"You Need Love and Friendship For This Mission!": *Final Fantasy VI, VII* and *VIII* in generic and social context

Ben Hourigan

Department of English with Cultural Studies

The University of Melbourne

`mail@benhourigan.com`

10 September 2004

Contents

The Discourse of Videogames as Social Pathogens

For most of videogames' public history,[1] discourse about them has been marked by bouts of civil and governmental anxiety concerning their supposed ability to induce psychologically and socially pathological behavior. Some claims that the early coin-operated videogame industry was linked, however tenuously, to organized crime, have bases in fact (Kent 75-7). Yet some popular and academic commentators have attributed a mysterious, corrupting power to videogames, often oblivious to the actual details of

---

[1] I take this to begin in 1971, when Nutting Associates began shipping Nolan Bushnell's *Computer Space*, the first arcade videogame (Kent xii).

their form and content and of their cultural contexts (see Squire). Where characterizations of videogames as social pathogens hinge on reference to actual instances of violent behavior allegedly inspired by specific games, they are frequently accompanied by unwarranted generalizations about the medium as a whole. Such generalizations have gone on to shape serious academic discussion of videogames. This essay offers a generically situated and socially contextualized analysis of three games from the *Final Fantasy* series, to highlight the diversity and specificity of individual games. These games demonstrate that videogames can exhibit a critical relationship to perceived social conditions, posing positive models of social behavior against the specter of social disintegration.

Anxiety over the pathogenic quality of videogames usually surfaces first in popular news media, associated with a particular instance of violent or antisocial behavior. This is typically followed by responses by videogame review magazines that rely on game advertising for revenue, which often argue that non-specialist commentators, censors and legislators unfairly discriminate against videogames because they are a new and unfamiliar medium. Game journalists simultaneously level the serious, and accurate, accusation that game demonizers are not adequately familiar with the games they attack.

The most striking instances of the discourse of videogames as social pathogens have occurred in Japan and the United States, the world's two largest national markets, and homes to a large portion of its videogame developers. In the US, discourse representing videogames as causes of violence and social disturbance reached its peak of intensity and popularity following the Littleton Massacre of 20 April 1999.[2] Prominent proponents of this discourse were called to appear at hearings "that investigated the marketing of violence to children," (Kent 545) chaired by Senator Sam Brownback (Republican of Kansas) and beginning on 4 May 1999.

Legislators and the public had reason to be concerned. The Littleton killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, had made a videotape of themselves before the massacre, talking about their plans with reference to the videogame *Doom* (Green et al.).[3] Months later, a journalist described the tape's contents:

> Eric Harris settles into his chair with a bottle of Jack Daniels
> and a sawed-off shotgun in his lap

---

[2]In which Eric Harris (18) and Dylan Klebold (17), students at Columbine High School, Colorado, attacked their fellow students with two twelve-gauge shotguns, a 9mm pistol, a 9mm carbine, and homemade pipe-bombs. (Sullum n.p.) Twelve students and one teacher were killed, and twenty-three more students were injured, before Harris and Klebold killed themselves.

[3]*Doom* belongs to the ludic genre of the 'First-Person Shooter' (FPS). In games of this genre, the player navigates a three-dimensional environment, viewed from a first-person perspective, killing enemies with weapons acquired in the course of exploration.

> "I hope we kill 250 of you," Klebold says"after the bombs are
> setI can't wait. I'll be shaking like a leaf."
>
> "It's going to be like fucking *Doom*," Harris says. "Tick, tick,
> tick, tickHaa! That fucking shotgun is straight out of *Doom*."
> (Gibbs & Roche).[4]

As the 1999 Senate hearing began, that evidence had not yet come to light. Yet the carnage seemed to speak for itself. Reverend Charles J. Chaput, Archbishop of Denver, Colorado, was able to make the following comment, representative of witnesses' concerns:

> The roots of violence in our culture are much more complicated than just bad rock lyrics or brutal screenplaysBut common sense tells us that the violence of our music, our videogames, our films, and our television has to go somewhere. And it goes straight into the hearts of our children, to bear fruit in ways we cannot imagine until something like Littleton happens. (qtd in Kent 548)

Senator Brownback appealed to "studies showing a correlation between playingviolent videogames and violent behavior" (Kent 547) for scientific support. Fitting this description, a recent report by Thomas N. Robinson, et al. following a psychological methodology, concludes: "intervention to reduce television, videotape and videogame use decreases aggressive behavior in elementary schoolchildren." (n.p.) Much like Chaput at the 1999 Senate hearing, the study fails to distinguish between media, as well as between videogame genres or individual games. While symptomatic of persisting general anxieties about the effects of mass-media consumption, its data and conclusions are of questionable accuracy and value.

In the humanities, the discourse of videogames as social pathogens is exemplified by *Video Kids* by Eugene Provenzo, Jr. In *Video Kids*, Provenzo recognizes that games "represent very specific social and symbolic constructsinstruments of cultural transmission," (75) and engages in superficial textual analysis of some games. Despite this, he concludes his study with the following prescription: "we need to eliminate the violence, destruction, xenophobia, racism, and sexism that are so much a part of the world of Nintendo."[5] (140). His observation of these elements is valid, but the prescription he makes are based on a an incomplete understanding of game genres, a blinkered idea of how "the world of Nintendo [or videogames]" relates to their social context, and a lack of knowledge of the cultural origins of some videogames.

---

[4]Non-essential descriptive elements of this account of the video have been removed.

[5]Nintendo, at this stage, occupied such a dominant position in the US videogame market that the brand name was also synonymous with videogames generally (see Sheff).

The Videogame World as Novum

The discourse of videogames as social pathogens appears to be based on an idea that a one way relationship exists between videogames and their social context. While it claims that violence in videogames may cause increased incidences of violent behavior in society, it refuses to admit that videogame violence may also reflect a violent social reality. The above quotations from Chaput and Provenzo treat elements of videogames seen as violent or objectionable as aberrations confined to videogames' interior, virtual spaces, from which they radiate harmful influence on individuals and society.

The non-naturalistic settings and altered world-physics of many videogames could have partially inspired this refusal. Equally, though, non-naturalistic settings could have prompted commentators to question the likelihood of translating in-game actions to real-world behaviors. The fact that this line of argument has not been popular suggests an ideological motivation: of scapegoating a new medium to protect the status quo from criticism. Employing the concept of the novum as it is adapted by Darko Suvin from the work of Ernst Bloch can demonstrate an alternative way in which these non-naturalistic settings might be read.

In his seminal book, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction,* Suvin describes the novum as:

> a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm of realityin the sense that it entails a change of the whole universe of the tale, or at least of crucially important aspects thereof (and that it is therefore a means by which the whole can be analytically grasped). (64)[6]

A novum of this sort is the basis of many videogames, in the sense that they present, as a simulation of activities imaginable in the empirical world, a nevertheless new rule-bound dynamic system that determines the character of the videogame as a unique type of cultural product. Representational elements of videogames, such as graphics, written text and digitized speech, when utilized in particular ways, can also contribute to the appearance of a more science-fiction-like novum-as-alternate-reality.

According to Suvin, the novum always refers to the empirical world of its creator by way of its difference from it. This is particularly so in the best utopian and science fiction, where, explicitly or implicitly, the novum functions as a "yardstick for comparison" (53) against the realities of the author's historical period. This best usage of the novum should result in what Suvin calls "cognitive estrangement" (12). This, an extension of Brecht's *Verfremdung* (6-7) is how, through the novum, the audience comes to view their

---

[6]See all of (Suvin, *Metamorphoses* 63-84) for a comprehensive discussion of the constitutive role of the novum in science fiction.

historical circumstances with a newly critical awareness based on modern rationality. In any case, it should be nearly or actually impossible for anyone to imagine something not based in experience (see 68).

