The Fantasy Begins: The Affective Potential of Games Through *Final Fantasies I and VI*

by

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Introduction

Why Final Fantasy?

When I was a child, I didn’t play Final Fantasy. By the time I was an ardent Nintendo fan, it was the early 2000’s and the franchise had long since jumped to the Playstation systems (and I was a loyalist). Still, for as long as video games have had a past to look back on—and video games do now have a history—Nintendo has capitalized on nostalgia. So as a reader of Nintendo Power (the company’s now-defunct magazine), I grew up reading loving accounts of the early Final Fantasy games. What this means is that as long as I have been playing video games, I have known about the opera scene.

The opera scene occurs partway through Final Fantasy VI (originally released as Final Fantasy III in America). It is, to put it briefly, a silly subplot about an improbable heist. At its heart are Celes, a warrior who escaped from the game’s evil empire, and Locke, the thief whom she has fallen in love with. The two are seeking an airship pilot to help them fight the empire, but to get his attention Celes must impersonate an opera star named Maria, singing in her stead to get the pilot’s attention. Meanwhile, Locke must prevent a minor villain, a purple octopus named Ultros, from sabotaging the performance. On paper, it is frankly weird.
Yet the opera sequence is mythic among video game fans. *Nintendo Power* called it unforgettable.\(^1\) It remains perhaps the only celebrated musical (as in, characters singing along to a song) sequence in video games.\(^2\) In both Japan and the U.S., this is a sequence that people remember with fondness,\(^3\) and that even those playing for the first time today find impressive.

There are no actual vocals in the *FFVI* opera sequence—the technology was far too young for that—so what we actually witness are sixteen-bit sprites representing our characters moving around a screen while a track that sounds like it is singing in time with the written words plays. It is an abstract impersonation of singing and dancing, strung together by our participation (help Celes remember the words; guide Locke to fend off Ultros). It is a pixelated-love-story-within-a-pixelated-love-story, one that ends in a battle with an octopus.

And, having finally experienced it, I can say that it works; the sequence is beautiful and memorable and it moves us. It feels like we are watching other human beings sing, and even in its clumsy moments it is clear to see why fans still talk about it. As one games writer, playing for the first time in 2015 (twenty-one years after *FFVI* was released), said of a single gesture: “That flower-throw was a moment that, like many great classic video game moments, felt immediately iconic despite the fact that I’d never seen it before.”\(^4\)

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4. Hamilton.
For those of us who grew up sinking our teeth into pixelated worlds—those of us who read the magazines and the fan sites and spent every moment we weren’t playing *Pokémon* imagining what we were going to do next in *Pokémon*—we can take this enchantment for granted. Of course we understand how simplistic sound and abstract image, imbued with even a bit of interactivity, can suddenly paint a whole world and put us inside it. Yet if we step back, one really has to wonder how this is possible. What alchemy makes something that is on its surface so strange, and that we must read so differently from other media, come to life so vividly?

As video games become more and more relevant to our lives, devising the language to discuss this draw becomes more important than ever. Scholars around the world are constantly contributing to a rich body of research about games, how they speak to us, and what their implications are. Nevertheless, unless you know precisely where to look, it can be hard to find this discourse. Almost since their inception, video games have had a reputation as a niche interest, and although this changes every day, it can still be difficult for the uninitiated to join the conversation.

Unfortunately, this perception is not just a generalization—it is, to some extent, enforced by the culture around the medium. The industry often appears to be in a state of arrested development. Game writing is usually clumsy, and the culture is often hostile, even violent, to the underrepresented communities who so rarely get to see their experiences reflected in games. In the conclusion to his book *How to Talk About Games*, critic Ian Bogost observes,
Games have often maintained a separation from other forms of human culture and creativity. [I mean] that they—that we—have actively cultured and supported this separation in order to come into our own. Even as games have become even more widespread they have also receded farther within themselves.\(^5\)

Games are young, but as a product of the 70’s, they are no longer in their infancy. Nevertheless, their mainstream progress remains curiously stunted, as if their community strives to cultivate bemusement and indifference from the outside world. It is insular, squalid, and resistant to new ideas.

Adding to the difficulties of the community are the challenges posed by the games themselves. Video games are such fabulously complicated objects that it can be difficult to find the right focus to discuss them effectively. One can approach games from a psychological or neurological perspective, as systems that interact with our minds in complex ways. One can look at them as sociological phenomena, studying online games or subcultures like *otaku*.\(^6\) One can discuss them as computer programs. Or one can look at them as stories, adventures, or aesthetic experiences.

Every such perspective has a body of literature, much of which we will discuss in these pages. Sometimes I will adopt these perspectives as my own. I wanted to write this particular thesis, however, because it exists in a particular

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\(^6\) Azuma Hiroki, author of the book *Otaku*, summarizes the culture: “Simply put, it is a general term referring to those who indulge in forms of subculture strongly linked to anime, video games, computers, science fiction, special-effects films, anime figurines, and so on.” (Azuma, 3.)
area of game studies, one that I have come to appreciate during my study of related disciplines like film. Close, extensive analyses of specific games remain uncommon. Certainly they exist, though many of them tend to be more about phenomenal games, such as MMOs (World of Warcraft being the obvious favorite) or sensations like Pokémon. These works are important, as are the sorts of broad looks at games’ affective capacity that we find in titles like Reality is Broken by Jane McGonigal (a book about social impacts) or How Games Move Us by Katherine Isbister (a book about emotional impacts). Nevertheless, we lose something special when we consider these big questions before the intimate experiences we have with games. What happens between and individual and a game that they play has just as many implications for the medium’s future as a treatise on mechanics.

Pilgrim in the Microworld (1983) is perhaps the most famous example of this kind of close analysis. It chronicles the author’s—sociologist David Sudnow’s—obsessive relationship with the simple 80’s game Breakout. It is an intense and beautiful book because Sudnow sees intensity and beauty in the game. His tone borders on ecstatic:

The full sequencing, calibrating, caressing potentials of human hands now create sights, sounds, and movements. And the eyes are free to watch, wonder, and direct from above, free to witness the spectacle and help the hands along without looking down. A keyboard for painters, a canvas for pianists. With lots of programs to choose from, lots of ways to instantaneously vary and organize
the tunings and makeup of the palette. All the customary
boundaries get blurred when you're painting paragraphs,
performing etchings, sketching movies, and graphing music. I was
hooked.7

I want to write about games because I want to contribute to this body of
literature that finds them not only interesting, or important, but unrivaled
visceral experiences. What makes Sudnow's work stand out decades later is that
he captures the sensation that so many video game fans understand: that these
works can, just maybe, take us to places that were once impossible.

This is a work about the places that Final Fantasy I (1987) and Final
Fantasy VI (1994) take us. It joins the ranks of Pilgrim in the Microworld and
other close analyses of games such as the Boss Fight series. It stems from my
belief that I cannot write about every game and still be able to express the
intimacy or gravity of what a great game makes us feel. The intriguing thing
about these particular Final Fantasy games, however, is the way they capture the
big picture alongside the small. By looking closely at them we can learn more
about the series as a whole as well as the specific setting in which they debuted.
They stand as successful craftsmanship in themselves while also offering
glimpses of everything else that games could give us.

Part of this is because I and VI are bookends for a particularly exhilarating
kind of Final Fantasy. While I jump-started the franchise (and saved its
company), VI was a last in many ways for the series. It was the last in 2D, the last

on a Nintendo console, and the last under famed character designer Amano Yoshitaka, but it was certainly not the last Final Fantasy game. In 2016, Final Fantasy XV was released for the Playstation 4, and in addition to the fifteen main titles in the franchise, there are countless spinoffs, sequels, ports, remakes, and even films. That Final Fantasy XV is now the fastest-selling game in the series is a testament to the franchise’s endurance as well as its early influence. Before Final Fantasy was a next-generation open world game, though, it was a series of titles for Nintendo’s original consoles that helped create the blueprint of an entire genre. Before Square Enix was founded in 2003 and became a multinational corporation, it was two companies: Enix, creators of the original console RPG Dragon Quest, and Square, who published Final Fantasy.

My interest in these two companies, and the early Final Fantasy titles in general, are rooted in personal interest as well as my belief in their wider importance. I believe that at their very best, Square Enix produce some of the finest, most emotionally resonant stories in video games. Part of games’ excitement is their tumultuous relationship with narrative (itself a grievously unspecific term); many people are singularly focused on “story games,” whereas others, myself included, believe that narrative is only one of many ways that games can be powerful. Nevertheless, games can tell stories, and Square Enix games tell the very best. My very favorite game of all time is The World Ends with

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9 History | Corporate Information | SQUARE ENIX HOLDINGS CO., LTD, accessed April 07, 2017.
You (or Subarashiki Kono Sekai in Japanese), a 2007 Square Enix game so dense that one could probably write a paper of equal length to this on it. It is a work of colossal ambition that does astonishing things with game and narrative form, as well as my heartstrings. It therefore piqued my interest in other Square Enix titles.

This led me back to the beginning. Final Fantasy I came into being at a pivotal early stage of the industry. Just as the exact definition of a “video game” is a tricky thing, so it is difficult to pin down exactly when they were first born. The act of play itself predates our culture or even the human species, but we cannot say the same for computers. Nevertheless, when exactly the two synthesized to create video games is difficult to pin down and obfuscated by the mythology around it. One could crown Spacewar, the 1961 brainchild of an MIT student, as the first video game, though some might argue that even he was behind by a few years.\textsuperscript{11} Pong, published in 1972,\textsuperscript{12} is the title that I was raised to believe was the first video game, although this is clearly not completely true. What is apparent is that video games emerged \textit{sometime} in the latter half of the twentieth century, and proliferated throughout the 70’s.

For our purposes, \textit{Pong} and its fellows are less important than the two mammoth companies that eventually led to Final Fantasy’s existence: Atari and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Steven L. Kent, \textit{The Ultimate History of Video Games} (New York: Random House International, 2001), 18.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Kent, xii.
\end{itemize}
Nintendo. Atari (an American company) dominated the industry in its early years. Throughout the 70’s it became important as the main distributor of home consoles, which brought video games out of the arcades and onto consumers’ TVs. Atari's reign did not last, as it infamously crashed in 1983. The legend is that it was their movie tie-in *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial* that was so terrible that it singlehandedly killed the company because they overproduced a product nobody wanted. 13 This is an exaggeration of the truth; *E.T.* played a role, but it was symbolic of a larger problem: the company's increasingly poor production in general. Either way, after the crash, the industry in America was dead. Nobody wanted to buy games.

Overseas, however, the Japanese company Nintendo was primed to introduce its first-ever home console. America in 1983 was a wasteland for game designers, but the same dire circumstances did not apply universally, and at the exact same time Nintendo was taking steps toward the release of the Family Computer (or the “Famicom”), a console that would change the industry and launch a company that remains successful to this day. It is here that our story begins in earnest, as it was the Famicom that would eventually become the home of the *Final Fantasy* franchise for its first decade.

Technically, the game that set Square Enix in motion was *Dragon Quest* (1986), Enix’s groundbreaking role-playing game. What makes the *Final Fantasy* franchise so important is the way it contributed to Square (and later Square Enix’s) reputation as a storyteller. This was especially true outside of Japan,

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where *Dragon Quest* and its sequels were less successful. When I was growing up in the 90's and 2000’s, *Final Fantasy* was an essential part of any conversation about video game narrative. Though a game does not need to tell a story to be great, *Final Fantasy* was always one of the first names to come up in a conversation about good writing. Many of Square Enix’s games have lost this standing in recent years, but this makes the early titles all the more important—they set the early standards for a certain kind of video game.

*Final Fantasy* has been here since the advent of the console industry, of the RPG genre, and of narrative games. Studying the series’ early entries means exploring titles that are in some ways simple, even dated, but that still manage to resonate with audiences without the bells and whistles of a newer game. When I played them for the first time, what I found exciting was how they managed to do so much with such limited resources, and how this success speaks to the reality that what makes a game great is deeper than the amount of stuff it throws at you.

The question that remains, of course, is how on earth we are to analyze these two titles. Since *Final Fantasy* is a Japanese series, it might be tempting to default to a common mode of addressing JRPGs, which is to define them mainly by their country of origin. American game critics have a bizarre tendency to narrow in on these qualities in ways that barely make sense. For example, in a trilogy of videos on “western” and “Japanese” RPGs, the game education show *Extra Credits* poses the question of why Japanese RPGs (JRPGs) are distinguished by their region, unlike other video game genres. It is a good question, and *Extra*
Credits goes on to argue that we distinguish these subgenres because of the way in which JRPGs and WRPGs developed parallel to each other in their respective regions. Again, the videos make an important observation, but it also demonstrates a mode of thought that critics often apply to games like Final Fantasy. This is the habit of attributing characteristics of JRPGs to their inherent “Japaneseness,” such as party-based combat that demonstrates “collectivist” Japanese philosophy. To rely on these arguments makes a troubling point about the way that American fans consume Japanese entertainment and the tendency to reduce the actual craft of game design to broad “east versus west” stereotypes.

It is far more productive to approach Final Fantasy by looking at its audience and its intended impact. This does not ignore its context, but it also does not treat the series’ home as its only significant influence. It can be easy to get pulled in one of a million different directions when discussing games, and to forget in the process the fact that on an individual level, a game is just an object with a specific purpose, and a designer’s job is to extract that purpose.

Many of those actually dealing with video games in an academic setting are vehemently against delving too deep into theory. Christopher Weaver, both a professor and founder of the company Bethesda Softworks, argues that this sort of rhetoric largely comes from people who do not know what it means to actually design a game. Instead, he suggests, the tools for understanding games

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are a far more elegant series of questions: “What are we doing? Who are we doing it for?” Final Fantasy sold because there was harmony between the designers’ vision and the way that the audience responded to that vision.

The vast majority of games’ purpose is to entertain, but this is hardly specific. There are countless ways to entertain an audience, and no two video games approach it in the same way, not even within the same series. I and VI, in fact, use entirely different methods to entertain their audience, and this means that they have completely different goals and visions. To analyze both games, then, we must first discover exactly what they are trying to do, and then we can begin analyzing how Square used the tools at their disposal to make it a reality.

The bedrock of each chapter will therefore be an analysis of one of the games’ parts, what they are trying to convey to the player, and how they do so. In analyzing these titles, I will focus on one of their strongest unifying characteristics, which is their mode structure. While we often think of “modes” in video games as being distinct play experiences within a single title (story mode, multiplayer mode, training mode, etc.), the technical use of the term is somewhat different. In computing, modes are distinct states in an interface wherein the same inputs yield different outputs. For instance, if I am navigating a town in Final Fantasy, pressing the D-pad causes the character to move around, whereas in battle, the same button presses instead allow me to select a move or an opponent. Because both actions are associated with

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movement in the direction we tap on the D-pad, players tend to interpret these gestures as the same action, but in fact they are two separate functions with their own internal logic and intended outcomes. Thus “walking around” and battling are in fact two separate modes.

All of the original Final Fantasy games have the exact same modal structure, and the structure’s simplicity makes it an intuitive way to dissect each title. Each game is comprised of four distinct modes: the overworld, a top-down version of the world map from which the player accesses towns and dungeons; the menu, where the player can view stats, equip abilities, or change the game setting; the battle screen, where the series’ primary conflicts play out; and the town map, wherein players navigate and interact with specific environments. Even a simple visual of each mode is telling of the two games’ similarities but gradual transformations.

These are two screenshots of the “town map” mode. Final Fantasy I is on the left, and VI is on the right. Even a static image suggests how many things changed between the two games.

And yet, games are at a point in their lives when they really are more than this alchemy between product and player. Games are technology, culture,
therapy and teaching tools. They are art, sound, writing, rules, and the nearly indescribable relationship between those things. They are maligned as time-wasters and yet they are the biggest entertainment industry in the world. They are young and very powerful, and much work remains to be done before we understand these paradoxes. I contend that, as long as we ground our studies in a specific game-player relationship, we have a lot to learn about games. As I discuss Final Fantasy's modes and their audience effects, I will also consider some of their broader implications for games' creative potential.

This is an analysis in five parts. We will begin by diving deeper into the context that I began to touch on above. To understand these titles, it is also essential for us to understand their context, their audience, and what this means for the final product. We will look at Square's history as a company, the cultural and economic conditions of games in the 80's, and the way these changed between the release of I and VI. As with any kind of analysis, it is vital that we analyze the author’s intent before we can examine its effect on ourselves, so we must first establish the design goals of each respective title.

Next, we will move on to a discussion of each mode in Final Fantasy. These analyses are loosely grouped so that the “exploration” modes (the overworld and the town map) are juxtaposed, followed by the “interactive” modes (the menu and the battle screen). The purpose of this framework is manifold. First, I wish to establish how these games are tightly designed so that each mode contributes directly into its respective title’s design goals. Second, I want to highlight the rich variety in experience that even a single game is able to
provide while remaining a comprehensive whole. Thirdly, I want to use these modes and the responses that they evoke to explore some of gaming’s “big questions.” Within these seemingly outdated games, we can answer questions about how video games tell story with space; about how they tap into the ethos of our era; about how their irreplaceable relationship with character and the way they tap into feelings as old as culture. The modal structure allows us to look at FFI and FFVI as successful games, but also to examine what this means.

The great excitement driving games studies is that both planes of analysis—the dramatic theory and the simple question of audience effect—are largely unexplored. Like the great media before them, video games pose stunning possibilities for the ways that people can share experiences with each other. Looking at titles as resonant as Final Fantasy demonstrates that although conventional wisdom forgets games’ past, developers have been powerfully affecting players since the industry was in its earliest stages.

