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Chapter 4

Challenging Linearity

Microstructures and Meaning-making in Trails of Cold Steel III

Joleen Blom

Desperate to save the little boy's life, Renne throws herself in front of the wolves about to attack. They both survive, but instead of relief Renne feels anger: she had promised herself she would not intervene! Renne's reaction is but one of the many events that Nihon Falcom's *Trails* series depicts in its main storyline. No matter what the player does, they cannot prevent Renne from saving the boy's life. This unchangeable aspect marks the entire series; the rigid narrative structure of the games prevents the player from changing anything about the outcome of the main story.

The storyline of the *Trails* series consists of a complex network of political plots, twists and turns between different opposing and allied countries, mysterious alliances, and extravagant characters on the world of Zemuria. Every game instalment adds to the complicated workings of the world's politics to which players have to pay careful attention. The story of my main case study¹, *The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel III* (hereafter *Cold Steel III*)² is told at the height of the series' political intrigues: protagonist Rean is forced together with his students to resolve various incidents related to the annexation of the independent state of Crossbell by the Erebonian Empire. The game brings together a massive cast of characters who the player is supposed to know from prior instalments, where familiarity with their backgrounds determines the player's narrative experience in this Japanese role-playing game, or JRPG.

The JRPG genre is described by fans in terms of its linear narrative structure in which the player has limited narrative choice over events within the game, and controls a pre-defined character.³ Debates on the linearity of the JRPG genre in opposition to the Western role-playing game, as a genre that grants players more freedom than JRPGs, still occur regularly on several sub-fora of the online

network community Reddit (see Reddit/rpg_gamers post April 2020, Reddit/JRPG posts September 2020, and December 2020). This kind of discussion implies a negative and disempowering status towards the player's agency in the narrative structure of the JRPG genre, as it associates a JRPG's linear storyline with forcing players on pre-defined narrative paths. However, this discourse has multiple flaws, for example it does not acknowledge a player's own experience of creating meaning from texts like JRPGs, does not consider the ecology in which JRPGs are produced, and it perpetuates the archaic dichotomy between Japanese and Western cultural products. As such, the question to ask should rather be: what is at stake in the tension between this linearity and agency in *Cold Steel III*'s narrative structure, and the JRPG genre in general? To examine this question and offer a possible answer, I will employ a reader-response theory method, using moments of my own playthroughs of the games, which allows us to focus on how the player's construction of stories in the *Trails* series influences their own meaning-making of *Cold Steel III*'s narrative.⁴

PERCEIVED DICHOTOMIES: JAPANESE RPGS VERSUS WESTERN RPGS

The genre of the JRPG is initially inspired by computer-based role-playing games (CRPG) from Western—primarily European and North American—markets whose origin can be traced back to pen-and-paper RPGs and table-top RPGs, such as *Dungeon and Dragons* (1973) (Riggs 2017; Schules, Peterson, and Picard 2018: 107). The JRPG is usually defined by its supposed opposition as a foreign object to the so-called 'Western' RPGs (WRPG) (Pelletier-Gagnon 2018: 142). The JRPG as a term is contested but mostly used by fans, the industry, and critics because they cluster the tendencies the JRPG has as a genre (Hutchinson 2019: 104). The perceived distinctions between the JRPG and the WRPG are particularly strong in internet discourse, where fans gather to discuss the common traits of the JRPG (Portnow 2012). On the forum Reddit, for instance, discussions about the JRPG's linearity in contrast to the WRPG's perceived open structure occur regularly, with users calling the genres the complete opposite of each other, discussing what linearity in JRPGs means, or seeing the linearity as a reflection of Japanese culture.⁵ Summarizing these kinds of discussions, Schules, Peterson, and Picard (2018) consider the JRPG a sub-type of the CRPG, in which the emphasis of the JRPG's design are on the gameplay and its narrative structures. They state that fans cite the following traits as the main differences between JRPGs and WRPGs respectively: confinement to a world versus sandbox exploration; anime or cartoon-style art versus 'realistic' art; limited narrative choice in a single story versus narrative plurality and multiple story paths/endings; and a

fantasy world versus a medieval world (2018: 114). While not all JRPGs contain anime artwork, and the descriptors of 'fantasy' and 'medieval' overlap, the main point of these observations for the purposes of this chapter concerns the perception of narrative.

