



Analyzing the “Cultural Identity” of Videogames — Through the Comparison Between Final Fantasy and The Witcher Game Series

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博 士 論 文

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Analyzing the “Cultural Identity” of Videogames

ー Through the Comparison Between Final Fantasy and The Witcher Game Series

（ビデオゲームにおける「文化的アイデンティティ」の分析
ーファイナルファンタジーゲームシリーズとウィッチャーゲームシリーズの比較を通じて）

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Analyzing the “Cultural Identity” of Videogames

— Through the Comparison Between Final Fantasy and The Witcher Game Series

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Abstract

The videogame industry has been largely influenced by major companies in Japan and America, dominating the creation and aesthetics of games. It is important to create a space for small and indie games to thrive, fostering diversity and innovation in game development. One avenue to help this cause is to draw inspiration from local cultures. However, asserting a local identity globally and competing with industry giants is challenging. Therefore, understanding the cultural identity in successful games is crucial for inspiring alternative and meaningful approaches to game development. That is why in this paper, I'd like to compare the cultural identity represented in role-playing game (RPG) genre, one in the Final Fantasy game series (Square Enix, FF) and the other in The Witcher game series (CD Projekt). The Witcher is a Western RPG (WRPG), while Final Fantasy is a JRPG. While not the most typical WRPG, The Witcher is a notable game rooted in Eastern Europe, representing the development of RPGs in the West. On the other hand, FF is an influential early JRPG that shaped subsequent games in the genre. Initially inspired by medieval themes present in WRPGs, FF diverged from that path in later games, showcasing a distinct approach to the RPG genre. In order to adapt tabletop RPG into computer RPGs, designers had to employ various approaches. Some changes were driven by technical limitations, while many others were influenced by the cultural preferences of the game creators. Consequently, games created in Japan and Europe, can reflect the cultures in which they were developed. In this study, my goal is to identify these choices that establish patterns, which in turn evolve into distinct genres such as WRPG and JRPG. To uncover these recurring patterns that shape a genre, I will focus on two crucial elements in RPGs: the game-world and the player-character (PC). The game-world establishes the logic of the game, including the thematic elements of the story world, the abilities and objectives of the PC, and more. The PC, as the player's means of interaction with the game-world, profoundly influences their experience and understanding of the game. Therefore, by analyzing these fundamental elements in RPGs I aim to understand the cultural identity presented in WRPG and JRPG.

In order to analyze the games in question, I will first use Mikhail Bakhtin's theories to identify the repeated patterns that construct each game. Bakhtin's (1981) concept of chronotope serves as a lens to analyze the interwoven relationship between time and space in literature, particularly in novels. It highlights how authors artistically express events within a structured time-space framework. He explains that genres are defined by their specific time-space characteristics, creating predictable patterns. Bakhtin uses this theory to introduce various novel genres. However, applying Bakhtin's theory to the medium of game, requires some changes. In games, the narrative structure is not the sole determining factor. For example, in RPGs, game mechanics, such as leveling up, acquiring skills, and using different equipment, significantly shape the game. Moreover, the players are constantly interacting with the game and their actions directly impacting the game. Thus, Bakhtin's theory requires modification to accommodate the distinct features of games. To adapt Bakhtin's theories to games, I propose two new chronotopes which include the "Progress Chronotope," focusing on transformations in the game state through progressing in the game, and the "Historical Chronotope," examining how games incorporate historical elements within their fictional worlds.

Once the chronotropic elements within the game have been identified, they can be further analyzed using theories connect to postmodern popular culture and mass media. First, is Umberto Eco's theories. Eco (1972) argues that characters in mass media need to encompass two conflicting aspects: meeting audience expectations for fresh and thrilling narratives, while also allowing for the consumption of endless stories revolving around similar characters. Eco explores various strategies used to reconcile these contradictory features. In this analysis I will try to discover the strategies that WRPGs and JRPGs use in order to address this contradiction. Secondly, I will analyze the chronotropic elements based on the idea of simulation and simulacra in postmodern media. Baudrillard distinguishes simulation from representation: while representation refers to reality, simulation doesn't rely on reality and can persist even after the reality it was based on vanishes. Simulations exist independently, creating their own distinct reality, blurring the line between the original and the copy, an idea central to postmodern theories. Baudrillard describes simulation as reality generated from miniature elements and memory banks, replicable countless times. This notion echoes in Azuma's examination of otaku culture's relationship with postmodernity. Otakus create derivative works using a database created from fragmented subculture pieces, blurring the lines between original and derived content, while placing importance on fiction as a framework to navigate society's norms. Both *The Witcher* and *Final Fantasy* exhibit specific characteristics that align with the perspectives of Baudrillard and Azuma regarding postmodern media and simulation. However, it is crucial to note that although both games serve as postmodern simulacra, their approaches to creating this simulacrum differ due to cultural distinctions. The aim of this research is to understand these differences.

Case studies:

The Witcher: The *Witcher* games, based on Andrzej Sapkowski's book series, gained worldwide popularity with the release of the first video game in 2007 by CD Projekt. According to Tomasz Z. Majkowski (2018), the books draw inspiration from Slavic folk tales, European fairy tales like *The Beauty and the Beast*, and Tolkien's work. The game's story is set in a world reminiscent of 13th-century Eastern Europe, aiming to stay faithful to its Slavic origins. The architectural design in the game takes cues from historical cities in Croatia, Hungary, and Poland. The overall aesthetic of the game is dark and gloomy, aligning with Helen Young's (2015) notion of "gritty" and "grimdark" neomedievalism. Players assume the role of Geralt of Rivia, a witcher who hunts monsters for a living. This game serves as an illustrative example of a western RPG with a neomedieval theme. It does not claim to represent WRPGs comprehensively, but it does possess a direct and evident connection to Western culture in terms of its origins.

Final Fantasy: RPGs gained significant popularity in Japan during the early 1980s, leading to the creation of numerous RPG titles. Games such as *Dragon Quest* (Chunsoft, 1986) and *Final Fantasy* (Square, 1987) were among the first commercially successful RPGs in Japan. These games played a crucial role in establishing and the JRPG genre. Among the popular JRPGs, I have chosen FF as my focus because it has evolved away from traditional JRPG elements, such as anime-style design and turn-based gameplay, while still maintaining its classification as a JRPG. This suggests that there is a fundamental essence within the JRPG genre that defines it, and my aim is to uncover this characteristic through an analysis of the FF series. Since its debut in 1987, the FF series has expanded with multiple distinct universes and storylines, each installment standing independently. However, there are recurring

elements that tie them together as part of the series, and examining these patterns is a key objective of this article.

The game-world in *The Witcher* and *Final Fantasy*: *The Witcher* aims to depict a medieval past in a manner that evokes a sense of realism. This emphasis on realism is achieved through the portrayal of a world that seems to have long history. decaying buildings and grotesque monsters contribute to this depiction while creating a dark and gloomy atmosphere. As part of the grimdark fantasy genre, *The Witcher* strives to create a game-world where players can experience violence and danger in a way that feels real. In contrast, *FF* does not prioritize realism to the same extent as *The Witcher*. The game world of *FF* is filled with elements that disrupt immersion, such as graphical interfaces and instances that break the fourth wall. *FF* combines various features from different genres and chronotopes, resulting in a game world that openly embraces its artificial nature. It is important to highlight that while I am categorizing each game based on their approach to world-building, the boundaries between these approaches are not rigidly defined. The classification is meant to illustrate the predominant tendencies within each game, but it is possible for elements from different approaches to coexist. Ultimately, the games exhibit a combination of features that suggest a stronger inclination towards one approach rather than the other. John Clammer (1995) suggests that while forms of postmodernity in the West and Japan might seem similar, their underlying epistemologies differ significantly. Clammer explains that in Japan the simulation itself is not taken seriously and is recognized as something to be played with and eventually discarded. Similarly, in the case of these two games, both can be considered as simulacra. However, they differ in their approach to simulation. *The Witcher* aims to conceal its artificial nature by simulating a reality that substitutes the actual Middle Ages. On the other hand, *FF* does not treat the reality of its game-world with the same seriousness. It is designed to be played with and discarded. As a result, although both games can be classified as simulations, there are epistemological differences between them that stem from their respective cultural backgrounds.

Novelty and predictability in player-character: In Eco's essay "The Myth of Superman," he argues that characters in mass media must embody two contradictory aspects to satisfy audience expectations while also allowing for the creation of endless stories. These aspects include a consistent and predictable side, often associated with mythical characters, and an ever-changing and unpredictable side, commonly found in novel characters. Eco further explores various strategies used to reconcile these contradictory features within a single character or series. The analysis in this paper highlights that games provide new ways and strategies to address these contradictions, thanks to the concept of double consciousness of play. The player-character already represents a fusion of two distinct entities: the player and the in-game character. Players recognize the difference between themselves and the character, but since they interact with the game-world through this character, they also develop a sense of identification. As a result, paradoxes and inconsistencies can naturally arise between the abilities and intentions of the players and those of the characters.

However, there are notable differences in how *The Witcher* and *FF* approach this feature. *The Witcher* focuses on creating an ideal character, someone for players to aspire to become. Geralt embodies various desirable traits that players might wish to possess. As a result, Geralt himself does not undergo significant changes from one game to another; instead, it is the players who need to evolve and transform to become like Geralt. On the other hand, *FF* takes a different approach by presenting characters that

undergo constant change and development. At the beginning of the game, these characters are ordinary individuals, not significantly stronger than others within the game world, and perhaps even weaker. This creates a strong opportunity for players to identify with these characters, as they can relate to their initial vulnerabilities. However, the game then offers a journey for both the players and the characters to grow stronger, evolve, and ultimately become heroes. But players possess a knowledge base that they have acquired through playing multiple games within the FF series. This knowledge not only creates a sense of familiarity with the game but also enables players to play more skillfully and expertly. It is important to note that these features are not strictly exclusive to each game. For instance, *The Witcher* also incorporates players' knowledge of monster abilities, and FF occasionally requires fast reactions from players, particularly in later installments. Additionally, both series have protagonists with constant and evolving characteristics from a narrative standpoint. However, when considering the overall perspective, it appears that each game places a greater emphasis on one strategy over the other.

Introduction

The videogame industry has long been dominated by major companies in Japan and America, shaping the tastes and standards for the production and aesthetics of games. In this landscape, it becomes crucial to carve out a space where new, small, and indie games can thrive. This would not only foster diversity but also pave the way for innovative approaches to game development. One avenue to help this cause is to draw inspiration from local cultures. However, it can be challenging to assert a local identity on the global stage and compete with industry giants. Hence, this research underscores the significance of comprehending the cultural identity evident in successful and popular games to determine how they have navigated the global arena. This is not to advocate for local games to emulate the same trajectory, but rather to gain insights that can inspire alternative methods in a meaningful way. The researcher has a specific interest in making a contribution to the videogame industry in Iran because of personal connections.

Iranian videogame industry has faced challenges over the past couple of decades, including limited financial support and small budgets, which have affected the quality of Iranian games. However, there are also promising signs for the future of game design in Iran, particularly with the presence of creative indie games. The late entry of the Iranian videogame industry into the market and the intense competition leave little room for error. Players nowadays have high expectations and a slight mistake or disruption in their gaming experience can lead them to stop playing. This makes it difficult for newly founded companies, especially those struggling financially, to survive and learn from their mistakes. Moreover, establishing a local image for Iranian art in the global scene has been a challenge across various media. While there have been successful attempts in Film or animation industries, creating a cultural identity is a topic of discussion among many art communities in Iran. *The Tale of Bistun*, a recent game produced in Iran by Black Cube Games in 2022, also seems to also address this issue. The team leader, Amin Shahidi, expressed their goal of creating a Persian game and incorporating a Persian aesthetic into its production. While the game was better received by foreign critics in terms of cultural representation, the Iranian audience might not have been as satisfied. The author of this research suggests that in order to contribute to the development of the Iranian game industry, it is important to analyze the techniques and strategies employed by game industries in different countries and cultures. By studying how they have tackled similar challenges, the young Iranian game industry can learn from their strategies, avoid making similar mistakes, and explore new approaches. Japan serves as an example of a country that has successfully established its own gaming industry. Although the term "JRPG" (Japanese role-playing game) was initially used to separate Japanese-produced RPGs from those from the West, it signifies that this genre offered an alternative game design approach specific to Japan. Therefore, comprehending these diverse approaches can aid in gaining a deeper understanding of the cultural identity expressed in games.

According to Salen and Zimmerman, game as simulations is “an operating representation of central features of reality” (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 351). This means that simulations in games always refer to a real or an imaginary situation that can be perceived as real, but they cannot replicate every

single aspect of those situations. When creators translate reality into a simulation, they need to make certain changes and focus on specific aspects while ignoring others. These changes are sometimes influenced by technical limitations but more than often they are influenced by the cultural preferences of the game creators. As a result, games developed in different cultural backgrounds, such as Japanese or European, can reflect the cultures in which they were created. The objective of this study is to identify these choices made in game development in order to understand the cultural identity represented in the games. Specifically, the focus will be on comparing the cultural identity portrayed in the role-playing game (RPG) genre, one in the *Final Fantasy* game series (Square Enix, hereafter *FF*) and the other in *The Witcher* game series (CD Projekt). *The Witcher* is a Western RPG (WRPG), while *FF* is a JRPG. While not the most typical WRPG, *The Witcher* is a notable game rooted in Eastern Europe, representing the development of RPGs in the West. On the other hand, *FF* is an influential early JRPG that shaped subsequent games in the genre. Initially inspired by medieval themes present in WRPGs, *FF* diverged from that path in later games, showcasing a distinct approach to the RPG genre. Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) explains that a genre can be identified by repeated patterns of time and space that have turned into traditions. Therefore, this research also aims to identify and analyze these recurring patterns in order to understand the JRPG and WRPG genres and their cultural identities.

In Chapter 1 I will conduct a comprehensive exploration of the concepts central to this research, establishing a solid foundation for subsequent discussions, and concurrently, reviewing the existing research conducted in related fields. Since this study aims to examine the cultural identity of the game by comparing the game-world and the player-characters in the game series introduced earlier, there are four key elements that necessitate precise definition: RPG, the game-world, player-character, and cultural identity within the context of videogames. In this chapter I will initially delve into the historical changes of RPGs and elucidate the structural essence of an RPG. Subsequently, I will expound upon the concept of a game-world within the context of an RPG, and explore the facets of time and space within the game-world. While defining the player-character, I will explain the characteristics that render a game character unique and explore the player's relationship with their player-character. Lastly, I will endeavor to elucidate how culture is simulated and presented in games.

In Chapter 2 I will begin the discussion by exploring Bakhtin's theory of chronotope, which identifies recurring patterns that shape a genre. By applying Bakhtin's theories, it becomes possible to identify patterns within the games under examination and consequently determine their similarities and differences through this approach. While Bakhtin's theory provides valuable insights into the chronotopes present in these games, it is crucial to incorporate other theories to further analyze and unravel the intricate cultural identities at play. That is why I will continue this chapter by explaining multiple theoretical perspectives, such as Umberto Eco, Jean Baudrillard and Hiroki Azuma, to later employ them in the cultural analysis of the games.

Chapter 3 aims to offer a comprehensive explanation of the two primary case studies, specifically *The Witcher* and the *Final Fantasy* game series, and the rationale behind selecting them. The structure of information presentation for each game differs due to the variations that exist within each franchise. *The Witcher* is a trilogy set in the same world with recurring characters. Consequently, in order to introduce the three games, I will provide an overview of the overarching storyline and highlight the changes in game mechanics from one installment to the next. On the other hand, the *FF* series comprises

16 main entries, each featuring unique worlds and characters. Therefore, I will provide a general explanation of how the game has changed by focusing on a few select games within the series, rather than delving into an explanation for each individual game.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the comparative analysis of the game series. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section delves into an exploration of the game-world, with a specific focus on elements such as aesthetics, monster designs, and navigation methods. These aspects will be analyzed to determine what are the games simulating and what kind of chronotope they suggest. The second section shifts the focus to the relationship between players and the PC. The analysis will include examining aspects such as leveling up and the extent to which the game relies on player skill rather than the PC. The impact of this relationship on players' overall experiences of the series will be thoroughly explored.

In the preceding chapters, I have presented a method for exploring the cultural identity of games and subsequently applied this method to conduct a comparative analysis of *FF* and *The Witcher* game series. However, my ultimate objective is to employ both this method and the findings of the analysis to comprehend the cultural identity of Iranian games. Therefore, in Chapter 5, I will employ the outcomes of the previous chapters to analyze a specific Iranian indie game called *The Tale of Bistun*, developed by Black Cube Games in 2022. Similar to the approach taken with *FF* and *The Witcher*, my initial step will involve identifying the elements of time and space within the game-world and the player-character. By examining these elements, I will proceed to analyze them in relation to the cultural context of the game's creators. However, this time, I will utilize the findings from Chapter 4 as a reference point in order to gain a deeper understanding of this Iranian game and how it reflects the cultural background of its creators.

1. Chapter 1: Defining the Key Words

The objective of this chapter is to conduct a comprehensive exploration of the concepts central to this research, establishing a solid foundation for subsequent discussions, and concurrently, reviewing the existing research conducted in related fields. This study aims to examine the cultural identity of the game by comparing the game-world and the player-characters in two role-playing games (hereafter RPGs), namely the *Final Fantasy* and *The Witcher* game series. Therefore, there are four key elements that necessitate precise definition: RPG, the game-world, player-character, and cultural identity within the context of videogames. Initially, I will delve into the historical changes of RPGs and elucidate the structural essence of an RPG, along with an examination of how this genre came into existence. Subsequently, I will expound upon the concept of a game-world within the context of an RPG, and explore the facets of time and space within the game-world. While defining the player-character, I will explain the characteristics that render a game character unique and explore the player's relationship with their player-character. Lastly, I will endeavor to elucidate how culture is simulated and presented in games.

1.1. Role-playing Games

Numerous individuals have provided detailed explanations about the history of role-playing games. The book *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations* (2018), edited by Zagal and Deterding, is a compilation of articles exploring RPGs. Although my research primarily focuses on RPGs as videogames, this book offers a comprehensive overview of all existing RPGs, including tabletop RPGs (TTRPG), live-action RPGs (LARP), and videogames. Zagal and Deterding discuss the evolution of RPGs and their various subgenres in the introduction to this book. Schules et al. also present an extensive account of the history of CRPGs within the same book. Additionally, Hutchinson and Pelletier-Gagnon delve into the history of RPGs and their influence on the creation of the Japanese RPG (hereafter JRPG) subgenre in their book *Japanese Role-Playing Games: Genre, Representation, and Liminality in the JRPG* (2022). In this book, Yuhsuke Koyama also offers insights into the history of RPGs in Japan. The book *A Guide to Japanese Role-Playing Games* (2021) published by Bitmap Books acts as a comprehensive reference guide for a large number of JRPGs that have been created. This book also

provides a certain level of coverage on the history of RPGs. Other authors, such as Patrick Holleman in *Reverse Design, Final Fantasy VII* (2018) and Shinji Matsunaga in the article "Early Japanese RPGs as Stylized Simulations" (2016), also explore the history of RPGs leading up to the emergence of JRPGs for their respective arguments. Hence, I will not delve into every detail of RPG history here. Instead, I will provide an explanation of the key events that led to the development of RPG video games, which will serve as a contextual backdrop for future arguments.

In 1974, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson collaborated to develop the inaugural role-playing game, *Dungeons & Dragons* (referred to as *D&D*). Although it is an oversimplification, their creation of *D&D* involved blending certain elements from existing wargames and strategic board games, incorporating the fantasy realm depicted in popular books like *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (J.R.R. Tolkien, 1954, henceforth referred to as *LOTR*). Consequently, they devised a game that enabled players to assume the roles of heroes within a fantasy setting. As personal computers emerged in subsequent years, numerous attempts were made to adapt tabletop RPGs into computer games. This adaptation allowed individuals to play the game independently, eliminating the need for a Game Master (hereafter GM) or other players. Notable early successes in computer RPGs (hereafter CRPGs) include *Akalabeth* (Garriott, 1979-1980), *Ultima* (Garriott, 1981), and *Wizardry* (Sir-Tech, 1980).

I begin with a discussion on the historical background because it aides with understanding what RPGs are. Defining the RPG genre in today's context is challenging due to its extensive expansion. Numerous games in different genres incorporate RPG elements, or the RPG genre itself incorporates elements from other genres. Consequently, establishing a distinct boundary for the RPG becomes difficult. However, we can explore the origins of this game and how it has evolved. When examining the origins of RPGs, Holleman identifies three crucial rules present in *D&D* (Holleman, 2018):

The Orthogonal role: According to Holleman's explanation, earlier war games involved players taking on the role of a military commander, granting them a god-like perspective of the battlefield. Their main objective was solely to win the battle, and they controlled various squads of soldiers. However, in games like *D&D*, players assume the role of individual characters who are “driven by their personal (narrative-driven) imperatives which are more dramatic than practical” (Holleman, 2018: 4, 5). For instance, a player might embody a young warrior whose primary goal is to find a stolen family heirloom. Consequently, their focus may not be on winning battles, as long as they can achieve that objective. It is due to this particular aspect that these games are classified as Role-playing games.

The simulated skill: As Holleman points out, in the context of *D&D*, a simulated skill is “any skill that belongs entirely to a character in a game, rather than to the player who controls the character”. As previously stated, players in the game take on the persona of a specific character who possesses distinct skills that are separate from the player's own abilities. For instance, the character may possess the strength to break a stone wall with their bare hands, a feat that the player themselves cannot accomplish. Each character skill is assigned a numerical value that reflects the character's proficiency in that particular skill. Whenever players make decisions or take actions as their respective characters, they will employ one of these skills. The outcome of the action is determined by a randomly generated number, which can be achieved through various means such as rolling dice in TTRPGs or computer-generated numbers in CRPGs, along with the character's proficiency in the relevant skill.

The level-up system: According to Holleman, within a role-playing game, players have the opportunity to improve their character's abilities, acquire new skills, or obtain better equipment through a process known as leveling-up. Typically, players engage in quests and battles throughout the game, and in doing so, they earn experience points and money. These experience points can then be utilized to enhance the character's skills, while the acquired money can be spent on purchasing upgraded equipment.

Matsunaga also provides a description of the defining characteristics of an RPG. Although he employs different terminology than Holleman, his explanation of RPGs shares significant similarities. Firstly, he highlights the importance of character abilities and attributes, such as Hit Points, strength, and speed, which are typically quantified by numerical values. Matsunaga explains that one key feature of an RPG is the ability for players to manage and control these attributes. Secondly, he emphasizes the concept of character progression through leveling-up, wherein characters gain experience points by participating in quests or adventures. Lastly, Matsunaga underscores that players engage in leveling-up and attribute management for a specific objective. In other words, players require a motive to play the game, and typically, this motivation is provided by the narrative of the game, as stated by Matsunaga (Matsunaga, 2016).

Holleman explains, when *D&D* and other TTRPGs were adapted into video games, three distinct strategies were employed to accommodate the new medium: simplification, combination, and specialization. Firstly, as Holleman explains the rules of *D&D* proved to be too complex for a direct translation into video games. In TTRPGs, the game master, being a human, possesses the ability to comprehend intricate scenarios and adapt to unexpected player actions. However, when developers ventured into creating CRPGs, they faced the challenge of simplifying the game rules and restricting player choices due to the limitations imposed by the computer's processing capabilities. With the rising popularity of the RPG genre and the increasing number of games being developed within this realm, as Holleman explains, developers began to innovate by combining RPG elements with features from other genres. This led to the emergence of hybrid games that combine diverse gameplay mechanics. A notable example is *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks, 2008), which combines elements of first-person shooters with RPG gameplay. Finally, according to Holleman there are games that center their focus on specific features within the RPG genre. One such example is *Rogue* (Epyx, 1980), which places a heavy emphasis on dungeon exploration¹. This game played a significant role in the development of the roguelike subgenre, characterized by its procedural generation of levels, permadeath (permanent death), and strategic gameplay elements (Holleman, 2018: 4, 5).

Apart from the techniques outlined by Holleman, when RPGs made their way into Japan, the genre naturally diverged due to cultural disparities. According to Yuhsuke's explanation, the popularity of CRPGs preceded that of TTRPGs in Japan during the early 1980s. As a result, RPGs in Japan are more closely associated with CRPGs rather than TTRPGs (Yuhsuke, 2022: 23). Consequently, the initial inspiration for RPGs produced in Japan can be traced back to the Western CRPGs that were introduced to the country. However, the influence of TTRPGs soon followed and also became a significant source for the development of RPGs in Japan. Schules et al. explain that the initial sources of inspiration for

¹ This is known as dungeon crawling by the players.

RPGs developed in Japan were Western CRPGs such as *Ultima*, *Wizardry*, and *D&D*. During this time, numerous commercial and non-commercial RPGs were created for personal computers. However, it was *Dragon Quest* (Chunsoft, 1986, hereafter *DQ*) that achieved significant commercial success. Yuhsuke explains that while RPGs had already gained popularity in Japan before *DQ*, they were primarily available for personal computers, which were not widely accessible to elementary and junior high school students. One key factor contributing to *DQ*'s success was its release on home consoles, allowing a younger audience to engage with the game. Furthermore, Yuhsuke highlights that while *DQ* drew inspiration from Western RPGs (hereafter WRPG) like *Ultima*, it sought to simplify certain rules and the user interface, making the game more accessible to a broader audience. While WRPGs were transitioning to action gameplay, RPGs developed in Japan continued to employ the command-driven battle system, as it did not require players to possess action-oriented skills (Yuhsuke, 2022: 27-29). These distinctive features of *DQ* laid the foundation for the creation of subsequent RPGs in Japan, including *Final Fantasy* series developed by Square in 1987.

Thus, the games produced in Japan take on a different path. Hutchinson (2019) elucidates the key distinctions, stating that JRPGs tend to feature a linear narrative structure, fewer impactful choices to alter the story, and turn-based combat. According to Yuhsuke's explanation, Horii Yuji, the creator of *DQ*, viewed RPGs as a means of storytelling and character development. While Yuhsuke acknowledges that the first three installments of *DQ* may not exhibit a particularly strong narrative to support this notion, they emphasize that subsequent JRPGs embraced the idea of RPGs as a medium for storytelling (Yuhsuke, 2022: 23). As a result, it appears that JRPGs tend to have more linear narratives and well-defined player characters, aligning with this perspective. Similar to Hutchinson, Schules et al. define JRPGs as having characteristics such as a "confinement to world," "defined characters," "anime/cartoon style art," a "singular story," and a "fantasy world," in contrast to WRPG that emphasize "sandbox exploration," "character customization," "realistic art," "narrative plurality," and a "medieval world." Schules et al. do not provide an explanation for the specific terminology used to describe these differences. However, drawing from common observations and opinions of fans and industry experts, they suggest that RPGs developed by Japanese studios tend to have limited player customization options, frequently guiding players along predetermined paths. On the other hand, they offer captivating character development and compelling narrative arcs. One of the distinctions that they propose between JRPGs and WRPGs is a "fantasy world" for the former and a "medieval world" for the latter. Although they do not delve deeper into the precise meaning of these terms, it appears that they employ "fantasy" to refer to a broad body of works that are considered fantastic. The medieval world used in WRPG can also be considered fantasy due to using elements such as sword and sorcery but it seems the authors are trying to make a distinction by suggesting that WRPG are more closely associated with the Middle Ages. Regardless of Schules et al. intentions investigating the difference in using fantasy in the world creation process is one of the main objectives of this article and will be explored in detail later on.

It is crucial to note, as Hutchinson and Pelletier-Gagnon highlight, that the term JRPG did not originate in Japan and is first used by Western media to refer specifically to Japanese RPGs that deviate from the typical Euro-American standards. Therefore, it is not a term commonly used in Japan and the extent of what it refers to is subject to negotiation, encompassing a variety of games and allowing for diverse interpretations (Hutchinson and Pelletier-Gagnon, 2022). In summary, this section aimed to

establish a foundation for RPGs by providing a historical account. Various approaches have been employed to develop new RPGs, leading to an expansive scope that makes it challenging to provide a definitive definition for the genre. Nevertheless, we can still offer a general depiction of the rules and characteristics that are common among WRPGs and JRPGs. In this research, the key elements associated with RPGs are the act of role-playing as one or more player-characters, the progression through gaining experience and leveling-up, the management of skills and abilities of the player-characters based on the game's rules, the exploration and interaction with the game-world, and the advancement of the story. In WRPGs, the player-character is typically controlled through an action-based interface, relying on the player's quick reactions and decision-making. On the other hand, in JRPGs, players typically choose commands that are performed by the player-character. Another notable distinction is that WRPGs often grant players the ability to create their own characters and make choices that have significant impacts on the storyline. In contrast, JRPGs typically provide players with predefined characters and follow a more linear narrative structure. Moving forward, I intend to utilize these discussions as the context for future arguments and analyses.

1.2. Defining the Game-World

Schrier et al. (2018) emphasize the crucial role of the fictional world in RPGs and highlight its significance in shaping the stories, perspectives, and roles within the game (Schrier et al. 2018, 349). In other words, this world, which here I refer to as the game-world, determines what kind of stories and what kind of characters the players are going to encounter. Zagal and Deterding (2018) provide a definition of the game-world based on two key elements: constitution and theme. For CRPGs, they define constitution as "a computational model, generating audiovisual representations on the player's interface that ground the player's imagination, updating the model and representation in response to player input" (Zagal and Deterding, 2018: 44). Essentially, the game-world's simulation aids players in understanding their relationship with the game, establishes the game's mechanics, and outlines the capabilities of the player-character (PC) and their interactions within the game. Furthermore, Zagal and Deterding explain that the theme of the game-world typically aligns with genre fiction, adhering to the conventions of specific genres like fantasy, science fiction, horror, or a fusion of genres.