What do video games offer us that nothing else does? What can they teach us about the time in which they were made? What about our identities, or our needs as human beings? These questions have their own infinitely compelling answers, but they orbit around an even more fundamental idea. Like any cultural object, a video game’s significance inevitably cycles back to the audience; before we wrestle with their grand implications, we must first consider what it is that moves us about an opera scene performed entirely by a computer. In these pages I want to explore what Final Fantasy is trying to make me feel, and how it makes me feel this way no matter how implausible it may seem. These are the
questions at the heart of a series that has spanned three decades and been with the industry since its younger days. Buried in *Final Fantasy I* and *VI* we can find just a few of the staggering possibilities posed by this thrilling young medium. As we dive into their history and their structure, these two titles will become a gateway into the boundless potential lying latent in every cartridge, disc and download from 1970 to today.
Chapter 1

**Nintendo’s Final Fantasy: A History**

The *Final Fantasy* series celebrates thirty years in 2017, but a lot has changed in that time. Video games now span the entire world and are the most successful entertainment industry there is, but when *Final Fantasy I* came out they were still grappling with the question of what exactly they were. *Final Fantasy* remains important because it helped answer those questions. 80’s Japan was one of the most crucial settings in video game history, and *FF* defined both the era and what video games would be in the future. As the series progressed along with video games themselves, it took new approaches to match a changing audience, but remained emblematic of smart, creative design. Before we can discuss the craftsmanship of *Final Fantasy I* and *VI*, it is important for us to look at where these games came from, and the way their histories influenced the design goals that Square sought to achieve. Doing so means diving into a rich, exciting part of video game history.

*Final Fantasy* was released at a pivotal moment for video games, one characterized by the rise of the Japanese console industry. As misguided as it may be to view it as some product of Japanese “tradition,” the social, economic, and technological conditions of 1980’s Japan did have a profound impact on how *Final Fantasy I* was made and what it would become. Yet what played an even greater role in jump-starting this franchise was the keen talent of the people involved, and the way they responded to the state of the industry in their design.
Although this chapter will look at *Final Fantasy I*'s context, this is not to explain it as a product of an alien culture, but rather to look at how good game design responds to the realities of its place, time, and audience.

Good video games are made the same way as anything else: by talented people with a vision. This is often lost because we generally have an unsteady grasp on what makes a game good to begin with. Whereas people accept that an emotionally evocative song is good, or a novel with astute political observations is well-written, many of us fail to notice that the criteria for a successful game are equally clear. At their root, games are feedback systems, responding to player input to entertain through empowerment.1 Successful games give us agency, and are compelling because they show us the direct consequences of our actions and in doing so give us a reason to play. Of course, there are countless avenues toward this goal that a designer may take. A first-person shooter game provides a different kind of experience from a sports simulator—which itself varies wildly from a Japanese role-playing game. While *Final Fantasy I* is considered to be one of the cornerstones of both the JRPG genre and console RPGs in general, it was not the first of its kind. It spoke to audiences because of the way it built upon the larger context of other games, the technology that those games were played on, and the demands of the audience. The way *Final Fantasy* responds to these needs demonstrates how smart design requires an informed sense of purpose.

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Final Fantasy was a product of Squaresoft (also called Square), a video game company founded in 1983. Square met lukewarm sales in its first few years, and eventually found itself in tight financial straits. Its situation was dire enough that when Sakaguchi Hironobu (b. 1962) was assigned to spearhead a new game for the company, he considered it his last chance at success; if he failed, he would give up game design and return to university. He alluded to the predicament in the project’s title, which was of course Final Fantasy. In other words, Final Fantasy’s creators had serious personal investment in its popularity. Commercial and creative success do not always align, so intuitively this may not say much about Final Fantasy’s quality, but the 1980’s were a unique time for games. Because of the standards set by Nintendo, whose Famicom console would become Final Fantasy’s home, Sakaguchi was going to need creative vision to sell his game and keep his career.

In 1983, Nintendo debuted its home console in Japan. That same year, Atari— the company that had previously controlled eighty percent of the video game industry— crashed. This could have halted progress for video games entirely, but there were still communities around the world where video games were in demand. The 80’s were a period of economic growth for Japan, and a combination of rising industries like home electronics and computing and increased demand for leisure entertainment meant that video game consoles

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had new resources and audiences. While North American consumers would spend the next two years suspicious of video games, Japan’s economic circumstances meant that audiences were far more enthusiastic about games. The result was that when the Famicom was released, it found unprecedented success and set the standards for home consoles.

In addition to economic circumstances, another key difference between Nintendo and the American companies that preceded it was the standard of quality to which they held their products. Whereas Atari drove itself into the ground with shoddy, hastily-developed games, Nintendo limited the amount of titles that third-party publishers could release per year and tested every product themselves. These standards were reflected in Nintendo’s own output; games like *The Legend of Zelda* and *Super Mario Bros.* are beloved titles that established conventions that every game uses to this day. This new paradigm was the first time in the history of video games that titles actually had to be good to sell. While every game was guaranteed to reach some middling level of success in the years before Nintendo, the company raised the bar and challenged developers to release polished products. In order to keep afloat, Square needed to meet standards of quality and popular appeal that were so new that designers and players didn’t quite understand them.

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6 Picard.
With the pressure on them to release an appealing product, there were some strategies that could help Square produce a game that would sell. One such strategy was to ride the coattails of a recent success. In 1986, one year before *Final Fantasy* was released, the company Enix published a game called *Dragon Quest*. At a time when many games were pioneering important design techniques that would become industry mainstays, *Dragon Quest* joined the elite few that wrote the rulebook for an entire genre. The very first true console RPG, *Dragon Quest* is essential to understanding *Final Fantasy* because it created the interface upon which all games of its kind are based. One retrospective on console RPGs (which begins with *Dragon Quest*) describes its impact: “a seminal and revolutionary title that establishes so many conventions and standards that, even years later, titles don't play or look all that differently.”\(^7\) The Dragon Quest franchise continues today, and its popularity in Japan is astonishing. It has been declared the country’s national video game,\(^8\) and by the time *Dragon Quest III* was released in the late 80’s, the National Diet passed a law stating that subsequent Dragon Quest games had to debut on Sundays so that children wouldn’t skip school.\(^9\) If Square wished to produce a successful game, it was not a bad strategy to study such a revolutionary new franchise.

\(^7\) Andrew Vestal, "A Brief History of Console RPGs," GameSpot, undated, accessed August 17, 2016.


\(^9\) Vestal.
To find success, Sakaguchi and his team would have to understand fundamentally why *Dragon Quest* worked. Although *Dragon Quest* was the first console RPG, it was inspired by the PC RPGs that were successful in America. The issue was that a PC experience could not be replicated on the Famicom because of the simplified console and controller. The complex systems of a computer game were dependent upon the range of controls that a keyboard afforded, and there was simply no way to recreate that on the Famicom's little control pad. Enix would have to streamline the genre for the new technology, and it is here that JRPGs began to branch from their American cousins—not because of broad cultural divides, but because of technological necessity.

The challenge of *Dragon Quest* was to preserve the magic of an RPG, to tap into why people played these games even if the how was different. Horii Yuji (b. 1954), the game's creator, describes that core pleasure in terms of the player's relationship to the game: “I still thought that it would be really exciting for the
player to play as their alter ego in the game. I personally was playing Wizardry
and Ultima [two American PC games] at the time, and I really enjoyed seeing my
own self in the game.”¹⁰ This quote—about seeing ourselves in the game—will
return later on, because it is crucial to understanding how Final Fantasy I works.

*Dragon Quest* was a hit in spite of its simplicity because it possessed the
trait that made RPGs compelling: the power to show players some version of
themselves inside of another world. Someone who doesn't play RPGs might
assume that the engine of all video games is the combat, that one plays a game to
win challenges. Anyone well versed in the language of RPGs, however, knows
that meaning also lies in the occupation and exploration of another reality as a
person who is simultaneously you and not you. RPG combat has always been a
roundabout mechanism for achieving this sense of presence rather than its own
end, as Horii himself observed. As we will discuss later, battle serves a clear
function for reaching this goal in early games, but it is important not to equate
*Dragon Quest*'s dry menu-based combat with the magic effect it had on
audiences. Instead, an RPG’s sense of meaning is derived from the fantasy it
creates.

Sakaguchi Hironobu’s career as a game designer hinged upon his ability
to replicate that fantasy. With *Dragon Quest* offering a template for how this
might be done on the Famicom, the principle problem became how to offer an
experience that was similar but still different enough to pique consumers’
interests. Because the rules for console RPGs were so new, this was a daunting

challenge, and it was compounded by the severe restrictions of the Famicom’s technology. There was simply not much that could be done to the look, sound, or scale of the game that audiences would see as a marked improvement over *Dragon Quest*. Although there were numerous peripherals that updated the Famicom’s technology over its lifespan, fundamentally it was the same console, with the same set of tools and limitations. This meant that *Final Fantasy* had to find a way to distinguish itself within narrow confines.

Square’s goal with *Final Fantasy I* was therefore not just to coast on the success of *Dragon Quest*, but to create a game that could transcend its predecessor and draw its own followers. To do this, they needed to understand why *Dragon Quest* worked. From the beginning, Square understood that merely replicating the setting or base mechanics would fail to capture the magic that made *Dragon Quest* successful. A demonstration of this thinking is their decision to hire the promising manga artist Amano Yoshitaka (b. 1952) to create the art for *Final Fantasy*. Part of *Dragon Quest*’s success is attributable to the art of Toriyama Akira (b. 1955), who was already famous for manga such as *Dragon Ball* and thus attracted customers familiar with his work.\(^\text{11}\) While Amano was not yet as famous as Toriyama, his selection indicates that Square was working hard to understand why *Dragon Quest* attracted Famicom owners and then putting their own spin on these qualities. Amano’s work, mature and ethereal, is very different from Toriyama’s cartoonlike design, but both artists have signature styles that audiences responded well to. The choice to use an up-and-

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coming artist like Amano shows that Square was striving to create something of similar pedigree that was nevertheless exciting in its own way.

Still, small changes do not explain why *Final Fantasy* is considered equally influential to the genre. The game is so famous because it also introduced fundamental alterations to *DQ*'s gameplay that were so effective they would go on to become JRPG mainstays. Of these, the most famous is the party system, which visually and mechanically reconfigured the battles that make up so much of the game. While *Dragon Quest* put players in charge of a single character (who, in turn, usually battled one enemy at a time), *Final Fantasy* introduced a party of four playable protagonists. The number meant that players could encounter multiple enemies at one time without unbalancing the game, and this completely reshaped each battle, compounding the challenges that a player could face and the strategies they could use to confront them. It also affected the look of the game, since the first-person perspective made less sense when the player was overseeing more than one character. The view on combat mode was therefore rotated so that the protagonists appeared on the right side of the screen facing enemies on the left side. More characters on the field had implications beyond simply lengthening combat; they immediately increased the game's depth. This became the standard for JRPGs; every *Final Fantasy* game that followed would include a party, and the system was adapted by many major JRPGs.

This returns us to the issue of American critics oversimplifying JRPGs, as the party system is a favorite topic for embarrassing analysis. JRPGs contain parties of playable characters rather than one protagonist, the argument goes,
because Japan is a collectivist society and America is individualist.\footnote{Extra Credits.} Therefore, the reason every Final Fantasy game (and the countless JRPGs that followed) put you in control of the group is because that’s a cultural value of Japan. On its face this is silly, even if one disregards the richly varied ways in which Final Fantasy approaches heroism and player representation—in IV, for instance, the player is largely aligned with a single protagonist, with the rest of the party in supporting roles. More importantly, we can clearly trace the actual origins of the mechanic. It emerged because it was an effective way to make the game interesting, one that was possible within the technical confines of the Famicom. It was a smart development choice, not a subliminal echo of cultural values.

When considering Final Fantasy I’s legacy, such mechanical changes are important to note because the feature the series would eventually become known for—story—was still in its infancy. Due to the Famicom’s limits, the plot of the original Final Fantasy is sparingly told, and can hardly be considered much of an advancement over Dragon Quest. The player controls four characters (identified as the “Light Warriors”), each in possession of a magical orb, who travel the world to dispel evil. There is a loosely established chain of events whereby the warriors defeat four super-powerful fiends to open up a time loop that allows them to kill the immortal demon Chaos. The fact that Final Fantasy climaxes with a battle against an immortal demon named Chaos ought to indicate that this story does not break much ground. At this point in gaming history, a fantasy game didn’t need to take big narrative or world-building risks
to distinguish itself. *Final Fantasy* may be a story about elves and demons (and pirates, and goblins, and princesses, and...), but in 1987, even if none of these were novel ideas, the opportunity to experience them as a participant was.

Because the Famicom was an early system, the reliance on such conventional genre tropes arguably aided the players’ sense of place rather than distract from it. The Famicom’s limits forced the game to assert itself nonverbally, through movement and experience rather than plot. Square had to convince gamers that beneath silent, low-resolution sprites, there was an entire world that they were a part of. One way to do this was by using iconography that we already understand. When we see archetypes that we recognize in *Final Fantasy*, we feel as if we know the world more deeply because we already have an understanding of what we are seeing, even if the game tells us very little. This allows *Final Fantasy* to have a world that feels occupied by a variety of entities without being confusing to players or putting too much work into explaining its mythology. By using archetypes to create a coherent world, the designers were free to spend most of their effort on mechanics that would make this world feel viscerally real.

Although *Dragon Quest* was the first console RPG, *Final Fantasy* is widely considered to be equally influential to the genre, which suggests that it added something special. To understand how Square distinguished itself, it is useful to look at each discrete element of the game and analyze how they worked toward its goals. This is why analyzing the series in terms of its modes is such a

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13 Vestal.
useful point of comparison. Every mode presents different challenges, goals, and
tools to the player, but even so, when we play Final Fantasy, we don’t feel as if
we are being jerked between different games. They flow into each other and
create a unified experience; just as film editing becomes invisible, we experience
the work as a whole. This is because each of these components is working
toward the same end. Cuts in a film harmonize in the name of storytelling; the
modes in Final Fantasy transition smoothly from one to the other in order to
offer the sense of embodiment and adventure that Sakaguchi was chasing.

Final Fantasy VI has the exact same modal structure as Final Fantasy I. It
also had a number of things that I lacked: seven years and four additional games
with which to experiment; a more powerful console; a bigger budget and stiffer
competition. Once again, the context of Final Fantasy VI shaped how the
developers wanted their audience to react, and the choices that they made to
instill those reactions. While it may have the same structure as I, it uses it toward
fundamentally different ends.

Final Fantasy VI was the last Final Fantasy title ever released in 2D, and
the last to premier on a Nintendo platform. It was not the first Final Fantasy
game to pay special attention to storytelling. That honor belongs to IV, the first of
the three games released on the Super Famicom. The Super Famicom was
Nintendo’s 16-bit follow-up console, and the added power opened up a myriad
of new possibilities. Nevertheless, it took a long time for designers to tap into
these opportunities. It is therefore Final Fantasy VI, released three years later,
that players and critics often remember as the high-water mark of Final
Fantasy’s 2D era. As a general gauge of its rapport within gaming culture, *VI* is one of two Final Fantasy games to be inducted into the hall of fame of IGN, a popular gaming news source. The other is *Final Fantasy I*. The hall of fame prioritizes older titles that are fundamental to the industry’s growth such as *Pong* or *Doom*. *FFI*’s inclusion reflects that emphasis on historical relevance over contemporary popularity (the list was released in 2007). This speaks to the weight that *Final Fantasy VI* holds for many video game fans. It is more than a popular game; to many, it is a cornerstone of gaming history. It resonated with critics and players alike; many public polls have found *VI* topping the list of the best Final Fantasy titles ever. Popular opinion in Japan and abroad dictates that apart from the elementally influential *I* and the record-breaking *VII*, *VI* is unrivaled in its importance.

Whatever *Final Fantasy VI* did worked better than anything had before and remains unmatched—but what was this magical accomplishment? A Japanese survey from 2009 reflects the points that publications often reference to explain the game’s success. The survey, which asked fans to rank the Final Fantasy series based on various criteria, found that players believed *VI* to have the third-best story (behind *VII* and, perhaps for nostalgic reasons, *I*) and the second-best characterization (once again behind the colossally popular *VII*).

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Tellingly, very few retrospectives on Final Fantasy VI dwell on its gameplay. The game continues to earn praise in Japan and abroad years after its original release, as does Final Fantasy I, but the language we use to talk about these games is different. While the innovations we remember from I are gameplay-based, like magic or the party system, the celebrated parts of VI have a decidedly more literary bent. When IGN released a 2016 ranking of all the Final Fantasy games, I earned seventh place, with the article commenting on how “players could choose character names and party class.” Meanwhile, VI took the top spot, but what earned the most praise was the villain Kefka, “one of the best villains in video game history.” VI’s iconic characters were cited as the primary reason why the game was a “masterpiece” that the editors considered to be the best Final Fantasy title.17

Strangely, the emphasis on characterization is antithetical to the goals of I, a game about providing empty vessels for us to fill. Over the course of the early 90’s, however, a number of developments in the industry gave rise to conditions under which Japanese role-playing games, especially those created by Square, started to explore the storytelling possibilities of 2D gaming.

Just as the history of console gaming was shaped by its reemergence in Japan, the subsequent proliferation of the Japanese industry opened narrative potential that was impossible elsewhere. There is a simple linguistic explanation for why the earliest celebrated game stories came from Japan. The character system of Japanese is syllable-based rather than letter-based, which means that

17 IGN Staff, “Ranking the Final Fantasy Games,” Snapchat, November 29, 2016.
a single character contains more sounds than in English. Kanji further condense the language, squeezing several syllables and even whole words into one character. This means that more information can be conveyed in less space.