Besides the fact that this overly simplistic juxtaposition between the JRPG and WRPG fails to deliver a nuanced understanding of narrative structures in videogames, it also perpetuates the historical practice to dichotomize entire fields of cultural production between Japanese and Western versions (Tobin 1992; van Ommen 2018). This dichotomy, however, says nothing about the Japaneseness or Westernness of the objects themselves (van Ommen 2018: 30). Instead, during its rise in the 1990s and early 2000s, the Japanese RPG's presence and value was negotiated as a foreign object against the Western RPG (Pelletier-Gagnon 2018). Thereby, it effectively created a juxtaposition between the two cultural products, which is even used by the Japanese game industry to sell their JRPG products overseas as distinct from other game genres (Consalvo 2016: 110). As Bjarnason (2020) explains, the narrative structures of JRPGs and WRPGs share the same historical ancestry in tabletop RPGs and CRPGs, but diverge in how they thematically, systematically, and artistically express themselves, with the JRPG more connected to the aesthetics found in manga and anime, turn-based combat systems, linear progress of events, and a bigger focus on characters. This chapter therefore takes a stance against the perceived dichotomy between JRPGs and WRPGs. It denounces the discourse that limits the JRPG to linear narratives as a form of othering Japanese RPGs that confines the genre to a static identity, which distorts our understanding of its narrative structures from the outset, and only perpetuates the archaic Orientalist dichotomy.

Instead, we should understand the JRPG's narrative structure as deeply intertwined with the Japanese economic force in which characters play an important role. The Japanese videogame industry in general is bound to markets of game-related cultures that are constantly fluctuating under the influence of industrial structures (publishers, developers, fans and player communities etc.) (Picard 2013; Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015). This market is primarily characterized by commercial strategies, specifically that of the media mix (Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015), a marketing strategy centred on cross-media production through the proliferation of characters (Steinberg 2012). Employing this strategy enables companies to create touchpoints to newcomers and old-time fans to consume as many related products as they can (Nakamura 2017; Nakamura and Tosca 2019), using characters to form resonance between the different platforms and products (Steinberg 2012) as is also the case for the JRPG (Schules 2015). This suggests that characters offer a plausible approach to the narrative structure of the JRPG as they are the essential element to connect stories and platforms, by which they

become the nodes for players to make sense of the different stories that can arise from a JRPG's narrative structure.

THE PLOT OF THE TRAILS SERIES

Although the *Trails* series might not be as well-known as popular Japanese role-playing game franchises such as the *Final Fantasy* series (Square Enix, 1987-) or the *Persona* series (Atlus, 1996-), it is developed by Japan's longest-running JRPG developer, Nihon Falcom Corporation (Wen 2019).⁶ The developer's flagship game series are the *Dragon Slayer* series (1984 – 2016), the *Ys* series (1987 – present), *The Legend of Heroes* series (1989 – present), and the *Trails* series (2004 – present).⁷ *Dragon Slayer*, being one of Japan's first action RPGs, became the label under which *The Legend of Heroes* game series was initially released (Kalata 2017). From that series eventually another sub-series emerged: the *Trails* series, that started with *The Legend of Heroes: Trails in the Sky* (2011), a turn-based RPG originally developed for Microsoft Windows.

Nihon Falcom's *Trails* series is expansive, with over 800 hours of story-related gameplay in a single world. The most important aspect of this series as a JRPG is its story containing mechanics facilitating its narrative structure (Wallace 2019). The *Trails* series does not offer multiple endings, nor does it necessarily depend on replayability, but instead focuses on a one-story structure. However, the series has become inventive inside that larger scaffolding, with a narrative structure and story that have become increasingly more complex over the course of 15 years. Each subseries is set in a new country on the continent of Zemuria, introduces new characters, different battle systems, and friendship systems. The entire series is marked by its recurring theme of political plots and mysteries, many of which are only explained to the player later in the series (or not at all), so that familiar character appearances become a vital aspect for the player to understand the events in the series' world (Galizio 2019).

