

“THIS IS MY STORY”: REPRESENTATION AND CHANGE IN FINAL FANTASY X-2

Kyrie Eleison H. Caldwell
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
kyrieehc@mit.edu

In 2003, *Final Fantasy X-2 (FFX-2)* was released as the first direct sequel to a main entry in the series. It was met with critical praise and fan disdain, due in part to the vast differences between it and its predecessor, *Final Fantasy X (FFX)*. Also in 2003, I was twelve years old and finding vast differences between elementary and middle school, between the “cool” kids and the “geeks,” and between girls and boys. Feeling uncomfortable in my own skin with the different identities I was forming, I played video games frequently, as I enjoyed losing myself for awhile in big, unique, beautiful, sorrowful worlds. Whereas my experiences of *FFX* have been shared with my brother, father, and friends, *FFX-2* has been mostly mine alone. Any additional moments in my weekends were devoted to it, and I loved all 230 hours I spent with my original save file (still the highest hour count I’ve logged in a single file). The game resonated with me in ways I would not be able to name until much later, until around the game’s rerelease in March of 2014, which I have been playing as an adult who has chosen games as a career path. Now I am grateful that I found *FFX-2* when I did, as it is exactly what I needed at the time and perhaps made it possible for me to be where I am now.

As I encountered the awkward trials and errors of adolescence and now as I reflect on diversity, the process of inclusion, and fostering empathy for others, change and difference have been tricky subjects. It is often emotionally easier to note similarities between oneself and others, or between the past and the present, so as to justify and validate one's own way of interacting with the world and preserve times during which one felt comfortable and happy. Yet, change and difference, across both time and people, are crucial to positive social interactions and the growth achieved through making meaning of experiences in the world. These are ultimately essential to the ever-churning, 'forward'-moving innovation that is valued in much of modernity, including in the communities around games. Representation of people, events, and ideas is a large part of how media respond to social change, and thus as deeply seeded structural issues such as sexism and racism are aired and discussed in mainstream society, mainstream games too have increasingly sought ways to represent differences, both real and fictional, from the tired narrative of the 18-25 young white male "gamer" and game character. But, I argue, this is not entirely new. In this piece, I will consider 2003's *FFX-2* through both critical and personal lenses, wrapping my own experiences around Yuna and her story while exploring how change and difference is the potency of the game in all of its facets, from its battle system and mechanics to its world, the characters that inhabit it, and the story told within.

I might have originally ascribed my deep appreciation for *FFX-2*'s characters to story elements revealed through cutscenes, the parts of the game that are the least guided by the player's actions and thought processes and are the easiest to convey to are not as steeped in games. However, having learned more about analyzing games, I now recognize the power of games as systems that, at their most successful as exemplars of the medium, inextricably intertwine narrative, dialogue, and the mechanics—the methods, actions, and responses of inputs that mediate a player's interactions with a game (Sicart 2008). All storytelling in

games can be distinct from other media forms primarily through these mechanics. As characters are a part of storytelling, the representation of personal identities in games is not limited to visual character design or what a character says and instead also includes how the player can directly act upon that character. Or, indeed, the game's world in general, where representation and identity can also lie through the implicit systems at work therein. Mechanics are their own form of argument, one that runs further below the surface by dictating the way a system works on its agents, both characters and player.

In *FFX-2*, the main mechanics serve exploration and the battle system. The latter forms the primary point of interaction, as with most games in the Japanese tradition of the role-playing genre, making battle systems also the primary point of innovative design in such games. *FFX-2*'s unique battle system hinges on the unpredictability that occurs when characters and enemies act concurrently. Rather than continuing with *FFX*'s Conditional Turn Based (CTB) style, which encourages deliberate, strategic planning to optimize your party characters' limited actions in predictable, patterned battles, *FFX-2* marks a return to the series's Active Time Battle (ATB) style that requires quick decisions and coordinated actions from the player. To achieve this unpredictable, swiftly-paced play experience, or what Hunicke, LeBlanc, Zubek (2004) might call the dynamic, ATB moves in real time (adjustable in the settings to allow more time to browse battle menus), with different actions requiring different amounts of time for preparation and recovery before the next turn can be taken. Like in previous *Final Fantasy* games, all player-controlled characters and AI-controlled enemies adhere to this clock.