In the early days of game design, when space on the cartridge was still tight, the freedom afforded by the Japanese language was enough to propel games from that region into unrivaled storytelling territory. PC adventure games, which were another significant contributor to the early Japanese industry, are an example of this freedom. The adventure game (like the console RPG) is a genre that existed in both the Japanese and American industries in distinctly different forms. In Japan, adventure games became increasingly text-heavy until they morphed into what players now know as the visual novel, a mostly text-based adventure with severely limited interactivity. Particularly important to the history of text-based games is the controversial “erotic game” that proliferated in the 80’s. While developers and fans often brush the genre under the rug when discussing video game history, the reality is that these titles were some of the first games to prioritize storytelling over other gameplay elements like combat and puzzle solving. Its Japanese origins created the audience for games that traded consistent interactive engagement for a lengthy story. If one still doubts the genre’s significance to Final Fantasy, it is also worth

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noting that many of Japan’s most famous developers had their start making erotic games—including Square.19

In Japan, language enabled new steps for story games, and audiences spent the decade leading up to FFVI’s release affirming that there was a market for this sort of gaming experience. When the Famicom was released, its speed and memory relative to PCs meant that it was better at providing action-based gameplay,20 and so it catered to a different kind of game. Final Fantasy I and other games of its time consequentially had little narrative focus, but as early as II (still a Famicom title), the series began a steady growth towards literary density, something that the second game exhibits simply by allowing its protagonists the chance to speak.

In 1991, Final Fantasy IV became the first game in the franchise to actually shift storytelling to the forefront. The game has been cited as “the most story-dense RPG of [its] time,”21 and its international success (it was the first game after Final Fantasy I to come to the United States) was another indicator that audiences wanted story games. With the Japanese industry’s strong (if sensational) history of profitable story games, and the affirmation that a story-heavy Final Fantasy could sell, Square entered the nineties in a unique position to confidently release an ambitious story game. With V taking a more niche-

19 Extra Credits.
20 Hardcore Gaming 101.
oriented look back at the class system of *III* (it remains a favorite of Sakaguchi’s), it fell on *VI* to voyage into the brave new literary world.

For *Final Fantasy VI*, Sakaguchi appointed a new director: Kitase Yoshinori, who had previously filled a variety of roles on other Final Fantasy games. Sakaguchi still stayed on a producer, and continued to be an important team member. *VI* had an unusually tight schedule for a game of its scale, and the way the team confronted this potential problem was through careful division of labor. Kitase describes the division thusly: “If we consider that Final Fantasy games are divided into two core elements: battles and drama, then I oversaw design of the latter while Hiroyuki Ito supervised the battle aspects. It was then up to Sakaguchi to bring the project together as a whole, intelligible piece.”

His comment immediately makes one thing apparent: In this new order of Final Fantasy, the series’ creator and the game’s director gave the story equal weight to the combat.

Kitase’s comments expand on how he designed this story, and the concept that he continually comes back to is the way it is structured around its characters. From the beginning, the team approached *Final Fantasy VI* as a story driven by the cast of characters at its center. *VI* contains fourteen playable characters, far surpassing any other *Final Fantasy* title, and the game was

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designed from the beginning around the idea that its story would be told in episodes; it was about each individual character and their backstory, with the overarching plot more as a means to bring these elements together. This was a structure unlike anything the series had seen so far, and its relatively grounded take on characterization was a sharp break from high fantasy JRPG conventions of the time. Nevertheless, it was not an arbitrary choice, and in fact had a clear conceptual grounding that built upon the core of the series. Kitase describes this idea: “The idea was to transform the Final Fantasy characters of the time from mere ciphers for fighting into true characters with substance and backstories who could evoke more interesting or complex feelings in the player.”

*Final Fantasy VI* evidently prioritized its story, and the way it told its story was through its characters. These traits are the foundation upon which it was designed. Characterization therefore becomes paramount to understanding the game. In *Final Fantasy I*, the playable characters were meant to be reflections of ourselves, surrogates for us to do things that we cannot do in real life. *VI* is a game predicated on diametrically opposed ideas; here, the characters are supposed to be interesting to us not because they *are* us, but because they are unique, interesting, and distinct from ourselves and each other.

How does the same basic design structure realize two wildly successful, entirely contradictory philosophies about video games and player experience? The subsequent chapters will go through each of the four basic modes of a classic *Final Fantasy* game, analyzing the two games’ opposing approaches. My

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25 Edge Staff.
hope is that in doing so, we might come to a more sophisticated understanding of how the nuances of game design affect their outcomes and emotional impact on the player. Even in the absence of the myriad technological advances that we associate with good games today, it was possible for a careful designer to produce very different outcomes through the design language that they used. A comparison of *Final Fantasies I* and *VI* demonstrates the complexities of craftsmanship, and it is my hope that it will help to expose the relationships between culture, technology, and design that inform every video game.

The following four chapters will break the two games down into their separate modes. We will continue from the premise, explored here, that *Final Fantasy I* is a game whose central goal is to allow the player the experience of living in and exploring a fantasy world. *Final Fantasy VI* responded to the precedent established in earlier titles, aiming to tell a grand adventure story that made innovative use of the resources available on the SNES. Exploring their connections, similarities, and differences exposes the rich and complex system of ideas beneath the surface of any video game that has ever resonated with a player before.
Chapter 2

The Overworld: The Art of Space

Fig. 2.1: FFI’s overworld. Fig 2.2: FFVI’s overworld.

In some ways, Final Fantasy I is a more coherently realized game than VI. It is easy to assume that time, money, and personnel automatically catapulted VI into a class beyond I, but to make this argument means ignoring how FFI set the standards for its genre and cultivated its own evocative experience. These games are interesting because of the way I evolved into VI, yes, but the first Final Fantasy is also a fascinating accomplishment in itself, calling upon minimal resources to coax us into the role of a hero. Its necessarily stark presentation means that it relies on some of the fundamental traits that make video games compelling. These qualities were elaborated in VI, but the simplicity of Final Fantasy I has a power all its own. The real excitement of comparing these games comes from seeing how they make very different but equally strong cases for video games as objects of intrigue.
A useful place to begin discussing the titles’ differences and their influence is the overworld map. Arguably the most straightforward mode in the game, the overworld is the large-scale world map that the player uses to travel between sites and to trigger random-encounter battles. Although it is simple in both games, and indeed may seem forgettable in VI, it also taps into one of the most powerful characteristics of video games, which is the capacity to radically reconceive how we relate to the space of a story. A growing vein of games scholarship has begun to argue that games fall under a tradition of “spatial stories” or “narrative architecture.”¹ This concept encompasses media like “hero’s odysseys, quest myths, or travel narratives.” It includes stories where the mythology of the world extends beyond the confines of the narrative, such as the Lord of the Rings books, and real-life, physical spaces meant to guide people through a story, such as Disney or other theme parks.² What Middle-Earth and Disneyland share is that even though their topography technically exists independent of any narrative, the responses that they evoke in the player are emotionally significant and meant to contribute directly to a narrative.

The power of video games is that they bridge the imaginative freedom of a fantasy world with the ability to see, touch, and interact with that world as one would a theme park. The ability games have to place us within invented space is often overlooked, but the potential of narrative architecture is so great that entire books have been written on the subject. In his book Video Game Spaces,

¹ Henry Jenkins, First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 122.

² Jenkins, 122-123.
Michael Nitsche summarizes what makes narrative space in digital media unique: “Through the loophole of virtual space we are able to reclaim the space of the action where we do not ‘look at’ but actively visit the center of the action... We are not analyzing the events as neutral onlookers but share the space with them [the characters].”³ The drama that becomes possible when we exist and act in the narrative is astonishing in its scope and potential. In Final Fantasy, Square invokes a wide range of reactions and emotions in the player. Some of the most powerful examples move us with nothing but the physical layout of its virtual world and the way we move through it.

Crafting video game spaces with attention to emotional significance has been a convention of the industry since the Famicom's early days. Miyamoto Shingeru, one of the most important video game designers of all time, has spoken extensively on the concepts behind the worlds he builds. Games like Mario and especially The Legend of Zelda (both of which debuted a few years before Final Fantasy) set a standard for carefully considered world design. The Legend of Zelda is particularly important to both the technology and the philosophy of Final Fantasy's overworld. It essentially invented the structure of the overworld, standardizing it as an aboveground wilderness populated by monsters for the player's exploration. Zelda was the first game to allow screen-

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to-screen movement in every direction, which meant that it was also the first title with a large map that we could explore in its entirety.

The story behind *Zelda*'s creation is famous: Miyamoto based its adventurous gameplay on his own experiences exploring the forests and caves around his childhood home. The game was meant to replicate this sense of discovery, intentionally designed to be “cryptic” with secrets hidden in surprising places. It was designed not to replicate a specific place but the feeling of where Miyamoto grew up, the sense of stumbling upon a new and mysterious world. *Zelda* is an action game, and therefore different in important ways from *Final Fantasy*, but it also first plotted the overworld as a vast unexplored terrain of rivers and forests. It introduced it as a map based on experience, rather than passive observation. Just as Nitsche notes, we are not meant to take in the overworld as neutral onlookers; from its inception it was about the act of exploration. It is a relationship based on interactions.

Looking at *Final Fantasy I* is helpful for illustrating how exploration impacts our experience of the story. In later *Final Fantasy* games (*VI* included), the overworld’s main function is to give the continent some topography and to provide an arena for random-encounter battles, but the first game demands far more from the player. *I* intentionally places obstacles in spots that force the player to navigate what is more or less a maze of dead ends and impassable mountain ranges. Building on the mystery of *Zelda*'s map, *I* ensures that we

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5 Altice, 173.
never quite know what lies beyond the edges of the screen, nor whether we are on the right path to our invisible goal. For instance, areas of the map are often constructed so that mountain ranges or rivers create obstacles—there may be multiple ways around these objects, but only one will actually lead to the right destination. This means that the game demands that we pay attention if we want to get anywhere.

Physical barriers are not the only obstacles the player faces. As they weave their way through the terrain, they also participate in a series of random-encounter battles with monsters. In later games, these battles primarily enable the characters to train in preparation for more important encounters, but in *I,* they also serve an important role in the overworld’s pacing. The random battles in *Final Fantasy I* are far more difficult than in later games. Part of this is due to being such an early title that Square had not yet figured out exactly how to balance it, but in other ways the difficulty serves the experience. When a random-encounter battle begins, there is always the chance that the enemies will be too powerful for the players’ resources and immediately defeat the party. With every random encounter posing the threat of sudden defeat, the overworld can be agitating, but it also creates tension that Square can exploit to create a certain kind of player experience. Difficulty can be frustrating, but *well-balanced* difficulty is actually essential to our enjoyment of a game; our minds like to be challenged, and psychologists and video game theorists alike have explored the effects that well-built challenges have on us.⁶ Because navigation is so difficult, it

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enables the player to feel present and powerful in the game world when they
eventually do overcome these obstacles. Since it was building off of a template
that barely existed at the time, *FFI* does not always feel fair, but it is consistent
enough that the challenge it poses adds rather than detracts from our pleasure.
The difficulty forces us to pay attention, and as a result it gives meaning to our
interaction, turning exploration into a worthwhile challenge rather than a means
of getting from point A to point B.

In essence, the overworld of *Final Fantasy I*—in both its physical
construction and its pacing—is hinged on tedium. This may sound like a dreadful
thing to put one’s self through—and to a 2017 audience, it perhaps is. We must,
however, consider the impact of these design elements on how we viscerally
experience the world map. Even if we find it frustrating, Square clearly made
decisions in an endeavor to evoke a certain kind of reaction, and for the most
part they were successful. Infuriating gameplay is a convention of early games
for an important reason. Because older games’ memories allowed for only
limited content, a common strategy that they employed to make players feel
satisfied with a short experience was to lengthen the game without adding more
content, often by raising the difficulty. This is where the twisted logic puzzles of
an American adventure game or the hidden stages of a Nintendo title come from:
the need to give players an experience worth their money with the resources at
hand.\(^7\) By simply adding a few impassable tiles to the map (in turn forcing the
players into more random battles), Square was able to add hours to the game

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\(^7\) Jason Haas, "Videogames and/as the Moving Image" (Lecture, Wesleyan University), March 2016.
and alter how we, the players, approached the experience. Even minute changes in the landscape of an interactive environment can have huge effects on the player’s response.

*Final Fantasy I* is a smaller game than *VI*, but it paces its overworld to actually feel more epic: larger and more dangerous. In this way it actively engages with the world and experience of the game, as opposed to simply being the connective tissue between story elements. There is a thrill and even a bit of fear in traversing the overworld, because any battle or wrong turn could result in hours of lost progress. As tedious as it can be, it also has a distinct dramatic arc. When I set out toward an unknown area of the map, I am nervous; when I encounter an obstacle, I experience the tension of knowing that a wrong guess means failure; when I finally reach a safe area such as a town, I feel relief and victory. These are all distinct, powerful emotions that are brought about because of my role as an agent in the world; were I merely watching the navigation take place with no interactive elements, I would feel none of this.

*Final Fantasy I* convinces us that we are in a wild, inhospitable landscape. It provides a sense of danger, a sense of place, and a sense of curiosity about what lies ahead. It does so without using a single story scene or one word of dialogue. The overworld is an affecting example of the power of games because it is purely experiential, inciting a wealth of emotions without relying on a story or arresting visuals. It stems from a Famicom tradition of recreating players as agents and explorers. As exciting as a cool narrative or realistic graphics can be, it is precisely this agency that moves us when we are playing a video game, be it
a Famicom or a Playstation 4 title. Final Fantasy had the disadvantage of being one of the first of its kind, and it had to invent many rules for itself; not all of these were successful. At the same time, though, the limitations that Sakaguchi’s team faced also forced some of the game’s most ingenious and beautiful qualities to the surface, as they crafted ways to keep players interested in such a simple game. The overworld is the perfect example of how Square took the Famicom’s limitations (manifested in a map with very little to do) and the weak qualities of its own gameplay (punishing difficulty) and wove them into an experience that was more than the sum of its parts. Final Fantasy is able to use our frustration as an advantage, interrogating what makes us feel this way and bending that emotional experience into something exciting, something that feels like an adventure.

Final Fantasy I therefore exemplifies how a game world can move the player using space alone. The remaining question is how this fits into the grander idea of what we find to be “meaningful” content in media and how the experience of FFI extends beyond the moment of play. In his 1992 article “Landscape and the Human Being,” Professor Yamagishi Takeshi (of Keio University) discusses an idea that is often overlooked but fundamental to human experience: the psychological importance of the landscape and its significance to traditional art. To Yamagishi, everyone has physical spaces that are emotionally important, and our relationships to these spaces are as significant to our identities as our interpersonal relationships.⁸

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There are many celebrated forms of art that seek to explore this relationship. Yamagishi calls upon the landscape painting in particular: “The painter, more than any other person, faces the landscape with utmost attention, uses his whole body to grapple with it, approaches it from a unique viewpoint, and expresses an individual landscape with personal style.” This bears an astonishing resemblance to Miyamoto Shigeru’s approach to spatial design and the way he uses it as a tool to discuss his own experiences. This begs the question of whether Yamagishi picked the wrong medium to champion. When he praises the landscape painting for its ability to replicate our perception of space and time, one has to wonder whether a painting can actually measure up to a video game’s capacity for rhythm and change, or whether it could ever replicate the literal relationship between observer and object or games’ capacity to render an entire setting from every possible angle. If we acknowledge landscape and its replication as meaningful, we must also consider video games as one of the key media for exploring it.

A Famicom game’s overworld map, like a landscape painting, enables a complex look at both real and imagined spaces, but paintings are static objects. This means that games can add greatly to existing discourse about how we engage with these spaces. In 1996, the Japanese writer Katayama Osamu drew a connection between video games and the cultural and ecological context of Japan:

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9 Yamagishi, 96.
In the good old days, Japanese children had fields and meadows they could run around in, but nowhere in our cities today will you find such places... It is no longer a simple matter for people to ‘play’ with nature, and the more distant and farther removed it becomes, the more need there is for new ‘natural environments.’ Game machines and their computer chips give immediate access to unlimited ‘meadows’ and ‘nature.’

More than being interesting trifles, games have the ability to regenerate essential human experiences that we have lost. When Miyamoto recreates his childhood adventures, he preserves a personal experience, allowing younger generations to experience something they might not otherwise have access to. While *Mario* and *Zelda* often demand that the player deconstruct nature, *Final Fantasy* accomplishes the same sort of exploration without the destructive subtext. As in *Zelda*, the player kills enemies that they encounter along their journey, but this takes place in the battle mode, preserving the harmony of the overworld. Moreover, unlike a game like *Mario*, the characters of *Final Fantasy* cannot destroy any of the obstacles they encounter on the map. All of these


Famicom titles engage directly with their cultural context in a meaningful way,

10 Altice, 190.

11 Lately, augmented reality games (ARGs) such as *Pokémon Go* have literalized the connection between game spaces and real-world experiences by mapping live spaces into virtual worlds. These titles, which demand that the player actually move through the real world in order to play, are bigger, less personal experiences than Miyamoto’s work. Despite the obvious differences, these games also demonstrate the fallacy behind claiming that games are insular and distance us from our surrounding environment. In fact, for as long as they have existed games have opened varied dialogues with our surroundings. This continues to move in exciting directions today.

12 Altice, 193.
whether they mean to or not. Nevertheless, Final Fantasy realizes this vision the most coherently, and in doing so proves that video games are capable of dialog with their culture.

In fact, the overworld in I is so articulate that it almost begs the question of what VI had left to add to the conversation. Its approach to the overworld is interesting because it is similar to I in some ways and dramatically different in others. It shares the same appearance (albeit updated for the new console), but uses the same devices to different ends; it carries the same environmental subtext to its exploration, but modifies it for the game's narrative-driven experience.