The first sub-series *Trails in the Sky* (*Sora no Kiseki*, 2004-2007) is set in Liberl Kingdom, and starts with the classical cliché of the absent parents in JRPGs where teenagers Joshua and Estelle Bright journey through Liberl Kingdom to become Bracers, individuals tasked with helping and protecting civilians.⁸ Along the way, they meet several figures, some of whom become the player's new party members, including travelling troubadour Olivier Lenheim, and Renne, member of the mysterious organisation called Ouroboros. The next sub-series, *Zero no Kiseki* and its sequel *Ao no Kiseki*, are set after the events in the first sub-series. Here, the player is suddenly placed in a new country, Crossbell State, and introduced to new characters who seem to have no connection to the characters in Liberl.⁹ The player takes on the role of Lloyd Bannings, the leader of the new Special Support Section

(SSS) of the Crossbell Police Department. The SSS too is gradually pulled into a larger political mystery, and eventually learns about the Phantasmal Blaze Plan that simultaneously takes place in Crossbell and in Erebonia, ignited by Ouroboros. As this political intrigue is gradually revealed, the player meets characters from the previous instalments, like Joshua and Estelle, Olivier, and Renne.

The complexity of the *Trails* series story has become particularly visible in the third sub-series, *Cold Steel*, set yet again in another country, the Erebonian Empire, with, again, plenty of characters not met before.¹⁰ The player embodies the protagonist Rean Schwarzer, a student of Thors Military Academy's Class VII. Unlike the prior games, games in the *Cold Steel* sub-series have a narrative structure coordinated according to the days of the calendar within a school setting, much like other contemporary JRPGs such as *Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 4* (Atlus, 2008). Like *Persona 4*, these games contain days where the player freely roams around, passes practical exams, and performs field studies filled with quests in order to progress the story. Nevertheless, the first instalment starts around the same time as the events in Crossbell, where the player is swept up in the political situation of the Erebonian Government while simultaneously dealing with the Phantasmal Blaze Plan from Erebonia's side, a conflict which marks this entire sub-series. *Cold Steel III* then is placed in the aftermath of the annexation of Crossbell state by Erebonia, during which Rean is appointed as instructor of the new Class VII at the Thors Branch Campus (Fig. 4.1). In this instalment, Rean is



Figure 4.1 New Class VII. From left to right: Rean, Juna, Kurt, and Altina in *Cold Steel III*. Gameplay screen captured by author.

ordered to resolve the various incidents caused by Ouroboros. Eventually, Rean and his students learn about Ouroboros' plan to release a mysterious dark curse and set out to thwart the organisation, however, the game ends not with Rean preventing the curse's release but causing it instead.

CHARACTER PROFILES AND BONDING DYNAMICS IN *COLD STEEL III*

Due to the *Trails* series' complex story, characters form the most important source of information on the game world to show the player what is going on, which creates a character-world relationship. The concept surrounding the character-world relationship finds its origin in the Japanese academic circles of the late 1980s with Ōtsuka Eiji's *Narrative Consumption* (2010), a theory that explains how putting fragments of characters together allows one to form a larger understanding of the world in which the characters live (Ōtsuka 2010: 106). This theory, in turn, has been used by cultural critic Azuma Hiroki (2007: 125) to explain characters' meta-story-like quality, an ability to appear and re-appear in separate stories so that these works become connected through the characters. One way that this character-world relationship manifests in *Cold Steel III* is through its character profiles, a vignette-like mechanic that tracks pieces of information about the different individuals that the player has obtained. In *Cold Steel III*, the character profiles are divided into a few different categories such as 'former Class VII,' containing Rean's previous classmates, 'faculty,' containing Rean's colleagues, or 'Class VII,' containing Rean's students. Each character has a picture assigned to their name and a short description about the person (Fig. 4.2). For example, student Kurt Vander's description is: '[a] practitioner of the Vander sword style. Excels in everything and is quite handsome but has a complex about his looks.' Each character profile also contains two or more empty slots that are filled when the game reveals more information about each individual. The number of slots differ per character and it is clear to the player when they have missed a slot. For example, in Kurt's case, the player can obtain up to four different slots of information. During my gameplay, I managed to only obtain three slots for Kurt, namely slots one, two and four. The slots are filled in accordance with the progress of the game, which means that, since I missed slot three, I will never be able to obtain that slot of information within the same playthrough.