Similar to Zagal and Deterding, I adopt the term "game-world" to encompass both the underlying codes that constitute the game and the thematic elements presented within the narrative world. According to their definition, the game-world consists of the computational model representing the world, including elements like sound effects and 3D models. However, I also aim to incorporate certain game mechanics that facilitate player interaction with the world. For instance, navigation is a gameplay mechanic closely associated with the spatial aspects of the game-world. How players navigate the world directly influences their perception and understanding of it. Therefore, I consider the mechanics associated with the game-world as an integral part of the analysis. Consequently, this section will be divided into two parts. The first part will discuss the elements that constitute the game-world. Since I intend to apply Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope theory to analyze the case studies in this research, the constitution of the game-world will be defined accordingly. The term "chronotope" combines "chronos" meaning to time and "topos" meaning to space. Bakhtin borrowed this term from Einstein to emphasize the inseparability of time and space, stressing the need to study and analyze them together. In this context,

I will also explore the role of space and time within the framework of a game. The second part of this section will delve into the role of fantasy in shaping the game-world from a thematic perspective. As I will explain, the theme of RPGs is often associated with the fantasy genre. Therefore, this section will provide an explanation of the relationship between fantasy and RPGs.

1.2.1. Time and Space in videogames as Part of the Game-world Constitution

1.2.1.1. Space in Videogames

Mark J. P. Wolf (2011) explains that the concept of space can be most effectively comprehended by examining movement and navigation. Wolf has formulated theories regarding various categories of game space in two separate articles: one titled "Inventing Space: Toward a Taxonomy of On- and Off-Screen Space in Video Games" (1997) and the other titled "Theorizing Navigable Space in Video Games" (2011). In his initial article, he draws upon cinematic conventions to classify how various games present the game space to the players. He introduces eleven categories based on the camera movement and the on/off-screen space² (Wolf, 1997: 13-21). In the latter article however, he focuses more on how players navigate the space and interact with it. Wolf first emphasizes the distinction between real-world navigation and video game navigation. In reality, humans depend on a range of sensory inputs—including sight, hearing, smell, and touch—to comprehend their environment. Conversely, in the context of video games, typically only visual and auditory senses come into play. Consequently, when assessing navigation within video games, it is crucial to consider the medium's conventions. In light of this, Wolf presents the idea of "spatial cells" as a framework for analyzing game space. He elucidates that regardless of whether game spaces are 2D or 3D, they are essentially comprised of numerous spatial cells. Each of these cells is defined by a boundary and can have one or more entry points that link it to other cells. These cells can be the squares on a chessboard, distinct countries on a map, or different rooms in a building. Wolf further emphasizes that navigation takes on significance when players cross the boundary of a cell, trying to navigate their way to other interconnected cells. Wolf presents five characteristics that define the connections between cells. These five attributes encompass the notions of passability, visibility, reversibility, contingency, and finally whether they are open or closed. Players can decipher how to move within the space by considering these five attributes (Wolf, 2011).

Henry Jenkins (2004) however approaches the game space from another angle. He elaborates on the idea that "game designers don't simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces" (Jenkins, 2004: 121). Jenkins refers to this as environmental storytelling. To put it differently, he contends that game designers shape spaces, and when players engage and interact within these spaces, they have the opportunity to uncover its lore, history, and the stories that have unfolded within that environment. He proceeds to outline four methods for implementing environmental storytelling (Jenkins, 2004: 121,122).

Evocative Spaces: Jenkins elaborates that in some games, developers shape their stories and game spaces by taking inspiration from existing narratives and settings from earlier forms of media. In essence,

² These categories include: “No visual space; all text-based”, “one screen, contained”, “one screen, contained, with wraparound”, “scrolling on one axis”, “scrolling on two axes”, “adjacent spaces displayed one at a time”, “layers of independently moving planes”, “spaces allowing Z-axis movement out of frame”, “multiple, nonadjacent spaces displayed on-screen simultaneously”, “interactive three-dimensional environment” and “represented or ‘mapped’ spaces” (Wolf, 1997: 13-21).

they tap into the audience’s prior knowledge and create recognizable spaces. As an illustration, we can refer to the game *American McGee’s s* (Rogue Entertainment, 2000), which draws upon Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) (Jenkins, 2004: 123).

Enacting Stories: Jenkins points out that in this method, separate story episodes, which he terms as “micronarratives,” are positioned within different sections of the game space. These episodes do not directly influence the development of the main storyline and have the potential to offer players a self-contained and distinct experience. Jenkins sets apart this form of storytelling from traditional narrative structures, where he explains that every element of the story should be pre-planned and act in a unified and cohesive manner towards the overall goal (Jenkins, 2004: 124).

Embedded Narratives: Jenkins compares embedded narratives with more traditional storytelling techniques. He utilizes the distinction between the plot (or “syuzhet”), which encompasses the structured sequence of all causal events as they are presented in the film, and the story (or “fabula”), which represents the viewer’s mental arrangement of the chronological order of these events. He elaborates that in certain games, particularly within open-world games, instead of unfolding the story in a linear fashion, elements of the narrative are spread throughout the game space. However, in this scenario, players can explore various sections of the game-world to discover different parts of the story and pursue them at their own discretion. In other words, players exercise some degree of control over which part of the story they wish to explore first (Jenkins, 2004: 126).

Emergent Narratives: In this method, players have the opportunity to shape their own story within the game using the tools and features provided to them by the game. Simulation games such as *The Sims* (Electronic Arts, 2000) exemplify this category (Jenkins, 2004: 128).

William H. Huber (2009), argues that Jenkins places too much emphasis on narrative elements in video games, and not enough on a broader theory of spatiality. Instead, Huber draws upon the theories of David Harvey, which are rooted in Henri Lefebvre’s ideas on the production of space. Lefebvre introduces three concepts for studying space, while Harvey expands upon this by introducing three additional concepts. By combining these sets of concepts, Harvey creates a comprehensive three-by-three matrix for understanding space and spatiality (Huber, 2009: 373). Here are the three concepts initially introduced by Lefebvre (1991).

Spatial Practice (space of experience): Spatial Practice is defined by Lefebvre as the dialectical relation between society and the surrounding space. According to Lefebvre, society seeks to create and exert control over its environment. However, in reality, society itself is influenced and shaped by the space it inhabits. Consequently, the commonly held notions about how a space should be structured are actually products of the spatial context (Lefebvre, 1991: 33, 38). Spatial practice is essentially focused on how society shapes and understands space according to the perceptions that were shaped by the space itself. Harvey (2006) refers to this type of space as the space of experience, which he describes as “the world of tactile and sensual interaction with matter” (Harvey, 2006: 131).

Representation of Space: The concept of the representation of space, as defined by Lefebvre, refers to the signs, codes, and languages used to depict and communicate space. This aspect of space is primarily used by scientists, architects, and urban planners. It encompasses a mental and logical space

that shapes the "lived experience" (representational space) and the "perceived" space (spatial practice) based on the "conceived" space (Lefebvre, 1991: 33, 38). Harvey further elaborates that representation of space involves the use of words, graphs, maps, diagrams, pictures, and other visual and textual means (Harvey, 2006: 131).

Representational Space (spaces of representation): According to Harvey, Lefebvre suggests the existence of spaces that go beyond physical or material realms. These spaces encompass aspects such as imagination, fears, emotions, psychology, fantasies, and dreams that are experienced in everyday life alongside the physical space (Harvey, 2006: 131). Lefebvre explains that this space comprises intricate symbols, sometimes encoded and sometimes not, and examines the space that is intimately intertwined with these symbols. While the representation of space focuses on those who create and shape space, representational space applies to those who inhabit and experience these spaces (Lefebvre, 1991: 33, 39).

Harvey then introduces three concepts to study space: absolute space, relative space, and relational space. Absolute space, according to Harvey, aligns with Newtonian or Cartesian notions. It is a fixed and pre-exists any perception. In a world of absolute space, uncertainties and ambiguities can, in theory, be eliminated, allowing for unhindered human calculation. Relative space, as described by Harvey, is associated with Einstein's theories, where time and space are intertwined as spacetime and cannot be separated. In this theory, the state of one spacetime is relative to the observer's spacetime. Harvey notes that Einstein taught us to abandon the idea of simultaneity in the physical universe, as the same event may be observed differently from different spacetime perspectives. For example, a person inside a moving train perceives the outside world differently from someone standing outside the train. Relational space, as explained by Harvey, is linked to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's ideas. Leibniz criticizes Newton's theory, arguing that in it, God exists within absolute time and space, rather than having control over it. In the relational view, a process does not occur within a pre-existing space and time; instead, the process itself defines the space and time. Time and space are inherent to the concept of process. Accordingly, when creating the world, God has chosen a specific process (or space and time) among numerous possibilities. Harvey emphasizes that, similar to relative space, it is impossible to separate time and space within relational space, and both must be studied simultaneously (Harvey, 2006: 121-123). Based on the above explanation, Harvey provides a three-by-three matrix to understand space.

Huber applies Harvey's matrix to analyze the spatial elements found within a videogame. In his article, he specifically focuses on the *Final Fantasy* series and utilizes the matrix to understand the spatial aspects present in the games. Huber emphasizes that “it is within genres, franchises, and titles that we can unwind strategies and methods by which space is produced, represented, and engaged” (Huber, 2009: 373). In other words, repeated patterns within videogames allow for the emergence of identifiable patterns that can be studied. While he considers the entire *FF* franchise, his analysis primarily centers on *FFX*. Using the concepts introduced by Harvey, Huber describes and explores the various spaces within *FFX*. By doing so, he provides a deeper understanding of how space is conceptualized and portrayed within the game (Table 1.1).

	Experienced Space	Representation of Space	Space of Representation
Absolute Space	Rendered 3-D space; physics; buildings, trees, grass, road; barriers, walls, and rivers that effect navigation	Map displays; intertitles; landscape features; textured spaces; city layouts; reference to spaces in FAQs, walk-throughs, and guides	The game world and its fiction as an object of contemplation; literacy of game space and ability to interact with it confidently—the space created by mastery; the learned map, becoming traversable with minimal attention
Relative Space	Modes of transportation and acceleration: chocobo space, airship space; scaled space (from overhead map to walking space to battle space)	Airship destination menus; nodes and linkages; zone transitions; hidden and revealed spaces (secret doors, corridors); minigame (Blitzball) spaces	Affective play spaces: melancholy, anxiety/tension—sense of threat/excitement in high-risk zones and boss fights; shifts of attention motivated by changes in level of threat and comfort; cutscene spaces
Relational Space	“Battle space” versus “traversing space”; transitions in scale; blockages and transitions between zones and modes	Narrated space; the fictional accounting of fictional space; aestheticized space, rendered architectures, and landscapes	Collective and personal memory; pre and postcataclysmic spaces; zones of return; sublime spaces

Table 1.1: Table provided by Huber regarding the space in videogames, more specifically in *Final Fantasy X* (Huber, 2009: 382)

Wolf, Jenkins and Huber offer valuable perspectives on the meaning of space within the medium of videogames. While there are various angles from which we can delve into game spaces, Bakhtin's insight reminds us that time and space are inherently intertwined. To truly comprehend space, we must also consider time simultaneously. Consequently, to further explore the concept of game space, I would like to explore theories related to the concept of time in game.

1.2.1.2. Time in Videogames

Jesper Juul (2004)³ presents two primary time frameworks for a game: play time and event time. He explains that “To play a game takes time. A game begins and it ends. I’d like to call this time play time” (Juul, 2004). In simpler terms, play time refers to the duration players spend actively participating in the game. He continues to say that during gameplay, players are constantly modifying the game state. He clarifies that a game essentially operates as a state machine, signifying that it functions as a mechanism capable of existing in multiple states. Depending on players' inputs, it transitions from one state to another (Juul, 2004).

As an illustration, at the beginning of a chess game, all pieces are arranged on opposite sides of the chessboard, representing the initial state of the game. However, when one of the players makes their first move, such as advancing a white pawn, they initiate a change in the game state. This process continues with each subsequent piece movement until the game reaches its concluding state, which is a checkmate. Juul explains that the event time is the time that takes for the game state to change (Juul,

³ Juul includes a similar explanation about game time in his book *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2005).

2004). In this context, I prefer to conceptualize the game state as the game space. By space here, I'm referring to the tangible manifestation or the perceivable aspects of the game. Therefore, we could conclude that a change in the game space connotes the passage of time in the game.

Juul clarifies that the correspondence between play time and event time varies depending on the specific game being played (Juul, 2004). To illustrate, in games like football or action videogames, play time aligns closely with event time, as in-game events occur in real-time. However, in the case of chess, event time operates differently. Event time progresses only when there is a change in the game state; therefore, during the intervals when players contemplate their next moves, event time remains static. In certain games, the ratio between play time and event time differs due to the fictional conventions established by the game. For instance, a minute of play time in *The Sims* might correspond to an hour within the game world. Thus, as demonstrated by these examples, the relationship between play time and event time varies based on the nature of the game.

Tychsen and Hitchens (2009) present a model for understanding the concept of time in games, building upon the theories of Hitchens (2006) and Juul (2004, 2005). They initially classify time in videogames into two main categories: linear representations of time and nonlinear representations of game time. Within linear time, there are three categories: play time, engine time, and server time. Tychsen and Hitchens' definition of play time closely aligns with Juul's concept of play time. Engine time refers to the length of time during which the game engine or application software is actively running the game. Server time comes into play in multiplayer or massively multiplayer games, where a shared server accommodates all players. While individual players may experience time differently, the overarching game space for all of them adheres to the server time. These game times progress in a chronological manner, placing them within the linear representation of time (Tychsen and Hitchens, 2008: 184-187).

Tychsen and Hitchens go on to elaborate that specific game features can lead to a nonlinear experience of time. They identify these features as encompassing multiple paths and choices, and the revisiting of paths. Many games provide players with multiple choices, and at each decision point, these choices alter the game's temporal progression. Additionally, features like saving and loading the game enable players to revisit previous moments in a nonlinear manner. In light of these considerations, Tychsen and Hitchens categorize nonlinear time into three distinct facets: progress time, story time, and world time. Progress time denotes players' advancement within the game. As previously mentioned, players consistently change the game state with the aim of progressing further in the game. This phenomenon is what Tychsen and Hitchens refer to as progress time. Story time pertains to how the game's narrative, if existing, is presented to the players. This concept aligns with the earlier discussion regarding embedded narratives in Jenkins' theories. Lastly, world time measures time as it unfolds within the game world. Tychsen and Hitchens clarify that world time is typically chronological, but certain actions, such as loading the game to an earlier point in the game world, can disrupt the chronological flow of time (Tychsen and Hitchens, 2008: 188-192).

The final aspect worth noting here in Tychsen and Hitchens' theories is what they term "perceived time." Perceived time relates to the players' subjective perception of time. Unlike play time or engine time, which are objective and quantifiable, perceived time focuses on the qualitative dimension of the

time players invest in the game. For instance, if a player is thoroughly enjoying the game, they may perceive time as passing quickly, whereas, in contrast, moments such as waiting through a loading screen might feel exceptionally prolonged (Tychsen and Hitchens, 2008: 195-198).

The preceding discussion encompasses key points regarding the role of time in videogames. As evident from these arguments, it is nearly impossible to examine time in isolation from the concept of space, and vice versa. These two concepts inherently derive their significance from their interrelation. Consequently, in the following section, I intend to explore both concepts concurrently.

1.2.1.3. The Magic Circle

The term "magic circle," borrowed from Johan Huizinga's book *Homo Ludens* (1949, original work published in 1938). Huizinga addresses play in a broader context, emphasizing that each act of play occupies a distinct time and space. He goes on to describe play as the creation of "temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (Huizinga, 1980: 10). In simpler terms, from the moment play begins until its end, it establishes a distinct space that is separate from everyday life, which he refers to as the magic circle.

This concept has been employed by various researcher in game studies, including Salen and Zimmerman (2004). They believe that something truly magical occurs as a game begins. To illustrate this, they provide an example: Picture a backgammon board arranged as a decoration on a living room table. While the board serves as mere decor, the number and arrangement of the checkers hold no importance. However, the moment someone challenges a friend to a game of backgammon, everything changes. The quantity and placement of the checkers become meaningful, and players adhere to preestablished rules, as if they've entered a magic circle. Salen and Zimmerman clarify that while the magic circle may have external and physical manifestations in many games, it is fundamentally a mental and abstract concept defined by the rules of the game. The magic circle serves to separate the game space from the complexities of the real world, and to reassure the players that the game will not encroach upon their everyday lives (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 87, 88).

T. L. Taylor (2007), on the contrary, questions the concept of the magic circle. She finds the idea of the magic circle overly simplistic and constraining. Taylor argues that the notion of a magic circle implies a predefined set of rules that establish the boundaries of this circle. However, as players consistently challenge these rules and blur the lines by engaging in the broader culture surrounding the game, such as creating walkthroughs and participating in forums, it becomes difficult to pinpoint where play starts and where it ends (Taylor, 2007: 113).

In response to Taylor, Juul (2008) suggests the use of the term "puzzle piece" instead of "magic circle." Juul begins by underscoring the presence of a boundary, and he illustrates this with example of a person who is seated at a dinner table. In this scenario, if someone intends to take the saltshaker and the person obstructs their attempt, the person's behavior would be perceived as impolite. However, if the person hinders another player in a game from achieving their objective so that you can win, the behavior would be considered acceptable. This does not indicate that the game space is entirely isolated from everyday life; it simply implies that the norms governing typical daily life do not necessarily govern the game space (Juul, 2008: 59, 60). Juul further explains that players' actions within the game, driven by their motivations (such as winning, enjoying themselves, or managing a social context), will

vary. Consequently, the limits of the game's boundary will also be defined differently. In essence, players are continuously engaged in negotiating the extension of the game space. This is why Juul proposes adopting the term "puzzle piece," as it signifies that the game's boundaries should fit appropriately with the social context at hand (Juul, 2008: 62,63).

1.2.1.4. Experiencing the Game-world through Time and Space

The preceding conversation was presented to establish a solid groundwork for understanding the implications of space and time in games. Each theory offers a unique understanding of the concept of spacetime within video games. Despite facing criticism, these theories are not necessarily incorrect. This research aims to take a comprehensive approach to understanding spacetime in video games. The way players navigate space (as Wolf explains) is a key aspect of their interaction within the game, and the spaces they traverse can convey narratives (based on Jenkins' theories). The players experience of time (according to Juul, Tychsen and Hitchens description of time in videogames), can influence how they navigate and comprehend the game-space. Video games have the ability to construct a unique spacetime, and the boundaries of this spacetime are constantly changing (as Juul explains). Therefore, this research seeks to integrate multiple perspectives simultaneously in order to gain a holistic understanding of spacetime. This information will prove valuable in forthcoming chapters where I delve into Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope. For now, it is crucial to acknowledge that games have the capacity to construct a space-time continuum distinct from everyday life. These boundaries can change depending on how players engage with the game, the associated culture, and their perceptions of it. Consequently, once players start the game, their experience of space and time changes.

Jari Takatalo et al. (2015) propose that the gameplay experience can be segmented into three distinct components: presence, involvement, and flow. The combination of presence and involvement causes a sensation of detachment from the real world, leading to the perception of entering the game space, essentially being fully present within the game. They also explain that the state of flow arises when there is a well-balanced challenge that is tailored to the player's skill—neither too difficult nor too easy—which results in a gratifying experience (Takatalo et al., 2015: 93-96). When players find themselves in a state of flow, their perception of time undergoes a transformation. As they derive enjoyment from the game, they tend to feel that time is passing swiftly. Conversely, if the game proves excessively challenging or frustrating, time may appear to move at a slower pace. I provide this explanation here to suggest that videogames often create a time-space that though is not fully separated from the real world it defines its own boundaries. players' experience of the game is intimately intertwined with how they perceive time and space within the game and thus needs to be studied accordingly.

1.2.2. Fantasy as Part of the Game-world Theme

In terms of the theme of the game-world within RPGs, early CRPGs not only adopted the game mechanics found in TTRPGs but also drew inspiration from the widely recognized fantasy settings commonly associated with those games. As previously mentioned, the world of Middle-Earth from *LOTR* served as a fundamental influence on the game world of *D&D*. Hence, early CRPGs often embraced the fantasy genre as their thematic backdrop. To better understand the fantasy genre, I will refer to the “introduction” of *The Cambridge Companion to fantasy literature* (2012), where Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn discuss the challenges of defining the fantasy genre. They refer to Brian

Attebery's concept of a "fuzzy set" as an alternative approach to defining fantasy. Attebery proposes the idea of a core, where fantasy encompasses texts that employ specific tropes. Texts closer to the core utilize a greater number of tropes that create elements that are impossible in reality, while those closer to the periphery may only incorporate a few tropes and remain ambiguous as to whether they are referring to something fantastical or not. Based on this perspective, James and Mendlesohn suggest that rather than attempting to provide a rigid definition of fantasy, it is more fruitful to focus on analyzing the tropes and modes of fantasy employed in different literary works (James and Mendlesohn, 2012: 1-2). James and Mendlesohn rely on modes of fantasy proposed by Mendlesohn in her work "Toward A Taxonomy of Fantasy" (2002). Mendlesohn outlines four distinct categories for fantasy based on how fantasy is introduced to the narrative world. These categories are intrusive, estranged, portal, and immersive fantasy. Portal fantasy involves the protagonist entering a fantastic world through a portal. Within this category, quest fantasies are included, where the protagonist leaves their ordinary life, crosses a threshold, and entering the fantastic world and navigating it. Mendlesohn suggest that based on this definition works such as *LOTR* also fall under the portal fantasy category. In immersive fantasy, the protagonist is already part of the fantastic world, and the rules of this realm are considered normal for the protagonist. The story invites the audience to accept these rules as the norm as well. In intrusive fantasy, the fantastic elements break into the primary world, often bringing chaos. While this trope is commonly used in horror, it does not necessarily imply unpleasantness. The estranged fantasy mode is the rarest. It suggests that the story's world is our own, but when something fantastical occurs, the protagonist does not exhibit surprise or disbelief in response to it (Mendlesohn, 2008: 173-179).

Although Mendlesohn's taxonomy is useful for this research to recognize fantasy tropes, it is still too broad for analyzing the games in question. According to Edward James (2012), Tolkien's Middle-earth was influenced by his studies of the Middle Ages, biblical stories, European languages, and myths (James 2012, 63). This neomedievalism is evident not only in Tolkien's own work but also in the works inspired by him. Neomedievalism, as described by Young (2015), is a genre that references the Middle Ages indirectly. Since the Middle Ages is a distant historical period, our knowledge of it is based on surviving medieval texts and historical descriptions, leading to interpretations and perspectives that differ from reality. Young points out that neomedievalism is “not a dream of the Middle Ages, but a dream of someone else's medievalism. It is medievalism doubled up upon itself” (Young 2015, 2). This can also be explained by what Jean Baudrillard (1981) calls the “hyperreality”. hyperreality defines a concept that has lost its referential, therefore it no longer refers to the real. It simulates its own reality. An abstracted reality that substitutes the imperfect real and it is a “programmable, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes” (Baudrillard 1981, 3, 4). Similarly, neomedievalism takes the idea of Middle Ages and shapes it into a new world, a new reality⁴. What is commonly used in RPGs, is a combination of neomedievalism and the fantasy genre. RPGs take the fantastical stories of neomedievalism and depict them as if they were true and real in a parallel universe. While neomedievalism even to this day has been the primary setting employed in RPGs, numerous later games have explored other realms such as science fiction or horror. For instance, *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt, 2020), based on the *Cyberpunk* TTRPG created by Mike Pondsmith in

⁴ For more detailed explanation please refer to Chapter 2, Simulation and post-modernity.

1988, presents a futuristic setting. Additionally, games like *Shin Megami Tensei* series (Atlus) delve into contemporary Japan as their backdrop, showcasing the versatility and diversity of settings within the RPG genre.

It is important to note that although JRPGs have been influenced by Western fantasy, the influence of manga is more visible. According to Mio Bryce and Jason Davis (2010), fantasy and legend manga are characterized by their ability to create rich fictional worlds by drawing from mythological, folkloric, and literary sources. These myths and legends are not limited to Japanese folklore but also include elements from Chinese legends, Greek gods, Norse deities, and more. Bryce and Davis explain that some fantasy manga juxtaposes the ordinary with the extraordinary, creating surreal and imaginative narratives that challenge conventional storytelling conventions. Furthermore, fantasy manga frequently combines elements of quest-based adventures with magical or mythical elements, catering to different orientations such as *shōjo*⁵ (targeted at young girls), *shōnen*⁶ (targeted at young boys), and *seinen*⁷ (targeted at adult males) (Bryce and Davis, 2010: 35, 36).

It appears that shōnen manga, specifically the action/adventure genre, has had a significant influence on RPGs in Japan. Angela Drummond-Mathews (2010) explains that action/adventure shōnen manga often combines elements of fantasy or science fiction with combat and quests. She uses Akira Toriyama's *Dragon Ball* as a prime example for this genre. In *Dragon Ball*, the protagonist, SonGoku, embarks on a quest to find the legendary "dragon balls" while simultaneously training as a martial artist and participating in tournaments to prove his skills. Throughout his journey, he confronts and battles fantastical beings that pose a threat to the world (Drummond-Mathews, 2010: 65). Similar tropes can be found in JRPGs. For example, Matsunaga explains that in the early *Dragon Quest* games, the weapons available for purchase at the beginning of the game are relatively weak, even if they are found in major cities. As the game progresses, players come across stronger weapons, sometimes in small villages with limited resources. Although this may not make logical sense, it aligns with the storytelling structure often seen in shōnen manga. As the characters move from town to town, the enemies become stronger, increasing the game's difficulty, and thus requiring stronger equipment (Matsunaga, 2016). This explanation aims to offer a broad understanding of the common themes found in RPGs in order to provide a context in which *The Witcher* and *FF* are created. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that games are not confined by the genre boundaries established in literature, and they engage with these genres in their own way. A more thorough and detailed explanation specific to the themes explored in the mentioned games will be provided later on.

1.3. Defining Player-Character

The task of defining a story character has been undertaken by numerous theorists in relevant fields. For example, in the article "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative" (1975), Roland

⁵ 少女

⁶ 少年

⁷ 青年

Barthes and Lionel Duisit offer an analysis of story structure and present their definition of a story character. They propose that characters are primarily defined by their actions within the narrative. It is true that characters can possess consistent psychological traits prior to their involvement in the plot. However, due to the vastness and complexity of character psychology, structuralists like Vladimir Propp have chosen to focus on analyzing characters as agents of action (Barthes and Duisit, 1975: 256-258). While these definitions can be valuable in the present discussion, it is essential to develop more precise and tailored definitions specifically suited for the medium of games as we progress further.

In a chapter titled "Character" from the book *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies* (2013), Jessica Aldred endeavors to define game characters from various perspectives. She begins by elucidating that game characters possess both ludic (relating to gameplay) and representational (relating to fictional portrayal) qualities, as they can function as both the player's agent and a fictional entity. Aldred highlights that players often shift between identifying with the character as an extension of themselves and perceiving the character as a distinct, fictional being—a concept referred to as the "double-consciousness" of play by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (Aldred, 2013). Put simply, players establish two distinct connections with their player-character. When they exert control over the character, they perceive it as their own representation within the game world, essentially becoming the character themselves. However, during cutscenes or other instances where player control is limited, players recognize the character as a separate entity, distinct from themselves, and view them as the story character.

Numerous debates surround the appropriate terminology to use when referring to a game character, considering their unique nature resulting from the double consciousness. However, as Aldred points out, one of the prevailing terms employed in this context is "avatar." Aldred defines an avatar as "the user's representative in interactive digital space, responding to their inputs via the game or computer interface" (Aldred, 2013). Nevertheless, as Aldred illustrates, several scholars advocate for "a continuum wherein avatars function primarily as projections of their players, while characters may take on strong, fictional identities that are recognizably separate from those of their players" (Aldred, 2013). In other words, the term "avatar" denotes an in-game character that provides players with greater freedom and creative agency, while "character" refers to a separate entity that can have its own independent identity.

In the article titled "Heavy hero or digital dummy? Multimodal player-avatar relations in *Final Fantasy 7*," the authors delve into the dual nature of a game character based on interviews conducted with players of *FFVII*. Through the analysis of pronoun usage during these interviews, such as referring to the character as "he" (referring to Cloud) when discussing story events like "he has to defeat this big corporation," and switching to "you" (referring to the player) when discussing player actions like "you have to go and try to stop him," the authors reveal evidence of the player's double consciousness. Essentially, when referencing narrative events presented in the game, the player uses the pronoun "he," while when discussing moments where the player takes direct action, the pronoun "you" is employed. The article categorizes the former nature of the character as the "heavy hero," akin to heroes found in folk tales and mythology, while the latter is termed the "digital dummy," representing an empty puppet manipulated by the player (Burn and Schott, 2004).

The term that I will be using in this study is player-character (hereafter PC). PC is a common term used in RPGs to refer to any character that is controlled by the player as opposed to none player-characters (hereafter NPC, characters that are controlled by the GM or the computer) and enemies (offensive NPCs). Broadly speaking, PCs in RPGs fall somewhere in the middle between a character and an avatar, as they can simultaneously function as both a story character and a representation of the player within the game world. However, the degree to which a PC leans towards being either a story character or an avatar can vary depending on the specific game. Building upon the earlier discussion regarding WRPGs and JRPGs, it appears that in JRPGs, the PC tends to assume the role of a character rather than a mere avatar, whereas in WRPGs, the PC leans more towards being an avatar. In WRPGs, it is common for players to create their own avatar at the beginning of the game. They have the freedom to choose the avatar's race, gender, appearance, and class. In these scenarios, the PC typically only speaks through dialogue options selected by the players themselves. This allows players to easily project themselves onto the character and immerse themselves in the game. On the other hand, in JRPGs, the PC is usually predefined with its own distinct personality. It comes with a detailed backstory and is an integral part of a predetermined narrative. This approach gives the game creators more control over the story and enables them to deliver a more impactful narrative experience. However, there are exceptions to these general patterns. For instance, *The Witcher*, despite being classified as a WRPG, features a predetermined protagonist. Conversely, games like *Dragon Quest IX* (Square Enix, 2009) allow players to create their own avatar. In some JRPG series such as *Pokémon* (Nintendo) or *Persona* (Atlus), the characters' appearances are predetermined, but players still have the freedom to define their personalities and abilities, making them more like avatars that players can shape according to their preferences.