If the overworld in I was constructed in order to draw out gameplay, this meant that the same structure would be useless in VI, which was on a console powerful enough that it could actually have a lot of content. The question that VI faced is whether this exploration serves any role at all in a story-based experience. Though its overworld betrays some superfluity, VI folds it into the narrative in important ways that amplify the thematic content that was present in I.

In Final Fantasy I, where jaw-clenching difficulty and exploration took center stage, the overworld was a natural way to upgrade the sense of tension and place. Moreover, since the Famicom could not allow for towns or dungeons that were significantly populated, there was a somewhat blurred distinction between the overworld and specific locations; there was not much to distinguish the two, and because story was so unimportant, both felt as if they held equal
weight. The world may have been small, but this meant that it was dense with obstacles and scenery, and this gave its navigation a consistent purpose.

As soon as we shift the focus from exploration to narrative, the overworld’s original function becomes less important. Story events do occasionally play out in the overworld in *Final Fantasy VI*, but it is a narrative that emphasizes its characters, and in the overworld only one character (the party “leader”) is traditionally visible at one time. This fact alone immediately constricts the potential of the overworld to enrich the story; it becomes extraneous to the central conceit of *FFVI*. Rather than directly facilitate the story, the overworld is largely unchanged from the original game. It provides a sense of place by giving us a geographic impression of the world, and it is still the primary source of random-encounter battles, a feature that is necessary for the game’s battle system to work. These are two apparent ways in which the world map facilitates the adventure at the heart of *Final Fantasy VI*. Still, just because the map is necessary does not mean it is elegant. The careful planning and navigation that shaped the overworld in *I* are gone in *VI*, and the mode can therefore feel hollow.

The overworld still has a general function within the game, but its contributions are inefficient. Other JRPGs would eventually find ways to streamline the map screen. For example, the spinoff game *Final Fantasy Tactics*, released for the Playstation One in 1997, uses the same map-like layout, but rather than having the avatar walk between each location, the player selects the next destination and their party instantly travels there. This provides the same
world-building effect of having a detailed geography without distracting or confusing the player. And yet—this is invasive to other elements of the experience. For some players, the tactile experience of moving one’s character around the world is more satisfying than navigating via menus.\textsuperscript{13} If this adds to a player’s connection with the characters, then removing it does infringe upon one’s enjoyment of the story.

This is the paradox of interactive storytelling. It is very difficult to strike a balance between a satisfyingly paced story and one that allows us to engage with the world. Some scholars have even suggested that interactivity and narrative are incompatible.\textsuperscript{14} Although the application of the overworld in \textit{VI} is unsatisfying in some ways, many of the most obvious “solutions” to this problem would create a discordant experience for some players. The overworld mode therefore demonstrates how following in the footsteps of its predecessors was limiting for \textit{VI}, as well as the significant challenges the developers faced when adapting something as ancient and conventional as narrative to the extremely complex organism that is a video game. Could this balance be struck, or did \textit{Final Fantasy VI}’s overworld fall somewhere in the functional but dissatisfying gray area between tedium and meaninglessness?

\textsuperscript{13} For this point it is useful to consider another popular JRPG, \textit{Persona 3}. Originally released for the Playstation 2, \textit{Persona 3} received a Playstation Portable rerelease that added features but, to accommodate for the reduced hardware capabilities, dropped the ability to maneuver the avatar in favor of menu-controlled movement. Reception was mixed; some players appreciated the efficiency while others found it limiting. As one forum commenter put it: “I think the menu-based navigation takes something away from the game” (“Persona 3: FES or P3P? - Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3” Giant Bomb, accessed January 29, 2016.). This quote shows how even more recent JRPGs struggle with finding the middle ground between disparate player desires.

\textsuperscript{14} Jenkins, 118.
Rather than radically change the way the player navigates the overworld, 
*VI*’s developers do the same thing they do for every other mode in the game: They find ways to integrate it into the experience. Part of this integration is technological; the overworld becomes a platform for showing off what late-period Super Famicom games were capable of, and in this way it enhances our experience through spectacle if not story. Of particular note is the Super Famicom’s limited 3D effects, which are used to cast new perspective on the overworld. *VI* is not the first *Final Fantasy* game to use 3D, but as a later Super Famicom game, it needed to stretch the console’s visual capabilities to the limit in order to impress players. Thus the airship (a feature that first appeared in the original *Final Fantasy*) remains a primary means of transportation, and its illusory “2.5D” depth endows us with a different point of view.

More striking, however, are the cutscenes that make use of the technology, such as the scene where Terra, one of the game’s most important characters, accidentally unleashes powers she doesn't know she had. She turns into a flaming creature and flies uncontrollably away from the rest of her party, speeding across the map in pseudo-3D. The 3D here adds depth, action, and drama, and of course it relies upon the existence of an overworld map, giving us a sense that Terra’s power is so great that she towers above the entire world. In addition to being spectacular, this scene has narrative importance that is compounded by the way Square layers effects on the overworld. It demonstrates thoughtful craftsmanship; yes, this is a moment meant to impress players with the technology, but the visuals also enhance the story. The moment exemplifies
how Square used the Super Famicom’s resources to make the story they wanted to tell more meaningful, rather than simply trying to impress players.

The overworld also has narrative significance beyond the use of 3D, and it is here that we can see Katayama and Yamagishi’s theories slip into its conception of space. In his reflections on space, Yamagishi remarks, “We should turn our eyes to the changes in places and landscapes; a dramatic change may lead to a sense that we have lost our home.”\textsuperscript{15} This is, inadvertently, a broad summary of the plot of \textit{Final Fantasy VI}. Perhaps the most significant turning point in the game is the moment when the villain, Kefka, unleashes a cataclysm that destroys the characters’ world. When this happens, the old map, the “World of Balance” is replaced by a new one, the “World of Ruin.” The colors change from greens and blues to russet (in the World of Ruin, the sun is always setting) and the entire map is reconfigured so that every single land mass is different. Cities are destroyed, and after the disaster the protagonists are scattered around the world and believe each other to be dead.

\textsuperscript{15} Yamagishi, 97.
The World of Balance (Fig 2.3) and the World of Ruin (Fig. 2.4). The World of Balance map represents everything that we can explore before the disaster that creates the World of Ruin, which we spend the rest of the game navigating. From http://finalfantasy.wikia.com/.

Final Fantasy VI spends its first act building a world that we relate to similarly to the worlds of Zelda or Final Fantasy I. We take pleasure in exploration, discovery, and the way they enable us to feel like agents in the story. FFVI adds to this by making apparent something that is important but largely invisible in these games: Through the process of moving through it, we develop a relationship with this world, only to have it undermined. As the characters travel between towns to reassemble their party, the player is disoriented not just because things are visually different, but because locations are rearranged so that we struggle to navigate between them. The destruction of the landscape echoes Yamagishi’s words, and is emphasized by the way it forces us to relearn this space.

VI is not the only Final Fantasy game where the villain wages war against the environment. Its successor, the 3D Final Fantasy VII, famously delves into environmental themes by pitting its heroes against a corporation ravaging the
world for commercial gain. The environment as both a source of adventure and a
target for destruction is a well-established theme for the series. Although global
balance is a common set of stakes in fantasy stories, Final Fantasy engages with
this context in new ways by making us feel what is about to be lost. The twist of
Final Fantasy VI is that we actually do lose our home, and the game demands that
we encounter the aftermath of the disaster firsthand. This fits into the discourse
that Katayama opens up about early games and their relationship to how kids
relate to the environment. If the older Famicom games like Final Fantasy I
recreate these lost environments, VI does so as well, but also forces players to
acknowledge their fragility. In doing so it taps directly into our emotional
reactions to landscape in a way that would not be possible if this were a static
map.

Therefore, although the overworld in Final Fantasy VI is occasionally
incongruous with the narrative goals of the game, it uses the visual and narrative
capabilities of the Super Famicom to become a meaningful part of the
experience. In doing so, it uses what could have been a superfluous feature to
advance the discourse surrounding Famicom games. In Final Fantasy I, the
overworld mode may be more carefully considered and deliberately paced, but
ultimately both games advance the arguments made by video game spaces in
meaningful ways. This makes the overworld a useful jumping off point for
considering the modal structure of Final Fantasy, because although it is
fundamentally the same mode, it behaves very differently based on the two
games’ discrete goals. In I, the overworld is a device for exploration and mystery;
in *VI*, the overworld informs the narrative and vice versa. Despite their differences (and even their failings), both are strongly integrated into the overall experience.

The overworld is also a good starting point because it exemplifies some of the boldest ways in which video games can invoke experiences and emotions inaccessible to traditional media. If our relationship to place has been overlooked in the history of aesthetic theory, it is perhaps because there has not been a medium sufficiently able to replicate this relationship. Toward the end of his essay on landscape, Yamagishi talks about gardens as a particular type of landscape where one “can observe both nature and culture.”16 Miyamoto uncannily echoes the idea of gardens as a type of constructed space when discussing *Zelda*: “I have been making much of the ambience that players feel, as if they had actually visited and explored a miniature garden called Hyrule that can be placed in your desk drawer.”17 Perhaps, if we think of gardens as culture expressed through natural objects, it is not unreasonable to think of digital worlds as nature expressed through cultural objects. Rather than tame the world around it, *Final Fantasy*’s overworld seeks to recreate nature in its wildness and danger, and in doing so on a scope far greater than a garden, it opens players up to new emotional experiences.

The overworld is our introduction to the richness of experience that interactivity can afford and the way that it creates new relationships with

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16 Yamagishi, 112.

17 Altice, 189.
objects on the screen. Next, we will look at another mode that is fundamentally concerned with how we relate to the space around our *Final Fantasy* avatars, but that extends this relationship beyond the landscape and reaches into characterization.
Chapter 3

The Town Map: Digital Storytelling in Postmodernity

Fig. 3.1: A city in FFI. Fig 3.2: A cave in FFVI.

The overworld finds a close cousin in the town map. Comprising more than just cities, the town map is the more “close-up” view of dungeons, villages, and houses that the characters navigate between. This mode controls similarly to the overworld, and both are centered on movement through space. Yet despite these similarities, the overworld and the town map serve fundamentally different purposes. The overworld map gives pacing and broad structure to the game world, but more often than not, the close-up perspective afforded by the town map is not used to bring us closer to the space, but instead to the characters. In both I and VI, this mode is where the vast majority of the dialog takes place, where characters are introduced, and where the most significant story events are carried out. Not all video games have a clear focus on story, but between I and VI, Final Fantasy evolved into a series that prioritized its narrative. We cannot discuss Final Fantasy without discussing story, and the
town map, as the mode at the center of narrative, is the best place to begin this conversation.

Story is an incredibly loaded issue in video games, however, and there are countless ways for designers to approach it (including foregoing narrative entirely). Just as interactivity makes space in video games unique from space in other media, the same quality completely changes the shape of the stories we can tell. The implications of this are far-reaching, but in this chapter I want to focus on one particular idea and its development from I to VI, using the town map as the primary mode through which Square expressed it. This is the question of postmodern storytelling in video games. Introducing postmodernity, of course, rips open even bigger questions, since it is a nebulous term almost by definition. It can be broadly understood as a school of thought that emerged in response to the changes of modern society.\(^1\) Postmodernity concerns how we acquire knowledge and evaluate truth, and it applies to all kinds of culture from science to history to art. In his 1984 work *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard asserts that the decline of the grand narrative is one of the central qualities of postmodernity and its standards for what is truthful. In modern thought,

> [Grand] narratives give credence to the status quo of institutions and activities: they orient decision-making, prescribe behaviour, order social life, give it a sense of purpose, determine rules and conventions and what counts as valid practice, establish what is

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true and just, and provide means of interpreting and valuing
human action and experience. They are static, universal, absolute,
and totalizing.²

In postmodernity, on the other hand, the grand narrative is no longer a
dominant way of asserting truth. This has implications for many disciplines, but
in fiction it means a breakdown in our understanding that any story—be it
literature or history itself—is defined by a single coherent direction of
movement.³ The link between this decline and video games is clear, as one of the
few traits that unite all video game stories is that each one is shaped by the
subjective experiences of each player.⁴ Whether it is the time or order in which
the story is completed, or the way in which it begins or ends, by definition, a
video game’s story reflects the unique experience of the player. Video games, by
introducing our own actions, push stories to less verbal, more physical places
that are not confined to a single linear path. This means that video games are
inherently contradictory to the grand narrative, but many games take it even
farther. Final Fantasy and its evolution is a key example of the symbiosis
between postmodernity and video games, demonstrating games’ capacity to
articulate postmodern ideas as well as the consequences of this ability.
Ultimately, the way the franchise developed between I and VI represents the rise
of the grand nonnarrative in popular entertainment.

⁴ James Paul Gee, Why Video Games are Good for Your Soul (S.l.: Common Ground, 2005), 47.
It helps that the framework of pop culture in 80’s and 90’s Japan was already receptive to radical experimentation with nonnarrative and postmodern stories. In *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*, one of the seminal academic works on anime subcultures, Azuma Hiroki argues that otaku culture is fundamentally rooted in a postmodern perspective. To Azuma, we can look at the ways in which fans consume anime and manga—media that developed concurrently with early video games and influenced their presentation—as “animalized.” Animalized consumption means taking an intense interest in character and seeking work or buying merchandise related to those characters, at the cost of an interest in the wider story. This pattern of media consumption came to dominate otaku culture in 90’s Japan. In this way, otaku works eschewed the grand narrative; suddenly the overarching world and storyline were not important to fans, with the focus instead falling upon objects of instant gratification at a more granular, character-based level.

Another idea of Azuma’s that will prove crucial to analyzing postmodern video games is the connection he draws between deconstructed narrative and computer programs. If our narrowed definition of postmodernity is focused primarily on the deconstruction of a hierarchical version of events, then any kind of computer application exemplifies this by presenting information as a database rather than in a linear manner. Computers puncture the notion that there is a single truth by being an assembly of code, interface, and presentation—neither


6 Azuma, 37.
element any less “true” than the others. This means that it is not only the
cultural context of Famicom games that engages directly with postmodernity,
but also their technical composition. Azuma himself is aware of games’ potential
to engage with his argument. He includes an extensive analysis of a visual novel
called Yu-No, arguing that its multiple endings are a commentary (accidental or
not) on database consumption. Yu-No’s universe-hopping story simultaneously
demonstrates an understanding of grand narrative (the story connecting these
universes) and of the more scattered database structure (the multiple universes
and the ways their seemingly contradictory stories can coexist). Games, as a
form of computerized storytelling that allows the player to view all these small
narratives within the context of a whole, are specially suited to expressing the
contradictions of postmodernity.

Final Fantasy therefore came into existence at a crucial intersection
between new, important ideas—the question is how this works in practice. We
can begin by looking at I as an example of how games can forego narrative
entirely and still be coherent. Although I does have an overarching story about
the Warriors of Light and their quest, it is largely underdeveloped. Square puts
far more detail into the individual locations and civilizations that the player
discovers; these are the real draw of the game. As usual, the technology limits
what exactly is portrayed, but Sakaguchi’s team makes each location on the map
intriguing for one reason or another. Entering a cave unexpectedly leads to a

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7 Azuma, 103.
8 Azuma, 116.
dwarf metropolis; the Warriors of Light help a town overrun by pirates; abandoned locations teem with bats that squeak at the player. These locations hold far more intrigue than the bland story tying them together, because that is all the story is really supposed to do: provide momentum to get us from one set piece to another. As a result, the pleasure that we usually expect from a story—that of watching the narrative unfold—is largely forgotten.

Moreover, as a game mostly lacking in story sequences (which started playing an increased role in II), the ways in which we uncover both our smaller and larger goals in I resemble database navigation more than traditional narrative. Rather than having tasks dictated to us in a linear narrative, it is up to the player to uncover their goals themselves by walking around and talking to characters. For instance, it is through interacting with his brethren that we learn that the elf prince is in an enchanted sleep, and what we must do to awaken him.

The way we discover the elf prince’s plight and what to do about it does not unfold linearly; there is no prescribed order in which we uncover information. Rather, in the town map, we walk around speaking to his subjects and learning about the situation. Like searching for something on the Internet, this is literally a process of database navigation rather than passively gleaning information from somebody telling us a story. In this way, the pacing and structure of a grand narrative collapse; long-term goals are still present, but they often recede into the background in favor of what is immediately in front of us. Moreover, the grand narrative is not what actually keeps us playing. Rather, it is the intrigue of
each new civilization that we encounter, our desire to explore our immediate surroundings, and the suspense of what lies ahead.

*Final Fantasy I* demonstrates how games can be satisfying and interesting with little to no narrative at all. The story is functionally an afterthought. When the franchise entered the 90’s and JRPGs became more focused on storytelling, however, players began to expect narrative from the genre. As Square and other developers rose to meet those needs, their work became even more reflective of postmodern ideas. For instance, *Chrono Trigger* was a game published by Square in 1995, one year after *Final Fantasy VI*. For years, *Chrono Trigger* was considered the gold standard in video game storytelling, and one reason its time-travel narrative was praised so highly was because of its multiple endings. Just like *Yu-No* in Azuma’s analysis, *Chrono Trigger* diverts our expectation for a single true narrative by offering multiple possibilities based on our choices. *Chrono Trigger* is a useful point of reference because it demonstrates how 90’s JRPGs, as they began to focus more on writing, diverged from conventional narrative. Although it may initially seem counterintuitive that more narrative focus resulted in a less linear structure, this is more than possible in digital media, where we can navigate paradoxical storylines ourselves.