There are several means by which the player can obtain information about characters to fill the empty slots. These means operate in accordance with the game's overall narrative structure. According to game scholar Hans-Joachim Backe, a game's narrative structure can be divided into three levels: a macrostructure, a microstructure, and *paidia* (Backe 2012: 254).¹¹ Backe uses

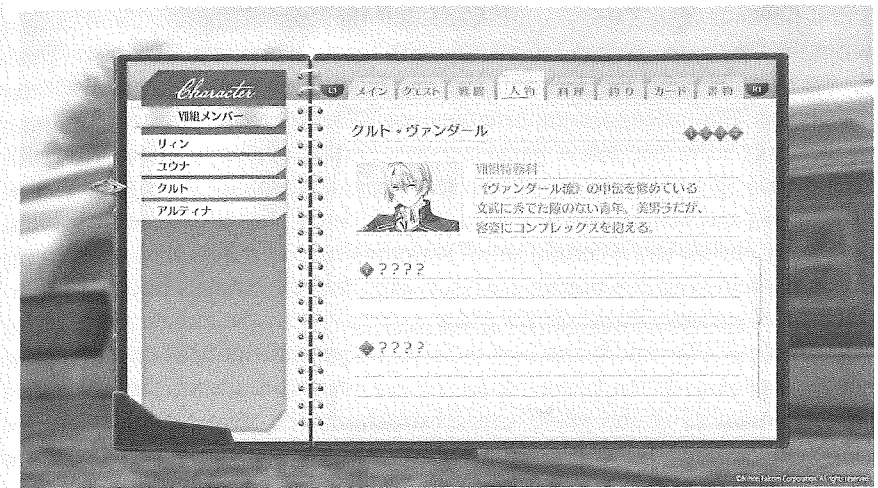


Figure 4.2 Kurt's character profile with a short description and (empty) slots in *Cold Steel III*. Gameplay screen captured by author.

Caillois' (1961: 53) distinction between *ludus* (structured play) and *paidia* (unstructured play) as two opposite ways of playing to explain a game's narrative structure. From this distinction we can understand a game's macrostructure as a form of *ludus*, that translates in *Cold Steel III* as the central storyline consisting of major events that act as unavoidable objectives for the player to meet. In *Cold Steel III*'s macrostructure, certain slots will always be filled as the player progresses through the game. Kurt's second slot, called 'Duty Revoked,' explains that his family's duty as guards of the Imperial family was revoked, prompting Kurt to leave the school's main campus and study at the branch campus instead. This slot is naturally filled when the Imperial crown prince Cedric Reise Arnor visits the branch campus, revealing Kurt's choice to attend that campus in order to avoid Cedric. This event will happen no matter what play style the player adopts, and always in the same manner. Although this shows a certain form of linearity, it also ensures that the player will not miss this information, giving it the status of an unavoidable objective for players to meet in the macrostructure of the game.

Cold Steel III's linearity is alleviated on the levels of the microstructure and *paidia*, where the player assembles their own version of the game's story. A useful distinction between macro- and micro-structures in ergodic texts like digital games is provided by game scholar Espen Aarseth (1997), who distinguishes between *textons* and *scriptons*. The former refers to information in the text, while the latter refers to information given to the reader (1997: 62). In a linear text, the textons are fixed and present the player with fixed scriptons. What the text contains is also what the reader sees. However, in

a non-linear text, the textons are fixed, but the user of the text creates the scriptons they read through interacting with the text (Aarseth 1997: 62). That means that although the author is the one who determines the textons, it is the player who influences the arrangement and expression of the scriptons, so they can influence how a game presents certain events to them –if at all. Backe uses this distinction between textons and scriptons to explain that a game's microstructure then refers to 'goal-oriented play situations' in which the player encounters a certain set of scriptons based on how they interact in the game, resulting in a meaningful story that they themselves created within the game's textons (Backe 2012: 254).

Cold Steel III's microstructure consists of several optional quests and a bonding system. If the player does not complete the quests, there will be no consequences in the game's macrostructure. The player might want to complete them for the monetary or item rewards, but they might also want to undertake them to gain more information about the involved characters, filling the slots in the character profiles. In one of *Cold Steel III's* optional quests, called 'Legendary Recipe,' the player is asked to gather moon mushrooms on a field trip for Sandy, a student of Class IX. Upon completion, Sandy rewards the player by making a special risotto, which the player can craft later to use as a healing item in battle. In this quest, Sandy reveals that she grew up in the same hometown as Erebonia's Prince Olivert, one of the most prominent figures in the entire *Trails* series. And the famous chef who created this dish was none other than Olivert's late mother. The player is rewarded for this quest's completion not only by having Sandy's character profile filled with the information that she grew up in the same place as her country's prince, but the player also discovers information about other characters, in this case, Olivert and his mother. Completing optional quests such as these can even be so rewarding that they grant players a better understanding of the character's inner motivations and actions –which I will discuss in more detail below.

