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# Psychological Effect Variations Based on Changes in the Player Character Relation in the *Final Fantasy* Game Series

Homeira Baghbanmoshiri

## 1. Introduction

Games are only possible through players participation and their interaction with the game world. According to Jessica Aldred (2013), these interactions happen through an avatar. She explains that the term avatar often refers to “the user’s representative in an interactive digital space, responding to their inputs via the game or computer interface” (Aldred, 2013). This could include a wide range of entities, from a mouse cursor to customized personas. In the case of JRPGs and in specific the *Final Fantasy* series, the humanlike characters that are controlled by the players are the avatars.

Nicholas Davis Bowman et al. (2006) explain that players tend to form a strong bond with their in-game character as they identify with them due to both the narrative and their active role in the game progression (Bowman et al., 2006: 88). Because of this and the fact that player characters are the instruments that allow players to maintain control in the game, we can see that they have a massive effect on players’ understanding of a game. That is why, in this paper, I will attempt to first break the player character down into its structural components and then investigate the psychological effects of each component. It is important to mention that since there can be many effects, the focus of this research is on those effects that help players enjoy the game and enhance their sense of being connected to the game world.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Games are complicated systems that include many components. This aspect makes it hard to study games without first understanding their structure. In the book *Rules of Play* (2004), Salen and Zimmerman introduce an important framework, which makes it easier to understand the multiple complicated layers that exist in games. *Rules of Play* (2004) is a comprehensive book primarily aimed at game designers and it tries to give an overview on what should be known about games. The framework introduced in this book consists of three main integrated “schemas” (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 94). As this framework can also be applied to an individual game’s smaller components, like the characters, in this paper I will use this framework to analyze player characters. The three main schemas are as follows:

Rules: rules are the most basic and the most important part of every game; they are the distinctive part of the game and create the inner structure (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 95).

Play: the word play here refers to the game play. This schema involves the player’s experience and how the rules are represented. It can be a social experience, narrative experience or a fun experience (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 96).

Culture: while the play schema investigates the direct experience of the player, the cultural schema goes beyond that and studies the game in the social and cultural context that it was created in (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 96).

An important aspect of this framework is that it is layered. The rules schema is at the core and the culture schema is on the outer surface (Figure

1). This means that the inner layers are more concerned with the formal structure of the game while the outer layer is concerned with games relative to their surroundings. But it also means that each schema is built upon the previous one and cannot be separated from it.

Knowing these schemas can help us to understand how a character works in the context of a medium like game. Each of these layers (rules, play and culture) contributes to what the player character simulates and represents. This framework can make it easier to investigate the different psychological effects that characters exert on players. Now that the characters' structure has been established, it is important to examine the specific psychological effects that the characters can have.

Bowman et al. (2006) introduce two different concepts related to how players have fun playing a game: enjoyment and appreciation. Bowman et al. explain that when players have a feeling of autonomy (being able to act freely within the game) and competence (a sense of achievement) they will enjoy the game more. Furthermore, when players feel a sense of relatedness or connection with the player character and their story, they will appreciate the game more and have a more meaningful experience (Bowman et al., 2006: 86). In other words, enjoyment is more associated with the ludic aspect of the game and appreciation with the narrative aspect, but it is important to note that enjoyment and appreciation are not completely independent entities.

Jari Takatalo et al. (2015) have another classification that can also be useful here. They divide the gameplay experience into three parts: presence, involvement and flow. Presence and involvement together create a sense of detachment from the real world and a feeling of entering the game space (being present in the game). Presence itself can be broken down into three main parts: "attention (psychological immersion), perceptual realness (naturalness), and spatial awareness (engagement)," which can be the result of "high-quality graphical interface and an engaging narrative"

(Takatalo et al., 2015: 93). Involvement refers to the players' motivation that keeps them moving toward a certain situation based on the dimensions of importance and interest. They explain, "Importance is dominantly a cognitive dimension concerning the meaning and relevance of the stimulus, whereas interest is composed of emotional and value-related valences" (Takatalo et al., 2015: 95). On the other hand, they explain that the concept of flow is more related to the game mechanics (the ludic aspect) and the player's cognitive understanding of them. The state of flow is the result of a well-balanced challenge against the player's skill (not too hard or too easy) which results in a satisfactory experience. It is also mentioned that "clear goals and instant feedback" are important aspects that result in flow (Takatalo et al., 2015: 96). Again, there is a differentiation between ludic and narrative elements and once more, it must be emphasized that these different effects cannot be completely separated and that they include overlapping aspects.

According to the definitions given above about different psychological effects, we can name some of the elements that this research will focus on when analyzing the player characters in each game. These include the amount of players' freedom, the role of narrative, the type of challenges offered by the game and the realness of the character and the game world (this includes the type of physical interaction, quality of player presentation and type of social interaction). Each of these will emerge in some capacity in different layers of the character's structure. For example, the realness of an individual character can be explained based on how it is leveled up (rules), how it is visually presented (culture) or how it interacts with the world (play). All of this will be further explained in the following sections.