Certain elements of *Final Fantasy VI* that we have previously discussed are already suggestive of postmodern otaku culture. One of the most significant examples of such a trait is *VI*’s intense focus on character; otaku fixate on character over story, and Square designed *VI* from the ground up to have a similar balance. In a 1994 interview, Takahashi Tetsuya, the game’s graphics
director, remarked, “There isn’t a single protagonist this time, so you’re free to use the characters you like throughout the game, which I think makes for a more interesting playthrough.” Kitase Yoshinori, who directed the game in Sakaguchi’s stead (a first for the franchise), has stated that the team built the entire game around the premise of a large cast of characters, with each one serving as a protagonist rather than having a hierarchy of importance. This is a far cry from some of the earlier *Final Fantasy* titles; *IV* in particular focuses on one single protagonist, with the rest of the party serving supporting roles. In *VI*, each character has an individual subplot as well as a role to play in the larger story. In this structure we can observe some of the primary traits of postmodern otaku consumption, namely the obsessive focus on character and smaller narratives over the grand narrative.

Now that we know that Square wanted to emphasize character, it is important to look at how they did so. One significant note about this era of games is that, though they paid more respect to narrative than any console titles that preceded them, the actual writing was rarely where the narrative emphasis was placed. This is not to say that the writing—either the original Japanese or its translation—was poor, but rather that it has a workmanlike quality. Still facing memory limitations, Square tended to use text with an efficiency that, while effective, was not geared toward eloquence. Where players found the beauty of

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*Final Fantasy VI* was not so much in poetics as it was in the way the game synthesized the writing with its visual presentation and interactive elements to coax its characters to life. Even here, we can see the echoes of postmodern influence, as *FFVI* prioritized character visuals over the traditional verbal focus of narrative. This is why so much of the storytelling onus fell on the town map, as the area of the game that afforded its characters the most movement and nonverbal expression.

GameTrailers’ retrospective on *FFVI* begins by asking a crucial question: “How do you animate something 26 pixels tall? How can a character with barely enough room to blink exude emotion?” To have a good story that hinged on visual representations of character meant more than simply adding a lot of characters; the entire presentation of the game needed to adapt. For *VI*, Square reworked the character sprites to allow for a greater diversity of movement and, therefore, expression. Of course the change from Famicom to Super Famicom made a difference, allowing for far more colors and animation frames per character. Character-based storytelling was made possible because even a large cast of characters could be visually distinct from each other and express a more dynamic range of emotions. The story could become more complex not so much because of its literary content, but because Square was finally building the toolkit to communicate with the player visually. When your heroes’ movement

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becomes endearing and your villains can physically act sinister, your world can come to life.

Kefka, the central villain, is an excellent example of how both the designers and players prioritized character. Fans often celebrate Kefka as one of the best video game villains of all time, 12 with this distinction standing in spite of the fact that he doesn’t do much in the grand scheme of the story besides grandiose acts of villainy. Kefka is memorable not because of what he does but because his presentation turns him into an over-the-top monster. We do not remember him because of speeches he makes or the specificity of his transgressions, but because he is such a distinct physical presence. He bounces around the map, waving his hands and even uttering a computerized laugh, the choreography shaping him into a dynamic on-screen person. It is important to note that his generic story arc does not need to be viewed as a failing on the part of the Final Fantasy VI writers because it was so clearly not their focus. Rather, the areas where they did choose to bolster his presentation, and the impact he left on audiences, indicate that VI knew how to build an exciting adventure while also deprioritizing the larger story and the text itself.

JRPGs clearly have strong connections to 90’s otaku culture, be it stylistic (using manga art to attract audiences) or formal (character over narrative focus). Whereas much of Azuma’s analysis focuses on fan culture, games are unique because they enable the original media to delve into postmodern ideas like small narrative directly. The visual qualities of the characters are one

example (as well as one that shows how important the town map was to emphasizing the format), but it is the game’s grander database structure that enables it to experiment with narrative form in ways that would never be possible with traditional narrative media. Azuma himself alludes to this when he chooses a game, rather than another kind of popular work, to analyze for postmodern themes. *Final Fantasy VI* makes these concepts even more accessible, appealing to a wide international audience. The emphasis on character is a surface element of a systematic format that deconstructs a single conventional narrative without sacrificing its strength.

![Fig. 3.3: The scenario selection screen is laid out like a town map, but demonstrates a tentative step toward branching narrative.](image)

Unlike later endeavors of Square’s, *Final Fantasy VI* has only one ending. Nevertheless, there are moments where the plot splits and converges in response to the player’s choices. These choices are somewhat superficial, but they remain important because they show the decline of the author as the sole
source of narrative authority. The early examples of this are found in the "World of Balance" portion of the game. Once the party starts getting larger, there are certain parts of the game where the group splits to pursue different tasks. When this happens, the game gives the player a choice of what order to follow each party in (the screen is pictured above). We must complete all scenarios eventually, so the choice is not really a meaningful one. As a design decision, what this illusory choice accomplishes is highlighting the breadth of the playable party as well as drawing attention to the game’s episodic structure. The way that the design team chose to emphasize character was to craft the story around episodes focusing on each character individually; this was as elemental a design decision as the emphasis on character itself.\(^{13}\) By giving the player a choice in episode, Square could draw attention to this format by asking us to actively engage with it. The choice may not have an impact on the events of the game, but it is important in the way it enforces our understanding of its structure.

It is also, of course, a demonstration of the ways in which games are well-suited to the kind of postmodern structure that Azuma wrote about. The choice highlights episodic storytelling, emphasizing character-based events over the broad narrative. Our ability to select the order of events is also a kind of defilement of narrative structure; there is not, in fact, a single “true” sequence, nor are the events dictated to us by a single creator. Instead, we are asked to assemble the experience ourselves. Square, the author, ceases to have the sole power over the narrative, which is demonstrative of another of Azuma’s

\(^{13}\) “The Making of Final Fantasy 6.”
elements of postmodernity: the decline of the author as a “god” figure. The difference here is that while otaku culture only allows the consumer to engage at a meta level of consumption, an RPG allows the player to divert the intentions of the supposed author within the story itself. The direct application of choice, however superfluous, is a way of asserting that in a video game, there is never one pre-ordained structure.

These choices, however, are merely the premonition for the second half of the game, which takes an even more dramatic deconstructive form. As we discussed in our analysis of the overworld, the game is split into two halves; the World of Balance becomes the World of Ruin after Kefka unleashes a cataclysmic force. The overworld map is physically broken up, a change mirrored by the fragmentary shape that the story adopts. The entire cast of characters is scattered throughout the world, and when the World of Ruin story starts, the player only has control of Celes. The whereabouts of every other character are unknown, so the player must traverse the world to reassemble the team. With some restrictions, the order in which we locate our allies is left open to the player. Although the first challenge is locating every character, once we find them, we typically have to play through a small story to get them back in our party.

These stories once again take the form of standalone “episodes” and in many cases have almost nothing to do with the wider plot. For instance, to reclaim the swordsman Cyan, the party must first find him by following a carrier

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14 Azuma, 60–61.
pigeon that brings messages to a young woman. Once you locate Cyan, you can continue his story by bringing him to his old home at Doma Castle, at which point you begin a bizarre journey through his soul to rid him of some creatures that are possessing his nightmares and help him come to terms with the loss of his family. This has nothing to do with defeating Kefka (beyond recruiting another warrior); it is purely a personal, character-based episode.

This sort of storyline repeats for every character. In the first half of *Final Fantasy VI*, the structure is mostly linear, and we are by and large following the story of the characters fighting Kefka. In the World of Ruin, this structure falls away; there is never one expected “next move” that they player must make. The predictable structure of the first half of the game, where the player visits an important location, experiences an event, and then learns where they must go next falls away. As the narrative becomes less linear, the characters’ movement within and between map locations develops in the exact same way. Here we can see how narrative and movement share a direct connection; as one becomes more or less structured, the other follows. This is emphasized by the fact that the climax—where the plot converges once again—takes place in a tower that is in the center of the map, with the player moving around it of their own accord until they can enter. The central narrative conflict remains a clear final goal, just as it remains a visible location on the map, but for large stretches of the game we do not engage with it directly.

This means that *Final Fantasy VI* deliberately deconstructs its own storyline; the entire game is built around reducing the grand narrative in service
of character. This is one way in which we can analyze it as a postmodern cultural object. Indeed, when Azuma writes about the distinction between \textit{Gundam}'s fanbase in the 80's and \textit{Neon Genesis Evangelion} in the 90's, he observes a clear break in that consumption that resembles the distinction between the World of Balance and the World of Ruin. \textit{Final Fantasy I}, a product of the 80's, prods gently at nonlinearity and small narrative, but it is \textit{VI}, in 1994, that actually breaks into it as a valid form of video game structure. The first half of \textit{Final Fantasy VI}, which is more “traditional,” reads as a commentary on earlier structures on popular media, and the literal change from an old world to a new one is an observation that we are entering a new frontier that defies structure.

It is also important to analyze how this reduction of narrative creates a database structure, because herein lies much of the analysis for video games as a medium uniquely capable of reflecting postmodernity. In the absence of linear structure but in the presence of the player's ability to decide where to go and what to do, the overall shape of the game becomes that of a database. In his discussion of visual novels and other games, Azuma writes, “In our ‘animal age,’ the desire for small narratives at the level of simulacra and the desire for a grand nonnarrative at the level of database coexist, dissociated from each other but without contradiction.”\textsuperscript{15} This comprehensively sums up the structure of \textit{VI}'s second half: small narratives united by a loose structure to be uncovered by the player. In order for this structure to be possible, however, we need to facilitate nonlinearity—which is really only possible in digital landscapes where the

\textsuperscript{15} Azuma, 103.
consumer is able to choose and interact with all components at once. When Azuma discusses nonnarrative in anime or manga, it is purely within the context of fan communities, who can deconstruct or ignore the narrative. It is in games alone that we can find examples of the authors themselves exploring anti-narrative structure. *Final Fantasy VI* is not only an example of nonlinearity, it is also a work that looks critically at its predecessors and engages directly with these new forms of storytelling.

The early *Final Fantasy* games therefore build off of ideas about how interactivity changes the types of experiences we are able to receive from media. There are few forms of entertainment that treat unconventional narrative structure as viable in works intended for popular audiences. Blockbuster films or television, for instance, are rarely able to experiment with structure because it is very difficult to make unconventional works in these media appealing. Much of the joy of Square’s more ambitious stories, then, arises from the way it makes almost avant-garde structure accessible while also adding to the discourse surrounding that form. It is an exciting demonstration of the power and importance that video games hold in the cultural landscape.

Both *I* and *VI* are thorough deconstructions of the modern grand narrative. From *I’s* quest-based structure to *VI’s* almost anti-structural conclusion, both are able to remain compelling even as they eschew conventions of writing and narrative because Square understood how to harness the game worlds’ interactivity to edge the player on. As a result, they can forego traditional structures while still remaining engaging to a general audience. In doing so, they
demonstrate the importance of video games in the postmodern age, as a medium that can reflect—or even experiment with or commentate on—postmodern ideology in a way that is exhilarating to its participants. The exciting implications of this ability are summarized in one of my favorite quotes on digital narratives and their capabilities, from Janet Murray’s classic *Hamlet on the Holodeck*:

To be alive in the twentieth century is to be aware of the alternative possible selves, of alternative possible worlds, and of the limitless intersecting stories of the actual world. To capture such a constantly bifurcating plotline, however, one would need more than a thick labyrinthine novel or a sequence of films. To truly capture such cascading permutations, one would need a computer.¹⁶

Thinkers and writers have been grappling with the aesthetic implications of postmodernity for decades now, and in Murray’s book she examines ways that a variety of media have experimented with new structures to articulate a changing world. Yet what could represent postmodernity better than a medium completely born out of the postmodern era? The Famicom, Square, and *Final Fantasy* are all entities that arose from the specific circumstances of their time and place. It follows that they are able to shed new light on these circumstances, to make its complex ideas newly accessible, and to offer a kind of story that we had never seen before.

Chapter 4

The Menu: Encountering the Characters of *Final Fantasy*

Fig. 1: *Final Fantasy* I’s menu. Fig. 2: *Final Fantasy* VI’s menu.

Exploring the world, visiting a new city, fighting a monster—for the most part, the thrill of every *Final Fantasy* mode is self-apparent. It’s easy to see why we enjoy these experiences, which are concerned directly with exciting fantasy and adventure tropes. Next to these modes, the menu might seem downright boring; it is the realm of statistics, item management, and game settings, none of which sounds very appealing at all. In fact, on its surface the menu is simply a clunky way to make the rest of the game more fun, resource management placed awkwardly inside of an epic.

Saving your game, balancing your party’s statistics, or assigning gear do not seem to have much to do with embodiment or exciting storytelling, but this assumption ignores how central the menu actually is to our experience. It is how we explore our relationship to character, one of the central components of any role-playing game. By providing the mechanism by which we define and shape
our characters, the menu screen emerges as a rich element of the game with complicated implications and boundless potential.

The menu is so important that it is in fact where *Final Fantasy I* begins, and it is here that we make some of the game’s most important decisions. The very first thing the game asks us to do is not explore a map or win a battle, but to select the party of four warriors whom we will control for the rest of the game. Without this decision, nothing else is possible. The menu is not simply how we get our affairs in order; from character crafting to character revelation, *Final Fantasy* demonstrates the rich, unique relationship that exists between a video game player and the protagonists they control.

What makes a video game protagonist unique among all other media is the interaction between the player and the character that games allow. This relationship can take a huge number of forms, from direct embodiment, to a side-by-side relationship, to using the character as a mediator between real people, as we see in later examples of multiplayer games. As early RPGs from before the advent of online games, *Final Fantasy* represents only a fraction of this spectrum—yet even between these two games we can observe wildly different takes on characterization that hint at the diversity that games make possible. By using the menu through which we build our character, as a lens, we can see how *I* and *VI* carve different paths.

The one consistent element of characterization across all video games is that the main character is never one person, but two: a hybrid between the designed protagonist and the controlling player. James Paul Gee, one of video
games’ best-known scholars, calls these two levels of characterization the “designer’s story” and the “virtual-real story.” ¹ On the one hand we have the designed character, with their appearance, backstory, and abilities, and on the other hand we have the traits that emerge from the choices we make during the game. According to Gee, despite the influence of the designer, the “virtual-real” story is the “true” narrative, since it is what we actually see expressed in the game; the designer can guide you toward the experience that they want you to have, but it is really you, the player, who makes everything happen.²

The virtual-real character always exists in a video game; as long as we control the avatar, we have some influence over the exact path they will take. Nevertheless, our relationship to the virtual-real character is not so straightforward. *My Avatar, My Self* by Zach Waggoner is a book that looks specifically at this relationship in single-player RPGs like *Final Fantasy*. Waggoner argues that there are two primary relationships that we can have with the character: we can either think of them as an avatar or as an agent. Waggoner defines an avatar as “the user’s representative in the virtual universe.” ³ By definition, it is a surrogate for the user, meant to be a representation of them in the virtual space. For a character to be an avatar, its creation must involve a

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¹ James Paul Gee, *Why Video Games are Good for Your Soul: Pleasure and Learning* (Champaign, IL: Common Ground Publishing, 2005), 27.

² Gee, 27.

significant degree of user input. This is how the avatar becomes a representation of us, by allowing us to express ourselves through the character.

Not all characters afford this level of customization, however. When user input is limited, a character becomes not an avatar, but an agent. Waggoner offers the example of Pac-Man: “Pac-Man cannot be altered in any way by the user. He can only be controlled. His appearance and skills never change throughout the course of the game. This makes Pac-Man an agent.” The key distinction is the degree of control that a player has over the skills, appearance and personality of the character. Because Waggoner believes that “appearance and skill level” are the most important factors in making a character an agent, all RPGs theoretically fall under this term, since they involve accumulating experience to make the character stronger. I would argue, however, that the dichotomy has less to do with the presence or absence of a specific device. Rather, it is about the intended experience overall: how we are expected to relate to the characters, and how that influences the rest of the gameplay.

Viewed through this lens, the player characters in I are avatars and in VI they are agents. This is far more than a technical distinction; it colors the entire game, its story, and what both we and the characters are capable of. Square uses these qualities to shape each game toward their design goals. In I, where Square’s goal was to enable our self-expression, character becomes the means by which we do so. While VI’s more prescriptive characterization might seem

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4 Waggoner, 9.

5 Waggoner, 9.
limiting, it influences how deep Square can go into story and character by facilitating different levels of character depth. Like so many other techniques that Square uses, these approaches, while diametrically opposed, use the same tools to craft equally rich experiences.

In *Final Fantasy I*, characters exist for the player, and we shape everything about who they are. We act as a sort of god-figure; we are not meant to identify with a single character but all four, creating and controlling each. Our freedom over our characters is limited only by the rules of the world. This, of course, relates directly to the original goals of *Final Fantasy*, and we can clearly see how it builds upon *Dragon Quest*’s success. Recall Horii’s design philosophy: “It would be really exciting for the player to play as their alter ego in the game.”

*Final Fantasy I* sought to appeal to the same audience by giving them not one, but four characters that would facilitate their presence in the game world.

From the game’s start, the menu is the primary way in which we shape our characters. Our first task as saviors of the world in *FFI* is to select the classes and names of the four characters that we will control for the rest of the game. There are six classes to choose from—three warriors and three magic-users—and the party can be any combination of these characters (including four of the same class if the player so chooses). Each class has its own strengths and weaknesses in addition to the broad distinction between magical and physical abilities. This means that any given party might be one of an extraordinary

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number of possibilities, with the outcome of the entire game riding on an individual player’s desires.