The bonding system in *Cold Steel III* is a process in which the player has the agency to facilitate diegetic relationships between Rean and other characters by having Rean give gifts to and converse with his friends, students, and colleagues. Although this particular bonding system is not the main mechanic for the game's story to progress (Blom 2020), it is in this system where the player gains a form of agency over the game's overall narrative structure, making sense of the different stories that they create as they interact with the world's inhabitants, which seems to have become an overall tendency among many JRPGs and other game genres.¹² Once a bond is completed, both Rean and the character in question will receive a significant raise in their statistics so that they are stronger in the game's battle segments. This is quite a reward in terms of gameplay as it smoothens the progress towards the game's end-state. Yet, the player is also rewarded in their narrative experience. One such

reward is obtaining information in the character profiles. For some characters, the player only receives certain information for their profiles when Rean spends time with them. To fill all the character profiles of Rean's students of new Class VII, such as Juna, Altina, or Ash, the player has to choose to let Rean talk to them and spend intimate moments with them. Not conversing with them on a particular day when they are available means the player will never get the information about the character in their profile slots in a single playthrough.

Finally, *Cold Steel III's* paidia, the mode of unstructured play, is where the game offers an endless variety of play to experiment with rules and the game world (Backe 2012: 254). It manifests in *Cold Steel III* through its characters by the hidden slots in the character profiles, but also by buying recipes, finding books, or talking to non-playable characters. These activities do not exist as objectives to bring the game to its end-state but exist for their own sake and personal enjoyment of the player (Backe 2012: 249). The information of some slots is only revealed if the player talks to characters during the exploration segments. This differs from the macrostructure and microstructure in the sense that on the level of paidia, the game does not communicate to the player that they can obtain information for the character profile slots. It is only by experimentation, or rather, unplanned encounters when the player roams around, that they are able to unlock the information of these slots. For example, if we return to Kurt's case again, I missed his third slot which reveals his admiration for his older brother, Mueller, because I did not speak to Kurt on the train on June 16th (diegetic time). The game does not punish the player for not obtaining this piece of information, but it can emotionally agitate the player, since the empty slot constantly reminds them of a missed experience with that character, thereby missing a piece of information about the game's world. This agitation can manifest in an incentive to replay the whole game so that in the next round, the possibility becomes higher that the player is capable of collecting all the information for the character profile slots.

Cold Steel III thus stimulates the player to explore and discover its world through its characters on all three structural narrative levels (macro- and micro-structure, and paidia). Its character-world relationship manifests as the game asks the player to come to know the inhabitants, regardless of their importance to the game's major events that determine the ending. By actively engaging with the game text,¹³ the player creates scriptons that they would not have seen had they just followed the main narrative structure. As the player creates these scriptons, the game documents each individual character's progress and reveals additional information about them. This shows that although the game's main story is still rigid in the sense that the player cannot determine how main events will play out to lead to a different end-state, the

player has the agency on the micro-level of the game's narrative structure to construct their own version of the story.

Yet, it is important to note that *Cold Steel III* is not unique in using these three narrative structures. After all, as Backe (2012: 249) states, the three different structures are present in every kind of game, so this is also applicable for other games with a central storyline and optional side-quests, like many JRPGs. How the structures manifest per game, however, can differ greatly – and they do not necessarily always have to be related to their characters. For example, players receive information about the protagonists in the character skits of Bandai Namco Studios' *Tales of* series (Bandai Namco Entertainment, 1995-) and also in the *Final Fantasy* series (Square/Square Enix, 1987-) when players visit certain places with different party members, thereby receiving different cut-scenes. But, what makes the *Trails* series, in particular the *Cold Steel* sub-series, so distinct from these other JRPG series is that the character profiles keep track of this information for a huge cluster of characters ranging from the player's party members like Rean and his students, to protagonists like Prince Olivert, and to minor characters like Sandy who do not bear a significant role for the series' main story. The character profiles signal information that is worth remembering in order to understand the series' entire story. Moreover, even in the case of information that the game does not keep track of, as the player creates different scriptons, the series stimulates the player to obtain *additive comprehension*, a term introduced by game designer Neil Young and later used by media scholar Henry Jenkins to explain the idea that a new piece of information changes the reader's or player's perception of certain events (Jenkins 2006: 123).