### **3. Introducing the *Final Fantasy* Game Series**

Patrick Holleman (2018) explains that computer RPGs have a very clear point of departure which is the famous tabletop game series *Dungeons &*

*Dragons* (here on after *D&D*) (first game 1974). According to Holleman, *D&D* games were incorporated into computer games based on three important rules: simulated skills<sup>1</sup>, the level-up system<sup>2</sup>, and orthogonal roles<sup>3</sup>. In this process different strategies like simplification<sup>4</sup>, combination<sup>5</sup> and specialization<sup>6</sup> were adopted to create different games (Holleman, 2018: 5- 9). Taking different approaches in different societies resulted in the two branches of western and Japanese RPGs. Of course, it is not possible to generalize all western and Japanese RPGs, but certain mechanics are seen more frequently in one rather than the other. For example, WRPGs are more focused on avatar creation, free exploration with a loose story line and battles that are more fast paced and heavily rely on players immediate reactions. In other words, the games have a large amount of action and flashy gameplay. In JRPGs, on the other hand, there is often slow-paced combat where players can take their time to think about strategies. Players usually coordinate a group of characters (rather than roleplaying as one). They have to invest a lot of time in leveling up (grinding) and learning the characters and enemies' strong points and weaknesses, rather than developing a better and faster eye to hand coordination. In JRPGs the characters and the story are more defined and linear.

The *Final Fantasy* (*FF*) games are one of the most successful series among JRPGs. As will be explained later, the first games in the *FF* series are very similar to other JRPGs of the time, like *Dragon Quest* (1986). But with each game new changes were introduced that brought the game closer to some of its western counterparts. Still, many elements like the visual design and some of the game mechanics that have remained in the games since the beginning make it difficult to consider them as WRPGs. So, analyzing the *FF* series is an important task because it will help to understand why the transition from a classical JRPG to a more western like action RPG has happened.

The first entry in the franchise was released by the struggling Square,

Inc. in 1987, thinking it would be their final game. But it turned out to be a success and this success led to fourteen more entries in the main series and many more sequels and spinoffs (Huber, 2009). Later Square, Inc. merged with Enix (a company that also created RPGs such as *Dragon Quest*) in 2003 and since then it has been known as Square Enix. Each game has its own universe, characters and story line, but they all share certain elements that connect them as a series. Players will take control of a group of player characters (ranging from four to nine characters) to navigate the world and engage in the game story.

The first game in the series that I will consider here is *Final Fantasy I* (1987) to demonstrate how the series started. In following entries, the developers tried to experiment with the game mechanics and establish its universe. In *Final Fantasy V* (1992) mechanics that had been introduced in *Final Fantasy III* (1990) were further refined. *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) was a turning point in terms of game mechanics<sup>7</sup> which also inspired the following games up until *Final Fantasy X* (2001). *FFX* was a first in many aspects. For example, it is the first game in the series to have a fully 3D environment and voice overs for its characters. The analysis in this paper will consider all subsequent games except for *Final Fantasy XI* (2002) and *Final Fantasy XIV* (2010), which are massively multiplayer online RPGs (MMORPG). They will not be mentioned because the study of on-line games is a field on its own. Although comparing them with the other entries would have interesting outcomes, it would require the inclusion of many aspects of online gaming that are beyond the scope of this paper. It is also important to mention that there are many sequels and spinoffs in the series that branch out with their own style. This paper will focus on the main entries and the changes seen in each game:

*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)

#### 4. Rules

To simply explain the rules schema, it is the mathematical structure of a game (and for the purpose of this research a player character). The mathematical structure of a character in *FF* is borrowed from pen and paper RPGs like *D&D* which means that each character is defined by certain numbers called the character statistics or for short character stats. These numbers will affect their performance in-game and especially in battle. For example, in *FFV* there are six stats: Hit Points, Magic Points, Strength, Agility, Stamina and Magic. In *D&D* the primary numbers are random but depending on the characters' race (human, elf, orc, etc.) and class (fighter, magic user, thief, etc.) these numbers have a different growth rate when characters level up.

The character stats represent the mathematically simplified abilities of a real person. But real people have numerous abilities and their growth can be affected by infinite possibilities. That is why the abilities chosen for the heroes and what effects them show what the game values the most and what it tries to convey. For instance, in *Persona 3* (2006, Atlus), another JRPG, the hero is defined by two different sets of stats: battle stats and social stats (including academics, charm and courage). Comparing this simple information with the character stats in *FFV*, we can see that *P3* values social skills more. Although there is not such a drastic contrast in the different versions of *FF*, examining how the rules have changed can help to better understand changes in the player character relation in the series.



