Straddling the Great Divide: Intersections in Gameplay and Narrative in Contemporary Japanese Role-Playing Games

by

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Abstract

This project explores questions concerning whether digital games should be studied in terms of narrative, ludology (gameplay), or both. The project begins by discussing the current state of Game Studies and the ‘narrative vs. ludology’ debate. The author provides a brief outline of contemporary theory surrounding the debate before asserting her central thesis that both gameplay and narrative are integral components of player experience and that both must be acknowledged. The author then outlines her research methodology, which includes textual analyses of two popular Japanese role-playing games. By examining the ways in which morality is depicted in both games, the author posits that the functions of both gameplay and narrative in constructing player experience will become evident. A brief discussion of what constitutes a role-playing game is provided, followed by a discussion of the ways in which digital role-playing games are cultural products. The author includes an analysis of narrative conventions in contemporary Japanese role-playing games in order to resist Eurocentric readings of the two games to be examined.

The textual analyses begin with an examination of gameplay in *Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn*. An analysis of the game’s narrative elements such as plot, characterization, and theme follows. Through this analysis, the author observes a marked focus upon collectivist morality, which is clearly observable in both the gameplay and narrative elements of the game. Gameplay in *Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World* is then examined, followed by an analysis of the title’s narrative elements. The author observes that the gameplay and narrative elements of the latter game emphasize individualistic morality. Although the games provide very different depictions of morality, both rely continually upon intersections in gameplay and narrative to construct player experience.

Through the textual analyses, the author concludes that gameplay and narrative are thoroughly interconnected and that attempting to divorce the two for the purpose of academic study is purely artificial and thus not useful in understanding the ways in which digital games affect global cultures. The project concludes with a number of recommendations concerning the future of Game Studies.
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Introduction

The purpose of this project is to aid the Field of Video Game Studies in suturing the divide that has arisen between ludological and narratological methods of digital game studies. As will be discussed in further detail in my analysis of the field of Video Game Studies, game scholars have traditionally found themselves mired in debates over whether or not video games should be considered and analyzed as narrative texts. Drawing upon the works of contemporary video game scholars, I will practically apply both ludic and narrative theory in textual analyses of two popular video games: *Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn* and *Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World*. My aim is to utilize textual analyses in order to examine the ways in which gameplay and narrative intersect to construct overall gameplay experiences. It is my contention that many contemporary digital games are designed to be experienced by players chiefly through intersections between gameplay and narrative, and that attempting to divorce the two is counterintuitive to understanding the ways in which players experience games.

I have specifically chosen two titles within the Role-Playing Game (RPG) genre due to RPGs’ characteristic focus on combining gameplay and narrative. Because RPGs are marketed as being both interactive and heavily narrative, they are, by design, experienced by players through intersections of gameplay and narrative. I have chosen to examine *Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn* and *Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World* specifically because the games share a number of common features; both were developed for the Nintendo Wii console and were released roughly one year apart, as well as sharing common cultural origins. Moreover, the *Fire Emblem* and *Tales* franchises are two of the most globally popular and lucrative RPG franchises developed in Japan. For this reason, both titles can be considered ‘mainstream’ games with wide appeal in the gaming subculture.
By performing textual analyses of these games, I intend to examine the ways in which games as texts influence and even construct player experience. Both games’ treatment of the theme of morality will serve as the focal point of my textual analyses due to the fact that intersections between narrative and gameplay can be seen most clearly in the ways in which morality is depicted in both titles. *Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn*, a turn-based strategy RPG, depicts a morality centered upon success through collective effort and a continued resistance to portray a singular character or viewpoint as morally superior to others. Conversely, *Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World*, a real-time action RPG, depicts a morality centered entirely upon one individual, whose thoughts and actions are portrayed as holding such significance as to affect the very fate of the planet he inhabits. The two very different depictions of morality offered in the games can be clearly seen at the level of narrative (through the use of point of view, character, plot, etc.) as well as gameplay (through the use of character control in combat, access to characters’ inventories, etc.). Hence, gameplay is used by the games’ creators to enhance the player’s experience of the games’ narratives, and narrative is likewise used to enhance the player’s experience of gameplay. I will expand upon the ways in which gameplay and narrative intersect through morality in my textual analyses (I will also expand upon terms such as ‘turn-based strategy RPG’ and ‘real-time action RPG’).

Implicit in my study is the fact that, contrary to the claims of some theorists in the field of Video Game Studies, games do exist as text, insofar as player experience is concerned. While it is true that some video game titles and genres—particularly those released in the 1980s and early 1990s—need not be examined in terms of textuality, the complexity of most contemporary video games demand close analysis of textual elements. As my analyses of *Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn* and *Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World* will reveal, The RPG genre is heavily
invested not only in the construction of narrative experiences, but in constructions of intertextual experiences which demand a high level of video game literacy in order to achieve a satisfying gameplay experience. It is also important to note that both games examined in this project share a common cultural origin; *Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn* and *Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World* are both products of Japan and are thus classified by fans and industry professionals as J-RPGs (or Japanese Role-Playing Games). While the cultural origins of video games should not be overemphasized, the fact that both games originated in Japan is highly significant at the level of narrative, as ideas surrounding what does and does not constitute a narrative are highly culturally informed. As will be discussed in my analysis of J-RPGs, contemporary video game scholars’ failure to recognize narrativity in digital games may very well be tied to a Eurocentric understanding of how narrative is formed.

The final implication of my textual analyses is that traditional methods of studying digital games under the broad, umbrella term “video games” is no longer viable. Considering the multitude of video game genres that currently exist, as well as the vast differences in gameplay mechanics, levels of narrativity, and increasingly complex hardware, scholars within the field of Video Game Studies must adopt a more individualistic approach to both game and player analysis; that is, scholars must analyze individual titles and genres. This in turn will require scholars to develop a more intimate understanding of contemporary video game titles and genres alike, without relying exclusively upon audience/player research in order to examine games and their effects on global culture. This is, of course, not to suggest that audience research is not a valuable and, in fact, essential aspect of Video Game Studies, but rather that scholars themselves must also actively engage with games in order to gain firsthand understanding of their subjects of study.
Literature Review

As it is an emerging field, the history of Video Game Studies has long been mired in methodological debates surrounding classification, genre, and textuality. As James Newman states in his book *Videogames*, “even though the discipline is in its infancy, a schism has already emerged between ‘narratologists’ [who argue that video games should be studied as narrative texts] and ‘ludologists’ [who argue that gameplay should be the sole focus of video game studies]” (2004, p. 91). According to Newman, the “schism” he outlines has in many ways been the result of traditional scholarly discourse which characterizes narrative simply as “reducible to narrative components” (2004, p. 92). Newman argues that while players of video games experience narrative elements within individual titles as dynamic, interactive, and even ignorable components of gameplay, academic writers focusing solely on narratology have imposed readings of “the text as a static entity from which meaning can be deduced” (2004, p. 95).

Despite the divide that he observes between players of video games and academic writing on the subject, however, Newman asserts that the “schism” he observes in the field of Video Game Studies is in many ways a false dichotomy. Because gameplay and narrative are both extremely important aspects of players’ experiences with video games, the attempt at the hands of academics to disentangle these two elements reveals a marked divide between video games as defined by the ‘Ivory Tower’ and video games as experienced by most players. As Newman claims, “the videogame cannot be considered as a technology or medium used solely on an individual basis outside any kind of context for its use” (2004, p. 94). Throughout his work Newman offers evidence in support of both narratological and ludological approaches to video game research in an attempt to mend the divide that has dominated the field.
Henry Jenkins and Janet Murray are perhaps two of the most influential theorists in the field of Video Game Studies whose works address video games from a narratological perspective. In his article “Transmedia Storytelling”, Jenkins claims that due to the advent of new media technologies such as television, home computers, the Internet, and mobile phones, “we have entered an era of media convergences that makes the flow of content across multiple media channels almost inevitable” (2003, para. 2). By arguing that solitary stories are now being translated across multiple media formats and that an age of franchises rather than singular works has dawned over the past century, Jenkins positions video games as one of multiple mediums of storytelling. Murray’s book *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* likewise explores the narrative possibilities of digital media by focusing her analysis of films and video games on the state of “immersion” in what she terms “cyber-narratives” (1997). *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, coupled with her works “Inventing the Medium” (2003) and “Here’s Looking at *Casablanca*” (2005), situates digital media as novel avenues of storytelling which expand the borders of narrative expression.

Standing in opposition to narratologists such as Jenkins and Murray are scholars such as Espen Aarseth, Markku Eskelinen, and Mark Wolf, who argue that video games should be studied purely in terms of gameplay mechanics and that narrative does not in fact exist in video games in any meaningful way. In his work *Genre Trouble: Narritivism and the Art of Simulation* (2004), Aarseth draws upon arguments made by Jesper Juul in asserting that “games are not textual” and thus cannot be examined as textual narratives: “where is the text in chess? We might say that the *rules* of chess constitute its ‘text,’ but there is no recitation of the rules during gameplay, so that would reduce the textuality of chess to a subtextuality or a paratextuality. A central “text” does not exist—merely context” (as cited in Clearwater, 2011, p. 31). Markku
Eskelinen argues a similar point in his work “The Gaming Situation” in which he claims that narrative components of video games are:

Uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games, and laying any emphasis on studying these kinds of marketing tools is just a waste of time and energy. It’s no wonder gaming mechanisms are suffering from slow or even lethargic states of development, as they are constantly and intentionally confused with narrative or dramatic or cinematic mechanisms. (2001, para. 8)

Both Aarseth and Eskelinen make insightful points regarding the function of gameplay in video games, particularly those released in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s. Both authors suggest that because narrative elements within video games are only illusions meant to enhance gameplay, study of such elements is ultimately irrelevant.

Aarseth’s and Eskelinen’s arguments are mirrored in Mark Wolf’s *The Medium of the Video Game* in which the author claims that:

While some video games can be classified in a manner similar to that of films (we might say that *Outlaw* (1978) is a Western, *Space Invaders* (1978) science fiction, and *Combat* (1977) a war game), classification by iconography ignores the fundamental differences and similarities which are to be found in the player’s experience of the game. *Outlaw* and *Combat*, both early games for the Atari 2600, are very similar in that both simply feature player-characters maneuvering and shooting at each other in a field of obstacles on a single, bounded screen of graphics, with cowboys in one game and tanks in the other. (2001, p.115)

It is important to note that the examples used in Wolf’s analysis—*Space Invaders, Combat,* and *Outlaw*—were all released before 1980; while this does not invalidate the author’s argument, it
does reveal a specific context for purely ludological video game study. As noted previously, such arguments are most relevant in the study of games released before the mid-1990s, and perhaps in certain limited contemporary video game genres such as puzzle and racing games. In fact, Wolf acknowledges that narrative elements such as iconography and theme are important to such studies, and that they “may” become more useful with the technological progression of video games (2001, p. 115).

Despite the fierce resistance on the part of many ludologists to include examinations of narrative elements in studies of video games, however, the field of Video Game Studies has, in the past few years, begun to evolve past the “schism” outlined by James Newman. Scholars in the field are increasingly urging a more holistic approach. Even Jesper Juul, a highly influential ludologist in the field, has begun to alter his approach by incorporating discussion of “fictional” aspects of games (2005). Scholars such as Margaret Mackey, Jim Bizzochi, and David Clearwater have openly criticized the ludological/narratological debates. In her work “Gaming Stances and Strategies: Hybrids, Opportunists, and Cross-Fertilizations”, Mackey attempts to repair the visible disconnect between players and video game scholars in her analysis of the strategies players use while gaming. Mackey observes that, despite the gap that exists between narratology and ludology in the field of Game Studies, “many of [the players studied] made sophisticated points about gameplay; several of them, however, were explicit that the story mattered more to them than any amount of gameplay. Rather than perceiving the game as mainly game or as mainly story, they were clearly opting for ‘the best half of both’” (2007, p. 8). In essence, Mackey uses audience research coupled with textual analysis to position players’ experiences, rather than scholars’ methodologies, as central in studying and understanding video games. In his article “Games and Narrative: An Analytical Framework”, Jim Bizzochi addresses
the intersection between gameplay and narrative by drawing upon Jenkins’s concept of “micro-narratives”, which he outlines as “moments of brief yet self-contained narrative arc embedded within a longer narrative development” (2007, p. 7). Bizzochi claims that “one can frame game design as a process that sets the stage and the conditions for a series of micro-narrative events that are triggered and completed (or not) by the player's success or failure in the moment of play. In this framing, we no longer draw a distinction between game and narrative, but we see the two conjoined in an ongoing process of engagement” (2007, p. 8). Like Mackey, Bizzochi uses audience research to support his claims that players experience video games in terms of interconnected gameplay and narrative, and like Mackey asserts that attempting to divide the two only hinders researchers’ understanding of games.

David Clearwater (2011), while making a similar argument, focuses on genre theory rather than audience research in his article “What Defines Video Game Genre? Thinking About Genre Study After the Great Divide”. Clearwater states:

The tendency to privilege player activity (or ‘gameplay,’ or ‘interactivity’) over all other aspects of a videogame has limited what some authors believe can be (or should be) included in the analysis of a single title or an entire genre...Isolating gameplay from anything else is useful from an analytical standpoint…but we have to remember that it is artificial to do so…gameplay and other elements (setting, story, characters, theme, tone, etc.) are tethered to form the larger experience of each game. (p. 30)

While Clearwater does not incorporate audience research into his argument, he, like Mackey and Bizzochi, acknowledges that in order to truly understand how video games function for players, a holistic approach to research must be taken. As his article progresses, Clearwater draws upon the
work of Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska in order to outline three specific categories of study that the authors assert must be examined in a given title’s analysis: “platform” (or hardware, such as game consoles), “mode” (or narrative/stylistic conventions such as point-of-view, characterization, and plot structure), and “milieu” (or genre)(2011). The complex framework of study that King and Krzywinska have provided is yet another example of contemporary video game scholars’ attempts to move beyond Newman’s “schism” and to begin effectively analyzing video game content. As Clearwater states, King’s and Krzywinska’s framework may not be entirely feasible in small-scale studies (2011), yet it outlines a method of analysis that includes the holistic approach to the study of video games that many other contemporary scholars have begun to urge.

In this project I intend to build upon the works of contemporary scholars in the field of Game Studies to aid in the field’s expansion beyond discussions of methodology. I will provide textual analyses of the two popular Role-Playing Games *Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn* (2007) and *Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World* (2008). To use vocabulary common to the study of English literature, I will perform formalist textual (content) analyses, or analyses which focus upon the form and content of the games rather than authorship, audience research, or other such factors of video game design and consumption. My purpose in doing so is not to ‘colonize’ the field of Video Game Studies with a literary research methodology, but to shift focus from discussions of abstract methodologies to practical study of video games as texts. Formalist textual analyses are useful in the field as a means of eradicating false universalism and, in cases of studying games produced in Japan, resisting orientalist readings of games. The limitations of this approach will be outlined in the project’s conclusion.
My analyses will incorporate analytical frameworks similar to King’s and Krzywinska’s concepts of “genre”, “mode”, and “milieu”. Due to the limited scope of this project and the nature of the games examined, a meaningful engagement with “platform” is not possible. “Platform”, as previously stated, is defined by King and Krzywinska as the hardware (game consoles, controllers, etc.) with which players physically interact. The advent of ‘seventh generation’ consoles such as the Nintendo Wii, the Playstation Move, and the XBOX Kinect has introduced an ever-increasing complexity to the ways in which players interact with their games and consoles. Research on such consoles—and, in fact, video game hardware in general—is extremely minimal, undoubtedly due to the fact that ‘seventh generation’ consoles were released to the public relatively recently. More studies on “platform” will undoubtedly be released as the complexity of video game hardware grows. Nevertheless, because this project is ultimately a discussion of the ways in which gameplay and narrative intersect, rather than a strictly ludological examination of video game consoles, “platform” will not be examined.

The reason I have chosen to examine Role-Playing Games (or RPGs) specifically is that the RPG genre has been almost entirely overlooked by scholars in Game Studies; despite the genre’s pointed focus on narrative and character development, RPGs are rarely discussed even among narratologists in the narratology/ludology debate. This is perhaps not surprising considering the time-consuming nature of most titles within the genre; an average RPG takes a skilled player between thirty and forty hours to complete, if he or she is simply interested in completing the story and defeating the ‘final boss’. If the player wishes to partake in extra content and fully explore a title’s digital environment, an average RPG takes upwards of a hundred hours. Moreover, such games are highly intertextual, in many cases demanding prior knowledge of the genre’s gameplay and narrative conventions in order to be successfully
completed by the player. It is important to note that RPGs are an extremely popular genre among players, and that the lack of scholarly writing on the genre does not reflect its impact on individuals in the gaming subculture.

The reason I have chosen to perform textual analyses rather than audience research is that the field of Game Studies is currently saturated with audience research interpreting the ways in which players experience various games. Considering the medium, such studies are unarguably crucial in understanding the effects of video games on contemporary global cultures. Nevertheless, the sharp focus on players and playability without textual analysis has in some ways rendered the field ‘watered down’ in that many scholars routinely refuse to engage with video games at all, but instead rely upon research participants to provide scholars with an understanding of how the games studied are meant to be played. For games with simple gameplay mechanics and minimal narratives such as Pac-man and the early Super Mario Bros. titles, a deeper textual analysis is likely not required. For contemporary narrative-heavy games such as those within the RPG genre, however, such an approach is analogous to literature or film scholars refusing to read novels or view films, opting instead to study such texts through research subjects. It is my intention to aid in balancing research methodologies by focusing my study on the texts themselves rather than on audience research.

My focus, however, will remain upon how the games themselves function in relation to the player. I intend to explicate the ways in which gameplay and narrative are indivisible and thus equally important to the player’s experiences of Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn and Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World. I will examine both games through the lens of how morality is constructed through the intersection of gameplay and narrative; the specific form of morality I will examine will focus upon the centrality and decentralization of the player and
protagonists in overall gameplay experience. Implicit in this study will be how specific individuals’ lives are valued or not valued within the broader contexts of the narratives.
What Defines an RPG?

