From 'Cinema Envy' to Social Media Envy? The Changing Face of Videogame Characterisation in the Age of Platformisation

Rob Gallagher, University of East Anglia

Introduction

It was in Summer 2020 that the aspiring musician Seraphine began building a following on Twitter, Instagram and Soundcloud. With her candyfloss-pink hair, her outsized vintage spectacles and her pet cat Bao, Seraphine was well-versed in the aesthetics of the 'Instagirl' (Maguire). Her posts ran the gamut from dreamy musings to goofy selfies, with the occasional shots of handwritten journal entries confessing her creative misgivings and feelings of self-doubt. A paragon of 'popular feminis[t]… ambivalence' (Banet-Weiser 5), Seraphine would caption shots of herself in a bikini with reflections on her fluctuating self-esteem and the vicissitudes of personal growth. None of which is unusual for a social media influencer. More unusual was the fact that Seraphine was a fictional character, a computer-generated facsimile of an Instagirl. Between July 2020 and December 2021, her social media posts fleshed out this character's personality while sketching an aspirational narrative about a plucky musician leaving her day job to pursue her dreams. Theories about who was behind the character were already circulating when Seraphine posted a cover version of the song Pop/Stars by K/DA, a virtual girl group comprising characters from Riot Games' hugely popular 'multiplayer online battle arena' *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009). In September Riot confirmed that Seraphine was joining the game's roster of playable 'champions'.

In many ways Riot's transmedia experiment was a success: Seraphine accrued hundreds of thousands of followers, racked up millions of listens on Spotify, and inspired a raft of fanart, some of which she shared on Twitter. But her introduction was also controversial. Some *League* players saw Seraphine as an instance of Riot - an American company that has been owned by Chinese technology giant TenCent since 2011 - being forced 'to support [sic] the ULGY [sic] asian gaming culture full of whimsical creatures and cuttie [sic] nerdy beings' (Kostas Pantadis); others derisively accused Seraphine of looking like an 'e-girl', a 'tik toker' or something from 'a 17yo girl's deviantart', rejecting the character as a craven bid 'to appeal to female players' (Aceraxe Blade; Luka Tatomirov; Shot040; emilytchuu). Many fans remarked on Seraphine's resemblance to Belle Delphine, the pink-haired model and vlogger who sparked a lucrative controversy in 2019 by listing jars of 'GamerGirl Bath Water' for sale on her online store (Dickson).

Such comments betray signs of "hardcore" gaming culture's sense of itself as 'under attack' and in need of 'defense… against "others"' who fail to fit the gamer archetype of the white male geek (Salter and Blodgett 77). They speak to tensions between the 'face culture' of sites like Instagram and the 'mask culture' that prevails on anonymous messageboards and in avatar-based virtual worlds (Zeeuw and Tuters 214) – and to gaming culture's status as a key front in an ongoing culture war between the 'deeply entwined' forces of 'popular misogyny and popular feminism' (Banet-Weiser 2). But these fans were not alone in taking exception to Seraphine. For journalist Gita Jackson (2020) the character's calculated bids for 'relatability', Riot's portrayal of her mental health issues, and the narrative of a young woman quitting her dead-end job to become a star were 'perverse' and 'offensive' – especially against the backdrop of a worsening pandemic. The controversy intensified when, in a Medium post published in November, Stephanie Dorris (2020) recounted her 'brief relationship with a Riot

1

employee' and outlined her belief that the company had essentially plagiarised her online persona to create Seraphine, a character who 'looks like me, and talks like me, and sounds like me, and draws like me'. As part of her case Dorris juxtaposed images from Seraphine's feeds with her own social media posts, highlighting similar situations, poses and compositions. Riot hit back with a statement insisting that Seraphine was 'not based on any individual' and asserting that Dorris' 'claim lacks merit' (Haasch 2020).