Our freedom to do what we want with the characters is so absolute that we can even break the game if that is our desire. In a 2012 interview, Kawazu Akitoshi, one of the lead designers on the game, noted that the different character classes were really about player freedom and not about fine-tuning the gameplay:

I wanted people to be all Black Mages or all Warriors if they wanted. But back then... In those days, people didn’t think that deeply about that kind of thing, either... The idea was to just let people figure things out. If you make a party of all White Mages, you probably can’t clear the game, but we weren’t really worried about that affecting the balance or anything like that.7

This reflects Horii’s words as well, showing how Final Fantasy adhered to the same philosophy about choice. The party system and the choices it afforded the player were not about maintaining a balanced system, but rather creating something that the player felt they had an active role in. Through the menu, Final Fantasy invites us to step into a virtual space in the bodies of these characters that we create in our own image.

This kind of dynamic self-expression is something that video games are uniquely capable of. Our option to make the game impossible for ourselves is yet

another of its postmodern tendencies; *Final Fantasy I* further undermines the grand narrative by emphasizing character and then giving the player so much control over those characters that they are able to sabotage the storyline completely. The grand narrative, or what Gee would call the “designer’s story,” can be so easily subverted because of the level of control that interactivity affords. We can select a party of characters that we like, of characters that we think sound cool, of characters that will make the game easy or hard or impossible. *Final Fantasy I* is a very simple world, but it is also a world where we have a tremendous amount of agency. This is a relationship to fiction that belongs only to games.

Another possibility unique to games is also my favorite example of how much power *Final Fantasy* affords the player: our simple ability to name the characters. It is an innocuous choice that most gamers take for granted today, but its expressive possibilities are vast. When we select a character’s class, we are also invited to give them any name we like—as long as it is four characters or fewer. The four-letter cap obviously restricts the names we can use, especially in English; in Japanese, the flexibility of the character system is more forgiving. Regardless of limitations, the freedom to choose any name within reason gives players a tool with which to craft their heroes’ personalities. This may seem insignificant, but when the designer suggests a name for the character in advance (as in later *Final Fantasy* titles), it makes strong implications about who that character is supposed to be. The option to name our characters is an invitation to make them into whatever we like. As limiting as it feels in 2017, it
remains true that choosing a class and four letters for each of my warriors allows me to decide who they will be in every way that matters to the characters around them.

To see just how much FFI actually influences self-expression, we will look at my own party and how the results reflect my personality. My FFI party consisted of a Fighter and one of each type of Mage (Black, White, and Red). This makeup reflects my predilection, shaped over years of playing other RPGs, for magic-using characters. Already, my own identity—that of a relatively experienced RPG player—asserts itself, defining my playthrough. With such a magic-heavy party, I will have to put effort into raising the funds to buy spells that I will teach to the right characters. Additionally, because the amount that I can use magic skills is limited by the number of Magic Points (MP) that my character has remaining, traversing the overworld becomes even more of an exercise in rationing resources (perhaps this is why the game takes me an interminable amount of time to play; perhaps it is because I grew up on RPGs much gentler than this one). I am willing to put the time in because I think that it will make the game the most enjoyable for myself, but what this means is that my choice in character will also affect how I spend real hours of my life.

Among my party, the member most receptive to our analytical purposes is the Red Mage. The Black Mage is built for offensive magic and the White Mage for healing magic, but the Red Mage is equally proficient in both; as a result, it does not have a specific path for spell learning and is more readily customizable.
This makes it an ideal example of how free choice results in personalized characters.

My particular Red Mage's name is Meg. I chose this name because it was in trend with my other characters, who are similarly given light, vaguely cute (and very short) names. I also picked it because it is a feminine-sounding name, and since none of the playable characters have explicitly stated genders, I wanted a party mostly made up of gender-neutral or feminine characters. It can be easy to scoff at the notion that a four-character name could possibly allow a person to place themselves in a game, but with it I have managed to assert a political agenda—a game this stark feels the magnitude of simple decisions.

Thus far, I have discussed only choices that I made in the game's opening menus, and although they are the most crucial for crafting identity, my decision-making continues until the end of the game. My party established, what I have left are the choices about how they will progress as they level up: the items they equip, the spells they learn, the time I invest in their training and the way in which I use them in battle. Of the party, Meg is the character most likely to evolve in an unexpected direction, because she can use both types of magic and is therefore the most responsive to my needs. Partway through the game, then, my Red Mage comes to reflect my unique experience with Final Fantasy I.

At level 10, Meg knows five spells: Fire, Lighting, Cure, Ice, and Lighting 2 (a more draining but more useful version of Lightning). She evidently fulfills the role I originally intended, because she sports both offensive and defensive spells, but the specific combination of these spells has adapted to accommodate the
realities of gameplay. The emphasis is clearly placed on offensive spells (the
elemental attacks), which I assigned in such a way as to compliment my Black
Mage’s moveset. Meg’s lone White Magic spell, Cure, is there because it is the
White Magic spell that I use the most regularly, and the skull-cracking difficulty
of battle in Final Fantasy I means that I find it advantageous to have multiple
characters able to heal one another.

This is thus the way in which Meg the Red Mage is shaped: an entity
crafted by my entire history with video games as well as the circumstantial
needs of the combat in Final Fantasy I. Meg is born out of my ideals as well as my
preferences and my immediate needs. She barely reflects the intentions of the
designer at all; she is almost entirely a product of my own creation. In 2017,
when it is standard practice in RPGs to choose the neck girth of your avatar, four
names and a moveset may not seem to afford much self-expression—but within
its eight-bit confines, Final Fantasy I offers true freedom. It demonstrates how,
with the right set of tools, players really can put themselves in a story, and
within that story assert their own arguments. For the player, characterization is
power.

Final Fantasy VI does not begin with a menu; it begins with a cut scene.
This is perhaps the best representation of the two games’ differing
philosophies—I you to define the characters, while VI uses the same devices to
tell you who they are. The purpose of the opening is to introduce us to the
central character, Terra. We cycle through multiple towns and dungeons and
several battles before the game offers the opportunity to make a choice about
the as-yet nameless character. Several changes in scenery, a climactic battle, and one communion with a mysterious spirit encased in ice later, this character receives the same introduction as every main character in the game. The background fades away to black, and a few lines of text introduce her: “A mysterious young woman, controlled by the empire, and born with the gift of magic...” Then—finally!—we are placed in the familiar menu for naming the character.

And yet there is a crucial difference from Final Fantasy I; when the screen loads, there is already a name in place for the character, whom the game strongly suggests we name Terra by filling in the name by default. The player can technically name the girl whatever they choose, but doing so means deleting Square’s strong suggestion and retyping the new name. VI gives the player the option of renaming the protagonists (because why not?), but several minutes of story leading up to the “choice” divert the player from thinking that Terra belongs to us.

Fig. 4.3: Despite the opportunity to name our characters, VI offers official suggestions to divert our choice.
What seems like a relatively innocuous change colors the entire gameplay experience and highlights what we are supposed to get out of VI that differs from I. In I, the characters are blank slates, and we are meant to enjoy them as entities that we create, but in VI, they are anything but. Each character comes with their own history and narrative role, and throughout that story’s course they will make decisions independent of the player and reveal new things about themselves. Just as in any story, the characters’ names suggest something about their identities and personalities, from the connection to some natural power that “Terra” suggests to the proud elegance of “Celes” to the guttural “Gau.” We can change the names, but each means something, and the game tries to divert our instinct to reanimate the characters in our image.

Although we can nominally influence the characters’ identities in VI, the developer maintains the most control. The identities of I’s cast are fluid, shaped entirely by the player’s choice, but in VI the characters come with names, backstories and personalities. Therefore, although the player does have a role in character progression, I would contend that the relationship that we have with the party is a player-agent relationship, rather than a player-avatar one. Whereas I gives us constant authority over the characters and provides the mechanisms to express their personalities, VI has the most say in who these people are. As a result, the function of the menu changes from facilitating expression to explicating character.

For players seeking a certain kind of experience, this might feel frustratingly limiting, and even make some question the point of interactivity at
all. Still, while perhaps not equally satisfying to every player, this relationship also carries significance, suggesting how interactivity can actually strengthen characterization techniques cultivated in traditional media. The virtual-real relationship still exists, but no longer are we a god. Instead, we exist alongside and within the characters, affording new opportunities to explore who they are. By presenting new ways to explore conventional models of characterization, *Final Fantasy VI* reveals how video games have wider cultural relevance, and their importance in conversations about story.

True to any form of postmodern storytelling, the menu is, ultimately, a database. *VI* is clever about using the statistics and resources that we unearth to connect us to the people it creates, turning moves and statistics into important sources of detail. As agents rather than avatars, each *FFVI* protagonist comes with prescribed abilities that are largely unchangeable. Everyone in the party has a specific statistical build; some have magical prowess, others are strong physical fighters, some specialize in offense or defense, and so on. In addition, whereas *I* allows any class to learn any magic spell, *VI* gives each character an established magic move set that they learn by leveling up. Another crucial part of each character’s makeup is their special move. Each character has one attack unique to them alone; every one is radically different in both effect and mechanics, with many taking advantage of the game’s real-time combat. These special attacks are unchangeable for the player. This means that each character has clearly defined strengths and weaknesses that we have little control over,
but instead of being restricting, these limits are valuable to us because of what they teach us about each character.

The warrior Celes is a character with a fairly straightforward statistical build but who plays one of the most significant narrative roles in the game (in addition to being a favorite of mine). Celes is an imperial general, modified with magical powers, who defects to join the main characters in their resistance. Her abilities reflect her military history; Celes has well-balanced physical and magical capabilities. She is one of a subset of characters that begin the game with the ability to use magic, although all can eventually learn spells. In addition to spells and the generic physical attack, *FFVI* gives each character a unique special attack, each with a very different mechanic behind it. In Celes’ case, the attack is “Runic,” or 魔封剣 (*mafūken*, or “magic-stealing sword”) in Japanese. This ability absorbs the next magic attack that the enemy casts and regains some MP instead of taking damage.

The special attack system is a spectacularly clever vehicle for character information. The mechanics of Celes’ *mafūken* ability reveal a number of things about who she is entirely independent of the narrative. The etymology of the Japanese name alone reveals the crux of her character—she is both a warrior and a magic-user. Just as her physical and magical stats are relatively balanced, the character herself has a history as a soldier engineered to fight with magic. Technically, this is all information that the player learns in early dialog scenes with Celes, but the role she plays in battle frees up the narrative from the

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constant need to reinforce who she is—a useful function in a story spanning dozens of hours with over a dozen main characters. This process of nonverbal communication allows for more streamlined story sequences, enabling the game to build convincing characters outside of dialog. Ironically, the game’s ability to eschew story becomes the key to its story’s success; the database, while an unconventional narrative structure, brings us to a rich understanding of the characters based on our experience with them.

The system allows for efficiency, then, but perhaps more exciting is the potential it suggests for games to tell stories that would be ungainly in other formats. Final Fantasy VI’s cast is huge, and it is very difficult to tell a story with fourteen main characters without them becoming indistinguishable from each other. Of course each character does not get a chance to speak in every scene, and some disappear from the story for stretches of time, but they retain relevance as playable agents on the battlefield. Moreover, their unique abilities, relayed quickly through the game’s database (menus), help distinguish them to the player. This is crucial because it reveals how a database structure does not mean fighting narrative; the two can work harmoniously to tell stories that a linear narrative never could. In doing so, it shows how the diversity of options for video game characterization do not always mean isolation from traditional storytelling, but can add to a centuries-old discourse.

It is also important to note how Square still needed to facilitate meaningful interaction between the player and the characters. A game will fail if we feel as if we have no control, so Square facilitated customization in a number
of ways that don’t intrude on identity. While the “base” of each character is set in stone, there are several small ways in which the player can customize them, taking the template that the narrative dictates for each character and tweaking it to their satisfaction. These changes mainly take the form of outfitting each party member with abilities or items that change their battle performance. We can equip our party with armor and weapons that afford stat boosts, a standard feature of role-playing games, but each character can also carry up to two “relics” that grant them more significant abilities, such as casting a spell at the beginning of combat or changing one of their battle commands. Thirdly, the flashiest customization option is the ability to equip everyone with an Esper, a magical creature that not only casts a powerful spell once per battle, but also allows characters to learn a certain set of spells upon leveling up. Therefore, although each character has a prescribed role, the player is never forced into a style of battle that they find unsatisfying; rich characterization is not at odds with enjoyable gameplay.

For all the differences between Final Fantasy I and Final Fantasy VI, their approach to characterization is perhaps the point where they diverge most dramatically. Both games completely contradict the other’s strategy; VI is about delivering as much information as possible whereas I is about leaving things open to interpretation. It is remarkable that such different styles are realized in the exact same mode, using the exact same language of characterization: statistics, moves and names. The menu is crucial to understanding Final Fantasy because it demonstrates how different both games were, but it also offers
exciting promise for video games as a whole. Here we finally get the chance the chance to see what happens not only when we move through the game, but when, partially or fully, we become a part of it. But what exactly is this change that occurs? What are its implications beyond the fun of Final Fantasy?

The first answer to this question is the most immediately relevant to Final Fantasy. This is simply the joy of experiencing character in new ways. Characters are among the most wonderful gifts that fiction gives us, and exploring and identifying with these characters is a true joy no matter what medium we do it in. The thrill of games is that they offer entirely new ways to explore and reveal character, and even to question what a character can be. Is Meg entirely myself, or is there some other part of her that I must discover? Where is the exact point where Celes ends and I begin? Final Fantasy does not answer any of these questions directly, but it does open our minds to them, and to new ways to empathize with our characters or hidden aspects of our own identities.

Characterization is its own reward, but the question remains of whether our unique connection to Final Fantasy's cast has implications after we put the controller down. In recent years, there have been a number of studies examining how games affect socialization. The prevailing result is that they absolutely do have an impact. Studies have found that games with “prosocial” (as opposed to violent or antisocial) leanings have strong links to empathy and decrease in aggression. This has resulted in a recent rise in “empathy games” (an example

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being the Canadian title *Papo & Yo*) designed to exploit these qualities.\textsuperscript{10} The benefits are even more pronounced in social games, and as video games expand in scope and interactivity,\textsuperscript{11} their potential to connect us to real or fictional people outside themselves expands as well.

Characterization in games also gives us the chance to explore our own identities. Whether we are called upon to perform as people different from ourselves (as in *VII*) or asked to tell the game who we are, games provoke a special sort of self-reflection. For instance, when Professor Oak in *Pokémon* asks a young child if they are a boy or a girl, it may be the first time many of us are given the choice to choose our gender. *Final Fantasy* eschews the binary nature of this question entirely by providing hardly any gender coding; the characters are us, but a version that we can gender however we wish. We can create characters that reflect our own identities or address the full gender spectrum.

In recent years, there have been a number of experimental independent games made by transgender designers that specifically explore the trans experience. Some of these contain visual styles or motifs that evoke old eight-or-sixteen-bit games (such as 2013’s *Problem Attic*). The fact that many artists have begun using games to talk about gender suggests that the fluidity they facilitate can relate to issues of identity in unique ways. Gender is hardly a central theme of the *Final Fantasy* games, yet by giving us the freedom of self-determination or


\textsuperscript{11} NPR/TED Staff, "How Can Playing A Game Make You More Empathetic?" NPR, March 27, 2015.
the chance at a new identity, they facilitate a freedom often absent in our daily lives. This, too, holds thrilling promise for games’ social impact.

Both *FFI* and *FFVI* were released in a period when not much of this territory had been explored, and when the public eyed games uneasily. Phenomena like otaku or hikikomori (shut-ins with powerful social phobias) contributed to the perception in Japan as well as abroad that video games were not social but “myopic, enclosing kids within their virtual constructions.” Yet it was the self-consciousness of these potential problems that led to games like the Pokémon series (1996), which were created explicitly to foster social relationships rather than hinder them.

Video games are so controversial and so complicated, with so much potential for both harm and good, because they are capable of so much. They have the astonishing power to prod gently at the edge of the self, by connecting us to others, withholding us from others, or blending our identities with someone entirely fictional. *Final Fantasy I* and *VI* explore only a fraction of this potential, because they are only two games. Future titles, namely *Final Fantasy XI* and *XIV*, would explore the social aspects in more detail by including online play, but all of these elements are here in their prototypical forms. Even at their earliest stages, games were always able to explore the limits of ourselves and our communities, and the results are young examples of one of the most dizzying, exciting possibilities for games.

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Chapter 5

The Battle Screen: Ritual and Meaning

Fig. 5.1: Final Fantasy I; fig. 5.2: Final Fantasy VI.

A professor once said to me that “battles are what make video games seem silly.” The maps and the menu all add texture to Final Fantasy, with clear connections to character, storytelling, and worldbuilding, but when most people think of a video game, they think about fighting stuff. That video games are often written off as being violent and destructive is made all the more complicated by the fact that most of gaming’s most popular genres—RPGs included—utilize combat. Final Fantasy is, in this regard, no exception. Battles with enemy monsters are the central play mechanic, and in many ways they do disrupt the flow of the game. Their primary function is as obstacles that must be overcome, but as a result, they obstruct our characters’ progress, which means they withhold goals like embodiment or story.

That so many video games feature combat sequences should nevertheless suggest something about their importance. There is clearly some characteristic
of combat that is so valuable that games up to this day rely on it, even as a

crutch. Final Fantasy's battle screen is the final game mode for us to analyze, and

it is perhaps the most complicated, because its existence seems so at odds with

any of the gameplay elements we have discussed thus far. Nevertheless,

inelegant though it may be, the battle screen is indispensable because of the way

it facilitates our sense of agency. Games researchers have proven how a sense of

meaning in our actions positively changes our involvement and sense of

presence. As with so much of what we have discussed, though, these theories

stem from human experiences much older than video games. The processes that

video game combat uses to empower players share qualities with ritual

practices, showing how action can instill ideas, emotions, and connections. The

battle screen taps into all these complex and exciting emotions. As with ritual's

ability to give power to seemingly insignificant actions, it gives our choices

tangible meaning within the game space and creates a sense that we are a part of

this world.