Whether games like *Doom* intend to produce cognitive estrangement in their players is questionable. At the 1999 Senate hearings, retired Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman claimed, albeit inaccurately: "Doom is being marketed and has been licensed to the United States Marine Corps. The Marine Corps is using it as an excellent tactical training device," and asked "How can the same device be provided indiscriminately to children over the internet?" (qtd in Kent 551). His testimony draws explicit linkages between videogame violence and US military activity. FPSs like *Doom* exhibit a relationship to US militarism and firearm ownership, uncritically reflecting a particular segment of US culture that presents violence and war (even as pop-kitsch) as duty (to nation or to self, in self-defense), spectacle, and/or entertainment. This is not to say that players cannot develop an estranged attitude towards violence and war in the process of playing *Doom*, merely that dominant readings, particularly those of official military culture, do not favour this.

Videogame demonization of the sort engaged in by Chaput, Grossman, and Provenzo sequesters aberration in a game world in order to deny its inherence in contemporary realities. Rather than being a springboard for increased critical awareness, the unacknowledged presence of the novum in videogames has often been an excuse for critics to deny the origin of objectionable elements of that novum in the empirical world. The outcry against violence in videogames following the Littleton massacre may be seen as a refusal of some sections of US society to acknowledge that violence is one of its social products. The relatively uncritical use made of the novum by videogames like *Doom* facilitates this refusal.

In contrast, as we will see, some games in the *Final Fantasy* series make use of the novum and its potential for (not necessarily cognitive) estrangement that appears calculated to produce a critical awareness of the status quo. This is evident in their response to contemporary concerns about anti-social behavior in Japanese youth.

Some Comments on Genre in Videogames

In a moment of perspicacity that is rare for writers on videogames in the popular press, an anonymous reporter for *Time* characterized "splatter games like *Doom* and *Quake*" not as representative of videogames generally, but as a "significant fraction of a total revenue stream." (*A Room Full of Doom* 65) Wider failures to make such clear distinctions are behind anxieties about the pathogenic quality of videogames in general. Distinguishing games like *Doom* from videogames as a whole could diminish the popular and institu-

tional ascription of socially pathogenic qualities to videogames.

The videogame review press has employed a relatively clear set of generic distinctions in its analysis of videogames since at least the early 1980s. A properly detailed delineation and description of these distinctions, and of the exact qualities that justify videogames' generic groupings, is not possible here. Readers unfamiliar with these distinctions are directed to any current game review magazine for examples of the application of common generic distinctions. It should be acknowledged that game genres can be extensively hybridized, and that it remains possible for games to be produced that do not fit comfortably into any one established genre. Within the context of existing generic distinctions, it is possible to discern the fractional character of both the FPS, on which the discourse of videogames as social pathogens has focused in the US, and the genre of the role-playing videogame (RPG), to which the *Final Fantasy* series belongs.

Two types of genre operate in videogames. The game review press has collectively delineated a set of genres based on the features of videogames' interactive, rule-based dynamic systems (their styles of gameplay). I will call these *ludic genres*. These are unique to games. Aside from this, one can also discern the operation of genres appropriated from other media, most notably film and literature, which I will call *representational genres*. Examples of these are science fiction, fantasy, film-noir, and action cinema. Where these operate in videogames, they do not necessarily influence gameplay, most often functioning to invest a videogame's ludic aspects with referential significance.

However, some representational and ludic genres are strongly linked. The representational genre of fantasy informs many videogames, and almost totally dominates the RPG genre. Action and martial arts cinema are closely associated with the beat-'em-up and versus fighter. Some instances of games in various ludic genres, including the RPG, tend towards an integration of ludic form and representational content that could problematize a complete separation of ludic and representational genre.

With exceptions like the cited article from *Time*, popular writing and academic work on videogames has seldom employed or analyzed these generic distinctions usefully. In the popular press, an identification of the ludic genre of the FPS with videogames in general has led to an overestimation of the role of graphic, firearm-based violence in videogames. It is true that physical violence, in variously stylized forms, is a prominent part of the ludic aspects of most videogames. Yet this violence takes different forms in different genres. In the puzzle genre, for instance, it tends to be completely absent. Provenzo's *Video Kids*, which analyses games in a variety of ludic genres without explicitly differentiating between those genres, also stumbles over an inability to show how violent content is inflected by particular representational contexts. The influence of particular representational contexts on the reading of simulated actions needs to be taken into account in

order to avoid indulgence in totalizing assumptions about the pathogenic character of videogames.

Videogames in Social Context

In *Video Kids*, Provenzo ignores the fact that five of the ten games he analyses in detail were designed in Japan. At a 1993 US Senate hearing into videogame violence chaired by Senator Joseph Lieberman, his failure to recognize the games' origins led him to claim (based on his research for *Video*) that *Ninja Gaiden(Sakurazaki)*, produced by Japanese developer Tecmo, taught children that Asians were bad because they were depicted as ninjas (qtd in Kent 472). Unable to situate the causes of the "violence, destruction, xenophobia, racism, and sexism" (Provenzo 140) he perceived in videogames, Provenzo was unable to identify and analyze them properly. Without recourse to appropriate, culturally specific codes of interpretation, he could not reliably impute the game's Japanese designers with self-directed racism or other objectionable intentions. In this case, his concluding prescription to eliminate these elements is robbed of its force, since their perception is apparently the product of ignorance. While no such obvious misreading is apparent in popular discussions of *Doom* and other FPSs in relation to youth violence, it is clear that a lack of social contextualization in analyses of *Doom* precludes a reading that could recognize it as a reflection of violence in US culture and society.

Each analysis of videogames that seeks to connect them with external realities, whether as instigators of violent or anti-social behavior, as reflections of it or something else, must be acutely aware of the contexts in which the games are produced, played, and read. Here, I will offer a socially and generically contextualized reading of three games from the *Final Fantasy Series*. It will focus closely on concerns about youth socialization in contemporary Japan and the way in which these games, which are highly popular among Japanese youth, respond to them.

Final Fantasy I-VIII: A Brief History

Final Fantasy VI,[7] *VII*, and *VIII* (*FFVI, FFVII, & FFVIII*) belong to the ludic genre of the RPG. With its roots in board or pen-and-paper RPGs[8] and

---

[7]References to this game are in fact directed to its English translation, released in the US as *Final Fantasy III* (Kitase, *FFIIIE)*. Games two and three of the *Final Fantasy* series were never released in the US on their original platform, the Famicom (FC), sold in the US as the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). Nor was *Final Fantasy V* (Sakaguchi*, FFV*) for the Super Famicom/Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SFC/SNES). *Final Fantasy IV* (Sakaguchi, *FFIV*) was released in English translation as *Final Fantasy II* (Sakaguchi, *FFIIE*). *Final Fantasy VII* (Kitase, *FFVII*) was released in both Japanese and English with its original numbering, as were English translations of remakes and conversions of *Final Fantasy I-VI* for PlayStation (PSX).

[8]All other references to RPGs in this paper are to *videogame* RPGs unless otherwise spec-

wargames, most notably *Dungeons and Dragons* (see Cook), this genre is defined in ludic terms by its focus on the player's interpretation and manipulation of an overtly presented statistical system that represents player-characters' (PCs) innate and learned (particularly combative) abilities. Through battle, other activities, and players' skilful manipulation of the system, characters gradually grow stronger as they advance towards a final confrontation with an adversary.

RPG sub-genres tend to be hybrid: action-RPGs frequently incorporate elements of the beat-'em-up and/or platform genres; strategy RPGs typically include elements of the turn-based strategy genre. Frequently, RPGs (including those in sub-genres) also include elements of the object-based puzzles that dominate games of the adventure genre. All games in the *Final Fantasy* series are what are commonly referred to as 'traditional' RPGs, so called because they are minimally hybridized instances of what is deemed to be the 'original'[9] style of RPGs. In Japan, typical examples of this 'original' style are the first games in the *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest* series.

RPGs frequently place themselves consciously in the fantasy or science fantasy genres, though there are a relatively small number of RPGs in science fiction, horror, and other representational genres. In keeping with their strong link with literary genres, RPGs, particularly from the early 1990s onwards, tend towards strong narratives. These are typically told through large amounts of written or spoken dialogue, and/or non-interactive cutscenes. Such narratives are often highly linear, though some RPGs, such as *Legend of Mana* (Ishii), employ non-linear narratives that foreground the explorative and configurative functions (Aarseth 64) of the player with regard to the videogame as hypertext.

