Chapter 3

Tutorial Characters and Rhetorical Strategies in *MOTHER* and *Final Fantasy*

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This chapter examines the figure of tutorial characters in Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs) from a narratological and rhetorical perspective, to determine how this archetype articulates the explanation of the gameplay with the construction of a fictional universe. In order to explore and map the different forms of tutorial characters JRPGs can build, I carry out a comparative analysis of two series: *MOTHER* (*Mazā shirīzu*) and *Final Fantasy* (*Fainaru fantajii shirīzu*). The analysis of this corpus is divided into three parts. First, I focus on the different types of signifiers that can be covered by the notion of tutorial character (ranging from the simple menu to the most developed character). Second, I decode the rhetorical strategies employed by characters to articulate empirical information and fictional elements (tutorial metaphors, raw metalepsis and fictionalized metalepsis). Finally, I describe five main tones or registers of expression regularly adopted by guiding-characters: the description, the possibility, the injunction, the hint and the anti-tutorial.

TUTORIAL CHARACTERS

Building on studies devoted to videogame characters and their specificities,[1] I will focus on an archetype specific to this medium: the guiding-character, or tutorial character. In many videogames, the explanation of the rules is indeed embodied in one or several characters that accompany the avatar's progress and guide the player from one quest to another. Since they combine a utilitarian function (revealing the game's instructions) and a narratological function (presenting and advancing the narrative), guiding-characters represent an ideal entry point to study the narrative and rhetorical specificities of

a videogame genre: by acting as an introduction to both the fiction and the gameplay, they condense the 'narrativization' mechanisms of the rules at work within the medium. In other words, although the use of tutorial characters is not an exclusive feature of JRPGs and is rather common in narrative games in general, studying how this genre constructs guiding-characters is a way to uncover its ludo-narrative particularities, since these characters expose in a condensed way the constraints that gameplay imposes on the construction of a fictional universe.

For the purpose of this research, I define 'tutorial' as a metalanguage intended to transmit utilitarian information about the commands ('press X to do this'), the rules ('the sword can break the blocks'), the behaviors expected by the player ('you can do this', 'do this') and the main goals of the game ('you have to defeat the antagonist'). At first glance, tutorials may appear to be devices whose function is primarily linked to games' rules, since they serve precisely to make these mechanics explicit. However, in many videogames, tutorials also have a narratological function: they are templates facilitating character development and serving to populate the fictional universe.

In games that build a fictional universe, tutorials can indeed be used as an excuse to create a large number of guiding-characters. Instead of explaining the rules via an interface menu or a training level, these are expressed by non-player characters (NPCs) that the player can cross throughout the game – which leads Antonin Bechler to compare RPG cities to large encyclopedias in which each inhabitant would be an entry.[2] Such a distribution of knowledge is very common in JRPGs: it was already at work among the helpful NPCs in *Dragon Quest*[3] in 1986 or among the many villagers in *Zelda II – The Adventure of Link* (*Rinku no bōken*) in 1987, but we can also mention the NPCs scattered in the towns of *Pokémon* games, among many other examples. In all these games, the tutorial is thus a tool to generate, at low cost, a multitude of narrative voices giving life and meaning to a fictional universe.

CASE STUDIES: *MOTHER* AND *FINAL FANTASY*

In order to explore and map the different figures of tutorial characters JRPGs can build, I will carry out a comparative analysis of two series that have been both extremely influential for the genre, but that construct very different kinds of fictional universes and discursive tones: the *MOTHER* series, with the games *Mother* (*Mazā*), published in 1989, *EarthBound* (original title *Mazā tsū – Gīgu no gyakushū*), published in 1994 and *Mother 3* (*Mazā surī*), published in 2006, and the *Final Fantasy* series, through a selection of three titles more or less contemporary with the above-mentioned games:

Final Fantasy III, published in 1990, *Final Fantasy VI*, published in 1994, and *Final Fantasy XII*, published in 2006.[4]

More precisely, the study will be based on the English-language North American translations of these games. However, two particular cases must be pointed out. First, as *Mother 3* was never localized outside Japan, I based my analysis on the fan translation developed by the mother3.fobby.net team (JeffMan, Tomato, Chewy), which is currently the reference for players and through which the title has been known in the West.[5] For the same reason, the analysis of *FFIII* is also based on a fan translation: the one that I considered the most literal compared to the Japanese text and which is provided by Alex W. Jackson, Neill Corlett and SoM2Freak.[6]