     It is a classic argument against video games as “art” (a dubious term at

best) that the competitive or trial-based structure of most games undercuts any

pretensions that the medium might have. Roger Ebert (1942-2013), the beloved

film critic whose argument that games could never be “art” placed him at

unfortunate odds with a community not known for calm mediation of

differences, was among the most vocal supporters of this claim. In 2007, he

wrote:
How do I know this? How many games have I played? I know it by the definition of the vast majority of games. They tend to involve (1) point and shoot in many variations and plotlines, (2) treasure or scavenger hunts, as in “Myst,” and (3) player control of the outcome. I don’t think these attributes have much to do with art; they have more in common with sports.¹

The crux of Ebert’s point is that the structure of a game such as Final Fantasy, which is designed around combat, undercuts any grander aesthetic ambitions of the designers by diverting attention to the goal-oriented structure rather than the finer points of a designed world. It is, of course, true that for the player to see this world, they will have to put the vast majority of their mental energy into the battle system, since succeeding within its confines is necessary to move forward. Thus Ebert appears to be right. How can I appreciate my interaction with a beautiful fantasy world if that world is constantly shoving distracting challenges in my face? The goal-oriented structure seemingly undercuts all the design goals we have discussed up to this point.

Nevertheless, although this structure might be obstructive to conventional linear narrative, this does not make the games’ design goals unachievable. For every scholar out there saying that the obstacle course structure of most video games means the medium has no integrity, there is another exploring the potential of goals and challenges. Jane McGonigal’s book Reality is Broken discusses at length the benefits of games not as stories or

worlds, but as systems of challenges. To McGonigal, games are personally and culturally enriching precisely because they are pleasurable; they are fun, and people react strongly to fun. Her argument is far-reaching, but it stems from the premise that the system of goals and rules that defines the “game” part of a video game becomes a powerful motivator when it can provide clear feedback to the player. People appreciate having their abilities tested when the context is interesting. We are psychologically primed to enjoy work when it returns a satisfying outcome, and this sustains our interest in a game (or any activity) for a long time. As McGonigal puts it, “If the goal is truly compelling, and if the feedback is motivating enough, we will keep wrestling with the game’s limitations—creatively, sincerely, and enthusiastically—for a very long time.” It is a crucial way of keeping us engaged with a product; an action that might seem pointless, like killing a dragon, actually heightens our connection with the narrative or thematic content of a game.

McGonigal’s book is largely about the “real-world” applications of this kind of focus and how games can shape day-to-day behaviors. Much of her analysis is concerned with augmented reality games (ARGs), which apply game structures to everyday acts in order to motivate “players” toward community-improving goals they might otherwise ignore. She goes into less detail about how it might affect us when coupled with a moving story, or a compelling environment to explore. Nevertheless, if a game can keep us more engaged with

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3 McGonigal, 27.
real-world actions, it can do the same in fiction. While scholars like McGonigal or James Paul Gee (whose focus is on games as education tools) look at how games can enliven learning or community service, I want to look at feedback and challenge from an aesthetic perspective. Scholarship about the practical applications of games is extensive, but what often goes overlooked is how game-like mechanics also have a long cultural history, with roots extending as deep as religion, and how they can affect our relationship to the world.

As much as I have spoken to the spare beauty of an eight-bit game’s world, there is not very much to do in it, which means that the average player would likely be prone to a quick loss of interest. *Final Fantasy I* needed a way to draw the player in, and combat was the natural solution for a number of reasons. It was the convention at the time, even at the inception of the JRPG genre, to use combat as a hook, perhaps because it was easy to render in simple actions and visuals. Moreover, using combat rather than puzzle-solving, treasure hunting, or something of the sort as the means of challenging the player adds texture to the fantasy by remaining consistent with genre tropes. Many traditional fantasy stories contain a great deal of action, because physical conflict is an effective way of establishing tension even when we are not directly taking part in it. By connecting *Final Fantasy* to other fantasies wherein the protagonists fight goblins and giants, Square uses the battle screen as another way of communicating to us about what kind of world this is. While a challenge (according to both Ebert and McGonigal, for once in agreement) does not have to be combat-based, it makes sense for *Final Fantasy* because it builds off genre
conventions that enrich its world as well as game design conventions that provide a template Square could build off of.

The battle system keeps the player mentally engaged while maintaining curiosity about what the world has in store. Recall how in our look at *Final Fantasy’s* overworld, I noted that the battles, and the challenge they pose, have a direct impact on how our movement is paced. The two primary actions we take in *Final Fantasy*—exploration and combat—may not always be perfectly congruent with each other. A random-encounter battle can disrupt exploration in any number of ways, including setting it far back. Despite posing a practical obstacle, however, battle reinforces exploration in ways that make both modes much stronger, because it adds tension to the pace of our movement through the overworld.

Battle also motivates us to engage with our characters by providing payback for customization. In the previous chapter, we examined how interacting with characters’ abilities and stats connects us to them. With no real story to speak of, and no action besides walking around in the game’s exploration sections, any player choice would be cosmetic at best were it not for the impact that it has on the battlefield. As I noted in my discussion of the menu screen, the battle screen is where most of the player’s choices actually play out and change the game world: The decisions that I make in the opening menu affect how I experience battles, which in turn affects the next set of choices I make, and so on.
The battle mode therefore has a direct link to both the developers’ design goals and every other part of the game. Far from being superfluous to the game’s aesthetic goals or “too much like sports” as Ebert suggested, it is the material that connects us directly to the rest of the game. It highlights Square’s advancement over the formula of Dragon Quest, it gives the decisions the player makes meaning, and it invigorates the world of the game.

The question, of course, is whether this coherence remains in Final Fantasy VI, a game that not only serves a fundamentally different purpose, but also has substantially more ways to communicate with the player. It makes sense to argue that in 1987, when the vocabulary of video games was so limited, leaning on combat was an effective way for Final Fantasy I to engage the player and establish its world. By FFVI, although combat remained the norm (as it does now), the experiential palate of games had grown, and with it VI’s ambitions. The battle screen risked becoming irrelevant or distracting from the main draw of the game, its story. Adaptation was necessary.

Part of how Square revised the mode was by making combat itself a more effective way to reveal character. I have already discussed how statistics provide character background—but these statistics don’t have consequences until we get to the battlefield. Many of the most informative elements of character are directly connected to the real-time battle system adopted by the Super Famicom FF games. Rather than being a pure turn-based game like the early titles, when a player could deliberate as long as they wanted between moves, the Super Famicom games put a small amount of time pressure on the player. Although the
battle screen looked the same, the real-time engagement opened up more opportunity for unique character moves. For instance, Cyrus’ special move gives the player a choice to either attack right away or wait to power up—but the opponent can attack in the meantime. This system builds on the principle that battle is meant to continuously engage the player; as games themselves were becoming more complex, the original *Final Fantasy* battle needed updating to stay relevant. The so-called “Active Time Battle” system became a hallmark of the *Final Fantasy* series for many titles, and in its implementation we can see an echo of the original game’s need to define itself by carving out its own niche. Battle therefore continued to be a device for the designers to distinguish the game from competitors. Whether it is perfectly integrated into the literary or aesthetic elements of the game remains to be seen—but commercially, at least, it may have been a necessity.

*Fig. 5.3: Active Time Battle at work. On the right, we can see the gauges that fill up in real time before the character can move. As a result, although the player still makes the same choices that they did in *Final Fantasy I*, they must keep the timing of their attacks in mind as well.*
Despite its somewhat uninspiring financial utility, Square finds numerous ways to give the battle screen meaning. ATB and other new elements of combat are not only engaging, they tie the battle system directly to characterization. The special moves that inform each character's personality are only possible because of the added freedom of real-time combat, which enables types of attacks that would not make any sense in FFI's turn-based arena. The mechanics of combat continue to interweave with the stated purpose of the game; whereas I's battles allow for expression, VI allows the designers to dictate their own characterization, turning attacks into a form of expression.

In short, in both I and VI, battle is where the relationship with our characters begins to pay off. Clumsy though it may be, it is the only part of the game where the player's decision making has actual consequence to the outcome of the story, even if those consequences are a binary like winning versus losing. Regardless of the outcomes' simplicity, it is we, the players, who have control over them, and this is enough to empower us.

Of course, this empowerment does not count for much if, as conventional wisdom would have us believe, video games glorify violence. This has been a hot-button issue throughout the entire history of games, and especially in the U.S., it has often been used to demonize the medium. There are many different kinds of games, and I have no doubt that some of them do glorify brutality, just as some movies do. It might seem logical to lump Final Fantasy in with these games; after all, you kill hundreds of creatures before the end. Still, I would argue that this reading fundamentally misinterprets the mode, because at no
point are we supposed to revel in or even notice the violence. Although the implication is that we kill our enemies, fighting is sanitary; there is no blood, only abstract graphics to suggest attacking or taking damage. At no point does the game even directly confirm that any death is happening. It is more accurate to read battle not as hunting or killing for sport, but rather a challenge, victory, and resulting growth meant to symbolize progress.

Though it may seem crude, using violence as a symbol for some kind of progress or becoming is far from new. Sacrifice is a form of violence that has a strong history in religious practice. Georges Bataille (a postmodern theorist) writes about sacrifice as ritualized violence and argues for its symbolic importance as a way to transport the practice into a liminal space. Although often singled out, video games are hardly the first cultural object to recognize the transformative power of violence. Unlike the real-world equivalent, though, they are able to incorporate elements of sacrifice without causing any harm. Moreover, they allow for the act without glorifying suffering or trauma, the power of ritual without its cruelty.

The sacrifice provides meaning, but killing is not the element of combat that we are supposed to find pleasurable; rather, it is problem solving and the resulting items, experience points, and other rewards. It is growth and a rite of passage. This theme, though in its infancy in the 80's and 90's, would eventually become more explicit in JRPGs. In Atlus' *Persona* franchise (1996-present), for

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instance, we still participate in battle, but rather than wild animals, the enemies are not living things but manifestations of our darkest thoughts. Square Enix themselves explored the same idea in titles like *Kingdom Hearts* (2002-present) and *The World Ends With You* (2007). These games demonstrate how battle is meant to be a means of confronting our fears. Though not as clear cut in *Final Fantasy*, there is an early echo of these themes in battle’s neutral presentation. This subtext—battle as a metaphor for personal growth, violence as an intermediary symbol for something more meaningful—links video game combat to a much older tradition. McGonigal’s research explains why we enjoy combat, and even how it might improve our quality of life, but does little to explain how it might add to our relationship with these worlds. Yet in our discussion of the symbolic nature of combat, we have begun to engage with another form of repetitive, representational action: ritual.

Play and ritual have a long-standing connection. *Homo Ludens*, one of the seminal anthropological works about play, argues that ritual is actually a derivative of play. Play itself predates any other kind of entertainment, but ritual is simply what happens when we contextualize it with culture, often through religion. Huizinga categorizes play as an activity outside the sphere of everyday life, where we agree to interpret certain actions as representative of something else. He explicitly states that this makes ritual a form of play, since “all are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the

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6 Huizinga, 13.
performance of an act apart.” For instance, while Catholic communion is thought of as sacred, one actually approaches it with the same mentality that they would a game. The “body and blood” are not actually that, but rather metaphors that we accept as the real thing within certain spaces (the church). This is the same mechanism by which I agree that throwing a ball through a net equals a point on a court, or that a chess piece represents a knight on a board, or that I am battling a giant by selecting options from a virtual menu. All are ways that we give cultural meaning to seemingly insignificant objects. If ritual is play rooted in certain elements of culture, then of course it follows that video games, which themselves are cultural artifacts, would exist somewhere on the spectrum between pure play, devoid of any consequences, and ritual.

It is therefore helpful to look at battle not as a poorly paced part of Final Fantasy's continuous story, but as a ritual that enhances that story. Huizinga's phrase “temporary worlds within the ordinary world” refers to the entire world of Final Fantasy, but it can also refer to the battle screen as a world-within-a-world-within-a-world, a space that takes on significance all its own. Ritual scholars summarize it as “embodiment of ideology in habit.” Saba Mahmood uses this phrase to refer to repetitive Muslim ritual like prayer, which, as it turns out, is a distant cousin to fighting dragons in Final Fantasy VI. Religious ritual and video game combat share the fact that that participation is necessary

7 Huizinga, 10.

the actor enlists) and takes place in a separate psychological space. Mahmood understands participation in these rituals as a “disciplined rehearsal of ‘right attitudes.’”

In prayer, the ideologies and attitudes of ritual are quite clear, but it may be difficult to understand what kind of meaning it could carry in a lighthearted fantasy video game. One answer to this question lies in the physicality of ritual and repetition and its influence on our mentality. The actions that Mahmood writes about are based on “bodily practice,” and the purpose of their repetition is to enact spirituality through the body. In Final Fantasy, the player barely moves, but combat is deeply physical for the characters on screen. We carry out the ritual of combat ourselves, but it is embodied by the on-screen party. Ritual studies demonstrate the importance of embodied action, but in video games (at least those that precede motion control), the actor and the body through which they act are different. Yet there is still continuity; when I press a button, Celes reinterprets that as an attack, and no matter how small the movement may be, it is still a physical action that results in tangible effects within the game. This returns us to the issue of agency—our actions have consequences that are reflected in these virtual bodies.

Battle connects us with these bodies. When we make a decision about what move a character will make in Final Fantasy, it changes how they behave and the outcome of their actions. A character will gesture when they are

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9 Mahmood, 833.

10 Mahmood, 836.
attacking, or flinch when they are attacked; a character with a status condition is in a different position than one who is healthy or one who has been defeated. We may not physically feel these conditions, but we understand when something has changed, even feeling emotional responses, and we understand these changes to be consequences of our own actions. As a result, battle becomes the primary device by which the game connects us with the characters, blurring the distinction between ourselves and other entities. It is precisely the repetition and ubiquity of battle, then, that makes it resonant, establishing through habit that we are these characters and they are us.

In *Final Fantasy I*, it is clear how this enhances our experience because it has such a strong connection to the game’s design goal. It is through battle that we become our characters, and it is therefore how we are able to see ourselves represented in the game. In *VI*, we are not asked to identify with our characters directly, but we *are* expected to be aligned with them. There is little moral ambiguity in the *Final Fantasy* games, and there is good reason for this, because battle situates us on one side—literally. This is demonstrable in the way that the battle screen is set up, with the enemies always on the left, the player characters always on the right, and a wide space between them. In the world of *Final Fantasy*, the heroes and villains are always separate, and therefore always easy to distinguish from one another. While this has a degree of moral simplicity to it, it is also a powerful way to quickly, viscerally dispense information to the player. In *I*, battle is a simple device to connect us to simple characters, but in *VI*, when the story becomes more nuanced and we are expected to have connections to a
wide range of characters, our intuitive understanding of battle becomes a shorthand to communicate with the player. A (somewhat) more complicated narrative is reflected in a more refined, nuanced use of the battle mode that can be put toward a variety of purposes.

Both the physical layout of the battle screen and the act of combat itself can advance the narrative. From the very beginning of the game, Square uses the screen to explicate relationships and reveal character information. First, I want to look at a simple, early example of how, even without the physical act of combat, our understanding of how the mode works becomes a shorthand between ourselves and the game. This scene is not actually a battle, but rather a story sequence that uses the visual language of battle—a language that the player understands regardless of whether they are aware of it—to convey emotions that are not possible in the town map.

When Terra, the half-human, half-Esper protagonist, meets an Esper for the first time (when her family history is still unknown and the Espers are a mystery to all), she has a mysterious psychic reaction to it. She discovers the Esper along with a large group of other characters, but she alone experiences this connection, one so intense that it causes physical transformation. The emotional engine of this scene is Terra discovering that she is different than all the other characters. From a plot standpoint, we must understand that Terra is connected to these creatures, and from a character standpoint, we must understand her isolation and confusion about this power.
As expressive as VI’s character sprites can be, they also pose limitations. It is easy to imagine how in a film, the shot length might change so that only Terra and the Esper are on screen, conveying their unique connection. In Final Fantasy, though, when everything is viewed from the same top-down angle, this is impossible. Square therefore uses a change in game mode like a change in shot. Just as audiences understand the language of a cinematic close-up, which pushes us closer to the character, audiences also pick up on the implications of the battle mode. We understand that battle is a kind of direct, physical discourse. We also know that, like in a close conversation between two characters in a film, other characters in the scene disappear from the screen not because they are literally gone, but because they are no longer important to what is currently happening.

Something akin to a close shot happens between Terra and the Esper; their connection takes the form of a battle screen between just the two of them. Because the other characters are gone, we understand that this is a moment that belongs only to these two entities. Moreover, because of the implied tension of a battle, we know that there is some opposition between Terra and the Esper. The Esper is dangerous, and this is enforced by the fact that it is on the side of the battlefield reserved for the enemy. Lastly, by using the language of combat but not allowing us to make the choices we have come to expect from the mode, the game signals a lack of control. We sense that Terra cannot stop the communion and her subsequent transformation because if she could, we would be able to act through her; these are the rules of the battle screen as we understand them.
Even though there is no actual combat, the fact that this moment takes place in the battle screen invokes a certain emotional reaction in the player. Even if we are not consciously aware of it, we intuit the tension of this moment because as soon as a battle starts in *Final Fantasy VI*, it comes with a certain set of expectations.