Given the highly textual nature of the RPG genre, videogames like those in the *Final Fantasy* series are ripe for detailed analysis. Close but exegetical reading can discern the influence of specific cultural and social contexts on them. In Japan, the RPG is one of the most prolific and commercially popular genres. RPGs preserve violence as a central element of gameplay in their frequent but highly stylized battle sequences. Yet *FFVI-VIII*, in contrast to games of the FPS and real-time strategy (RTS) genres most popular in English-language markets during the late 1990s, articulate it in a manner *obviously allegorical to*, and *critical of* empirical world violence in the locations in and for which they were produced. Conscious attempts to use the games' nova to work out concerns about social disintegration supplement violence in the game and in the empirical world, with a view to positive change in both. Violence and anti-social behavior in *FFVI-VIII* cannot be separated from their perceived presence in Japanese society: the games both

---

ified.

[9]The genealogy leading back to this particular concept of an origin only leads back as far as the first Japanese RPGs, not to the Western games that inspired them, including early games in the *Ultima* and *Wizardry* series.

reflect it and reflect on it.

In contextualizing *Final Fantasy*, it is pertinent to give an account of the series' aesthetic history, the process of evolution visible through it, and the series' relationship to the RPG genre as a whole. This will demonstrate some of the ways in which the games' ludic aspects relate to their representations of and responses to Japanese social problems.

In 1987, Square Co., Ltd, a small Japanese company that developed software for the Nintendo Famicom and its associated Famicom Disc System, was about to collapse due to poor sales. Directed by Sakaguchi Hironobu, a team including visual artist Amano Yoshitaka and composer Uematsu Nobuo completed what was to be the company's last game. *Final Fantasy* (Sakaguchi, *FFI*) was an immediate success that resuscitated Squaresoft,[10] and the name stuck to a series that now runs to eleven core installments.[11] The *Final Fantasy* name is now a valuable property that has been attached to a feature film, two animated series, action figures, costume replicas, and Coca-Cola promotions.

The general narrative formula in an RPG that draws on the representational genre of fantasy is as follows: a group of PCs, who operate within a variably Manichean opposition to a force or character that (usually) plans to destroy or enslave a world, must undertake a journey and pass a series of trials in order to defeat that evil force or character. The RPG novum is often politically and visually modeled on an idealized European medieval period which is pre-industrial and feudal in its political relations, in which magic is a powerful force, and monsters roam the land. Suvin writes that Fantasy: "presents an alternative concept of 'history,' or better flow of human affairs, usually reduced to personal power relationships[and] it is only within such relationships that [its] interest in abrogating our empirical physical laws can be found." (Suvin, "Considering" 222). This particular "alternative concept" is typically opposed to the dehumanizing effects of technologized capitalism, which explains Fantasy's preference for nostalgically medieval settings. Particular settings or motifs are not Fantasy's essential characteristic. Rather, it is the ideology of opposition embedded within their selection which is central.

From their beginnings, Japanese RPGs have also included images of post-feudal technologies, juxtaposing them with feudal political structures in a way that brings them into the hybrid sub-genre of science fantasy. Suvin has criticized fantasy of all types for being non-cognitive, branding it, in early comments on the genre, as a "subliterature of mystification"

---

[10]There are at least two versions of this story. The one I have relayed is the most widely recounted by members of the online fan community, and is best told by Andrew Vestal in *The History of Final Fantasy*. The other can be found in Kent's *The Ultimate History of Videogames*.

[11]A twelfth, *Final Fantasy XII*, is scheduled for a Japanese release in late 2003. Squaresoft has also released numerous *Final Fantasy* spin-off games such as *Final Fantasy Mystic Quest* (Squaresoft) and *Final Fantasy X-2* (Motomu).

(*Metamorphoses* 8-9). From this angle, hybridization from science fiction to science fantasy may be considered a degradation. Yet the *Final Fantasy* series' move from a mostly fantasy-genred position towards science fantasy represents an injection of cognition, and a movement away from mystification.

In order to prevent their world's destruction or enslavement, the PCs must explore it, gaining quantifiable experience in battle, and items that increase their power. This development is represented by the statistical system that is at the core of RPGs' ludic element. PCs can talk to non-player-characters (NPCs) inhabiting the world, whose dialogue advances the game's plot and guides the player toward their in-game goals, while also contributing to a greater sense of solidity or "thickness" (Suvin, "Considering" 18) in the game's representationally generic novum. When the PCs are strong enough to pass most of the game's spatial and combat-related obstacles, as well as having fulfilled sufficient plot-related conditions, they proceed to the final battle with their adversary. If the player's manipulation of the game's statistical and battle systems is sufficiently skilled, the enemy is defeated and the game enters a short phase where plot elements are resolved, usually in a non-interactive cut-scene.

In Japan, the RPG genre was pioneered by Enix's *Dragon Quest*[12] (Horii, *DQI), which reworked ludic formulas derived from English-language videogame RPGs. While enormously commercially successful, it suffered from an unrefined user interface and poor technical execution. FFI reworked the fledgling RPG format, introducing greater ludic complexity while streamlining the user interface. It also improved remarkably on DQI's lackluster visuals.*

Dragon Quest remains the more commercially successful of the two series in Japan, at least partially due to the fact that successive installments have avoided making significant revisions to game mechanics, and have eschewed use of later consoles' technological capability to deliver better graphics and sound. Instead, they aim to evoke nostalgia for the allegedly simpler and more authentic 'old school' gameplay of the late 1980s. This use of nostalgia resonates with Suvin's identification of an anti-technological, anti-capitalist ideological content in the fantasy genre ("Considering"). *Dragon Quest* has also avoided the incursions into science fantasy, away from the predominantly feudal and pre-industrial settings of early games in both series, that *Final Fantasy* has made.

However, because of the technical, ludic, and representational innovations made by *FFI*, which later games in the series expanded upon, *Final Fantasy* has come to define the model for 'traditional' Japanese RPGs to the present day. *Final Fantasy* is also much more commercially successful in English-language markets than *Dragon Quest*.

While indebted to English-language pen-and-paper and videogame RPGs

---

[12]English translations of *Dragon Quest* games bear the title *Dragon Warrior*.

for their systems of character statistics and idealized medieval contexts, *DQI* and *FFI* set Japanese console RPGs on a divergent path, creating a particular niche within the genre that is nationally distinct in ludic form, visual aesthetic, and textual content.

One of the *Final Fantasy* series' most important innovations, and one that most firmly set it apart from *Dragon Quest* and most English-language RPGs up to the present day, was its replacement in *Final Fantasy II* (Sakaguchi, *FFII*) of customizable and generic PCs with ones with individual facial portraits, set abilities, and predefined (but user-modifiable) names. These characters had complex personal histories and individual personalities. Play gradually revealed their personal role in the game's plot. *FFI*'s generic PCs were empty shells into which players could project themselves. Thus, *FFII*'s move was alienating, but enabled the construction of a detailed narrative that, through believable, individualized characters, could be strongly linked to the ludic element of statistical growth and manipulation. As the *Final Fantasy* series extended character development from battles into dialogue, its emphasis shifted from gameplay to storytelling. Of subsequent single-player *Final Fantasy* games, only *Final Fantasy III* (Sakaguchi, *FFIII*) returned to anonymous, fully customizable characters.

Related to this is an equally significant ludic feature of the *Final Fantasy* series, though one not unique to it: the party system. Most RPGs, including those in the *Dragon Quest* series, allow the player to control multiple PCs (usually three or four). This grouping is known as a party. This is most significant in battle, where the PCs' powers are combined in facing their foes. The *Final Fantasy* series' use of the party system from *FFII* is unique because of its integration with narrative elements that involve characterization. Most games in the *Dragon Quest* series exhibit minimal interaction between PCs. This is a function of their limited characterization and the usual blankness of the hero's character, which the player is responsible for naming and imagining. In contrast, games in the *Final Fantasy* series from *FFII* (but excluding *FFIII*) saw fully characterized PCs interacting extensively with one another in ways that contributed to the advancement of the games' narratives. *Final Fantasy* games, even from *FFI*, also reduced the significance of the individual hero. While there was often a central, male hero at the games' narrative core, his place was more tenuous than that of the heroes of *Dragon Quest*; he could slip in and out of the party, be separated from it or injured.