In another nod to older *Final Fantasy* titles, the characters of *FFX-2* can use dresspheres, or equippable outfits that change a character's statistics and abilities, much like the job system of *Final Fantasy V* and others, in which characters are cast into changeable "job" classes, such as the White/Black/Red/Blue

Mages, Monks, and Warriors, to change how they can interact with allies and enemies in battle. Job systems allow players to customize their game through the specialization of characters to suit individual play styles. However, *FFX-2*'s job system differs in that dresspheres can be changed during battle, thus allowing battles to showcase the player's ability to adapt to changing situations and needs. In addition, *FFX-2* offers particularly robust customization through the availability of three characters, fourteen dresspheres (plus a unique one for each character), and sixteen learnable abilities for each dressphere, with a high likelihood that no two playthroughs will see players making the same choices inside and outside of battle.

As critics at the time noted, *FFX-2*'s battle system works incredibly well and makes for a deep, rich, and unique play experience that melds the pre-, during, and post-battle strategizing of a role-playing game with the need for the quick thinking and precise timing of an action game. For me, I found the most joy in shaping the characters into roles and abilities that I thought suited their personalities and their pasts via *Final Fantasy X*. Sometimes I decided which character would master which dressphere simply because I liked their outfit best of the three. And although the options are there, I never skipped or shortened the dressphere change animations, which are unique to each woman. Instead, I savored each moment of battle, grinding for dozens and dozens of hours for the sake of growing the characters into the multifaceted, multi-talented, and yet individual women I imagined them to be. I think now that it's no coincidence I played this game as I transitioned from obscuring my gendered presentation to presenting much more conventionally femme, as I finally had *fun* playing with different kinds of femininity and how those could fit with my other identities. After all, if Yuna, Rikku, and Payne could save the world while wearing pink, ruffles, or rocking their sexuality, why couldn't I be skilled, taken seriously, and seen as "cool" (a term

loaded to adolescents, perhaps only of certain generations) while doing the same?

Indeed, through my focused and lengthy gameplay, another result arose: I found myself no longer needing the help I had had during other role-playing and action games, becoming skillful in my own right even as I started to wear dresses and hairbows. As I progressed through the game, I took pride in defeating tougher and tougher enemies, and I started to dive into the hidden challenges found in online forums such as those at *GameFAQs*. I would peruse these voraciously, marveling at other users' self-imposed challenges and thinking about how I would work through them. I brought manuals, strategy guides, and gaming magazines (R.I.P. *Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine*) to school, fascinated by the sheer wealth of things in each, along the way memorizing details and relationships that cemented my skills across the role-playing genre. This is still my favorite genre, due not just to the focus on deep, narrative character development, but also to my own feeling of being in control. In turn-based RPGs, I find even failures to be empowering, as I am still confident that my skill in understanding these systems will see me succeed with a certainty that life by no means always affords. In these games, I can contribute to characters' development, inside and outside the narrative canon, without having to lay personal stakes in identifying as a game designer, writer, or artist, all of which I've dreamed of becoming while at times feeling like I will never be qualified enough.

Yet, I have never been interested in asserting full power over a game system through skill and stat maxing; rather, I spend great lengths of time mentally in a game, either playing or not, to simply be in the world it creates. One of the biggest joys of strategy guides (now a budding hobbyist collection of mine) is the vibrancy I find on those pages. My conception of games has always been the bright colors and animations that brought to life the worlds within, due in no small part to the concept art, character models, and screenshots reproduced in the printed

materials I poured over daily and to which I am still drawn. Although I would not have put the same name to it, I identified early on as an explorative gamer (2) à la Bartle (1996), spending large amounts of time in several kinds of games, even fighters, looking around for nooks and crannies where a small secret or fun detail might lie. In the era of much fewer online console games, my play style affected no one but myself and those immediately around me. However, as play has moved increasingly online and I have begun studying games critically, it has become clearer how different people play games for different reasons. Because of this, games are designed by and for different ways of playing, accounting in part for the huge variety of games available today and before.

