The Character of Difference: Procedurality, Rhetoric, and Roleplaying Games
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Abstract
This essay examines the cultural politics of the Final Fantasy series of computer roleplaying games. It advances an approach to games criticism that supplements Bogost’s procedural method with a thoroughly contextual approach to rhetorical criticism. By accounting for the narrative, visual and procedural representations in various iterations of the series, this essay argues that Final Fantasy games can also be understood as toys that allow players to experiment with different responses to cultural difference.

Keywords: roleplaying games, Final Fantasy, multiculturalism, rhetorical criticism, simulation, Burke, procedural rhetoric, Dungeons & Dragons, cultural difference, party management

Introduction
Late last year, a number of gaming forums and blogs enabled a provocative and engaging conversation about roleplaying games (RPGs) and race. It began with a lecture at a “Nerd Nite,” hosted at a bar in Brooklyn, NY, in which a nerd provocateur argued that the seminal roleplaying game Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) is riddled with problematic representations of race (Van Dyke, 2008). In the midst of this public debate concerning the social and political dimensions of race in roleplaying games, one blogger wrote, “Haven’t we destroyed the very concepts of fiction and imagination if everything imagined is directly mapped and compared to the real world?” (Raggi, 2009). While the statement is an effort to silence arguments supporting the notion that literature, games, and media have analogic bearing on contemporary life, it is also a fascinating starting point for an essay concerning identity, gameplay and procedural rhetorics in the Final Fantasy (FF) series of computer RPGs.

An equally fascinating starting point is the exchange on Tetris, as narrated by Bogost (2006), between Murray (1997) and Eskelinen (2001). In this exchange, Murray plays the role of the provocateur when she ascribes a narrative to Tetris (Pajitnov, 1989), describing the game as “a perfect enactment of the overtasked lives of Americans in the 1990s” (p. 143). Eskelinen, in turn, charges that Murray’s analogical reading commits an “interpretive violence” that degrades game scholarship. As an effort to silence a particular style of games criticism, the statement illustrates the myopia of pure ludological criticism. Bogost correctly notes, “If Murray’s interpretation is ‘horrid’ because it is determined to find a story at any cost, perhaps Eskelinen’s is horrid because it is determined to conceal worldly reference at any cost. In both interpretations something is missing” (p. 100). As Bogost goes on to explain, what is missing is a framework for understanding how ludological forms participate in the process of representation.

The scholarly debate and the public debate tackle similar issues, concerns which are also at the heart of this essay. These discourses contest the representational frontiers of games and the capacity of critics - and I use the term loosely, in the sense that all living things are critics (Burke, 1954/1935, p. 5) - to assign meaning to an experienced characterized by procedurality. This essay addresses the same tensions and attempts to undertake a rigorous reading of the FF series that accounts for visual and narrative representation as well as the procedurality of ludic structures. While I hope this rigor will be a talisman against some critics, ultimately, it is not possible to empirically demonstrate that players consciously experience the FF series as ‘equipment for living’ in a changing cultural milieu. Firmly grounded in the lessons of Marx and Freud, I reject Cartesian constructions of the subject/player as the coherent and self-sovereign arbiter of his or her own experience.

This paper will first construct a theoretical foundation for the claim that the Final Fantasy series can be understood as an apparatus for players adjusting to changing formations of cultural difference. Where Ian Bogost and Gonzalo Frasca are critical starting points, twentieth century philosopher and rhetorician Kenneth Burke’s notion of “equipment for living” is indispensable. The relatively simple and exemplary protocols of Dungeons & Dragons will be discussed throughout this first section to illustrate the efficacy of this approach. The second section will take a broad look at several moments in the American incarnation of the FF series. It shows how various iterations of the game opened up, for players, whole fields of possible responses to an increasingly diverse social and political environment.

In one way, this article attempts to destroy the very concepts of fiction and
imagining" the racial politics of the FF series to contemporary circumstances. I argue that the FF series figuratively conflates subject positions and identity categories with character classes. I further contend that the material and discursive contexts in which the games circulated encouraged players to use the fantasy role-playing games as instruments for coping with social and cultural tensions germane to multiculturalism. Of course, in this context, to destroy means to make non-trivial. It constitutes destruction to the extent that play is made transparent as something serious. On the other hand, this article is an effort to celebrate fiction and imagination by illustrating some of the ways in which the FF series enables analogic relations with real world referents. In this context, to celebrate means to make relevant. It constitutes celebration not because it "elevates" the everyday practices of gameplay to the status of political and philosophical argument and action, but rather because it recognizes the ways that the experience of popular cultural texts like the FF series are already imbricated with political and philosophical discourse and action.