FFIV had vastly more dialogue than previous games, and its narrative was the first to thoroughly integrate extensive character development with gameplay. Usually, one or many *seichō monogatari* ('stories about growing up') (Allison 74) are embedded within the overarching narrative of conflict in an RPG. The ludic element in which characters accumulate experience points to achieve professional mastery and defeat their enemies favors this. Some games supplement narratives of professional mastery by having the main character begin as a child who later reaches adolescence and adult-

hood (*Dragon Quest V* [Horii, *DQV*], the *Breath of Fire* series). *FFIV* featured characters of diverse ages, so coming of age was not a dominant concern, but it linked characters' experiences and choices as described in dialogue to changes in appearance and power. Like the schoolgirl heroines of *Sailor Moon*, who *henshin* (transform) to gain power in times of crisis, *FFIV*'s hero, Cecil, turns from a "dark knight" to a "paladin" in a key narrative scene. Unlike the Sailor Scouts', Cecil's change is permanent, and it manifests a development of character rather than simply appearance and power. In *FFIV*, as in *Sailor Moon* or other *anime, manga*, and RPGs like *Neon Genesis Evangelion* or *Pokemon*, characters must overcome their personal demons and character flaws to achieve their goals. Cecil's character transformation increases his power in battle. Thus, the narrative scene in which it occurs marks the integration of the game's ludic aspect of battle (based around the stylized enaction of physical violence) with the textual, representative aspects, which can contextualize and occasionally criticize that violence.

This integration facilitates a denser textuality (and potentially, a complex didacticism) without totally transforming the games into experiences of viewing or reading rather than play. Subsequent *Final Fantasy* games drew on this innovation by ensuring that prominent features of gameplay, particularly the use of magic in battle and the assignment of character abilities, were made central elements of the games' primary narratives. Advances in the technological capacity of game consoles was central to this and subsequent innovations made by the *Final Fantasy* series. *FFIV*'s increased dialogue was in part facilitated by the increased storage capacity of game cartridges for the Super Famicom (SFC; Super Nintendo [SNES] in the US).[13] The PlayStation's 3d graphics and large CD-ROM storage capacity eventually resulted in increasingly detailed visual representations of individual characters. Together, these deepened the games' textuality, and pushed them towards an engagement with numerous traditional art-forms. Pre-rendered cut-scenes mimicked cinema, the design of three-dimensional objects for battle scenes and the world map drew together sculpture and animation, and as characters moved around on the mostly static backdrop of the field screens, performing actions and uttering lines of dialogue, they were, in a sense, actors on a stage. In a Japanese context, the more de-

---

[13]Because Japanese text, particularly *kanji*, takes up less space, both on screen and as data, than Japanese text, official English translations of the Squaresoft RPGs *FFVI* and *Chrono Trigger* (Kitase, Matsui, Tokita) for SFC/SNES had to effectively cut the amount of dialogue in half to fit it on the cartridge. This raises issues of authenticity, compounded by Nintendo of America's 'no sex, no excessive violence' policy of the time (Kent 465). Thus, representations of prostitution, suicide, teenage pregnancy, and slaughter in war were sanitized or removed from the English-language *FFIII* (Kitase). Sky Render's forthcoming unofficial retranslation (*FF6 Script Translation*) remedies these issues, but at present its romanization of character and object names is inconsistent. RPGs on the Sony PlayStation (PSX), such as *FFVII*, suffered from neither space constraints nor censorship. As such, their English translations are reasonably reliable.

tailed graphics of *FFVII* and *VIII*, viewed from multiple 'camera-angles' and overlaid with boxes containing dialogue, took on a striking resemblance to *manga*, with which Japanese videogames had always been linked.

Yet the most fundamental aesthetic change undergone by the series in recent years has not been a direct result of new technologies of representation, nor of experimentation with the ludic aspects of individual games. Rather, it has been a conscious shift, in *FFVI-VIII*, from medieval to modern and futuristic game worlds. In making this move, these games lent the series a greater capacity to comment on contemporary issues without changing the RPG form.

FFVI-VIII in a context of perceived social malaise

Concurrently with analyzing the texts themselves, it is essential to examine what events or trends may have inspired *FFVI-VIII*'s move towards the modern and futuristic, since their textual content directly responds to contemporary social concerns. Whether the way in which *Final Fantasy* represents social problems directly corresponds to the objective realities of their social context is not under investigation. Rather, I will examine how they reflect and/or address anxieties about those realities manifested in discourse.

In Japan, videogames are less a specific target of anxiety than part of a constellation of denigrated popular cultural forms. This includes *manga*, *anime*, videogames and pornography, the representational contents of which routinely intersect. The particular social anxieties that *FFVI-VIII* reflect are related to the disruption of youth socialization, sometimes perceived as a result of too close an engagement with these devalued forms. From *FFVII* onwards, Square has deliberately targeted North America as a market for its flagship series. It is possible that some elements of the games may have been constructed in awareness of US attitudes to videogames and their reproduction of values and behaviors in players. Yet Japan has had its own similar instances of violent eruption to contend with and for videogames to represent and respond to.

On April 28, 1999, little more than a week after the Littleton massacre, a fourteen-year-old boy shot and killed one student, and injured another, at his former school, W.R. Myers high in Taber, Alberta. Mark Garner, a resident of the town, said this of the event: "We're a pretty protected and sheltered little placeWe have clear blue sky, clean air and corn. We have things quite good and for this sort of thing to come into our community, it just taints everything." (qtd in Bergman 20) In part, the popular shock and moral panic Littleton and similar incidents in the US have inspired can be attributed to the shattering of perceived innocence. Comments like Garner's suggest a feeling that small towns and quiet neighborhoods should be less likely to host violent incidents than others. Some elements of of-

ficial Japanese nationalist ideology promote similar attitudes. These are based on the idea that Japan, at least in the past, possessed a uniquely harmonious social framework. This idea is supported by popular and academic *nihonron(Japan-discourse)* literature espousing the 'group model' of Japanese society (see Befu) including work by Nakane Chie and Doi Takeo. Ross Mouer and Sugimoto Yoshio explain that during the 'learn from Japan boom' of the 1970s and 80s, some academics, in Japan and the West, went "so far as to suggest that Japan ha[d] not only industrialized successfully, but also solved many of the social problems associated with becoming a post-industrial society: alienation, crime, social disintegration and a certain loss of self-discipline." (Mouer & Sugimoto 4-5).

When a man fatally stabbed eight schoolchildren at Ikeda Elementary in June 2001, Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō lamented: "I'm disturbed to hear about this tragedy that has befallen the children. It's a sign our society is cracking." (qtd in "Madman kills 8" n.p.). Endō Katsuya, an assistant professor of international law at Tokyo International University, comments more acutely on the Tokyo subway incident of 1995: "the sarin gas attack has shown us that Japan is no longer a village, no longer a self-policing monocultureit is a myth to talk about Japan as a 'safe society.'" (qtd in Hills 295)

Attacks on schoolchildren have the capacity to be particularly disturbing because they disrupt sites at which individuals are inculcated with values intended to perpetuate the existence of the mythical Japanese "self-policing monoculture." In Japan, according to Thomas Rohlen, "modern mass processing of children in universal educationgenerates great uniformity of training, experience, and aspirationprepares [students] for their allocation into the larger social structures of employment, class and status," (111) and at least at elementary levels, "teaches equality and the norms of group solidarity." (140)

Concern over the disruption of this process presupposes that children have been interpellated by mainstream society and ideology to the extent that they attend educational institutions. However, some Japanese youth may withdraw from mainstream society, and absence from school is one marker of this. The most extreme cases of this withdrawal are *hikikomori*, mostly male adolescents who retreat totally from the outside world. *Time International* begins an article on *hikikomori* as follows: "One day in 1996, T.H. skipped his high school classesA few weeks after that, he didn't venture outside the upstairs bedroom in his family's home. He slept during the day and stayed up all night, playing computer games and watching TV dramas." ("Staying In" n.p.) Kudō Sadatsugu, director of a non-profit centre for *hikikomori* in Fussa, says of the phenomenon: "You can't pinpoint the reasonsbut you can pinpoint the context: it's Japan. Here, you have to be like other people, and if you aren't, you have a sense of loss, of shame. So you withdraw." (qtd in "Staying In" n.p.)