In the article “The Character of Difference: Procedurality, Rhetoric, and Roleplaying Games” 2009, Gerald Voorhees divides the *FF* series into three different moments based on how the procedural rhetoric<sup>8</sup> represents the characters’ cultural aspects. He explains that these three moments are not separated by radical breaks but rather evolve into one another. According to Voorhees, the first moment can be best observed in *FFII* and *FFIII*, the second one in *FFVII* and *FFVIII* and the final moment in *FFX* and *FFXII*<sup>9</sup> (Voorhees, 2009).

Voorhees explains that in the first moment the rules are very similar to the original *D&D* and the characters’ stats are affected by their class, or in the terminology of *FF*, their jobs (Voorhees, 2009). In *FFI* for example the players choose between six different jobs<sup>10</sup> which is the only thing that will affect their stats’ growth. Voorhees believes these jobs represent the character’s race, ethnicity or nation in later versions like *FFIV*. But in *FFI*, the only defining factor of the characters is their occupation. Either way the class or job signify a rigid attribute in characters that is inherited and cannot be changed. The player’s freedom is in choosing a combination of four jobs for battle at the beginning of the game (Voorhees, 2009).

Although Voorhees does not mention *FFV*<sup>11</sup> in his article, it can be seen as a passing phase between the two moments he indicates. In *FFV* there are five main characters. The raw character stats for each character are based on their personality and role in the story. For example, Bartz is the protagonist and therefore the strongest. But the job system is rather different. There are in total 22 jobs and each character can freely switch between these jobs at any time<sup>12</sup>. Of course, the characters’ raw stats make them more suitable for certain jobs but the jobs themselves can affect these stats and improve them accordingly<sup>13</sup>. When a specific job is chosen, the characters will gain ABP (ability points) from battle. The ABP will improve that character’s proficiency in the chosen job. Although characters can switch between jobs freely, the best strategy would be to stick to a few and master

them.

Voorhees explains that the second moment can be seen in *FFVII*. In this game the job system is almost completely absent and skills are separated from the character in the form of materia (Voorhees, 2009). Materia are orbs embodying different skills which in other games were previously associated with certain jobs. They can improve separately from the character and can be equipped by any party member. So, a character can have the strongest ability of a black mage and a thief at the same time regardless of their stats. In this sense players are more in control in defining the characters. Voorhees mentions that the game differentiates between the characters through their weapons (and also their limitbreak ability which is not mentioned in the article) (Voorhees, 2009). Although the weapons are inspired by the job system, they mostly represent the characters' personality and history rather than their role in battle.

Voorhees continues to say that the last moment takes this evolution even further. He explains how in *FFX* each character can learn new skills and gain better stats through the sphere grid (Figure 2). All characters are placed on the same grid but near a different set of skills, suggesting a certain job for them. But after a certain point in the game, they can branch out and learn any other skill and develop similar stats to others. In *FFXII* the characters can move toward any job and use any weapon from the very beginning (Voorhees, 2009). *FFXIII* is not included in the article but it has very similar mechanics to *FFX* for leveling up.

I would also like to consider *FFXV* and the remakes of *FFVII* and *FFXII*. *FFXII* International Zodiac Job System was released a year after the original game. At the beginning of this game the players have to choose a job among twelve different ones for each character and stick to that job until the end. In the original game players unlocked new skills and abilities from the license board which was the same for all characters but in the new version each job has its own license board. The characters' level-up

mechanic in *FFVII Remake* (2020) is very similar to the original *FFVII* with a slight change. In this version each weapon has a special ability. If the character masters that weapon, they can keep the ability even if they switch to a new one. The result is that the characters will have a list of abilities tailored specifically for them, growing as the game progresses and setting them further apart from other characters. *FFXV* also follows this pattern. There are four player characters with their own set of skills, weapons and level up grid. Originally the players were only allowed to play as the protagonist, Noctis, but in later versions they are allowed to play as other characters, and are even able to experience a different battle system.

What can be seen here is that in earlier games the characters were rigidly set in core mechanics presenting stereotypical jobs for heroes. Although it might seem that there was a lack of freedom in such a game mechanic and therefore lack of enjoyment, this is not actually true. For example, in *FFI* there are 126 combinations of jobs for players to choose from, so there is enjoyment in the freedom of figuring out the right combination (this challenge can also help with the state of flow). However, the rigid character mechanics actually present a less realistic way for players to interact with each individual character. Also, the narrative was not well defined and the characters were empty vessels without personality. These two aspects indicate less involvement of the players with the characters and less appreciation for them. It could also result in a lack of presence, but as I will discuss later the world navigation compensates for the rigid characters. Later in the series the story becomes more linear, defining a very specific story and characters while the job system becomes more flexible, allowing more freedom for players to affect the characters leading up to *FFXV*.