Before an analysis of the games themselves can be provided, it is necessary to outline the conventions that are widely-accepted as defining RPGs. It is important to clarify that, while certain conventions of the RPG genre can be recognized as resonating across many titles, such conventions are by no means ubiquitous. The definitions of RPGs and J-RPGs (or Japanese RPGs) that I will provide are intended as temporary, working definitions for the purposes of this project. Moreover, while it is not my intention to engage in a comprehensive discourse of genre theory, it is important to note that genre itself is a fluid subject. As scholars in the field such as Robert Stam, Andrew Tudor, and Stephen Neale have argued, it is nearly impossible to establish a universally accepted genre label. In his analysis of genre labeling in films, Tudor claims that:

To take a genre such as the ‘western’, analyze it, and list its principle characteristics, is to beg the question that we first isolate the body of films which are ‘westerns’. But they can only be isolated on the basis of the ‘principle characteristics’ which can only be discovered from the films themselves after they have been isolated. (as cited in Gledhill, 1985, p. 59)

Stephen Neale further complicates the notion of a firmly-defined genre in his work Genre, stating “genres are instances of repetition and difference…difference is absolutely essential to the economy of genre” (1980, p. 48-50). Neale’s claim rightfully acknowledges the necessity of novelty and innovation in genre economy, which is particularly relevant to video games. As video games are thoroughly commodified and marketable products, the push for innovation in the video game industry is fierce. Hence, genre conventions within the industry are as constantly reinvented as they are invented. In my analyses of Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn and Tales of
**Symphonia: Dawn of the New World**, I will explicate the ways in which each individual title’s genre classification is problematized. It should be acknowledged that, as theorists such as Tudor and Neale claim, ‘pure’ genre and ‘pure’ genre study are fraught.

In the field of Game Studies, discussions surrounding genre and categorization are equally heated. Jesper Juul, in his article “The repeatedly lost art of studying games”, claims that “it is generally customary for writers on play and games to first describe their elusive character, discuss the impossibility of defining the terms, only to then use them freely and suggestively, indicating that there is after all some meaning attached to [game definitions]” (2001, para. 6). Genre and categorization are uniquely problematic when applied to video games due to the heavy emphasis on gameplay that video games demand. In her article “To Automaticity and Beyond: Narrative Interpretation in Game and Novel”, Margaret Mackey attempts to identify the elements of narrative experience that distinguish mediums of storytelling such as novels and films from those found in video games. She claims that novels and films are, generally speaking, heavily invested in forward thrust on the level of narrative, while in video games “the multiple elements of the story work not only with but also against each other” (2012, p. 102). Mackey expands upon her point in her assertion that “there are multiple points of decision making: actions (go or stay), directions (here or there), dialogue (share or keep secret) and so forth. All these different components that go to make up the experience of the game create a synergy but also have the potential to frustrate forward movement” (2012, p. 102). Mackey’s ultimate thesis is that an experience of smooth forward motion is often regarded among readers of novels and viewers of films as a mark of success, while players of games more often expect and even relish the experience of a hindered struggle toward a game’s completion. Hence, while reading novels and viewing films are undoubtedly participatory experiences, the difference between these
 mediums of storytelling and that of video games is that the participatory nature of the games is far more visible and cognitively accepted by the player.

Given the problematic nature of genre classification, a significant query arises: what, if anything, is to be gained by identifying and studying specific video game genres? This question can best be addressed through Liv Hausken’s concept of “media blindness”. In his article “Computer game studies, year one” (2001), Espen Aarseth outlines the concept of “media blindness” insofar as it is relevant to video game studies:

How a failure to see the specific media differences leads to a “media-neutral” media theory that is anything but neutral. This is clearly a danger when looking at games as cinema or stories, but also when making general claims about games, as though they all belonged to the same media format and shared the same characteristics. (para. 6)

Essentially, by studying digital games under the broad term ‘video games’ without taking into account specific genre and medium conventions, scholars risk constructing a false universalism. Because different video game genres aid in creating different gaming experiences, such a method of study ultimately devalues practical players’ experiences with different genres and titles.

David Clearwater addresses this issue in his article “What Defines Video Game Genre?: Thinking about Genre Study after the Great Divide” (2011). While acknowledging the instability of popular video game genres, Clearwater recognizes the fact that industry professionals and fans alike are in agreement concerning a certain degree of widely-accepted genre classification. Clearwater states:

Among prominent videogame review websites and magazines, there is general uniformity when it comes to genre labels. Action, Adventure, Fighting, First-
Person Shooters, Flight, Massively Multiplayer, Music/Rhythm, Party, Platformer, Puzzle, Racing/Driving, RPG, Simulation, Sports, and Strategy are commonly encountered categories. As we might expect, the degree of complexity in the application of these terms varies considerably. (p. 37)

Clearwater’s intention is to urge scholars in the field of Game Studies to acknowledge the existing lexicon provided by members of the gaming community. Such an acknowledgment, he argues, may prove useful in bridging the gap created by the ludology/narratology debate. Additionally, the outline of contemporary video game genres that Clearwater provides acknowledges the existence of RPGs among the most prominently-recognized and influential genres in the gaming community.

The most prominent feature that links games within the RPG genre is the marked focus on plot development and characterization rather than puzzle solving and dynamic combat. Many game franchises within other genres utilize light narratives in order to link extensive and time-consuming puzzles, battle stages, etc.; the Legend of Zelda franchise, for example, includes mostly action-adventure games, in which the length of dungeons the player must explore and the difficulty of battles therein almost always increase as the game progresses. The first dungeon in the game will likely be the shortest and the least difficult, while the last dungeon will be the longest, and the final ‘boss’ the player encounters will demand the most gameplay skill. This organizational method is mirrored in most other genres, such as first-person shooters and survival-horror games in which environments generally become larger and more complex as players progress and enemies increase in either number or difficulty. There are, of course, exceptions to the genre characteristics provided, yet in a general sense they hold true.
As can be inferred, video game franchises in which narrative elements are included for the sole purpose of enhancing gameplay experience construct a vastly different author-player relationship than do game franchises in which gameplay is included for the purpose of enhancing narratives. Most games within the action-adventure, platformer, and racing/driving genres, for example, provide the player with a greater level of freedom concerning chronology and plot than do most RPGs. As Espen Aarseth (2001) states in his work *Genre trouble: Narrativism and the art of simulation*:

> In the adventure games where there is a conflict between narrative and ludic aesthetics, it is typically the simulation that, on its own, allows actions that the story prohibits, or which make the story break down. Players exploit this to invent strategies that make a mockery of the author’s intentions…When you put a story on top of a simulation, the simulation (or the player) will always have the last word. (p. 52)

It is important to acknowledge that regardless of genre or programming, player ‘control’ is necessarily limited and most often illusory; because players must act within pre-programmed game environments, executing pre-programmed actions, a player can never truly be a game’s sole author. Nevertheless, Aarseth’s’s claims largely hold true when applied to games which emphasize gameplay rather than narrative.

Games which emphasize narrative, however, problematize the concept of player-as-author. RPGs, which are characterized by strong narrative elements, typically sacrifice player control to a large degree in order to maintain plotlines and characterization provided by game designers. Many RPGs include superficial decision-making elements which, on the surface, appear to provide players with choices concerning plotlines and battle outcomes. Replays and
closer analyses of such games, however, reveal that most such decision-making on the part of the player has little to no effect on games’ actual outcomes. In recent years RPGs such as those within the *Elder Scrolls* and *Mass Effect* franchises have emerged which provide players with unprecedented world-, plot-, and character-shaping options, yet such games remain exceptions to the genre’s conventions. Most RPGs differ from other video game genres in that they generally include gameplay elements such as battles and puzzles as a means to develop a title’s plot, which stands in contrast to genres that include light narrative ‘ornamentation’ for the sole purpose of enhancing gameplay experience.

RPGs’ strong emphasis on narrative is exemplified in the ways in which combat is integrated into such games: RPG battles are typically structured to reflect the ebb and flow of the games’ narratives. The strength of a given enemy typically parallels the dramatic tension surrounding the scene in which a battle takes place, and characters with whom the protagonist and his or her party are intimately connected are almost always some of the most challenging in the game. This is demonstrated by RPGs typically including at least one battle in a given game which, for narrative purposes, the player’s party is meant to lose. The narrative purpose for the player losing such a battle is to establish the strength of a game’s antagonist and thus raise the narrative’s dramatic stakes. Thus Aarseth’s (2001) claims that a player’s “skills are rewarded…mistakes punished, quite literally” and that narrative elements are “completely superfluous…and ignoring them will not affect gameplay at all” (p. 52) cannot be applied to narrative-heavy games such as those within the RPG genre. In such games narrative and gameplay are far too intrinsically connected for either element to be ignored. As will be revealed in my analyses of *Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn* and *Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World*, player ‘mistakes’ such as the aforementioned pre-programmed loss of boss battles are in
fact often rewarded. Such losses ensure the continuation of storylines, and thus the successful completion of games. Furthermore, as will likewise be discussed in my textual analyses, gameplay in RPGs is often encroached upon and even disrupted by narrative elements.

A point of no small significance is that, while RPGs are characterized by industry professionals and players alike by their strong emphasis on narrative and characterization, the RPG genre is not entirely distinct from other genres by the inclusion of such features. The dating/social simulation genre, for example, is largely comprised of games which are heavily invested in plot and character. Likewise, many titles/franchises within the survival-horror genre, such as the Silent Hill and Resident Evil series, incorporate rich narrative features which are integral elements of players’ experiences of the games. Hence, while this project is focused upon the RPG genre specifically, the implications of this project are relevant to a broad range of video game titles and franchises. As Ewan Kirkland observes in his article “Restless dreams in Silent Hill: approaches to video game analysis” (2005): “the historically unprecedented preoccupation with games as narratives…indicates that video games constitute a genuinely fresh combination of audiovisuality and gaming, one necessitating a similar fusion of narratological and ludological perspectives if the medium is to be fully understood” (p. 4). While differences between specific genre conventions cannot be ignored (it is rarely possible to examine puzzle games, for example, as narrative), the advent of contemporary video game technology has changed the face of the medium by making possible more richly nuanced narrative elements than did the technology of the past. What makes RPGs unique among video game genres are the ways in which narrative elements are incorporated into specific game titles. The implementation of such elements is largely cultural; as such, RPGs must be analyzed, at least in part, as cultural constructs.
RPGs as Cultural Constructs

It is important to note that both games studied in this project are products of Japan and can be classified as a subgenre known as ‘J-RPGs’ (an acronym for Japanese Role-Playing Games). As previously stated, discussions concerning narrativity must acknowledge the cultural origins of games, as the idea of narrative itself is culturally constructed and thus somewhat fluid. This is not to suggest that players are necessarily aware of or concerned with the cultural origins of the games they play, but that cultural origin is embedded in the narratives of games. Moreover, as will be discussed, the narrative conventions of J-RPGs are largely informed by narrative conventions of contemporary manga and anime. Hence, the narrativity found in J-RPGs stems from a specific form of culturally produced narrativity found in other forms of contemporary Japanese visual storytelling.

Japanese and ‘Western’ RPGs differ somewhat in that ‘Western’ games generally include a sharper focus on player autonomy in shaping characters and environments, at least on a surface level. The concept of ‘player as creator’ is somewhat problematic, as researchers such as Alexander Galloway have pointed out; in his work “Playing the code: allegories of control in Civilization”, Galloway highlights the artificial nature of ‘control’ in gaming in his statement that “the playful video game may metacommunicate ‘this is play’, but it can never avoid also being informatics control” (2004, p. 35). As all video games are necessarily pre-programmed and thus sharply limited in what players can and cannot affect in a given game, player control is necessarily limited and perhaps entirely illusory. Regardless of how a player chooses to interact with a given game, he or she is limited to actions pre-programmed by the game’s creators as well as to the programmed environments that exist within the game. Nevertheless, ‘Western’ RPGs are far more deeply invested in the illusion of players as creators than are their Japanese
counterparts. This is not to suggest that players themselves are equally invested in the same illusion; J-RPGs such as those within the Final Fantasy franchise continue to exhibit staggering popularity in North America, Europe, and Australia. Rather, the investment in player autonomy can be seen most clearly at the level of industry and marketing, as commercial trailers and copy surrounding franchises such as Fable and The Elder Scrolls attests. Marketing surrounding such franchises is often centered on game mechanics which allow players to actively shape the games’ worlds and plotlines. Conversely, marketing surrounding J-RPGs typically includes references to strong pre-determined storylines and characters.

It is likely that many ‘Western’ players of RPGs do not discriminate between products produced in ‘Western’ countries and products produced in Japan. Many fan-made websites such as blisteredthumbs.net, penny-arcade.com, and spoonyexperiment.com rarely include content referring to RPGs’ cultural origins except in passing. This may be a result, at least in part, of marketing strategies utilized by Japanese game companies, which target global rather than purely domestic markets (Wai-ming, 2001). A part of Japanese game companies’ global marketing strategy is, according to Koichi Iwabuchi in his article “Marketing ‘Japan’: Japanese cultural presence under a global gaze”, to create “‘culturally odourless’ products, that is, products which, in contrast to American export icons such as Coca Cola or McDonald’s, do not immediately conjure images of the country of origin in the minds of consumers” (1998, p. 165). The purpose of this strategy of “culturally odourless” export products is to appeal to the widest range of global consumers possible by eliminating the risk of consumer alienation through products which appear ‘foreign’ or ‘unfamiliar’. As Iwabuchi claims, ‘cultural odorlessness’ can be seen at the surface level of many of Japan’s most lucrative export products, which:

Present an imagery in which the bodily, racial and ethnic characteristics are
erased or softened. This is particularly evident in Japanese animation where the characters, for the most part, do not look ‘Japanese’...the producers and creators of game software intentionally make the characters of computer games look non-Japanese because they are clearly conscious that the market is global. Mario, the principle character of the popular computer game Super Mario Brothers, for example, does not invoke an image of Japan. Both his name and his appearance are intended to be Italian. (emphasis Iwabuchi, 1998, p. 167)

Of course, this is not to suggest that players of video games produced in Japan are unaware of or do not acknowledge the cultural origins of games, or that marketing surrounding Japanese games is structured to mask the fact that they are produced in Japan. However, it is unlikely that most players consider knowledge of a game’s cultural origin to be integral to understanding a game or having an enjoyable gameplay experience. Hence, while players may understand that a particular game is produced in Japan, it is not necessarily perceived as ‘Japanese’, but as belonging to global culture.

In light of this fact, while video games’ cultural origins should not be overlooked, overemphasizing games’ cultural origins may be misleading in terms of player experience. As Garry Crawford and Jason Rutter note in their work “Playing the Game: Performance in Digital Game Audiences”, “it is important to recognize that even individual gamer[s] bring their social, cultural, and psychological selves to the games they play” (2007, p. 280). While J-RPGs specifically are designed in Japan and contain storytelling techniques and conventions unique to Japanese culture, it is likely that most players in ‘Western’ cultures are largely unaware of such narrative elements’ origins. Players unaware of such narrative elements will experience Japanese
games through their own individual cultural lenses and will understand games on their own psychological terms.

Nevertheless, the popularity of J-RPGs in ‘Western’ nations suggests cross-cultural similarities in player appeal. Crawford and Rutter (2007) comment upon artificial cultural and social divisions of fan communities in their claim that “the performativity of gamers can be socially located and drawn on as a resource in wider, everyday social interactions…it also identifies parallels with other fan and audience groups…emphasizing the importance of not establishing (false) distinctions between ‘types’ of audiences, which may in practice share many similarities and even membership” (p. 280). Hence, while players’ experiences of games should not be universalized or homogenized—nor should cultural, gendered, and other forms of gameplay be ignored—false distinctions between fan communities should be avoided. It is for this reason that textual analyses of games are useful in the field of Game Studies. The examination of games as texts can aid in eradicating false distinctions between fan communities by focusing on the ways in which specific elements of gameplay and/or narrative function to create player experience.

While the cultural origins of games should not be overemphasized, there are several narrative conventions of Japanese RPGs that are not as prominent in titles produced by ‘Western’ developers. Ironically, despite the genre’s moniker, many J-RPGs do not involve the player actively assuming a role, at least in the sense that the player might have an active part in shaping characters’ identities within narratives. The ‘role’ that the player assumes is the game’s protagonist, and the player follows him or her through the game’s plot much as readers of novels follow protagonists through pages and viewers of films follow protagonists through scenes. The player is not given control over which character will or will not prove to be a game’s protagonist;
as in novels and films, the protagonist is pre-selected by the author (or game designer). Moreover, much like in novels and films, games’ perspectives often shift between characters, providing an omniscient point of view from which the player perceives the unfolding story. Typical J-RPGs give the player very little control over the progression of the game’s plot and still less control over characters’ behaviours in social encounters. On the rare occasion that the player is given a choice in how characters will behave, the results typically have minimal bearing on how the plot will unfold, as such a choice is usually only provided to allow a player to achieve a small reward. Several RPGs such as *Chrono Trigger* and those within the *Star Ocean* franchise do provide the player with choices that result in different endings; however, the bulk of the narrative remains unchanged regardless of the player’s choices throughout. I will expand upon the implications that multiple endings bear for J-RPGs in my analysis of *Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World*, which includes three possible endings for the player to achieve.

It must be acknowledged that the concept of narrative itself is culturally constructed. While it is not the purpose of this project to provide a comprehensive analysis of cross-cultural constructions of narrativity, attempts at studying narratives in J-RPGs through a purely ‘Western’ lens will inevitably prove to be problematic. In his work “Towards computer game studies” (2001) Markku Eskelinen suggests that an understanding of Japanese narrativity is most useful in the study of narratives of games produced in Japan: “There is no guarantee whatsoever that the aesthetic traditions of the West are relevant to game studies...it would be...sensible to speculate on Japanese aesthetics and claim that a tradition that emphasises the values of perishability, suggestion, irregularity, incompleteness, and simplicity is perhaps better suited to approach computer games than its Western counterpart” (p. 176). For many games, Eskelinen’s
claims are undoubtedly true. However, it is important to acknowledge that most narrative-heavy J-RPGs utilize narrative conventions found in contemporary manga (Japanese comics) and anime (Japanese animation), mediums which have historically been heavily influenced by both traditional Japanese narrativity and traditional Western narrativity through the popularity of American comics in postwar Japan (Ito, 2008). Hence, J-RPGs must be understood in terms of the specific narrative conventions found in contemporary manga and anime.