Procedure and Rhetorical Criticism of Roleplaying Games

Roleplaying games are among the more visible digital games and receive a fair amount of critical attention. However, the vast majority of this attention is focused on a particular form of RPG, the massively multiplayer online roleplaying game. In this body of literature, a good deal of attention has been focused on the construction and performance of identity in the social contexts of persistent worlds (for instance, Sanford & Madill 2007; Taylor 2008; Schroder 2008) - no doubt thanks, in part, to Gary Fine's (1991) and Sherry Turkle's (1995) prescient and trailblazing works on identity, roleplaying games, and online social interaction. But, with a few notable exceptions - Higgins' (2009) analysis of Everquest (Sony Online Entertainment, 2002) and World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), for example - scholarship willing to confront the ways that MMORPGs' rules and culture intersect to structure the representation of racial and ethnic identity is rare. Even Lisa Nakamura's (2002) influential work concerning "cybertypes," which briefly enters the realm of online games, is focused more on how social interaction produces and reproduces identity constructs than how narrative, visual and ludic elements of the game participate in these processes. Additionally, RPGs have yet to be considered from the perspective of simulation or procedural representation. In a short article found in Tracy Fullerton's (2008) textbook, Game Design Workshop, Ian Bogost writes, "Most of the time, videogames create procedural models of fantasy lives, like that of a pro ballplayer... or a blood elf... or a space marine" (p. 58). Because Bogost does not further pursue the critical implications of this statement, this essay will attempt to explore its significance to the study of RPGs.

Procedure and Rhetorical Criticism of Roleplaying Games

Bogost explains that procedural criticism emerges from the union of computational science and linguistic inquiry. Combining the computational sense of procedure as the rules of execution that determine which tasks and actions can and cannot be performed in a given situation with an understanding of rhetoric as persuasion, Bogost argues, "Computation is representation, and procedurality in the computational sense is a means to produce that expression" (2007, p. 5). More specifically, Bogost champions this approach because it allows critics to interrogate representational strategies germane to computational media: "[O]nly procedural systems like computer software actually represent process with process" (p. 14).

It is this procedural expression, or representation, that Bogost carries into his theorization of procedural rhetoric. He calls on fellow games scholars to interrogate the ways in which computer games "make claims about how things work," in order to reproduce or contest social, cultural, and political processes (2008, p. 125). One of Bogost's most lucid examples is the McDonald's Videogame, a game critical of McDonald's, developed by Moleindustria (2006). Bogost notes that players must manage four aspects of the business - a cattle pasture in the developing world, a slaughterhouse, a McDonald's store, and the corporate headquarters - which, if run ethically, ultimately fail to keep the company profitable. To the extent that the McDonald's Videogame depicts the processes involved in the operation of the business, it constitutes a procedural representation. However, to the extent that these processes are editorialized, depicted as fraught with greed, dishonesty, and even outright violence, the McDonald's Videogame embodies a procedural rhetoric. Procedurally, as I will demonstrate, is an appropriate framework for understanding RPG characters.

However, procedurality alone will not suffice. Frasca's (2003) perspective of games as simulations is required. He argues that every simulation - and I understand Bogost's procedural model as a simulation, a system that models the behaviors of another system (p. 223) - is wrought with ideology. Specifically, Frasca calls attention to the question of who and what have been included and excluded from the reality constructed by the simulation. Frasca also explains the politics of manipulation rules, which define, "what the player is able to do within the model" (p. 232). For instance, in Frasca's primary example, the Sims, you can form a family with a same-sex partner and change jobs. These actions are possible but not necessary to play the game. Nor are they goals, which Frasca also identifies as an ideological element. Goals distinguish winning from losing and point to an ideal state. Frasca's analysis also offers an implicit critique of Bogost's distinction between procedural representation and procedural rhetoric. When every representation is in some way ideological it is not possible to speak about representation without also considering it rhetorical. In this regard, it is important to recognize that RPG simulations of life are limited, partial and subjective simulations in which individuals are essentialized and their origins
This is inescapable in the first edition Dungeons & Dragons (Gygax & Arneson, 1974). Each character is created by randomly generating a set of six attribute scores ranging from one to twenty in the categories of strength, dexterity, constitution, intelligence, wisdom and charisma. As a representational scheme, this suggests, most obviously, that persons can be reduced to these six factors. It also suggests a fixed range of ability that no mortal person can surpass. This reductive determinism is modeled procedurally as well, in the processes of generating the character that represents the six numbers. Attribute scores play a significant role in determining the character’s race and class, (or occupation), as well as influencing the quantity and quality of skills and abilities they may learn.