ADDITIVE COMPREHENSION AND THE ROLE OF THE PLAYER

The character-world relationship in the *Trails* series is not limited to the character profiles I just discussed; in fact, until the *Cold Steel* sub-series appeared, the *Trails* series did not use these kinds of profiles. Instead, the player has always been the most important element in the meaning-making process of *Trails*' story. Many events that are shown in the series' early instalments are not explained until later in the series. For example, in *Trails in the Sky the 3rd*, Erebonia's prince Olivert announces to Gilliath Osborne, Erebonia's chancellor, that Olivert is ready to challenge Osborne on his intention to annex smaller countries (like Crossbell State). How Olivert intends to do this is not revealed until three game instalments later in the first *Cold Steel* game, when the player is introduced to Class VII through Rean. It turns out that Class VII

is a socio-political experiment initiated by none other Prince Olivert himself. The importance of the creation of Class VII might be lost on players who have only played the *Cold Steel* sub-series, but for the player familiar with the *Trails in the Sky* sub-series, it provides additive comprehension to the events in *Trails in the Sky the 3rd*.

As the player plays and finishes more of the *Trails* series, they will obtain more knowledge that lets them interpret certain in-game events differently than the player-characters they control. However, Jenkins (2006: 123) does not consider the affordances of each medium that shape the player's interpretation of these events. The player's agency in a game determines to a large extent what they come to see and experience, even in a JRPG as a genre that fans know for its linear plot. As Aarseth (1997) explains, games remind the player constantly of paths they have not taken. Despite the fact that it is possible to complete *Cold Steel III* by catching all information pieces, two players playing this game will not play exactly the same way, nor will they obtain the exact same information in the exact same manner, and never in their first playthrough. The game makes it impossible, for instance, to complete all character bonds in a single playthrough, and it is likely that the player will have missed a character or a quest even in the second or third round of playing to experience as much of the full game as possible and to complete all character slots. Because different players create different scriptons, not all players will come to obtain additive comprehension, nor the same kind of additive comprehension, about the events in the *Trails* series.

Returning to a previous example, in the optional quest of the 'Legendary Recipe,' Sandy makes a risotto dish created by Olivert's late mother. Sandy reveals that this dish is called 'Lenheim Risotto' and named after prince Olivert's mother. Over the course of the entire *Trails* series, Prince Olivert occasionally disguises himself as a travelling musician, calling himself Olivier Lenheim. None of the instalments in the series reveal explicitly the reason for Olivert's choice of alias until this particular quest in *Cold Steel III*, when Sandy tells she grew up in the same remote village as Olivert before he was officially recognized as a prince of Erebonia. The additive comprehension that the player gains is quite rewarding for those who keep up with the emotional reasons for why the characters act as they do, allowing the player to retroactively interpret the depth of Olivert's feelings for his late mother even if he does not outwardly speak about her – which shows the pathos of what Olivert went through, given that he is otherwise one of the most talkative persons in the entire series.

This kind of information is only revealed if the player opts to 'accept and complete the 'Legendary Recipe' quest. As such, this kind of narrative experience might bear greater significance to the player who has played (almost) all games than a player who has played only the *Cold Steel* sub-series in

which Olivert has a less visible role than prior instalments. Then again, the relevance of this kind of information only stays on the game's periphery as it changes very little about the events in the game's macrostructure. Besides rewarding the player with minor details about characters, the game also rewards players with additional comprehension about main events if they opt to put in extra effort. Such an example can be found in the events between *Trails in the Sky the 3rd*, and *Zero no Kiseki*.

Trails in the Sky the 3rd is a distinctive instalment in the series; it is the only game that is set in another dimension, Phantasma. In this space, the player is presented with Star Doors associated with specific individual characters, all of which are available in a single round of the game, and optional. This means that the player can choose to ignore these doors and just follow the game's macrostructure. However, if the player puts in extra effort by choosing to engage with the optional doors, as I did during my playthrough, they will be rewarded with extra narrative experience that provides them with additional comprehension of the story over the entire series. This is unlike JRPG series such as the *Final Fantasy* series or the *Persona* series where usually each game instalment is initially portrayed as distinct from other instalments through story, world, or other means.¹³ The *Trails* series, however, is designed to have the characters as footholds for the player to understand the series with such a long ongoing story over multiple instalments (Galizio 2019).