And for me, *FFX-2*'s rich world proved to be a fitting playscape for my own tendencies. The world is a continuation of *FFX*'s Spira, bearing the changes that one might expect two years after such events. Yuna and her friends had eternally destroyed the calamitous creature "Sin," leaving Spira free from fear of it for the first time in one thousand years. The Spira of *FFX-2* is visually very similar to that of *FFX*; in fact, many of the same assets—character and monster models, environments—were reused in the sequel. Yet, this Spira has replaced the fear it once knew all too well with frivolity, with citizens pursuing fun interests, enjoying rebuilt towns, and engaging with politics. The changes in environmental assets that were applied, such as new areas "discovered" in citizens' free time, suggest that Spira is not just livable, but lived in. Unlike many games, for which sequels are a continuation of mechanics in new settings, *FFX-2* is at once an evolution of and a different experience altogether from *FFX*, a unique way to build a world that can really reward fans. In fact, Spira's rejuvenation is treated as almost a primary character in the game, developing along the same path, in relation to the same events and situations, as the main characters do.

However, as much as *FFX-2* is about Spira, it is truly about Yuna, and her story is certainly one of change and one that

captivated me as an adolescent girl. In *FFX*, Yuna was a serious, dedicated, and altruistic summoner, a clerical figure who is charged with traveling across Spira, praying to and receiving the powers of creatures called aeons, then sacrificing oneself to the aeons to, in turn, defeat Sin for a decade of peace. After she found a way to destroy Sin forever, she also lost her lover, Tidus, who faded from existence along with Sin. In *FFX-2*, Yuna has set out with her cousin Rikku to venture across Spira once again, this time to find a way to bring Tidus back, and to have some fun in the meanwhile. In many ways, Yuna is the same; she cares deeply about others and becomes angry when there is needless violence and injustice. Yet, this Yuna is no longer willing to sacrifice her own dreams for others, nor is she willing to let others dictate her path. If Yuna is successful in bringing Tidus back (a condition dependent on satisfactory player progress), Yuna runs in front of him, nearly bowling him over as they run towards friends after their reunion. He says smiling, “You know, you’ve changed,” to which she responds, “Well, you’ve missed a few things!” If *FFX* was Tidus’s coming of age tale, in which he matured from a self-centered star athlete to a kind, unselfish friend and lover, *FFX-2* is Yuna’s, in which she finds herself as a strong, adaptable, and vivacious leader in a world that has changed, is changing, and will continue to change, like she does as well.

As a preteen girl whose interests branded me, somewhat reluctantly, as a “geek,” finding my own place amongst my peers was not an easy but an incredibly important task, in the way that such things seem very important to a twelve year old. Unfortunately, the medium I had chosen for my time, allowance money, and an intense emotional connection was nearly barren of anything that may have helped me find that place. I thought many game characters were exquisitely cool, like Sly Cooper, Ratchet and Clank, and Solid Snake, but they are ready-made cool, so to speak; the settings of those game follow these characters as men (anthropomorphized or not) who know what their place are, and everyone else does too. It was the *Final*

Fantasy series for me that told the stories of those who still had growing left to do, and in my experience, it had only been *FFX-2* that had told that of a woman's, or indeed three women's.

And they *are* cool. Yuna's headstrong but compassionate leadership, Rikku's fresh-faced and spunky go-getter attitude, and Paine's brooding but physically powerful ass-kicking were three personalities that I wanted to see in myself. While I was playing games at home, I was drawing a fair amount at school, usually in the anime/manga style of the Japanophile fan culture I had entered. I made up characters that were Yuna, Rikku, and Paine had they existed in my world: skilled in martial arts, fans of the same things I liked, caring friends, broadly liked, and attractive to men, a mix that did not seem possible to me at the time. I drew them and the *FFX-2* main cast through the beginning of high school in awe of women I thought were amazing and in hopes of finding the woman I would be proud to be.