Race is determined by a die roll and effects a character by restricting what professions are available. Human are allowed any of the three professions: fighter, magic-user, and cleric. However, elves are restricted to either fighter or magic-user and both dwarves and hobbits are restricted to the fighter class. This is how, as the ability modifications are factored into the process of character development, race is modeled procedurally.

Character class completes the simulation, determining what skills and abilities - in short, actions - the character may use to interact with and in the game. The fighter, defined by high strength and constitution scores, can wear any armor and has a substantial amount of health, or hit points. Fighters also begin the game with the ability to use four different weapons and can specialize in the use of particular weapons, which grants additional bonuses to hit and damage foes. The magic user, on the other hand, needs intelligence, wisdom and dexterity. Higher scores in these abilities allow magic users to memorize more spells, reduce the probability that spells fail, and grant access to more powerful magic as they advance in level. However, magic users are restricted from wearing armor, start with proficiency in only one weapon, and generally have a small number of hit points. The cleric, finally, is able to use restorative and defensive magic, wear armor, and begin with specialties in two weapons. As procedural representations about fantasy lives, D&D character classes constitute an essentialist claim about the possibilities life affords an individual. There are some actions available to all characters, such as speaking and moving, but the rate of success of some relatively commonplace tasks, including horseback riding and rope climbing, are modified by character class. More complex, imaginative, or fantastic forms of interaction - creating a magical ball of fire, fighting with a weapon in each hand, or improving the morale of other adventurers through a blessing - are either possible or impossible depending on character class.

Before turning away from this analysis, consideration must also be given to the process of character development. If characters are simulations of fantasy lives, character development simulates personal growth through life experience. The road to character development is paved with defeated enemies and completed quests, which reward players' characters with experience points. Once enough experience points have been attained, the character crosses an invisible threshold - quantified in the rules but intangible in every other way - and levels up.

Characters improve slightly with each level, and at regular intervals can develop new weapon specialties or other skills their adventures may require.

These improvements are all pre-designated possibilities of each character class, written into the rules of the game. Thus, a magic user that levels up may be able to increase their repository of spells and the frequency of their use. A fighter may choose to increase their proficiency with a certain weapon, their ability to move while wearing heavy armor, or their skill fighting from horseback. However, characters can only develop along the path preordained for their class. For the most part, this means that a fighter will never be able to perform a magic-attack and that a magic user will never be proficient fighting from horseback. In this fashion, the essentialist representation of each distinct class is preserved and projected across the character's lifespan. As a life simulator, the original D&D depicts life as a violent series of episodes in which the trajectory of one's personal growth is determined in advance.

...And Other Forms of Rhetorical Criticism

When we accept game studies of procedurality and procedural rhetoric as valid, we acknowledge that the representational frontiers of games cannot be explained through the conceptual binary of fiction and reality, to which public culture sometimes turns. But to accept Murray’s interpretation of Tetris, or this essay’s claim that the FF-series is also a toy for coping with changing modes of multiculturalism, we need to push the representational frontiers of games even further. Though a number of approaches may suffice, Kenneth Burke’s notion of literature as equipment for living is particularly appropriate because it accounts for this therapeutic function of rhetoric and recognizes the active engagement of critics in the making of meaning.

The basic premise is innocuous. Burke (1968/1941) suggest that critics read literature - and Brummet (1984; 1985) extends this to the realm of contemporary media and other ‘electronic literature’ - as “proverbs writ large” (p. 256). Proverbs function, according to Burke’s analysis, to console, to avenge, to aide in foretelling and, encapsulating the other functions, to “name typical, recurrent situations” (p. 254). Additionally, they provide strategies for dealing with situations, as the competing proverbs “out of sight, out of mind” and “distance makes the heart grow fond” illustrate. Texts work in the same fashion. “A work like Madame Bovary... is the strategic naming of a situation. It singles out a pattern of experience that is sufficiently representative of our social structure, that recurs sufficiently often mutatis mutandis, for people to ‘need a word for it’ and to adopt an attitude
In the same way that Wittgenstein (1998/1953) attempts a unified definition of games by linking “familial resemblance,” Burke encourages us to look for linkages that direct the critic outside of the text to the contemporaneous situations they describe. He explains, “One doesn’t usually think of [proverbs] as ‘abstract,’ since they are usually so concrete in their stylistic expression. But they invariably aim to discern the general behind the particular” (p. 260). In other words, Madame Bovary is not simply a novel about one woman’s adultery in nineteenth century Normandy, but rather is a proto-feminist expression of the increasingly prevalent sentiment that the bourgeoisie family is a prison of banality for women. In contemporary rhetorical criticism, this approach is expressed in McGee’s (1980) clarion call to locate the meaning of a text by situating it in relation to discourses circulating in the social. As DeLuca (1999) explains, this means constructing a “con/text,” an understanding of the rhetorical text as imbricated in and articulated to relevant discourses and conditions (p.154).