It may not be true of all *hikikomori*, but cultural consumption was at the centre of T.H.'s new life. This suggests that he did not withdraw totally, but shifted to an exclusively mediatized way of relating to society. Television remained a point of contact with the shared experiences of mass culture, while videogames may have been able to constitute an alternative form of social reality. The article in *Time International* links *hikikomori* to *otaku*, "people who shut themselves away, spending their days absorbed in *anime*, *manga*, and video games." (n.p.) Official concern over videogames' ability to seduce children from legitimate fields of social interaction extended to the enactment of legislation prohibiting new installments in the *Dragon Quest* series from being released except on Sundays or public holidays, to prevent students from skipping school to secure copies (Hubbard). If one takes mass-mediated experiences to be the foundation of contemporary social cohesion, the *otaku*'s voracious cultural consumption may actually be considered a *hyper*-engagement. As Frederik Schodt shows, the *dōjinshi* (amateur *manga*/comics) that are a key item of consumption for this group are the focus of a massive subculture that is both a social outlet and a lucrative commercial activity (36-43).

The popular fear of *otaku* and *hikikomori* may stem from a worry that the sinister, repressed feelings of alienated youth, excised from society through their sacrificial withdrawal, will return in an eruption of violence and/or sexual perversity. Schodt summarizes a popular Japanese conception of *otaku* as:

> a group, mostly of young males who could no longer effectively relate to real world people (especially women) and thus bury themselves in pornographic *manga* and animation and masturbatory fantasies; in short, people who might be mentally ill and perhaps even a threat to society. (44)

Schodt does not historically locate this perception, but it is likely conditioned by the abduction, murder and mutilation of four infant girls between August 1988 and July 1989 by Miyazaki Tsutomu, a "fan of girls' *manga* and in particular *rorikon* ['Lolita complex'] *manga* and animation," who had "written some animation reviews in *dōjinshi* and had been to Comic Market [a *dōjinshi* convention]." (Kinsella 127) Sharon Kinsella reports that the incident sparked a "moral panic" (126) over the *dōjinshi* subculture, though in "heavy symbolic debate[Miyazaki's] alienation and lack of substantial social relationships featured as the ultimate cause of his anti-social behavior." (127) The unconfrontational withdrawal of T.H. and others is counterbalanced by this and incidents such as the one in which an alleged *hikikomori*, a 17-year old male, hijacked a bus near Hiroshima and held its passengers and driver hostage for 19 hours, fatally stabbing one. ("Staying In" n.p.)

These isolated incidents provide no firm evidence on which to found theories that broadly link the consumption of cultural products whose contents

or reading protocols are interpretable as antagonistic to mainstream values to violent or otherwise socially deviant behavior. However, less extreme cases like T.H.'s should prompt a recognition that some Japanese youth have troubled relationships with cultural products that are bound up with an equally troubled engagement with social realities.

FFVI-VIII reflect and address the perception of a Japanese society whose roots have been disrupted by violence. The three games foreground representations of the disruptive effects of imperialist warfare, magical apocalypse, and environmental degradation on the lives of common people, in particular on their social relations. The pertinence of these representations to contemporary Japanese social problems is highlighted by the games' adoption of modern settings.

The *Final Fantasy* series has a long standing set of representational and ludic generic conventions that consumers expect it to adhere to. It would not have been possible to transgress these without risking a fall in sales and reduced brand integrity Thus, despite their adoption of modern settings, *FFVI-VIII* retained the generic veneer of science fantasy instead of moving closer to naturalistic fiction. At the same time, *FFVI-VIII* saw an adjustment to the series' use of the game novum that allowed for more explicit references to the empirical world, capable of inducing an estranged, or at least critical stance towards it.

All games in the *Final Fantasy* series rely on a narrative model that parallels epic, adventure-oriented instances of fantasy and science fiction. Numerous, discrete incidents encountered in the traversal of the game space connect in the relation of a complex story. It is not possible to summarize the entire sequence of events in any of the games, but concurrent with their analysis, the story elements most pertinent to this study will be related in a manner that gives the best possible overview of the games' narrative contents. This relation neither represents ideal sequences of events (see Juul), nor the record of the author's peculiar experience of a sequence of events that could have occurred in another order. These are the relevant elements of the games' stories as they were narrated through dialogue and other modes of representation. These stories *could not have been otherwise* as a result of players' interaction.

FFVI was the first game in the series to make modern technology a significant part of its novum, and is initially the story of the struggle of a group called the Returners and their allies against an expansionist Empire. This takes place against the backdrop of a world that has endured the catastrophic War of the Magi, in which humans harnessed the potentially destructive powers of magical beings called Espers. In the thousand years since, the world has developed technology as a substitute for magic, which disappeared after the War of the Magi. In *FFVI*, cities are depicted with a

16

'steampunk' aesthetic that evokes an industrializing 19th century Europe,[14] augmented by robotics, genetic engineering, and re-emergent magic. Thus, the war and destruction to come are associated with the coming of modernity, recalling similar associations made by Western literary modernists, or even earlier by Twain in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (esp. 313-26).

Initially, *FFVI*'s action focuses on Terra, an amnesiac girl with magic powers who escapes the control of the Empire, which is using her as a weapon of war, and Locke, a thief who is entrusted with the task of delivering her safely to the Returners as a source of information and potential ally.

In its attempts to conquer the world, the Empire seeks to regain the powers of the Espers, who have retreated to the Esper World, hidden in a cave on Triangle Island. It also uses genetic engineering to infuse humans with the magic power of Espers. Among these are the Imperial Generals Celes and Kefka. Both parentless, their treatment in the game reflects anxieties about children who have fallen outside traditional spheres of social interpellation, in this case the family rather than school. Celes and Kefka's creator, the scientist Cid, manages to recuperate Celes, described as having "a spirit pure as snow" (Kitase, *FFIIIE*), by his paternal love, and she shows her fundamental goodness by joining those fighting the Empire. Kefka remains bereft of familial ties, and thus evades socialization; disconnected, he is overcome by hatred and a lust for power.

This focus on the disruptive effects on the social subject as a result of their removal from the family extends to most other PCs in the game. For instance, Terra is half Esper, stolen from her human mother by the Emperor Gestahl as a baby, but her ties with the party and characters in it help ground her in a social reality; Gau's insane father mistook him for a demon and threw him out into the wilderness where he grew up among monsters; and Cyan's grief at the death of his wife and children makes him vulnerable to a demon that possesses his soul. The association of removal from the family with both war and biotechnology signals a linkage with anxieties about the disruption of youth socialization by violence at school, and also with the technologies of post-industrial capitalism.

In an attempt to rescue their fellows imprisoned within the Empire's Magitek Research Facility, the Espers briefly leave the Esper World, but lose control of their powers and destroy much of the Imperial Capital, Vector. Emperor Gestahl offers the Returners a truce, claiming they must work together to ensure the Espers do not destroy the entire world. The terms of the truce include the imprisonment of Kefka, responsible for war crimes, including poisoning the castle town of Doma's water supply (killing Cyan's

---

[14]Amano Yoshitaka's conceptual artwork for *FFVI* exhibit a strong and deliberate Italianate flavour, reinforced by the surnames of some characters, like Setzer Gabbiani, Edgar Roni Figaro, and Cefca (Kefka) Palazzo (Amano).

family and others). Terra and the rest of the party help the Empire locate the entrance to the Esper World, and take the Espers to a meeting with the Emperor in the town of Thamasa. There the truce is revealed to be a ploy to induce the Returners to lead the Empire to the remaining Espers. Kefka (no longer imprisoned) kills the Espers and captures the crystallized remains that hold their power. Kefka and the Emperor discover the entrance to the Esper World, where three Goddesses of Destruction lie sealed in statues. The party arrives at Triangle Island too late to prevent Kefka from unleashing and obtaining their power, causing a cataclysm that reconfigures the entire world's landmass.