From a structural point of view, these two series share many similarities, which could be considered as JRPG patterns: they feature a party of characters who travel around the world to accomplish various quests and to take part in increasingly challenging battles that ultimately affect the future of the entire world; these characters face multiple monsters in random battles and progress from level to level, gaining physical and magical abilities. However, from a thematic perspective, the universes represented are very different: *MOTHER* games take place in a contemporary era, are marked by an American imaginary, and represent creatures that are objects of everyday life. In the three games, the player embodies several avatars (mostly young boys) facing various disasters either paranormal (resulting from the negative influence of Giygas, an evil alien force) or political (linked to the rise of capitalism and of a police state personified by the Pigmask Army in *Mother 3*), and ends up saving the world thanks to the intervention of a maternal figure.

Final Fantasy games, for their part, build complex and heterogeneous universes, mixing multiple mythological references and drawing inspiration from all the subgenres of pop culture (fantasy, science fiction, horror, adventure, and so on). In *FFIII*, four warriors are endowed with powers by a crystal that enjoins them to fight evil and restore balance to the world. *FFVI* takes place in a world where magic has almost entirely disappeared in favor of 'Magitek' technology, which gives the Empire full power over the world; the player plays as Terra, who will join a group of rebels trying to stand up to the Empire. In *FFXII*, two powerful empires, Rozarria and Archadia, fight for domination; in this context, the game focuses on Vaan, a young adventurer who joins Princess Ashe's resistance movement against Archadia. It should also be noted that the parodic tone of *MOTHER* games (which play on the unexpected nature of monsters or situations encountered, but also on the frequent use of 'meta' discourses) differs considerably from the epic spirit of *Final Fantasy*.[7] Being at the same time comparable and different, these two series offer a very large and varied corpus of tutorial characters. We will see, among other things, that *MOTHER*'s ironic dimension is particularly

apparent in these characters' discourses and in the way they reintegrate the 'meta' passages into the fiction, through the process I will call 'fictionalized metalepses.'

DEGREES OF TUTORIAL AVATARIZATION:
FROM A MENU TO A CHARACTER

If characters are often used to transmit information to the player in JRPGs, this function is also largely fulfilled by the interface: these games (in which text usually plays an important role) rely on the use of multiple menus. However, the boundary between explanatory interfaces and tutorial characters is not always clear, and it is possible to identify many intermediate entities. For this reason, it is useful to make a first distinction between several degrees of tutorial avatarization.

First of all, while most of the messages conveyed by the interface adopt a neutral and descriptive tone, some menus, on the contrary, are endowed with a particular voice, which gives them the beginnings of a 'personality.' In the *MOTHER* series, certain billboards address the player directly and contain indicators of subjectivity, expressing a point of view on the situation they describe: for example, a billboard of *EarthBound* adopts a rather passive-aggressive tone: 'If you have time to read this, go to the Chaos Theater,' while another from *Mother 3* speaks to the player in a complicit and familiar tone: 'You know that feeling when you're just kind of bleh and can't eat anything at all? When that happens, a Fresh Mint will freshen you right up!'

Also, in this series, some interface-like messages are even assigned to named characters – although these never appear graphically. For instance, in *Mother* and *EarthBound*, the save function is managed by the protagonist's father, who can be contacted through phones. This character is never visible and marks the story by his absence, but takes responsibility for the save menu and associated explanations, thus personifying them. Similarly, in *Mother 3*, a series of instructions are given to the player by entities whose existence is only textual: the ants (see Fig. 3.1), who interrupt the avatar's movements by asking him to not to step on them and give him advice about fighting, and the 'word on the wind,' which also stops the avatar to transmit 'rumors' about psychic powers.