In light of the complicated cultural history of manga and anime, new methods of narrative analysis must be adopted. In his work “Anime creativity: characters and premises in the quest for cool Japan” (2009), Ian Condry discusses the ways in which narrative conventions of such mediums are often (mis)interpreted by ‘Western’ viewers. In the process of anime production, Condry’s findings reveal that “characters (kyarakutaa), premises (settei), and world-settings (sekaikan) generally came prior to the writing of the story per se” (p. 3). In light of the medium’s emphasis of such elements, Condry characterizes “anime creativity” as a process of analyzing anime and other mediums of storytelling which draw upon anime narrative conventions. Condry claims that “a character-based analysis of cultural production raises a somewhat different range of questions compared to thinking of anime in terms of narrative representations in already completed works” (p.3). Essentially, Condry urges a novel method of narrative analysis, one that takes into account the ways in which anime narrative conventions are produced and intended to be consumed. In light of Condry’s findings, it is possible that many ‘Western’ scholars in Game Studies are unable to view many Japanese-produced games as narrative due to a lack of cultural understanding of how narratives are constituted.

Condry’s findings are particularly relevant to analyses of Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn and Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World due to both games’ reliance upon anime
narrative conventions. Not only do both games utilize anime-style visuals, but both games likewise display a strong focus on character rather than plot. This is not to suggest that structured, linear plotlines do not exist within the games, but that character development and construction in both games strongly affect the player’s experience of each game’s plot. Moreover, because Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World contains three possible endings, viewers who are unfamiliar with “anime creativity” and the culturally-constructed nature of narrative may mistake the centrality of character as a lack of narrative (or a lack of narrative authority on the part of the game’s creator). This is not to suggest that character development is not an integral component of Western narrative study, only that “anime creativity” provides a unique construction of character centrality that may be misinterpreted by those not familiar to its form. In my analyses of Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn and Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World, I will outline more thoroughly the ways in which character and plot aid in shaping the player’s experiences of the games.
Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn

Gameplay is one of the most crucial elements in understanding how player experience is constructed in digital games. In the case of RPGs (both ‘Western’ and Japanese), it is in the minutia of gameplay mechanics that intersections between narrative and gameplay can be seen most clearly. The dozens of minor, almost invisible elements that constitute combat, puzzle-solving, and reward-retrieval mechanics meld not only with each other but also with a game’s narrative elements to create a specific type of investment in a game. As will be discussed, the specific type of investment that is created varies from title to title.

Gameplay in *Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn* (or simply *Radiant Dawn*, as it is referred to by fans of the game) is structured much like a game of chess. The player is given an aerial view of the combat field, which is divided into a grid of squares, and the player and the computer take turns moving units across the field to attack or defend. Each unit can only move a certain number of spaces per turn which is determined by his or her movement skill as well as character class (knight, mage, archer, priest, etc.) much like pawns, knights, queens, etc. on a chess board. A character’s position on the grid and equipped weapon determine which units he or she will be able to attack, if he or she is able to attack at all; knights, for example, are most often only able to attack units on squares directly adjacent to their own, while archers utilizing bows and arrows can only attack opposing units if there is a gap of one square dividing attackers and their intended targets. Support classes like priests, which are primarily responsible for healing allies, are unable to attack or adequately defend until they have gained significant experience in battle and must be shielded by other units until they do so.

The chessboard-style combat setup included in the game is not exclusive to *Radiant Dawn;* the *Disgaea* and *Sakura Wars* franchises, as well as individual titles such as *Final
Fantasy Tactics and Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Survivor, also make use of the turn-based strategy system and chessboard-style layout. While Radiant Dawn and others of its ilk are widely acknowledged by the gaming community to be RPGs due to their noticeable focus on narrative, they are most often categorized as either ‘strategy role-playing games’ or ‘tactical role-playing games’, a subgenre of the larger RPG category. What largely sets Radiant Dawn apart from other tactical RPGs is the extensive use of ‘phases’. There are four possible phases in a given battle, the most prevalent being the ‘player phase’, in which the player moves his or her units across the battle field, and the ‘enemy phase’ in which the computer moves enemy units. Unlike in a game of chess, all of the player’s and the enemy’s units are moved in a single respective turn.

Additionally, there are often more than two parties on a battle field, complicating the gameplay through the inclusion of the ‘ally phase’ and the ‘other phase’. During the ‘ally phase’ computer-controlled ally units (if extant in a given battle) are moved to aid the player. The ‘other phase’ also includes computer-controlled ally movement, the difference between the ‘ally’ and ‘other’ phases being that while ‘other’ units cannot in any way be affected by player control, the ‘ally’ units can be partially controlled. The player is able to give ‘ally’ units very general commands, although the computer controls the detailed mechanics of how they will attack, such as which weapons are used, which units move first, which units are healed by support classes, etc. Many contemporary RPGs incorporate computer-controlled allies, yet such characters almost always work to further the survival of the player’s party. Moreover, computer-controlled allies typically include player-controlled elements such as the ability to customize allies’ skills, weapons, and equipment. Radiant Dawn does allow the player to direct the movement of ‘ally’ forces to a general degree, but not the units’ weapons, equipment, or battle strategies, and the player has no
control over ‘other’ forces whatsoever. Moreover, both ‘ally’ and ‘other’ units often display little regard for the survival of the player’s party.

Another fairly unique aspect of Radiant Dawn’s gameplay is the sheer number of playable characters that are available to collect. In total, there are seventy-three characters for the player to recruit throughout the game. Fire Emblem is not the only RPG franchise to include dozens of playable characters; games in the Suikoden series, for example, typically include a staggering one hundred and eight playable characters, yet it is somewhat unusual in the genre, as most titles include roughly ten playable characters in total. The reason for the sheer number of recruits in Fire Emblem games specifically is that the franchise employs a unique element of combat consequences in the games’ battle systems. Typically RPGs utilize an ‘all or nothing’ logic in battle victories and defeats—even if an individual character within the player’s party is defeated, it is still possible for the player to win a given battle as long as he or she has at least one combatant available to fight. Characters in the player’s party are ‘KOed’, or knocked-out, when their hit points reach zero, and in most RPGs there exist spells and items that can be given to knocked-out party members which will restore their drained hit points and allow them to re-enter combat. This is not the case in the Fire Emblem series. Units that are defeated in battle are removed from the player’s party for the duration of the game. Characters that are inconsequential to the game’s plot will die, while characters who continue to appear later in the game’s narrative sequences will simply “withdraw” from combat and will not be available for the player to use in future battles.

The fact that a character’s death or defeat has long-lasting consequences on gameplay as well as (to a certain extent) narrative has a deep impact on the player’s experience of both. It is important to note that while there are seventy-three potential playable characters in the game, the
player is most often limited to selecting fewer than twenty units per battle, though the specific number fluctuates. Because the player is only able to select roughly ten to twenty units in a single battle—and is sometimes provided with fewer—he or she is forced to view each individual character as a valued asset of his or her fighting force. The small number of units provided in early portions of each game’s segment forces the player to learn to utilize each character’s respective strengths and compensate for his or her respective weaknesses. In doing so, Radiant Dawn’s gameplay mirrors the narrative’s themes of valuing the diverse nature of collective sentient life, teamwork, and the destabilization of the concept of one individual person or perspective as central or superior. A player’s success is dependent upon effectively understanding each unit, keeping units strong and safe from harm, and not relying upon one individual unit (even one of the game’s protagonists) to carry an army to victory.

Radiant Dawn’s focus on collective battle mechanics in terms of ‘phases’—the ‘player phase’, ‘enemy phase’, ‘ally phase’, and ‘other phase’—likewise aids in the game’s destabilization of the centrality of individual characters. Just as the protagonists of the narrative are depicted as only single components of a larger group, the player’s armies are likewise only one of several clashing forces in a given battle. As enemy forces flood the battlefield, player and protagonists alike are forced to accept the aid of ‘ally’ and ‘other’ armies, to wait for each respective unit in said armies to attack, and to learn to fight cooperatively with them. The player is thus encouraged to view his or her party (as well as the characters that comprise it) within a broader fictional socio-political context that is shaped by a multitude of factors and individuals. The player is discouraged from imposing a hierarchy of value on his or her own party, as certain missions require certain units of ‘ally’ and ‘other’ forces to survive in order for the player to succeed. The collective nature of combat in Radiant Dawn exists in sharp contrast to many RPGs
which, although requiring players to utilize several different characters cooperatively, tend to focus on one protagonist whose role in the narrative (and usually in combat) often overshadows all other characters.

The game also encourages balance between individual units in combat through the incorporation of yet another fairly unique gameplay mechanic, that of ‘bonus experience’. As in many other RPGs, the player strengthens units in *Radiant Dawn* through combat; each time one of the player’s units engages in combat, the unit will receive a certain number of ‘experience points’. In *Radiant Dawn*, a unit will gain an additional level for every one hundred ‘experience points’ gained, and will thus be granted new skills and abilities. Typically RPGs require the player’s units to defeat enemies in order to gain experience, yet in *Radiant Dawn* units receive experience simply for attacking and being attacked, even if the player’s/enemy’s attacks are unsuccessful. Additionally, support units such as priests are able to gain experience by healing allies. The player also receives ‘bonus experience’, which varies depending upon the player’s performance in combat: rescuing hostages, quick completion of battle, protecting ‘ally’ and ‘other’ units, and so forth, are actions which result in ‘bonus experience’ being awarded at the end of a battle. The player is then able to award the ‘bonus experience’ to any characters within his or her combat roster. A final point of significance is the fact that each of the player’s units has a maximum number of ‘experience points’ that he or she is able to attain. After gaining sixty levels, a unit is no longer able to continue leveling up, which forces the player to spread ‘experience points’ between units.

The abundance of available ‘experience points’ in *Radiant Dawn* encourages the player to create a balanced team of units, without implied superiority in any one individual unit. Because the player is given freedom over which units will be strengthened and which will or will
not be used and thus will not receive ‘experience points’, the player is urged to view success within the game as dependent upon the collective effort of a broad number of individual units crafted by the player’s own subjective strategic reasoning. This stands in contrast to other games (such as *Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World*), which display a controlled focus on a limited number of individuals in battle and thus encourages the player to view success in terms of one individual that he or she is forced to utilize at all times.

The nature of the game’s turn-based combat, the sheer number of enemy units on each combat field, the size of combat fields, and changeable victory conditions further aid in encouraging the player to spread ‘experience points’ between units. Relying upon one or two of the player’s units to carry the player’s army to victory proves impossible due to the fact that a typical battle includes dozens of enemy units, each of which is given an attack round during an ‘enemy phase’. A player who attempts to rely upon one or two of his or her own units will find his or her forces quickly winnowed by enemy units, whose collective efforts are then focused entirely upon the remaining units that the player has chosen to strengthen. The result is inevitable defeat, as the player is unable to successfully balance the healing of his or her units with offensive actions. Moreover, victory is not always determined purely by the survival of the player’s forces; the conditions of victory change from battle to battle. Some battles require that the player fully route the enemy’s forces, while others impose time limits that render victory impossible unless the player has cultivated an army of balanced units that is able to swiftly overpower a large enemy army. Additionally, victory is often predicated upon the survival of an ‘ally’ unit or the rescue and release of prisoners. Such conditions force players to rely not only on his or her forces’ combat strength, but also certain units’ abilities to pick locks, to use support skills such as healing ‘ally’ units, granting adjoining units extra turns, etc. Strengthening an
overall team rather than one or two strong physical combatants is thus the only way to complete the game, a fact which strongly encourages the player to spread ‘experience’ points as evenly as possible over his or her units.

Naturally, due to the large number of characters the player is able to choose from in his or her party, some specification is necessary. However, the player is able to craft an army almost entirely of his or her choosing rather than being forced through gameplay mechanics or plot developments to focus entirely upon pre-determined units. Once the character’s core army has been established, he or she is free to abandon units that have formerly been focused upon when new units are acquired. Moreover, as will be explicated in more detail in my analysis of Radiant Dawn’s plot, the game’s perspective continually changes, often pitting the player’s forces against one another; the result of this is that the player in fact spends the majority of the game building three separate armies, each of which contain roughly fifteen units (although the exact number of units varies from battle to battle, as previously discussed). Consequently, the player becomes intimately familiar with, and is focused to rely upon, the vast majority of the game’s available units.

The fact that the game encourages collective success rather than forcing the player to focus his or her attentions on a singular character is highly significant. As will be discussed, the key themes in Radiant Dawn’s narrative are success through collective effort and the importance of valuing sentient life. As such, the game’s constant destabilizing of the player’s dominant position in a given battle can be read as containing thematic significance. Indeed, unlike many more action-oriented video games which use narrative as a means of furthering gameplay, Radiant Dawn includes such gameplay elements for the purpose of adding complexity not only to the narrative itself but also to the player’s sense of investment in the game’s storyline and
The fact that units die and are permanently removed from the battle segments of the game add a layer of potential trauma to the player’s experience of the game.

The gameplay that exists outside of battle in *Radiant Dawn* is extremely minimal. The game’s narrative requires almost no input on the part of the player aside from scrolling through menus of dialogue. Overall, the game’s structure is extremely formulaic: a ‘cut scene’ will occur in which characters interact with one another, discuss their current situation, comment on the political landscape in the game’s world, etc. This invariably culminates in some sort of battle, be it in the context of a prison escape, the rescue of a victim of kidnapping, a rebel uprising against an oppressive regime, or a plethora of other scenarios. Moreover, the very few interactive options that are available to players in narrative-heavy sequences have almost no effect whatsoever on the plot or the ways in which characters develop throughout the story, instead affecting only combat scenarios. There is thus a marked divide between the narrative-heavy elements of the game and the combat that the player takes part in. The narrative-heavy portions of *Radiant Dawn* are much more akin to reading a digital graphic novel than they are to actively playing a role. This is reinforced by the fact that the vast majority of narrative-heavy sequences throughout the game include minimal animation, presenting players with still images of characters and locations and relating dialogue through written text rather than voice acting.

The minimal animation that exists in such sequences is in some ways reminiscent of visual conventions of dating sims. In her article “Dating-Simulation Games: Leisure and Gaming of Japanese Youth Culture”, Emily Taylor provides an in-depth analysis of visual conventions that characterize many games in the dating sim subgenre of social simulation games:

> Dating-sim games usually have no animation; the background remains static and changes only when the character moves [between locations]… Additionally, when
the main character is interacting with another person, that person appears in front of the background and remains still, merely alternating between poses (which, like the backgrounds, are static and frequently reused) to match what the conversation partner is saying. (2007, p. 194)

The outline Taylor provides of dating sims in many ways applies to Radiant Dawn; there are, however, significant differences in Radiant Dawn’s gameplay and narration. The object of most dating sims, as previously discussed, is to engage in artificial romantic (and sometimes sexual) social encounters, whereas the active gameplay in Radiant Dawn involves strategic combat. Radiant Dawn also includes multiple cut-scenes which are fully animated and typically occur during dramatic climaxes in the game’s plot, highlighting the significance of such scenes in the overall narrative. Moreover, as both Galbraith (2011) and Taylor (2007) state, the main characters in dating sims are rarely given distinguishing personality traits or even physical bodies, and hardly ever appear on screen, but rather provide vantage points through which the player experiences the games. Radiant Dawn, much like most RPGs, includes several protagonists whose personalities are deeply explored and who develop full character arcs by the time the game’s plot draws to a close.

The limited animation found in the narrative portions of Radiant Dawn is most likely the result of a limited budget. Regardless of the reasoning behind the ‘flat’ visual style, however, there is a visible attempt on the part of the game’s creators to utilize visual conventions found in anime and manga such as large eyes, unrealistically-colored hair, and disproportionate bodies. Radiant Dawn also makes use of characterization through what Thomas LaMarre terms “soulful bodies”. Patrick Galbraith outlines the origin of “soulful bodies” in his article “Bishoujo Games: ‘Techno-Intimacy’ and the Virtually Human in Japan”:  

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Gilles Deleuze theorizes a crisis in cinema when the action-image was no longer able to coordinate all other movement-images; the result was the time-image, which drew out possible interior movements...for LaMarre, anime, especially series produced for television with lower budgets...is overwhelmingly comprised of time-images. Force is redirected from character animation to the composited layers of character design...This leads to an emphasis on ‘soulful bodies,’ or ‘bodies where spiritual, emotional, or psychological qualities appear inscribed on the surface’. (2011, para. 16)

Essentially, creators of narrative mediums such as anime and video games which rely upon animation yet are unable to produce effective animation due to budgetary constrictions, have produced the “soulful body” as an alternate means of affective storytelling. Rather than relying upon fully-animated body language and physical movements to convey unspoken characterization, creators instead convey characterization on the surfaces of characters’ bodies. The result of this narrative technique is that the viewer, particularly if he or she is familiar with visual anime conventions, is able to identify crucial character traits such as kindness, cruelty, mischievousness, and so forth at a moment’s glance.

The effect of “soulful bodies” as outlined by Galbraith and LaMarre is that players are able to empathize with such animated characters with minimal exposure to them. Because “soulful bodies” contain implied character traits which are inscribed upon characters’ physical bodies yet not necessarily bolstered by characters’ direct actions and/or dialogue, players are urged to participate in inscribing meaning onto such characters. In this sense “soulful bodies” also utilize a narrative technique Scott McCloud terms “masking” in his work Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art (1994). Examining the ways in which images affect viewers, McCloud
asserts that images containing complex detail are far more alienating to viewers than are simple images. Simplicity, according to McCloud, invites viewers to project themselves onto and empathize with characters, while complexity creates subconscious barriers between viewers and characters. According to McCloud, viewers gazing at highly complex images notice physical differences between themselves and the characters on the page and are thus less able to identify with the characters they are viewing. Conversely, simpler character designs allow viewers to project more of themselves onto the images and consequently empathize with the characters more deeply. “Masking” can be seen in “soulful bodies” as well due to the fact that the implied characterization of each image is not necessarily explicitly stated and thus invites players to project meaning onto the character traits that appear on different characters’ bodies.