1.3.1. The relationship between the player and the player-character (PC)

Games rely on the active participation and engagement of players. This distinctive characteristic establishes a unique relationship between players and characters compared to more traditional narrative media like movies. Hefner et al. (2007), in their article "Identification with the Player Character as Determinant of Video Game Enjoyment," explore the impact of interactivity on player identification. Their findings demonstrate that the higher the level of interactivity in a game, the greater the players' tendency to identify with their PC (Hefner et al., 2007). Thus, understanding the dynamic between player and PC in the context of RPGs becomes crucial in comprehending the identity of the PC within these games.

In their article titled "Player Identification in Online Games: Validation of a Scale for Measuring Identification in MMOGs" (2012), Looy et al. propose a three-dimensional model to elucidate the relationship between players and their PC. Although their primary focus is on massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), it appears that their model can be extended to other types of games as well. The three-dimensional model presented by Looy et al. encompasses similarity identification, wishful identification, and embodied presence in their study. According to their model, similarity identification refers to the way players connect with their avatars based on resemblances in lifestyle, thinking patterns, appearance, problems, and other factors. Essentially, players identify with the player character based on the degree of similarity they perceive between themselves and the character. On the other hand, wishful identification occurs when players form a connection with avatars that possess qualities or abilities that

the players themselves lack or desire. By assuming the role of such avatars, players can experience things in the game that they cannot in real life, such as flying, using magic, or possessing incredible strength. Embodied presence occurs when players become fully immersed in the game, forgetting the virtual and artificial nature of the game space, and feeling as though they are actually present in the game world through their avatars. In this state, players fully embody their avatars and perceive themselves as one and the same with their player characters (Looy et al., 2012).

In her book *Better Game Characters by Design* (2006), Katherine Isbister presents an alternative framework for examining how players establish connections and engage with their PC. Within this book, Isbister introduces four layers encompassing the player's psychological experience: visceral, cognitive, social, and fantasy. Visceral feedback refers to "the sensory experience that a player has of that character, particularly in the sense of feedback from the character to the player as he or she takes action." But one does not automatically respond to sensory input. The player needs to develop an understanding of how the character works and "map herself or himself cognitively onto the player character" (Isbister, 2006: 25) in order to properly interact with the game-world. In other words, the player gathers data from the game world using an avatar, processes information, and responds within the limits of the character's capabilities. Social affordances refer to the social presence of the player in the game while interacting with other players or NPCs. Finally, fantasy affordances refer to players' understanding of the character's role in the story and the fictional world (Isbister, 2006: 203-206).

Bowman and Schrier (2018) concentrate their attention on the player-character relationship within RPGs. They provide an intricate exploration of how a players establish a connection with the player's PC at various levels. They elaborate on how players define their PC in relation to their own identity in four distinct manners, encompassing avatar-as-object, avatar-as-me, avatar-as-symbiote, and avatar-as-other⁸ (Bowman and Schrier, 2018: 400).

Bowman and Schrier elucidate that avatar-as-object implies that players perceive the PC merely as a tool. In simpler terms, the PC serves as a mere instrument for winning the game and embodies the game's mechanics. The PC's social relations and the character's identity are inconsequential at this stage. Avatar-as-me, on the other hand, denotes that players view the PC as an extension of themselves. The PC's role, appearance, and personality mirror the player's own identity. Conversely, avatar-as-Symbiote enables players to assume a mask and engage in role-playing as alternative personas. These personas often embody "idealized personality traits, such as heroism, sociability, strength, independence, etc." (Bowman and Schrier, 2018: 401). In this context, the PC may also represent the player's ideal self. Finally, avatar-as-other signifies that players acknowledge the PC as a distinct social entity. The PC is perceived as a separate individual from the player, existing within the game world (Bowman and Schrier, 2018: 400-402).

Irrespective of how players establish a connection with their PC, the process of identification plays a pivotal role in enhancing a player's enjoyment of the game. Bowman et al. (2006) elaborate that when players experience a sense of autonomy (the ability to act freely within the game) and competence (a

⁸ Bowman and Schrier (2018) adopt these terminologies from Banks (2015). It is important to note that Bowman and Schrier use the terms "character" and "avatar" interchangeably.

feeling of accomplishment), their enjoyment of the game is heightened. Moreover, when players establish a sense of relatedness or connection with the PC and their narrative, their appreciation for the game is deepened, resulting in a more meaningful experience (Bowman et al., 2006: 86). In other words, players can derive enjoyment and appreciation from the game by identifying with the PC, both on the mechanical level and the narrative level.

1.4. Defining Culture in Videogame

Culture is an intricate and broad concept, which makes defining it quite challenging. Salen and Zimmerman explain that “The word ‘culture’ commonly refers to all of the knowledge and values shared by a society or group, and often is used to refer collectively to a society and its way of life.” However, depending on the field of study and the specific perspective adopted by a scholar, the interpretation of culture can vary (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 422). Nevertheless, the primary aim of this section is not necessarily to establish a definition for culture, but rather to grasp its connection to games. Salen and Zimmerman propose two approaches to comprehending games as cultural artifacts: the reflective and transformative perspectives. In the reflective framework, a game serves as a reflection of the culture at large (in Salen and Zimmerman's context, this culture is whatever exists outside the magic circle of the game). On the other hand, the transformative viewpoint suggests that games, owing to their capacity to offer players choices and autonomy, present an opportunity to alter the cultural framework embedded within the game. As an example, there are numerous games that offer players the ability to modify or “mod” the game. This entails accessing the game's underlying code to alter the appearance of objects or characters, as well as adding or modifying certain mechanics. Additionally, players sometimes create their own objectives or challenges within the game. For instance, a player might decide to complete *Super Mario* (Nintendo) without collecting any coins as a self-imposed challenge. However, Salen and Zimmerman underscore that while all games have the potential to be reflective, only a limited number of games have the capacity to be transformative (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 421). In this research, the primary focus will be on the reflective aspect of games. In other words, I will seek to comprehend how the games in question mirror the culture in which they were created. Nevertheless, I will also make an effort to acknowledge the role of players in reshaping the cultural meaning conveyed in the games, as, at times, it becomes challenging to discuss cultural meaning without considering the influence of the player.

1.4.1. Creating Meaning and Cultural Reflection in Videogames

Ian Bogost's book, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games* (2007), delves into the concept of games as reflections of ideologies and their capacity for conveying meaning⁹, which he terms “procedural rhetoric.” Bogost's fundamental premise lies in viewing video games as software that

⁹ When examining how games generate and convey meaning, scholars employ various terms based on their respective arguments and areas of focus. This distinction becomes evident throughout this discussion. For instance, Bogost emphasizes on ideology, Taylor explores the boundaries of the magic circle, Chapman delves into historical aspects, and in this particular context, I am concerned with culture. However, for the purpose of this argument, it is advantageous to consider all these terms as different manifestations of meaning.

mirrors human thought processes, emphasizing how computers simulate logical steps akin to human cognitive functions. He draws parallels between human cognition—where sensory data is collected, processed based on prior experiences, and responded to—and the operation of computers within games. In other words, he believes that games function through encoded algorithms, akin to the logical processes of the human brain. However, he notes the limitations in a computer's rigid logic compared to the adaptability of the human mind (Bogost, 2007: 4, 14). Bogost explains that the key aspect that defines a game as procedural is its operational mechanism, where it functions by sequentially adhering to logical statements within an algorithm. By executing a predefined coded procedure, the game is able to effectively respond to player inputs.

Now, let's delve into Bogost's interpretation of the term "rhetoric." He defines rhetoric as a methodical approach to employing language in order to prove an idea. The origins of rhetoric can be traced back to the theories of Plato and Aristotle, who expounded on the logical utilization of written or spoken language to support an argument. However, the scope of rhetoric extends well beyond spoken language. A contemporary illustration would be the employment of imagery in modern advertising (Bogost, 2007: 15-20). Bogost suggests that when language provides more tangible information to the audience, it becomes more persuasive. For instance, a diagram is easier to comprehend than the same information presented as a series of numbers. Consequently, images hold greater persuasive power than text, and moving images with sound are even more potent than static images. This is where Bogost introduces the concept of procedural rhetoric into the equation. As Bogost explains, software and computer games function quite similarly to the human mind. Consequently, information conveyed through a procedure is highly comprehensible for the human mind, and therefore, highly persuasive (Bogost, 2007: 34). An example Bogost employs is *MacDonald* (Pedercini, 2006), a game where players assume the role of the company's CEO and face moral dilemmas, such as managing infected meat. This game, designed as a critique of McDonald's policies. Bogost argues that using such a game can offer more insight into the situation compared to an article on the same subject. This is because players are placed in the shoes of the decision-maker and become part of McDonald's infrastructure. Consequently, they understand that building such an empire cannot be achieved solely through goodwill (Bogost, 2007: 29, 30). However, there is an inherent bias in such games, where intentional design influences player behavior and outcomes. That is why games wield persuasive power due to their ability to engage players in decision-making processes, granting them agency and fostering a belief that their choices lead to the outcomes presented.

However, Bogost's argument holds true only if we accept his underlying assumption regarding the cognitive processes of the human brain. Bogost presents a bottom-up explanation of how the brain operates, where it receives sensory input from the external world and reacts accordingly. However, the concept of "prediction error minimization" suggests a top-down process for the brain. Jakob Hohwy, in his book *The Predictive Mind* (2013), explains that according to this theory, our brain can influence and modify sensory input based on preexisting biases. He highlights that the issue with the first theory can be elucidated by considering cause and effect (Hohwy, 2013). To illustrate, let's use an example. Imagine a scenario where there is a person and there is a bee (the cause), but the person cannot see the bee. However, they hear a buzzing sound (the effect). Based on Bogost's explanation, the brain perceives this sound as sensory input and traces it back to the cause, which is the bee. However, Hohwy argues that

this is not how the brain actually operates. This is because different effects can be attributed to the same cause, or one effect can be attributed to different causes (Hohwy, 2013: 13). For instance, upon hearing the buzzing sound, the person might think it is a bee, but, in reality, it could be coming from a light bulb. Hohwy goes on to elaborate that when the brain receives sensory input, it engages in a process of predicting potential causes by considering multiple hypotheses. Subsequently, it systematically eliminates the less probable hypotheses based on the contextual situation and prior experiences (Hohwy, 2013: 15-17). In the aforementioned example, upon hearing the buzzing sound, the brain might generate hypotheses that include a bee, an electronic machine, or a wizard casting a spell as potential causes. However, certain hypotheses are more likely to be true based on past experiences. For instance, if the sound actually originates from a light bulb but the person has never encountered a light bulb making such a noise, they are unlikely to guess that it is a light bulb. Conversely, if they are in a rural area, they are more inclined to assume that the buzzing sound is caused by a bee. Hohwy also highlights that the brain may adjust or augment the received information to align with the scenario it finds more probable (Hohwy, 2013: 19-23).

In the present context, this implies that even when game creators intend to convey a specific message, there is always the possibility that players will interpret it differently due to their own biases. According to James Lawson (2011), drawing from Bakhtin's theories, the interpretation of a text or a piece of art emerges from an ongoing dialogue between the audience and the text itself. Hence, the meaning of the text can change based on the artwork's context, the audience, temporal and spatial elements, and cultural influences (Lawson, 2011). As a result, the meaning of a text is never fixed; it is in a constant state of flux. Olli Sotamaa (2014) shares a similar perspective but within the context of games. He posits that games represent a dialogue between the player and the game system. While games can serve as a potent medium of expression in the hands of a designer, it does not prevent players from influencing what a game can simulate (Sotamaa, 2014: 6). It is worth noting that there is a distinction between Bakhtin's concept of dialogue and what Sotamaa refers to as dialogue. Bakhtin's concept of dialogue is more aligned with Hohwy's explanation and can be applied to various contexts, texts, media, or artworks. In contrast, Sotamaa is discussing the interactivity inherent to games. Games are not passive experiences; players actively engage with them, taking actions that can alter the game's state. Sotamaa's perspective aligns more closely with Salen and Zimmerman's notion of the transformative play or Taylor's argument about the boundaries of the magic circle.

Taylor argues that players have the capacity to modify and influence the meaning of a game. For instance, players often employ game mechanics in unexpected ways, beyond what the designer originally intended (Taylor, 2007). As Salen and Zimmerman noted, games are dynamic systems, and this emergent behavior is quite common. It can manifest as something as simple as repurposing an in-game item for an entirely different function, exploiting system bugs and flaws, or using an unconventional controller. For example, Matt Swarthout, known from the YouTube channel Vexal, developed a version of the game *Doom* (id Software, 1996) that can be played while driving a Porsche 911. While the practicality of such an endeavor is questionable, it does provide a novel gaming experience. As Taylor illustrates, the influence of players can even extend beyond the confines of the game itself. They can create walkthroughs, cheats, or engage in fandoms and forums (Taylor, 2007). This involvement spans various levels and degrees of influence on the part of players.

Up until now, I have examined how a game can effectively communicate ideology and meaning by using Bogost's theories. I have also presented counterarguments that suggest players have a greater influence in creating meaning than we typically acknowledge. Consequently, players may not be solely impacted by the ideologies conveyed through the game. However, Alexander R. Galloway in his book *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (2006) offers a different perspective that implies our prior discussion may lead us away from grasping the true essence of games, rather than offering a more profound comprehension. Galloway distinguishes between ideological criticism and political criticism of games, asserting that once we move beyond the analysis of ideology, we delve into political criticism. According to Galloway, “the more one tries to pin down the ideological critique, the more one sees that such a critique is undermined by the existence of something altogether different from ideology: informatic code” (Galloway, 2006: 102).

Galloway explains that games are essentially information. As a result, any principles governing the control of information and digital technology, such as internet protocols, can also be applied to games. Galloway further elaborates that starting from the late twentieth century, society has been transitioning towards what he terms a “control society,” a concept borrowed from Gilles Deleuze. Drawing an analogy, Galloway explains that according to Deleuze a control society operates like a network of freeways. While individuals have the freedom to navigate and travel along these freeways without confusion, their movements are perfectly regulated by the structure of the freeway itself (Galloway, 2006: 87, 88). In another source, Galloway (2010) clarifies that “information must not be confused with meaning” (Galloway, 2010: 285). To elaborate on this point, I would like to reference the theories proposed by Bruce Clarke (2010). Clarke explains that in the context of information theory, the specific meaning conveyed by a message is not significant. He cites Weaver, who suggests that “the concept of information applies not to the individual messages (as the concept of meaning would), but rather to the situation as a whole” (Clarke, 2010: 159). This implies that information is not concerned with the meaning of an individual message; instead, it focuses on the possibility to choose a single message from a limited number of messages. It is about the relation between the messages.

In summarizing Galloway's perspective thus far, he asserts that games function as informatic codes, meaning that the rules governing computerized information societies also govern games. The emphasis in such societies lies not on the meaning of information, but rather on how it is transmitted and controlled. While it may appear that information flows freely through a network, the actual structure of the network is regulated. Galloway contends that games serve as a prime illustration of how such a society operates, as they effectively replicate the framework of a control society. To succeed in playing and winning the game, players must adapt to this framework and think in alignment with the game's logic. Returning to Galloway's initial point, the specific meaning of the game (its ideology) is inconsequential, just as the meaning of individual messages holds little significance in information theory. What truly matters is that the game compels the player to think in a manner that mirrors the control of information within a control society.

In order to clarify his viewpoint, Galloway uses the game *Sid Meier's Civilization* (Meier, first released in 1991) as an illustration. *Civilization* is a turn-based strategy game that places players in a god-like position to guide a civilization towards prosperity. Players can explore the world, engage in battles with other societies, and develop their own culture. The ultimate goal is to achieve a world

government. On an ideological level, the game may face criticism for its use of stereotypes to depict different cultures. When starting the game, players can choose to play as specific civilizations, such as Americans, Chinese, Babylonians, and more. Each civilization is associated with certain traits that influence their gameplay strategy. For instance, the Aztecs are portrayed as religious but not industrious, while the Russians are expansionist but not religious. Consequently, each culture is simplified and abstracted, represented by a few distinguishing traits (Galloway, 2006: 97). However, Galloway highlights that upon deeper examination, the concept of each culture’s identity within *Civilization* itself is a codified entity. It is information, another message among many to be selected and processed. Its specific meaning holds little significance. Galloway describes it as “modular, instrumental, typed, numerical, algorithmic” (Galloway, 2006: 102). Therefore, when players are playing the game, they are dealing with the informatic version of this identity and not a representation of it. In other words, players are not concerned with semantic interpretations while playing; instead, they are interacting with the game's algorithms. Galloway explains that “to play the game means to play the code of the game. To win means to know the system. Thus, to interpret a game means to interpret its algorithm” (Galloway, 2006: 90, 91). To succeed, players must think in alignment with the game’s and the computer's logic. They need to internalize the game's underlying rules if they wish to overcome its challenges. This, in turn, involves engaging with information rather than focusing on meaning.

One critic of Galloway's theories is Adam Chapman, who focuses primarily on the historical aspects of games. In his article titled "Is Sid Meier's Civilization history?" (2013), Chapman argues that while it may be theoretically easy to separate the game's algorithm from its fictional world, in practice they are experienced simultaneously (314). Chapman quotes Juul (2015), who explains that the player “experiences the game as a two-way process where the fiction of the game cues him or her into understanding the rules of the game, and, again, the rules can cue the player to imagine the fictional world” (Juul, 2015: 163). In another instance, Chapman (2016) further emphasizes the role of the player. He echoes Taylor's perspective that players can exert control over the game space through counterplay. Chapman highlights various forms of counterplay, including exploiting game bugs and flaws, modding, and configurative resonance/dissonance. He particularly emphasizes the significance of configurative resonance/dissonance within the context of historical games (Chapman, 2016: 41, 42).

Thomas Apperley (2011) explains “configurative resonance, or dissonance, involves the player deliberately configuring, and/or performing actions in the game—out of all the possible potential configurations and performances— in order to create specific resonances” (135). As an illustration, in the game *The Witcher 3* (CD Projekt, 2015), players assume the role of Geralt, the game's protagonist. During gameplay, players have the option to steal items from people's houses. However, stealing from peasants holds no significant consequences within the game. While acquiring these items can be advantageous for players, some may opt not to engage in such behavior due to its contradiction with the heroic nature of Geralt. Drawing from Apperley's definition, Chapman highlights that players often participate in activities that do not align with the game's intended goals or winning conditions. These activities neither contribute directly to winning nor result in losing. Players engage in them simply because they hold personal significance. As an instance, Chapman describes a scenario where players may strive to faithfully recreate a historical event within the game *Civilization*. The game itself does not

provide rewards or penalties for this particular player behavior. Rather, players undertake such actions because they hold a specific resonance to them (Chapman, 2016: 43).

In this research, the concept of meaning in games is examined as being generated during the players' real-time interaction with the game. Initially, the game is planned and designed by the creators with an intended meaning, which is constructed through codes and algorithms. However, the algorithm will not work until there is an input. The meaning remains incomplete until players engage with the game. However, players do not always interact with the game in the exact manner intended by the designers. This can occur unintentionally, as players may interpret and understand the game differently, resulting in them playing the game in what could be considered the "wrong way" from the designers' perspective. Nonetheless, this alternative experience is still valid and acceptable for the player, providing a unique meaning. On the other hand, there are instances where players deliberately choose to challenge and exploit the game's rules and structure in order to create new experiences. In both cases, the meaning of the game is dynamically created in real-time during gameplay. Additionally, there are situations where game mechanics may malfunction, leading to glitches and bugs that are unique to each playthrough. It is worth noting that not all games afford the same degree of freedom to players, thus resulting in a more fixed meaning. However, even within these constraints, different interpretations of the meaning can still arise, forming a dialogue between the game and the audience, as described by Bakhtin.

Although the meaning of a game is generated during gameplay, it is crucial to first comprehend the intended meaning of the creator. Whether consciously or unconsciously, creators infuse their worldview into the game. This aspect highlights the culturally reflective nature of games, which I aimed to investigate here. However, based on the definition above, it is important to recognize that understanding this meaning is nearly impossible without considering the player and their interaction with the game. Therefore, this research begins by analyzing and comprehending the potential afforded by the game itself. However, the researcher expresses the hope of conducting interviews with players from diverse cultural backgrounds in the future. This is an effort to gain deeper insight into how the intended meaning of the designers may have been interpreted and experienced within different cultural contexts.

When it comes to examining how games reflect culture, my approach aligns closely with that of Matsunaga (2016). Matsunaga argues that if games were to accurately portray reality, they would be mundane and uninteresting. Therefore, when designers aim to simulate reality in games, they must stylize certain aspects to make the gameplay enjoyable. This is where the cultural element becomes significant, as the choice of what to stylize and how to stylize it is influenced by the cultural context. Matsunaga himself seeks to understand what distinguishes early JRPGs as Japanese by examining how they deviate from reality. For instance, in the game *FFV*, characters can equip items like ribbons or hoodies with cat ears, which would be useless in a real battle but provide significant defense in the game. Matsunaga explains that the presence of such items can be understood in light of the database theory and the *chara-moe*¹⁰ culture. These items are designed in such a way because they enhance the cuteness or coolness of a character. In summary, Matsunaga's perspective emphasizes that game designers stylize

¹⁰ キャラ萌え (For more information on *chara-moe*, please refer to chapter 2, Simulation and Post-modernity.)

certain elements of reality to enhance gameplay, and these choices are influenced by cultural factors (Matsunaga, 2016).

Although my approach may not be exactly as Matsunaga's, I share the objective of comprehending the cultural distinctions present in each game. This involves analyzing the choices made by game developers when constructing the game-world and designing player-characters, which I refer to as cultural identity in my research. By determining what aspects are simulated and what are not, we can gain insights into what the designers considered to be significant. Furthermore, the players' cultural backgrounds can influence their choices to engage in certain activities and avoid others within the game. This cultural context shapes how players interpret and make sense of the game. Recognizing the impact of cultural identity helps to deepen our understanding of players' experiences and perspectives in relation to the game.

1.5. Conclusion

Holleman suggests that in order to adapt TTRPGs into CRPGs, designers had to employ various approaches. Some changes were driven by technical limitations, while many others were influenced by the cultural preferences of the game creators. Consequently, games created in Japan and Europe, for example, can reflect the cultures in which they were developed. In this study, my goal is to identify these choices that establish patterns, which in turn evolve into distinct genres such as WRPGs and JRPGs. To uncover these recurring patterns that shape a genre, I will focus on two crucial elements commonly found in RPGs: the game-world and the PC. The game-world establishes the logic of the game, including the thematic elements of the story world, the abilities and objectives of the PC, and more. The PC, as the player's means of interaction with the game-world, profoundly influences their experience and understanding of the game. This chapter has provided definitions for each of these elements, laying the groundwork for a deeper analysis and exploration of their significance from various perspectives in the upcoming chapters.

2. Chapter 2: Methodology and Theoretical Framework

In the previous chapter, I talked about the RPG genre, specifically examining the some of the differences between WRPG and JRPG. In this chapter, the discussion begins by exploring Bakhtin's theory of chronotope, which is used to identify recurring patterns that shape a genre. By applying Bakhtin's theories, it becomes possible to recognize patterns within the games under examination and consequently determine their similarities and differences through this approach. While Bakhtin's theory provides valuable insights into the games' chronotopes, it is crucial to incorporate other theories to further analyze and unravel the reflected culture in the game. By combining multiple theoretical perspectives, such as Umberto Eco, Jean Baudrillard and Hiroki Azuma, we can gain a better understanding of the cultural identity in RPG genre.

2.1. Patterns of Time and Space in Genre: Mikhail Bakhtin's Theory of Chronotope

Bakhtin introduces the concept of chronotope in order to understand the narrative structure of an artwork. He defines chronotope as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin 1981, 84). Bakhtin borrowed this term from Einstein to emphasize the inseparability of space and time. As Deborah J. Haynes (1995) explains in Bakhtin's theory, “chronotope describes the time/space nexus in which life exists and creativity is possible”. This means that “there is no experience outside of space and time”. These two are intertwined, and when one of them changes, the other one changes with it as well (Haynes 1995, 298). Simply put, we can assign a time and a space to every existence, every human activity, every experience, and every work of art. But Bakhtin emphasizes that he is addressing the chronotope only as a component in literature structure where “spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole” (Bakhtin, 1981: 84). It means that he uses the chronotope as a tool to understand how the author uses time and space artistically in order to concretely express the events of the literature. If we accept Stuart Allan's (1994) explanation, the chronotope can be applied to any text, such as novels, movies, advertisements, etc., since they all present a narrative structure, and such a structure “organizes a patterned series of causal events within particular relations of time and space” (Allan 1994, 199).

Bakhtin uses chronotope to analyze and categorize novels. According to Bakhtin, there is a predictable pattern in the relationship between time and space in novels. While these patterns were initially productive, they have been repeated so frequently that they have turned into traditions and have become generic. Bakhtin states that chronotope “has an intrinsic generic significance” and “that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinction” (Bakhtin 1981, 84- 85). In other words, in Bakhtin’s opinion genres are defined by their unique time and space characteristics. To gain a deeper understanding of Bakhtin's concept of chronotope, I will refer to one of his classifications for the novel as an example. Bakhtin refers to a specific category known as "The Greek romance" or the "adventure novel of ordeal." This category encompasses novels written between the second and sixth centuries, often referred to as "Greek" or "Sophist" novels, as well as their successors, the Byzantine novels. Bakhtin begins by examining the various components or the small chronotopes, that make up these novels. He explains that these romances typically begin with the unexpected encounter of a young man and a young woman of marriageable age, often during a festival or similar event. Instantly, they fall deeply in love. However, their path to marriage is obstructed by various challenges. Bakhtin presents several examples of these obstacles, including the abduction of the bride, the lack of parental consent, the presence of alternative suitors for either of the lovers, and more. Nevertheless, despite these hurdles, the two lovers ultimately manage to overcome them and marry one another by the end of the story.

Once Bakhtin identifies these chronotopes within the novel, he proceeds to analyze their interconnectedness and their impact on the characters. He explains that, within this genre, only two chronotopes truly matter: the initial encounter of the couple and their eventual marriage. Regardless of what unfolds between these two chronotopes, it has no bearing on the final outcome or the development of the characters. Whether there are numerous obstacles or none at all, until the story's end, the couple remain as youthful, as beautiful, as virtuous, and as deeply in love as they were at the beginning (Bakhtin 1981, 86-83). Bakhtin expands the application of his method to introduce additional genres for novels. However, these genres are not relevant to the current research topic and therefore fall outside the scope of this study. As he himself states, Bakhtin's main concern, is literature and, more specifically, the novel. This suggests that since the medium of the game differs significantly from that of the novel, Bakhtin's theory must be modified to fit the new medium.

For instance, Bakhtin's classification of novels is based on how the events within the narrative impact the development of the characters. However, in the realm of games, the narrative is not the sole factor that influences the PC. Another crucial aspect of the PC is the game mechanics. PCs undergo constant changes from a gameplay perspective, such as leveling up, acquiring new skills, and utilizing different equipment. All of these elements significantly impact both the game itself and the character. Furthermore, the PC is not just a character within the story; it also serves as the player's avatar. As a result, any changes in the player's skills or abilities directly affect the PC as well. As players invest more time in the game, they become more proficient, constantly evolving and adapting. Therefore, even if the story character remains static, the players themselves are continuously changing as they learn and master the game. Consequently, Bakhtin's theory must be adapted to accommodate the unique characteristics of the gaming medium. In chapter one, I extensively examined the concept of space and time in videogames. Building upon those discussions and incorporating Bakhtin's theories, I would like to propose the following chronotopes as the foundation for the study at hand.

2.1.1. Progress Chronotope

In chapter one I examined the notion that meaning within a game is actively constructed through the players' interactions with the game mechanics. Whether this meaning is intentionally designed by the game developers through procedures and coded algorithms, or it emerges through the players' improvisation and counter play, it is ultimately the outcome of the active involvement of the players in changing the game state. Therefore, in order to comprehend the cultural identity of both the game-world and the PC, it is essential to grasp how these two elements evolve and transform throughout the course of the game. Players rarely remain static in regard to their situation in the game. They are constantly changing the game state in order to progress the game. In the first chapter, I referred to Holleman and Matsunaga's account of key features in RPGs that define the genre to some extent. According to Holleman, these features include the orthogonal role, the simulated skill, and the level-up system. While the latter two aspects refer to the PC and how the player interacts with the PC, the former refers to the positioning of the character within the game world. Thus, it is safe to assume that when players are changing the game state, they are either changing the game-world or the PC. The progress chronotope will focus on investigating the potential transformations that occur throughout the course of the game. During the analysis of the game, particular emphasis will be placed on examining the changes observed in the PC, the game-world, or the player as the game progresses. This examination aims to uncover and understand the cultural identity embedded within the game through the changes in game state.

2.1.2. Historical Chronotope

History is intricately linked to the notions of time and space, making it easy to analysis through the lens of the chronotope. In chapter one, I explained that neomedievalism serves as a common theme in the construction of game-worlds for early JRPGs and Western WRPGs. Consequently, analyzing the RPG game-world necessitates a thorough examination of the historical chronotope. Even though JRPGs cannot be confined to neomedievalism, as I will expound upon in upcoming chapters, the historical chronotope remains invaluable in exploring how this change has transpired, particularly in comparison to WRPGs. Any game that incorporates historical figures, locations, events, and concepts inherently embodies a historical chronotope. For instance, an FPS game set during World War II can be considered to have a historical chronotope. However, the historical chronotope encompasses more than just these surface-level references. RPGs, in particular, have a tendency to construct parallel worlds that exist independently of our own reality. Consequently, we can identify two distinct historical chronotopes within RPGs.

Firstly, as a separate world, the RPG game-world possesses its own timeline and, subsequently, its own unique history. This internal history is shaped by the events and developments that occur within the game. One of the primary focuses of this research is to comprehend the internal history of the game-world. Secondly, despite being an imaginary world, RPGs still draw upon and reference real history. Peterson et al. (2013) introduce the concept of a historical concept within the realm of games. According to them, “concepts are generalized models of processes that operate in the real world” (Peterson et al., 2013, 40). For example, monarchy or feudalism are historical concepts associated with the Middle Ages. Therefore, if an RPG simulates a feudal system within its game mechanics, it is referring to a real historical period. However, due to the imaginative nature of RPGs, they are not bound by strict

adherence to the original historical concepts. This is evident in the incorporation of myths, legends, and fairy tales within RPGs. These historical concepts are brought to life within the fictional worlds of RPGs, but they are also subject to modification and alteration as deemed necessary for the game's narrative and gameplay. A notable example of this can be found in Hutchinson's (2019) analysis of *Ōkami* (Capcom, 2006). Hutchinson explains that in *Ōkami*, “the ‘Japanese past’ is thus imagined as a time and place where legendary heroes walked the earth, mythical beings were real, and fairytales were true” (Hutchinson, 2019, 59).