Fig. 5.4: Terra communes with the Esper, while the other characters comment off-screen. Note that although there is a dialog bubble, it is superimposed over the normal combat menus. Everything about the structure of this moment is identical to an actual battle; the only difference is that the scene is cut off before we actually get the chance to fight.

Here we can begin to see how the repetitive nature of the battle screen influences our understanding of events. It is because we are so accustomed, even by this early point, to how battle works that this scene affects us. It works by both affirming our expectations about battle screen relationships and by subverting our expectations for how combat plays out. This practice of using repetition to establish expectations is here mined for emotional potential, just as ritual uses it for psychological effect.
The battle mode is a distinct part of video games with a number of unique traits worthy of examination, but it is important to remember that everything about it exists within the context of the game as a whole. Like shots or scenes in a film, the four modes of a Final Fantasy game may have different tones and functions, but when used intelligently, the still blend into a whole and strengthen each other in ways that would be possible on their own. I would therefore like to conclude this examination of Final Fantasy’s battle mode—and the examination of the modal structure of Final Fantasy as a whole—by looking at a sequence that shows how the different game modes can synchronize in ways that have powerful emotional implications. Discussing each mode in isolation might make them seem like broad or one-note devices, but Final Fantasy VI is so worthy of examination because it shows the variety of purposes that they can actually serve.

The game realizes its expressive potential midway through the game when General Leo, a famous warrior of the empire, confronts the main villain, Kefka. General Leo is not a primary character, but he does play a significant role, and as an enemy soldier who still earns the characters’ respect, he occupies one of the few moral gray areas in FFVI. It falls on this scene to clarify once and for all who Leo is and how we ought to feel about him. The way the game mediates the dynamics between the town map and the battle screen becomes the primary way that it teaches us about who Leo is and how we should react to him.

When Kefka interrupts a truce with the Espers that Leo is mediating, the general decides to put a stop to Kefka’s actions. He attacks Kefka, and the two
enter a battle screen. Although there are several main characters in the scene, none of them are present on the screen; Leo and Kefka are alone. The player understands that they are still present in the same setting as the other characters, the same way we understand that a random-encounter battle takes place in the location where our avatar stands despite the visual change. The change in the setting’s appearance is not meant to convey a jump in physical location. Instead, it communicates psychological isolation; no matter who else is present, this moment belongs to Leo and Kefka alone. By this point, the story has already established Leo as a foil to Kefka in a number of scenes where he criticizes Kefka’s cruelty. We understand that this moment is about ideological opposition because both the narrative and the dynamics of the battle screen enforce this point.

When the game cuts to the battle screen, the player briefly takes control of Leo and fights Kefka the way a traditional *Final Fantasy* battle takes place. Like any other playable character, General Leo has a standard attack as well as a special attack. Every character’s special attack somehow ties into their narrative role, and Leo’s is no exception; it deals massive amounts of damage and defeats the enemy in only a few turns. This battle does not pose any strategic challenge, because Leo is so powerful that it requires no technique to finish. Rather than serving its traditional purpose, this sequence is therefore pure characterization. Although the game has alluded to his combat ability at other points, this is the first time the player sees it firsthand, and they do more than watch; they experience his power by using it. This, of course, differs from the earlier scene
with Terra because it actually asks us to participate in a battle as Leo. In this way, the game swiftly aligns us with General Leo, inducting him into our in group the same way *VI* does with any other player character. Suddenly, any ambivalence we have about General Leo dissolves because he is aligned with us and against the villain. What’s more, the game relies on our preexisting knowledge of *Final Fantasy* combat to convey to us precisely (numerically, even) how strong Leo is. By this point, the player has a rich understanding of the combat and what constitutes an effective attack. When we see Leo dealing over two thousand damage in one hit and taking no damage himself, we gain a specific understanding of his strength. The combat mechanics have become a shared vocabulary between the game and the player.

Yet all is not well—once Leo defeats his opponent, he discovers that it was only a mirage, and the real Kefka appears and murders him in cold blood. *But I just won the fight!* the player might think, and again the dichotomy between the two is reinforced; Leo won his battle fair and square, playing by the rules that the player know and followed. Kefka, the coward and poorer soldier, must trick his way around the battle conventions as the player understands them in order to seal his victory. To reflect that Kefka is playing dirty, the end of the fight completely removes the conventional combat menus; the normal rules do not apply. Kefka murders Leo, and the battle ends, casting the player back into the town map where the story continues.

Leo’s death is a significant turning point and carries a great deal of thematic weight. It represents the point where Kefka begins to gain power,
building toward the moment when he unleashes forces that destroy the world. As such, it is crucial to the narrative that the player understands the sort of evil that Kefka is truly capable of, that we fear and hate him and what he can do. Whether the narrative is successful can be deduced by looking at player responses to Kefka, who is considered by many to be among the best villains in video game history. Clearly his character, a mortal man capable of unspeakable evil, resonated with the audience.

Because the conceit of Kefka’s character is that he is a human being as opposed to some all-powerful entity, he differs from conventional video game villains in that his hook as a character lies in his writing rather than simply being cool or frightening. Scenes such as Leo’s death are imperative to cultivating his character, and as a result, the fight is a particularly strong example of the how Final Fantasy VI refined its expressive techniques in order to write about characters in meaningful ways. Throughout the story Final Fantasy VI uses its battle mode as a way to dramatize emotionally intense scenes, especially ones that emphasize the relationships between the two opposing characters. Leo’s death scene uses the battle screen not only because it is a literal battle, but because the scene is about oppositions, contrasting Leo’s willingness to do the right thing despite his alliance with the cowardly, power-hungry Kefka.

The scene also relies on the relationship that we have with playable characters for added impact. Were this a sequence where we merely watched

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Leo fight Kefka, even if it took place in the battle screen, it would not be as resonant. However, because we control Leo (albeit briefly), we empathize with him and mourn his death more deeply. Handing the player control of General Leo is the game’s way of communicating that he shares our values and is worthy of being part of our group. During the fight, his goals are our goals, the same way our goals are represented through any other playable character. The battle is an intimate moment with a character that we otherwise did not get to know very well, and it is strengthened by the narrative context in which it exists. The battle feeds into the cut scene that plays out around it, and we are primed to accept what the battle tells us about Leo because of our experience with both kinds of play.

It is in the richness of this interaction that *VI* begins to assert what Square learned over the seven years between *I* and *VI*. It builds on the expectations of the player as well as an enriched understanding of which mechanics create what experiences to enrich the expressive potential of this four-mode structure. Like shots in a film, the modes in *Final Fantasy VI* not only entertain, they also offer crucial new perspectives on the characters.

The reliance that games—especially early games—have on combat is demonstrative of the growth still left for the medium. Still, it is important not to write it off as entirely pointless or destructive, because this reliance stems from an important part of human culture. If ritual is play, and play can adopt the shape of ritual, then perhaps we can connect the rise of video games as entertainment to something more innate than technological growth, fun, or
satisfying play. Religious practice—in both Japan and the U.S.—is on the decline. As religion and ritual become less relevant, people will naturally start to look for replacements: new rites of passage, new practices, new ways to instill action with meaning. Games fulfill these needs; in some ways they are ritual. Jane McGonigal’s work can provide technical explanations for why video games give us meaning, connection, and even hope. What she does not touch upon is just how old and powerful these instincts are, and the way that games can rush into the spaces created in a changing world. Battle is anything but a superfluity; it is the fulfillment of something so vital that we can forget how much we need it, replacing something absent in contemporary life.

What the Final Fantasy series began to touch upon as it evolved is how these rituals link to story, and the way the two support each other. Interactive media, above all other forms of entertainment, is where we can best apply the methodology of ritual to our perception of narrative. By allowing for the consumer themselves to act, it replicates the repetition and participation found in religious practices far better than a static medium can. This type of engagement has implications for any subsection of society, but many tend to favor its potential for utility over the way it can create more beautiful work that connects us to fictional worlds in new ways. Is it, as Ebert questioned, art?

Maybe, maybe not, but it is my belief that the label we ascribe to a medium is far

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14 McGonigal, 82.

15 McGonigal, 68.
less important than its actual ability to move us—and video games are the
newest example of a kind of emotional connection that is as old as culture itself.
Art or not, it’s about time we listen up.
Conclusion

What's Next?

Video games still feel new and special and exciting. Perhaps as a consequence of this immediacy, the community is always wrapped up in some crisis or another. At the time of writing, today's issues include the racist outbursts of celebrities famous for web shows about games.¹ “Let's Play” videos, usually posted to YouTube, are a popular subculture in games. These videos, which are usually just somebody talking over footage of themselves playing a game, can become massively popular and make celebrities out of their creators. Recently, however, some of the community’s biggest names have exposed hostile beliefs. These run the gamut from anti-Semitic to ant-immigration; it is easy to see their connection to the 2016 election. The fact that so many instances of discrimination occurred in close succession is both a disturbing and unfortunately accurate portrait of the gaming climate, which is dominated by such voices.

Discriminatory comments are toxic in and of themselves, whether they are made by anonymous internet commenters or millionaires. Still, these recent incidents are especially troubling because the audience for these celebrities is made up heavily of young children. Felix Kjellburg, also known by his screen name PewDiePie, was the most-watched YouTube star ever, building a career

from “let’s play” videos of himself playing games. He was signed to a contract with Disney (which he lost during the scandal),\(^2\) and his demographic is mostly young teenagers.\(^3\) This is content marketed directly to children, yet Kjellburg rocketed to fame before anyone interrogated his views because they’re just stupid videos about computer games. What consequences could they have?

In 2014, the community spent months in the hold of one of its most notorious crises, the ridiculously named “Gamergate.” Gamergate was a paranoid, incredibly convoluted battle that racked the entire industry. To put it concisely is nearly impossible, but at its heart it was a witch-hunt in which Internet communities harassed, threatened, and doxed female-identifying game designers and critics. People feared for their lives; they left the industry forever. Recently, commentators have drawn a link between this massive anti-feminist movement and the American “alt-right,” responsible for Donald Trump’s shocking election. *The Guardian* notes:

> In 2016, new wave conservative media outlets like Breitbart have gained trust with their audience by painting traditional news sources as snooty and aloof. In 2014, video game YouTube stars, seeking to appear in touch with online gaming communities, unscrupulously proclaimed that traditional old-media sources


were corrupt. Everything we’re seeing now, had its precedent two years ago.4

Video games and the culture that they create have had consequences, or predicted larger political trends, for years. If we do not listen to the media that we (and our children, and our political opponents, and so on) consume, these consequences become dangerous, and these predictions go unheard. When “Gamergaters” verbally harassed threatened the feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian,5 it was because they thought she was trying to take something from them. All Sarkeesian did was make videos offering fairly standard critiques of the way women are portrayed in games. Yet when so many of her arguments are criticism of sexualized or misogynistic portrayals of women (of which there are many),6 people respond with actual threats of death. They think they are somehow being robbed, and they turn violent. Video games are about agency, about the even momentary belief that you are not only witnessing something, you are experiencing it. This includes power. Just as privileged groups respond violently to demands for equality in the “real world,” they do the same to protect their privilege in games. The blurring of reality and fiction enabled by interactivity inevitably means that video games will have wider consequences, but as long as we do not examine why this is, this power can become dangerous.


Games’ cultural importance has been proven time and time again, often in horrible ways. Violent, racist comments made by industry stars instill toxic ideology in children, and fringe movements first rear their heads in the community; video games both sow and reap serious political consequences. The question is whether we have the tools to interpret these consequences. Liz Ryerson, a game designer and writer, remarked on the toxicity of the industry:

    The fact that videogames are still so frowned upon in larger culture I think has made them the go-to medium for fringe politics... the left will lose the culture war if it decides to stick primarily to traditional forms of media & rationalist enlightenment-era philosophy.⑦

Games are powerful, and if we do not treat them as such then they will continue to spawn communities that attack the vulnerable. Even as the industry diversifies, these incidents continue because there are still those who don’t realize how powerful a game can really be.

    Even as she cautions us to pay attention to games, Ryerson raises the question of whether a fringe medium should strive to go mainstream, and the potential consequences of public acceptance. Although Japan is no longer quite as central to the industry as it was in Nintendo’s early days, the country’s “soft power” endeavors nevertheless indicate the sort of fallout that comes with the government’s embrace of games. Games are an essential part of the “Cool Japan” push, an ongoing attempt to boost Japan’s economy by exporting creative

⑦ Liz Ryerson, Twitter post, March 13 2017, 3:39 PM.
products. In a 2014 article, the *Economist* reported that Abe’s administration was spending nine billion yen on the endeavor. Moreover, the article highlights video games, even more so than anime or manga, as an export that was successful abroad even before the initiative. All of this seems to be in line with what I was arguing for moments ago: public figures embracing the potential that video games and popular media have to bring about real change.

Yet these practices can easily become exploitative, diminishing the games themselves in favor of political utility. The *Economist* itself notes, “Isn’t a government-driven attempt to manufacture ‘cool’, well, just the opposite?” If the practice of turning games into soft power is most prevalent in Japan, that might explain why the Japanese industry has lost some prestige. Many commentators, including Extra Credits’ videos on JRPGs, agree that they simply don’t respect the genre as much as they used to. And—of course—the *Final Fantasy* series is the perfect franchise to highlight this trend. *Final Fantasy XV*, released in 2016, will always be notorious for its convoluted, ten-year development during which Square repeatedly renamed, relaunched, and delayed it. It shows; like so many big-budget games, *XV* is huge and lovely to look at, but feels empty.

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9 “Squaring the Cool.”


There is no easy answer for why *Final Fantasy* drifted the way that it did, but it certainly has something to do with the way companies and even governments use games as flashy, one-note propaganda. *Final Fantasy XV* does not flow from a single elegant premise like its predecessors, but is rather a game designed for scale, designed to impress, designed to rake in prestige for Sony, Square Enix, and Japan. This is a fundamentally flawed idea, because it assumes what so many triple-A games do: that how we get the audience’s attention is through sheer scale.

Yet I have devoted chapter after chapter now to two games that do not need scale to excite audiences or become internationally renown. Of course scale has a place, because the real world is also huge, and exploring the complexities of a vast interactive world is compelling. That is not what most “big” games do, though; most use size as a vapid means to impress people. I believe that this is what led to the long, exhausting development of *Final Fantasy XV*; there was simply no focus. It was a game without a real vision, and this is why it took so many years to even come into existence.

Like anything with cultural power, video games are complex. If we ignore them, they can turn on us; if we attempt to treat them like political tools, they become dull and domesticated. The compulsion to offer *more stuff*—the idea that a big-budget game is only worth it if it pushes the technology to its very limit—relates to both the toxic outrage culture found in the U.S. and the parody of coolness that we see in Japan. It is yet another indication that most of us do not quite understand what games mean or how they affect us. Video games have
only grown in influence since 1994, but consumers, developers and lawmakers seem oblivious to where this comes from. On yet another incident in which people leveled death threats at American industry professionals for not giving them what they wanted (this time, ludicrously, because they didn’t like Mass Effect 3’s ending), a columnist had this to say:

We are truly in a ‘give us’ culture. We want indulgence… You can argue that video games are growing in popularity because they ‘give us’ the things we want in terms of experience instead of having some kind of relationship with something we can’t control.12

As consoles get more powerful, games get bigger, but it becomes easy for everyone to mistake this size for what actually makes games great. Perhaps this is why so few people have managed to harness video games for truly great purposes. Unchecked, they can be incredibly destructive, and when officials harness them they often do so without an understanding of what makes them powerful. In order for us to use video games to move people in meaningful ways—to introduce them to new experiences, to connect communities around the world, to teach and inspire—we have to look deeper. We have to look at the many great games that exist already, and ask ourselves what it is about these games that compel us. I promise that if you look at your very favorite game, its size is not what you find beautiful.

This is why it remains essential for us to look at games’ past even as we move forward. *Final Fantasy* teaches us about the strengths that can be found in limitations. It proves that games’ joy does not derive from their size, nor their ability to indulge the audience. There is something magical to be found in picking four letters with which to name a character, or in watching miniature actors play out a story that we ourselves participate in. As long as we overlook this reality, we will never be able to understand the medium and the dreadful and wonderful things it can instill in people.

And video games are wonderful. As creative expression, they can explore ideas like nothing else that precedes them. As interactive objects, they become tools to alter how we think and learn. As combinations of these experiences, they transcend our daily lives and other forms of entertainment and become something that gives meaning to all of these things. *Final Fantasy* is a series with many things to say, but rising above all of them is the fulfillment of a promise: With the right amount of experience and resourcefulness, any one of us has the ability to save the world. This idea is unbelievably powerful. It is games’ gift to make us believe it.

I believe very strongly that video games can make the world a better place, because they already make my life better, but what we need are communities who are passionate about exactly what it is that makes them great. We need to look at titles that people are still writing about thirty years after they were originally released and acknowledge everything that they have to offer, and how we can put all those things to a new future. Scholars and commentators
need to find the words to explain how games move us. Designers need to understand the real-world impacts of these effects in order to make responsible, conscious games. Players need to understand how their reactions to games affect their actions. If we can open these conversations, we may well find that video games become more and more a source of joy, meaning, and empowerment. The social problems that games prophesize may never dissipate entirely, but if we listen, they can become tools for understanding.

I hope that, as the *Final Fantasy* series enjoys its thirtieth year and its fifteenth game, fans take the time to look back on the times they have spent in these worlds and acknowledge the thought and talent that went into creating them. I hope that this analysis of *I* and *VI* has helped others understand the potential that these titles fulfill, and how it is still only a fraction of what video games are capable of. If they are to have the global impact that Japan is aspiring toward, or if they are to become solutions rather than problems, we need players who are willing to listen. If you are inspired to do so, you will find a deep history of exciting, brilliant, moving titles, games that suggest an extraordinary future.
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