FFVI signals the beginning of an intense engagement with the figures of the orphan and misfit that continues through to *FFVIII*, but its means of dealing with social dislocation is relatively unique. In *FFVI*, the stories of player-characters' individual rehabilitation and social reintegration are articulated in terms of their place within the party. Players' success in completing RPGs is usually made to appear dependent on the utilization of PCs' power and abilities as part of a group. In *FFVI-VIII*, this depends on the characters overcoming personal difficulties that prevent them from functioning as a member of the party. In all three games, most PCs with significant narrative involvement either strive for acceptance by the other party members, or to accept their own unwitting or unwilling recruitment into the group.

FFVI foregrounds this representational aspect by integrating it very closely with gameplay. Following the cataclysm of *FFVI*, the player controls Celes alone, marooned on an island. After Celes overcomes her own grief at Cid's death, the player must guide her to locations around the world where the other PCs can be found. The reintegration of each into the party is preceded by a scene or quest that resolves that character's personal and social dysfunction. Subsequently, the character returns to the party, bringing more powerful abilities and/or items gained through overcoming their problems. After recruiting Setzer, who leads the party to an airship, the party can fly directly to the final area, the Tower of Kefka, but without first gaining the support of the rest of the characters, defeating Kefka would be extremely difficult. The more characters the player reintegrates into the party, the greater their chances of success.

FFVII, like *FFVI*, begins as a story of resistance against imperialist forces. *FFVII* has a strong central character, Cloud, a mercenary who claims to have previously been a member of Soldier. Soldier is the elite paramilitary arm of the Shinra Corporation, an all-powerful organization whose business is based on the extraction of Mako energy (a likely analogue for nuclear power, given its ability to poison and mutate living things) from 'the Planet,' the name for *FFVII*'s particular world. Of all three games under close analysis, *FFVII* makes the most critical use of its novum. *FFVII* depicts a world in which the potential for environmental catastrophe and violent class struggle between globalized capital and local populations in the empirical world

are intensified and set within an estranged framework of imaginary history and magical incursions into a world dominated by scientific and economic rationality. It makes the status quo strange. By pitting players against the exaggerated realities of their own empirical world in an narrative of epic heroism, it encourages them to imagine a greater agency in their daily struggle with such realities.

Cloud is recruited by the eco-terrorist organization Avalanche, and participates in a mission to blow up a Mako reactor in Shinra's base city of Midgar. In retaliation for this act, Shinra destroys the slums where Avalanche is based, and kidnaps Aeris, a girl whom Cloud befriends and who is the last surviving member of a magical race known as the Ancients, or Cetra. In the course of the mission to recover her, Avalanche discovers that Sephiroth, the leader of Soldier, who supposedly died five years earlier, has killed the President of Shinra. Sephiroth has escaped with the remains of his 'mother,' a malevolent alien being named Jenova.

While Sephiroth, rather than Shinra, soon becomes the party's main adversary, subquests throughout the game continue to pit the party against Shinra in attempts to prevent environmental and social destruction. *FFVII*'s is obviously opposed to a destructive global capitalism. This highlights the fact that *FFVI-VIII*'s use of the party to rehabilitate individuals who have fallen out of society or eluded interpellation cannot be simply allied with the conception promoted by key *nihonron* texts that Japanese society is fundamentally more group-oriented and harmonious than others. *FFVII* denies the existence of a totally homogenous social body without (particularly class-based) conflict, and rejects the paternalistic images of corporate Japan promoted by books like Nakane's *Japanese Society*. Each of *FFVI-VIII* define the identities of the party and its members in opposition to at least one corrupt ruler or ruling class. That the party's goals are supported by a majority of the common people in the games' worlds signals that their society is fundamentally divided by effects of power. In opposition to Nakane's depiction of Japan as a harmonious *tateshakai* (vertical society) the party represents a social group based on horizontal ties of common interest in resisting the status quo. Membership of this grouping provides an alternative sense of socially provided well-being.

Placed in a situation where they need to increase their characters' power to succeed, players are encouraged to repair damage done to those characters' social identities and relationships. The linkage of in-game success to this imaginary social reintegration may be hoped by the developers to encourage an identification with characters that results in the imitation of those characters' positive behaviors in real life. This would ideally result in the reinvigoration of those individuals' social lives and of Japanese society at large. But this does not entail a mere nostalgic return to the mythical "self-policing monoculture" (Endō in Hills 295). Rather, through allegorical reflection of perceived (dysfunctional) social realities, and a response

to them that involves the player's interaction, *FFVI-VIII* posit an alternative, more functional, supportive, and satisfying structure of social relations.

The rest of *FFVII*'s narrative is too convoluted for concise and still just summary,[15] but in the main, it centers on the party's attempts to prevent a meteor, magically summoned by Sephiroth, from colliding with the Planet. Sephiroth intends to wound the Planet, and then absorb the Mako energy it would gather to heal itself, becoming a god in the process. Frustrating the party's attempts to thwart Sephiroth, Cloud becomes increasingly unhinged. At inopportune moments, his personality splits and he betrays the party by delivering the Black Materia to Sephiroth, who needs it to summon the meteor. After one of these incidents, at the North Crater, where Sephiroth attempts to make Cloud believe he is a clone, and that his memories are false, Cloud falls into the Lifestream, the reservoir of Mako energy that flows beneath the planet, and is lost. When found, he is a gibbering wreck, and only a surreal journey into his memory with his childhood friend Tifa can restore him to sanity. This sequence reveals he was never a member of Soldier, but merely a Shinra foot soldier. His very real memories of childhood and of the massacre at Nibelheim five years earlier where Cloud 'killed' Sephiroth, are tainted by an appropriation of elements of the identity of his dead friend Zack, a member of Soldier who also participated in the events at Nibelheim.

The manipulation of Cloud's body and memories by himself and others mirror the anxieties surrounding *otaku* and *hikikomori* whose social relations have become exclusively mediatized. Following Derrida's reading of memory in Freud, which considers memory as the psychically written trace of experience (Derrida 199), Cloud's too close and too fluid engagement with memory as image is responsible for the destabilization of his subjectivity. His absorption in the false identity propagated by Sephiroth, as a (rogue) agent of the hegemonic Shinra Corporation, reproduced as image (presented as flashbacks) in his unreliable memory, parallels the popular imagination of perverse, psychopathological or homicidal behavior induced by too close an involvement with certain devalued types of mass culture totalizingly characterized as pathogenic, including videogames. The specters of cloning and genetic manipulation in Cloud's process of identity formation, along with the destruction of his home town of Nibelheim, also link his character to the orphans central to *FFVI* and *FFVIII*.

Of the three games under close analysis here, *FFVIII* most overtly addresses itself to Japanese youth. It focuses on a group of orphans of the Sorceress War, in which the nation of Galbadia fought Esthar, an aggressor nation under the leadership of the Sorceress Adel. As children, they were taken care of by a woman named Edea. Later, with the exception of a girl named Ellone, they were sent to military academies called Gardens in the

---

[15] See Sophie Cheshire's *Final Fantasy VII–Plot Analysis, v1.7* for an exhaustive synopsis.

regions of Balamb, Galbadia, and Trabia. The Gardens train students to become SeeDs, mercenaries in the employ of the Gardens. During their first real mission, the orphans are sent to assassinate their forgotten childhood guardian, Edea, now a Sorceress who is about to seize power in Galbadia.