2.2. Analyzing the chronotopic elements

In this study, I will use the world chronotope in two different manners. Initially, I will employ the term chronotope to refer to specific concepts such as the progress chronotope, historical chronotope, or a genre's chronotope as it was defined earlier. Additionally, I will also employ the term to signify spacetime in a broader sense. For instance, neomedievalism encompasses a particular time and space, thus it can be described as a neomedieval chronotope. Similarly, players operate within a specific spacetime while playing, which can be referred to as the player's chronotope. Bakhtin's theory provides valuable method to find the patterns of time and space that recur in the games being examined. Once the patterns have been identified, it is important to incorporate other theories to further analyze them and uncover the cultural identities. While I have previously discussed Bakhtin's concept of dialogue, which emphasizes the dynamic interaction between the audience and the text, it is necessary to expand our theoretical framework. In the following sections I will include Umberto Eco, Jean Baudrillard and Hiroki Azuma's theories to further expand the scope of the framework.

2.2.1. Eco on seriality and repeated patterns: Novelty and predictability

There are several reasons why I find Eco's theories valuable for the present study. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, Eco demonstrates how mass media (such as comic books, TV series, and games in this context) are able to consistently produce content centered around the same characters while still maintaining the audience's interest. Although Eco does not specifically focus on genres, his description of story schemas consisting of repeated tropes, such as those found in detective stories, aligns closely with Bakhtin's definition of a genre. Furthermore, Eco discusses the characteristics of heroes in mass media in his work "The Myth of Superman" (1972). In RPGs, especially the ones being examined here, the main characters may not fit the traditional superhero archetype. However, they often possess heroic traits and embark on quests to save the world. It is for this reason that I am utilizing Umberto Eco's theories to analyze these protagonists. Additionally, as I will elaborate towards the end of this section, Eco's analysis emphasizes the relationship between time and space, which parallels Bakhtin's approach, although Eco does not explicitly highlight it. Therefore, the similarity in their approaches suggests that creating a unified method for analyzing the games can be possible.

"The Myth of Superman" explores how a heroic protagonist, particularly Superman, is depicted in media like comics. Eco draws a comparison between two types of heroes: those found in mythical stories and those found in novels. He explains that a mythical hero “embodies a law, or a universal demand, and, therefore, must be in part predictable and cannot hold surprises for us” (Eco 1972, 15). These heroes

have predetermined fates and their stories are fixed. They often possess divine origins and supernatural abilities. On the other hand, the protagonist of a novel is depicted as more human-like. They are susceptible to change, capable of growth and transformation over time. Unlike mythical heroes, the fate of a novel's hero is typically unpredictable. This unpredictability adds a sense of novelty and excitement to their story, making it engaging for the audience. As a result, readers or viewers can continuously consume new and captivating narratives without becoming bored. In contrast, because the fate of a mythical hero is predetermined and evident, it cannot be consumed in the same way as a novel's hero. The story of a mythical hero has already been consumed, as it follows a fixed and known narrative trajectory (Eco, 1972: 15).

According to Eco, a hero like Superman in modern media, particularly in comic books, needs to embody elements of both a novel's hero and a mythical hero. The mythical aspect refers to the inclusion of supernatural abilities in the hero's character. As Eco clarifies, supernatural abilities are “the extreme realization of natural endowments such as astuteness, swiftness, fighting ability, or even the logical faculties” (Eco 1972, 14). In essence, the mythical hero embodies the ultimate form of power that ordinary individuals aspire to possess. On the other hand, Eco explains that alongside these supernatural abilities, a mythical hero also possesses eternal qualities that remain unchanging. These characteristics contribute to the hero's godlike nature, making them seem unattainable and beyond the reach of ordinary individuals. Consequently, the godlike qualities of a mythical hero can create a challenge for ordinary people to identify with such a character (Eco, 1972: 15).

When examining Superman as an example, the mythical aspect of his character encompasses his superpowers and the ideals he represents. Superman is depicted as a god-like figure in this regard, with extraordinary powers such as super strength, super speed, invulnerability to bullets, x-ray vision, and more. However, establishing a strong audience connection with a character of such god-like stature can be challenging. To address this, Eco's analysis introduces the second aspect of Superman's character: Clark Kent. This aspect aligns with the traits commonly found in protagonists of novels, which tend to possess more human-like qualities that make them relatable to the audience. Clark Kent is portrayed as an ordinary individual with a regular job and an awkward romantic interest in Louise Lane, exemplifying these relatable features. By incorporating these relatable aspects into the character, Superman becomes more akin to the audience and facilitates a sense of identification. This allows the audience to connect with Superman on a more personal level, despite his god-like abilities (Eco, 1972: 15).

Another challenge with a mythical hero is that their fate is often predictable, which can make their story less appealing for repeated consumption. In the case of mass media products like comics, which are regularly published, it becomes essential to continually create new and captivating stories for the audience to enjoy. This is where the incorporation of novel-like hero traits in characters like Superman becomes crucial. These traits make the hero more susceptible to change and allow for the undermining of their destiny, introducing new and unexpected elements as the story unfolds. As a result, the hero becomes a source of numerous consumable stories. However, the inclusion of both novel-like and mythical hero features creates a paradox. If the character is subject to change like a human, it raises questions regarding how they can maintain their eternal nature. With each new story development, time progresses, causing the hero to age and approach their mortality. Yet, they must also remain the same hero to enable the production and consumption of new stories. Balancing these conflicting aspects can

be challenging, but it is necessary for mass media to maintain the character's immortality and appeal to the audience at the same time.

In the article “Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics” (1985), Eco explores the commonness of repetition in the realm of artistic creativity and media during his contemporary era. He explains that in modern¹¹ aesthetics, something is valued as creative and artistic if it is original and novel. However, he argues that repetition has always existed in art. This repetition, or what Eco refers to as seriality, is particularly prevalent in mass media. In Eco's article, seriality refers to the idea that something appears new and different on the surface, but it contains recurring underlying structures. According to Eco, mass media offers something as original and new to align with the requirements of the modern aesthetic. However, the audience is aware that this thing is essentially a repetition of something else. But regardless or perhaps precisely because of this awareness, the audience still like it. Eco argues that the audience find comfort in the familiarity of repetition. To illustrate this point, he cites detective stories like Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot. In these stories, certain elements remain consistent. For instance, Poirot always gathers all the suspects together to unveil the truth at the end of the story, while Holmes provides a detailed character profile solely based on observation during his initial encounter with someone. Eco suggests that these repetitive habits and behaviors create a sense of kinship within the audience and make them view these characters as old friends. However, Eco also points out that to allow the audience to keep enjoying these repetitions, authors must introduce new crimes and characters in each story. Hence, it is essential to create a dialectic between recurring patterns and new elements within a serialized media to be able to tell many stories while ensuring the enjoyment of the audience. Eco describes that although this approach is employed in modern media, post-modern media distinguishes itself through its radical approach. Instead of making few variations, post-modern media aims to generate an infinite number of variations (Eco, 1985: 162-167). Eco provides a categorization of the methods employed by mass media to address this paradox. These categories include the retake, the remake, the series, the saga, and the intertextual dialogue.

The Retake: The retake involves the reuse of characters from a previously successful story to capitalize on their popularity, exploring what happens to them after the conclusion of their initial adventure. The subsequent story may present a slight variation on the original or a completely different narrative featuring the same characters. It may even delve into their past experiences (Eco, 1985: 167). Similarly, in "The Myth of Superman," Eco notes that in Superman and similar comic books, while temporal continuity is maintained within each episode, the transition between episodes is not explicitly stated. As a result, each episode exists in a state of limbo, while the overall timeline that links them remains uncertain. This allows the hero to retain their humanity while also remaining immortal. This ambiguity enables the creation and consumption of countless stories (Eco, 1972).

The Remake: Regarding the concept of the remake, Eco doesn't delve deeply into how innovation accompanies repetition. However, it appears that even when creators attempt to remake a previous story, they still manage to introduce something new. Eco highlights that Shakespeare's works can be seen as

¹¹ Eco explains that by "modern" he refers to “those born with Mannerism, developed through Romanticism, and provocatively restated by the early-twentieth-century avant-gardes” (Eco, 1985: 161).

remakes of earlier stories, suggesting that even in adaptation, there is room for originality (Eco, 1985: 167).

The Series: The idea of a series is exemplified by detective stories, as explained by Eco. These stories typically feature a fixed situation and a limited number of pivotal characters, while the secondary characters change. For instance, Hercule Poirot serves as a prime example. While Poirot and a few other characters remain consistent, the cases he faces always differ. Each story introduces new characters and new crimes, yet Poirot follows a consistent pattern to uncover the culprits (Eco, 1985: 168).

The Saga: the saga, as a narrative form, is characterized by its genealogical nature. It takes a family and traces its story across multiple generations. According to Eco, “saga is a history of the aging of individuals, families, people, groups” (Eco, 1985: 169). However, despite the appearance of stories focused on new generations, the underlying structure of the story remains consistent.

The Intertextual Dialog: Eco defines Intertextual Dialog as a form of text that echoes previous texts. In this case, the text heavily relies on the audience's familiarity with existing texts, which Eco refers to as the “encyclopedia” of the spectator. The text ironically incorporating quotations from other texts. If the spectator is aware of the reference, it prompts them to reflect ironically on the nature of such a literary device. Additionally, it invites the spectator to recognize and engage with their own knowledge in various texts, playing upon their encyclopedic understanding (Eco, 1985: 170, 171).

In summary, Eco's perspective explores the depiction of heroic protagonists in his contemporary mass media, highlighting the delicate balance between mythical hero traits, such as supernatural abilities, and novel-like hero traits, such as relatable human characteristics. This balance is crucial in creating captivating characters that can endure the passage of time. Eco also discusses the methods employed by mass media to generate infinite possibilities and narratives, ensuring the continuous consumption of stories within the framework of established characters.

One of the key features in methods provided by Eco is the manipulation of time and space. The main goal is to prevent the characters from being affected by the passage of time, thus avoiding their ultimate demise. Alternatively, the aim is to ensure that any changes in the space-time continuum can be reversed in some way or another. For instance, in the context of Superman comics, Eco notes that the exact chronological occurrence of an episode is often left uncertain within the overall timeline of the series. This technique creates the illusion that time has not progressed significantly. Additionally, the events of one episode should not meaningfully alter the space in which they occur, as any noticeable change would be observable in subsequent episodes. For example, if a landmark is destroyed in one episode but appears intact in the next issue, it suggests that the events of the latter happened before the former. However, achieving coherence in this manner is not always possible. Thus, a combination of various methods has been employed over the years to allow the story of a character, such as Superman, to continue evolving while maintaining a sense of continuity.

2.2.1.1. Eco's theories and chronotope in RPGs

RPGs, as a genre, exhibit recurring patterns that can be effectively analyzed through the lens of Eco's theories. However, it is worth noting that both *The Witcher* and, more notably, the *FF* series are examples of game series that have existed for a long time. At the time of writing this text, the *FF* series consists

of sixteen main entries. This suggests that the series may employ some of the methods proposed by Eco to sustain its ongoing production of titles under the banner of *Final Fantasy*. Eco's theories can shed light on the strategies used in game design, storytelling, and world-building within these games. By analyzing the recurring chronotopes we can better understand how the franchise has managed to evolve and adapt while retaining its core essence. Furthermore, Eco's insights regarding the portrayal of heroes in mass media are highly relevant when examining the progress chronotope in games. His observations align closely with the discussions presented in chapter one, specifically in relation to the dynamic between the player and the PC. There is a parallel between Eco's definition of a hero in novels and mythical heroes, the concepts of similarity identification and wishful identification, and avatar-as-Me and avatar-as-Symbiote, respectively. When playing an RPG, players have the opportunity to experience these different types of identification by actively changing the state of their PC. Through analyzing the patterns of change or consistency in the PC's identity, one can determine whether it aligns more closely with a mythical hero or a novel hero. Thus, analyzing the progress chronotope of the PC we can discover the cultural identity of the PC.

2.2.2. Simulation and Post-modernity

There is simulation in all games. Simulation is one of fundamental features among others that construct a game. However, the type of simulation I am discussing here differs from the typical concept of simulation in game studies, as it includes a wider range. Specifically, I am referring to the Baudrillard's interpretation of simulation. While I briefly mentioned this topic in Chapter 1 when exploring neomedievalism in RPGs, I now aim to delve deeper into the subject by drawing upon the theories of Baudrillard and Azuma. Baudrillard (1981) defines simulation as oppose to representation. Representation, according to Baudrillard, is rooted in reality, where an image or symbol reflects something that exists in the real world. In contrast, simulation does not necessarily rely on a connection to reality. While a simulation may initially aim to recreate something real, it can persist even after the original reality has vanished and eventually replace that reality altogether. To better understand Baudrillard's perspective, it is helpful to examine what he refers to as "the successive phases of the image." These phases are as follows:

it is the reflection of a profound reality;

it masks and denatures a profound reality;

it masks the absence of a profound reality;

it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum.

(Baudrillard 1981, 6)

According to Baudrillard, in the first stage, the image aims to accurately depict and mirror what exists in the real world. Moving to the second stage, the image still maintains a connection to the real, but the representation becomes distorted. It portrays the real in a manner that deviates from its true form. On the third stage, the image attempts to conceal the absence of reality. It becomes a fabrication and a

falsehood. It still bears a connection to the real, because the distinction between the image and reality is apparent. We recognize that the image is fake. To illustrate, consider the scenario where an individual fakes an illness. They may be successful in convincing others that they are genuinely sick. But, if a doctor were to examine them, it would become evident that the person is not actually ill. However, the fourth and final stage no longer has the need to reference the real. The image becomes self-sufficient, relying solely on its own existence to be considered real. For instance, if someone simulates an illness, they need to produce some symptoms associated with that illness in themselves. If they have the symptoms of the illness, it becomes challenging to distinguish whether they are genuinely ill or not. The boundary between the simulated illness and the real illness becomes blurred, unlike the clear distinction observed in the previous stage when someone is merely faking an illness. Consequently, the simulation generates its own reality which Baudrillard calls hyperreality (Baudrillard 1981, 4-6). In the first chapter, I explored the distinction between medievalism and neomedievalism. During the Middle Ages, individuals who lived in that era produced texts and images that reflected their reality. As time progressed, the Middle Ages became a part of history, yet that period is still being recreated through various mediums such as stories, films, and games. However, it is uncertain whether these contemporary simulations truly reflect the Middle Ages. The real reference point, the actual Middle Ages, has vanished, making it impossible to confirm the accuracy of our portrayals. Yet, this validation isn't necessary. The contemporary simulation of the Middle Ages exists independently, forming its own distinct reality.

According to Jonathan Boulter (2001), simulations play a central role in postmodern theory, serving as a touchstone for understanding the state of ontological confusion. Boulter explains that simulations blur the distinction between the real and its representation, as well as the original and its copy (Boulter, 2001: 357). Baudrillard explains that in simulation “the real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control – and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these” (Baudrillard 1981, 3). To put it differently, simulation involves breaking down reality into its building blocks and then combining these blocks in various ways to generate countless replicas. This concept is also discussed by Hiroki Azuma in his book *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (2009), where he explores similar ideas. According to Azuma, there exists a deep connection between the principles of postmodernity and otaku culture in Japan. Azuma highlights two key aspects within otaku culture that are closely tied to the structure of postmodern society. The first aspect is “the existence of derivative works” (Azuma, 2009: 25). Otakus commonly engage in activities such as creating fanart, derivative amateur works, or *dōjinshi*¹². For instance, fans of a popular manga, anime, or game may take the characters from that original work and incorporate them into their own imagined scenarios. These derivative works are then consumed in a similar manner to the original, blurring the boundary between the authentic and the replica.

Azuma's second point is “the importance placed on fiction” (Azuma, 2009: 26). He explains that for otakus, engagement with fiction goes beyond being just a hobby. Otakus take the rules and conventions of fiction more seriously than the norms of social reality. This is not because they cannot distinguish between fiction and reality, but rather because traditional social norms have failed them. As a result,

¹² 同人誌

otakus rely on fiction as a framework for navigating and interacting with society. Azuma explains that in modern society, people were once unified by shared goals and beliefs, often referred to as grand narratives. However, over time, these beliefs proved to be unreliable and ineffective, causing the values associated with them to crumble. This left a void in the new generation, searching for a sense of meaning and identity. To fill this void, the younger generation seeks refuge in fragmented pieces of subculture, put together in infinitely different ways that allows the readers to have their own reading of it and thus constructing a simulacrum. Azuma refers to this practice as "database consumption" (Azuma, 2009: 26-28).

Azuma employs the internet as a prime illustration of the database model. He explains that the internet network lacks a central or a grand narrative to regulate its functions. Instead, it operates on a "double-layer structure." In the deeper layer, encoded information is dispersed throughout the network in small fragments. On the surface, such as a webpage, these fragments are assembled and presented for users to “read them up.”¹³ Azuma further elaborates on how derivative work within otaku culture operates under a similar principle. He provides *chara-moe* as an example, which is a subset of otaku culture. In this context, the process of creating an alluring character that evokes *moe* feelings (excitement or affection) involves combining traits borrowed from popular stories, characters, or media. By borrowing and combining these elements, creators in otaku culture construct characters that resonate with fans and elicit the desired emotional response (Azuma, 2009: 31-36).

Here I will refer to the character design of the protagonist, known as Joker, in the game *Persona 5* (Atlus, 2016) to provide an illustration. Joker's character embodies two distinct appearances: one being his student uniform and the other being the costume he wears as a thief. Even without any prior knowledge of the game or its narrative, someone familiar with popular culture media would likely be able to make assumptions about Joker's personality based solely on his character design. This is because the character is interpreted in relation to the established conventions present in pop culture media, particularly in Japan, rather than solely within the context of the game's story. Joker's appearance combines elements that draw upon meanings borrowed from various genres, media, and characters (Image 2.1). It is worth noting that Joker is a silent protagonist, a common occurrence in *Persona* games. This means that there is minimal voice-over for the character, and the only dialogue he has is determined by the players themselves. As a result, Joker can be seen more as an avatar rather than a fully defined character, allowing players to have their own unique understanding of this character based on their own readings.

¹³ Azuma's explanation is similar to Galloway's perspective and information theory presented in chapter one.



Figure 2.1: *Persona 5* protagonist and its design connotations

To conclude, Here I have explored the concept of simulation, particularly focusing on Baudrillard's and Azuma's interpretation. Baudrillard defines simulation as distinct from representation; representation reflects something real, while simulation does not necessarily rely on a connection to reality. It can persist even after the original reality vanishes, creating its own independent, self-sufficient reality or in other words hyperreality. I continued the discussion by referring to Azuma's theories about the otaku culture in Japan, where derivative works and the importance placed on fiction play a crucial role. In a society lacking shared grand narratives, individuals construct their identities through fragmented pieces of subculture, forming a simulacrum. Azuma's concept of "database consumption" is best illustrated through internet's structure, where encoded information is dispersed and assembled for users to come up with their own readings. Similarly, otaku culture creates characters by combining traits from popular media, resonating with fans emotionally.

2.2.2.1. Simulation in *The Witcher* and *Final Fantasy*

Both *The Witcher* and *Final Fantasy* exhibit specific characteristics that align with the perspectives of Baudrillard and Azuma regarding postmodern media. For instance, *The Witcher* constructs a neomedieval theme within its game-world, while as mentioned in Chapter 1, Matsunaga identifies some chara-moe features in early *FF* games. The details of these attributes will be thoroughly discussed in subsequent chapters. However, it is important to emphasize that since these games are products of the postmodern era, they should be approached as such. Both *The Witcher* and *FF* employ the practice of reusing elements from multiple genres and narratives to create their characters and game-worlds. They utilize various strategies such as creating remakes, series, or engaging in intertextual dialogues to generate infinite copies. Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that although both games serve as postmodern simulacra, their approaches to creating this simulacrum differ due to cultural distinctions.

John Clammer (1995) explains that “even when the forms of postmodernity appear to correspond in western and Japanese culture, their epistemological basis is frequently (though not always) so far apart that their comparability let alone identity, must be called into serious question” (Clammer, 1995: 29). In the Western context, postmodernity is defined as a historical progression from the premodern era to the modernity and finally to the postmodernity. However, Clammer notes that Japan's experience differs. Japan seems to have possessed postmodern qualities throughout its history and has recently blended capitalism with its traditional methods. Clammer refers to Baudrillard's description of postmodernism as all simulation, and he suggests that Japan also engages in simulation, albeit in a playful manner. He emphasizes that the simulation itself is not taken seriously and is recognized as something to be played with and eventually discarded (Clammer 1995, 21). Therefore, it becomes crucial to take these factors into account when examining the cultural identity of the chronotopic elements present within the game-world and the player-character.

2.3. Conclusion

In order to examine the RPG genre this thesis uses various theoretical lenses to reveal the cultural identity embedded within games. Employing Bakhtin's chronotope theory highlights recurring patterns shaping the genre. The concept of the progress chronotope concerns the evolving game-world and player-character, emphasizing the dynamic relationship between player agency and game state. Furthermore, the historical chronotope underscores the incorporation of history both as part of the game's narrative world and as historical concepts. In order to analyze these chronotope patterns I referred to a combination of theories. Eco's insights into the portrayal of hero in a serialized media offer a lens through which the evolution of series like *FF* and *The Witcher* can be understood, revealing the strategies employed in design, storytelling, and world-building. Moreover, considering Baudrillard and Azuma's perspectives on postmodern media in these games underscores their postmodern nature while recognizing the divergent cultural nuances between Western and Japanese manifestations of postmodernity.

3. Chapter 3: Introducing the Case Studies

In this chapter, my objective is to offer a comprehensive explanation of the two primary case studies, specifically *The Witcher* and the *Final Fantasy* game series, and the rationale behind selecting them. The structure of information presentation for each game differs due to the variations that exist within each franchise. *The Witcher* is a trilogy set in the same world with recurring characters. Consequently, in order to introduce the three games, I will provide an overview of the overarching storyline and highlight the changes in game mechanics from one installment to the next. On the other hand, the *FF* series comprises 16 main entries, each featuring unique worlds and characters. Therefore, I will provide a general explanation of how the game has changed by focusing on a few select games within the series, rather than delving into an explanation for each individual game.

3.1. *The Witcher*

The Witcher games were inspired by a book series of the same name. According to Gawroński and Bajorek (2020), Andrzej Sapkowski, a Polish author, started writing *The Witcher* as a collection of short stories in 1990. In 1994, he published the first novel in a series called *The Witcher Saga*. These books gained popularity in Poland and were later adapted into movies and TV series. However, it was in 2007 that *The Witcher* gained worldwide recognition with the release of its first video game, developed by CD Projekt, a Polish video game company (Gawroński and Bajorek, 2020, 3,4). Since then, two more games have been released in the series, along with several mini-games. According to Tomasz Z. Majkowski (2018), *The Witcher* books draw inspiration from various sources, including Slavic folk tales, European fairy tales like "Beauty and the Beast," and J.R.R. Tolkien's works (Majkowski 2018, 3). The story of *The Witcher* is set on a small continent that resembles Eastern Europe in the 13th century. A video essay by Cook and Becker (2022) explains that the game made an effort to stay true to its Slavic roots. For instance, the city of Novigrad in the game derives its name from the Slavic languages, meaning "new city." The architecture of Novigrad is inspired by historical cities in Croatia, Hungary, and Poland (Cook and Becker 2022). In the game, players assume the role of Geralt of Rivia, a witcher who is a professional monster hunter. Witchers possess enhanced physical abilities due to mutations and can also wield a limited amount of magic.

It is important to note that while *The Witcher* is cited as an example of a WRPG with a neomedieval setting, it does not encompass the entirety of WRPGs or Western culture. However, it is important to acknowledge that it still reflects elements of Polish culture within its design and narrative. Gawroński and Bajorek's article, as well as Majkowski's article, highlight the game's efforts to emphasize its Polish heritage and distinguish itself from Western European and American culture. I mentioned in the Introduction that because large companies in Japan and America have had a big impact on the videogame industry, it's important to create space for games with local identities to encourage diversity and innovation in game development. That's why it's crucial to understand the cultural identity in a game that aims to represent a local culture on the global stage. Thus, recognizing and understanding the cultural identity of *The Witcher* as a successful Polish game is important in its own right. However, Gawroński and Bajorek, as well as Majkowski also acknowledge the influence of European and American cultures within *The Witcher* game. This suggests that part of its success may be attributed to how it incorporates elements used in other WRPGs and associating itself with such genre. Therefore, while *The Witcher* may not be the perfect example, it can still be a valuable starting point for examining WRPGs, due to features like realistic art, multiple narrative paths, and a medieval setting. One notable distinction between *The Witcher* and other WRPGs lies in the utilization of a predefined character based on a book series. Comparing the player-created avatars in WRPGs with the predefined characters in JRPGs is an important task in itself. However, this research aims to focus on aspects other than the well-known differences in game mechanics between WRPGs and JRPGs. Given the focus on other elements of the player-character relationship, it is helpful if the two games have similar types of player-character, in terms of the avatar-character spectrum. Nonetheless, the researcher recognizes that the decision to have a PC as an avatar also reflects the culture in which the game is created and can impact the overall cultural identity of the game even if it is not explored here. Another reason for choosing this game is its popularity in Iran. One of the primary objectives of this research is to develop a methodology for analyzing the cultural identity within games. As mentioned previously, the true meaning of a game is experienced during gameplay, as players interact and engage with the game world. Although this paper does not cover it, the ultimate goal of this research is to conduct interviews with players from diverse cultural backgrounds, including those from Iran, in order to gain insights into how individuals from different cultures interpret and engage with games as part of the method to understand the cultural identity of the game. *The Witcher* game series holds significant popularity in Iran, making it a promising avenue for future research in this area.

3.1.1. Storyline

The story of *The Witcher* takes place in the 13th century. Its world includes a combination of several kingdoms surrounded by mountains and sea, resembling Eastern Europe during the Middle Ages. The First game (2007), which is set after the events of the book series, starts with Geralt of Rivia, found unconscious and suffering from amnesia. He then is brought to Kaer Morhen. Kaer Morhen is an old keep where witchers of the school of wolf are trained. Here he learns that he used to be a strong and renowned witcher. Soon after, Kaer Morhen is attacked by bandits. From here on Geralt departs on a quest to find and stop the people responsible for this attack. During his investigation he partakes in other quests, becomes entangled in the political affairs of the region, and meets people who knew him from before his amnesia. Some of them are friends and some of them are enemies. But because of his amnesia

he (or the player) has the chance to redefine these relationships. After a long search, Geralt eventually discovers the mastermind responsible for the attacks. It is during this encounter that Geralt learns about a prophecy foretelling the destruction of the world by the white frost and a treat known as the Wild Hunt. At the end of the game, Geralt pays a visit to a king to claim the reward for a quest he had undertaken on the king's behalf. However, during this moment, an assassin tries to assassinate the king, but Geralt intervenes and prevents the attack. This event serves as a setup for the events that unfold in the sequel, *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* (2011).

In the second game, the story picks up shortly after the events of the first game. Geralt finds himself accused of assassinating a king and is asked to recount the events leading up to the king's death in order to prove his innocence. Then he is tasked to investigate and search for the true assassin. On his quest, Geralt becomes entangled in political conflicts and is faced with decisions that will have a significant impact on the ongoing wars. Concurrently, he starts to regain his lost memories, remembering his lover Yennefer, his ward Cirilla (also known as Ciri) who is the princess of Cintra, and their connection to the Wild Hunt. These memories shed light on events that occurred in the period between the books and the first game. Once Geralt uncovers the truth behind the assassinations and resolves these issues, he embarks on a quest to fully recover his memories.

The transition between the second game and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* is somewhat abrupt, as the specific events leading up to the start of *The Witcher 3* are not explicitly explained. However, in the third game, Geralt's journey begins as he follows the trail of Yennefer. Upon finding her, Geralt discovers that Yennefer has struck a deal with King Emhyr (Ciri's father) to locate Ciri. Moreover, he becomes aware that the Wild Hunt is also pursuing Ciri due to her elder blood and her extraordinary magical abilities. The Wild Hunt is a mysterious faction of riders dressed in armor and skeleton masks who possess the ability to traverse between different worlds and have now set their sights on capturing Ciri for her powers. During Geralt's quest to find Ciri, he encounters various individuals who have crossed paths with her. Through their conversations, players are able to play as Ciri and experience events from her perspective. Eventually, Geralt succeeds in locating Ciri, and with the aid of their allies, they work together to resolve the political conflicts in the region and overcome the threat posed by the Wild Hunt. At the end of the game, Ciri makes a decision to enter a portal to another world, aiming to prevent the occurrence of the white frost, a catastrophic event that could potentially destroy the world. After successfully averting the white frost and saving the world, Ciri returns and decides to become a witcher. This marks the end of this trilogy.

3.1.2. The game mechanics

In the first Witcher game, players assume control of Geralt from a third-person point of view (hereafter POV), which remains consistent throughout all three games in the series. Unlike many other WRPGs, players do not have the option to create their own character, but they can develop Geralt's skills in various ways. Geralt's primary weapon is his sword. He has a steel sword for fighting humans and a silver sword specifically designed for battling monsters. Players can switch between three different fighting styles to adapt to different combat situations including fast, strong and group. Geralt wields only one sword at a time, using his free hand to cast signs, which are a form of magic. As players advance in the game, they can improve Geralt's skills in wielding the iron sword, silver sword, and signs, as well

as enhance his attributes such as strength, dexterity, stamina, and intelligence (Figure 3.1). These attributes impact his proficiency with the sword and the effectiveness of his signs. Geralt is also skilled in alchemy, utilizing potions to bolster his health, endurance, and other attributes. Players can learn to craft new potions by acquiring scrolls or through experimenting with different ingredients. Additionally, players have the ability to equip a variety of armors and weapons. The game offers players multiple opportunities for role-playing, presenting them with important decisions that significantly shape the game's progression. Additionally, players have various ways to interact with NPCs. For instance, they can choose to give gifts or engage in drinking contests based on their own preferences and playstyle.