FFVI uses a similar system, except that the interface messages are graphically embodied by a mascot. Indeed, the game is regularly interrupted to make way for a black screen, on which a 'Moogle' (a cute furry creature iconic of the *Final Fantasy* saga) appears out of nowhere to deliver information to the player. Similarly, when the playable character Gau joins the party, a screen opens on a Kappa (a green water-creature of Japanese legend) explaining

Figure 3.1   The save menu embodied by the father in *Mother* (left) and the ants' intervention in *Mother 3* (right). Gameplay screen captured by author.

the newcomer's special abilities. The interventions of these mascots call into question the coherence of the fictional universe, since they literally emerge from the void and without any explanation that would respect the narrative logic. However, their fantastic nature partially answers this rupture of the diegetic pact: since they are enchanted beings with unknown powers, they can enrich the diegesis while existing at its margin.

In the examples above, menus are endowed with a certain 'narrative voice' or personality that distinguishes them from the other more neutral messages from the system, but without actually allowing them to be interpreted as fully-formed characters, endowed with interiority and a life of their own. To qualify the undefined entities represented by these tutorials, Itō Go's distinction between the notions of *kyara* and *kyarakutā* is useful (2005: 109-111). While the *kyarakutā* designates a complete form of character (with a body and personality, similar to a real person, who can be imagined leading an autonomous existence), its abbreviation, *kyara*, is a more abstract concept referring to 'proto-characters,' which may become full *kyarakutā* provided that their characterization is further developed. The *kyara* – whose prototypical examples are mascots – is thus a set of caricatural and simplified traits, forming a recognizable entity, but one which is not developed to the point of possessing a story, a complex interiority, a way of life, in the manner of *kyarakutā*.

The examples of personified interfaces mentioned above correspond exactly to this status of proto-characters: recognizable through the (sub)text without necessarily being supported by another signifier, sometimes associated with a generic name ('Ant,' 'Father,' 'Word on the Wind') or a generic appearance shared with all entities belonging to the same functional category ('Moogle,' 'Kappa'), they help to set the minimum boundary of what a tutorial character can be. Nevertheless, the examples cited show a certain progression in the development and characterization of these entities, from a simple text to the association of a text and a sprite in *FFVI*.

A further step in this development is taken in the *MOTHER* series, which contains not only interfacial characters, but also tutorial mascots strictly speaking, represented as inhabitants of the fictional universe, living among other characters. These mascots are distinguished by the fact that they take the shape of talking animals: 'assistance moles' in *Earthbound*; advice-giving sparrows and 'arrow lizards' in *Mother 3*; mice and dogs in all three games.

These forms of *kyara* have more distinctive features than the previous cases: a particular way of speaking often tinged with humor and irony, an appearance integrated in the game space. Nevertheless, they retain a certain status of exteriority and strangeness in relation to the world around them: not only because they know information that should be out of their reach (as said by the first sparrow met in *Mother 3*: 'A sparrow fluent in game lingo is pretty rarrow, wouldn't you say?'), but also, quite simply, because they are talking animals. The singular status of their tutorial discourses is marked textually by the fact that they are presented in parentheses, as if they were translations of these animals' cries.

While interfacial characters and mascots can be seen as two kinds of *kyara*, *FFIII* and *FFXII* use another form of character that partially merges with the interface, but that is more akin to a full-fledged *kyarakutā* in that its identity is developed elsewhere in the game. In *FFIII*, when no NPC is present to assume the role of metadiscursive commentator, instructions and explanations are attributed to the avatars – although it is not possible to determine precisely which of the four avatars is speaking, and even though their personalities are relatively undeveloped over the course of the game. In *FFXII*, each time players open the map, they can read a short text at the bottom of the screen reminding them where they need to go. This text is not formally associated with the avatar's name, Vaan, but the character's subjectivity is clearly recognizable. For example, right after saying he had to find the pirate Balthier, the map displays this message written in the first person: 'Now, if I were a tired, thirsty sky pirate, where I would be?'.

These cases show that the categories presented in this point are not completely definite and impermeable: there is a continuum going from the most abstract menu to the most fully developed character.

UTILITY-CHARACTERS AND AVATARS OF THE TUTORIAL

When the game rules or objectives are no longer explained through a menu, an interface, or through those ambiguous beings described above, but are transmitted through the point of view of a fully-fledged character who takes responsibility for this information, I will then speak of *tutorial avatars*.