Whether or not Riot was taking direct inspiration from Dorris' output, or from that of Belle Delphine, their approach was undeniably informed by 'self-branding' strategies (Duffy and Hund 2015) and 'small storytelling' techniques (Georgakopoulou 2016) pioneered by young female users of social media platfoms. Riot are hardly the first to have adapted these techniques to fiction: artist Amalia Ulman's Instagram series *Excellences and Perfections* (2016) has already been canonised for its use of the photo-sharing platform to spin a pseudo-autobiographical narrative, one that Maguire argues is best understood less as a 'hoax' than a meditation on the 'public demand for images of young women and girls' and the 'tropes and conventions' that women deploy online 'in order to be recognised as a brand worth investing in' (28-9). Seraphine also has a high-profile precursor in transmedia studio Brüd's Lil Miquela, a virtual model, popstar and influencer whose posts portray her getting to grips with the revelation that she is a 'robot' created to serve commercial imperatives (Drenten and Brooks). This paper begins by considering the contexts from which such forms of characterisation and storytelling have emerged, showing how they reflect the logics of networked platforms. The following section turns to the videogame industry. Arguing that changes in how games are distributed, monetised, accessed and promoted are informing approaches to storytelling and characterisation among game developers, it posits a shift away from cinema and towards social media as a source of inspiration. Finally, the paper argues that Seraphine's story is noteworthy not only for what it tells us about emerging forms of digital fiction and the changing dynamics of the media industries, but for what it suggests about the impact of 'platform capitalism' on understandings of identity, subjectivity and sociability (Srnicek 2017).

Fictionalising the Influencer
For Georgakoupoulou the design of social media platforms 'encourages the sharing of everyday life as stories, as a branded directive of living and telling, of sharing-life-in-the moment' ("Sharing the Moment" 107). As she readily concedes, these 'stories' do not necessarily fit conventional narratological definitions of that term – which tend to presume that a 'story' is a retrospective narrative, related by a single teller, describing a sequence of events with a beginning, middle and end ("Small Stories Research" 20-21). The 'small stories' shared by social media users, by contrast, often take the form of ongoing updates and flashes of 'breaking news' that capture events in the process of unfolding, and that other users may contribute to as co-tellers by replying, commenting, linking or otherwise adding their perspective ("Storytelling on the Go").

The potential for small stories to reach huge audiences online has fuelled the phenomenon of 'microcelebrity' - 'a mind-set and a collection of self-presentation practices endemic in social media, in which users strategically formulate a profile, reach out to followers, and reveal personal information to increase attention and thus improve their online status' (Marwick 138). The social media ecosystem also 'rewards, via the logic of its metrics', users who are willing to open up the intimate spaces of their homes to strangers, turning locations 'previously conceptualised as private and safe from judgement' into zones of 'public visibility, surveillance and evaluation' (Kennedy 1070). Instagram and TikTok, in particular,

have catered to a seemingly insatiable popular appetite for what Kennedy calls the 'viral spectacle of girls bedroom culture' (idem.). If 'the bedroom has long been understood as a central organising space for the leisure, same-sex friendships, expression of sexual desire, and creative and playful production for girls in Western culture', these platforms have turned it into a site of content creation too (ibid. 1071). While this transformation can be rewarding - yielding approval, social connections, and (for some users at least) opportunities to monetise one's fame - it is not without 'risk' (idem.). The risks are exacerbated by the dynamics of algorithmic curation, which incentivise would-be microcelebrities to court controversy in search of greater visibility. While attention-grabbing stunts can draw clicks, likes and subscriptions, they can also backfire, with consequences both for individual influencers and for the brands and platforms seeking to capitalise on their popularity. Belle Delphine has periodically been banned from Instagram and YouTube for posting content judged to contravene the platforms' adult content policies, while gaming streamer Felix 'PewDiePie' Kjellberg was spectacularly dropped by Disney after the corporation was alerted to his habit of posting 'anti-Semitic jokes [and] Nazi imagery' by journalists from the *Wall Street Journal* (Winkler, Nikas and Fritz).