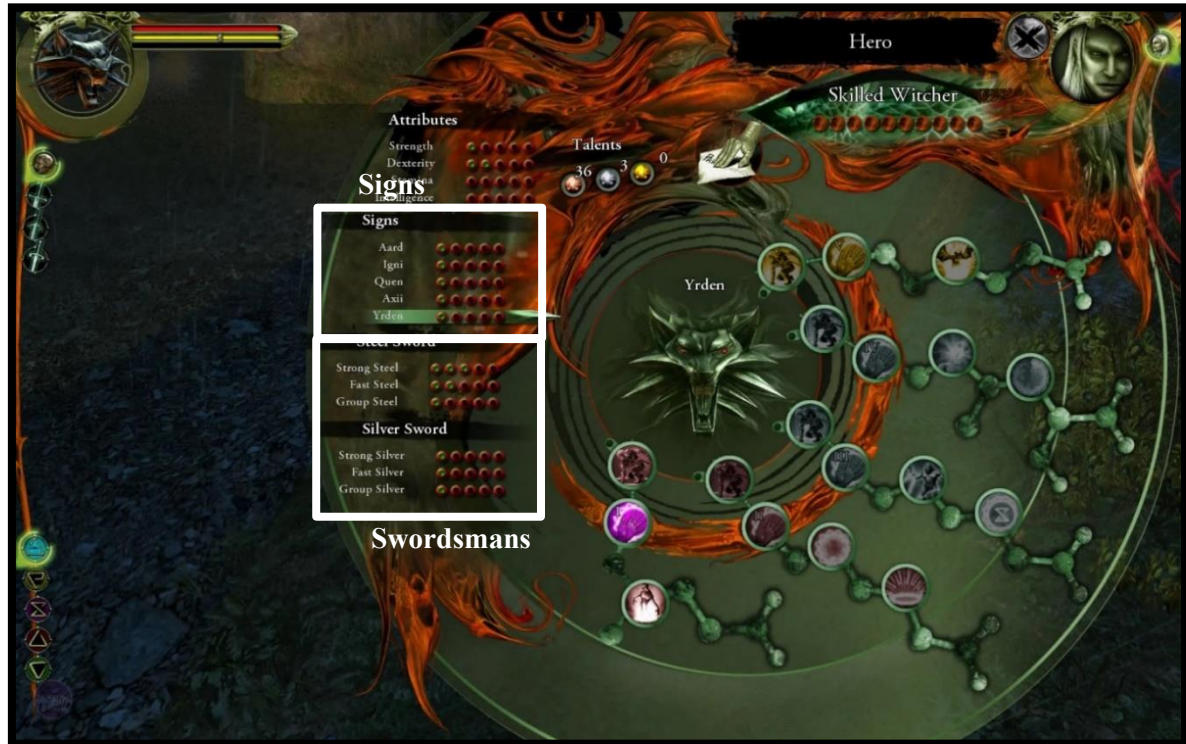


Figure 3.1: *The Witcher 1*: Level-up screen

In *The Witcher 2*, the combat system has been improved with the addition of new mechanics such as dodging and additional fighting styles. Alongside swords and signs, Geralt now has the ability to utilize ranged weapons like bombs and daggers. Players are given the option to use other melee weapons such as an axe or a pick instead of a sword, providing more variety in combat choices. Similar to the previous game, players earn experience and talent points by playing through quests and challenges. These talent points can then be invested in one of three paths for leveling up: swordsmanship, alchemy, and magic. By investing in swordsmanship, Geralt's skill as a swordsman is enhanced, making him more formidable in melee combat. Opting for the alchemy path allows Geralt to create more potent potions and increases his chances of success in battle through the use of alchemical concoctions. Lastly, investing in magic improves Geralt's proficiency in casting signs, granting him greater effectiveness in utilizing his magical abilities (Figure 3.2).

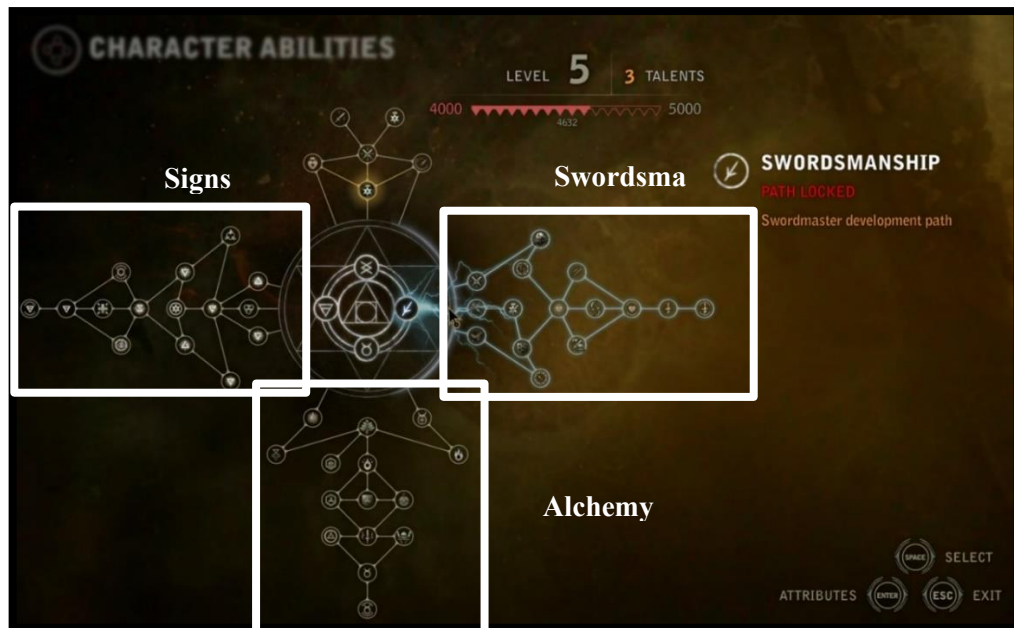


Figure 3.2: *The Witcher 1*: Level-up screen

The combat system in *The Witcher 3* has undergone further enhancements, providing players with a smoother control. Geralt can use his swords as well as other melee weapons like maces or axes similar to how he uses his sword, employ signs, throw bombs, wield a crossbow, and use potions during battles. When facing monsters, players can study their behavior and adapt by setting traps or applying oils to their sword for increased effectiveness. Players are able to invest in different abilities such as combat, alchemy, or signs based on their preferences (Figure 3.3). *Witcher 3* offers an expansive open world, allowing players to freely explore diverse environments, ecosystems, and settlements. The game presents players with significant choices that have a greater impact on the progression of the story compared to previous iterations. Furthermore, players have the opportunity to play as Ciri from time to time.



Figure 3.3: *The Witcher 3*: Level-up screen

3.2. *Final Fantasy*

As it was explained in Chapter 1, RPGs gained popularity in Japan due to games such as *DQ*. This led to the creation of many new RPGs, including *Final Fantasy* (Square, 1987), which drew inspiration from *DQ* while also adding its own unique elements. *DQ*, *FF*, and other games like *Megami Tensei* (Atlus) played a significant role in establishing the JRPG genre. Since the first *FF* game in 1987, there have been many entries in the series. Each installment in the *FF* series features its own distinct universe and storyline, independent from the others. However, there are consistent elements that connect them as part of the *FF* series. These recurring elements can vary from simple creatures like Chocobos or Moogles to more significant aspects such as the narrative structure or overall visual style. For example, Hutchinson points out that the series frequently addresses the criticism of technology misuse, including nuclear power, often utilizing the character Cid as a means of exploring this theme (2019, 130).

There are several reasons why I have chosen to focus on the *FF* series over other well-established JRPG series. Firstly, compared to many other series like *Megami Tensei*, *FF* tends to have a broader appeal beyond Japan, targeting a wider audience. Similar to the discussion on *The Witcher*, as this research aims to explore players' understanding of the game from different cultural perspectives, it is advantageous to select a game that is popular in other countries, such as Iran. On the other hand, *FF* diverges from many features typically associated with JRPGs. However, despite these differences, *FF* is still widely regarded as a JRPG. Therefore, it is crucial to ascertain the distinguishing characteristics in the game that go beyond the commonly known features and contribute to its classification as a JRPG. One distinguishing characteristic often associated with JRPGs is their anime/cartoon-style design. However, *FF*'s artwork deviates from the typical anime style. In contrast to a game like *DQ*, *FF* showcases more photorealistic graphics. However, the photorealism in *FF* differs from that seen in Western counterparts. Despite not adhering to the perfect anime style found in JRPGs, it is important to explore why the game world in *FF* appears distinct from that of WRPGs like *The Witcher*. Furthermore, *FF* has moved away from turn-based strategy in recent games, which is another iconic feature of the JRPG genre, opting instead for faster-paced combat mechanics akin to WRPGs.

Despite these changes, *FF* is still classified as a JRPG, indicating that there is a deeper essence within the series that defines it as such. It is important to note that it still retained certain JRPG features such as a confined world, defined characters, and a singular story similar to other JRPGs. Certainly, there are RPGs created in Japan that diverge from the conventions of a typical JRPG. One example of this is the *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware). Visually and mechanically, *Dark Souls* bears more resemblance to WRPGs rather than the traditional JRPGs. While it can be categorized as a dungeon crawl, which is a subgenre of RPGs, there is a debate regarding whether *Dark Souls* should be considered a JRPG due to its departure from the established norms of Japanese RPGs. While analyzing *Dark Souls* as an RPG that deviates significantly from typical Japanese RPGs is an important task for future research, it is currently beyond the scope of the present study. It is important to note that the author does not claim that the *FF* series comprehensively embodies JRPGs or Japanese culture, similar to how *The Witcher* does not fully represent Polish or Western culture. However, the subsequent sections of the article will explore certain recurring patterns observed in the *FF* series that also manifest in various other types of Japanese subculture media, suggesting similarities between them.

3.2.1. Features of the PC in *Final Fantasy* series

In an article titled "Psychological Effect Variations Based on Changes in the Player Character Relation in the *Final Fantasy* Game Series" (2022), I explored various aspects related to the PCs in the *FF* game series. Specifically, I discussed the changes in the PC's characteristics, game mechanics, and the methods provided to players to interaction and exploration the game-world. In the context of our current argument, I will now refer to some of these relevant changes to provide an introduction to the series as a whole.

According to Huber (2009), the first *FF* game was released by Square, Inc. in 1987 when the company was facing financial difficulties and believed it would be their final game. However, the game turned out to be a tremendous success, leading to the development of fourteen additional main series entries, as well as numerous sequels and spinoffs (Huber, 2009: 377). In 2003, Square, Inc. merged with Enix, the creator of RPGs such as *Dragon Quest*, and the company became known as Square Enix. As of the time I am writing this thesis, there have been a total of sixteen main entries in the *FF* series. However, providing a full explanation of each game, its narratives, and characters would be counterproductive for the scope of this research. I will strive to consider all the games and their significant features while examining the series, but in this section, I will provide an overview of how the portrayal of PCs has changed in the series, focusing on seven main entries and two remakes.

- *Final Fantasy I* (1987)
- *Final Fantasy V* (1992)
- *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) (*FFVII Remake* (2020))
- *Final Fantasy X* (2001)
- *Final Fantasy XII* (2006) (*FFXII: International Zodiac Job System* (2007))
- *Final Fantasy XIII* (2009)
- *Final Fantasy XV* (2016)

The first game in the *FF* series that I will discuss is *Final Fantasy I*, released in 1987. This game serves as a starting point to demonstrate the series' origins. As subsequent entries were developed, the game mechanics were experimented with and the universe of the series began to take shape. In *Final Fantasy V*, released in 1992, the mechanics that were introduced in *Final Fantasy III* (1990) were further refined. However, it was *Final Fantasy VII*, released in 1997, that marked a significant turning point in terms of game mechanics. The innovations introduced in *FFVII* served as inspiration for the games that followed, up until *Final Fantasy X* in 2001. *Final Fantasy X* introduced several noteworthy elements. It was the first game in the series to feature a fully 3D environment, and it also incorporated voice overs for its characters. For the purpose of this analysis, all subsequent games in the series will be considered, excluding *Final Fantasy XI* (2002) and *Final Fantasy XIV* (2010). These two entries fall into the genre of massively multiplayer online RPGs (MMORPGs), which would require a separate study due to the unique aspects of online gaming. Although comparing them to the other entries could yield interesting results, it would necessitate the inclusion of many facets specific to online gaming that lie outside the scope of this analysis. It is worth mentioning that the *FF* series contains numerous sequels and spinoffs, each with its own distinctive style and characteristics.

3.2.1.1. PC changes from game mechanic perspective

The game mechanics of characters in the *FF* series draw inspiration from pen and paper RPGs like *D&D*. This means that each character is defined by specific numerical values known as character statistics, or character stats for short. These stats have a direct influence on the character's performance in the game, particularly during battles. For instance, in *FFV*, there are six primary stats: Hit Points, Magic Points, Strength, Agility, Stamina, and Magic. These stats determine the character's health, magical energy, physical strength, agility, endurance, and magical abilities respectively. In the article "The Character of Difference: Procedurality, Rhetoric, and Roleplaying Games" by Gerald Voorhees (2009), the author analyzes the PCs in the *FF* series based on their game mechanics. Voorhees identifies three distinct moments in the series, characterized by how the procedural rhetoric represents the cultural aspects of the characters. He explains that These moments are not marked by abrupt shifts, but rather an evolution from one to another. The three distinct can be best observed in *FFII* and *FFIII* (first moment), *FFVII* and *FFVIII* (second moment), and *FFX* and *FFXII* (final moment) (Voorhees, 2009).

In the first moment, the game mechanics closely resemble those of the original *D&D*. The characters' stats are influenced by their class, or in the *FF* terminology, their jobs. In games like *FFI*, players have the option to choose from six different jobs¹⁴, which becomes the primary factor determining the growth of their stats. Voorhees suggests that these jobs represent the characters' race, ethnicity, or nation in later versions such as *FFIV*. However, in *FFI*, the characters are primarily defined by their occupation. The class or job serves as a fixed attribute for the characters that cannot be changed. The player's freedom lies in selecting a combination of four characters with different jobs for battle at the beginning of the game (Voorhees, 2009).

Although Voorhees does not specifically mention *FFV* in his article, the game can be seen as a transitional phase between the two moments he identifies. In *FFV*, there are five main characters, and their raw character stats are based on their personality and role in the story. For instance, Bartz, being the protagonist, has the highest initial stats. However, the job system in *FFV* differs from the previous and subsequent games. There are a total of 22 jobs available, and each character has the freedom to switch between these jobs at any time. While certain jobs may align better with a character's raw stats, the chosen job can also impact and enhance those stats. For example, various types of mage jobs will improve the character's magic stat. When a character selects a specific job, they earn Ability Points (ABP) from battle. These ABP contribute to improving the character's proficiency in the chosen job. Although characters have the flexibility to switch between jobs freely, it is generally recommended to focus on a few jobs and master them for optimal strategy and character development. By doing so, characters can maximize their effectiveness in battle.

According to Voorhees, the second moment can be observed in *FFVII*. In this game, the traditional job system is largely absent, and instead, skills are separated from the characters and represented by materia, which are orb-like objects (Voorhees, 2009). Materia embody different abilities that were typically associated with specific jobs in previous games. The interesting aspect is that materia can develop independently from the character and can be equipped by any member of the party. This means

¹⁴ Warrior, Monk, Thief, White Mage, Black Mage and Red Mage

that a character can possess the powerful abilities of a black mage and a thief simultaneously, regardless of their innate stats. Players have more control in shaping and defining the characters in this regard. Voorhees also mentions that the game differentiates between characters through their weapons, which adds another layer of distinction (Voorhees, 2009). In addition to their weapons, characters also possess unique abilities called limitbreaks, although these are not extensively discussed in the article. The weapons, inspired by the previous job system, primarily represent the characters' personality and backstory rather than strictly defining their role in battle.

Voorhees further elaborates on the final moment, highlighting how it pushes the evolution even further. In *FFX*, each character has the ability to learn new skills and improve their stats through the sphere grid system (Figure 3.4). Although all characters are placed on the same grid, they are positioned near a different set of skills, suggesting a particular job or role for them. However, as the game progresses, players have the freedom to branch out and learn skills from other parts of the grid, allowing characters to develop similar stats and acquire diverse abilities. In *FFXII*, the characters have the flexibility to move towards any job or role and can utilize any weapon right from the beginning of the game (Voorhees, 2009). It represents a departure from the traditional job system, offering players the freedom to customize and shape their characters' abilities and playstyle. While *FFXIII* is not specifically mentioned in the article, it shares similar mechanics to *FFX* in terms of character progression and leveling up.

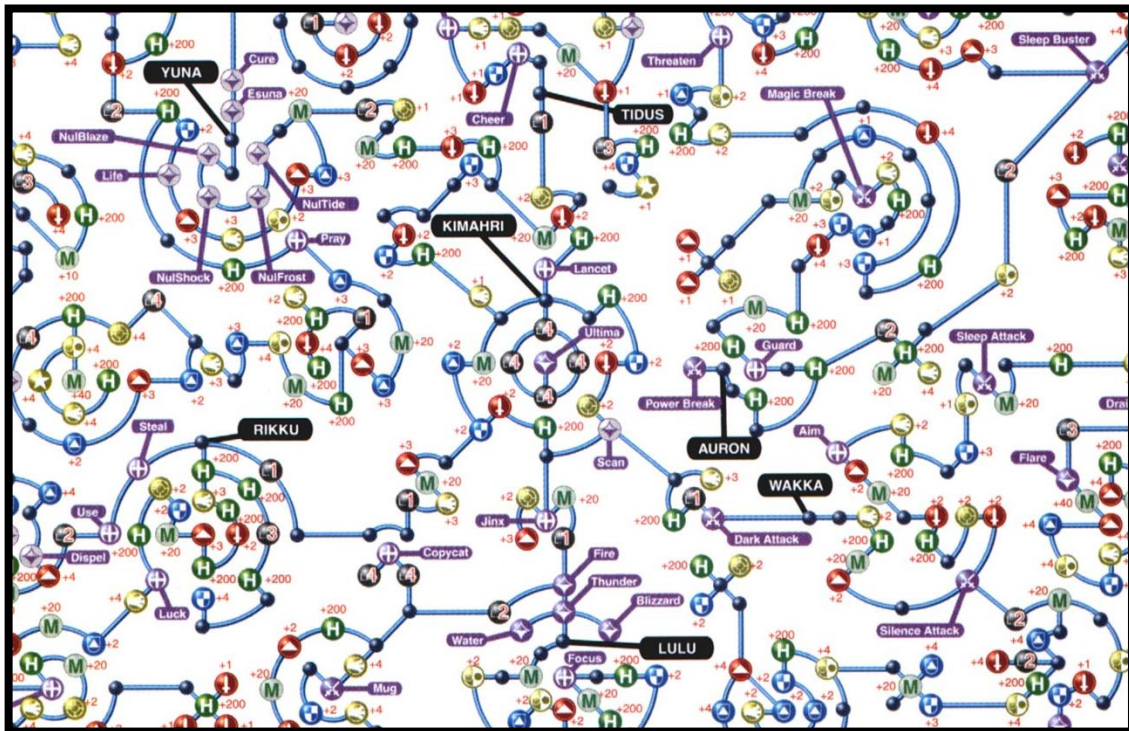


Figure 3.4: *FFX*, the sphere grid

In the case of *FFXV*, *FFVII Remake*, and the remastered version of *FFXII* known as *FFXII International Zodiac Job System*, there are notable changes in character progression and customization. *FFXII International Zodiac Job System*, released a year after the original game, introduces a job system where players must choose one of twelve different jobs for each character at the beginning and remain

committed to that job throughout the game¹⁵. Unlike the original version, where all characters shared the same license board to unlock skills and abilities, the remastered version assigns a unique license board to each job, differentiating the characters' capabilities. Moving to *FFVII Remake* (2020), the character level-up mechanic closely resembles the original *FFVII* but with a slight modification. Each weapon in the game possesses a special ability, and if a character masters a particular weapon, they can retain that ability even when switching to a different weapon. This results in each character having a personalized set of abilities that grows as the game progresses, setting them apart from one another. Similarly, *FFXV* follows a similar pattern of individualized character progression. The game features four player characters, each with their own distinct skills, weapons, and level-up grid. Initially, players were limited to controlling the protagonist, Noctis, but subsequent versions allowed players to assume control of other characters and experience a different battle system.

In earlier games of the series, the characters were limited to specific job roles, which may give the impression of a lack of freedom. However, this is not entirely accurate. For instance, in the first *FF* game, players actually had 126 different combinations of jobs to choose from, showcasing a degree of flexibility. Nevertheless, the rigid character mechanics in these games often resulted in less realistic character interactions and less defined personalities. As the series progressed, the storylines became more linear and the characters became more defined, while the job system itself became more flexible. This trend continued until the release of *FFXV*. Contrary to the observation made by Voorhees, I would like to propose an alternative perspective. In the more recent installments, there is a return to the original mechanics of the job system, albeit at a different level. *FFXV*, for example, reintroduces a rigid job system with a stronger emphasis on the characters' individual stories. While players have more freedom in how they level up each job, there is no room for job combinations. In summary, while Voorhees presents a linear progression in the changes to character mechanics, I suggest a spiral development where the series revisits its original mechanics but at a different level. The later games incorporate a more defined narrative and character development while reintroducing a modified version of the job system.

3.2.1.2. Changes in the appearance of the PC

Thomas Makryniotis, in his article "Fashion and Costume Design in Electronic Entertainment—Bridging the Gap between Character and Fashion Design" (2018), emphasizes the significance of fashion and style in video games. He highlights that, characters in games act as representations of the players themselves within the game world, and their appearance can raise questions related to "class, gender, occupational role, and body type" (Makryniotis, 2018: 3). Makryniotis introduces three dimensions for analyzing digital fashion: the programmatic, the visual, and the social (Makryniotis, 2018: 5). The programmatic dimension refers to how a character's appearance is influenced by or serves the game mechanics. For instance, when a player changes a character's weapon, the visual representation of the weapon in battle will also change to reflect the difference in power. The visual dimension encompasses the overall visual appearance. Makryniotis specifically uses the term to refer to the "traditional semiotic interpretation" rather than the ludic viewpoint of the programmatic dimension. The social perspective focuses on how these visual signs impact the social dynamics between players in online games (Makryniotis, 2018: 5). Although not explicitly mentioned in the article, fashion within

¹⁵ They can choose one additional job midway through the game.

the game could potentially represent a character's status within the social construct of the game's fictional world. These three dimensions serve as the foundation for the analysis presented in this section.

Before delving into the specifics, it is important to introduce two prominent character designers at Square Enix: Yoshitaka Amano and Tetsuya Nomura. Yoshitaka Amano served as the character designer for the first six entries in the series. In one of his interviews, he expressed his interest in Western fantasy and his passion for illustrating knights. He explains that his artistic style draws inspiration from various Western artists such as Gustave Moreau, Mucha, and Da Vinci (Archipel, 2020). According to Polygon, which features interviews with *FF* creators including Amano, his style is also influenced by Japanese ukiyo-e and the Art Nouveau movement (Polygon, 2019). This fusion of Western and Japanese influences results in a romantic medieval character design with intricate and elaborate details. On the other hand, Tetsuya Nomura is heavily influenced by Japanese streetwear fashion. Nomura began designing characters for the series starting with *FFVII* and continued to do so for most subsequent entries, as well as other games developed by Square Enix. Polygon notes that Nomura's work incorporates elements from various fashion styles such as hip-hop, punk, and pop culture, along with the influence of renowned Japanese fashion designers (Polygon, 2019).

In *FFI*, the focus is primarily on the characters' jobs, as discussed in previous section. Consequently, the visuals in the game are dedicated to serving programmatic purposes. Each character's job is indicated by their attire, and when characters level up to a higher job class, their body shape also transforms into a more muscular form. *FFI* also establishes the standard appearance for each job, which is subsequently maintained in many future games. However, in *FFV*, there is a distinction between the characters' job outfits during battles and their appearance as story characters. During battles, characters wear outfits that clearly reflect their jobs, but outside of battles, they wear different costumes that represent their personalities or social classes. For instance, Bartz's general appearance portrays him as a traveler, while Faris embodies the look of a pirate. Moving on to *FFVII*, characters in this game equip materia to gain abilities, but their weapons and physical attacks are personalized. The characters' appearance is heavily influenced by their physical attack style, which also conveys significant aspects of their backstory. In other words, the programmatic and visual dimensions complement each other. For example, Cloud's costume not only reflects his history as a member of SOLDIER but also represents his fighting style as a warrior.

In *FFX* and *FFXII*, the character progression system allows players to level up in any job they prefer. As a result, the characters' appearance is less focused on the programmatic aspect and more on their social status, even if it is related to a specific job in the game. In *FFX*, an example of this is Lulu, whose appearance draws inspiration from the traditional obeah voodoo priestess. While her appearance does reference the black mage job, the cultural references in her design hold greater significance. *FFXII* introduces a notable change in the protagonist's golden pose¹⁶. Unlike previous protagonists who were shown holding a sword, Vaan is depicted without any weapon at all. The golden poses of other characters in *FFXII* do include weapons, but these weapons symbolize their social statuses rather than being representative of their actual jobs in battle. In later games, such as *FFXV*, the character costumes have

¹⁶ Either a rendered or drawn pose of the character that is usually used for advertising purposes.

almost no indication of their job or fighting style, except for their weapons. Instead, the costumes primarily reflect their social class. For instance, in *FFXIII*, Fang's and Vanille's outfits signify that they are from a different planet compared to the rest of the characters. Additionally, the black costumes worn by the main party in *FFXV* are a visual representation of their affiliation with the Lucis royal family.

Throughout the *FF* series, there has been a shift from a focus on programmatic simulation to social representation. This change can be attributed to the increasing importance of storytelling in the later games. Initially, character outfits were primarily influenced by their jobs and the overall medieval theme of the game. However, as the game's narrative and the complexity of the characters' personalities developed, the programmatic aspect became less prominent compared to the visual and social aspects. In more recent versions of the game, the programmatic effect on character design is still present, but it is overshadowed by visual aesthetics and social representation (Figure 3.5).



Figure 3.5: Changes in the appearance of a White Mage or a Healer in *Final Fantasy*

3.2.1.3. Changes in how PCs interact with the game-world

In the *FF* series, the PCs interact with the game-world can generally be divided into two main sections: navigation and battles. These two sections are usually distinct from each other, with clear transitions between them. During navigation, players assume control of one of the party members, typically the protagonist, and explore the world map, dungeons, and cities from a third-person point of view. While exploring cities and dungeons, players normally have the ability to walk, interact with NPCs, and discover various items and secrets. However, when traversing the world map, different means of transportation, such as chocobos, ships, and airships, may be available. This can lead to different perceptions of the game space, although a detailed analysis of this aspect is beyond the scope of this article. When it comes to battles, the common battle system in JRPGs is turn-based strategy. In this system, the two parties involved in the battle line up facing each other and take turns to attack and defend. However, it is important to note that the battle system in the *FF* series has undergone numerous changes throughout its history. The series has introduced various battle mechanics and systems, which will be explored in detail later in this section.

Navigation: The mechanics of world navigation in the *FF* series have remained relatively consistent throughout most of the games, with notable changes in the most recent entries. The navigation is typically presented from a third-person POV, allowing players to control their character's movements, interact with non-playable characters, and interact with certain objects in the game world. In earlier versions of the series, such as *FFI* and *FFV*, the graphics may not have been as photorealistic as in more recent entries. However, the game compensates for this with the freedom it gives players to explore the vast open world. Navigating the world and exploring its various locations were significant aspects of gameplay in earlier versions. Unlike more recent entries that may provide cut scenes, clear explanations, and objective indicators on the map, earlier games like *FFI* took a different approach. There were no predefined objective markers or storytellers guiding the players. Instead, players were required to travel from city to city, interact with NPCs, and engage in social interactions to learn about the game's lore, discover where to go next, and progress through the story. This allowed players to discover the narrative and uncover the story at their own pace, giving them a sense of autonomy and freedom within the game world.

As the *FF* progressed, there was a shift towards a more linear storytelling approach, accompanied by a transition to a more realistic graphical presentation. This change was evident in most entries, except for some games such as *FFIX* (2000). It is worth noting that as technology advanced, games in general started to feature more visually realistic graphics. However, this emphasis on realism in the *FF* series sets it apart from other JRPGs and brings it closer to Western counterparts. In contrast to series like *Dragon Quest* (Square Enix), *Persona* (Atlus), *Tales* (Bandai Namco), *Pokémon* (Nintendo), and *Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo), where the world and characters maintain a cartoonish and anime-like aesthetic even in the latest games, the more recent entries in the *FF* series, such as *FFX* and *FFXIII*, used a three-dimensional realistic environment. However, it's important to note that in the first half of both *FFX* and *FFXIII*, players do not have access to an open world environment. The gameplay is more linear, guiding players through a structured narrative progression.

In *FFXV*, the game introduces an open world environment in the first half, which is visually realistic. The interaction with the game world also feels more realistic in a different way compared to previous entries. Previously, players primarily focused on navigating the world, discovering fantastical elements, and engaging in social interactions with NPCs. While navigation still plays a role in *FFXV*, the emphasis is now more on physical interaction. In *FFXV*, players have the ability to sprint, jump, and climb while exploring the terrain of the map. This adds a new level of physicality and freedom to the navigation experience. In contrast, in earlier games, players were often limited to walking and would frequently encounter invisible walls that prevented further exploration.