However, this category is not homogeneous either, but includes more or less developed 'quasi-persons.'[8] Most NPCs belong, by their appearance, to a generic category of characters (for example police officers, children, old wise men) and combine only two functions: that of populating the represented world and that of delivering a tutorial fragment. From a rhetorical point of view, the tool nature of these characters is marked by the fact that they often express themselves without indicators of subjectivity. In other words, if we have seen that some interfaces speak like characters, there are also characters that speak like menus: for instance, a ghost in *FFVI* tells the player how to summon Espers in combat. The tone it uses is completely neutral and descriptive, to the point that a speech frame even contains a title (which labels its lines as a written text that the player is reading rather than a dialogue that the avatar is supposed to hear):

Press the A Button to use the Esper.
Remember, an Esper can only be used once per battle.
Learning Magic
Learn new spells by equipping Espers. Switch Espers to learn different sets
    of spells.

The personification process is here ensured by the graphics, but not by the discourse; the character has no voice or humanized tone.

The continuity existing between menus and these 'uncharacterized characters' is parodied in *EarthBound* through a dialogue where, after having given the direction to the player, a common NPC is obliged to specify ironically that he is more than just a sign: '(East of here is the port town of Toto) ….No, no… I'm not a billboard….'

However, the more recent the games studied, the more recognizable individuals appear among the tutorial characters. In *Mother 3* and *FFXII*, the player encounters guiding figures who share their own emotions, concerns, or personal opinions about the information they express. For example, when an NPC in *FFXII* gives the following advice: 'Want a word of advice from an old adventurer, boy? Don't squander your gil[9] on techniks you've not got the license to use yet,' one can imagine the past adventures that have helped him develop this knowledge.

FFVI and *FFXII* also differ from the *MOTHER* series by featuring tutorial avatars whose function is not limited to a diegetic embodiment of the instructions and who play a key role in the narrative's progression. At the beginning of *FFVI*, the two soldiers Vicks[10] and Wedge accompany the protagonist Terra – at this moment controlled by a 'slave crown' that deprives her of her will – to investigate rumors about a frozen Esper. Throughout this passage, the player controls the three characters in battles that serve as an introduction

to the game. The chapter ends with a boss fight during which Vicks and Wedge have a discussion that indirectly reveals to the player how to defeat this enemy:

'*VICKS:* Hold it! Think back to our briefing……
WEDGE: What about it?!
VICKS: Do you recall hearing about a monster that eats lightning……
WEDGE: ……and stores the energy in its shell!
VICKS: Right. So whatever you do, don't attack the shell!'

The tutorial is delivered here only in fictional terms (the soldiers talk to each other, not to the player), through the point of view of characters who have a complex narrative role: they are opponents, as they serve the antagonistic group, but also helpers from a gameplay point of view, since the player partially controls them during the fights.[11] The fact that they serve as guides accentuates this complexity, because tutorial characters are usually positively marked figures whom the player is invited to trust. Similarly, the controls and fighting system of *FFXII* are explained by the knight Basch, who later appears to be a traitor. In these ways the player's trust can be manipulated, adding to narrative tension.

By their way of articulating utilitarian explanations and narrative developments, the last examples raise the question of why I chose the term tutorial *avatars* to designate them (rather than 'personifications' or 'incarnations'). These NPCs are indeed different from other kinds of game characters, in that their tutorial function makes them hybrid entities, composed partly of empirical content and partly of fictional content.

This transgressive nature is close to the functioning of the avatar since, by being a mediation between the player and the game object, the avatar is what Gérard Genette (2004: 110) calls a 'metalepsis operator.' Metalepsis may be understood as a transgression of a level of fiction (like when a character speaks to the reader or acts in the extradiegetic world), so that narrative levels that are normally hermetic are linked.[12] The avatar can be qualified as an operator of this type of transgression, since, while it often takes the form of a fictional character, it also represents the player who manipulates it and, as a result, it introduces the empirical element of the player's gesture in the game diegesis (Barnabé and Delbouille 2018). In the same way, tutorial NPCs represent empirical content (the rules, the controls) through a fictional prosthesis (the character) and become so many avatars, not of the player, but of the system. In other words, these characters are constructed, in a certain way, as the equals of the player's avatar, which makes the player lose their status of exceptionality: the player is not the only empirical entity to be fictionally represented in the game.