By including the later instalments in the series in my analysis, I would like to offer an alternative to the pattern observed by Vorhees. He believes that the series abandons the job system as it goes further, but as I have shown above in more recent versions this observation is not true. So, while

Vorhees explains the changes in character mechanics in a linear way, I would like to propose a spiral development where the series goes back to its original mechanics but at a different level. In a game like *FFXV*, unlike earlier games there is a heavy emphasis on the characters' stories but the rigid job system is used again. It is true that this time players are a bit freer in how they want to level up each job, but the problem is that there is no job combination or consistent open world<sup>14</sup> to back up the rigid job system. This means more involvement and appreciation but less enjoyment. There is still realness in these later games but it has a different nature that results in a different kind of presence. The change in realness and presence would be better explained in accordance with the play and culture schema.

## 5. Culture

Culture is the outmost layer in Salen and Zimmerman's framework which means it is the biggest and most diversified schema among the three. It also means that there is always required a bit of cultural perspective in analyzing the schema of rules and play. As this schema can refer to a wide range of subjects, what I will consider under the heading of culture here is better defined as the cultural representation of the rules schema in the characters' appearance and costumes. The changes in appearance follow similar patterns to what has been discussed in the previous section. This is why I choose to attend to it immediately after the rule schema rather than after the play schema where it is actually located.

Thomas Makryniotis, in the article "Fashion and Costume Design in Electronic Entertainment—Bridging the Gap between Character and Fashion Design" (2018), brings attention to the importance of fashion and style in video games. He mentions that since characters are the embodiment and physical representatives of the players in the game world, they can raise issues of "class, gender, occupational role and body type" (Makryniotis, 2018: 3). He goes on to introduce three dimensions for digital fashion: the

programmatic, the visual and the social (Makryniotis, 2018: 5).

Makryniotis explains that the programmatic aspect refers to how the appearance of a character is affected by, or serves the game mechanic. For example, when the player changes a character's weapon the appearance of it will change accordingly in battle to represent the difference in power. Although this section is about the visual appearance in general, when Makryniotis uses the term "visual dimension" he is referring to the "traditional semiotic interpretation" (as opposed to the ludic viewpoint of the "programmatic dimension"). Finally, the social perspective is concerned with how these signs affect the social relation of the player to other players in an online game (Makryniotis, 2018: 5). Although it is not mentioned in the article fashion could represent the character's status in the social construct of the game's fictional world. These three dimensions will be the basis of the analysis in this section.

### **5.1. Costumes in the *Final Fantasy* series**

Before going into details, it is necessary to introduce two of the most important character designers in Square Enix, Yoshitaka Amano and Tetsuya Nomura. Yoshitaka Amano is the character designer for the first six entries. As he mentions in one of his interviews, he was interested in western fantasy and illustrating knights. His art style is influenced by many western artists like Gustave Moreau, Mucha and Da Vinci (Archipel, 2020). A YouTube channel named Polygon which has several interviews with *Final Fantasy* creators, including Yoshitaka Amano, explains that his style is influenced by Japanese ukiyo-e as well as the Art Nouveau movement (Polygon, 2019). The combination of western and Japanese styles results in a romantic medieval character design with a lot of extra elaborate details. Tetsuya Nomura on the other hand is heavily influenced by Japanese streetwear style. Nomura started designing characters for the series with *FFVII* and continued to do so for most later entries in addition to Square

Enix's other games. Polygon mentions that elements of different fashion styles like hip-hop, punk and pop as well as the influence of many famous Japanese fashion designers can be seen in his work (Polygon, 2019).

In *FFI*, as was discussed in relation to the rules schema, the game solely focuses on the characters' jobs. So, the visuals are also devoted to the programmatic purposes. Each character's job is indicated by its attire and midway through the game when characters level up into a higher job class their body shape also changes into a more muscular one. This game also set the standard for each job's appearance that was then the same for many games to come. But in *FFV* there is a rift between the character's job's outfit and their appearance as a story character. During battles characters are in an outfit that clarifies their job, but at other times they have a different costume that represents their personality or their social class. For example, Bartz's general look represents a traveler and Feris's a pirate.

As mentioned above, in *FFVII*, characters equip materia as a source for their abilities but their weapons and physical attacks are personalized. The character's appearance is highly affected by their physical attack style which also represents a lot of the character's history. In other words, the programmatic and visual dimensions complement each other. For example, Cloud's costume both refers to his history as being a part of SOLDIER and to his fighting style as a warrior.

From the perspective of rules, characters in *FFX* and *FFXII* can level up towards any job that the player prefers. So, their appearance has a lot less to do with the programmatic aspect and a lot more to do with their social status even if it refers to an actual job class in the game. For instance, In *FFX*, Lulu's appearance was inspired by the traditional obeah voodoo priestess. Although her appearance refers to a black mage job, the cultural references are far more powerful (Figure 3). One notable change for *FFXII* is in the golden pose<sup>15</sup> of the protagonist. Previously protagonists were shown holding a sword which emphasized their fighting style, but in

Vaan's case he is depicted with no weapon at all. Other characters' golden poses do include a weapon but once again it represents their social statuses rather than what they might actually use in battle. In later games, especially in *FFXV*, there is almost no sign in the costume pointing to the character's job or fighting style (except for their weapons) and it only refers to their social class. For example, in *FFXIII* Fang's and Vanille's outfits show that they are from a different planet from the rest of the characters. Also, the black costumes of the main party in *FFXV* are a sign of their association with the Lucis royal family.