Battles: One of the innovations introduced by the *FF* series was the transition from a first-person POV to a third-person POV during battles. In traditional RPGs, the perspective would shift to a first-person view when entering a battle, typically showing only the enemy. This approach aimed to enhance the sense of roleplaying. However, in *FFI*, the game displayed all four party members in a lineup during battle (Figure 3.6). This not only influenced the strategic aspects of combat but also added to the immersive fantasy experience. Players could now witness their characters in action as they attacked enemies with various weapons or cast powerful spells. According to an interview with Hiroyuki Ito (2010), the designer of the battle system in *FFI*, the mechanics drew inspiration from different sports,

particularly American football. The opposing parties lined up against each other, with each character's role and the player's strategy playing a significant role in the outcome of the battle (1Up, 2010). The available actions during battles were similar to those found in other RPGs of the time and were presented in a menu format. These actions included "Fight" (perform a basic attack with the equipped weapon), "Magic" (cast spells), "Drink" (consume potions), "Item" (use items), and "Run" (attempt to escape from the battle). The subcategories and effects of these actions were highly dependent on the character's job and level. Players had the freedom to carefully plan their strategy and manually select actions for each character. Following the introduction of this battle system in *FFI*, the series continued to strive for a more realistic action experience in subsequent entries.



Figure 3.6: Battle mode, left: *FFI*, right: *Dragon Quest III* (1988)

In *FFV*, a significant gameplay mechanic is the Active Time Battle (ATB) system, where each character has a bar that fills up over time. Characters can only perform actions when their bar is full. This system was designed to simulate a more realistic battle experience while avoiding intense reflex-based elements that could deviate from the RPG genre's conventions and potentially alienate players. In *FFVII*, there was a notable graphical distinction between the navigation mode and the battle mode. During navigation, players controlled small, blocky characters with exaggerated heads that were expressive. However, when entering battle, the character proportions changed to be more anatomically realistic. This allowed for more intricate attack animations and postures that better represented the fantasy elements of the game. *FFX* diverged from the trend by introducing a 3D environment and character voice-overs. However, the battle system in *FFX* did away with the ATB gauge and returned to a more traditional style similar to earlier games in the series. *FFXII* introduced the Active Dimension Battle (ADB) system, which aimed for a more realistic experience. Unlike in previous games, where enemy encounters happened randomly, players could now see enemies roaming around in the game world. Approaching an enemy would initiate a battle seamlessly, with no transition between navigation and battle modes. Players retained control of the character they were navigating with, and for other party members, players could choose their actions manually or switch to automatic mode.

In *FFXIII*, there is one large ATB gauge divided into smaller portions. Players can use one or more portions to perform actions. The intention behind this modification was to allow for chaining multiple

actions together, creating a fast-paced and exhilarating combat experience that could compete with other action-oriented game genres. *FFXV* takes this concept even further with its Active X Battle system, which categorizes the game as an Action RPG. When players approach enemies in *FFXV*, they seamlessly transition into battle mode. While players can still issue commands, such as using items, through a menu, the focus of the gameplay shifts towards quick reflexive actions. Additionally, players have the ability to incorporate elements of the environment into their battles, adding another layer of strategy and immersion. Initially, players could only control the protagonist, Noctis, and had limited command options for other party members. However, through later upgrades to the game, other characters became playable as well. Regardless, players are still in control of only one character at a time, rather than the entire party.

The previous discussion provided a brief overview of some of the changes that the *Final Fantasy* series has undergone from various perspectives. It is important to note that the information presented here is not a complete account of all the changes, as the series comprises numerous games. Instead, the focus was placed on highlighting the aspects that will be relevant for the analysis to be presented in later chapters. For a comprehensive summary of all the changes discussed, please refer to Table 3.1. This table provides a condensed overview of the key changes covered in the previous sections.

		<i>FFI</i>	<i>FFV</i>	<i>FFVII</i>	<i>FFX</i>	<i>FFXII</i>	<i>FFXIII</i>	<i>FFXV</i>
PC's Game Mechanics		PCs have no personality or backstory; their stats are purely based on their jobs which is determined at the very beginning	Each PC can switch between different jobs which will affect the basic character stats	PCs have their personalized weapon for physical damage but other skills can be equipped and mastered by every PC	PCs start with a certain job but from a certain point they can move toward any other one	From the very beginning PCs can level up toward any job	PCs start with three jobs but from a certain point they can move toward any other one	Originally only one character is playable and its job is predetermined
Player-World Interaction	Navigation	Open world, hard navigation, environmental storytelling	Open world, hard navigation	Open world	Linear storytelling, second half with a semi open world, first game to have 3D environment	Open world	Linear storytelling, second half with open world	First half open world, visceral navigation, second half linear storytelling, photorealistic environment
	Battle	First RPG to have third person POV in battle, Traditional turn-based	Active Time Battle, first game in the series to have ATB gauge for more realistic effect	Active Time Battle, the graphic presentation is more realistic in battle compared to navigation mode	Conditional Turn-Based Battle, it is more similar to the traditional version	Active Dimension Battle, smooth transition between navigation and battle and characters can move freely in battle	Command Synergy Battle, characters can move freely, they can chain different attacks to perform together to give a sense of action	Active X Battle, action RPG, smooth transition between navigation and battle, interaction with environment during battle
PC's Visual Design		Appearance based on character jobs	Separate appearance for jobs and story characters	Complementary combination of story character and their physical abilities in appearance	Appearance based on initial jobs	Appearance based on characters' initial jobs and social status	Appearance based on characters' social status	Appearance based on characters' social status

Table 3.1: Changes in PC's Game Mechanics, PC's Visual Design, and Player-World Interaction in the *Final Fantasy* Series.

4. Chapter 4: Comparative Analysis

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section delves into an exploration of the game-world, with a specific focus on elements such as aesthetics, monster designs, and navigation methods. These aspects will be analyzed to determine what are the games simulating and what kind of chronotope they suggest. Baudrillard distinguishes simulation from representation: while representation refers to reality, simulation doesn't rely on reality and can persist even after the reality it was based on vanishes. Simulations exist independently, creating their own distinct reality, blurring the line between the original and the copy, an idea central to postmodern theories. Baudrillard describes simulation as reality generated from miniature elements and memory banks, replicable countless times. This notion echoes in Azuma's examination of otaku culture's relationship with postmodernity. Otakus create derivative works using a database created from fragmented subculture pieces, blurring the lines between original and derived content, while placing importance on fiction as a framework to navigate society's norms. Both *The Witcher* and *FF* exhibit some of these characteristics that align with the perspectives of Baudrillard and Azuma regarding postmodern media and simulation. However, it is crucial to note that although both games serve as postmodern simulacra, their approaches to creating this simulacrum differ due to cultural distinctions. The second section shifts the focus to the relationship between players and the PC. The analysis will include examining aspects such as leveling up and the extent to which the game relies on player skill rather than the PC. The impact of this relationship on players' overall experiences of the series will be thoroughly explored. Eco (1972) argues that characters in mass media need to encompass two conflicting aspects: meeting audience expectations for fresh and thrilling narratives, while also allowing for the consumption of endless stories revolving around similar characters. Eco explores various strategies used to reconcile these contradictory features. In this analysis I will try to discover the strategies that *The Witcher* and *FF* use in order to address this contradiction.

4.1. The Game-world and Historical Chronotope

In Chapter 2, I discussed the presence of a historical chronotope in games that either have a historical background associated with the game-world itself or make references to real-world history using historical concepts. In this section, I will examine how each game approaches the simulation of history

and how the game-world is understood based on it. Writers invest significant effort in crafting a believable narrative world, particularly when the story takes place in an alternate universe. For Example, Edward James (2012) explains that Tolkien dedicated approximately four decades to developing the history and culture of Middle-earth before even starting to write *LOTR*. A notable example of this intricate world-building can be seen in a passage where Aragorn says of Gandalf: ‘he is surer of finding his way home in a blind night than the cats of Queen Beruthiel.’ Queen Beruthiel is not otherwise mentioned in the *LOTR* trilogy. However, this reference implies that there is a broader history to Middle-earth beyond the events directly related to the books' story, lending a sense of realism and depth to the world (James, 2012: 66). A similar approach is taken in the universe of *The Witcher*. Sapkowski created a world with a rich history and background, which has been transferred into *The Witcher* games. Furthermore, the games have expanded upon this universe, adding to its history and culture.

However, as I discussed in Chapter 1, the concept of the game-world extends beyond the narrative world alone. It encompasses a combination of computational models, game mechanics, and representational features, including the narrative. In order for the game-world to feel real and believable, all of these elements must work together. For instance, consider a 3D model created using computer software. By itself, it lacks inherent history or materiality. It is generated through codes and information in real-time as the computer processes it. To imbue the model with a sense of realism, designers often intentionally incorporate imperfections during the creation process. They may add a dent to the blade of a sword or a stain on a shirt, giving the item a sense of history. These imperfections distinguish a more realistic design from a more cartoonish one, where such details may be intentionally omitted to achieve a simplified and abstract representation of the world. While this explanation may seem obvious, it is important to note that it does not always the case. Even when a game aims for a photorealistic design, there are varying degrees to which this approach is employed. As a result, the final simulated game-world can evoke different feelings and impressions. Both *The Witcher* and *FF* series strive for a photorealistic depiction of their respective worlds. However, as I will explain, the ultimate outcome may not always convey a sense of history and reality. The visual depiction of 3D models within the game-world is just one method that can be used to simulate history. There are other factors within the game that can also influence this depiction, which will be discussed in greater detail in the subsequent sections.

4.1.1. Emphasizing Realism Through Violence and simulating history in *The Witcher*

‘Evil is evil, Stregobor,’ said the witcher seriously as he got up. ‘Lesser, greater, middling, it’s all the same. Proportions are negotiated, boundaries blurred. I’m not a pious hermit, I haven’t done only good in my life. But if I’m to choose between one evil and another, then I prefer not to choose at all.’ (Sapkowski, 1993)

In one of Sapkowski's short stories titled "The Lesser Evil," Geralt encounters two characters, Stregobor and Renfri, who hold contrasting perspectives on the nature of evil. Stregobor seeks Geralt's assistance in eliminating Renfri, a princess-turned-bandit who is believed to pose a threat due to her violent actions. Renfri, on the other hand, argues that she is not inherently evil but seeks revenge against Stregobor for his past mistreatment of her. Stregobor asserts that killing Renfri is the lesser evil during a conversation with Geralt. In response, Geralt expresses his belief that evil is simply evil, without

degrees or gradations. He chooses not to kill Renfri, holding onto the hope that she can be redeemed. However, this decision comes at a high cost as Renfri takes the people of a nearby village hostage, demanding Stregobor's life in return. Ultimately, Geralt has to make a difficult choice and decides to kill Renfri in order to save the innocent villagers from harm.

The above story has a great influence on the game's approach to creating narrative decisions that present players with moral dilemmas, where there is no definitive right or wrong answer. For example, in *The Witcher 3*, players encounter three witches known as the Crones. The Crones live in a swamp and have taken orphan children under their care. During their interaction with Geralt, they request his help in defeating a spirit that resides within an ancient oak tree. The players are given the choice of either killing the spirit or setting it free. If players choose to release the spirit, she promises to free the children from the clutches of the Crones. However, later in the game, players discover that although the spirit fulfills her promise but goes on to exact revenge on the inhabitants of a nearby village by slaughtering them. On the other hand, if players choose to kill the spirit, they later learn that the Crones, in turn, kill (and presumably eat) all the children. Therefore, players must make a decision based on their perception of the lesser evil. Additionally, the game deliberately delays the outcome of the players' choice, revealing the consequences later in the game. Unlike most games where players can simply reload a previous save and make a different decision if they are dissatisfied with the outcome, *The Witcher* places greater importance on the decision-making process. The game heightens the significance of the choices and amplifies the severity of their consequences by preventing players from easily reverting their decisions through delayed outcomes.

This leads to a dark portrayal of *The Witcher's* world, which is reflected in various aspects of the game. The weather often carries a gloomy atmosphere, and the wilderness is inhabited by dangerous creatures such as cursed creatures, wolves, monsters, and bandits. Villages within the game are frequently impoverished, with some even abandoned due to infestations of monsters. While exploring, players may come across corpses accompanied by lurking ghouls nearby. *The Witcher 3* takes place during a war between Nilfgaard and the northern countries, and players bear witness to fields strewn with the bodies of fallen soldiers, devastated villages, orphaned children, and lives torn apart by the conflict. The colors used in the game are often muted and desaturated, contributing to an overall aged and decayed appearance of the surroundings.

As Young explains, the genre that encompasses this style can be referred to as grimdark fantasy. According to Gillian Polack (2015), grimdark fantasy is characterized by a high level of violence and a dirty portrayal of both physical aesthetics and moralities of characters and the world they inhabit. Polack suggests that while traditional fantasy relies on a moral universe (good versus evil), grimdark fantasy challenges this notion by depicting human beings as morally ambiguous, with consequences resulting from their actions (Polack, 2015: 81, 82). "The Lesser Evil" serves as a fitting example of Polack's argument. Shiloh Carroll (2015) explains that authors like George R. R. Martin, known for the *A Song of Ice and Fire* book series, turn to grimdark fantasy to resist the romanticized portrayal of the Middle Ages. Martin himself claims that his books are “more realistic text, both historically and sociologically, than other neomedieval fantasy”, a neomedievalism that he calls “Disneyland Middle Ages” (Carroll 2015, 60). In essence, authors such as Martin believe that romantic medievalism is an escape from the harsh realities of the era, but they intentionally adopt a more realistic approach by depicting the cruel

nature of Middle Ages. It appears that Sapkowski aimed for a similar aesthetic in his work, and the game adaptation has followed this sentiment by embracing the grimdark fantasy elements.

Baudrillard explains that between the two world wars and the Cold War, there is no place for myth in the real violent world, so it finds refuge in the cinema (Baudrillard, 1981: 31). This means that individuals, faced with the harshness of war and violence in their daily lives, turned to media as an escape from the cruel realities of the world. Media, particularly cinema, provided a platform for the creation of mythical and romanticized depictions of the world. This is the era when superheroes like Superman and romantic Disney animations emerged. However, as Baudrillard notes, in the post-modern era following the wars, people's lives have become monotonous and repetitive. The sense of danger or violence is no longer present in daily life. As a result, people turn to media, to experience and encounter violence. Baudrillard explains that cinema becomes infused with nostalgia for the past, “to resurrect the period when at least there was history, at least there was violence (albeit fascist), when at least life and death were at stake” (Baudrillard, 1981, 31). According to Baudrillard, historical movies, particularly those depicting events like the world wars, have gained popularity because they draw upon real-life events. As a result, the violence portrayed in these movies feels more real (Baudrillard, 1981, 31).

Similarly, grimdark neomedievalism seems to try to be more realistic than romanticized neomedievalism by claiming to depict historical concepts of the Middle Ages more accurately. However, it is important to acknowledge that the actual reality of the Middle Ages no longer exists. Therefore, while grimdark neomedievalism asserts its representation of the Middle Ages as realistic, it has essentially no reality. Instead, it has become its own simulacrum, a simulated version of the past. Grimdark neomedievalism replaces the Middle Ages by constructing its own simulated reality. It does so by deliberately contrasting itself with a more romanticized portrayal of the Middle Ages. Baudrillard explains that the purpose of Disneyland, is to present an extreme fantasy, thereby making everything else appear real in comparison (Baudrillard, 1981, 10). This concept aligns with how George R.R. Martin describes his own work, as a departure from the romanticized notion of the "Disneyland Middle Ages." It is important to clarify that my intention here is not to debate the accuracy or inaccuracy of *The Witcher's* portrayal of the Middle Ages. Rather, my focus is on highlighting that *The Witcher* strives to present itself as a real by incorporating tropes commonly associated with the grimdark fantasy genre. In other words, *The Witcher* has simulated its own distinct reality, which has taken on a life of its own. However, to establish this sense of reality for the audience, it draws upon the concept of the Middle Ages, specifically a grimdark interpretation that is deemed more realistic by some of the authors and the audience in the medieval fantasy genre community.

Despite the fact that the game world is ultimately artificial and created through computational modeling, *The Witcher*, attempts to create a sense of realism. The game-world lacks any inherent history as the polygons that construct it only exist in real-time when the player is actively engaged with the game (engine time). Certainly, *The Witcher's* narrative, particularly derived from the books, outlines a history for the game-world. However, conveying the history of the world to players requires methods beyond just storytelling. The mechanics, computational models, and overall simulation of the world must also serve to communicate this history. Therefore, *The Witcher* strives to give the impression that the game world has a rich history preceding the player's involvement through the portrayal of themes such as death, destruction, and decay, which symbolize the inevitable consequences of the passage of

time on any entity. For example, encountering a ruin within the game that is filled with collapsed sections, covered in mold, and featuring corroded stones due to prolonged exposure to air, creates the illusion that this structure has endured for centuries.

This is particularly evident in the design of beasts and monsters within *The Witcher*. When encountering enemies that are not human, they are predominantly cursed creatures, ghosts, and necrophages - beings that are inherently associated with death. The monsters are visually depicted with veins visible through their pale skin, decaying flesh, and dark color palettes. For instance, take basilisk, a mythical creature that combines the features of a rooster and a reptile. Different texts and interpretations depict the basilisk in various ways, with some resembling more of a rooster and others resembling a lizard or snake¹⁷. In *The Witcher*, the basilisk leans towards the lizard-like appearance. It possesses the head and wings of a rooster, but its overall form and characteristics resemble those of a reptile. This creature encapsulates the essence of death, featuring dragon-like claws, a hunched body covered in scales, dark green skin, piercing red eyes, and a breath that carries a deadly poison (Figure 4.1). Through its meticulous creature design, *The Witcher* effectively portrays these monsters as embodiments of death, employing visual cues such as rotting flesh, pale skin, and dark colors to evoke a sense of menace. Furthermore, when it comes to hunting monsters, Geralt typically needs to investigate and research into their past. Particularly with cursed beings, players must uncover the cause behind the curse or locate an item from the cursed individual's past to be able to defeat it. Hence, unraveling the monster's history becomes a crucial aspect of the hunt. In contrast, in games like *FFXII* or *FFXV*, where hunting is a significant part of side quests, the focus lies more on discovering the monster's whereabouts.



Figure 4.1: Left: Basilisk from *The Witcher 3*, right: Basilisk from *FFXV*

However, there are moments in *The Witcher* where the true nature of the game is revealed. One of these instances is the introduction of "the witcher sense" in *The Witcher 3*. The game explains that the witcher sense is a heightened sensory ability possessed by the witchers, allowing them to perceive things that normal individuals cannot see, hear, or smell. While this feature is justified within the game's narrative, it also serves a more mechanical purpose. *The Witcher 3* possesses the most photorealistic graphics compared to its predecessors. This commitment to realism contributes to the game's goal of presenting a gritty and realistic depiction of the Middle Ages, immersing players in its simulated world. However, the realistic depiction of the game world can sometimes make it challenging for players to

¹⁷ See *The Witcher*, “Bestiary Season 1, Part 2” on Netflix.

determine what is interactable and what is not. It becomes difficult to distinguish important objects and elements relevant to their missions from the countless details in the environment. To ensure a smooth and enjoyable gameplay experience, the game needs to effectively communicate to players what they need to do and what they should interact with. One solution to this issue would be to include graphical indicators, such as making important objects shimmer or adding a bright color outline to them. However, this approach would compromise the game's realism. As a result, *The Witcher* introduces the witcher sense mechanic. When activating the witcher sense, the background is blurred, and important objects are highlighted. The game world is no longer depicted in a photorealistic manner, but this departure is justified by the explanation that the witcher sense is an imaginary ability, and players have no frame of reference to compare it to. Therefore, the game establishes the reality of its own regarding the witcher sense. It is during these moments when the essence of the game is revealed: information, coded information that remains unaffected by the passage of time.

This becomes more noticeable when comparing it to *FF*. In *FFXV*, which is one of the most photo realistic games in the *FF* series, the immersion of the game world is occasionally interrupted by graphical elements that serve as the game's interface. For instance, mission destinations are indicated by an orange exclamation mark. During battles, numbers representing damage dealt or taken constantly appear and disappear on the screen or character abilities and skills are accompanied by flashy and extravagant visual effects. Similarly, in the *FFVII Remake*, treasure chests are distinctly shaped, and dropped items shine brightly with vibrant colors. *The Witcher* also incorporates such elements, but it does so in a more subtle manner that preserves the immersive experience in a realistic environment without jarringly disrupting the realism of the world.

4.1.2. Emphasizing artificiality through anti-historic approach and uncoherent world design in *Final Fantasy*

And so, their journey began. The four Warriors of Light felt overwhelmed by the great task destiny had placed upon them. They did not know the true significance of the four crystals they held in their hands... The crystal that once, long ago, shone with a light so brilliant. The time for their journey had come. The time to cast off the veil of darkness and bring the world once more into the light... (Final Fantasy I, 1987, Opening Scene).

At the beginning of the first *Final Fantasy* game, players find themselves immediately positioned in front of a town called Cornelia. Their first objective is to talk with the king of Cornelia, who reveals the urgent mission of rescuing Princess Sarah from knight Garland. Once the players successfully complete this task and rescue the princess, the king informs them about a newly constructed bridge that grants access to the entire continent. However, it is not until the players cross this bridge that the opening scene unfolds, marking the true beginning of their epic journey. *FFI* employs this narrative approach to convey that the heroes' adventure extends beyond the typical tropes often found in similar fantasy settings. For example, in the first *Dragon Quest* game players are assigned the task of rescuing the princess and defeating the Dragonlord, which essentially concludes the story.

FF continues to deviate from the typical conventions associated with neomedieval fantasy settings in various aspects. Even in the first *FF*, it breaks away from the neomedieval genre and incorporates elements of science fiction. For instance, in order to defeat the main enemy, Chaos, the characters must travel back in time 2000 years. Additionally, the inclusion of airships and robotic enemies like WarMech adds a futuristic twist to the medieval environment. This departure from neomedieval norms persists throughout the series, becoming particularly evident in *FFXV*. The protagonist, Noctis, hails from the modern capital city of Insomnia, which is modeled after Tokyo. Just outside Insomnia lies Leide, the starting point of the game, which bears resemblance to the landscapes of the American Southwest and Midwest. In the initial chapters, players spend a significant amount of time traversing these desert landscapes, from one diner to another in a car, evoking the atmosphere of a road movie. As players progress and gain access to more areas such as Duscae and Cleigne, the environment transitions into a more tropical and mystical setting reminiscent of traditional fantasy genres. One of the most fantastical locations in *FFXV* is Tenebrae, characterized by its lush surroundings, floating platforms, and a castle with a magical aesthetic resembling an elven residence from a neomedieval fantasy setting. The magical ambiance of Tenebrae stands in contrast to its futuristic neighbor, Niflheim, a cold and snowy land known for its technological advancements. Niflheim showcases elements like airships, robot soldiers, and cloning. Aside from the sci-fi elements, when Noctis visits Niflheim and navigates his way through Zegnautus Keep, the narrow corridors and jump scares create an atmosphere reminiscent of the horror genre. Towards the end of the game, as Noctis returns to his kingdom of Lucis after a decade, the game's setting takes on a post-apocalyptic tone, further adding to the diverse range of genres and themes explored within *FFXV*.

There are numerous examples that showcase the fusion of multiple genres in *FF* series. In *FFXIII-2*, for instance, players engage in constant time travel to prevent an impending apocalypse. However, their actions inadvertently cause paradoxes and disruptions in the fabric of time and space. In *FFXII*, there is a notable contrast between various locations, such as Rabanastre, Archades, and Salikawood. Rabanastre embodies a traditional Middle Eastern aesthetic, while Archades is depicted as a city with towering skyscrapers, flying cars, and advanced technology. On the other hand, Salikawood and its surrounding areas display a fantastical and mythical atmosphere. Another recurring element in the *FF* series is the inclusion of casinos, such as the Gold Saucer in *FFVII*. These casino's flashy settings often possess a distinct theme and design that stands in contrast to the rest of the game world. However, while *The Witcher's* world is confined to a single continent, *FF* games typically portray an entire world. Consequently, having diverse environments within a singular expansive world isn't always surprising. But it is important to note that each area usually possesses distinct boundaries, and the transition between them can sometimes be abrupt. The world of *FF* games is often segmented into different visually designed areas, and players move from one area to another upon crossing a defined line or boundary. This transition involves a loading screen, spawning players into a new area that may significantly differ from the previous one. This segmentation partly stems from technical limitations, especially evident in older games where rendering a large area at once was challenging. Even in *The Witcher 3*, separations exist between big areas such as different countries, requiring players to select a location on the map and traverse through a loading screen to reach it. However, this separation sometimes feels more intentional in *FF*. For instance, in *FFXV*, despite the absence of a loading screen when traveling from the desert of Leide to the grassy plains of Duscae, the transition is distinctly noticeable as players traverse through a

mountain range. Although the climate shift between these areas is rationalized by the existence of the mountain range, the deliberate placement of this range appears contrived and artificial (Figure 4.2).



Figure 4.2: *FFXV*'s map screen, To the desert area to the right is Leide and to the left there is Duscae.

Hiroki Azuma (2007) explains that in Japanese pop culture media, specifically light novels it is common to find a combination of different genres within a single work, such as mystery and fantasy. Rather than categorizing light novels based on their genres, Azuma suggests that they should be viewed as a medium for character. According to him, the audience tends to prioritize their attachment to the characters over the overall story or genre. Azuma highlights the influence of fan culture on commercial works like light novels. Initially, fans created *dōjinshi*, which involved taking characters from manga, anime, or light novels and placing them in new settings or contexts. This fan practice became immensely popular, and Azuma explains that it eventually made its way into commercial works such as light novels and eventually games (Azuma, 2007: 30-41).

What I want to emphasize here is not the act of combining genres itself, but rather its impact on how the game-world is perceived, particularly when compared to *The Witcher*. *The Witcher* makes a lot of effort to present a coherent neomedieval chronotope, despite incorporating elements that are not strictly from or of the that era. These elements are modified to align with the overall neomedieval chronotope. For instance, the game occasionally makes references to events that took place long after the Middle Ages in the real world. As an example, in one of the side quests called "Defender of the Faith," an NPC quotes from Nietzsche and Marx. Additionally, the game includes the idea of parallel universes or incorporates elements that are not exclusive to European culture, such as meditation and mythical creatures like ghouls and djinn. However, these elements are seamlessly integrated into the neomedieval chronotope. The game is meticulous in ensuring that these elements do not undermine the overall atmosphere. It appears that *The Witcher*'s primary concern is to establish coherence in its world-building. By creating a world that is coherent and logical, it aims to evoke a sense of realism. While the real world isn't necessarily coherent or logical, a newly constructed world within a game, formed through stories

and polygons, is delicate. The reality of it can easily shatter and it is prone to feel unreal. Discovering any inconsistencies within the game-world could lead players to lose their faith in its existence. Hence, *The Witcher* aims for realism by emphasizing coherence, intending for players to perceive the violence and death within the game as real as possible. The fusion of genres in *FF*, on the other hand, can contribute to a game-world that feels artificial and unreal in comparison.

I don't want to imply that the worlds simulated in *FF* are not immersive or believable. In fact, the diverse chronotopes in each area adds to the mystery of exploration, promising novelty with each new location which encourages players to interact with the world. The distinction lies in *The Witcher's* approach, which, similar to Hutchinson's interpretation of *Ōkami*, imagines the medieval past “as a time and place where legendary heroes walked the earth, mythical beings were real, and fairytales were true.” That is why *The Witcher* strives for consistency in portraying this medieval era. Despite creating a fantasy universe, it maintains a tether to the real world as a means to establish its reality. In contrast, *FF* builds separate fantasy worlds that are immersive and believable within their own boundary but don't prioritize coherence with the logic of the real world's history. This isn't to suggest that *FF* doesn't draw from real-world history; on the contrary, its references to real-world history are abundant and diverse, coexisting in various forms. Hence, *FF* cannot be confined or limited to a single reference point. While I have not included *FFXI* and *FFXIV* in this study due to their classification as MMORPGs, it is worth mentioning William Huber's (2022) findings regarding *FFXIV* as they align with the theory discussed here. Huber explores *FFXIV's* allegories of real-world history and geography within the world of *FFXIV*. He explains that in *FFXIV* “the allusions are usually polysemic: that is, a fantastic space in the game will allude to more than one real/historical topos, and in doing so blend, dilute, or otherwise complicate the political metaphors” (Huber, 2022: 262). In other words, Huber explains that while *FFXIV* may reference real-world historical concepts, it does so by combining and blending elements from different historical chronotopes. As a result, the game-world of *FFXIV* does not align with any specific historical chronotope from the real world and cannot be easily understood within those terms. This is in contrast to *The Witcher*, which has a clear connection to the Middle Ages.

The segmentation of space is not confined solely to different areas on the map. There's also a clear separation between the battle space and the navigation space. Usually, when players encounter enemies, their navigation gets interrupted, and they are shifted to a battle space where their control over the characters changes. Once the battle concludes, they can revert to the navigation space. However, this separation has become less evident with the series' shift from turn-based combat to action-oriented gameplay. Furthermore, *FF* and *The Witcher* both offer different modes of transportation within their respective game-worlds. In *FF*, one such mode is the chocobo, which are large birds that can be ridden similar to a horse. *The Witcher* also allows players to ride a horse in order to traverse the game-world more quickly. However, there is a notable distinction in how players can interact with their surroundings while riding. When riding a horse in *The Witcher*, players can travel at a faster pace. However, if they come across enemies along the way, the horse may become scared and throw Geralt off its back. This adds a sense of realism to the game, as it mimics how a real horse might react in a dangerous situation. On the other hand, in *FF*, the chocobo serves not only as a means of faster travel, but also as a way to avoid encounters with enemies. When players ride a chocobo in *FF*, they can travel through enemy-infested areas without being attacked, almost as if they are invisible to the enemies. On top of that a

distinct musical theme is played while riding chocobos, creating a separate mental space. This segmentation of space in *FF* emphasizes the artificial nature of the game.