MANAGING THE TRANSGRESSIVE
NATURE OF TUTORIAL CHARACTERS

Tutorial avatars are, as we saw, ambiguous fictional beings: their explanatory discourses are integrated into the diegesis (since they are stated by its inhabitants), but they address an extradiegetic receiver, the player – sometimes disguising this transgressive discourse behind addresses to the avatar (see Nélide-Mouniapin 2005). The tutorial is thus a type of discourse that is fundamentally reflexive (the game speaks about itself) and hybrid: it constantly mixes terms – sometimes within the same sentence – referring to the fiction and to the player's empirical world. For example, when an *FFIII* NPC says: 'Press B to use an item. For example, try using a Potion on me!', the B button is not on the same plane of existence as the potion or the character's body.

The integration of these explanations within the game universe implies, in other words, the production of numerous metalepses (Genette 1982: 527). It is possible to distinguish three main ways in which guiding-characters deal with the metaleptic nature of the information they transmit: they may try to conceal this transgression, they may leave it apparent, or they may underline it. Although these strategies are not unique to JRPGs but may be found in other games using guiding-characters, it is interesting to study in more detail how JRPGs use them in particular, as they profoundly determine the tone of the game, the representation of the characters, and the position constructed for the player.

The first rhetorical strategy possibly adopted by tutorial avatars consists in concealing the metaleptic nature of their discourse by integrating it into the diegesis. In this case, all the explanations are formulated in terms that belong to the fictional world, so that these sentences do not contain any explicit rupture. Formulations referring to the empirical world, to the game system, to its supports or peripherals are thus 'translated' through metaphors. In the following example from *EarthBound*, an NPC teaches the player the 'check' mechanism (a menu command allowing to get information about the environment) and the fact that it allows the player to read billboards: 'Uh, by the way Ness, did you check my billboard? I wrote the message myself.' In this text, the gameplay mechanism is smoothly integrated into the character's discourse, since the word 'check' refers to a possible action in the diegesis. Similarly, in *Mother 3*, the first frog met by the player develops an extended metaphor to translate the principle of saving in terms that make sense within the fiction: 'A story is a series of memories. Memories are remembered with other memories, and in turn become memories themselves. If you don't take care to preserve your memories, you'll forget them. So, please tell us frogs your memories of everything so far… That is what people refer to as "saving".' The game's data are compared to memories while the extradiegetic

word 'saving' is presented as a simple way of speaking to refer to the fact of recounting them.

Most videogames thus standardize, from their very beginning and through their characters, a metaphorical repertoire from which they repeatedly draw to give instructions to the user without uttering raw metalepses. It is nevertheless interesting to note that, in all the games studied, the terms conveying utilitarian information within these metaphorical discourses are sometimes underlined by the materiality of the text. In the *MOTHER* series, capitals, quotation marks or different colors are used to highlight the fact that certain statements do not have quite the same status as other diegetic discourses. This is for example the case of the word 'check' in the following text in *Mother*: 'Tell you a secret. Why don't you CHECK me out?'. *FFXII* also uses different colors, *FFVI* uses quotation marks, while *FFIII* inserts icons within the text (see Fig. 3.2).

Without being explicitly metaleptic, all these excerpts implicitly contain an injunction to act; as 'injunctive texts,' they announce a necessary future action by the player.

The second rhetorical strategy consists in interweaving fictional and empirical information in the discourse without softening the friction between these two ontological levels. In this category, characters do not attempt to translate empirical realities into diegetic terms: these are stated in a direct and unproblematized way. For that reason, they can be described as 'raw metalepses.' Whether in *MOTHER* or *Final Fantasy*, tutorial characters do not hesitate to include in their discourses mentions of the 'B button,' the 'Right Analog Stick,' 'icons,' or even the fact that they are just 'characters' (as in Fig. 3.3).

Despite their narrative incoherence, occurrences of these types of discourse in games are numerous to the point of being conventional. For this reason,

Figure 3.2 *Mother* (left) marks utility words in capitals, while *FFIII* (right) does so with icons. Gameplay screen captured by author.

Figure 3.3 **Raw metalepsis in *FFXII*.** Gameplay screen captured by author.