This sort of reading requires thinking about the way persons are simulated, or figured, in RPGs in relation to the social context in which the figuration was produced and received. This sort of reading also enables the critic to interrogate the relationship between the rules of the game, the forms of play they engender, and the knowledge about reality one constructs in the process of acting and reacting within those rules. In other words, it allows us to see the circumstance in which Tetris can be read as a simulation of American life, and the possible contexts in which the FF series might be used as a toy to help players make sense of and engage with rapidly changing social conditions.

Following this approach, I argue that it is vital to understand the experience of playing the original D&D, sold from 1974 to 1979, in the material and discursive context of contemporaneous socio-economic changes. Building upon changes in modes of production that gained widespread currency in the material and discursive context of the 1970s, Americans surveying the economic landscape of the 1970s found the demand for skilled and unskilled physical labor on a steep decline (Fischer and Haut, 2006, p. 107). So much so that sociologist Daniel Bell’s critical reflections on the 1970s led him to announce the coming of a new mode of living where corporeal tasks are nearly nonexistent, which he termed the post-industrial society (1976). Even as these various economic forces further diminished cultural valuations of physical labor, unionization efforts by professionals in the public sector were in the process of reshaping the flagging labor movement by establishing the normacy of mental labor e.g. teachers and civil servants (Fischer and Haut, 2006, p. 112-113).

Social agonisms of this sort were not new to the 1970s. After all, Marx (1965/1931) locates this dichotomy at the origin of capitalist modes of production, writing, “Division of labor becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labor appears” (p. 43). However, the salience of social and economic transformations afoot in American culture created conditions in which further implications can be ascribed to D&D’s essentializing procedural representations of characters.

In fact, the character creation and development system in D&D reproduces a classic binary between physis and nomos, body and mind, and this division between physical and mental capabilities in D&D represents the more pervasive dichotomy between manual and mental labor operative in 1970s American society. A later edition of The Player’s Handbook’s (Cook, 1995) begins with an explanation that the first three attribute scores represent physical qualities of a character and the last three represent mental qualities (p.18). Of course, the cleric provides a hybrid character type that employs both physical and mental power, but the rules determining the cleric’s skills and abilities only further illustrate how the game is structured so that the fighter and magic user’s interactions complement one another. Although it is a rather crude, binary model of social relations, the procedural representation of D&D characters provide players with a site to negotiate tensions germane to economic class and status.

Furthermore, the complementary nature of character classes in D&D engenders symbiotic relationships and patterns of interaction. In other words, the rules governing this final procedural rhetoric represents cooperation and integration as positive - even necessary - and encourage players to reach across certain class and status boundaries. In this dialectical moment of figuration, they open the possibility that ideas experimented with in the game seep into the player’s everyday practices.

**Final Fantasy as a Simulation of the Social**

Traditional pen and paper RPGs like D&D are still enjoyed by legions of gaming enthusiasts. However, computer RPGs (CRPGs) have been a mainstay of American video gaming since Richard Garriott’s Ultima (1980). And while Dragon Warrior (Chunsoft, 1989) was the first CRPG to grace American gaming consoles, Final Fantasy (Square, 1990) is credited with creating the North American market for like games (Vestal, n.d.). Indeed, more than 85 million FF titles have been shipped as of September 2008 (Square-Enix, 2009). More importantly, the FF series is commonly recognized by the gaming community as an exemplary CRPG series that pioneered a number of conventions now typical of the genre (Casamassina, 2005). And it is a series played by “casual” and “hardcore” gamers alike (Kalata 2008). In the interceding years, computer roleplaying games have developed in several unique directions, but the Final Fantasy series is paradigmatic of console-based RPGs.
The cost of upgrading weapons and armor and the cost of purchasing healing and two way.
The last two examples from the manual concerning party composition tells the player, “Make it anything, prestige classes, which, like the cleric, labor does not supersede the opposition of mental and physical traits. Nor do the prestige classes, which, like the cleric in D&D, are still structured by the binary. If anything, this more accurately simulates the complexity of class in a society where the technical and professional knowledge and services of teachers, nurses, and civil servants are increasingly identified with labor.