Gender is a huge part of why *FFX-2* was important to me (and was a point of struggle for other *Final Fantasy* fans, as comments strewn about the internet would suggest), but it was not the only part. Less discussed in Yuna's character and background is her race. Spira has several races of humanoid; the most human-like are a normalized one and the Al Bhed. During *FFX* and for centuries before those events, the Al Bhed were blamed for Sin's creation and thus became victims of marginalization and discrimination in Spira. Exiled to the desert, the Al Bhed developed their own language and became the mechanical engineers of Spira's forbidden "machina," a kind of robotics thought to be Sin's harbinger. Main character Rikku is an Al Bhed character, and later in *FFX*, it is revealed that she is Yuna's cousin via Yuna's mother, who was Al Bhed. Thus, Yuna herself is multiracial, half Al Bhed and half the normalized race who had control over Spira's central religious and political institution. It would have been impossible to be an openly partial or full Al Bhed summoner, so Yuna chose to pass as a member of the normalized race. In *FFX-2*, after Sin was destroyed and the Al

Bhed were, to the people of Spira, redeemed, this need for secrecy ended, and Yuna was allowed to be herself racially as well as socially.

If stories about strong women in games were few and far between in my youth, games about any multiracial characters, let alone strong female ones, were not something I would have even thought to expect. But as a multiracial girl in the southern United States (in an area not too far from now infamous Charleston, SC), which continues to writhe in a history of institutionalized racial violence, and whose multiracial mother once needed to pass for white, I was thrilled that in another way, I could be just like Yuna and get out even stronger on the other side of this process of finding myself. It was a powerful experience for me and for my parents as well, who were pleasantly surprised to see these games that I was obsessing over tackled ideas and representations that were important, especially to a person like me, with grace and gravity. It is hardly surprising that my parents have since encouraged me to pursue that passion into a career, which I am now just beginning.

Alas, right as I began graduate school to study games, Gamergate broke out, spilling into the inboxes, social media feeds, and the minds and hearts of those who study, care about, and believe in games as a medium. Luckily, I have not been targeted (yet). However, I have been and still am deeply shaken, and I know I am not alone. It gnaws at me every time I sit down to write about games or to do anything to assert my place as a scholar or even as a gamer. But it is crucial that academics and others who respect games continue to speak on behalf of this medium in ways that many may find difficult and threatening, namely in defense of letting change and difference always be a positive and driving influence of designing, writing, playing, and communing around games.

Much of the research around games have investigated in what ways the medium is capable of powerful impact on players, whether through the good of learning or the ills of violence.

More often than not, researchers have found worthwhile benefits of playing games, from building ever important and marketable critical thinking and problem solving skills to meaningful social interactions and from cultivating intrinsic motivations towards different kinds of success to understanding and enacting ethical, even mindful decision making around the needs of others. Games are a unique medium, and via scholars' rigorous critical work, developers' innovative approaches to design, and the industry's massive revenues and franchises, it is clear that games are here to stay and have been accepted by a wider swath of society than ever before.

Yet, instances like Gamergate set back the cause of all who champion games. The "gamers" oftentimes are not and know they are not the stereotyped marketing demographic of the 1990s: the old narrative of the basement-dwelling, socially inept, 18-25 young white male. However, people being attacked, made to feel unsafe and unwelcome in a field they love and to which they have much to contribute, makes it difficult for a society, struggling itself more broadly with change and difference, to see that this community and indeed the personal identity of a "gamer" should be along for the ride. If the "gamers" cannot deal with people different from them or cannot deal with a medium and a social structure that is changing, how will they contribute to healthy and productive discussions as the rest of the world turns?

Of a bigger threat to gaming than women, people of color, those of non-normalized gender/sexual identities, and other marginalized groups is the inability of some within the gaming community to positively interact with, or even acknowledge the significance of and need for, change and difference. As alluded to above, change and difference are drivers of society, bringing better living conditions to not only those directly affected by movements of change and difference, but ultimately to all members of a society. Media, such as books, films, movies, and games, act as arbiters of such changes and windows into such

differences, able to move people to extraordinary displays of kindness and solidarity or to harmful stereotypes that perpetuate inflexibility, intolerance, fear, violence, and hate. Thus, games are as good a space as any to work through change and difference, and to me and others who value the medium perhaps most in the current media landscape, they are a uniquely powerful space to hear the voices of all kinds of people, including to have one's own voice felt heard, in working towards a better future. And this is why it was and is still so resoundingly important to me—a multiracial, “geeky,” femme, and dare I say accomplished woman—to hear Yuna say at the end of her own journey, “I know that I’ll keep changing. This is my story— it’ll be a good one.”