It can be seen that through time, the *FF* series has moved from programmatic simulation to social representation. This is of course because the role of the story in general becomes more important in later games. First the outfits were only influenced by the characters' jobs and the general medieval theme of the game. But slowly as the game's story and therefore the characters' personalities became more elaborate, the programmatic side became separated from the visual and social aspects. The programmatic effect on the design in recent versions does not completely disappear but it is overshadowed by other elements.

This change indicates a transition between two kinds of presence. It means that in later games where the characters are more connected to the game world through their history and future which is entangled with the game's lore, their appearance also supports this change. This helps the players to feel that they are part of the game world as well. In earlier versions presence was more based on how the world worked mechanically. That is to say, it helped the players to sense and see the mechanics visually. This change in the visual presentation of the characters is not something that only effects the cultural schema, nor it is only influenced by the rules schema. In the next section other aspects of the game's user interface will be discussed as part of the play schema.

## 6. Play

As mentioned above, in this section I will investigate the gameplay and player experience in terms of how they are connected with the rules and culture schemas. Calvillo-Gómez et al., in the article “Assessing the Core Elements of the Gaming Experience” (2010), describe experience in the following way: “Experience is both the process and outcome of the interaction of a user with the environment at a given time” (Calvillo-Gómez et al., 2010: 40). The type of interaction in a game can depend a lot on the game genre. For an RPG this could include a range of objects and actions from the graphic used in the main menu to the actions performed in battle. But since here our focus is on the player characters, I will consider how the process of players controlling the characters relates to certain psychological aspects.

In the same article it is suggested that the player’s interaction with a game can be explained by the concept of puppetry. Puppetry includes three elements named control, ownership and facilitators. The authors of the article continue to argue that control can also be broken into six components: point of view (POV), controllers, small actions, memory, something to do (S2D) and goal. Players see the game world in a certain way (first person, third person, etc.) which is called the POV, then they use physical controllers (keyboard, mouse, console controllers, etc.) to perform small actions (moving left and right, jumping, etc.). For this to happen they have to memorize the corresponding buttons with small actions. Then the game will offer them S2D (defeating enemies, exploring the world, etc.) in order to reach the goal (progress the story, win the game, etc.). Once players master the control and get the proper response from the game, they have made the game their own and reached the level of ownership. It is important for players to attain ownership in order to enjoy a game, but in some cases, it will take players significant time to gain full control. In these scenarios the game can offer the players with some facilitators like beautiful



imagery or stimulating music to keep them interested until they manage to control the game (Calvillo-Gómez et al., 2010: 47-49). This structure shows how game mechanics offer interactivity to the player, but players also experience a psychological interaction with the game that needs to be defined.

There have been many studies and categorizations regarding the psychological interaction of a player with a game<sup>16</sup>, but in this paper I will refer to the tailored classification for player characters introduced by Katherine Isbister in the book *Better Game Characters by Design* (2006). In the book Isbister introduces four layers of 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” 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 non-player characters (NPCs). Finally, fantasy affordances refer to players' understanding of the character's role in the story and the fictional world (Isbister, 2006: 203-206). Now that we have established a mechanical and psychological framework from which to analyze the player character, it is time to see how *Final Fantasy* has changed since the first game.

### 6.1. The Player Experience in *Final Fantasy*

In general, the player character interaction in the *FF* games can be divided into two major sections of gameplay: navigation and battles. In most cases,

there is a very clear transition between the two. The navigation includes the players controlling one of the party members (usually the protagonist) from the third person POV to explore the world map, dungeons and cities. Although players can only walk when in a city or a dungeon, they can use different means of transportation (chocobos, ships and airships, etc.) in the world map which can lead to different perceptions of the game space but this subject is beyond this article's scope<sup>17</sup>. The changes seen in each section will be explained separately below.

### 6.1.1. Navigation

The world navigation's basic mechanics did not change much until the most recent few entries. There is a third person POV and the small actions used are walking, talking to people, and interacting with certain objects. In earlier versions like *FFI* and *FFV*, compared to more recent entries the graphics are not photorealistic but they are convincing enough for their time to give a sense of natural realness. Nevertheless, what the game lacks in graphics is compensated by players' freedom in navigating the vast open world of the game. Navigation around the world was a huge part of the earlier gameplay. Players do have access to the world map and their location on this map, but figuring out where to go or how to get there is another matter. For example, *FFI* does not have cut scenes, clear explanation or objective indicators on the map, but rather players need to travel from city to city and talk to NPCs in order to learn about the lore of the fictional world, where to go next and how to progress through the game. There is a sense of presence in the game but it is not because what the players see is real but rather because their cognitive interaction with the world is real. There is no storyteller to engineer players' experience, rather they can run around and find the story through social interactions at their own pace.