Again, the narrative of *FFVIII* is generally too convoluted to summarize adequately. The main conflict comes to revolve around preventing Ultimecia, a Sorceress from the future, from possessing the body of the Sorceress Adel and using it, in conjunction with Ellone's powers to send people's minds into the past, to achieve "time-kompression," an apparently catastrophic process that would allow her to gain control of all time and space. Ultimecia's time-kompression resonates with the time-space compression that is a feature of contemporary globalization (Waters 1995, 150), painting it in an apocalyptically negative light, but this theme is not developed in any element of the game's narrative other than the name of the phenomenon.

In the course of Galbadia's aggression under Edea, Trabia Garden is devastated by a missile attack, again utilizing the image of a site of social interpellation, here the school, disrupted by violence in war. *FFVIII*'s use of overtly hierarchical military/educational institutions as social frameworks for youth casts questions over its oppositionality, but the party, a horizontal social grouping, remains the key venue for the rehabilitation of traumatized and dislocated individuals.

FFVIII's key concern is social withdrawal, of a lesser intensity than that of *hikikomori*, but perhaps close to that of *otaku*, if not so bound up with issues of media consumption. Of all the orphans raised by Edea, Squall is the most deeply affected by the trauma of the Sorceress War. On the disappearance of his 'Sis', Ellone,[16] from the orphanage, Squall adopts a strategy of self-reliance and emotional isolation, corresponding closely to Doi Takeo's description of *hinekureru* (lit. 'to become twisted') which "involves feigning indifference to the other instead of showing *amae* [dependence]." (Doi 29) Doi translates *hinekureru* as, "to behave in a distorted, perverse way," (ibid.). In his account of a supposedly particular Japanese psychology, this behaviour is represented as pathological. Doi's *The Anatomy of Dependence* located the basis of Japan's supposed group society in a revised Freudian psychology in which *amae* became the most important psychological attribute of the normal subject. In this schema, what may seem like Squall's minor indifference represents a deviation from the normal psychological basis of Japanese social organization. Squall's refusal to let himself

---

[16]Though it requires some imagination to piece together the clues *FF8* gives the player, Andrew Vestal suggests that Squall, the game's hero, is the son of Laguna Loire. Laguna was the leader of the internal resistance against Sorceress Adel during the 'Sorceress War' between Esthar and Galbadia, and later became Esthar's president. While the game makes Squall's calling Ellone 'Sis' appear to be merely the manifestation of a childhood attachment, she really *is* his foster/adoptive sister. Squall's mother, Raine, took care of her during the war, and his father, Laguna, looked after of her following Raine's death.

be known by articulating his thoughts, emotions or personal history when in dialogue with others, while mild on any scale of social withdrawal, also refers to the more serious, real cases of withdrawal described earlier.

Like the dislocated characters of *FFVI* and *VII*, Squall is rehabilitated primarily through his integration into the party. This integration is supplemented by Ellone's sending him into the past of his father, Laguna, which very subtly (see note 16) reattaches him to his family through memory. Squall is later reunited with Laguna, though he never knows he is his father. In *FFVIII*, the party is represented as a closely knit group of teenage friends. As such, in conjunction with the SeeDs' connection with educational institutions, the model of relations between party members is easily read as a model for Japanese schoolchildren as players. Squall's rehabilitation is facilitated by his friends encouraging him to re-enter a group based on *amae*. It is the supposedly potential violent or deviant effects of self-removal from physically present and social relations of dependence that is at the core of anxieties about *hikikomori* and *otaku*. Squall's ties to the group are reinforced through his romance with Rinoa, the only member of the party not associated directly with Edea (and also not an orphan). After Squall saves Rinoa from death in the icy depths of space, there is a scene where they sit together, her arms wrapped around him. Squall ineptly asks: "Why are you holding onto me like this?" (Kitase, *FFVIII*). As part of her response, she asks: "Didn't you feel safe and secure being held by your parents?" and tells him "you missed out on all the good things in life." Rinoa offers to reinitiate him into the dependent relationship of child to parent through mutually dependent heterosexual romance. The centrality of this relationship is echoed by *FFVIII*'s logo, which depicts Rinoa resting her head on Squall's chest.

In a speech before the party's final assault on the strongholds of its members' enemies in *FFVIII*, Laguna delivers a pep-talk instructing them how to survive in a world affected by time-kompression, that simultaneously addresses Japanese youth. This is *Final Fantasy* at its most didactic:

> As friends, don't forget one another! As friends, believe in one
>   another!
> Believe in your friends' existence! And they'll also believe in
>   yours.
> To be friends, to like one another, and to love one another
> You can't do these things alone. You need somebody []¹⁷
> You need love and friendship for this mission! And the courage
>   to believe it.
> It's all about love, friendship, and courage. (Kitase, *FFVIII*)

When the time-kompressed world collapses after Ultimecia's defeat, Squall

---

¹⁷Dialogue in RPGs, as in *manga*, makes frequent use of ellipses. Here I have square-bracketed those that are my own.

and Rinoa become lost in a black void, then separated in an endless wasteland. Squall remembers their promise to meet, if separated, in the field of flowers outside Edea's house. Wandering, Rinoa comes upon the collapsed figure of Squall, and as she holds him in her arms, the cracked earth beneath them and heavy clouds above give way a shaft of light from above, that, spreading outwards, transforms the wasteland into the place where they promised to meet. From the brink of unbeing, their social tie brings them back into a world that, cleansed of Ultimecia's influence, is newly harmonious and idyllic. Yet while responding to youth withdrawal in a way even Chaput, Provenzo and Grossman might be persuaded to view as positive, *FFVIII* descends into the banal. Love, friendship, and courage may have a mystical power over the ravages of time-kompression. But in this, final instance, they are opposed to a cardboard cut-out, placeholder villain, rather than to a cognitively graspable, allegorically identifiable political regime or social reality. This moment marks the descent of the *Final Fantasy* series out of its brief foray into cognitive estrangement and critical, even subversive awareness of contemporary social realities. Subsequently, *FFIX* saw the series return to a medievalist novum, and *FFX*, though moving again towards science fantasy, set its use of technology within a framework that at best might be imagined to comment on the potentially insidious nature of Japan's 'new religions' and cults. This slide from close and critical engagement with social problems is itself an intriguing phenomenon, a new moment in the history of Japanese RPGs worthy of further study.

Conclusion

After identifying some of the most prevalent strands of totalizing discourse about videogames, particularly the discourse of videogames as social pathogens, this essay has offered a generically and socially contextualized reading of *Final Fantasy VI-VIII. In particular, a* socially contextualized approach to videogame analysis is capable of sharpening any attempts to link videogames to social problems, either as responses to, causes or reflections of them. Analyzing *FFVI-VIII* in social context has linked their textual content to specific, perceived social problems which the games respond to. This has little to do with decisively proving whether or not videogame play increases aggression and tendencies towards violence, a task that is likely to be difficult if not impossible. Far more pressing than this question, in fact, is that of the political content and utility of specific videogames and ludic genres. This is a facet of social contexts that this study, with its reactive focus, has only lightly touched on. Further work needs to be done on how the representations of society and of social activity in *FFVI-VIII* and games like them interact with particular political ideologies and projects.

FFVI-VIII do not stand for videogames as a whole. In Japan, as in the

United States, these games, like the demonized FPS genre, represent a portion of the highly diverse totality of videogame production throughout the history of the medium. They demonstrate that, at a particular time and in a particular place, game designers have made creative use of generic conventions, including the game novum and the party system, to provide players with positive models of social behavior in response to the perceived disintegration of a traditional, uniquely homogenous, stratified, and stable Japanese society. Other games, from other times and other places, produced by other people, demand equally specific readings. Game studies as a whole needs to explore more highly specified approaches to videogames that take specific notice of genre, and social and historical context, in order to provide continually more useful accounts of what videogames are, how they function as games and texts, and how they fit into the world at large.

Bibliography

"A Room Full of Doom: Did Columbine take the fire out of the splatter-game business? Not judging by last week's big expo." *Time* 153.20 (1999): 65.