Final Fantasy also procedurally represents the cooperation and integration of physical and mentally oriented characters in a positive light. A section in the game manual concerning party composition tells the player, “Make it anyway you like, it cannot be wrong” (p. 36). However, this is quickly followed by six example parties.

For beginners, the manual recommends a fighter, black belt, white mage, and black mage. “This combination works really well together,” the manual explains, “It is balanced and highly recommended” because it combines battle skill with magic abilities (p.36). In this arrangement, the armored fighter can withstand enemy attacks while the white mage keeps the fighter in good health as the black belt and black mage inflict damage on foes. The game’s default party of fighter, thief, black belt, and red mage is also balanced. However, in this arrangement, the red mage heals the fighter and also contributes some physical attacks to compensate for its less powerful healing magic. These example parties are both heterogeneous with regard to physical and mental abilities.

The last two examples from the manual, however, are not balanced in the same way. It discusses a magic oriented party consisting of a red mage, white mage, and two black mages as well as a physically oriented party composed of a fighter, thief, and two black belts. These examples highlight homogenous parties, which rely on a different approach. The magic party, for instance, is warned that without a warrior to draw enemy attacks characters will die often and need to be revived in a time consuming process. The physical party, on the other hand, is burdened by the cost of upgrading weapons and armor and the cost of purchasing healing.
which concerns about class experience both economic and cultural marginalization, suggests one way in which concerns about class and culture remain entangled (p. 19). Nevertheless, the narrative and visual discourses suggest a different reading in which characters are understood as figures for ethnic, national, and cultural difference. The protagonist is a young girl, Terra, who is half human and half esper, a race of spiritual beings linked to summoning magic. Because she is part esper, Terra is enslaved by the imperialist Gestaltian Empire as a child and trained as a weapon of war. When a mission goes wrong, and Terra is pursued by Gestaltian troops, a thief named Locke comes to her assistance and eventually introduces her to the rebel Returners. In the course of their struggle, Terra and the Returners travel to several different nations and are joined by a diverse cast totaling fourteen playable characters. Notably, the game’s story articulates the mechanic and samurai character classes to the cultural and ideologically distinct milieu of the technologically advanced kingdom of Figaro and the martial nation of Doma, respectively. Additionally, the characters Mog and Umaro’s jobs are described in game menus as Moogle and Yeti, terms that also name their respective races. While all but three characters (Locke, Setzer and Shadow) are associated with distinct cultures and worldviews, six of the fourteen playable characters are articulated to specific ethnic and national cultures. In this way, this iteration of the FF series enables the game to continue to serve as equipment for living in a changing social world.

But, the situation the FF series names is not the same situation the original D&D addresses. The narrative and visual discourses suggest a different reading in which characters are understood as figures for ethnic, national, and cultural difference. Additionally, situating the party management possibilities made available in the first few iterations of the FF series in the social context in which the figuration originally circulated draws these differences into strong relief. It is for these reasons that the party management simulations in these games allowed players to experience them as toys to help explore and negotiate social agonisms concerning cultural difference.

Indeed, while Americans played Final Fantasy IV and Final Fantasy VI the Cold War came to an end and single-issue politics and identity politics dominated public discourse. Of course, just as the final decades of the Cold War did not obviate the single issue politics of the anti-nuclear arms movement and environmental movement or the identity politics of the Black Panthers and the American Indian Movement, this shift does not negate the continued relevance of class agonisms. In fact, Nancy Fraser’s (1997) notion of bivalent collectivities, peoples who experience both economic and cultural marginalization, suggests one way in which concerns about class and culture remain entangled (p. 19). Nevertheless,
characters' attribute scores and allow players to reconfigure junctions also increase and abilities once reserved for specific character prerogative system that constitutes the "spectacle of the social and political struggles of the 1990s" (p. 26). This increasingly fractured landscape constitutes the stage upon which the FF series is played.

The proliferation of character classes rooted in increasingly specific attributes and abilities does not simply parallel this realignment of agonisms shaping the social, it functions as a mechanism to immerse players in the possible modes of life enabled by these re-figurations. Engaging this apparatus, players are thrust into a managerial role that requires the coordination of a diverse cast of character classes. For different portions of each game, the player is either assigned or allowed to choose a party of three to four adventurers from all the playable characters. In addition to selecting a balanced party, the player must also complementarily coordinate the actions of each member of the party during each encounter with an enemy or puzzle. Because classes are defined by numerous characteristics that variously supplement, complement and exist independently of physical and mental prowess, balance in CRPGs is less formulaic than in RPGs like the original D&D. The simple binary of physical and mental ability must be supplemented by consideration of variables including offensive and defensive capabilities, the acquisition and use of items, and the distance, defense, and special abilities of enemies. This balancing act forces the player to consider the differences that set classes apart, the relational value of each class, and the potential role of each distinct class in contributing to the party's overall success. In doing so, it acts as a training-ground for a social milieu increasingly characterized by the prevalence of constructions of ethnic, national, and cultural differences.