Later in the series, the story becomes more linear and there is less room for free navigation in an open world, a change which is also accompanied

by a more realistic graphical presentation<sup>18</sup>. Logically as technology has advanced the visual naturalness of any game in general has also increased. But this is specifically pointed out here because the *FF* series' emphasis on realistic modeling of the world is not shared with other JRPGs and is closer to western equivalents.<sup>19</sup> In the *FF* series' more recent games like *FFX* and *FFXIII* the game enters a three-dimensional realistic environment. On the other hand, in the first half of both games, the players do not have access to an open world environment at all (in other words they don't interact with the world in a realistic manner). This can result in two outcomes: firstly, there is an increase in appreciation and connection to the characters, and secondly, the sense of presence changes from a cognitive understanding to a visual realness. To put it differently, the fantasy lore of the game that was previously conveyed through navigation and interaction with the game world is later represented by visual aspects and the narrative.

Lastly, in *FFXV*, in the first half of the game players are part of an open world that features both a realistic look and realistic interaction but on a different level. Before, players' interaction with the world involved navigating, discovering new fantastical things and socializing with its inhabitants<sup>20</sup>. Although the aspect of navigation is partly present in *FFXV* as well, the realness is more visceral. Now the players can sprint, jump, climb or warp<sup>21</sup> while navigating the ups and downs of the map, though before they could only walk around and would often be stopped by invisible walls.

### 6.1.2. Battles

One of the *FF* series' innovations was changing the first-person POV in battle to third-person. Previously in RPGs, even if the world navigation was presented in third-person POV, when entering a battle, it would switch to a first-person POV, showing only the enemy. This presentation would give a sense of roleplaying. But in *FFI* the four members of the party are

shown in a lineup which not only affected the battle strategy but also added to the fantasy immersion (Figure 4), because now players could see the characters in action as they attacked the enemy with different weapons or cast an epic spell. In *FFI*, according to Hiroyuki Ito, the designer of the battle system, the mechanics draw from different sports, especially football as the opposing parties line up in front of each other according to each member's role and the player's strategy (1Up, 2010). The small actions in battle are similar to those in other RPGs at the time and are listed in a menu for the players to choose from. These includes "Fight" (attack with the weapon in hand), "Magic" (cast a spell), "Drink" (use a potion), "Item" (use an item) and "Run" (escape from battle). The subcategories of these actions and their effects highly depends on the character's job and level. Players can take their time to plan a strategy and choose an action for each character manually. From here on after the series tried to aim for a more realistic visceral experience.

In *FFV* the players can see a bar for each character that fills up as time passes as part of the Active Time Battle system (ATB), which only allows characters to perform an action when the bar is full. Ito mentions that this system was used to simulate a somewhat real battle without any of "the hardcore reflex action elements" which would break the RPG genre's rules and alienate players (1Up, 2010). Later in *FFVII*, one important change was the graphical difference between the navigation and the battle mode. While walking around, players control a small blocky character with a big head that is good for showing emotions, but when going into battle the character's proportions change. Since the characters in battle have closer anatomy to a normal human, they can show body postures that better represent the elaborate attack animations and add to the fantasy.

*FFX* is rather an exception. Although this is the first game in the series to both have a 3D environment and character voice over, the battle system disposed of the ATB gauge, making it more similar to the earlier games.

But *FFXII* takes one more step toward a more realistic experience with its Active Dimension Battle system. While in previous games the enemy encounters happened at random, in this version players can see the enemies roaming around and getting close to one can cause a battle to begin. The important difference is that there is no transition from the navigation mode to the battle mode. The characters immediately switch to the battle mode and they can still walk freely. Since the players were controlling only one character while navigating, they continue to do so in battle as well. For the other party members, players can either choose their actions manually or put them in automatic mode.

In *FFXIII* there is one big ATB gauge, divided into smaller portions. One or more portions can be used to perform an action. The idea was to link multiple actions together and create a fast and exciting performance to keep up with other fast-paced game genres. This idea is more fully realized in *FFXV*. *FFXV*'s battle system is called Active X Battle, and because of it the game can be considered to be an Action RPG. The players seamlessly switch into battle when getting close to an enemy. They still give some commands like using an item through a menu but mostly the game requires fast reflexive actions. Players can also incorporate elements of the environment into battles. Originally, players could only control the protagonist Noctis and give a very limited set of commands to other members, but in later upgrades to the game, other characters became playable as well, although in either case players are in control of only one character rather than the whole party.