Because the vast majority of Radiant Dawn’s narrative is conveyed through still images, the inclusion of “masking” and “soulful bodies” as narrative techniques cannot be overemphasized. There are, however, several fully-animated scenes which include dialogue conveyed via voice acting. In every such scene, two-dimensional character models that appear in the bulk of the game’s narrative sequences are converted into three-dimensional figures, although the anime-style animation is retained in each character’s appearance. In the few fully-animated scenes that are included in the game, characters’ fantastical features such as brightly-colored pink, green, or blue hair, and bestial physical features such as cat-like ears and bird-like wings, are noticeably positioned as focal points. The purposeful emphasis the game places upon these elements is in many ways indicative of the player’s (desired) experience of Radiant Dawn.

As Johan Hoorn, Elly Knijn, and Gerrit van Veer claim in their work “Virtual Reality: do not augment realism, augment relevance” (2003):
People do not necessarily like the highest involvement possible (identification or total immersion) because it may be too threatening (car crash simulation), too desirable (cyber sex), or plainly inappropriate (the virtual operating theatre). Trying to mimic real life ‘to the max,’ then, by only augmenting the realistic features ignores that involvement is subjective and multifaceted, that people like [to] keep realizing [virtual reality] is fiction. (p. 5)

The purpose of Hoorn’s, Knijn’s, and van Veer’s work is to explore the ways in which virtual reality is pleasurably experienced by viewers/players. Essentially, the authors’ findings reveal that for many viewers/players, a barrier of unbelief is desirable in virtual reality experience, as it affords subjectivity in the act of immersion. Such a barrier of unbelief allows viewers/players to choose the degree to which they immerse themselves in and identify with fictional characters and worlds. In Radiant Dawn, the ‘flat’ artwork which invites the player’s identification through “masking” and “soulful bodies” is coupled with ‘unrealistic’ animation which provides distance between the player and the game’s universe. Considering the many complex themes offered in the game, such as war, nationalism, and racial discrimination, the unrealistic art and character designs allow players who might otherwise avoid such issues in narrative to engage with them in an ultimately non-threatening environment.

The appeal of ‘unrealistic’ animation and empathy through distance can also be understood in terms of Masahiro Mori’s concept of the “uncanny valley.” Speaking of advances in the field of robotics, Mori posits that complex technologies designed for the purpose of mimicking the human form often produce the opposite effect than is intended, producing instead feelings of revulsion and alienation in viewers (Mori 1970/2012). Mori explains how the
“uncanny valley” functions in human psychology through an imagined encounter with a prosthetic hand:

When we realize the hand, which at first site[sic] looked real, is in fact artificial, we experience an eerie sensation. For example, we could be startled during a handshake by its limp boneless grip together with its texture and coldness. When this happens, we lose our sense of affinity, and the hand becomes uncanny.

(para. 7)

Essentially, when confronted with objects or images that appear human-like, viewers experience negative psychological reactions to small details that make such objects’ or images’ non-human nature apparent. Interestingly, according to Mori, the more human-like the objects or images originally appear, the more intense viewers’ negative reactions are likely to be (Mori 1970/2012).

Mori further claims that movement is a crucial aspect in a viewer’s ability to empathize with a human-like object or image and thus avoid the “uncanny valley”. Using the example of a Japanese robot capable of mimicking a smiling human face, Mori states “when the speed is cut in half in an attempt to make the robot bring up a smile more slowly, instead of looking happy, its expression turns creepy” (1970/2012, para. 13). In light of his findings, Mori concludes that “it is possible to create a safe level of affinity by deliberately pursuing a nonhuman design” (1970/2012, para. 14). As stated, Mori’s concept of the “uncanny valley” was originally limited to discussion of robotics. However, with the increasing ubiquity of computer graphics in almost all forms of visual media, his findings are extremely useful in understanding viewers’ encounters with and reactions to human-like images in contemporary visual media, including video games. Considering the time and budget constraints in game development, as well as the limited
capabilities of a given console’s graphics engine, game developers likely choose to rely upon a traditional animation style rather than risking alienating players by creating character designs that fall into the “uncanny valley”. By producing less realistic and more ‘cartoonish’ character designs, game developers provide an appropriate level of distance between the player and the game’s characters in order to invoke empathy for the characters.

The effects of the game’s artwork and character designs are highly significant due to the fact that, as in every video game, the visual elements of Radiant Dawn are important aspects of the game’s narrative. However, in order to adequately examine the ways in which gameplay, narrative, and character intersect in Radiant Dawn, an analysis of the game’s plot and narrative structure is also necessary. As previously mentioned, the game is divided into four ‘Parts’, each of which contains several chapters and is introduced by a short prologue. Every time a chapter is concluded, a brief summary of the preceding events is provided in both text and full audio. “Part 1: Silver-Haired Maiden” follows the first of the game’s protagonists, a woman named Micaiah, as she works to build an army to free her kingdom from the clutches of an oppressive, theocratic empire seeking to destroy it. In terms of narrative, the first segment is fairly simple. Micaiah leads her army through a number of battles which culminate in its expansion and transformation into a formidable military force. In the fifth chapter, Micaiah makes a pivotal acquaintance in Prince Pelleas, who is rumoured to be the son of Daein’s former tyrannical monarch known as the ‘mad king’ Ashnard. Pelleas joins Micaiah’s struggle which marks a turning point in the fate of Micaiah’s army. Over the course of chapters six through nine, Micaiah’s forces wrest their nation’s capital from their enemy and Pelleas ultimately takes the throne. “Part 1” draws to a close with Pelleas naming Micaiah Supreme Commander of his military.
There are number of thematically significant aspects to the first segment of *Radiant Dawn*. The first is that, although the player follows Micaiah through her struggles to liberate her nation, and although Micaiah is situated as a necessary component in the kingdom’s ultimate emancipation from its enemy, she is not able to achieve her goals without continually relying upon others. It is made clear throughout the narrative that it is only due to Pelleas’s position and willingness to join her cause that she is able to succeed. Her reliance on the skills and knowledge of less socially prominent characters is also emphasized. In the first chapter, her forces are caught by enemy soldiers and are only able to escape when a number of citizens sympathetic to her cause sacrifice their lives in order to protect her and her brigade. In the third chapter, Micaiah is caught and imprisoned by an enemy general and is only able to escape probable execution with the help of a skilled thief. Similar occurrences are littered throughout the entirety of “Part 1” and highlight the fact that her nation’s freedom is not won by Micaiah alone, but by a large number of high and low born individuals working collectively. Another significant detail is the fact that, although Micaiah and her allies seek the liberation of the Daein nation, not all of the members of her forces are Daein citizens. In the fourth chapter Micaiah encounters a small group of “laguz”, a race of the *Fire Emblem* franchise whose members are able to shift between human and animal form. Among her newfound allies are a prince of the “heron clan” and the queen and her vassal of the “wolf clan”; all three agree to aid Micaiah despite having little connection to the nation of Daein. In fact, in the game’s conclusion, Micaiah herself is revealed to be a citizen of the Begnion Empire—the very empire which she opposes—and is also revealed earlier in the game to have laguz blood in her veins. Hence, rather than depicting a specific race, class, or nationality as morally superior to others, the game focuses on the actions and decisions of a wide array of individuals. As will become clear, the emphasis that “Part 1” places on the necessity of
teamwork and characterization through individuals’ ethical decision-making are recurring themes *Radiant Dawn*.

“Part 2” introduces one of the most unconventional aspects of the game’s narrative structure. Unlike most RPGs, which are firmly centered on one character (or one group of characters) throughout the bulk of the narrative, *Radiant Dawn* shifts perspective several times and is split fairly evenly between several different groups of characters. Micaiah, the protagonist of “Part 1”, does not appear at all in “Part 2”. Instead, the player is introduced to a completely new cast of characters, and follows a new protagonist, Queen Elincia of Crimea. After choosing to acknowledge Pelleas as Daein’s rightful heir, Elincia agrees to aid Rafiel’s sister Leanne, the princess of the laguz heron tribe, in an altercation between the laguz and the Begnion Empire. Elincia is forced to endure a number of intense political attacks which ultimately culminate in an attempted *coup d’état* led by a power-hungry aristocrat. Throughout the second segment of the game the player takes control of Elincia and her allies, fighting battles to quash military uprisings. “Part 2” reaches its climax when Elincia’s opponents threaten to hang one of her most loyal political sympathizers in an attempt to force her to abdicate. Undeterred, she refuses to submit to their demands. Her enemies begin following through on their threat, but are stopped by the unexpected appearance of a company of mercenaries loyal to Elincia’s rule who save her friend and help Elincia to put an end to the mounting civil war. Ike, the leader of the mercenaries, proves to be the protagonist of “Part 3”.

The emphasis that *Radiant Dawn* places on success through collective effort is clearly visible in “Part 2”. Although the majority of Elincia’s allies are Crimean citizens, there are also a number of Daein and Begnion soldiers who aid her struggle, as well as several laguz such as the aforementioned heron princess. Like “Part 1”, “Part 2” includes characters from a wide range of
social positions, including thieves, farmers, knights, political advisors, etc. Additionally, “Part 2” includes several role-reversals; while Pelleas is instrumental in lending legitimacy to Micaiah’s cause in “Part 1”, it is he who requires Elincia’s support in formally establishing his kingdom in “Part 2”. By the second segment’s conclusion, however, Elincia is forced to rely upon Ike and his mercenaries to save her friend’s life and to end Crimea’s civil war. The shift in point of view is also a significant element in highlighting collectivity. Although Pelleas is spoken of in “Part 2”, neither he nor any character from the game’s first segment appear. The protagonists of “Part 1” are thus rendered secondary characters that are largely inconsequential in the second portion of the game, displacing them as Radiant Dawn’s central focus. Consequently, the world of Radiant Dawn is depicted as an intricate web of socio-political connectivity in which no singular character is able to independently exist. The constantly shifting perspective highlights the fact that each character views the fictional world in which he or she exists through his or her own limited perspective—a perspective which the player is able to see as only one small part of a larger whole.

In the third segment of the game that the plotlines of “Part 1” and “Part 2” begin to intersect. Having lost control of Daein because of Micaiah’s insurrection and faced with Elincia’s decision to support Pelleas as Daein’s heir, the Begnion Empire begins attempting to take ground against various laguz tribes. The laguz tribes in turn form a coalition against the assaults of the powerful Begnion theocracy. An agent of Begnion fools the naïve Pelleas into drawing Daein into the conflict and Micaiah is forced to lead Daein’s troops into war on behalf of the empire. Elincia, a long-standing supporter of laguz rights, chooses to side with the Laguz Coalition, as does Ike and his mercenary companions. By the end of “Part 3” the entire known
world has been plunged into war. The ensuing violence brings the Fire Emblem, an important plot device, into play. In *Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance* (the game that precedes *Radiant Dawn*) Pelleas’s father, the ‘mad king’ Ashnard seeks to bring about a world-encompassing war in order to release a dark god from an ancient laguz medallion. As the war intensifies, blue flames are emitted from the medallion, resulting in the ‘Fire Emblem’ moniker. Believing that summoning the dark god will destroy the land, Ike and Elincia fight to stop Ashnard and ultimately succeed in defeating him. In *Radiant Dawn*, Ike and Elincia are once again tasked with attempting to end a war before the dark god is released.

Ike and Micaiah are the chief protagonists of “Part 3”, and the player is given control over the conflicting forces of Daein (led by Micaiah) and Crimea (led by Ike). After having spent the first half of the game leveling up units in each separate army and following the plotlines surrounding Daein and Crimea, the player is forced to begin leading his or her own armies against themselves. For example, in the sixth chapter of “Part 3” the player takes control of Micaiah’s forces in order to defeat the laguz under Ike’s command. In the seventh chapter, the narrative’s perspective shifts and the player is forced to use Ike’s forces in order to defeat Micaiah. Such shifts in perspective have the potential to cause the player a certain degree of distress; during “Part 1” and “Part 2”, any unit which is killed in battle is permanently lost, and the game gives the player no indication as to whether or not his or her units will survive if cut down by his or her own hand in “Part 3”. Thus, when controlling Micaiah’s forces the player is potentially more hesitant to defeat Ike’s army. Players who are invested in *Radiant Dawn*’s narrative and are sympathetic to the causes of individual characters are likely to experience a greater degree of distress when forced to fight against certain armies. Moreover, because the player has a broader understanding of the game’s events than do the characters themselves, the
game further resists placing any one character in a position of centrality or moral superiority. Micaiah fights to support Pelleas despite his poor leadership skills for the sake of her nation’s well-being, while Ike fights for the freedom of Crimea and for the oppressed laguz tribes. Both are portrayed as sympathetic, yet both possess faults and flaws. Micaiah is willing to sacrifice the lives of countless laguz for the sake of Daein, despite possessing laguz blood in her own veins, and Ike’s lack of political savvy renders him unable to solve the problems of Crimea or the laguz through any means but violence.

The intersections between narrative and gameplay are best exemplified in the final battle of “Part 3”. The skirmishes throughout “Part 3” culminate in a battle which includes members of every race and nationality in the world of Radiant Dawn. The player is given control of Ike’s army, and a small counter appears in top right-hand corner of the screen, which records every unit that is killed, whether friend or foe. The player is never directly informed as to what the significance of the counter is, although the numbers of the counter resemble blue fire similar to the flames that emanate from the Fire Emblem. When twenty units have been killed, the battle is interrupted by an image depicting the princess of the heron tribe, who has been entrusted with the Fire Emblem, unconscious and clutching the medallion. After the image is shown, the battle resumes. When the counter reaches “30”, Micaiah (the player’s enemy in this battle) leaves the battlefield claiming that someone is calling out to her. After her departure the player is forced to continue fighting against her units, without being given a clue as to where she has gone or what has happened to her. There are also several points throughout the battle in which the fighting is interrupted as various members of the laguz tribe claim that the atmosphere of the battlefield is overwhelming them. When the counter reaches “80”, the battle is once again interrupted by a cut scene in which Ike is informed by his younger sister that the Fire Emblem is calling out to her.
At this point the battle ends altogether; there is no final boss to defeat as in other battles in Radiant Dawn, nor does the player have any control over how the narrative scenes unfold.

The constant narrative intrusions on the battle coupled with the battle’s abrupt halt highlight the significance of the narrative components of Radiant Dawn in the player’s overall experience of the game. This is not to suggest that the game’s narrative is more significant than its gameplay, but rather that gameplay and narrative within Radiant Dawn enrich one another through their intricately interwoven elements. What makes the battle at the end of “Part 3” particularly effective in blending these two elements is that the player is displaced as the primary force of control. The game stipulates that the player must rout Micaiah’s units in order to emerge from the battle victorious, yet the battle ends the moment eighty units (friend or foe) have been killed. Because Micaiah’s army numbers far more than eighty, the victory conditions outlined to the player are not possible to achieve, and prove to be an intentional deception on the part of the game’s creators for the purpose of establishing dramatic tension in Radiant Dawn’s narrative.

Moreover, the cut scenes that are littered throughout the battle continually remove control from the player’s hands and reinforce the authorial authority of the game’s creators through the unalterable narrative scenes that unfold. It is also worth noting that the player’s party, led by Ike, comprises less than half of the active units engaged in the battle. Roughly two thirds of the units on the battlefield belong to either Micaiah or two members of laguz royalty, which fight against Micaiah and yet cannot be controlled by the player. Consequently, the player is forced to spend a significant amount of time waiting for enemy and ally forces alike to position themselves on the battlefield between the player’s turns. The player, despite being the only human being participating in the gameplay, is displaced as the central participant in battle. The game demands
that he or she function as one of many participants, much like the game’s various protagonists in *Radiant Dawn*’s narrative.

The recurring technique of displacement of centrality continues in the conclusion of “Part 3”. Prompted by his sister’s claim that the Fire Emblem is calling out to her, Ike leaves the battlefield with her. The siblings come upon the unconscious heron princess and are surprised to find that Micaiah has heard the Fire Emblem’s call as well. The dark god emerges from the medallion and nearly every human and laguz on the battlefield is turned to stone. Micaiah is possessed by the ‘dark god’ who, in an unexpected turn of events, is revealed to be a child-like goddess named Yune who has awakened to come to the protagonists’ aid. Yune reveals that her sister Ashera—the goddess worshipped in the Begnion theocracy—has decided to punish the world for the widespread warfare by petrifying all living creatures. Yune further explains that the only way to reverse the petrification is to defeat Ashera. “Part 3” ends with Elincia, Micaiah, Ike, and the remaining laguz agreeing to join forces with Yune to fight her sister, which leads into the fourth and final segment of the game. Enemies thus become allies in “Part 4” and fight against Ashera’s divine forces. The game concludes with the player’s party, aided by Yune, killing Ashera and reversing the petrification that has cursed the land. The humans and laguz agree to end their fighting, Micaiah and Elincia return to their respective nations to aid in the post-war rebuilding of their countries, and Yune departs, leaving the mortals to forge their own destinies free of either goddess’s rule.

The events leading up to the final battle with Ashera once again emphasize the dialogic nature of *Radiant Dawn*’s narrative. Despite being a goddess with significant power, Yune chooses to address those who manage to escape Ashera’s petrification through possession of Micaiah. She communicates with them through Micaiah while also allowing Micaiah freedom of
thought and action; Micaiah herself tells her comrades that Yune never possesses her without
permission. Moreover, when Yune first appears to the mortal characters she is addressed by Ike
but refuses to speak to him. Instead, she chooses to converse with Ike’s younger sister and
explains Ashera’s plans only to her. Ike’s position as a powerful and well-respected military
leader—as well as his position in the player’s eyes as one of the game’s protagonists—does not
garner special interest by Yune. During the final battle with Ashera, however, Yune chooses to
lend her power to Ike rather than Micaiah in order to land the finishing blow that defeats her
sister. Additionally, in the events leading up to the final battle, the game continues to shift
perspective between different parties and many different characters are focused upon. Elincia is
reunited with a long-lost relative who she had formerly believed died at the hands of the ‘mad
king’ Ashnard, Pelleas discovers that he is not Ashnard’s true heir, and the Empress of the
Begnion theocracy is forced to come to terms with the fact that the long-worshipped Ashera has
turned on her nation. Despite their individual connections with Yune, Micaiah and Ike are
continually depicted as nothing more than individuals in a far broader social, political, and
spiritual context. In fact, once the player has beaten the game, an extremely lengthy epilogue
ensues in which the player is provided with information pertaining to the fate of every playable
character in the game. The player is able to see how the lives of the characters unfold after
Ashera is defeated and the war is ended, as well as how the world as a whole develops once
peace is achieved.