One of the Star Doors that the player can open in Phantasma reveals the background story of Renne, which, to me, is one of the saddest and most disturbing character histories that the series contains. In Renne's Star Door, I learned that she was abducted from her parents, and then physically and most probably sexually abused in a brothel called 'Paradise' (*rakuen*). She is later rescued by member of Ouroboros and decides to join them. In the next instalment, *Zero no Kiseki*, Lloyd and the rest of the SSS in Crossbell are tasked with finding a missing boy, Colin. As this chapter's introduction shows, Renne, an unknown girl to Lloyd and his team—but already a very familiar character to me when I played that instalment—immediately saves Colin when they find him surrounded by wolves. Yet, she is plagued by this decision. When they return to Colin's parents, Renne is apprehensive to meet them and instead hides. The parents, unaware of Renne's presence, reveal that, two years prior, they lost their daughter to a fire in their friends' house. After they have left, Renne reveals to Lloyd that her main reason for going to Crossbell is now gone, which utterly confuses Lloyd who does not understand the statement. A player without knowledge about Renne's abusive background might be able to deduce that this couple are her parents, and the little boy her younger brother, but why Renne is apprehensive to meet her parents is a question for which the player requires information

from Renne's Star Door. Here I learned that Renne considers herself to be tainted and has a desire for killing her parents because she thinks they gave her away to be abused in a brothel. Because I had already seen Renne's Star Door when I played *Zero no Kiseki*, I knew about Renne's revengeful desire, which led me to deduce that Renne's frustration over losing her number one reason for coming to Crossbell is that she lost her desire for revenge on her parents.

Events such as these demonstrate that the player's understanding of events in a game, and the depth of that understanding, rely on the choices they make, what scriptons they create, and what events they put together in their minds. The narrative experience differs per player, and not every player will obtain additive comprehension about all events throughout this extensive series. Some players will only opt to follow the game's macrostructure, while others might choose a completionist play style, and most might be somewhere in between, choosing to engage with certain quests while ignoring others. I, for example, never played the *Trails* series in a completionist style and only take side quests that pique my interest, thus my own predilections are one of the main factors in how I experience the *Trails*' expansive story. Coming back to the debates on linearity and player agency in the JRPG so prevalent in the internet discourse, the prior examples show that the agency of the player in the Japanese role-playing game genre is important, as it allows the player to create their own individual narrative experience.

The agency of the player is extremely significant in the Japanese role-playing genre. On the basis of this case study, I argue that the JRPG's narrative structure should not be defined by any simplistic assumption that JRPGs contain a linear narrative that force the player down pre-defined paths. The fan discourse on linearity only perpetuates the Othering of Japanese RPGs to restrict them to a static identity as having limited narrative choice. This reflects the broader archaic Orientalist practice of dichotomizing fields of cultural production between Western and Japanese versions. Instead, I argue, the key to undermine the preconceived Orientalist discourse of linearity is to focus on character consumption so central to the media mix, which extends beyond the confines of the JRPG games.

✦ CONCLUSION

Character consumption occurs throughout the entire media mix of the *Trails* series, and is essential to the player's agency to create meaning from the narrative in the games. Nihon Falcom proliferates the characters of the *Trails* series beyond just games. Systems similar to the character profile slots are

embodied in other paratextual commodities as well. For example, characters from Nihon Falcom's *Ys* and *Trails* series assemble in the *yonkoma* or 4-panel manga (Arakubo 2012) and anime series (Nihon Falcom 2015) called *Everyone, Assemble! Falcom Academy*. A manga prequel to *Zero no Kiseki* (Nihon Falcom and Kitsutsuki 2010) sheds light on why Joshua and Estelle appear in that game, and *Ao no Kiseki* contains a light novel extending the game's story with the perspectives of the individual protagonists (Tazawa and Ga-Show 2015). The *Cold Steel* sub-series has been adapted into a manga series (Emura and Sagara 2010), and commodities like figurines or keychains of the characters are sold both with and outside of the game series. Even if players do not assume a completionist play style, Nihon Falcom's entire economic system of characters is saturated with additive comprehension that bleeds into the player's understanding of the games series' storyline. Such comprehension is infinite; the proliferation of derivative goods, in combination with the levels of structured and unstructured play in the different game instalments, indicate that players have agency in the process of additive comprehension. It would be excessive at best and toxic at worst to compare individual player experiences to determine who has the best understanding of the characters in the series, since players attach different meanings to different experiences. Other JRPG series mentioned in this chapter also maintain a similar strategy. Thus, in other words, JRPGs should not simply be defined as a closed text as such, but rather, should be understood from the agency of the player and their engagement with the characters both in and beyond the games. That way, we might be able to step beyond simply repeating a misconstrued dichotomy between Eastern and Western cultural products.