In such a climate it is easy to see why 'virtual influencers' might appeal to brands. Putatively tweeting from the bedroom depicted in many of her selfies, Seraphine asserts 'i made mistakes, and everyone saw. and you know what? that's okay' (@seradotwav). But of course, the very point of virtual influencers is that they do not make mistakes: for all they might post about their 'insecurities… and vulnerabilities' these characters will 'never be fallible' in the way their flesh and blood counterparts are, because their every move has been scripted in advance by teams of professionals (Drenten and Brooks 3). And it is not just marketers who have been drawn to these forms of characterisation and storytelling. Game developers, too, are taking cues – a development that is not insignificant for a medium that has in the past often looked to film for narrative templates.

From Ellie to Seraphine?
In the early 2000s the designer and theorist Eric Zimmerman diagnosed the videogame industry as suffering from a serious case of 'cinema envy' (145). At the time critics were in raptures over *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty*, an interactive espionage thriller full of nods to action films, directed by ardent cinephile Hideo Kojima and scored by Hollywood veteran Harry Gregson Williams. The same year had seen Core Design's *Tomb Raider* – starring a character initially imagined as a 'female Indiana Jones' (Kline, Dyer-Witheford and Peuter 236) - adapted into a big screen summer blockbuster. While many scholars joined Zimmerman in arguing that attempts to marry interactivity with cinematic storytelling were misguided, and risked compromising the very qualities that made digital games unique, it seemed reasonable at the time to suppose that videogame designers would continue to draw on cinema for inspiration.

Some two decades later these predictions have largely been borne out. Certainly, the success of games like *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog 2020) would suggest that gaming culture has yet to shake its case of 'cinema envy'. Naughty Dog's blockbuster sequel boasts near-photorealistic graphics and uses state-of-the-art performance capture techniques, ensuring that it often *looks* like a film. Its approach to plotting and characterisation is also steeped in Hollywood conventions, and entails subjecting protagonist Ellie to a series of deadly trials and dramatic tests of character set in motion by a shocking inciting incident. Ellie is profoundly changed by what she undergoes, in ways that proved highly contentious among fans of the first game. But while *The Last of Us Part II* was one of the best-selling releases of

2020, as a story-led singleplayer console game it is also a specimen of what many consider a dying breed – a breed poorly adapted for the media landscape that platform capitalism is bringing into being.

As I have argued elsewhere, while 'in the 1990s, the holy grail for much of the industry was the videogame as "interactive movie"', today publishers tend to be more interested in understanding games as "platforms" upon which fan communities, advertising campaigns, data mining routines, digital rights management infrastructures, and downloadable content markets can be built' (174). As a free-to-play online multiplayer game *League of Legends* illustrates this shift. Rather than asking players to purchase the title up-front via a single payment, Riot has made *League* available as a free download, generating money through the sale of characters and costumes (known as 'skins'). While the game boasts a formidable body of lore, the point is not, as in *Tomb Raider* or *Metal Gear Solid II*, for players to work their way through a linear story. As a multiplayer game, *League* is about forming teams and competing with rivals, with players honing their skills and strategies across countless matches that are always broadly similar and always slightly different. Rather than releasing sequels, Riot constantly tunes, tweaks and augments the game, refining mechanics, rebalancing values, and adding costumes and characters.

Of course, a multiplayer game only works if there are people to play against. And it only remains viable for Riot if players are continuing to spend money (and generate data). With increasing numbers of free-to-play games competing for the time and attention of potential players, moreover, the battle for mindshare has become its own savage metagame – one to which fans are expected to contribute by sharing screengrabs, memes, videos and artwork on social media. In such a context storytelling *per se* becomes less important than the development of compelling 'story*worlds*' and of appealing, instantly recognisable characters (Ryan). This shift in emphasis, it should be noted, predates the advent of online platforms. In the 1990s Hiroki Azuma was already positing a move away from plot and towards character in Japanese popular media, arguing that Japan's 'media mix' environment privileged characters who could evoke powerful feelings of attachment, characters who could easily be displaced from their original contexts and dropped into new ones, from 'light novels, live-action feature films, television series, magazine specials and other popular narrative forms' to 'figurines, plush toys, lunch boxes, backpacks, clothing, and whatever other items can possibly be purchased to enrich one's everyday life with reminders of a favourite series' (Hutchinson 2). Platformisation has only accelerated this shift.