Astrid Ensslin considers videogames as 'unnatural narratives *par excellence*' (Ensslin 2015: 43): far from representing the world in a mimetic way, game fictions constantly deconstruct the classic codes of narration, including the closure and coherence of fictional universes. The raw metalepses observable in tutorials therefore cannot be considered as truly transgressive figures in the particular context of videogames (Ryan 2004; Allain 2018), since they are rather part of a ludo-narrative convention, presupposed by the articulation between the player's activity and the fictional universe.

A third – and rarer – strategy can be used by tutorial avatars to transmit information: they can underline the existence of a metalepsis in their own discourse and demonstrate that they are aware of the narrative transgression they operate. This strategy is specific to the tutorial avatars from the *MOTHER* series and is one of the main markers of these games' metadiscursive and parodic dimension.

In *EarthBound*, for example, Pokey (one of the first avatars of the tutorial) apologizes to the player for not having translated his explanation into fictional terms: 'Sorry about giving you this game-type advice, but you should equip your weapon!' He then suggests that he is aware of being in a game: '"Equip" is used a lot in games like this, but you already knew that…' In *Mother 3*, a sparrow even goes so far as to conceptualize the difference between tutorial metaphors and raw metalepses, when it explicitly announces that it will temporarily stop using 'comparisons': 'For this little bit, I'm going to use game lingo rather than comparisons. You can bring up the menu by pressing Start!'

In *EarthBound*, several other characters, such as the assistance moles, self-correct in a humorous way when they use extradiegetic terms. For example, one mole says that when enemies approach, 'your TV screen, no… no… I mean the world in front of you will show a red swirl for a second. … In that case, your TV… Oops again!' Another tutorial mole, further on in the adventure, intersperses its explanations with similar jokes: 'This is because of the rolling action of your HP meter. Oops! I mean your life.'

By explicitly assuming the metalepses they state, by underlining the friction that exists between the fictional and empirical parts of their discourse, these characters reintegrate tutorial metalepses within the fictional universe. In doing so, they underline the conventional nature of metalepses in videogames; they bring to light the fundamentally metaleptic nature of videogame fictions. In other words, in *MOTHER* games, tutorial discourses are part of the diegesis *as metalepses*, since they are recognized as such by the characters who populate it. For this reason, I propose to call these rhetorical processes 'fictionalized metalepses': far from interrupting the narrative, they are integrated into its development and, through them, part of the empirical world is also incorporated into the fictional universe.

The feeling of transgression, here, does not really come from the rupture of the threshold of fiction (since it is expected), but from the highlighting of this rupture: NPCs distance themselves from their universe and from its rules by commenting on them ironically. The fact that they self-correct also suggests that they actually *pretend not to be* aware that their world is fictional: they make *as if* they did not know that they are in a videogame.

This distanced attitude is very close to the definitions that have been given of the playful attitude, notably by Henriot (1989: 300), Schaeffer (1999: 234) and Genvo (2013). These researchers define the player's attitude as the act of taking a step back from the surrounding world, as a 'metaphorical process' (Henriot 1989: 300) through which the player acts 'as if' what they were doing was different (Genvo 2013). In other words, the tutorial avatars described above seem to be adopting a kind of playful attitude towards their own world. The tutorial they deliver is not only composed of instructions about rules and gameplay: it is also a user manual of the attitude that is expected of the player.[13] It invites players to mimic the character's reflexivity and to distance themselves from the game system, to question its logic and to regain consciousness of the unobvious and arbitrary nature of game conventions.

EXPRESSION REGISTERS OF TUTORIAL DISCOURSES

It remains to study in more detail the types of discourse that tutorial characters in JRPGs can deliver. By going through all these figures' dialogues in the

MOTHER and *Final Fantasy* series, I have been able to identify five major rhetorical registers through which they can convey information: description, possibility, injunction, hint and anti-tutorial.

The description mode encompasses sentences that explain how the game works in third-person, generally affirmative statements, without giving direct instructions to players, who must infer the procedure from the exposure of the facts. These discourses are characterized by a neutral, explanatory tone, free of subjectivity indicators. For instance, in *FFIII*, we can read sentences such as: 'The candle farthest to the right is the switch for a hidden door,' which indirectly tells players that they have to interact with the candle. In *FFVI*, a scholar explains the relics in these terms: '"Sprint Shoes" double your speed. "True Knight" lets you shield others during battle'; in *FFXII*, the tutorial avatars' first sentences often begin with a description of the interfaces or game elements they are going to explain: 'This is the licence board. The licence board shows which licenses you already have.'