NOTES

1. This research was supported by the Academy of Finland project Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies (CoE-GameCult, [312395]).

2. Original title *Eiyū Densetsu: Sen no Kiseki*. This game was released in Japanese in 2017, and in English in 2019.

3. On the prevalence of such descriptions and perceived defining elements of the JRPG see Hutchinson (2019: 104), and Schules, Peterson and Picard (2018: 114).

4. The reader-response theory method has been applied before to the meaning-making in video games, with an early example of Mortensen (2003), and my own dissertation on dynamic game characters (Blom 2020).

5. See in turn Reddit/rpg_gamers post (April 2020), Reddit/JRPG post (September 2020) and Reddit/JRPG post (December 2020).

6. According to Wen (2019), Nihon Falcom, founded in 1981, has stayed relatively small in terms of size and production value, but the developer is a pioneer of the

action-RPG genre with *Panorama Tō* (translating to *Panorama Island*, 1983) (Derboo 2013). The company started with game releases mostly inside Japan. But, since the appointment of Kondō Toshihiro as the company's president in 2007, the company has gradually been opening up to releasing their games in English for a Western market with new releases and remakes of older games to new platforms.

7. The *Dragon Slayer (Doragon Sureiyā)* series started in 1984 with *Doragon Sureiyā* released for the PC-8801, followed by *Doragon Sureiyā: Eiyū Densetsu* on the same system in 1989. This was the springboard for the *Eiyū Densetsu* or 'Legend of Heroes' series, which now runs to more than ten titles.

8. On absent parents in the JRPG see Hutchinson (2019: 106-109). The *Trails in the Sky (Sora no kiseki)* sub-series comprises three games from 2004, 2006 and 2007.

9. The second sub-series, *Zero no kiseki* and *Ao no kiseki* are at the moment of writing still untranslated, hence I refer to them with their Japanese titles. They could be rendered as *Trails of Zero* and *Trails of Blue*.

10. *Trails of Cold Steel (Sen no kiseki)* comprises four games, released in 2013, 2014, 2017 and 2018.

11. Backe (2012: 248) explains that theorizing the properties of narrative structures in computer games is a precarious adventure since there are many different and disputed theories, which has led to a distinction between ludology and narratology, a highly disputed topic within the field of game studies (Aarseth 2014: 187). Backe also points out that while other distinctions between rule types within computer games exist—such as Gonzalo Frasca's (2003) distinction between manipulation rules and goal rules—these do not 'allow for the inclusion of a narrative into the system of rules' (Backe 2012: 249). On the other hand, Backe's three different structures are present in every kind of game with a single-player campaign, from crossword puzzles to team sport games (ibid.) and are therefore very suitable to discuss how narrative and agency operate within the structure of a JRPG.

12. For example, JRPGs such as *Fire Emblem: Awakening* (Nintendo, 2012), *Persona 5* (Atlus, 2016), and even Nihon Falcom's own long-running *Ys* series, with *Ys VIII: Lacrimosa of Dana* (2016) having a bonding system by which the player can feel close to various characters and deepen their relationship. This tendency also appears already in JRPGs as well, with *Pokémon: Yellow* (Nintendo, 1998) as one of the earliest illustrative examples in which the player can bond with their Pikachu. Furthermore, in dating simulator games such as *Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side* (Konami, 2002) or *Hakuoki: Memories of the Shinsengumi* (Idea Factory, 2013), the bonding systems are main mechanics to progress the story, although they do not use a specific term to refer to such a system.

13. The emphasis here is on initially, because game designers and developers have the tendency to draw two separate game instalments together as if they develop in the same world. For example, *Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3* (Atlus, 2006), *Persona 4* and *Persona 5* present three distinct stories, but the spin-off game *Persona Q2: New Cinema Labyrinth* (P-Studio, 2018) draws the cast of characters together in a single game, thereby blurring the lines between the stories of the different games.

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