In such a media environment the qualities that critics have traditionally tended to praise in novelistic and filmic characters – psychological depth and complexity, a dramatic developmental arc – can become liabilities, impeding a character's legibility, mobility and malleability. Across the two *Last of Us* games Ellie follows a trajectory from innocence to experience, from happiness to loss to a thirst for vengeance and a realisation of the ultimate emptiness of revenge. While we may dispute how effectively Naughty Dog spins this tale, theirs remains an essentially classical approach to characterisation and plotting, one in which 'character is a function of narrative structure', just as Aristotle decreed (Frow 6). Ellie exists to enact her arc, and is left irrevocably changed by what she witnesses and does. In some sense it is pointless to ask who she would be or how she would behave in other circumstances. This fact, however, has not stopped the merchandising bandwagon - it is still possible, for example, to buy a bobbleheaded Funko Pop! doll of the character. Ellie's abstraction into an adorably saucer-eyed caricature of herself, however, underlines just how ill-suited she is to this kind of recontextualization, in terms both of her personality and her

visual design. With her nondescript grey clothing and her brown shoulder length hair, the mutedly androgynous Ellie could be anyone. By comparison, Seraphine – with her pink, blue and purple palette and the blue star under her left eye - is easy to recognise in even the most amateurish fan art (and, for that matter, in the character's own notepad doodles of herself). To put this in the terms used by Japanese critics, Ellie may succeed as a *kyarakuta* - 'a fictitious being represented to exist within a diegetic domain' - but she fares less well as a *kyara* - 'a stylized or simplified visual figuration that can be easily reproduced or consumed outside its original narrative context' (Wilde).

League is now a burgeoning transmedia property, with its own Netflix show in development. But Riot has long presented the game as a multiverse in its own right, framing each character 'skin' as another version of that character, belonging to their own alternate reality. Thus Seraphine can be a trainee mage from a steampunk fantasy city *and* an everyday girl posting selfies from her nondescript bedroom. Both versions of the character share the same key personality traits and visual signifiers, ensuring consistency across media, storyworlds and plotlines. Characters like Seraphine are conceived from the get-go as 'transmedia figures', ripe for reinvention and reimagining (Thon 181). Even across the small stories that were posted to her social media accounts, some representations tend towards the immediacy of the *kyara* while others that aim to evoke the depth and complexity of the *kyaratura*. As gaming is reshaped by platformisation, and as developers like Riot continue to pursue business models that presume players will build gameplay into their everyday routines over periods of years, such approaches to storytelling and characterisation will only become more common.

Personhood Under Platformisation
Near the start of the sequence of Instagram posts that served as her introduction to the word, Seraphine acquires a polaroid camera. Several of her subsequent posts are presented as digital photos of physical snapshots, captioned in marker pen. Others purport to be Seraphine's shots of family photographs of herself as a toddler, with her hand (complete with elaborately decorated thumbnail) visible in frame holding the physical print. The images of Seraphine's journal entries likewise strive to convey a sense of materiality and hapticity: pages are coffee-stained, collaged, and have origami cranes crushed between them; notes and doodles are messily crossed out or underlined. One of her posts presents a cork pinboard, onto which Seraphine has seemingly pinned printouts of inspirational tweets from fans. While these images do not necessarily tell stories, they perform a range of other functions: lending this immaterial being a sense of fleshly substantiality, hinting at a biography that predates her appearance online, and acknowledging fans' engagements with the character, they also playfully foreground the gap between fiction and fact, the virtual and the physical, representation sand reality.