*Radiant Dawn*’s theme of morality through collective effort and its destabilization of the
protagonists’ and player’s centrality can be seen in framing of the game’s antagonists as well as
it protagonists. As previously discussed, the primary antagonist and ‘final boss’ of *Radiant Dawn*
is the goddess Ashera, Yune’s sister. After being released from the Fire Emblem, Yune explains
to Micaiah and Ike that she and Ashera were once one being known as Ashunera who, centuries before the events of Radiant Dawn, flooded the world in order to punish the laguz and the humans for their constant warring. Upon realizing the consequences of her rash punishment, the goddess split herself into two parts: Ashera, the goddess of order, peace, and law, and Yune, the goddess of transformation and chaos. Ashera then sealed Yune inside the Fire Emblem and forged a pact with the surviving humans and laguz, stating that if the mortals were able to avoid war for one thousand years Ashera would spare the planet’s life. She then entered a deep slumber, promising to awaken to judge the world after one thousand years had passed. However, the escalating wars that occur throughout the game ultimately awaken Ashera after eight hundred years, prompting her to exact punishment on the mortals two hundred years earlier than promised.

The relationship between Yune and Ashera is crucial to understanding the ways in which villainy is framed in Radiant Dawn. Both goddesses are constructed as beings that are, although divine, highly flawed. They are ‘human’ in the sense that they are able to make egregious errors in judgment. It was Yune, the chaotic half of Ashunera, who caused the flood that both halves of Ashunera came to regret. Ashera likewise errs in turning all living beings to stone after being awakened by the all-consuming war. Despite their similarities, however, and in fact their true nature as one being, Yune is portrayed as a heroic figure while Ashera is clearly vilified.

Significantly, the game characterizes and thus morally encodes both characters through a dichotomy of collectivistic and individualistic traits. At several points throughout the game, Yune discusses the great flood that she caused, making comments such as “[goddesses] do make mistakes…sometimes we make terrible mistakes” and “sometimes all it takes is one emotional outburst and the entire world is drowning underwater!” (“Part 4”, Chapter 3). Such comments
reveal that Yune continues to be plagued by guilt over an act that occurred eight hundred years prior. Her motivation in helping Ike, Micaiah, and their allies is preventing Ashera from repeating Yune’s mistake, a fact that reveals her genuine desire to care for the creatures that she, as Ashunera, created. Moreover, Yune continually expresses indignation over the fact that Ashera enacted her punishment without consulting Yune. According to Yune, both goddesses agreed to decide the mortals’ fates together, rather than acting alone, yet Ashera broke their vow. Finally, once awakened from the Fire Emblem, Yune not only protects Ike, Micaiah, and their allies, but invests herself personally in their affairs by traveling with them to meet Ashera, explaining both her own and Ashera’s motivations, and allowing her mortal allies autonomy in battle.

Ashera’s characterization stands in contrast to Yune’s; unlike her sister, Ashera is characterized through a focused effort to enact her own will on the world she inhabits, regardless of the harm and suffering she causes. Upon awakening to find the world once more mired in war, Ashera breaks the promise she made with the mortals and pronounces judgment by turning nearly every living creature to stone. She likewise breaks her promise to Yune by failing to consult her before proclaiming the mortals’ fates. It is important to note that the scene in which Ashera petrifies the mortals marks her first appearance in both Radiant Dawn and Radiant Dawn’s preceding game, Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance. The placement of the ‘judgment scene’ is highly significant in terms of characterization, as it both shapes the player’s initial impressions of her character and begins a recurring trend of ego-driven actions.

Upon realizing that Yune has protected a small number of mortals from her judgment, Ashera seeks to eliminate the remaining humans and laguz. She does so by reversing her judgment on certain individuals who she deems loyal to her will and blessing them with divine
power (in an intersection between plot and gameplay elements, Ashera’s chosen forces become high-level ‘bosses’ the player must defeat). Unlike Yune, Ashera does not meet or consult with even her own forces. Instead, the leaders of her forces—high-ranking members of the Begnion senate—are left to come to their own conclusions regarding why they were saved from the fate of petrification that their fellow mortals suffer. Moreover, unlike Yune, who continually blesses her allies with additional powers and abilities in order to ensure their survival, Ashera uses her forces as pawns, allowing Ike, Micaiah, and their allies to destroy those who cannot protect themselves. Ashera also remains physically separated from her forces; after awakening, she remains in a tower in Begnion, watching Yune, Micaiah, and Ike advance from afar without assisting her own allies. Finally, before the final battle with Ashera, Yune attempts to reason with her sister and to avoid violent confrontation. She asks Ashera why she broke their promise and begs her to reverse her judgment. Ashera, however, refuses to engage in a dialogue with Yune and forces the confrontation to continue.

The differences between Ashera and Yune can, therefore, be understood as stemming from motivation rather than action. Both goddesses cause catastrophic destruction to the world, and both seek to change the world according to their own understandings of how best to improve it. Both are also clearly established as divine beings against which mortals have no ability to stand against on their own. The differences between them lay in how the goddesses choose to engage with the world they have created. Yune seeks to engage with the mortals as much as possible, speaking to and possessing Micaiah, addressing Ike’s sister Mist upon being released from the Fire Emblem, and calling out to the heron laguz before being released. As Ike’s and Micaiah’s forces travel to meet Ashera, numerous scenes occur in which Yune argues, jokes, and converses with multiple characters, forging honest relationships with them. After Ashera is
defeated, she asks Ike to forgive her for the damage she has caused the world. Essentially, while attempting to enact change upon the world, Yune is able to view herself in the larger context of the world she inhabits and seeks to adapt to it. Conversely, Ashera refuses to engage with others, be they creatures of her own creation or a fellow divine being. Her actions imply a position of assumed moral authority, an authority that extends beyond even that of Yune, who was formerly part of her. Her ‘allies’ are used as extensions of her own will rather than autonomous comrades, and rather than seeking to understand the world she inhabits Ashera attempts to bend all of creation to her own will without regard for the wellbeing of others. Ashera’s placement in the game as the ‘final boss’ implicitly connects her ego-driven actions and worldview with immorality, while Yune’s connection with the mortals portrays a morality through collective effort.

Significantly, despite the fact that there are clearly defined antagonists in Radiant Dawn, characters’ opposition to the protagonists does not necessarily result in their being vilified. In fact, several antagonists in the game are framed as somewhat morally ambiguous figures. Two of the most significant of such figures are the “Black Knight” Zelgius and Dheginsea, the king of the dragon laguz tribe, both of whom ally themselves with Ashera. The “Black Knight” Zelgius is a returning character from Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance, who in that game kills Ike’s father. Throughout Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance his true name and identity are never revealed. His face is obscured by a large battle helm, part of a suit of armour that is rumoured to have been blessed by Ashera. Hence, he is known only as the “Black Knight” through the entirety of the first game. Ike confronts, does battle with, and ultimately appears to kill the “Black Knight” in Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance, yet in Radiant Dawn he discovers that the “Black Knight” survived their battle. Through much of Radiant Dawn the “Black Knight” allies himself with
Micaiah and her army for unknown reasons. Neither the characters in the game nor the player him- or herself learn his true identity or motivations until shortly before the final battle with Ashera.

Ultimately the “Black Knight” is revealed to be General Zelgius, a member of the Begnion army, which opposes Ike and the Laguz Coalition throughout the latter half of the game. Although his identity as the “Black Knight” is not revealed to the player or the characters within the game, Zelgius becomes one of the most prominent antagonists in the game’s narrative. Although the player never directly faces Zelgius in battle (unless he is disguised as the “Black Knight”), three of Radiant Dawn’s fully animated cut scenes feature Zelgius locked in combat with the player’s allies. Considering the rarity of fully animated cut scenes in Radiant Dawn, Zelgius’s inclusion in such scenes marks him as a narratively significant character. Much like the game’s protagonists and the goddess Yune, Zelgius’s morality is framed through his ability and willingness to adapt to the world around him rather than attempting to impose his will upon others, as well as his respect for sentient life.

Zelgius is primarily characterized as a powerful yet obedient soldier determined to uphold his duty. At several points throughout the game he is shown obeying orders that he personally disagrees with, refusing to allow his own opinions or desires to interfere with his responsibilities as Begnion’s highest-ranking general. In one such scene, Ike’s chief military strategist devises a plan to lure Zelgius’s forces away from a pivotal battle. Knowing that the Begnion army is much stronger than Ike’s forces, Ike’s strategist proposes that a small number of units invade a nearby camp of Begnion’s aristocracy. Because the aristocrats within the camp in question are technically commanders of the Begnion army, Ike’s strategist reasons that they will demand Zelgius and his forces rush to their aid, thus allowing Ike and his weaker army to pass
through the battlefield unscathed. Ike agrees, the camp is invaded, and as predicted the aristocrats command Zelgius to withdraw from the battle to help them. A scene follows in which Zelgius, conversing with a subordinate, immediately recognizes the true purpose of the raiding of the camp. However, despite knowing that following orders will result in a serious strategic loss for his own army and his nation, he does as he is commanded and withdraws.

Zelgius is also characterized through the respect he displays for both allies and enemies. Unlike the goddess Ashera, and despite his steadfast determination to fulfill his duty as a soldier, he does not treat his subordinates as nameless pawns or extensions of his own will. After losing ground through the invasion of the aristocrats’ camp, Zelgius is ordered to pursue Ike into a dangerous volcanic region. Out of desperation, Ike leads his forces deeper and deeper into increasingly hostile terrain, knowing that his own army is still no match for Begnion’s soldiers. Zelgius at first obeys his orders and leads his troops into the volcanic region, but upon experiencing the unforgiving terrain and witnessing the hardships his men are forced to endure, he ultimately withdraws and allows Ike to escape once more. His actions result in a thorough reprimand and threat of severe punishment at the hands of the Begnion senate should he disobey orders again. Although remaining firm in the belief that he made the right decision and that further pursuit would be “suicide” for his subordinates, Zelgius accepts the rebuke he is given.

The concern Zelgius shows for his own men is mirrored in the treatment he shows his enemies. In order to cut off Ike’s retreat, the Begnion senate orders Zelgius to cut through Crimea, Queen Elincia’s kingdom. Upon learning that Begnion soldiers are marching on her land, Elincia stages an act of peaceful protest by laying down her sword and standing in the army’s path, blocking their way. Because the Begnion senate considers Crimea a vassal state of Begnion, her protest is interpreted as an act of treason and Zelgius is ordered to cut her down.
Zelgius, however, refuses to do so, stating that he will not fight an unarmed opponent. It is implied that he recognizes that Begnion’s view of Crimea does not reflect Crimea’s own view that it is an independent nation, not a vassal state. Once again Zelgius’s actions result in punishment. The senate, true to its earlier threat, sentences Zelgius to execution for twice disobeying orders. Again, although standing firm in his decision, Zelgius accepts his sentence and refuses to resist his nation’s leaders, regardless of the harm it causes him (although in the end the senate’s ruling is overturned and Zelgius is released).

Despite his somewhat ‘heroic’ framing in some scenes, however, Zelgius is not depicted as a strictly morality upright individual. His allegiance remains firmly committed to Ashera, even after the goddess petrifies most of the world. As the “Black Knight” he is still the character responsible for killing Ike’s father, a fact which, although having occurred in the previous game, continues to hold narrative significance in Radiant Dawn. Ike continues to view the “Black Knight” as the man who murdered his father. Nevertheless, Ike carries a grudging respect for him due to the moments of compassion and integrity that Zelgius displays throughout the game. Ike’s ambivalent view of Zelgius/the “Black Knight” mirrors the game’s overall framing of his character. Zelgius cares deeply for the world he inhabits and the creatures that dwell within it, which is revealed to be his motivation for siding with Ashera. Believing that the mortals are lost due to their warring nature, he believes that Ashera’s punishment is just and should be accepted by all. Hence, unlike Ashera herself who disregards the world’s wellbeing in favour of her own ego-driven desires, Zelgius sincerely seeks to heal the world, believing somewhat naïvely in Ashera’s infallibility. Immediately before the final battle with Ashera, Ike confronts Zelgius in battle and kills him. While expressing sorrow over what he considers to be a wasteful turn of
events, Ike remains firm in his belief that Zelgius’s death is necessary in light of the crimes he committed.

It is important to note that Zelgius’s role in Radiant Dawn’s gameplay mirrors his characterization in the game’s narrative. He appears briefly at the end of “Part 1” to help Micaiah escape an ambush orchestrated by an enemy of her liberation army. In a battle unique to all others in the game, the player is given control of only Micaiah and the “Black Knight”; Zelgius thus becomes an ally and a playable character until the end of the battle, when he once again disappears from the player’s battle roster. After Ike’s introduction at the end of “Part 2” Zelgius, always disguised as the “Black Knight”, again joins Micaiah at several points in order to oppose Ike’s forces. At times he functions as a playable character (when the player is in control of Micaiah’s army), and at times functions as an enemy (when the player is in control of Ike’s forces). As previously discussed, he likewise appears free of his disguise to battle Ike as General Zelgius of Begnion. While the player does not fight Zelgius himself when he is not disguised as the “Black Knight”, Ike’s forces continually clash with Zelgius’s in battles that culminate in animated and non-animated cut scenes, giving his character a presence on the battlefield. Significantly, he is also one of the final ‘bosses’ the player’s party encounters before battling Ashera herself. The player is therefore encouraged to develop a fraught relationship with the “Black Knight”/Zelgius character, viewing him as both a crucial ally and a dreaded opponent on the battlefield: he receives damage in battle only rarely and is able to defeat most enemies with a single blow. As in the game’s narrative, however, he is most often positioned as an enemy unit, marking him clearly as an antagonist in the game’s overall structure.

In the end, while Zelgius is not framed as a heroic figure, he is not outright vilified, either. He is firmly established as an antagonist, yet the game’s theme of collectivist morality can
be seen in the moments of compassion and respect for both allies and enemies that he displays. Likewise, his willingness to sacrifice his reputation and even his life for others—be it to protect his subordinates, to spare the life of a helpless enemy, or to defend the will of Ashera—are implicitly lauded. Like Yune, Zelgius is depicted as an individual who is able to view himself as a small part of a much larger whole, maintaining a personal sense of justice yet largely refusing to impose his position on those who oppose him. Yet he is also the murderer of Ike’s father, a general of the Begnion army, and one of the game’s final ‘bosses’. Zelgius’s framing thus highlights morality as constructed in *Radiant Dawn* in that the protagonists and the player alike are urged to consider the motivations behind his actions and to sympathize with him. He is not framed solely as a ‘villain’ as Ashera is, but as a rational individual whose motivations happen to conflict with the protagonists’ and the player’s.

A similarly problematized figure in *Radiant Dawn* is Dheginsea, the king of the laguz dragon tribe. Like Zelgius he is not outright vilified, and his moral ambiguity in many ways highlights morality as constructed in *Radiant Dawn*. Like Zelgius, Dheginsea is one of the game’s final ‘bosses’, yet his appearance in the game is relegated almost exclusively to the game’s narrative portions. The player encounters him only once in battle, shortly before meeting Ashera; before this battle, he appears in several non-animated cut scenes and is referenced continually by characters throughout the game. Despite being a highly significant character to *Radiant Dawn*’s narrative, Dheginsea is characterized largely through absence, a fact that marks him as unique among the laguz characters in the game.

As previously outlined, the laguz are human-animal hybrids, and are extremely important figures in the *Fire Emblem* franchise’s mythology. The laguz in *Radiant Dawn* are divided into the wolf, lion, hawk, raven, heron, and dragon tribes, each of which is established as possessing
unique strengths and weaknesses in combat. With the exception of the heron tribe, which are exclusively support units, the laguz are physically the strongest units in the game and appear as both crucial allies and powerful opponents. Very early in “Part 1” Micaiah is joined by the queen of the wolf tribe and a prince of the heron tribe, while Ike later finds allies in the king and prince of the lion tribe, the kings of the hawk and raven tribes, and a prince of the heron tribe. The dragon tribe is uniquely and conspicuously absent throughout much of the game. Nevertheless, two members of the dragon tribe join Ike’s and Micaiah’s forces near the end of the game, shortly before Yune is released from the Fire Emblem. Much of the narrative portions of Radiant Dawn are devoted to encounters between the laguz and humans, in which both species must learn to peacefully coexist and work together in order to survive Begnion’s military onslaught.

Two character arcs of particular significance include Skrimir, the prince of the lion tribe, and Soren, Ike’s chief military strategist, who clash several times over the course of the game. As a powerful laguz who was raised in a culture that resolves disputes with physical confrontations, Skrimir is initially unable to see value in Soren’s subtle strategies. Soren is likewise unwilling to work with an individual he considers to be lacking in both military grace and wit. As the narrative unfolds, however, Skrimir witnesses the effectiveness of Soren’s tactics when fighting human opponents, and Soren comes to understand the necessity of Skrimir’s brash demeanour in keeping command of his unruly lion forces. Throughout Skrimir’s and Soren’s various clashes, Ike continually urges the two to find common ground and use one another’s strengths to compensate for both character’s weaknesses. In the end, Soren and Skrimir are able to effectively work together, strengthening the Laguz Coalition greatly. Many such subplots appear in the game, often including scenes in which human characters must learn to overcome biases against the laguz, and vice versa. Additionally, several characters such as Micaiah and
Soren are revealed to be ‘branded’, or the children of human-laguz intermarriage and whom are shunned by both species, resulting in plotlines in which the ‘branded’ are forced to come to terms with their identities. Those around them are likewise forced to rethink their prior prejudices.