Another notable aspect that reinforces the artificial nature of the game is the anti-historic approach to designing the game-world. With the term "anti-historic approach," I aim to highlight the contrast between *The Witcher*'s efforts to depict a computational model of the world as real by showcasing how time affects simulated objects, like abandoned structures, and *FF*'s aesthetic, which might seem artificial because it doesn't simulate history in a similar manner. For instance, in *FFXII*, the Tomb of Raithwall, despite being a historical location within the game, does not appear to be affected by the passing of time. This lack of visible aging makes it come across as more of an abstract structure rather than a historical one, even though it may be inspired from real-world historical places¹⁸. Technological constraints might contribute to this limitation in creating a more realistic portrayal¹⁹. However, a similar approach can be observed even in more recent games. In *FFXV*, Noctis embarks on a quest to find his ancestors' tombs and retrieve their weapons for power. Despite his ancestry going back 2000 years, these tombs remain unchanged, featuring modern architecture, and showing little evidence of the passage of time or decay. This approach extends to the overall world design as well. Many significant landmarks in the series are the result of sudden acts by gods or natural disasters, which are often induced by spontaneous decisions. While these events are part of the game-world's history, they do not necessarily require a long span of time to occur. Whether they happened a thousand years ago or just a week ago, the outcome remains the same. Consequently, these events do not necessarily evoke a sense of ancient history.

For instance, the theme of celestial bodies impacting the planet is a recurring motif in the *FF* series. In *FFVII*, Jenova, an extraterrestrial life-form, arrives on Gaia via a meteorite impact, creating the North Crater and leaving lasting scars on the planet. Similarly, in *FFXV*, a meteorite collides with the planet but is stopped by Titan, one of the gods in this world. This event forms the Disc of Cauthess and dominates the surrounding landscape. Another example from *FFXV* is the snowy fields near Niflheim, which exist due to a battle between the Niflheim army and Shiva, an ice-elemental god, rather than being the result of a natural phenomenon. These examples portray a game-world that was artificially created through sudden acts rather than being shaped by natural forces over an extended period. It gives the impression that the world was purposefully constructed to accommodate an apocalyptic story for the heroes and players, rather than suggesting a world that has existed and will continue to exist regardless of the players' presence, which seems to be the aim in a game such as *The Witcher*.

4.1.3. The contrast between the game-world in *The Witcher* and *Final Fantasy*

The observations made above indicate that *The Witcher* aims to depict a medieval past in a manner that evokes a sense of realism. This emphasis on realism is achieved through simulating history.

¹⁸ The appearance of the tomb may be based on the real world Kailasa Temple.

¹⁹ Because of technical constraints, providing examples from earlier games in the *FF* series is challenging. However, there are a few exceptions in games like *FFVII* and *FFIX* (2000), where the backgrounds consist of painted images depicting a worn-out environment. Similar aesthetic has been recreated in the *FFVII Remake*. However, there is a noticeable contrast between the realistic drawings of the background and the cartoonish 3D models of the characters. This contrast creates a sense of detachment between the characters and their environment, ultimately giving the world an artificial feel in a different manner.

decaying buildings and grotesque monsters contribute to the depiction of an existence of history in an otherwise artificial world while creating a dark and gloomy atmosphere. As part of the grimdark fantasy genre, *The Witcher* strives to create a game-world where players can experience violence and danger in a way that feels real. In contrast, *FF* does not prioritize realism to the same extent as *The Witcher*. The game world of *FF* is filled with elements that appear artificial, such as graphical interfaces and the architectural aesthetics. *FF* combines various features from different genres and chronotopes, resulting in a game world that appears artificial and abstract. In chapter 2, I made reference to Clammer's work to highlight the distinctions between simulation in the Western and Japanese contexts. Similarly, in the case of these two games, both can be considered as simulacra. However, they differ in their approach to simulation. *The Witcher* aims to conceal its artificial nature by simulating a reality that substitutes the actual Middle Ages. It aims to create a world that feels authentic and immersive. On the other hand, as Clammer elucidates about simulation in Japan, *FF* does not treat the reality of its game-world with the same seriousness. It is designed to be played with and discarded. As a result, although both games can be classified as simulations, there are epistemological differences between them that stem from their respective cultural backgrounds.

It is important to highlight that while I am differentiating each game based on their approach to world-building, the boundaries between these approaches are not rigidly defined. The classification is meant to illustrate the predominant tendencies within each game, but it is possible for elements from different approaches to coexist. Ultimately, the games exhibit a combination of features that suggest a stronger inclination towards one approach rather than the other on a spectrum ranging from realistic to artificial depiction of the game-world. Moreover, the *FF* series has existed for a very long time, and various teams have worked on different installments across different periods. As a result, the features highlighted here may not be uniformly present in all versions. However, this research tried to refer to the most common elements that can be found in most games to the best of its ability.

4.2. Player-character and Progress Chronotope

The concept of the progress chronotope plays a significant role in any game. According to Juul, games can be seen as state machines, where players constantly modify the game's state to make progress. In RPGs, this progression primarily focuses on the PCs, although the game world itself also changes in response to player actions. This section will examine how both the PCs and players undergo change and advancement throughout the game. Additionally, Eco's theories will be utilized to analyze the implications of this change within the context of serialized games, such as the RPGs in question. Furthermore, this analysis will explore the strategies employed by each game to be able to tell numerous stories while maintaining a level of consistency in the player-characters.

As it was explained in Chapter 1, the roots of the themes found in WRPG and JRPG can be traced back to various works of fantasy. These themes not only shape the game-world but also greatly influence the PCs, their journey, and their interactions within the world. I previously mentioned that quest fantasy is common in shōnen manga. According to Mendlesohn, this type of fantasy can often be categorized as portal fantasy, where the protagonists embark on an adventure by crossing a portal or threshold into a fantastical world. While classic examples like *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (C. S. Lewis, 1950)

and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Lewis Carroll, 1865) clearly distinguish between the real and fantasy worlds with a threshold, Mendlesohn argues that stories like *LOTR* also fall into this category. In such stories, the protagonists exist within the fantasy world but are not initially familiar with its fantastical elements, similar to how hobbits live in the secluded Shire within Middle-earth. The *FF* series follows a similar pattern, with young and inexperienced protagonists embarking on an adventure and navigating through the fantastical world. The quest fantasy is as common in Western fantasy as it is in Japanese manga and anime. *The Witcher*, however, can be best described as immersive fantasy. Geralt, the main character, is a trained witcher who is familiar with the ways of the world and its most fantastical elements. In the book series, Geralt's story begins with him having already slain a Kikimora²⁰, a mythical creature. Therefore, the fantastical elements in *The Witcher* are the norm for Geralt, and Sapkowski invites the audience to accept them as normal as well. The initial Witcher game, in contrast, falls into the realm of portal fantasy due to Geralt experiencing amnesia at the beginning of the game. I will delve into the details of amnesia as a trope further shortly, but here I like to point out that this amnesia allows for Geralt to rediscover the fantasy world at the same time as the players. But this aspect only applies to the first game; by the third installment, both Geralt and players are well-acquainted with the fantastical elements of the world.

JRPGs frequently employ the concept of portal fantasy. However, unlike *The Witcher*, WRPGs typically do not incorporate immersive fantasy as frequently. Similar to JRPGs, many WRPGs fall into the portal fantasy category. This is partly because many WRPGs offer the option for players to create their own avatars, allowing them to enter the game's universe as themselves and experience the fantasy world as they progress. Additionally, there are not many WRPGs directly based on book series. Therefore, this characteristic is more unique to *The Witcher* game series. However, it still has the potential to reflect the cultural identity of its creators, serving as a distinctive Polish game. Therefore, the forthcoming section will delve into the cultural identities of PCs in each game series; exploring their differences, their impact on the player, and the underlying reasons for these disparities.

4.2.1. The double identity of Geralt as a player-character

Geralt of Rivia is described as a highly skilled monster hunter with distinctive features. He is a skilled warrior and has a muscular build. Geralt often wears his signature witcher armor. He carries two swords on his back. Geralt has cat-like eyes and pale skin. His face and his body are covered by scars, which are a result of his experiences as a witcher. He has white hair, which is a result of the alchemical mutations that he underwent during his training as a witcher. He has a longer lifespan than a normal human and is nearly a hundred years old. He has a silver medallion shaped like a wolf's which signifies that he is a witcher. The witchers are monster hunters and have a very specific set of skills. As a witcher, Geralt's physical abilities are enhanced through alchemical experiments and training. He has superior strength, speed, and reflexes compared to an average human. Geralt is a master swordsman, skilled in both armed and hand-to-hand combat. He also has access to Signs, which are a form of basic magic. Geralt is also skilled in alchemy, allowing him to craft potions, bombs, and other items that enhance his abilities, heal wounds, or provide resistance against specific threats. He possesses knowledge about

²⁰ According to “Bestiary Season 1, Part 1”, Kikimora is a beast from Slavic folklore.

monsters, including their weaknesses, habits, and origins which is crucial for effectively hunting and defeating various creatures. As a result of the witcher mutations, Geralt has increased resistance to diseases and toxins and can see in the dark.

The first game in *The Witcher* series is set after the events depicted in the books. At this stage of the story, Geralt, the protagonist, is a well-established character who is highly skilled in his craft. However, one of the key aspects of RPGs is the ability for players to develop and shape their PC. Initially, Geralt may not seem like an ideal character for this genre. To address this issue, the game utilizes a common trope found in videogames, particularly in RPGs: amnesia. Hutchinson explains that amnesia is frequently employed by game designers in JRPGs like *FFVII* and *FFX* to create a scenario where characters can explore their origins and uncover their identities. She further notes that "amnesia, or any form of memory loss, allows the player to learn about the world and the main character's backstory at the same time as the character, creating a strong sense of identification" (Hutchinson 2019, 112).

The Witcher also uses amnesia as a narrative device to create a sense of identification with players. However, there are some distinctions in how amnesia is employed in *The Witcher* compared to JRPGs. The immediate function of amnesia in *The Witcher* is to allow players to learn Geralt's skills as he remembers them. Under normal circumstances, Geralt would already be proficient in swordsmanship, alchemy, and magic. Yet, for new players, it would be challenging to immediately grasp and utilize all of these abilities effectively. Therefore, the game incorporates amnesia to create a natural learning curve for players and justify why Geralt is relearning his skills and abilities from scratch. However, amnesia in *The Witcher* does not appear to significantly impact Geralt's sense of self. As Hutchinson mentions in the context of JRPGs, amnesia is often employed by game designers to craft a story where the protagonist embarks on a journey to uncover their origins and define their identity. The notion of self-discovery plays a central role in many *FF* games. However, in *The Witcher*, Geralt is not primarily concerned with recollecting his past to understand himself better. In the first game of *The Witcher* series, Geralt readily embraces his identity as a witcher and demonstrates unwavering dedication to protecting the witcher creed. When Kaer Morhen, the witcher stronghold, comes under attack, Geralt fearlessly confronts dangerous monsters and embarks on a quest to uncover the perpetrator. While encountering individuals from his past, Geralt forges new connections with them rather than fixating on recalling previous relationships. It is in the second game that Geralt begins to regain memories of his past, but even then, remembering the past is not the central focus of the game. Eventually, towards the end of the second game, Geralt decides to embark on an adventure to fully recollect his past. However, this part of the story is not covered within the game itself, and the third game begins with Geralt having regained his memories and embarking on a quest to find Yennefer.

From the perspective of Eco's theory, Geralt can be seen as embodying the characteristics of a mythical hero. He possesses numerous supernatural abilities that distinguish him from ordinary humans, even within the fantasy world of the game. Geralt's personality remains largely unaffected by the events that unfold throughout the game's story. While he is not immortal, he does have an exceptionally long lifespan. In terms of gameplay mechanics, Geralt's abilities are predetermined and undergo only minor improvements from one game to another. The level-up system in *The Witcher* consistently encompasses three primary categories: swordsmanship, alchemy, and magic. Although players can choose to focus on one of these areas and enhance Geralt's abilities within that specific skill set, they are unable to learn to

wield alternative weapons or explore different types of magic. Consequently, Geralt's personality and his abilities as a witcher are characterized by rigidity and unchangeability.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with the characteristics described earlier, according to Eco's theories, a character should possess certain aspects that make them relatable and accessible to the audience, especially in media like comics and TV series. However, it is important to note that Eco's theories primarily focused on these forms of media rather than videogames. In terms of narrative, Geralt in the videogame differs from a character like Superman. While Superman had a dual identity as Clark Kent, a regular person with a daily job, Geralt appears to have only one side, that of a mythical hero. However, it is crucial to recognize that Geralt, as a "player-character," inherently possesses another side: the player themselves. In a previous chapter, the concept of double-consciousness of play was discussed, which suggests that players continuously identify with the player character on two different levels. They shift between seeing the character as an extension of themselves and perceiving the character as a distinct, fictional entity.

Even though *The Witcher* allows players to level up Geralt in meaningful ways, the progression chronotope in the game primarily focuses on the players themselves rather than Geralt as a character. It is the players who need to improve their skills as they play in order to progress effectively. According to Juul (2013), a good game should provide a challenge to the player. If the game is too easy or too difficult, it won't be enjoyable. According to Juul, failure is part of the gaming experience, and “when you fail in a game, it really means that you were in some way inadequate”. It will feel unpleasant at first but “games promise us a fair chance of redeeming ourselves” (Juul 2013, 7). Players always have the option to load their game, go back in time, and correct their mistakes. For instance, when playing as Geralt, the player may encounter a formidable monster. During the first encounter, they will learn about the monster's attack patterns, strengths, and weaknesses. In subsequent attempts, they will develop strategies to counterattack, but even then, success may not be immediate. Therefore, players may need to face the enemy multiple times before achieving victory. While players spend time playing the game (play time) there is no actual change in the game state (progress time). During the play time, players constantly evolve and become more skilled at the game. In contrast, Geralt's character remains static and unchanged.

After multiple attempts, the players will eventually defeat the monster, allowing the game to continue. The overall continuity of the story remains intact, as Geralt successfully confronts and overcomes a formidable foe. This triumph reinforces the image of Geralt as a strong and superhuman character, unaffected by the players' earlier failures. Once the players achieve victory, they become Geralt. In other words, through their continuous development of game skills, they become as skilled as Geralt, making it easier to accept his superhuman traits as their own. This process creates Geralt's double identity as a player-character. On one side, there's the character-Geralt, a mythical hero, flawless and destined to defeat the monster. On the other side, there's the player-Geralt, imperfect and in need of practice, facing an uncertain fate.

When comparing *The Witcher* to *FF* games with turn-based strategy battle systems, the contrasting emphasis on player skill and the level-up system in battle becomes more noticeable. In *The Witcher*, although there may be exceptions, the outcome of battles is primarily determined by the player's skill,

regardless of their character's level. Even if a player hasn't extensively leveled up their character, they can still achieve victory through their own proficiency and gameplay abilities. On the other hand, in *FF* games, if a player has sufficiently leveled up their character and has a higher level than the enemy, they are very likely to succeed in battle. While *FF* also incorporates elements of identification and provides challenges for players, it does so in a different manner compared to *The Witcher*.

4.2.2. The ever-changing player-character of *Final Fantasy*

"The Grand List of Console Role Playing Game Clichés," authored by Mark Sachs, is a well-known compilation of clichés commonly found in JRPGs. Within this list, there are notable observations regarding the portrayal of the main characters. Two particular entries, number five and number six, are worth highlighting. Number five draws attention to the common depiction of main characters as teenagers, often remarkably young considering their responsibilities. Number six notes the repeated use of an absent parent (Sachs 2004). Hutchinson addresses these and some other clichés that are used often within Japanese pop culture media such as manga, anime, and games. She traces back the origin of these clichés to Japan's Meiji Period when the Boy Scout culture has entered Japan. Pop culture media was highly influenced by this culture. Consequently, the characters in JRPGs are often portrayed as young individuals. The absentee parent allows them to embark on adventures without anything holding them back. This can be an empowering and liberating experience for young players who immerse themselves in the role of these protagonists within the confines of their homes. Hutchinson further argues that the absence of a parent can act as a catalyst for the adventure itself. In this scenario, the hero embarks on a quest driven by the desire to uncover their origins and reunite with their missing parent (Hutchinson 2019, 103- 115). Similarly, in *FF* games, young protagonists who embark on an adventure to not only save the world but also discover their own identities is a recurring theme. This motif of self-discovery has a notable impact on the gameplay mechanics and the level-up system. Due to the protagonists' young age, their skills and abilities undergo significant transformations and growth throughout their journey. Unlike *The Witcher*, where the character's abilities are predetermined and relatively fixed, *FF* allows for more flexibility. In many installments, PCs have the ability to switch between different jobs or classes, enabling them to employ entirely distinct fighting styles in battle.

FFVII is the first game in the series that completely abandons the job system. As discussed in chapter 3, each party member in *FFVII* has the ability to equip multiple materias, which grant them specific abilities previously associated with particular jobs. To demonstrate, in a traditional job system, a black mage would possess spells like fire, blizzard, or thunder for dealing damage. However, in *FFVII*, instead of assigning a character to the role of a black mage, there are multiple materias, each containing one of these elemental spells. This means that any character can cast fire by equipping a fire materia, regardless of their designated job or role. This shift in the game mechanics of *FFVII* signifies a departure from the direct correlation between a character's job and their identity, as explained by Voorhees. In *FFVII*, the personality and role of a character are no longer predetermined by their job; rather, players have the freedom to define each character's role by combining different types of materias. This aligns with Azuma's perspective regarding database theory. In this scenario the materias function as a database from which players can draw and create their own interpretations of each character, shaping their gameplay experience and understanding of the PCs.

Similar to *The Witcher*, *FFVII* explores amnesia as part of its narrative. However, in *FFVII*, amnesia serves a different purpose, affecting the protagonist Cloud due to past traumas. Cloud struggles not only to recall his past but also grapples with confusion about his own identity. When fragments of his past resurface, he falls into a deep depression. He realizes fundamental aspects of his identity were lies. His journey then involves rediscovering his true self by piecing together his memories and finding his place among his companions. Likewise, in *FFXV*, the young protagonist Noctis embarks on a quest after his father, the Lucian king, is killed. His mission is to gather the power necessary to reclaim his kingdom and prove his worth as a ruler. In this journey, his competence as a king is questioned by many including himself. After his father's death, he visits the tomb of an ancestor to retrieve a weapon, initiating a quest to locate other ancestral tombs. However, as I have discussed in previous sections, the significance of these quests is not to discover the game-world's history. Instead, each weapon Noctis acquires becomes a symbolic piece of his own identity and power. This symbolism is mirrored in gameplay, as each weapon unlocks a unique fighting style for him in battle. In contrast, Geralt doesn't exhibit confusion regarding his identity or purpose, even when he suffers from amnesia. From a young age, Geralt was left at Kaer Morhen to be raised by the witchers. While the absence of a traditional family allows Geralt to embark on adventures and lead a solitary life, he doesn't appear to be emotionally impacted by the absence of his parents. Unlike the protagonists in *FF*, Geralt doesn't feel compelled to search for his ancestral roots or establish his identity through that lineage. Despite being demonized and shunned by common folk due to his mutations, Geralt never feels the need to fundamentally change himself or prove his worth to others.

Creating a scenario where players and PCs can grow and learn together fosters a strong sense of identification. However, allowing too much change in a character can present its own set of challenges. According to Eco, visible changes and growth in a character often signify their approaching demise and end. This makes it less suitable for a serialized game like *Final Fantasy*, which aims to tell many stories over an extended period of time. In each main entry of the *FF* series, a new game-world and set of new characters are introduced. These characters embark on epic journeys to save the world, experiencing personal growth and evolution along the way. Once their story reaches its conclusion, it is time for the series to transition to a new game-world with fresh characters. While some entries have sequels, such as *FFVII*, *FFX*, and *FFXIII*, there is a limit to how many additional stories can be told about the same characters. However, changing both the game-world and the characters also presents its own challenges. If the game is constantly changing, why is it still called *Final Fantasy*? Eco argues that serialized mediums require certain consistent features. These consistent features serve as the building blocks of the series' identity and contribute to its recognizability among the audience. In the case of *FF*, there are specific elements that remain consistent, both within the game-world and in the PCs. While I have discussed some of the game-world features in the previous section, I will delve into more details in subsequent sections. For now, I will focus on the PCs.

While the characters in each *FF* game may change, there are certain core mechanics that remain consistent. Players typically begin the game with a first level character and progress by embarking on quests and defeating monsters. By engaging in these activities, players earn experience points and other resources that can be used to level up and enhance their characters' abilities. Consequently, every game follows a similar process that allows players to evolve their characters, promising to make them stronger.

This progression system enables players to start as novice adventurers and gradually become heroes through hard work and dedication. In contrast to games like *The Witcher*, *FF* does not heavily rely on players' fast reaction times and battle skills. Even in games with active battle systems like *FFXV*, the difference in levels between the PCs and the monsters can significantly impact the outcome of battles. In *The Witcher*, players always face the possibility that they may not possess the necessary skill to win a battle. But, in *FF*, if players invest enough time and effort into leveling up their characters, their success is guaranteed. The game gives players a sense of comfort through reassuring them that they can succeed if they follow the algorithm of the game. Therefore, The game challenges players' knowledge of the game rather than their reflexes.

Although the series incorporates different level-up and battle systems, certain aspects of the battle mechanics remain consistent. For instance, certain monster attributes remain the same throughout the series. Wolf-type enemies tend to have high agility, making them difficult to hit with heavy and slow weapons. Flan-type monsters are resistant to physical damage, while plant-type enemies are weak against fire. Attacking an elemental enemy with the corresponding element will heal them instead of dealing damage. Moreover, certain battle strategies are effective across different games. When facing lower-level monsters, players might opt for an offensive party formation consisting of characters with high damage output to quickly finish the battle. Conversely, when confronting higher-level enemies, a more balanced formation might be used, with one character capable of withstanding damage, another dealing significant damage, and one providing healing and support to ensure the team's survival. Additionally, certain character abilities remain consistent, even in games without a specific job system. For example, casting Shell on an ally will reduce damage from magic attacks by half, while casting Protect will reduce damage from physical attacks by half. Additionally, stronger variations of spells exist, such as Fira being more powerful than Fire, and Firaga being even stronger than Fira. By playing a single game from the *FF* series, players have the opportunity to gradually acquire knowledge about enemies, different abilities, and effective battle strategies, which they can then apply to win battles. Importantly, this knowledge can be carried over and utilized across multiple games in the series. This means that even though players start each game with level one characters, their understanding of the character mechanics and the structure of the game-world does not begin at the same level.

In summary, *FF* manages to present infinite stories by employing a consistent framework that takes players on a step-by-step journey towards victory in the game. However, on the surface, *FF* offers players new enchanting worlds and characters. With each installment, players have the opportunity to rediscover the fantastical elements. Moreover, due to the double consciousness of play, players consider the achievements of the characters as their own. As a result, through their PCs, players can evolve from being underdogs to becoming heroes. Having the knowledge about the mechanics of the world provides players with a sense of familiarity and connection to the game. Thus, players can engage with infinite stories within the *FF* series while possessing a foundational knowledge of how to guide their PCs through their journeys.

4.2.3. Novelty and predictability through double-consciousness of play

In Eco's essay "The Myth of Superman," he argues that characters in mass media must embody two contradictory aspects to satisfy audience expectations while also allowing for the creation of endless

stories. These aspects include a consistent and predictable side, often associated with mythical characters, and an ever-changing and unpredictable side, commonly found in novel characters. Eco further explores various strategies used to reconcile these contradictory features within a single character or series. The analysis above highlights that games provide new ways and strategies to address these contradictions, thanks to the concept of double-consciousness of play. The player-character already represents a fusion of two distinct entities: the player and the in-game character. Players recognize the difference between themselves and the character, but since they interact with the game-world through this character, they also develop a sense of identification. As a result, paradoxes and inconsistencies can naturally arise between the abilities and intentions of the players and those of the characters.

However, there are notable differences in how *The Witcher* and *FF* approach this feature. *The Witcher* focuses on creating an ideal character, someone for players to aspire to become. Geralt embodies various desirable traits that players might wish to possess. As a result, Geralt himself does not undergo significant changes from one game to another; instead, it is the players who need to evolve and transform to become like Geralt. Over time, players will become familiar with all of Geralt’s abilities. Although these abilities stay consistent, the game provides novelty by introducing new enemies with unique attack patterns, strengths, and weaknesses. As a result, players must rely on repeated patterns in Geralt’s abilities to adapt to new and unique encounters and battles. On the other hand, *FF* takes a different approach by presenting characters that undergo constant change and development. At the beginning of the game, these characters are ordinary individuals, not significantly stronger than others within the game world, and perhaps even weaker. This creates a strong opportunity for players to identify with these characters, as they can relate to their initial vulnerabilities. However, the game then offers a journey for both the players and the characters to grow stronger, evolve, and ultimately become heroes. But players possess a knowledge base that they have acquired through playing multiple games within the *FF* series. This knowledge not only creates a sense of familiarity with the game but also enables players to play more skillfully and expertly. In *Final Fantasy*, the novelty of the game arises from the introduction of new characters with new stories in a game-world that presents completely different environments. Nevertheless, players can consistently depend on their understanding of recurring patterns in the game, the monsters, and the game mechanics to advance through the gameplay. It is important to note that these features are not strictly exclusive to each game. For instance, *The Witcher* also incorporates players' knowledge of monster abilities, and *FF* occasionally requires fast reactions from players, particularly in later installments. Additionally, both series have protagonists with constant and evolving characteristics from a narrative standpoint. However, when considering the overall perspective, it appears that each game places a greater emphasis on one strategy over the other.

4.3. Conclusion

In this chapter, my aim was to examine the game-world and PC by dividing the analysis into two sections. However, it's challenging to fully separate the two aspects, because the PC serves as the players' medium to understand and engage with the game-world. By analyzing these aspects, I tried to understand the different approaches employed in each game. *The Witcher* portrays a neomedieval environment that seeks to establish its reality by aligning with the common tropes found in grimdark fantasy. Despite the game's attempt to present a cultural identity associated with Polishness, as explained by Majkowski,

adhering to the recurring patterns of the genre enables the audience to readily connect with the game-world's premise. The protagonist, Geralt, embodies a representation of a hero from the creators' perspective, and the game's mechanics enable players to become like Geralt. Players can learn Geralt's recurring skills and apply them in each new and novel encounter within the game. On the other hand, *FF* establishes its own identity by creating its own recurring patterns and tropes. Elements such as creatures, abilities, and story elements like chocobos, summoning gods, and world-ending threats form the underlying mechanics of the game. These elements are repeated in each new *FF* game, and players buy these games with the expectation that these patterns will persist. However, each game introduces new characters and worlds, allowing players to apply their knowledge of the game while exploring these new elements and following the new storylines.

5. Chapter 5: Analysis of *The Tale of Bistun*

In the preceding chapters, I have presented a method for exploring the cultural identity of games and subsequently applied this method to conduct a comparative analysis of *FF* and *The Witcher* game series. However, my ultimate objective is to employ both this method and the findings of the analysis to comprehend the cultural identity of Iranian games. Therefore, in this chapter, I will employ the outcomes of the previous chapters to analyze a specific Iranian indie game called *The Tale of Bistun* (hereafter *TOB*), developed by Black Cube Games in 2022. Similar to the approach taken with *FF* and *The Witcher*, my initial step will involve identifying the elements of time and space within the game-world and the player-character. By examining these elements, I will proceed to analyze them in relation to the cultural context of the game's creators. However, this time, I will utilize the findings from Chapter 4 as a reference point in order to gain a deeper understanding of this Iranian game and how it reflects the cultural background of its creators.

Iranian video game industry has faced challenges over the past couple of decades, including limited financial support and small budgets, which have affected the quality of Iranian games. However, there are also promising signs for the future of game design in Iran, particularly with the presence of creative indie games. Nevertheless, the industry's late entry into the market and intense competition leave little room for error. Therefore, one of the purposes of this study is to contribute to Iran's game industry through the analysis of produced games. In this chapter, I will use the analysis of *The Witcher* and *FF* game series as reference points to assess *TOB*. While these series are large-scale RPGs produced by major companies, they serve as valuable references due to their connection to fantasy and their approach to presenting mythological stories, creating fantasy worlds, and portraying legendary heroes. Despite the differences in project scale and game genre, the aim is to compare *TOB* with these games, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses in game mechanics, world creation, and character designs.

5.1. History of the videogame industry in Iran

According to Hackimi et al. (2020), the first game console, called Video master, was introduced to the Iranian market in approximately 1976. This game console was not manufactured within Iran, but it was assembled within the country. However, the development of the game industry in Iran was hindered

by the revolution in 1979, which led to significant cultural and economic changes. Following the revolution, various forms of entertainment, including games and sports such as card games, pinball machines, and chess, were banned due to their association with gambling. This ban was not lifted until ten years later. Another major setback for the development of the game industry in Iran was the war between Iran and Iraq, which lasted for about eight years. During this time, there was little activity in the game industry. In 1985, the Atari 2600 was introduced to Iran and quickly gained popularity, paving the way for other game consoles and platforms to enter the market again. Another console that gained significant popularity in Iran since 1992 was the Micro Genius, a Taiwanese clone of the Nintendo Famicom. Despite the absence of an official Famicom in Iran's market due to Nintendo's policies, many Nintendo games were played on the Micro and other Famicom clones. However, game cartridges in Iran were expensive and hard to find. As a result, many players relied on pack-in games or exchanged cartridges with friends, which often contained multiple small games rather than a single long game. Despite these challenges, the Micro Genius managed to establish a gamer culture in Iran (Hackimi et al., 2020). Although the article does not mention it, there is a current situation where none of the game consoles or their games are officially imported into Iran due to political policies. As a result, these consoles are often smuggled into the country, and the games are obtained through piracy. However, despite these challenges, game consoles such as Sony's PlayStation 2, Microsoft's Xbox 360, and PS4 have still managed to gain popularity in Iran. Over all PC games tend to be more easily accessible in the country and therefore more popular.

According to Hackimi et al., the first Iranian game studio supported by the government, called Honafa, was established in 1996. Although the company was active for approximately five years and released multiple games like *Tank Hunter* (1996), none of them achieved significant success. Subsequently, various studios made attempts to create new games. For instance, *Quest of Persia: The End of Innocence* (Puya Arts, 2005) was the first 3D game produced in Iran. However, the first game to truly achieve commercial success was *Garshasp* (Fanafzar studio, 2010), an action-adventure hack and slash indie game based on Persian mythology. While Fanafzar's subsequent project, *Garshasp 2*, faced financial issues and failed, the studio continued to produce other games like *Children of Morta* (2019) under the name Studio Dead Mage. A significant development that revolutionized the game industry in Iran was the establishment of Cafebazaar in 2011. Cafebazaar served as a Persian online market for Android apps, providing an opportunity for small studios to thrive by creating low-budget Android games. Hackimi et al. refer to this period as the golden age of mobile games. This progress continued for a while, but in recent years, many game studios and supporting institutions had to close down due to the economic downturn in Iran (Hackimi et al. 2020).