However, these first few iterations of the FF series advance another procedural rhetoric that advocates the practice of multiculturalist ideology. Slavoj Zizek (2003) summarizes how this ideology is expressed in popular culture: "We are all different - some are big, some are small, some know how to fight, others know how to fight - but we should learn to live with these differences, to perceive them as something that makes our lives richer" (p.276-7). In the FF series, some characters in the party are big and strong, some are small and agile, others are healers, damage dealers, dedicated item users, or defenders. The player must coordinate the interactions of these various character classes in order to successfully complete objectives and survive encounters with enemies. Additionally, this rhetoric is buttressed by rich character development that individuates each of the array of playable characters in these games. Unlike the original Final Fantasy and RPGs like D&D, it is not possible to configure a homogenous party because no two characters are exactly alike. The player can compose a party that is more homogenous than heterogeneous, but never a party of identical characters. In this fashion, early iterations of the Final Fantasy series enable and encourage players to engage reality in a particular fashion by simultaneously immersing themselves in a world where different folks can coordinate particular attributes in order to succeed where a homogenous group fails.

Configuring the Figurations

Though the American social landscape is still characterized by agonisms organized around ethnic, national, and cultural identity, the procedural rhetoric of the FF series has continued to develop and change. Final Fantasy VII and Final Fantasy VIII carry on a design principle initiated in Final Fantasy VI, which downplays the distinction between occupations.

Final Fantasy VII (Sakaguchi, 1997) does this by allowing characters to learn skills by equipping materia orbs in "slots" on their weapons. This means that a strong fighter with low intelligence can equip the most powerful magic materia. Even skills typically assigned to a specific character class can be exchanged between all characters. However, Final Fantasy VII also employs several parameters that encourage adherence to a traditional character class development scheme. For one, each character's ability scores are allocated in advance so that each has different emphases. This means that two characters with different intelligence attribute scores could cast the same spell at the same target and see disparate results, and that two characters with different agility attribute scores stealing from the same target have a different probability of success. Additionally, like most prior iterations of the series, each character is able to use one type of weapon. Because a weapon's type plays a large role in determining the attacking power of the weapon, only allowing one specific character to use each type encourages the player to use certain characters for their physical abilities. The ludic structure of character development in Final Fantasy VII is significantly different than the early iterations of the series and RPGs like D&D. It facilitates a great deal of freedom in the process of character development, which is traditionally a linear growth along a predetermined path. Still, the distribution of attribute scores and assignment of weapons encourages players to construct traditional character classes.

Similarly, Final Fantasy VIII (Sakaguchi, 1999) employs a character development system that rejects linear representations of experience but reinforces the prerogative to create distinct and complementary classes. The player "junctions" each character with multiple, summonable guardian forces, which grant characters three benefits. First, they give characters access to numerous skills and abilities once reserved for specific character classes. Second, junctions both allow and encourage each and every character to use magic. And, third, most junctions also increase specific attribute scores. As part of the junction system, the player assigns each character three passive abilities, which further alter characters' attribute scores and allow players to reconfigure physically oriented
character to be powerful magic users, and vice versa. Additionally, while each character is able to use only one type of weapon, *Final Fantasy VII* eliminates the disparity of damage inflicted by different weapon types. Together, these qualities of the junction system and weapon types allow players greater freedom to develop characters in novel ways.

However, like its predecessor, the game employs several mechanisms to encourage the development of characters that adhere to traditional class types. For instance, attribute scores are differentially distributed among characters. Of course, the influence of this is mitigated by the junction system, which allows players to modify their characters' attribute scores. But, a final aspect of the junction system, which has players select four active skills for each character, also encourages players to develop distinct character classes. Because the number of skills any one character can use is limited, it is important that passive abilities and active skills supplement one another. Thus, the character system in *Final Fantasy VIII* does not allow players to create powerful generalists, but rather, facilitates the construction of specialized characters.

*Final Fantasy VII* and *Final Fantasy VIII* both feature character development possibilities and protocols that trouble the traditional constructions of distinct PRG character classes, which simulate growth from experience occurring along the path of a straight and irreducibly singular line. Nevertheless, the games provide incentives to promote the creation of distinct and complementary characters. In this fashion, games from this second moment add another dimension to the rhetoric of the first moment. They incorporate the player into performance of the conflation of race, ethnicity, and nationality to character class. Like earlier iterations, characters are articulated to different subject positions and identity groups by the narrative discourse and visual representation. Unlike earlier iterations, *Final Fantasy VII* and *Final Fantasy VIII* make players complete this figuration as they manage the development of characters. The player - not the program - executes the process that configures characters as figures of difference. This becomes a necessary precondition for composing the heterogeneous parties capable of besting the enemies and obstacles players encounter as they adventure.