As the game progresses, Ike’s and Micaiah’s armies grow stronger as such biases disappear, both in the narrative portions of the game and in battle sequences. Strong friendships develop between many of the characters, and the player is given access to a larger and larger arsenal of increasingly diverse and powerful units to choose from. Moreover, the ‘laguz royalty’, including the kings of the lion, hawk, and raven tribes, are the most powerful units in the game and yet do not become playable characters until Ike’s and Micaiah’s forces are merged. The resolutions of the subplots involving the laguz, the humans, and the ‘branded’, as well as the circumstances in which laguz allies become playable characters, ultimately reveal a clearly-established pattern of how morality is depicted. In each case, characters and the player alike are ‘rewarded’ for collectivist thinking. Characters in the game are rewarded with survival and, most often, happiness, acceptance, or resolution concerning a past dilemma. The player is likewise rewarded with the survival of his or her units (which ensures the ability to continue playing the game), as well as increasingly powerful units and opportunities for potentially cathartic narrative experiences.

The character of Dheginsea stands in contrast to the majority of the laguz characters outlined above. Unlike his fellow human-animal hybrids who largely come to symbolize the breaking down of racial and species prejudice, Dheginsea remains firmly committed to keeping the dragon tribe isolated from humans and even other laguz tribes. Throughout the majority of the game, the player does not encounter dragon laguz at all, and it is not until “Part 3” that
Dheginsea and his people appear onscreen. The dragon tribe’s absence is a significant point, as their refusal to take part in the war against Begnion carries an implicit refusal to aid their fellow laguz in fighting against slavery and possible racial extermination. Dheginsea justifies his position by claiming that his tribe are pacifists and that they are attempting to protect the world by refusing to fight other creatures.

The possibly disastrous results of the dragon tribe’s refusal to fight are revealed in the scene in which Dheginsea first appears. Although the king of the dragon tribe is mentioned in many previous scenes, the player’s introduction to Dheginsea occurs immediately following a previously discussed battle with Zlegius, in which Ike is forced to lead his army into hostile volcanic terrain. With Zelgius and the Begnion army at their backs, Ike and his allies cross the volcanic lands only to find that they have unwittingly entered the dragon tribe’s domain. Ike and the hawk king, Tibarn, request passage through Dheginsea’s lands, but the dragon king is unwilling to grant their request, which leads to the following exchange:

Tibarn: [The dragon tribe] have ignored the suffering of their laguz brothers for centuries. They even looked the other way while we birds and beasts were enslaved by [humans]! Isn’t that so, Dragon King?

Dheginsea: …Our country is neutral. It has been since time out of mind and will continue to be so.

Ike: Then you might as well just kill us now. It’d be the same as sending us back [into Begnion’s hands], and it saves us the walk.

Dheginsea: You are a [human]. I would not expect your short-lived kind to understand.
Ike: I don’t need to understand to see that it’s a poor king who has such little regard for his fellow living creatures! (“Part 3”, Chapter 9)

This exchange between Ike, Dheginsea, and Tibarn, contains a number of crucial elements in understanding the ways in player experience is constructed. It is important to note that immediately before Ike and his forces stumble upon the dragon tribe’s lands, the player him- or herself actively engaged in Ike’s battle with Zelgius. It is possible that throughout the course of the battle the player lost one or more units, and more than likely his or her healing supplies and weaponry are limited (in Radiant Dawn, weaponry wears out with use, as do healing staves and items). Between the player’s battle with Zelgius and the encounter with Dheginsea, the game provides no opportunity for the player to replenish his or her equipment, nor scenes in which new units are recruited into Ike’s army. Consequently, Dheginsea’s refusal to help Ike is potentially as frustrating to the player as it is to Ike himself. The player, like Ike, is faced with the prospect of once again battling Zelgius’s troops with forces that have potentially already been winnowed and supplies that are likely dangerously low.

Tibarn’s and Dheginsea’s contributions to the conversation provide an added layer of depth to the scene in terms of narrative construction. Tibarn’s comments challenge Dheginsea’s pacifist claims by attempting to display a discrepancy between the goal of Dheginsea’s personal philosophy—world peace—and the reality of the lives of his fellow laguz, which are anything but peaceful. Significantly, throughout the early portions of the game, Tibarn and his fellow hawk laguz are revealed to be guardians of the heron tribe, of which only four members remain. “Part 1” introduces Rafiel (the heron prince who allies himself with Micaiah), “Part 2” introduces Leanne (the princess who allies herself with Elincia), and “Part 3” introduces Reyson, who serves in Ike’s army with Tibarn (the fourth heron is Rafiel’s, Leanne’s, and Reyson’s
father, who is deathly ill). The player’s widespread exposure to the heron characters and their near-extinction lends weight to Tibarn’s frustrations with Dheginsea’s policies. Dheginsea himself displays no sympathy toward his fellow laguz, nor does he attempt to explain his reasoning to Tibarn and Ike. Moreover, the dragon king proves himself willing to sacrifice Ike’s army for the sake of peace by driving it back into Begnion’s hands. By addressing the humans as “you short-lived kind”, Dheginsea reveals a perceived distinction between his own race and Ike’s, implying that Ike’s nature as a human limits his understanding of the world. Ike’s fiery response resists the implication that his ability to judge right from wrong is hindered by his race. The exchange thus reverses the previously established human biases against laguz, which are largely predicated on the belief that the laguz are less enlightened. Dheginsea thus becomes a figure more ‘human’ as established in Radiant Dawn than Ike himself.

In many ways Dheginsea’s characterization mirrors Ashera’s more closely than it does Zelgius’s. Like Ashera, he claims to wish peace for the world, but proves willing to sacrifice others for his own ideals. He is likewise rigidly unwilling to listen to or consider the beliefs of others, and consistently insists on separation between ‘his people’ and outsiders. Furthermore, Dheginsea shares in Ashera’s arrogant belief that his ideals are not accepted by others simply because those who do not accept them are ignorant or unworthy of understanding his notions of enlightened thinking. Dheginsea displays similar condescension toward his fellow dragons. In “Part 4”, his own son Kurthnaga and Kurthnaga’s aid who was formerly engaged to Dheginsea’s eldest son, join the Laguz Coalition, prompting Dheginsea to side with Ashera under the claim that they are unwittingly leading the world toward destruction. Rather than attempting to understand the members of his own tribe, Dheginsea resorts to violently opposing them, thus becoming one of the final ‘bosses’ in the game.
Dheginsea’s connection with Ashera is bolstered by the fact that he is revealed to have been alive when Yune was sealed in the Fire Emblem. After having witnessed the great war that flood that led to Ashunera splitting herself into two entities, the dragon king decided to isolate his kingdom in order to fulfill the promise that was made to Ashera. Dheginsea is also revealed to be the source of the world’s belief that a ‘dark god’ lives in the Fire Emblem. After being defeated in Ashera’s tower at the end of the game, he tells Yune that he fostered the belief that she was a ‘dark god’ in order to frighten all mortals into fulfilling their promise with Ashera. Many of the laguz who are with Yune, including Kurthnaga, are surprised by this revelation. The fact that Dheginsea chooses to rely upon the deception of even his own tribe and family reinforces his earlier characterization; again, he is portrayed as assuming that he alone is able to understand and act wisely upon the truth. Rather than attempting to work cooperatively toward peace, he chooses isolation and deception as methods of controlling the world’s development. Moreover, after Ashera awakens and enacts her judgment on the world, Dheginsea aligns himself with her and attempts to make her will a reality despite the devastation it is sure to cause for even his own tribe.

Despite Dheginsea’s many parallels with Ashera, however, he is not an entirely vilified character. His methods and overall character are largely portrayed as immoral, yet his motivations throw the protagonists’ and, by extension, the player’s actions into question. Throughout the game it is made clear that Ike, Micaiah, Yune, and their allies not actively seek violence, but view battle as the unfortunate reality of the situations they find themselves in. Although they continuously lament having to fight, they refuse to resort to neutrality, believing that confronting their respective opponents is their only method of resisting oppression. The inclusion of Dheginsea destabilizes the morality of their actions, however, due to the conviction
with which he acts upon his pacifist ideals. The destabilization of the protagonists’ moral authority is further problematized when the conditions of Yune’s awakening are fully considered; it is not until Kurthnaga and his aid enter into battle that Ashera and Yune are awakened. Before Kurthnaga enters the battlefield, the dragon tribe is the last kingdom in the world to resist joining the war. Had he not done so, Dheginsea’s methods may have proven effective and Ashera may not have broken her promise to Yune by enacting judgment on the mortals. Kurthnaga’s actions are implicitly lauded in the framing of the game, as he works to save the lives of his friends and end the oppression of the laguz at the hands of Begnion, yet there is no denying that they carry heavy consequences.

The inclusion of Zelgius and Dheginsea ultimately works to resist a ‘black and white’ construction of morality based upon agreement with the protagonists’ actions. The protagonists are, overall, clearly portrayed as heroic individuals, while Ashera and several of her allies are vilified. Yet the game’s creators resist constructing Ike, Micaiah, Yune, or any of their allies as morally upright merely by virtue of being the characters that the player follows throughout the narrative. Zelgius and Dheginsea, although antagonists in both narrative and gameplay, offer alternative viewpoints that work to counterbalance the protagonists’, potentially resulting in feelings of inner conflict in the player. The player may begin develop reservations about his or her involvement in certain battles and about fighting against certain opponents. Of course, the level of reservation the player may feel will depend upon his or her level of investment in the characters and the overall narrative.

The potential conflict that the player experiences is bolstered by the continual clashing of Micaiah’s, Elincia’s, and Ike’s forces, which constantly require the player to essentially work against his or her own units. In this way, gameplay and narrative intersect to present the game’s
theme of collective morality. In terms of gameplay, the player is forced to experience battles from several different perspectives, controlling several different armies, which continually clash with one another, urging the player to become equally invested in each army’s success. The battles are programmed in such a way that the player is urged to diversify his or her forces and to explore most of his or her units’ strengths and weaknesses, thus constructing each individual unit as a crucial component in the army’s survival. The constantly shifting points of view that the player is exposed to, as well as the inclusion of elements such as the ‘ally’ and ‘other’ phases in combat, displace the protagonists and player alike as the central driving forces of battles. The shifting points of view in battles are also mirrored in the game’s narrative portions, which include characters and plotlines unique to each respective army and in which characters’ motivations often clash with those of other armies’ characters. Likewise, by providing insight into the antagonists’ motivations and rationales for their actions, the game problematizes the protagonists’ and player’s actions. ‘Morality’ as constructed in Radiant Dawn is thus the ability and willingness of the individual to view him- or herself as a small part of a larger whole, to attempt to adapt to his or her environment by considering others’ positions, and to work toward the benefit of all sentient creatures. ‘Immorality’, by contrast, is portrayed as the ego-driven unwillingness to consider others’ viewpoints and attempting to enforce an individual will upon all sentient creatures regardless of potential harm.

Considering the many intersections between gameplay and narrative that I have outlined in this examination of Radiant Dawn, it is clear that neither feature can be satisfactorily divorced from the other. The player’s experience of gameplay and his or her experience of narrative are so closely intertwined that attempting to separate the two only creates an artificial distinction that, while perhaps appearing convenient for academic study, ultimately hinders scholars’
understanding of how gameplay experience is constructed in digital games. It is also important to note that just as grammar, syntax, diction, and so on are tools used by writers to express ideas, so too are the plethora of narrative techniques and features of gameplay mechanics used by games’ creators to construct unique gameplay experiences; games within the same genre and even within the same subgenre, while utilizing the same tools, may do so in order to construct vastly different experiences for players. Indeed, many of the aforementioned tools utilized by the creators of Radiant Dawn are likewise utilized by the creators of Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World in order to provide an entirely different gameplay/narrative experience which expresses an entirely different kind of morality.
Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World

As in Radiant Dawn, morality in Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World (or Dawn of the New World, as it is referred to by many fans) is expressed just as clearly at the level of gameplay as it is at the level of narrative. Dawn of the New World relegates gameplay almost exclusively to combat, allowing the player to build a party of four characters who travel the world and engage in battle between narrative-heavy cut scenes. The game employs ‘real-time’ combat in which the player must press certain buttons, usually in a specific combination, in order to execute attacks, while simultaneously blocking and evading oncoming attacks launched by enemies. The control structure of battles in Dawn of the New World in many ways resembles that of fighting games such as Mortal Kombat, Street Fighter, and Soul Calibur. Real-time combat has been a staple of the Tales franchise since the first game in the series, Tales of Phantasia, was released in 1995. Other early RPGs such as Chrono Trigger (also released in 1995), and later titles including The Legend of Dragoon, Kingdom Hearts, Final Fantasy XIII, and Final Fantasy VII: Crisis Core likewise employ real-time combat. Hence, while Dawn of the New World does mark a break from turn-based games, it is firmly grounded in pre-established gameplay conventions within the RPG genre. This is a detail of some significance, because the border dividing RPGs from other video game genres is often blurred most strongly by gameplay mechanics. However, the strong focus placed upon narrative in Dawn of the New World marks the game as an RPG. It is also important to acknowledge that every game in the Tales franchise to date has been marketed as an RPG and categorized as such by retailers such as Gamestop.

A distinguishing factor between Dawn of the New World and many other RPGs, however, including many within the Tales franchise, is the marked centrality of the game’s protagonist, Emil. As previously mentioned, the player is able to build a party of four characters that engage
in combat, yet when a battle is initiated Emil is the only character that is directly controlled by the player. The remaining three characters are controlled by the game’s artificial intelligence. The player is able to give them general strategic directions, such as prompting them to conserve ‘TP’ (technical points) which are needed to execute magic attacks, but such directions afford the player only minimal control. Even if Emil is defeated in battle, the player is unable to assume control of his teammates. The limited control featured in *Dawn of the New World* is not a constant element of the franchise; as an example, *Tales of the Abyss*, a previous entry in the series, allows the player to continually switch between players, controlling either the protagonist or any of his teammates at any given point in the game.

The player’s control over Emil exclusively is in some ways similar to *Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3*, a turn-based J-RPG which likewise affords the player control over only the game’s protagonist, yet *Persona 3* affords the player the opportunity to give far more specific commands to teammates during battle and likewise allows him or her to decide which weapons and armor teammates wear/utilize in battle. *Dawn of the New World*, on the other hand, does not allow the player to alter any but one of Emil’s teammates’ equipment. The remaining characters’ equipment is altered automatically without the player’s input. Additionally, of the ten ‘playable’ characters in the game (the term ‘playable’ referring to characters which can be used as allies in the player’s party), only two, Emil and his love interest Marta, are permanently available for use. Most playable characters come and go so frequently that upwards of ten hours of gameplay may elapse without the player having access to certain teammates. Many other RPGs such as *Final Fantasy XIII*, *Chrono Trigger*, and *Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn* also restructure the player’s party as the games’ plots demand, yet for the most part such computer-driven reorganization is minimal and the player is given balanced exposure to most characters. *Dawn of the New World*,
by contrast, constantly juggles playable characters in and out of the player’s party, offering a noticeable lack of party control at the hands of the player and giving markedly unbalanced exposure to the playable characters therein.

The unbalanced exposure to characters that the game affords may seem like a minor detail, yet it is highly significant in the establishment of Emil as the game’s—and the player’s—central focus. Emil’s role as the central focal point in battle is bolstered by the fact that he is the leading offensive unit in most battles; with the exceptions of the characters Regal, Lloyd, and Priscilla (two of which are rarely available in the player’s party), Emil is the only character able to deal significant physical damage with a melee weapon. Marta, Raine, and Genis, the three most frequently available playable characters besides Emil, and Zelos and Colette, two additional yet rarely available playable characters, use magic and/or ranged attacks almost exclusively. Spell casting in *Dawn of the New World* is time-intensive and requires characters to ‘concentrate’; if a character that is attempting to cast a spell is attacked by an enemy, he or she must begin casting the spell from the beginning and cannot succeed until it is cast without interruption. Thus, when battle is initiated characters that rely upon spell casting typically dart as far from enemies as possible before attempting to use magic. The player is typically charged with keeping enemies at bay and dealing damage while his or her party prepares spells. The result of this is that, while Emil plays the most active role in most battles by engaging enemies at close proximity, most of his teammates play supportive roles by casting healing and ‘buff’ spells on Emil (‘buff’ spells referring to spells that increase a character’s speed, strength, etc. or that heal abnormal status effects that decrease such attributes). Because the camera follows Emil, he is often the only playable character on screen during the bulk of a given battle, and he is most often
responsible for a battle’s triumph or defeat. This stands in sharp contrast to Radiant Dawn, which forces the player to rely on collectivity and teamwork to triumph in combat.

Emil’s centrality in combat is further established through his ability to “forge pacts” with monsters. After the player’s party has defeated a monster in battle, and if certain gameplay conditions are met, Emil is able to conscript the defeated monster into his party in order to use it in future battles. Because playable characters are so consistently removed from the player’s party at various points throughout the game, the player’s ability to succeed is predicated upon his or her ability to collect monsters; essentially, when there are fewer than four playable characters in the player’s battle party, he or she is able to use monsters as replacement units until the narrative once again brings playable characters across Emil’s path. The conscripted monsters are not given distinguishing personality traits, nor do they appear in cut scenes outside of battle, which establishes them as tools for Emil’s/the player’s use rather than characters. Hence, during the many sections of the game in which Emil and Marta are the only playable characters in the player’s party, their centrality becomes increasingly evident. Moreover, Emil is the only character in the game with the ability to conscript monsters, and the game makes it clear that the monsters participating in battle as members of the player’s party are serving Emil exclusively (as opposed to additional members in the player’s party).

