response, for instance, there seems to be a difference between avatars that we have agency over and other types of characters. This framework is a start of what we can explore, and the case study really acts as one probe which propels readers to primarily think about certain aspects and tensions in terms of affect.

What could a framework look like where the character or series is more central? That is a provocative question for sure, but also runs the risk of warping us back to traditional narratological frameworks too much. This affective framework is different from that suggestion and the idea to revisit seriality. However, I like the idea of a more advanced theory where the character takes the center stage and the other elements are positioned around them. Note that characters are increasingly complex, not only because of their transmedia iterations, but also because they impact our social reality.
Character culture is a given and affects its audiences on a creative, social, and emotional level.

If we truly want to study the core of narratives and textual response, characters are fundamental. We are in a media landscape now where they act as IPs and business models in their own right. They are a tool for branding, fan service, and so much more. Fans want to co-create these characters and have a degree of emotional and creative ownership over them, but industries may also police this. Characters like Kassandra are vehicles that we identify with for many hours during a game, as well as outside of it. In other words, these fictional beings spill over into our reality. These different modes of existence of characters add a layer of complexity to contemporary narratives that we need to explore further within media studies and adjacent fields.