In this way, the procedural rhetoric of the social simulation is not only preserved but also strengthened by the integration of the player into the process (Caldwell, 2000, par. 16, Douglas, 2002, par. 23).

**The Return of the Same**

The protocological changes to character development are carried even further in the third and final moment of the FF series. However, in this moment, the essentialism and linearity of traditional RPGs and early FF titles are abandoned, enabling a style of character construction at odds with the procedural representation discussed above. *Final Fantasy IX* (Sakaguchi, 2000), which reaffirms traditional ludic structures with a job system that articulates skills and abilities to specific character classes, is not the last game in the series that players might experience as a tool for generating possible responses to multiculturalism. But, it is the last in the series that advocates cultural pluralism by privileging integration and cooperation between different characters.

*Final Fantasy X* (Kaltsa, 2001) abandons the explicit use of character classes. Instead, characters are leveled up using a non-linear sphere grid, which marks the skills and attributes currently possessed by each character as well as skills and attributes that every character may learn. As characters gain experience, the player can improve them by accessing the sphere grid and opening nodes. Magic of all types can be learned from the sphere grid and character's attribute scores can be enhanced as well. What this ultimately means is that each character can learn the same skills and gain the same attributes as every other character.

*Final Fantasy X* does retain a number of vestigial components of a class differentiated character system. For one, each character's initial attribute scores suggest emphases in magic, physical strength, accuracy, speed, defense, etc. Weapons are also character specific, and tend to do more damage in the form of a sword or spear than a rod or a staff. Finally, different characters begin in closer proximity (on the sphere grid) to certain sets of skills, which suggests a class for each character. However, by completing notable feats in the game, the player acquires the ability for characters to branch out from their initial skill sets. And because attribute scores can be augmented (on the sphere grid) at the player’s discretion, the character that begins with a low attribute score in strength and fights with a staff can still become as powerful a physical damage dealer as the character wielding a two-handed sword. In other words, the vestigial components of a class-based character system - the weapon assignments, attribute scores, and relative proximity to skills on the sphere grid - are counteracted by rules that enable players to develop characters that transcend classes. In the normal course of play, characters will acquire enough experience to enable the player to develop them beyond their initial path and learn skills and attributes traditionally reserved for distinct job classes. In this manner, *Final Fantasy X* encourages the player to collapse the complex division of labor that has traditionally formed the basis of the relations between distinct character classes.

The most recent iteration, *Final Fantasy XII* (Matsuno, 2006) abandons the principle of character classes altogether. Characters are leveled up through a "license board," and every ability, including the capacity to equip various weapons and armor and the ability to learn magic, summon and special attacks, is learned through the license board. Even though characters begin with some different licenses, none of the characters are located very far from each other on the license board, which means that there is virtually no disincentive to changing
parties, which communicates a positive valuation of moments of the series, dynamics of real-life bands of adventurers, they also function as party management and character development systems not only simulate shows how various critics to investigate how "equipment for living" enables critics to consider "living" enables critics to address living"enables critics to consider living"enables critics to address living" that can be fully appreciated starting points. However, as efforts to interpret Tetris demonstrate, not all games can be fully appreciated when thought through the literal referents of their visual images and narratives. Burke's notion of (electronic) literature as "equipment for living" enables critics to consider how popular, well-received games might also be understood to address the recurrent situations that trouble the cultures that consume them so voraciously. Looking at games in "con/text" also encourages critics to investigate how "equipment for living" advocate particular attitudes toward these situations.

Applied to the \textit{Final Fantasy} series of computer roleplaying games, this approach shows how various iterations of the series can operate, for American audiences, as a safe space to experiment with different ways of engaging the social. The party management and character development systems not only simulate the dynamics of real-life bands of adventurers, they also function as procedural representations of an increasingly diverse society dealing with its own differences. Furthermore, each iteration of \textit{Final Fantasy} also constitutes a procedural rhetoric that advocates for a particular stance toward this condition. In the first and second moments of the series, \textit{Final Fantasy} rewards the configuration of heterogeneous parties, which communicates a positive valuation of difference and casts a positive
light on policies and practices that enact multiculturalist ideology. However, in the third moment there is no longer an incentive to construct a diverse party of complementary characters. In fact, games from this period require players to configure characters that transcend their class and acquire the abilities of other classes.