To conclude from Hackimi et al.'s report, it appears that economic problems are one of the most significant challenges faced by Iran's game industry. Consequently, studios that invest in small indie games tend to be more successful compared to big-budget projects. One example of such a small studio is Black Cube Games. Black Cube Games, as stated on their website, initially operated as a game art outsource studio but eventually transitioned into developing their own games. Their most recent and largest project to date is called *The Tale of Bistun* (2022). *TOB* is an action-adventure game with a strong emphasis on storytelling, drawing inspiration from the tragic poem from the 12th Century known as *Khosrow and Shirin*. In an interview for the purpose of this study with Amin Shahidi, the team leader at

Black Cube, it was revealed that *TOB* faced economic challenges, which prompted them to make adjustments to the game design based on their budget constraints. This suggests that the financial aspect played a significant role in shaping the development approach of *TOB*.

5.2. *The Tale of Bistun*

On the craggy slopes of Mount Bistun, a stone carver awakens with no memory of who he is nor how he came to be there. He soon discovers that a blight is squeezing the life out of nature, tainting the local wildlife and turning it hostile. Encouraged by a strange, pleading whisper, the man journeys between the real world and the mysterious place of forgotten memories, known as the Revelations Realm, in search of answers. But a colossal ancient evil is watching, waiting, and is not best pleased that its plans are being disrupted . . . All the while, an omniscient narrator recounts the man's every step and details his innermost thoughts. But who is he? And how does he know so much about the befuddled stone carver? (blackcubegames.com)

TOB is an action-adventure hack and slash game set in ancient Persia. The protagonist of the game is Farhad, a stone carver who awakens near Mt. Bistun²¹ with no recollection of his past. As Farhad embarks on a journey to uncover his true identity and unravel the mysteries of his past, he encounters both allies and adversaries, all while facing a mysterious blight that corrupts the environment. The storyline of *TOB* draws inspiration from the iconic love story of Khosrow and Shirin, which holds great significance in Iranian culture. Matini (1992) explains that the tale of Khosrow and Shirin has emerged during the decline of the Sasanian Empire, with Khosrow Parviz²², a Sasanian king, playing a central role. Various versions of this story were orally transmitted or written in early Islamic-era²³ Iran. The most notable written rendition can be found in the epic poems of *Shahnameh*²⁴, consisting of 122 couplets within the broader narrative of Khosrow's reign. In the 12th century, Nizami Ganjavi expanded upon the story, crafting a more intricate love story between Khosrow and Shirin across 6,500 couplets (Matini, 1992, pp. 518-520). There are numerous versions of the story, particularly in Kurdish, as it holds local significance in the Kurdish region of Iran. Shahidi explains that *TOB* draws its main source of inspiration from Nizami's version of the tale. Therefore, it is fitting to provide a summary of Nizami's story as a contextual backdrop for the game.

In this story, Khosrow, a Persian prince during the late Sasanian period²⁵, falls in love with Shirin, an Armenian princess, before he ascends the throne. The story depicts many ups and downs in Khosrow

²¹ Mt. Bistun, also referred to as Mount Behistun, is a prominent mountain situated within the Zagros Mountains range. It is specifically located in the western part of Iran, in the Kermanshah Province.

²² Khosrow Parviz, also referred to as Khosrow II, was the ruler of Iran from 590 to 628.

²³ The Islamic era commenced in 651 A.D. following the conquest of Iran by the Islamic army.

²⁴ The *Shahnameh*, translated as the Book of Kings, was authored by Ferdowsi between 977 and 1010 CE. This monumental work comprises over 50,000 couplets, making it one of the longest epic poems in the world. The *Shahnameh* provides a comprehensive account of the national history of Greater Iran, spanning from ancient times to the invasion of the Islamic Army. The flow of the *Shahnameh* can be categorized into three distinct sections: mythical, legendary, and historical. The historical section, although not a completely accurate historical record, presents a mythical interpretation of events. It is within this section that the story of Khosrow Parviz is found.

²⁵ From 224 CE to 651 CE

and Shirin's path before they are united. However, the game primarily centers around the portion of the story where Farhad has a crucial role. Shirin travels to Iran in search of Khosrow but is unable to find him, leaving her stranded in a hot and barren area without food or water. To sustain her, her servants have to travel long distances to bring her milk. This is when Farhad, a sculptor and stone carver, is introduced to Shirin as a potential source of help. Shirin meets with Farhad to ask him for help. Upon hearing Shirin's voice, Farhad immediately falls deeply in love with her. At Shirin's request, he constructs a stone canal to transport milk from a faraway farm to her location. This act of devotion catches the attention of Khosrow, who starts to feel threatened by Farhad's love for Shirin. In an attempt to test Farhad's dedication, Khosrow assigns him an impossible task. He tells Farhad that if he can singlehandedly carve a path through Mt. Bistun, he will allow him to marry Shirin. Despite the seemingly impossible challenge, Farhad doesn't hesitate and accepts the task. As Farhad makes progress in carving the path through the mountain, Khosrow becomes increasingly worried about the sculptor's success. In an act of deception, Khosrow sends a false message to Farhad, claiming that Shirin has passed away. Upon receiving this news, Farhad is overcome with sorrow. Unable to verify the information, he loses all sense of purpose in his life and consequently commits suicide.

Before delving into the narrative of the game, it is important to note that there is a constant voiceover by a narrator, providing insights into Farhad's thoughts and revealing information about the game's world. This narration persists from the beginning until the end. The game commences with Farhad awakening beside Mt. Bistun, confused about his presence there, his purpose and his identity. He then follows a hoopoe, later revealed to be Anahita²⁶, a goddess transformed into a bird, in order to find his bearings. The hoopoe guides him towards retrieving his axe from a mysterious stone. Upon removing the axe, Farhad is transported to a mystical realm known as the Revelations Realm. In this realm, he encounters a colossal tree bound by an enigmatic force. By freeing the tree, they are both returned to the real world. The tree introduces itself as All-seed²⁷ and offers to assist Farhad in recovering his memories if he aids in liberating other trees afflicted by a mysterious blight. Consequently, Farhad embarks on a quest to save the trees by defeating creatures and humans also affected by this blight. Each time he returns from an area, All-seed presents him with a pomegranate, which aids in the restoration of his past recollections. Gradually, his memories resurface, closely paralleling Nizami's story, as he remembers Shirin and Khosrow. Due to remembering them, he continues his mission to carve a path into Mt. Bistun. With every progress in the excavation, he is once again transported to the Revelations Realm. Farhad realizes that a *deev*²⁸ named Bistun, after the mountain itself, reigns over this realm and holds key answers to his own past. He eventually confronts and defeats the *deev* in order to gain the desired knowledge. In the game's conclusion, similar to Nizami's story, Farhad receives news of Shirin's death and thus takes

²⁶ According to Muzafarian (2012), the Avesta, a religious book of Zoroastrianism, mentions Anahita as the goddess associated with water and fertility (Muzafarian, 2012).

²⁷ According to Siddiqui (2007), the All-seeds, also referred to as Vispobish (meaning: a cure for everything), is a mythical tree that possesses the seeds of all other plants and possesses the ability to heal all illnesses. It is also said to be the dwelling place of the simurgh, a legendary bird (Siddiqui 2007, 90).

²⁸ According to Rezai (2013), the term "*deev*" (also spelled as "*div*" or "*dev*") can be traced back to the Indo-European word "*deiûn*," which means god. In ancient Iran, it referred to a group of deities that were worshipped during that time. However, Zarathustra, the founder of the Zoroastrian religion, later considered them to be evil and enemies of humanity (Rezai, 2013, 627). As described by Muzafarian (2012), the modern understanding of "*deev*" is that of a fiendish creature with tails and horns (Muzafarian, 2012).

his own life. Upon Farhad's death, he once again traverses into the Revelations Realm. Within this realm, Farhad finally encounters the narrator who has been recounting the story throughout the game, held captive and in chains. Surprisingly, the narrator is none other than Nizami himself. At this juncture, players are presented with a choice: either to initiate Farhad's story cycle anew or to take Nizami's place in chains, allowing him to break free and search for the source of the blight (presumably reserved for a sequel).

The gameplay of *TOB* follows a repeating pattern. Initially, players find themselves in the main area near Mt. Bistun. From there, they can enter a tunnel that is said to lead to a system of Qantas²⁹. Upon emerging from the tunnel, they arrive in a nearby region that has been plagued by the blight. In this infected area, players must defeat enemies who are also affected by the blight. Throughout the game, the protagonist, Farhad, obtains three different weapons, each offering a slightly different combat style. Players have the ability to switch between these weapons at specific checkpoints. Once the enemies have been defeated, players can revive the trees in the area. As all the trees are revived, day turns to night, and players return to the main area. Upon returning to the main area, Farhad eats a pomegranate from All-seeds, which aids in triggering fragments of his past memories. Subsequently, he continues carving his way through Mt. Bistun. Eventually, he is transported to the Revelations Realm, where he uncovers further insights into his own history and the world he inhabits. He comes back to the real world again and the pattern repeats.

5.3. A mythical representation of Iranian past in *The Tale of Bistun*

The setting of the Khosrow and Shirin's story is clearly defined within a specific historical chronotope. The story unfolds during the late 6th to early 7th century in ancient Iran, during the reign of the Sasanian dynasty. Farhad's narrative, in particular, takes place in Kermanshah, near Mt. Bistun. Consequently, the game's art direction draws significant inspiration from this era. As Shahidi explains, the design team embarked on a trip to Kermanshah to immerse themselves in the local environment and gather inspiration. The flora and fauna depicted in the game are derived from the region. The appearance of the characters, their costumes, the architectural designs, and the weaponry all draw from the aesthetics of the Sasanian period (Figure 5.1. and Figure 5.2). A notable example is the character of Farhad, whose visual depiction is based on the appearance of a Kurdish man and visual references from the Sasanian era. His weapons, such as hatchets and axes, are also inspired by historical artifacts from that time. Additionally, the stone carvings in the game draw influence from the prominence of stone carving as a revered art form during the Sasanian period. However, I like to argue that although the game is referencing a real historical chronotope, the game-world itself lacks history.

²⁹ A series of underground tunnels created to direct water from distant mountains toward dried cities in lower altitudes.



Figure 5.1: Architecture and Character design for Bistun Deev from *TOB*'s art book



Figure 5.2: Character and weapon design for Farhad from *TOB*'s art book

As mentioned previously, in video games, the game world is artificially constructed from the ground up. When a player starts the game, the game world is simulated, processed, and rendered in real-time using numerical data and information. Consequently, the game world lacks inherent history. To counter this, game designers strive to create a sense of history and thus reality within the game world, making it appear as though it existed before the player's entry and will persist beyond their presence. In relation to this, I have previously explained that *The Witcher* tries to depict a world that emphasizes signs of death and decay, thereby accentuating the passage of time and history. In contrast, the *FF* series does not attempt to mask its artificial nature. While it incorporates references to various historical chronotopes, its primary focus is not on recreating a specific historical period. Instead, it appears to present a fictional version of the current situation or a distinct world within its own narrative context. *TOB*, on the other hand, diverges from both approaches mentioned earlier. While it is understandable that *TOB* may not adopt the same approaches as *The Witcher* or the *FF* series, there are indeed several features within *TOB* that make the world feel artificial and create a sense of detachment between the player and the game-world.

The world of *TOB* can be categorized into two distinct sections. The first section represents the real world for Farhad, while the second section is known as the Revelations Realm. The Revelations Realm can be described as a hyperspace that is filled with fragmented and lost memories. Within this realm, there are floating platforms that exist in an infinite space. The Revelations Realm appears to symbolize

a realm of abstract ideas and concepts. For Farhad, it serves as a space for self-discovery and self-reflection. An example of this can be seen in the encounter with the Bistun deev, which reflects Farhad's perception and understanding of Mt. Bistun. The battle with the deev represents Farhad's struggle in the real world, encompassing his conflict with the mountain itself. It is only after defeating the deev that Farhad gains a deeper understanding of the truth. In this sense, the Revelations Realm serves as a representation of Farhad's internal struggle and personal journey. The mythical and surreal properties of the Revelations Realm align with its purpose of symbolizing and representing Farhad's inner conflicts and revelations. The otherworldly nature of this realm effectively captures the essence of what it aims to portray within the game.

However, it appears that the principles used to depict the Revelations Realm also unintentionally carry over to the portrayal of the real world within *TOB*. One noticeable aspect is the absence of any signs of life apart from Farhad. There is a distinct lack of NPCs that would typically suggest the presence of a populated civilization within the game world. The few NPCs that do exist are often mythical creatures themselves, adding to the sense of an otherworldly environment. Furthermore, the enemies encountered in the game do not seem to be natural inhabitants of the world. Instead, they emerge from blighted stones, which aligns with the game's central theme but also contributes to their unnatural and unrealistic nature. Some of these features may be attributed to production limitations. Inclusion of additional NPCs can introduce technical complexities. However, it is notable that the game-world of *TOB* appears to exist in a sort of vacuum, unaffected by external elements beyond the ones presented in the story. An example of this can be observed in the stone carvings found on the mountain walls. While these carvings are inspired by real historical sites in Iran, in the game they are exclusively created by Farhad and depict stories related to his personal history. Consequently, while these carvings serve the purpose of advancing the game's narrative, they do not significantly contribute to the overall history or depth of the game-world in a meaningful manner.

Another aspect in *TOB* that make the world seem artificial is the navigation system. In the case of *FF*, I previously mentioned how the combination of various chronotopes can create a sense of artificiality but also adds to the sense of exploration and mystery. This encourages players to engage with the world, as each new location promises novelty. Additionally, players tend to create a mental map of the game-world as they navigate through it, helping them perceive it as a tangible and logically interconnected space. Therefore, the world feels real because it occupies space. In contrast, *TOB* lacks a visible and logical relation between different areas. The majority of the game takes place in a central space near Mt. Bistun, and to access each level or area, players must pass through the same door, which seemingly teleports them to a different location. The absence of a map or clear depiction of how these locations are connected hinders the players' ability to form a comprehensive mental image of the game-world as a whole. It almost gives the impression that, similar to the Revelations Realm, these locations are floating in space without concrete connections. Moreover, the passage of time in *TOB* feels arbitrary and lacks a sense of natural progression. An example of this can be seen in the sudden transition from day to night, which occurs immediately after the player completes a level. This abrupt shift contributes to the artificiality of the game world, as it feels scripted rather than reflective of a realistic day-night cycle.

The world depicted in *TOB* can be considered a realm of gods and legends, aligning with Eco's theory of myth. However, Eco also suggests that relying solely on mythical elements can create a sense of detachment between players and the game. To overcome this, the game should incorporate new and innovative features that add unpredictability and excitement to the world. In the interview with Shahidi, he mentions that *TOB* was better received by non-Iranian critics compared to Iranians. One possible reason for this could be that the Iranian audience is already familiar with the story and the depiction in the game's world design, resulting in a lack of novelty for them. While *TOB* aims to present a Persian identity within the game-world, its reliance on a mythical portrayal of the past creates an artificial world. Although it may appear culturally unique to outsiders, it fails to simulate a time-space that can be accepted as real or associated with a historical past.

5.4. The Mythical character of Farhad

In Shahidi's interview, he describes Farhad as a mythical character with extraordinary physical abilities, driven by his quest but also vulnerable due to his love depicting a mythical hero based on Eco's theory. It is worth noting that this character is based on a figure from a legendary story as well. According to Eco's theory, this can limit the players' ability to identify with such a character. Similar problem was raised when analyzing Geralt from *The Witcher*. However, as discussed earlier, this issue was solved by the double consciousness of play. While Geralt himself was a mythical character with limited room for change, the players were not. As a result, players, as one side of the player-character relationship, needed to invest effort and develop their gaming skills to become as formidable as Geralt. However, this can only be achieved if the game provides an appropriate level of challenge to the players. Juul explains that a good game should promise a challenge to the player. If the game is too easy or too difficult, it may not be enjoyable. While this principle applies to games in general, it also significantly impacts the players' connection to their in-game character. If the game is too difficult, players may feel a lack of control over their character and consequently struggle to identify with them. On the other hand, if the game is too easy, players may perceive their control over the character as inconsequential. In other words, when players have to put in effort to master their character's abilities, they feel a sense of accomplishment and ownership over those skills. This makes their control over the character more meaningful. They identify with the character and perceive it as a true extension of themselves within the game world. However, if the game is too easy, their mastery of the character's abilities may not feel earned, leading to a sense of detachment between the player and the character. Even though *TOB* provides a compelling story for the character Farhad, it is challenging to identify with Farhad as the PC because the game is too easy. The behavior of the enemies is predictable, and there are limited combinations of abilities to use. Limitations such as the inability for players to freely change Farhad's weapon restricts player agency in battles. Additionally, unlike in *FF*, players cannot customize or level-up the character, further limiting opportunities for identification in that aspect. The root of this issue can be traced back to budgetary constraints and a lack of experience in designing robust battle systems. However, it is important to be aware that the difficulty of the game can affect the relationship between the player and the character.

There are also other aspects of the game that can still impact the player's relationship with the character. One such aspect is the presence of a narrator within the game. Employing narration can be a convenient method to convey the story to players. Shahidi also mentions that incorporating narration

was a way to incorporate the structure of Iranian poems into the game. In traditional Iranian poems, it is common for the poet to interrupt the flow of the narrative and interject their own thoughts and perspectives from a metanarrative standpoint. By utilizing narration in the game and revealing that the narrator is Nizami, the writer of the story, the game attempts to reflect this poetic structure. However, the use of narration in games in this manner can also have its challenges. The balance between providing necessary information and maintaining player immersion can be delicate. If the narration becomes excessive or disrupts the player's sense of agency, it may hinder the player's ability to fully identify with the character and the game world.

During the interview, Shahidi mentions that their approach to narration in *TOB* was influenced by games like *Bastion* (Supergiant Games, 2011). In *Bastion*, there is also a narrator who constantly describes the character's actions, reveals information about the world, and provides insights into the character's past. However, there is a crucial distinction in how narration is employed in *Bastion* compared to *TOB*. In *Bastion*, the narration is primarily reactive to the player's actions, rather than guiding them directly. The narrator delivers short statements triggered by the player's actions, commenting on what the player has done. For example, when the player discovers a new weapon, the narrator provides information about the weapon and later comments on its effect once the player uses it. These narrations, although scripted or predetermined, do not impede the player's sense of agency. In fact, they can even enhance it. For instance, if players repeatedly interact with an object or wonder about in the game, even if it doesn't affect the game's progression and is only a random act, the game recognizes it and the narrator comments on it. This makes players feel that their choices in the game have meaningful feedback. The utilization of such narration can significantly impact how players interact with the game world and how they perceive it. If implemented incorrectly, it can reinforce the creator's perspective on the game and limit players' opportunities to create their own meaning during the gameplay process. In *TOB*, the narrations are triggered as the player follows the linear path of the game. These narrations tend to be lengthy and a lot of the times focus on describing Farhad's emotions and thoughts rather than detailing the events of the game. Essentially, rather than allowing players to attribute their own emotions to the character or interpret what the character might be feeling, the game dictates the emotions to them. This becomes particularly significant due to the double-consciousness of play. As the game fails to provide space for the player to become fully immersed in the role of the PC, it becomes challenging to establish a sense of identification with such a character.

It appears that both the game-world and the character of Farhad in *TOB* are portrayed as mythical figures. This portrayal limits the opportunity for players to identify with such a character, particularly for Iranian players who are already familiar with the story of Shirin and Farhad. The character does not offer novelty or excitement by allowing players to modify or customize the character, nor does it provide the opportunity for players to develop their own skills to match the strength of the character. Furthermore, the game seems to hinder the players and the character relationship by using narrations that direct the players' understanding of the game towards the predetermined meaning provided by the game itself. This approach restricts the space for players to create their own meaning and interpretation while playing the game.

5.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I have explored how *The Tale of Bistun* has adapted the story of Farhad and how players may relate to this character within the game based on the approach that I had developed earlier for analyzing *FF* and *The Witcher*. The tale of Khosrow and Shirin, or Shirin and Farhad, is a legendary love triangle that holds significance in Iranian culture. *TOB*'s simulation of this story in a game format offers an intriguing perspective. However, one aspect to consider is the creation of a fully mythical world and character, which may introduce a disconnect between the player and the PC. To gain a better understanding, I have compared *TOB*'s approach with games like *The Witcher* and *Final Fantasy*. *The Witcher* and *TOB* differ significantly in terms of genre and project scale, yet they share several similarities that are important for this research. Both games are based on written stories and aim to reflect their respective cultural backgrounds. While *The Witcher* draws from common tropes in Western cultures and cannot be referred to as a representation of a local culture, it has achieved global popularity with its Polish roots. In a similar manner to *The Witcher*, *TOB* portrays a mythical hero with an idealized Persian identity. This portrayal presents several issues. For instance, it seizes Farhad's Kurdish identity and story, presenting it as Persian on a global scale. Despite these problematic elements, it also provides limited opportunity for players to relate to such a character. Additionally, the game's focus on offering a perfect Persian aesthetic prevents the game-world from feeling real or immersive, because it leaves little room for imperfections that could bring historical depth to the setting. It is important to note that I am not suggesting methods used in *FF* or *The Witcher* are definitive solutions, since they themselves are influenced by consumer culture. Creating a mythical story with consumable elements is a strategy to generate ongoing narratives while incorporating exciting and novel features. Nonetheless, conforming to these global standards can be crucial for a work to gain popularity.

Conclusion

The primary goal of this paper was to create a method for understanding the cultural identity of video games, aiming to explore how games reflect culture and how new and local games can reflect their own cultural context. Game developers, whether consciously or unconsciously, reflect their own cultural background into the games they create. However, once the game is released, they no longer have control over its meaning. It is through players' actions and reactions while playing that the meaning of the game is constructed. This research aimed to analyze the cultural reflections within the game while also considering the player's experience during gameplay. To achieve this, this study aimed to understand the game and its genre through the inseparable relationship of time and space, employing Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of chronotope. According to Bakhtin, genres incorporate repeated patterns of time and space that have become traditional. Therefore, in order to identify and understand the recurring patterns present in the *Final Fantasy* and *The Witcher* game series, Bakhtin's chronotope theory was applied. Once these patterns were discovered, they were further analyzed in the context of theories related to serialized mass media in the postmodern era, to which these games belong. It is important to note that these identified patterns are not absolute and cannot be universally applied to the entire culture they were created in, or even to every other game in their respective genres. Games and their cultural backgrounds do not exist in isolation; they are constantly influenced by other games, cultures, and media.

In addition to examining the games themselves, if we consider other forms of media that have been used to expand the universe and narrative of each game other patterns emerge. The *Final Fantasy* series, for example, has a rich history of exploring other media such as TV series, manga, and animated movies, alongside the games. There are also games like *Dissidia* (2018) or *Kingdom Hearts* (first released in 2002) that bring together characters from multiple games within the series. Similarly, *The Witcher* has expanded across various media platforms, including books, TV series, games, and web series. It is worth noting that unlike *FF*, where all the different media are produced by a single company, *The Witcher* books, games, and web series have been created and produced by different entities. As a result, there are significant differences between what has been represented within each one of them. For example, some of the features I mentioned here, such as the world-building or the portrayal of Geralt as a narrative character, may not apply to the web series. However, despite these differences, they are all linked together under the umbrella of *The Witcher* franchise.

As it was pointed out, *The Witcher* had already gained popularity through TV series and movies in Poland before it was adapted into a game. However, it was the game that pushed the series to global recognition. Interestingly, the game does not simply retell the story from the books, even for audiences who may not be familiar with the source material. Instead, it borrows the characters and world of the books and continues the narrative, employing a method that Eco would describe as a "retake." While discussing the character of Geralt as a PC, I previously mentioned that Geralt himself undergoes minimal change, with the emphasis placed on the player's evolution and growth. Nevertheless, there is a limit to how many stories can be told using this approach. In March 2022, CD Projekt Red announced a new trilogy for *The Witcher* game. At the time of writing this thesis, the game has not yet been released, but

it is known to mark the beginning of a new saga. The creators have made it clear that the new game should not be mistaken as *The Witcher 4*, indicating that while it will likely take place within the same universe, it will feature a new protagonist and a fresh storyline.

In 2019, Netflix released the first season of *The Witcher* series, which initially retold the stories from the books but then introduced significant changes as the narrative progressed. Netflix has also expanded *The Witcher* universe with other series, such as *The Witcher: Blood Origin* (2022) and the animated series *The Witcher: Nightmare of the Wolf* (2021), both of which explore different aspects of the world and lore of *The Witcher*. It's worth noting that Geralt is not the protagonist in these series, as they delve into the stories of new characters from different time periods. Furthermore, the series has dedicated multiple episodes to delving into the origins and inspirations behind the monsters featured in *The Witcher*, known as *The Witcher Bestiary*. Both the game and the series seem to recognize the limitations in the number of stories that can be told solely focusing on Geralt. Instead, they have chosen to keep the world as a constant and pivotal element, allowing for the exploration of new narratives with new characters. While not entirely the same, this approach aligns closely with what Eco refers to as a "saga." Although there may not be a direct genealogical connection between different characters, both the creators of the series and the game have chosen to follow the history of *The Witcher* world rather than solely focusing on a few characters. In this context, the consistent element that remains unchanged is the chronotope of the world. The world of *The Witcher* establishes the patterns and logic within which all the stories are told. As I previously mentioned, *The Witcher* aims to create a coherent world with themes of grimdark neomedievalism. However, it is logical to expect progress in lifestyle, technology, science, and governing systems as time passes. Yet, the world of *The Witcher* seems to be perpetually stuck in a specific chronotope. Despite the passage of time, the world of *The Witcher* maintains its overarching theme. Geralt, the protagonist, has lived for around a century, while other stories like *Nightmare of the Wolf* explore the past when Geralt was just a young child, and *Blood Origin* delves into events that occurred thousands of years before the main storyline. However, the fundamental them of the world remains consistent. Kingdoms rise and fall, cities undergo transformation, but the world of *The Witcher* adheres to similar logics and patterns rooted in historical concepts associated with the Middle Ages.

As mentioned previously, the *FF* series also exhibits various recurring patterns and mechanics that persist across different games. In addition to what has been discussed, there are other patterns that have been repeated multiple times. For instance, Hutchingson (2019) explores the recurring theme of nuclear power and nuclear weapons in her book chapter titled "Nuclear Discourse in *Final Fantasy*." However, while there are recurring elements, the general theme of the game-world changes with each new main entry. I argued that although the series incorporates multiple historical chronotopes simultaneously, it does not align clearly with any specific historical period. Instead, it seems that it portrays an alternative present, blending elements of the past and the future to create a parallel world that reflects contemporary issues. Therefore, changing the game-world with every new main entry allows the series to remain relevant to the current state of affairs. For example, the development of *FFXV* initially began as a sequel to *FFXIII*. However, due to extended development time, it evolved into its own separate entry with its own distinct game-world. It appears that the game-world in *FFXIII* had reached its expiration date, needing a fresh world and narrative to be explored in *FFXV*.

On the other hand, the characters in the *FF* games have been frequently reused in other games developed by Square Enix. While the main series introduces new characters with each installment, these characters often transcend their original worlds and make appearances in spin-offs and other games. A notable example is the *Kingdom Hearts* series, which is a collaboration between Square Enix and Disney Interactive Studios. In this game, characters from both *FF* and Disney can interact with each other in a multiverse that combines elements from both franchises. This characteristic aligns with Azuma's theories, as these games prioritize the characters themselves rather than the overarching narrative or the specific game-world. Moreover, the fusion of universes that would typically clash in terms of art style or storytelling methods results in a surreal game-world, aligning with the earlier discussion on *FF*'s artificiality of the game-world. From a broader standpoint, the approach of *FF* games shares similarities with Clammers' interpretation of simulation in Japan. Simulation is not treated as a serious endeavor but rather as something to be consumed and played with and eventually discarded.

To conclude, contributing every feature of the game series in question to their cultural origin is rather too simplistic. Regarding the Polish origin of *The Witcher* Maikowski explains that characterizing the game as inherently Polish would be an oversimplification and reductionist. The production of CD Projekt Red's game was shaped by an international game development culture that encompasses a fusion of American and Japanese corporate practices (Maikowski, 2018). It is also worth noting that both *FF* and *The Witcher* series are exhibiting signs of changing their approaches. In an era where creators and audiences have easy access to media from various cultures, it becomes challenging not to be influenced by them. For Example, while *The Witcher* games have traditionally focused on simulating a European neomedieval world, the Netflix web series combines elements from multiple cultures and chronotopes to depict its universe. On the other hand, *FF* is gradually shifting its game mechanics towards action RPGs, moving away from the traditional turn-based battle system. Additionally, the game-world of *FFXVI* (2023) adopts a more neomedieval setting, indicating a departure from previous iterations. These changes appear to be driven by a desire for globalization and to appeal to a broader audience. However, despite these changes, certain cultural influences persist within the games, showcasing remnants of their cultural backgrounds.

This research acknowledges that there are several areas directly relevant to the subject that were not explored in depth. For instance, there are RPGs produced in Japan like *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware) that do not align with the description provided for JRPGs in this study. Investigating the reasons behind the significant differences in this game compared to other JRPGs would be an interesting avenue for further exploration. Additionally, many WRPGs allow players to create their own avatars within the game. While the relationship between the player and their avatar has been studied before, understanding this relationship through the method presented in this research would yield unique insights. Furthermore, it is crucial to consider the role of the player in constructing meaning within the game, as emphasized throughout the discussions. The author of this paper has already conducted interviews with players from different cultures, specifically Japanese and Iranian players, to gain a better understanding of their interpretations of the game and to compare these insights with the findings of the analysis. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, these results were not fully explored and included in this thesis. However, this area presents an important avenue for future research.

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