Endnotes:

(1) For clarity, I am quoting the original North American release dates of *Final Fantasy X-2* and *Final Fantasy X* due my original experiences with them, but for the purposes of this paper, I am using and thus citing their remastered release.

(2) Here I use the term gamer as I did when I was younger: to identify myself as someone who plays games as a primary hobby and as a deep enthusiast. I simply do not believe that this term ever has exclusively belonged to the stereotypes that surround it, all of which have been co-opted by Gamergate, the use of which I mark here as “gamer.” I endeavor to take the term back.

References:

Bartle, R. (1996). “Hearts, clubs, diamonds, spades: Players who suit MUDs.” In *Journal of MUD Research* 1, no. 1. Retrieved from <http://mud.co.uk/richard/hcdfs.htm>.

Birlew, D., Hollinger, E., & Ehrlichman, W. (2004). *Final Fantasy X-2 official strategy guide*. Indianapolis: Pearson Education.

Bogost, I. (2007). *Persuasive games: the expressive power of videogames*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Hunicke, R., LeBlanc, M., & Zubek, R. (2004). “MDA: A formal approach to game design and game research.” In *Proceedings of the AAAI Workshop on challenges in game AI*, 04–04.

<http://www.aaii.org/Papers/Workshops/2004/WS-04-04/WS04-04-001.pdf>.

Johnathon Whitaker. (2014). "Final Fantasy X-2 (HD) Bad Ending" [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3e9wudNMXMU>

R3DPlaystationFilmer. (2014). "Final Fantasy X "HD Remaster" Ending and Eternal Calm Cutscenes {English, Full 1080p HD}" [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FfVBgbTypN4>

Sicart, M. (2008). "Defining game mechanics." In *Game Studies* 8, no. 2. Retrieved from <http://gamestudies.org/0802/articles/sicart>.

Sicart, M. (2013). *Beyond choices: the design of ethical gameplay*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Square Enix, Virtuos. (2014). *Eternal Calm* [Full motion video]. *Final Fantasy X/X-2 HD Remaster* [Sony Playstation 3 Blu-ray Disc, North American Release]. El Segundo, CA: Square Enix, Inc. Repackaged from Square. (2002). *Final Fantasy X International* [Sony Playstation 2 DVD-ROM, Japanese Release]. Tokyo: Square Company, Limited.

Square Enix, Virtuos. (2014). *Final Fantasy X. Final Fantasy X/X-2 HD Remaster* [Sony Playstation 3 Blu-ray Disc, North American Release]. El Segundo, CA: Square Enix, Inc. Repackaged from Squaresoft. (2001). *Final Fantasy X* [Sony Playstation 2 DVD-ROM, North American Release]. Costa Mesa, California: Square Electronic Arts, L.L.C.

Square Enix, Virtuos. (2014). *Final Fantasy X-2. Final Fantasy X/X-2 HD Remaster* [Sony Playstation 3 Blu-ray Disc, North American Release]. El Segundo, CA: Square Enix, Inc. Repackaged from Squaresoft. (2003). *Final Fantasy X-2* [Sony Playstation 2 DVD-ROM, North American Release]. Costa Mesa, California: Square Electronic Arts, L.L.C.

Steinkuehler, C., Squire, K., & Barab, S. A. (Eds.). (2012). *Games, learning, and society: learning and meaning in the digital age*.

Learning in Doing. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Acknowledgments:

This work is loosely adapted from a paper submitted to fulfill the requirements of Comparative Media Studies 796: Major Media Texts at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, taken in Fall 2014 from Associate Professor Eugenie Brinkema, who had incredibly valuable things to say about that work that has informed this one.

Thank you to my cohort in Comparative Media Studies, in particular to Anika Gupta and Lacey Lord, and to Sean Seyler as well, all of whom have been amazingly patient and helpful as I discuss my fondness for Yuna and recall being twelve perhaps a little too freshly.