Emil’s firmly-established centrality in battle is reinforced by his role in the game’s narrative as well. In fact, the narrative in many ways explains why and how Emil becomes the central fighting force in combat, as his abilities in battle are the result of several plot points that occur in the narrative elements of the game. In order to understand the close intersections between narrative and gameplay, however, a close analysis of the game’s storyline is necessary. Dawn of the New World is, like Radiant Dawn, a sequel to an earlier title in its respective
franchise. Similar to many J-RPG series, most titles within the *Tales* franchise are standalone games with separate storylines that are in no way connected to one another. While key aspects of gameplay and other features of the *Tales* series remain constant from one title to the next, players are typically able to play any game within the series without having played any previous entries. *Dawn of the New World* is in some ways an exception to this rule in that the story is set two years after *Tales of Symphonia*, a game released in North America in 2004. *Dawn of the New World*, released in 2008, is a continuation of *Tales of Symphonia*’s narrative. However, while the protagonists of the first game do appear in *Dawn of the New World*, the plot centers almost exclusively on a new protagonist (Emil).

The plot of *Dawn of the New World* is much simpler than that of *Radiant Dawn*, primarily because it is a far more character-driven narrative than is *Radiant Dawn*. While *Radiant Dawn* provides the player with richly established settings and at times complex narrative premises, *Dawn of the New World* focuses almost entirely upon character interaction and development. *Dawn of the New World*’s setting and in many ways its plot are often reduced to decorative backdrops which serve little purpose other than providing opportunities for scenes of dramatic tension between characters. While *Radiant Dawn* draws heavily upon premises from *Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance* such as the “dark god” sealed in the Fire Emblem, laguz slavery, and the “Mad King” Ashnard’s war, *Dawn of the New World* has little to do with its preceding title aside from returning characters. Two particularly striking examples of ignored plot elements are the discontinuation of the previous game’s “human ranches” and reduced emphasis of formerly significant spiritual figures. A large portion of *Tales of Symphonia* is centered upon racial oppression at the hands of half-elven, a species which conducts medical experiments on humans in facilities known as “human ranches”. After the characters have put an end to the
“human ranches”, the bulk of the game’s plot involves the protagonists embarking upon a spiritual pilgrimage that culminates in their participation in a battle between deities that ultimately determines the fate of the world. Despite the in-world significance of these plot developments, however, *Dawn of the New World* only rarely acknowledges them. *Dawn of the New World* is set three years after *Tales of Symphonia*, yet Emil must be told what “human ranches” were, a fact which implies that neither he nor any human he has encountered has been significantly impacted by their existence. Moreover, the complex mythology of gods and god-like figures that dominate the world of *Tales of Symphonia* and contribute heavily to its plot are referenced only in vague terms in *Dawn of the New World*.

The treatment of plot continuity in *Radiant Dawn* and *Dawn of the New World* can be understood in relation to Ian Condry’s (2009) previously outlined notion of “anime creativity”. The creators of *Radiant Dawn* place clear emphasis on premises (*settei*), and world-settings (*sekaikan*); plot elements such as the “dark god” in the Fire Emblem and laguz slavery are carefully developed, resulting in a stronger focus upon plot than character. Conversely, the creators of *Dawn of the New World* place far more emphasis upon characters (*kyarakutaa*). Despite the conspicuous absence of significant plot elements found in *Tales of Symphonia*, *Dawn of the New World* maintains returning characters’ psychological continuity and places far more focus upon character development than does *Radiant Dawn*. This is possible in no small part due to the smaller cast of characters in *Dawn of the New World*: unlike *Radiant Dawn*, which includes over seventy playable characters and continually shifts point of view, *Dawn of the New World* includes only ten playable characters and focuses almost exclusively upon Emil.

*Dawn of the New World* begins with the introduction of Emil in his hometown. Drawing upon conventions of many J-RPGs, Emil is a timid young man ostracized from his small
community before being thrust into a world-altering battle between good and evil. The catalyst in enacting Emil’s journey is the arrival of a strange man named Richter who enlists Emil’s help in searching the town for a young woman named Marta who possesses the fragments of a red jewel embedded in her forehead. Emil helps Richter find her, and is horrified to find that Richter intends to kill her. Marta flees with Richter in pursuit, leaving Emil alone with Marta’s companion Tenebrae, a self-proclaimed “centurian” (bestial creatures analogous to demi-gods). Tenebrae urges Emil to forge a pact with the centurian ruler Ratatosk, explaining that Ratatosk is a god-like entity who has power over all beasts in the world. Realizing that Ratatosk is able to give him the power to save Marta, Emil agrees and forges a pact with him. With Ratatosk’s might, Emil is able to help Marta escape Richter.

Once Emil, Tenebrae, and Marta have successfully fled to safety Marta explains that the red jewel embedded in her forehead is Ratatosk’s “core”, an essential part of him than Richter and others are attempting to destroy in the belief that Ratatosk is a demon lord. She further explains that she is on a journey to collect the cores of Tenebrae’s contemporaries, the other centurians who serve Ratatosk. Marta claims that Ratatosk has entered a deep slumber that has dampened his power and caused chaos to begin spreading throughout the world. She tells Emil that once the cores have been collected, Ratatosk’s power will be fully awakened and he will be able to restore balance to the world once again. Emil, realizing that Marta is fighting for a just cause, agrees to join her and Tenebrae in awakening the other centurians. The remainder of the game’s plot involves the three characters traveling from dungeon to dungeon in an attempt to awaken the centurian’s cores before Richter and his allies are able to get to them. As they do so, Ratatosk aids Emil by possessing him when he and Marta are in danger and lending him power in battle.
Throughout their travels, Emil’s and Marta’s path continually converges and diverges with characters from the original *Tales of Symphonia* game. For the most part, the characters from the previous game aid Emil and Marta in battle, but contribute little to the overall plot. The most significant exception to this rule is the character of Lloyd, the previous game’s central protagonist. While most characters from *Tales of Symphonia* are sympathetic to and aspire to help Emil and Marta in collecting the centurians’ cores, Lloyd is a minor antagonist in *Dawn of the New World*. Throughout much of the game he fights against both Emil and Richter and seeks the centurians’ cores for himself. His motivations are, throughout most of the game, unclear to the player. It is not until roughly two thirds of the game are complete that both Lloyd’s and Richter’s motivations are fully outlined: through a series of encounters with secondary characters during their travels, Emil and Marta learn that Emil is in fact Ratatosk himself, incarnate in human form. They learn that Richter, formerly a researcher, and his good friend named Aster once approached Ratatosk’s dwelling, an act with resulted in Ratatosk slaying Aster with no provocation. Enraged by the loss of his friend, Richter attempted to kill Ratatosk, but was only able to weaken him. In his weakened state Ratatosk took possession of Aster’s body in order to escape Richter and, coming upon Marta, placed a jewel in her forehead—a false core—in hopes of making her a decoy for Richter to pursue. Successfully misled, Richter began following Marta and Ratatosk escaped to the hometown of a young man, Emil, who had died, and took on Emil’s identity before cleansing his own memories of his true nature. Unlike Richter, however, Lloyd was able to discover what truly happened to Ratatosk and thus sought to prevent him from awakening to his former state of power.

Upon realizing who and what he truly is, Emil attempts to reject his former nature. However, Richter, obsessed with vengeance, returns to Ratatosk’s former dwelling, which
houses a gate to the realm of demons. Richter forges a pact with the demons inside, vowing to open the gate and release them into the world if they will slay Emil. Faced with this new dilemma, Emil, Marta, Lloyd, and the rest of the characters from the original Tales of Symphonia game join forces and ultimately defeat Richter. Emil is then faced with the decision to reject his new identity as “Emil”, to reject his old identity as “Ratatosk”, or to merge both identities. Dawn of the New World includes three possible endings, each of which is unlocked through the player’s performance in a series of battles that take place after Richter’s defeat. Once Richter has been subdued, Emil claims that he has decided to embrace his identity as Ratatosk and attempts to kill Marta. A battle is then initiated between Emil (controlled by the player) and Marta and Lloyd (controlled by the game’s AI). If the player succeeds in defeating Marta and Lloyd, the game’s “bad ending” is unlocked: a cut scene results in which Marta emerges wounded from the battle and Emil, overcome with grief over her wounds, uses Ratatosk’s power to seal himself in his “core form”, essentially killing himself. The cut scene—the last scene in the game, should the player achieve the “bad ending”—concludes with Marta screaming Emil’s name in anguish.

In my analysis of traditional RPG conventions, I noted that many RPGs include battles that players are intended to lose for the sake of a game’s narrative. This is an aspect of RPG literacy that the player is expected to draw upon in order to successfully avoid receiving the “bad ending”. When Emil, claiming to be Ratatosk, attacks Lloyd and Marta, the player must intentionally lose the battle. Once the battle has come to an end, a cut-scene is initiated in which Marta realizes that Emil has not truly chosen to allow Ratatosk to overpower the “Emil” identity, but is instead hoping to sacrifice himself by returning to Ratatosk’s “core form” in order to seal the gate to the realm of demons with Ratatosk’s power. Knowing his plan, Marta and Lloyd refuse to fight Emil, who is once again faced with the decision of choosing between his dual
identities. A second battle is initiated, this time taking place in Emil’s subconscious, between the “Emil” and “Ratatosk” identities. Once again, the ending that the player achieves is dependent upon the outcome of the battle. If the player fails to defeat Ratatosk, the game’s “neutral” ending is unlocked. Ratatosk overpowers the “Emil” identity and chooses to remain sealed within the gate to the demon realm in order to protect the world from the demons’ power. However, he reveals that he cannot complete this task alone, after which Richter, now contrite, offers to help him. Lloyd, Marta, and the other characters from Tales of Symphonia are forced to leave the two. Once alone, Ratatosk reveals that it will take Richter one thousand years to complete his task in helping Ratatosk forge a new seal on the gate, after which Ratatosk will release him from the gate. Richter is thus offered redemption, while Ratatosk is fated to remain alone in the gate to the demon realm.

If the player is able to successfully defeat the “Ratatosk” identity within Emil’s subconscious, however, the “good” or “true” ending (the moniker differs somewhat between fans of the game) is unlocked. Emil overpowers Ratatosk and chooses to allow his dual identities to merge, which results in a cut scene that is nearly identical to the one which unfolds in the “neutral ending”. However, after revealing his intention to free Richter from the gate, Richter urges Emil/Ratatosk to once again divide himself, offering Ratatosk the use of Richter’s own body to fulfill his task in creating a new seal on the gate. Emil/Ratatosk agrees, and splits his identities again, Ratatosk taking possession of Richter’s body and Emil taking possession of the body he and Ratatosk have thus far shared. The game concludes with Emil and Marta reuniting in a loving embrace, free to live together peacefully while Ratatosk and Richter remain sealed within the gate.
Considering the ways in which the multiple endings of *Dawn of the New World* unfold, it is impossible to deny the corollary nature of narrative and gameplay within the game. By design, the player is forced to rely upon gameplay (as seen in the battles which determine the ending achieved) and narrative (as seen in the textual cues which guide the player toward the “bad”, “good”, and “true” endings). *Dawn of the New World* also proves to be highly intertextual due to the demand it places upon the player to understand traditional RPG conventions (battles which are designed to be lost for the sake of narrative progression, the convention of a final cut-scene to bring the narrative to satisfactory conclusion, etc.). As is obvious, the player is not able to successfully complete the game without the gameplay elements that constitute the final battle. Additionally—as is less obvious—the player must also have an adequate level of RPG literacy in relation to narrative in order to achieve the ‘good’ or ‘true’ endings.

In her article examining Japanese dating simulation games, Emily Taylor makes the insightful claim that “one would think that players would aim for good endings, but such is not always the case. The only way to ‘beat’ the game is to play it numerous times, experiencing all the endings…Essentially, the only way to ‘lose’ when playing a dating-sim game is not to get a bad ending but to get the same ending twice” (p. 195). While Taylor’s analysis discusses dating-sims exclusively, her findings are highly relevant to all video games which feature multiple narrative conclusions. It is, of course, important to recognize that different players engage with such games for different reasons; many players may not derive satisfaction from viewing every possible ending within a given title. However, it is equally crucial to recognize the integral role the act of collection plays in almost every J-RPG. Regardless of narrative structure and the details of gameplay mechanics, virtually every J-RPG requires the player to collect spells, weapons, playable characters, and a plethora of miscellaneous items throughout the game. The
strong appeal that the act of collection holds among players of J-RPGs can be seen in the popularity of Pokémon, the most commercially successful RPG franchise (and the second most commercially successful video game franchise) in history. Originally released in 1996, the first Pokémon video game was designed by creator Tajiri Satoshi as a bug collecting simulation. In her article “The Cool Brand, Affective Activism, and Japanese Youth”, Anne Allison highlights the franchise’s success in stating, “as the first game alone has 151 monsters and each subsequent game adds ever more, this play of monster acquisition—spreading into ever more commodities to acquire—goes endlessly on” (2009, p. 95). Essentially, despite the franchise’s tagline of “gotta catch ‘em all!”, the success of Pokémon hinges primarily on the impossibility of the player completing his or her collection.

The success of the Pokémon franchise is particularly relevant to Dawn of the New World due to a similar gameplay mechanic which appears in the latter title; as outlined in my analysis of Dawn of the New World’s gameplay, Emil/Ratatosk is able to collect and control various monsters throughout the world in order to have them aid him in combat. Much of the gameplay elements in Dawn of the New World are centered on this ability and monsters that are collected can be leveled up and are even able to ‘evolve’ just as creatures in the Pokémon universe are. Given the similarities between Dawn of the New World and the Pokémon franchise, it is not unreasonable to assume that many players adopt a similar approach of ‘collecting’ endings. Players who seek to do so are thus only able to ‘beat’ the game by viewing all three possible endings.

While the inclusion of alternate endings within Dawn of the New World might be read as an indication of lack of narrative in Dawn of the New World, their existence should be understood in regard to what Hiroki Azuma terms “game-like realism” and “meta-narratives”. In
his article “Bishoujo Games: ‘Techno-Intimacy’ and the Virtually Human in Japan” Patrick Galbraith characterizes “game-like realism” as being “notable for its lack of a single narrative” and “highlight[ing] the existence of ‘meta-narratives’…or narratives that are aware of (or draw attention to) their structure and form…characters in games can exist outside narratives, in multiple narratives and between narratives [while maintaining] their identities” (2011, para. 17).

Essentially, while the plots of such games are somewhat fluid, the characters within the games exhibit psychological continuity and behave as though existing in a broader narrative that includes the realities of each possible plotline. The effect of the “meta-narrative” on the player is, as Galbraith suggests, that “the player is operating the world, or has access to different strands of narrative potential and straddles these realities…the player becomes aware of the ‘meta-narrative’ by playing through all the branches and seeing their connections…or is enabled by the technology of the game to reflect on reality and subjectivity” (2011, para. 17).

Azuma’s concept of the “meta-narrative” in video games is particularly relevant to the RPG genre. Entire franchises such as the Kingdom Hearts series have been constructed through the displacement of fictional characters from their original narrative settings; in the case of the Kingdom Hearts games, characters from the Final Fantasy RPG franchise and popular Disney characters such as Mickey Mouse, Goofy, and Ariel team up to adventure in what can be considered an ‘alternate universe’ to the worlds they originally inhabit. Although the plotlines of the Kingdom Hearts games have little to do with the characters’ original stories, the characters themselves remain more or less consistent. Single titles such as Final Fantasy Dissidia, Persona 4: Arena and Tales of Fandom likewise displace individual characters (from the Final Fantasy, Persona, and Tales franchises, respectively). As Henry Jenkins and Janet Murray (1999) state in their work Before the Holodeck: translating Star Trek into digital media: “in a horizontally
integrated media industry, characters, plots and images move fluidly across various media, participating in what Marsha Kinder (1991) has called the entertainment supersystem” (p. 36). In regard to video games, and especially RPGs, Kinder’s “entertainment supersystem” can also be understood in terms of individual characters’, plots’ and images’ movement across different titles in the same medium. For players who desire the fullest extent of intimacy with the fictional characters and worlds contained in video games—players who seek full exposure by ‘collecting’ narrative endings—following characters through multiple plotlines, titles, and mediums is the only true mark of success.

For players who do not view collection as the exclusive mark of completion, however, it is likely that Emily Taylor’s original assumption that players “aim for good endings” is far more likely (2007, p. 195). Indeed, despite the many similarities that occur in dating-sims and RPGs, there are also many differences between the genres; RPGs feature far more action-oriented plots and gameplay, and usually include considerably fewer possible endings (although there are, of course, exceptions to this rule). For players who “aim for the good ending” of Dawn of the New World, the ‘bad ending’ can be understood as a failure on the player’s part to successfully navigate the game’s narrative. Like many video game genres, RPGs typically conclude with a ‘final boss’ that the player is forced to defeat in order to complete a given game. In the ‘good’ and ‘true’ endings, Dawn of the New World adheres to this convention. In the ‘bad’ ending, however, there is a noticeable lack of a final boss; this is a highly significant element of the ‘bad’ ending in that it signals to the player that he or she has not in fact successfully completed the game. Moreover, the ‘bad ending’ of Dawn of the New World includes no satisfactory conclusion to the game’s narrative; the player is never informed of the fate of most of the characters or world as a whole after Emil is ‘killed’. Because most RPGs include narrative epilogues that
occur after the final boss is defeated, the lack of a narrative conclusion in *Dawn of the New World*’s ‘bad ending’ is a further contextual clue meant to signal to the player that he or she has not ‘successfully’ finished the game. *Dawn of the New World* includes additional clues as well, such as the lack of a concluding cut-scene in the ‘bad ending’. The player is expected to draw upon his or her pre-existing RPG literacy in order to understand that, because nearly every RPG includes a final cut-scene to draw the game to a close, he or she has not achieved the desired ending.

The final clue the player is given regarding the game’s multiple endings is an unsent letter that Marta has written to Emil which appears onscreen just before the game’s closing credits are displayed:

> Emil, our battles are over…you attacked us as if you were Ratatosk. You were hoping that we would defeat you and turn you into a core. I was such a fool. I should’ve known that it was you, Emil…I wish I can[sic] go back in time and redo that moment. Now that I know, I wouldn’t make the same mistake, and I would save you…I’m sorry. (Chapter 8: Eternal Bond)

The letter Marta writes to Emil is perhaps the most blatant signal on the part of the game’s creators that the player has failed to properly navigate through the narrative. Marta’s lament that she cannot “go back in time and redo that moment” draws upon the player’s knowledge that he or she can, in fact, replay the pivotal battle to achieve a different result. The letter can be read as thinly-veiled instructions given to the player by the game’s creators, showing him or her how to achieve an alternate ending. The letter can also be read as a highly intertextual clue; players who have prior experience with earlier titles within the RPG genre such as *Chrono Trigger* and games within the *Persona* and *Star Ocean* franchises are able to draw upon their knowledge of genre
conventions in order to recognize the possibility that *Dawn of the New World* includes more than one possible ending.