As Drenten and Brooks note in their account of Lil' Miquela, it would be a mistake simply to see virtual influencers as ersatz approximations of real (micro)celebrities. The celebrity's star image has always been a 'fabricat[ion]' in which a range of 'cultural intermediaries' have had a hand; and while influencers might be appealing because they seem more relatable and accessible than popstars or Hollywood celebrities, there is still an acknowledgement among fans and followers that this authenticity is at least partly a performance – and that, in an age of 'photoshopping, filtering… and digital[] editing', no one is quite as they appear online (3-4). Given this it is hard to know whether we should be surprised that some fans concluded there was a real person more-or-less literally *behind* the Seraphine they saw on screen: in a thread from August 2020 one Twitter user writes 'the images she posts are drawings on top of photos of a real person. I'm guessing the person behind the photos and managing the

account is the same…. The real person speaks through a filter, but what is spoken is more or less their real thoughts and feelings. But yeah it might be just 100% roleplay' (@CopoDeCiveta).

As this suggests, the Seraphine affair is not just a story about videogame characterisation, or the functions that fictional characters are assuming in entertainment ecosystems being reshaped by platformisation. John Frow proposes that rather than understanding 'fictional characters as somewhat similar to persons' we should instead treat 'persons as somewhat similar to fictional characters' – a stance that 'allows us to understand persons not as ontological givens, but as constructs, which are in part made out of the same material as fictional characters' (vii). Studying fictional characters can, Frow contends, help us to understand 'how social personhood works as a kind of fiction' (vii). Seraphine brings us face to face with the extent to which plaftforms have already reshaped storytelling, self-presentation, sociability and even subjectivity itself, reframing personhood through the lens of platformisation.

Works Cited

Aceraxe Blade. Comment on "Seraphine Champion Spotlight." *YouTube*, 2020.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiNN2WKkR3Q&ab_channel=LeagueofLegends

Azuma, Hiroki. *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*. Translated by Jonatan E. Abel and Shio Kono University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Banet-Weiser, Sarah. *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Duke university Press, 2018.

@CopoDeCiveta. "I think the text is more about the real person." *Twitter*, 21 August 2020, 1:27PM. https://twitter.com/CopoDeCiveta/status/1296785950572449798

Dickson, EJ. "Belle Delphine: Is Bathwater Gamer Girl the Greatest Internet Troll?" *Rolling Stone*', 11 July 2019. https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/belle-delphine-bathwater-gamer-girl-troll-857192/.

Drenten, Jenna, and Gillian Brooks. "Celebrity 2.0: Lil Miquela and the Rise of a Virtual Star System". *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 20, no.8, 2020, pp.1319–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1830927.

Duffy, Brooke Erin, and Emily Hund. "'Having It All' on Social Media: Entrepreneurial Femininity and Self-Branding Among Fashion Bloggers". *Social Media + Society*, vol. 1, no. 2, Sept. 2015, pp.1-11.

Emilytchuu. Comment on "Seraphine Champion Spotlight." *YouTube*, 2021.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiNN2WKkR3Q&ab_channel=LeagueofLegends

Frow, John. *Character and Person*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Gallagher, Rob. "Plotting the Loop: Videogames and Narratability". *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Narrative Theorie*s, edited by Zara Dinnen and Robyn R. Warhol, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, pp.174–86.

Georgakopoulou, Alexandra. "Small Stories Research and Social Media Practices: Narrative Stancetaking and Circulation in a Greek News Story". *Sociolinguistica*, vol. 27, 2013, pp.19–36.

———. "Storytelling on the Go: Breaking News as a Travelling Narrative Genre". *The Travelling Concepts of Narrative*, edited by Matti Hyvärinen, Mari Hatavara, and Lars-Christer Hydén, John Benjamins, 2013, pp. 201–24.

———. "From Narrating the Self to Posting Self(ies): A Small Stories Approach to Selfies". *Open Linguistics*, vol.2, no.1, 2016, 300-317.