In older games of the series, the one-on-one relation between the *controllers* and the *small actions* were fairly easy to memorize, so the challenge was for players to have a better cognitive understanding of how the internal mechanics of the game worked. This approach created puzzle-like battles that reenforced enjoyment and flow. At the same time because it required players to have lots of information about the world, it caused spatial

awareness and therefore there was presence through engagement. However, in recent entries, including *FFVII* Remake, the battles become more fast paced and require faster reactions. This means that players not only should memorize the relation between the controllers and small actions but must internalize it so they can react unconsciously, resulting in a more visceral experience. The visceral experience requires attention that causes yet another form of presence in the game world. This could be an attempt to keep up with other fast-paced genres and also to appeal to a wider audience. Again, like the series' approach to visual presentation, the action and visceral interaction is closer to W RPGs.<sup>22</sup> As discussed above, in the older *FF* entries the players give a command one by one to each party member. The idea was for players to have ownership over a group of heroes. But in later entries from *FFXII* onward, players would focus on one member while the others act automatically. This could result in better relatedness (and therefore appreciation and investment) to one character rather than a god-like overview of the whole party.

		FFI	FFV	FFVII	FFX	FFXII	FFXIII	FFXV
Rules		PCs <sup>23</sup> 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
Play	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
Culture		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 1: Each of the FF games' properties in terms of the rules, play and culture schemas

## 7. Conclusion

RPGs are fantastical universes that allow a normal human to step into a magical story. Edward James (2012) explains that one of J. R. R. Tolkien's greatest achievements was that he "normalized the idea of a secondary world" (James, 2012: 65). So, RPGs present a chance for players to inhabit these secondary worlds as heroes. The aim of this paper was to investigate the means offered by the *FF* series for players to interact with this world through the heroes. The inner structure, capabilities and visual appearance of these heroes affect what players feel about the game space at every moment. So, each game in the *FF* series was analyzed based on different structural layers to examine how the balance between enjoyment and appreciation, involvement and flow or different kinds of presence in the games have changed.

In *FFI* the player characters were just tools for players to enter the game world and the stereotypical hero's journey was an excuse to explore the fantastical world, discover its hidden secrets and encounter mythical creatures. This game mechanic encouraged enjoyment, flow and presence through freedom, attention and spatial awareness. But this was not enough because players needed to feel relatedness or they would not have appreciation for the game. They need to belong to the fantastic world. This sense of relatedness cannot be achieved without a story and character arc. According to Bowman et al. (2006), players feel responsible for their characters when they are connected to them (Bowman et al., 2006). When they feel responsible, they feel the importance of their mission and therefore get involved. According to Takatalo et al. (2015), when there is presence, involvement and flow at the same time, there is true sense of immersion in the game world (Takatalo et al., 2015).

That is why the series has progressed to have more elaborate stories. But at a certain point the series began to sacrifice game mechanics for narrative. After trying a few different game mechanics in *FFX* and *FFXII*, the



series moved toward a more visually active type of gameplay. The term visually active is used because action games still present the players with enough freedom to have stimulating gameplay. But this is not true for the *FF* series' recent games. For example, in *FFXV*, one of the most recent entries in the series, players' choices have become limited compared to previous games. Characters' classes are predetermined, and players cannot change the party combination like in *FFI*. In *FFXV* the priority is given to cinematography rather than gameplay. The game does offer a novel game mechanic for players to master but there are times that players' mastery doesn't affect the game's progression. For example, there is an epic battle between the protagonist, Noctis, and god of the sea, Leviathan. In this section rather than having a strategically difficult battle, the game focuses on a cinematic presentation where it is impossible to lose. All of these aspects point to limited freedom. Players do not feel autonomy, competence or achievement because they have played only a limited role in winning the battles and progressing through the story. And as a result, there is less enjoyment and flow.

To sum up the changes in the series, it could be said that the series starts with enjoyment and flow through world navigation. In later entries there is a switch to another form of enjoyment that is caused by freedom in developing and leveling up the characters. This is accompanied by appreciation and involvement since there is more lore to discover about the world and each character. But at a certain point the game is more concerned with telling a story<sup>24</sup> than providing a challenge. There is always a kind of presence in the game but the nature of it changes with the gameplay and visual presentation. At first engagement in learning about the world is what causes presence (cognitive interaction with the character and spatial awareness) but later it is the visceral interaction and the photorealistic presentation of both the world and the character that result in a feeling of presence.

## Future Research

In this paper I attempted to indicate different patterns that reside in the character evolution of the *Final Fantasy* game series but there is still much to be discovered. The narrative structure of these games is also of great importance as it defines the character arcs. It is only then that the actual relation between the games, players and characters can be fully discovered. On the other hand, the way the *FF* series has transformed over time is very different to the way other JRPGs or even WRPGs have developed. Finally, the examination in this paper is from a theoretical point of view and it would be worthwhile to consider its findings alongside data collected from players to see how they actually connect with these games.