The contextual clues afforded by the creators of *Dawn of the New World* in order to guide the player toward the ‘good’ and ‘true’ endings problematize claims made by researchers such as Espen Aarseth, who asserts that games are not textual. In his work *Genre trouble: Narrativism and the art of simulation*, Aarseth states: “the pleasure of games is quite different from the pleasures of the novel: for a chess or *Tetris* player, replaying is the norm, while most novels are read only once. You can be an expert chess player without playing any other game, but to understand even a single novel you will need to have studied numerous others” (2004, p. 52). While Aarseth’s claims are in fact true of many puzzle games (such as those within the *Tetris* franchise), his points concerning the understanding of novels are equally true of narrative-heavy games such as RPGs. Understanding the conventions of the genre such as the existence of a final boss battle, a narrative conclusion, and more than one possible ending aid the player in navigating *Dawn of the New World*. Moreover, players who are familiar with other video game genres, such as dating sims, are able to draw upon knowledge of those games’ conventions in order to ‘collect’ every possible ending should they desire to do so.

Regardless of whether the player’s goal is to ‘collect’ all three possible endings or to achieve only one desired conclusion, the existence of multiple endings in *Dawn of the New World* can be understood as one of the game’s central intersections between gameplay and narrative. In both cases, neither gameplay nor narrative is, of itself, a primary goal; the player must successfully navigate both gameplay and narrative in order to achieve his or her aspirations. The ‘final boss’ and desired narrative conclusion are of equal importance. Thus, in terms of the player’s overall experience of *Dawn of the New World*, gameplay and narrative are so richly
intertwined that any attempt to divorce the two for the sake of study would prove to be purely artificial. In light of the indivisible gameplay and narrative elements contained in *Dawn of the New World*, it is natural to conclude that both elements contribute significantly to overarching themes of morality that are constructed throughout the game.

The game’s focus on the character of Emil is crucial in understanding how morality is constructed within *Dawn of the New World*. Although the plot of the game is related to the player through Emil’s perspective, it is important to note that *Dawn of the New World* is initially Marta’s story. As far as the player’s experience of the game is concerned, Emil’s adventure begins with Marta’s and Richter’s arrival in Emil’s small hometown. It is Marta who initially fights to free Ratatosk’s core and who Richter pursues. Emil is caught up in Marta’s cause with only a minimal understanding of whom and what Ratatosk, Marta, and Tenebrae are and what they are trying to accomplish. As the narrative progresses, however, Marta’s role in the game’s plot is increasingly reduced. Emil’s struggle with his own identity becomes increasingly focused upon, resulting in Marta’s displacement from the central driving force of the plot to a love interest who is ultimately inconsequential to the game’s events. In the game’s final scenes that determine which ending the player achieves, Marta’s importance is entirely determined by Emil’s affection for her.

Marta is not the only character whose significance is dictated by Emil. Richter’s hatred for Ratatosk is what drives his actions throughout the entirety of the narrative, and Tenebrae, a “centurian” who serves Ratatosk, is likewise characterized by his role as Ratatosk’s servant. Moreover, the role of nearly every recurring character from the original *Tales of Symphonia* game is in some way dominated by Emil’s actions. Lloyd seeks the centurians’ cores and fights Emil and Marta in order to prevent Ratatosk from awakening to his former power. Raine and
Regal, two of Lloyd’s companions in *Tales of Symphonia*, agree to fight alongside Emil early in the game in order to watch over him. Neither Raine nor Regal are aware of Emil’s true identity, yet both suspect that he possesses a dual identity and remain at his side (and thus within the game’s narrative) for the exclusive purpose of divining the truth behind his psychological condition. Emil is thus in every way the central focal point of *Dawn of the New World*; he is the game’s protagonist (through his ‘Emil’ identity), antagonist (through his ‘Ratatosk’ identity), and author/god (it is Emil/Ratatosk alone who determines how each of the game’s three endings will unfold, including the fates of all living beings in the world).

Because Emil is ultimately the protagonist, antagonist, and author/god, he is necessarily the sole moral compass of the fictional world he inhabits. Throughout the narrative he and the characters that surround him answer to no higher or external authority; unlike *Radiant Dawn*, which continually problematizes the moral validity of singular characters’ actions and motivations, *Dawn of the New World* firmly situates Emil as the game’s only moral authority. This can be seen most clearly in the ways in which the characters in the game interact with him. Most telling of this fact is no doubt his relationship with the Marta character. Despite his callous disregard for her life in sealing a fake core in her forehead—thus placing her directly in Richter’s path—both the ‘Ratatosk’ and ‘Emil’ identities receive blind devotion from her. Initially, Marta seeks to awaken Ratatosk’s power because she believes that the core in her forehead is genuine and that Ratatosk saved her life by placing it within her. Yet even after discovering the deception, Marta insists that the ‘Emil’ and ‘Ratatosk’ identities be merged, claiming that “both are Emil”. Even after learning that Ratatosk murdered Richter’s companion, Aster, with no provocation, Marta continues to support Ratatosk and remains staunchly loyal to both of Emil’s
identities. Marta thus displays a firm dedication to ‘Emil’ and ‘Ratatosk’ even to the point of disregarding fatal harm to herself and others at his hands.

Lloyd, Richter, and the rest of the returning characters from the original *Tales of Symphonia* game display a similar sense of devotion toward Emil throughout the game. Despite fully understanding who and what Emil really is, Lloyd ultimately entrusts the fate of the world to him by revealing to Emil his true nature as Ratatosk. By revealing his true identity, Lloyd risks dooming the world to Ratatosk’s wrath, yet he explains his actions by stating “[I] want to believe in you, Emil…that ‘Emil’ is not an artificially created personality. It’s another spirit within Ratatosk. His conscience” (Chapter 8: Eternal Bond). Lloyd further explains that in spite of the opposition he has displayed throughout the game toward Ratatosk, he has no intention of killing Ratatosk due to Ratatosk’s importance in maintaining the planet’s life: “[Ratatosk] is…the guardian of the [gate to the demon realm]. Without Ratatosk, [the gate] would open and our world would become [the demons’] domain. We must make sure that never happens” (Chapter 8: Eternal Bond). Lloyd’s words reveal that, although he recognizes the threat Ratatosk poses to the world as a whole, Lloyd (and many others who aid him throughout the game), view Emil/Ratatosk as a being of such significance that he cannot die. The fate of Emil/Ratatosk is literally the fate of the entire world he/they inhabit(s).

While the ‘devotion’ that Richter displays toward Emil is somewhat different than that of Lloyd and Marta (he does attempt to kill Emil/Ratatosk), Richter’s motivations and character development are entirely dependent upon Emil’s/Ratatosk’s actions. His hatred for Ratatosk is ignited by Ratatosk murdering his friend Aster, after which his sole focus is gaining retribution. Even during his hunt for Marta, Marta herself is an incidental factor in his overall ambitions since his true goal is gaining the (fake) core embedded in her forehead. Richter’s attempt at
opening the gate to the demon realm is likewise centered on his obsession with killing Ratatosk, as he willfully tries to open the gate despite the knowledge that all living beings (himself included) will be delivered over to the dark whims of demons once the gate is open. Moreover, if the player is able to successfully unlock either the “good” or “neutral” endings, Richter is moved by Emil’s repentance concerning Aster’s murder and offers to aid Emil in sealing the gate he formerly attempted to open. Richter submits himself entirely to Emil’s/Ratatosk’s judgment by allowing Ratatosk to possess his body and use it as a seal on the gate. Whether burning with murderous rage or obediently contrite, Richter is entirely defined through his relationship with Emil/Ratatosk. The characters of Dawn of the New World can thus be understood, essentially, as satellites orbiting Emil’s/Ratatosk’s narrative. Through his dual identities as the kind-hearted Emil and the god-like Ratatosk, he determines not on his own destiny but literally the destinies of every other living creature in the world he inhabits.

In terms of constructions of morality, Dawn of the New World is thus an antithesis to Radiant Dawn, which constructs morality through collective effort and the displacement of the individual. Dawn of the New World, by contrast, depicts morality in terms of the flawed yet messianic individual whose personal struggles are significant enough to alter the fate of the entire world. Moreover, unlike Radiant Dawn which vilifies characters such as the goddess Ashera for attempting to judge and alter the world through her own singular efforts, Dawn of the New World depicts Emil/Ratatosk as the only character capable of competently passing judgment on the world. It is important to note that Emil’s/Ratatosk’s competence to do so does not stem from a legitimately superior grasp of ethical thought and behavior, but instead from his significance within the narrative. In this sense Dawn of the New World constructs morality purely in terms of adolescent narcissism, in which the importance of the people and the world
surrounding the individual are determined exclusively by their subjective relationship to the individual him- or herself. Moreover, the construction of the specific form of morality presented in *Dawn of the New World* can be seen most clearly in the ways in which gameplay and narrative intersect; Emil’s centrality determines the narrative’s conclusion, which itself is determined by the player’s ability to successfully master gameplay elements (in the final battle with Lloyd and Marta) as well as intertextual narrative cues common to many RPGs.
Conclusion

My examinations of *Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn* and *Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World* have yielded a number of interesting results. The first is that, despite the claims of authors such as Espen Aarseth (2004) and Alexander Galloway (2006), video games do in fact exist as texts insofar as players’ experiences of them are concerned. RPGs are particularly textual in that games within this genre contain carefully-crafted narratives that draw upon storytelling conventions found in novels and films. In RPGs, gameplay is used by games’ creators to enhance players’ investment in and experience of games’ narratives. The fact that the games themselves are narratives, or contain strong narrative elements, cannot be satisfactorily disputed; my analyses of both games have revealed extensive focus on the part of the games’ creators to develop intricate plotlines and characterization. My analyses have also revealed a heavy dependence upon pre-established narrative conventions such as Thomas Lamarre’s “soulful bodies” (as cited in Galbraith, 2011), Scott McCloud’s “masking” (1994), and Ian Condry’s “anime creativity” (2009).

As previously stated, the analyses performed in this project are necessarily limited. More research in the field is needed in order for an adequate understanding of the ways in which video games as narrative texts are experienced by players. More thorough analyses of RPGs and other narrative-heavy genres must be performed in order for the narrative, textual, and contextual conventions of such games to be adequately explored. Audience research focusing specifically on players’ experiences of the intersections that occur between games’ narrative and gameplay elements must also be performed. It is also important to note that there are a number of significant limitations in the methodology of the formalist textual analyses performed in this project. Meaningful engagement with the games’ cultural origins was not possible, nor was
analyses of gendered gameplay or ‘Western’ reception of the two games. It is my hope that future studies in the field will deeply and meaningfully engage with these vital issues.

Yet the narrow scope of this project is in itself useful to the field of Video Game Studies in that it reveals the complexity and fluidity of video game genres. As genre theorists such as Andrew Tudor (as cited in Gledhill, 1985) and Stephen Neale (1980) have pointed out, ‘pure genre’ cannot exist. The nature of video games as consumable capitalist products, however, render them particularly susceptible to change through marketing trends and thus difficult to classify and categorize. Nevertheless, as David Clearwater (2011) claims, fans and industry professionals have established a system of (admittedly problematic) categorization, one which is a part of overall gameplay experience. Players who prefer RPGs, for example, know how to find RPGs due to this pre-existing lexicon. Thus researchers must engage with video game study at the level of industry professionals and fans of video games in order to adequately study the ways in which such games affect global cultures. A part of such engagement is studying games on a more individualistic basis than has traditionally been done; that is, rather than attempting to study all video games through a singular ‘narrative’ or ‘ludic’ lens, scholars must recognize the vast wealth of differences that exist between video game genres (and even between individual titles within those genres).

It is important to note that, due to the limited scope of this project, I have focused my analyses on two J-RPGs, which are largely viewed by players as existing within a subgenre of RPGs. As discussed, J-RPGs typically contain narrative elements that adhere more strictly to (apparent) narrative authority than do RPGs produced in ‘Western’ cultures. Moreover, as Japanese cultural products, J-RPGs utilize narrative conventions unique to Japan. It is for this reason that Benjamin Wai-ming’s claim that “Japanese video games should be viewed as a
commodity or consumer technology rather than a cultural product” (2001 p. 26) is highly problematic. ‘Western’ scholars’ inability to recognize Japanese games specifically as narratives is likely the result of a Eurocentric understanding of what constitutes a narrative. As can be seen through concepts such as Ian Condry’s “anime creativity” and Thomas LaMarre’s “soulful bodies”, J-RPGs are largely produced in accordance with specific conventions unique to contemporary Japanese visual narratives. Moreover, in light of Patrick Galbraith’s concept of “meta-narratives”, in which a single character may exist within multiple narratives while displaying psychological continuity, it is clear that many J-RPGs depart from traditional ‘Western’ notions of what constitutes narrative. Nevertheless, due to the global popularity of “meta-narrative” products, and considering Marsha Kinder’s notion of the “entertainment supersystem”, it is clear that J-RPGs, while not adhering to traditional concepts of ‘Western’ narratives, are both narrative and textual.

Significantly, although J-RPGs are created in adherence to conventions of contemporary Japanese visual narratives, they are not necessarily experienced by North American players as Japanese cultural products. Due to the lack of focus that many prominent fan-produced websites such as blisteredthumbs.net, penny-arcade.com, and spoonyexperiment.com place on the cultural origins of such games, it would be equally problematic to assume that J-RPGs are consumed by players purely in terms of cultural production. Rather, it is far more likely that North American players of J-RPGs are able to engage with narrative conventions found in such games, and to recognize them as narrative, whether or not the conventions are familiar to them. This can be inferred by the fact that creators of fan-produced websites such as those mentioned previously typically focus discussions of games on gameplay and storyline rather than cultural origin. As Crawford and Rutter (2007) claim, “it is important to recognize that even individual gamers
bring their social, cultural, and psychological selves to the games they play” (p. 280). While the cultural origins of games cannot be entirely ignored, it would be problematic to assume that all players experience Japanese games as Japanese products; hence, the cultural origins of games should not be overstated.

The emphasis I have placed upon constructions of morality in my analyses of *Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn* and *Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World* has been extremely useful in examining the ways in which gameplay and narrative intersect in a player’s overall experience of both games. In *Radiant Dawn*, the theme of success through collective effort is continually iterated and reiterated at the levels of narrative and gameplay alike. At the level of gameplay, the player is forced to view his or her party as a collective unit, focusing upon each individual combat unit’s strengths and weaknesses in order to create a functioning army. Moreover, the player him- or herself is constantly displaced as the central active force in gameplay through ‘enemy’, ‘ally’, and ‘other’ phases. The inclusion of such phases forces the player to abandon notions of centrality by working cooperatively with and against several game-controlled forces. At the level of narrative, the game continually destabilizes the concept of a central protagonist through shifting points of view that give the player insight into a number of characters’ circumstances and motivations. Within the game’s central narrative arc, Micaiah, Ike, and the goddess Yune are portrayed as equally integral figures in the mounting wars and defeat of the goddess Ashera. Characters such as Ashera whose motivations are purely individualistic are depicted throughout the narrative as evil, while characters such as Micaiah, Elincia, Ike, and Yune, who fight for the collective good of the world, are portrayed as righteous. Moreover, because there is no clear protagonist in *Radiant Dawn*, the player is encouraged to view morality
in somewhat relative terms which are dependent upon individual characters’ social and political environments and understandings.

Like Radiant Dawn, Dawn of the New World displays a clear intersection between constructions of morality through gameplay and narrative, yet the ‘morality’ constructed is entirely different. Dawn of the New World continually presents the character of Emil as its singular focal point, urging the player to likewise focus primarily upon him. The player is able to control only Emil during battle, and it is Emil, through his strong melee skills, whose actions are typically instrumental in determining the success or failure of a battle. The player is unable to affect the weapons, armor, etc. that Emil’s teammates use, which severely limits his or her sense of connection with and/or investment in these characters. Moreover, Emil’s teammates continually enter, exit, and re-enter both the player’s combat roster and the game’s narrative sequences, giving the player limited exposure to them and consequently less investment in them. Moreover, unlike Radiant Dawn, Dawn of the New World focuses exclusively on Emil as the game’s protagonist, resulting in a narrative that is experienced by the player purely through Emil’s eyes rather than through multiple points of view. The game’s plot is likewise centered on Emil, as the central conflict within the narrative is Emil’s struggle with his dueling identities, ‘Emil’ and ‘Ratatosk’. As both protagonist and antagonist, Emil is depicted as the game’s sole moral authority. Hence, unlike the player’s experience of Radiant Dawn, the player’s experience of Dawn of the New World centers on an unproblematized individualistic morality in which the player him- or herself is, through his or her investment in the Emil character, the central driving force in the game.

The reason that the player’s experiences of games such as Radiant Dawn and Dawn of the New World are important to the study of video games is that they reveal the ways in which
many games do, contrary to many ludologists’ claims, function as texts. While video games cannot be considered narrative or textual in exactly the same ways in which novels, films, and other mediums of storytelling are considered narrative and textual, researchers must acknowledge the unique narrative and textual elements that do exist in contemporary games. What sets video games apart from other narrative mediums such as films and novels is the addition of gameplay experience, which, as previously stated, is often included as a means of enhancing the player’s experience of the narrative (and vice versa). A player’s experience of a video game is thus best understood as an experience of intersection, particularly in narrative-heavy genres; the constant intersection between narrative and gameplay affords an entirely unique and in many ways novel type of textual experience. In this project I have worked to illuminate many of the ways in which player experience is constructed by RPGs’ unique narrative elements by providing textual analyses that highlight video game narrativity. It is my hope that this project will be useful in aiding future discussions in the field of Video Game Studies away from purely theoretical debates surrounding ludology and narratology and toward more useful examinations of how video games are currently affecting global cultures.
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