———. "Sharing the Moment as Small Stories". *Storytelling in the Digital World*, edited by Anna De Fina and Sabina Perrino, John Benjamins, 2019, pp.105–28..

Haasch, Palmer. "Riot Games Denied a Woman's Claim That Her Image Was Used without Consent for a *League of Legends* Character". *Insider*, 13 November 2020. https://www.insider.com/seraphine-allegations-riot-games-denies-similarities-stephanie-2020-11.

Hutchinson, Rachael. *Japanese Culture through Videogames*. Routledge, 2019.

Jackson, Gita*. "League of Legends'* Fake Anime Pop Star Is Sad Tweeting About Genocide". *Vice*, 15 October 2021, https://www.vice.com/en/article/dy8g87/league-of-legends-fake-anime-pop-star-is-sad-tweeting-about-genocide.

Kennedy, Melanie. "'If the Rise of the TikTok Dance and e-Girl Aesthetic Has Taught Us Anything, It's That Teenage Girls Rule the Internet Right Now': TikTok Celebrity, Girls and the Coronavirus Crisis". *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol.23, no.6, 2020. Pp.1069–76.

Luka Tatomirov. Comment on "Seraphine Champion Spotlight." *YouTube*, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiNN2WKkR3Q&ab_channel=LeagueofLegends

Kline, Stephen, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter. *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003.

Kostas Pantadis. Comment on "Seraphine Champion Spotlight." *YouTube*, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiNN2WKkR3Q&ab_channel=LeagueofLegends

The Last of Us: Part II. Naughty Dog, 2020.

League of Legends. Riot Games, 2009.

Maguire, Emma. "Constructing the 'Instagirl,' Deconstructing the Self-Brand: Amalia Ulman's Instagram Hoax". *European Journal of Life Writing* vol.8, 2019, pp.12–32. https://doi.org/10.21827/ejlw.8.35546.

Marwick, Alice E. "Instafame: Luxury Selfies in the Attention Economy". *Public Culture*, vol.27, no.1 75, 2015, pp.137–60.

Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty. Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, 2001.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. "Story/Worlds/Media". *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, edited by Marie-Laure Ryan and Thon, Jan-Noël. University of Nebraska Press, 2014, pp.1-22.

@seradotwav. "I had to learn some hard lessons". *Twitter,* 6 November 2020, 11:30PM. https://twitter.com/seradotwav/status/1324494231088496641

Salter, Anastasia, and Bridget Blodgett. *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*. Springer International, 2017.

Shot040. Comment on "Seraphine Champion Spotlight." *YouTube*, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiNN2WKkR3Q&ab_channel=LeagueofLegends

Srnicek, Nick. *Platform Capitalism*. Polity, 2017.

Stephanie. "The Problem with Seraphine". *Medium*. 12 November 2020. https://stepnie.medium.com/the-problem-with-seraphine-58dc16c07e79.

Thon, Jan-Noël. "transmedia Characters: Theory and Analysis". *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, vol.5, no.2, 2019, pp.176-199.

Tomb Raider. Core Design, 1996.

Ulman, Amalia. *Excellences and Perfections*, 2016.

Wilde, Lukas R.A. "Recontextualizing Characters. Media Convergence and Pre-/Meta-Narrative Character Circulation". Image 29, 2019, pp.3-21.

Winkler, Fritz, Rolfe Winkler, Jack Nicas and Ben. "Disney Severs Ties With YouTube Star PewDiePie After Anti-Semitic Posts". *Wall Street Journal*, 14 Feb. 2017. https://www.wsj.com/articles/disney-severs-ties-with-youtube-star-pewdiepie-after-anti-semitic-posts-1487034533.

Zeeuw, Daniël de, and Marc Tuters. "'Teh Internet Is Serious Business': On the Deep Vernacular Web and Its Discontents". Cultural Politics, vol.16, no.2, 2020, pp.214–32.

Zimmerman, Eric. "Do Independent Videogames Exist?". Game on: The History and Culture of Videogames, edited by King, Lucien. Laurence King, 2002.