## Figures

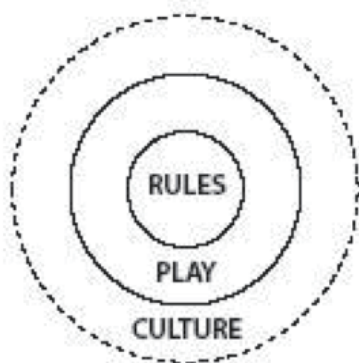


Figure 1: Primary schemas of games, (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 94)

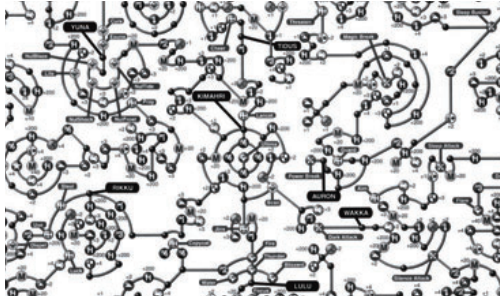


Figure 2: FF X, the sphere grid



Figure 3: FFX, Lulu's appearance was inspired by the traditional obeah voodoo priestess (Fandom, 2021)

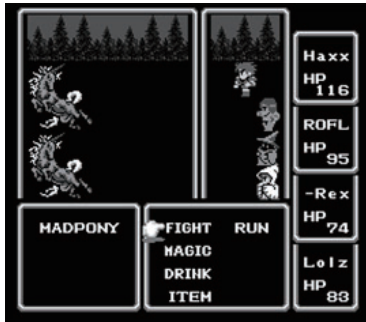


Figure 4: Battle mode, left: FF I, right: DQ III (1988)

## Notes

- 1 A simulated skill in the concept of *D&D* is “any skill that belongs entirely to a character in a game, rather than to the player who controls the character”. In order to be used the player has to role a dice and the *Dungeon Master* (the administrator of the game) assess the situation and the player’s character abilities and gives a result (Holleman, 2018: 3). In a computer game this process is done by the games program.
- 2 Players can enhance their skills and abilities by achieving different goals and accumulating points.
- 3 Holleman explains that in older war games players assumed the role of a military commanders, facing off against each other and leading their army into victory. But later a game designer named Dave Arneson added extra characters that were “driven by their personal (narrative-driven) imperatives which are more dramatic than practical.” This resulted in the role-playing aspect of *D&D* and RPGs (Holleman, 2018: 4, 5).
- 4 Simplifying the rules of *D&D* games into computer programing in games like *Ultima* (1981) or *Wizardry* (1980).
- 5 Combining two or more different genres like action RPG or first-person shooter (FPS) RPG in games like *Dark Souls* (2011) and *Fallout 3* (2008).
- 6 Emphasizing certain aspects rather than others. For example, a game named *Rogue* (1980) mostly revolves around dungeon exploration rather than role-play and story, which resulted in the roguelike game genre.
- 7 As I will explain in later sections, it was the first in the series without the job system established in previous games.
- 8 Referring to how rules can convey meaning through a procedure.
- 9 At the time of publication *FFXIII* and *FFXV* had not yet been released.
- 10 Warrior, Monk, Thief, White Mage, Black Mage and Red Mage
- 11 *FFV*’s job system is an evolved version of the job system in *FFIII*.
- 12 Not during the battle.
- 13 For example, different types of mage jobs will add a certain number to the magic stat.
- 14 Refer to 6.1.1. Navigation.
- 15 Either a rendered or drawn pose of the character that is usually used for advertising purpos-

es.

16 In the article "Understanding Presence, Involvement, and Flow in Digital Games" (2010), Jari Takatalo et al. gather a list of possible elements that can come into consideration from different categorizations from researchers: skill and competence; challenge; emotions; control, autonomy and freedom; focus and concentration; physical presence; involvement, meaning and curiosity; story, drama and fantasy; social interaction; and interactivity, controls and usability (Takatalo et al., 2010: 94).

17 For further reading refer to: Huber, W.H., 2009, "Epic spatialities: the production of space in Final Fantasy games", Third person: Authoring and exploring vast narratives, pp.373-384.

18 With the exception of *FFIX* (2000).

19 For example, in series like *Dragon Quest* (Square Enix), *Persona* (Atlus), *Tales* (Bandai Namco), *Pokémon* (Nintendo) and *Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo), the world and the characters maintain a cartoonish and anime like aesthetic even in the latest games.

20 The socialization is very limited of course compared to the interaction players can have in more recent WRPGs with the AIs.

21 Players can throw their weapon and teleport to the weapon's location.

22 However, we can see that in other JRPGs like *Persona 5* (2016, Atlus) a completely different approach has been taken. The game mechanic in *P5* is very similar to a traditional turned base RPG but the dynamic graphic design, camera movements and fast paced animations accompanying skill performances keep the game action moving.

23 Player character.

24 Although the focus of the game is on the storytelling, the quality of the story is still another matter that needs to be discussed on its own.

## Resources

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