On the one hand, we could say that Final Fantasy X and Final Fantasy XII, in which players freely determine the destinies of their characters, represent the culmination of an anti-essentialist trend begun in the second moment of the series. In fact, over the course of the series, the procedural rhetorics of the individual character does gesture toward the deterritorialization of identity. However, this is not the most salient "con/text" for critical engagement with the Final Fantasy series. As a simulation of social dynamics, the last two titles in the series incentivize homogeneity and sameness, characteristics of an ethnocentric, assimilationist approach to coping with cultural difference.

Such a reading of the Final Fantasy series is not possible when the representational frontiers of games are drawn to exclude everything beyond the screen. Such an approach cannot even account for the player, much less the context of play. A rhetorical approach, grounded in Bogost’s theorizations of procedurality and supplemented with Burke’s notion of “equipment for living” allows critics to engage games as cultural texts - not cultural vacuums. It also allows us to see how these simulations of the social express procedural rhetorics that can alternatively buttress or undercut the politics of cultural pluralism. If nothing else, this essay should remind critics that ludological forms are made meaningful by players engaging in figuration. In the case of the Final Fantasy series, ultimately, this interaction between player and game is what constitutes the character of difference.

Notes

[1] The discussion was sustained on five blogs, three of which (Van Dyke, 2008; Sanders, 2008; Raggi, 2009) directly engaged the controversy while the others (Coates, 2008; Koster, 2008) served as forums for discussion.

[2] Though all the games in the series were developed in Japan by Japanese design teams, this is no barrier to considering how they are received in the American market. Indeed, we cannot deny that American audiences will make Final Fantasy meaningful to their own lives anymore than we can reasonably suggest that a game developed by a Russian programmer will decoded by the global audience that plays it in precisely the same fashion that it is encode.

[3] This is not a new project. Huizinga (1955) first wrote about the impossible exclusion of seriousness in Homo Ludens.

[4] I will not attempt to summarize the growing body of MMORPG research, but rather, encourage readers to consider recent special issues on the subject of MMORPGs produced by the online journal Game Studies and the journal Critical Studies in Media Communication, as well as a 2006 special issue of Games and Culture.

[5] While the game is an outlier according the language of moments this essay employs, the reader is asked to recall that these moments are a somewhat clumsy organizational tool. Final Fantasy IX is glossed over for this and no other reason.

[6] This conclusion is drawn from reports on gaming websites (see Final Fantasy Republic, 2007) as well as my own experience.

[7] Final Fantasy XI (Tanaka, 2002) is not discussed because it is a massively multiplayer online roleplaying game with a job system, which organizes character classes around specific set of abilities and attributes but also allows the player to switch between jobs frequently. This game demands the energy of another, distinct inquiry.

[8] Indeed, Newman (2002) argues that videogame characters are best, “considered as a suite of characteristics or equipment utilised [sic] and embodied by the controlling player”(para...3). According to this procedurally oriented perspective, Final Fantasy XII's characters each enable the same forms of interaction.

References


procedurality and procedural authorship, we must address the concept of procedural rhetoric, which Bogost calls a “… subdomain of procedural authorship” (Bogost, 2008). In the context of Pokémon games, procedural rhetoric is evident through the narrative unfolding as players progress through the game. For example, the local Pokémon professor will outline the story and set expectations for the player, explaining that the ultimate goal of the game is to “catch ’em all.” This narrative element is procedural rhetoric in action, as players are led through a series of choices and actions that further the story.

Procedure, Process and Possibility Space, in Ctrl-Alt-Play: Essays on Control in Video Gaming, edited by M. Wysocki. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012). “The Character of Difference: Procedurality, Rhetoric… Procedurality: How we learn from games. All Pokémon games start identically: The character is a new guy or girl in a small village, in a world inhabited by creatures that can be trained to battle, help with chores and work, or that can be held as pets. A local Pokémon professor will tell the players everything they have to know to start their journey, and will explain to them that the ultimate goal of the game is to “catch ’em all.” Some of the professor’s explanations will outline the scenario, in which the story is about to take place. After explaining the concept of procedural and procedural authorship, we must address the concept of procedural rhetoric, which Bogost calls a “… subdomain of procedural authorship.” The Character of Difference: Procedurality, Rhetoric… Roleplaying Games. Game Studies. 9 (2). ISSN 1604-7982. Role-playing video games typically rely on a developed story and setting. Players control one or several characters by issuing commands, which are performed by the character at an effectiveness determined by that character’s numeric attributes.