"Madman Kills 8 in School Rampage." *Mainichi Daily News* 9 Jun. 2001. `www.mainichi.co.jp`

"Staying In and Tuning Out: Alienated Japanese youth are increasingly locking themselves away in their rooms - and venturing out to engage in violent crimes." *Time International* 156.7/8 (2000): 54+

Aarseth, Espen J. *Cybertext: Perspectives on ergodic literature*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.

Allison, Anne. "A Challenge to Hollywood?: Japanese character goods hit the US." *Japanese Studies* 20.1 (2000): 67-88.

Amano, Yoshitaka. *Japan: Final Fantasy*. Tokyo: NTT, 1994.

Befu, Harumi. "A Critique of the Group Model of Japanese Society." *Social Analysis* 5/6 (1980): 29-43.

Bergman, Brian. "Tragedy in Taber: A week after the massacre in Colorado, a southern Alberta town is rocked by a school shooting." *Maclean's* 10 May 1999 (1999): 20.

Blank, Mark, and Dave Lebling. *Zork I: The Great Underground Empire*. PC. Infocom, 1984.

Bushnell, Nolan. *Computer Space*. Coin-operated arcade machine. Nutting Associates, 1971.

Cheshire, Sophie, *Final Fantasy VII–Plot Analysis, v1.7*. 2 Sep. 2002 [cited 26 Nov. 2002] `http://db.gamefaqs.com/console/psx/file/final_fantasy_vii_plot.txt`

Cook, David, et. al. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, 2nd Edition: Player's handbook*. Lake Geneva: TSR, Inc., 1989.

Derrida, Jacques. "Freud and the Scene of Writing." Trans. Alan Bass. *Writing and Difference*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978. 196-231.

Digital Pictures. *Night Trap*. Sega CD. Sega, 1992.

Doi, Takeo. *The Anatomy of Dependence*. trans. John Bester. New York: Kodansha International, 1971. 1988.

Eskelinen, Markku. "The Gaming Situation." *Game Studies: The international journal of computer game research*. 1.1 (2001). `www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/`

Gibbs, Nancy, and Timothy Roche. "The Columbine Tapes: In five secret videos they recorded before the massacre, the killers reveal their hatreds— and their lust for fame." *Time* 20 Dec. 1999: 40+

Green, Shawn, Sandy Petersen, and John Romero, et al. *Doom*. PC. id Software, 1993.

Hills, Ben. *Japan Behind the Lines*. Rydalmere: Sceptre, 1996.

Horii, Yuji (dir.) *Dragon Quest* [*DQI*] FC, NTSC J. Enix, 1986. —. *Dragon Quest V*. [*DQV*] SFC, NTSC J. Enix, 1992.
—. *Dragon Quest VII*. PSX, NTSC J. Enix, 2001.

Hubbard, Dustin. *Dragon Quest*. 29 Sep. 2001 [cited 13 Oct. 2001] `www.dqshrine.com/dq/`

Ishii, Koichi (dir.). *Legend of Mana*. PSX, NTSC U/C. Squaresoft, 2000.

Jenkins, Henry. "Game Design as Narrative Architecture." *First Person*. Eds. Pat Harrington and Noah Frup-Waldrop. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002.

Juul, Jesper. "Games Telling Stories?: A brief note on games and narratives." *Game Studies: The international journal of computer game research*. 1.1 (2001). `www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/`

Kent, Steven L. *The Ultimate History of Videogames*. Roseville, CA: Prima, 2001.

Khonsari, Navid (dir.). *Grand Theft Auto III*. PS2, NTSC U/C. Rockstar Games, 2001.

Kinsella, Sharon. *Adult Manga: Culture and power in contemporary Japanese society*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000.

Kitase, Yoshinori (dir.) *Final Fantasy III (E)*. [*FFIIIE*] SNES, NTSC U/C. Squaresoft, 1994.
—. *Final Fantasy VI*. [*FFVI*] SFC, NTSC J. Squaresoft, 1994.
—. *Final Fantasy VII (E)*. [*FFVII*] PSX, PAL. Squaresoft, 1997.
—. *Final Fantasy VIII (E)*. [*FFVIII*] PSX, NTSC U/C. Squaresoft, 1999.
—. *Final Fantasy IX (E)*. [*FFIX*] PSX, PAL B/G. Squaresoft, 2001.
—. *Final Fantasy X International*. PS2, NTSC J. Squaresoft, 2002.

Kitase, Yoshinori; Matsui, Akihiko; and Tokita, Takashi (dirs) *Chrono Trigger (E)*. SNES, NTSC U/C. Squaresoft, 1995.

Kojima, Hideo (dir.) *Metal Gear Solid*. PSX, PAL. Konami, 1998.

Miyamoto, Shigeru. *The Legend of Zelda*. NES, NTSC U/C. Nintendo of America, 1986.

Motomu, Toriyama (dir.) *Final Fantasy X-2*. PS2, NTSC J. Squaresoft, 2003.

Mouer, Ross, and Yoshio Sugimoto. *Images of Japanese Society: A study in the social construction of reality*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986.

Nakane, Chie. *Japanese Society*. Trans. Chie Nakane. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970. 1981.

Provenzo, Eugene F., Jr. *Video Kids: Making sense of Nintendo*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991.

Raffel, Brian, and Raffel, Steve (dirs). *Soldier of Fortune*. PC. Loki Games, 2000.

Robinson, Thomas N., et al. "Effects of Reducing Children's Television and Video Game Use on Aggressive Behavior: A randomized controlled trial." *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 155.1 (2001): 17+.

Rohlen, Thomas P. *Japan's High Schools*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

Sakaguchi, Hironobu (dir.) *Final Fantasy*. [*FFI*] FC, NTSC J. Squaresoft, 1987.

—. *Final Fantasy (E)*. NES, NTSC U/C. Nintendo, 1990.

—. *Final Fantasy II*. [*FFII*] FC, NTSC J. Squaresoft, 1988.

—. *Final Fantasy III*. [*FFIII*] FC, NTSC J. Squaresoft, 1990.

—. *Final Fantasy IV*. [*FFIV*] SFC, NTSC J. Squaresoft, 1991. —. *Final Fantasy II (E)* [*FFIIE*]. SNES, NTSC U/C. Squaresoft, 1991.

—. *Final Fantasy V*. [*FFV*] SFC, NTSC J. Squaresoft, 1992.

Sakurazaki (dir.). *Ninja Gaiden*. NES, NTSC U/C. Tecmo, 1989.

Schafer, Tim, et al. *Day of the Tentacle*. PC. Lucasarts, 1993.

Schodt, Frederik L. *Dreamland Japan: Writings on modern manga*. Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 1996.

Sky Render, *Final Fantasy VI Script Translation: Complete and proofread script*. [cited 28 November 2002] `http://sky_render.tripod.com/ff6script.txt`

Soldier of Fortune: Journal of professional adventurers–About SOF. [cited 17 May 2002] `www.sofmag.com/about.html`

Squaresoft. *Final Fantasy Mystic Quest*. SNES, NTSC U/C. 1992.

Squire, Kurt. "Cultural Framing of Computer/Video Games." *Game Studies: The international journal of computer game research*. 2.1 (2002). `http://cmc.uib.no/gamestudies/0102/squire/`

Stanley-Baker, Joan. *Japanese Art*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1984.

Sullum, Jacob. *Shooting Blind*. 26 May 1999 [cited 26 Nov. 2002] `http://reason.com/sullum/052699.shtml`

Suvin, Darko. "Considering the Sense of 'Fantasy' or 'Fantastic Fiction': An effusion." *Extrapolation* 41.3 (2000): 209-47.

—. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*. London: Yale University Press, 1979. 1980.

Twain, Mark. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Aerie Books, 1889. 1988.

Vestal, Andrew. *The History of Final Fantasy*. [cited 12 Jul. 2001] `www.videogames.com/features/universal/finalfantasy_hs/sec1_8_2.html`

Williams, Roberta, et al. *Phantasmagoria*. PC CD-ROM. Sierra, 1995