It is noteworthy that this type of statement is much rarer in *MOTHER* games (although it is not absent), whereas it is very common in *Final Fantasy*. This difference has a double effect: on the one hand, *Final Fantasy* games describe themselves in a very encyclopedic and detached way, as if the richness of their universe unfolds by itself before the player's eyes, where *MOTHER* games are much more marked by the subjectivity of their characters. On the other hand, *MOTHER* games constantly include players and address them in their discourses, while *Final Fantasy* games build for players a position of exteriority: the world and the story seem to work without them.

The second register of expression, which is regularly used in all the games studied, is the possibility: tutorial characters present to the players what they *can* do in the game. For example: 'You can go outside through that magic circle' (*FFIII*); 'You can save a game anywhere on the world map' (*FFVI*); 'The "Town Map" can be checked out at the library' (*EarthBound*). The frequency of these turns of phrase can be explained if we consider that, by its very nature, the playing activity consists of experimenting with possibilities. According to Genvo (2013: 72): 'to play is … to make a decision and "exercising possibilities." If playing consists only of a succession of single decisions, then players have no "latitude" in their choices; they are merely actualizing a proposition that is held to be true ….' In other words, the openness of games to a variety of contingencies is what makes them playable: it is therefore not surprising that JRPGs insist on the possibilities they offer to promote their playability and encourage the adoption of a playful attitude by their audience.

The third register, injunction, encompasses several types of formulations: verbs conjugated with the imperative ('do this'), but also actions expressed as obligations ('it is necessary to,' 'you'll need to,' etc.). For instance: 'To go to

Scaraba, you need to cross the sea' (*EarthBound*); 'Whenever you get tired, just drop by our Inn' (*Mother*). It is interesting to note that raw metalepses are particularly often expressed on this modality, as in the following examples: 'Press A to transform into an airship!' (*FFIII*); 'Choose with the A Button. Cancel a choice with the B Button' (*FFVI*). In both series, the more frontally metaleptic messages are also expressed in a particularly direct tone: through them, the system reveals without many mediations.

A fourth way of organizing tutorial information consists in not expressing it directly, but in a concealed or partial way, in the form of hints that the player must interpret. Contrary to the previous registers, non-explicit instructions can take extremely diverse forms (questions, hesitations, evasive descriptions, incomplete sentences, etc.) and are not limited to a particular phrase construction, since what is expected of the player is not said directly. For example, in *FFIII*, the following statement pronounced by an NPC must make players understand that they have to use the 'Mini' spell on their avatars: 'I came from the forest of midgets to the south. The town in the forest can only be found by midgets!' It is only by making this deduction that players will be able to reach the village of Tozas, an obligatory passage to continue the adventure. To take another example, in *Mother*, a dialogue emitted by a 'suspicious rat' suggests that something is in the piano room, but without giving more details ('The room with the piano... Hee hee hee...'). Checking the piano in question will allow players to retrieve one of the eight melodies that will help them to defeat the antagonist.

Both series thus contain explanations that are constructed as gameplay mechanics in their own right: NPCs' dialogues are part of multiple puzzles that the player must solve in order to progress in the main quest. These puzzles require interpretive skills: they invite us to postulate that all information transmitted by NPCs is utilitarian information, that all NPCs in JRPGs are potentially hidden tutorial characters.

Finally, although this last category leaves the spectrum of utilitarian instructions, it is important to note that several of the games studied also include fake tutorials or anti-tutorials: some NPCs imitate the tutorial characters' discursive codes, but only to reveal useless or false information. Although these parodic forms of tutorials are particularly developed in the *MOTHER* series, there is also an occurrence in *FFVI*: the inhabitants of the town Zozo are described by several NPCs as untrustworthy thieves and, indeed, the player must perform the opposite action to any instructions they give. The tutorial is formulated as an antiphrasis, hence the term 'anti-tutorial.'

In *Mother 3*, NPCs also deliver with seriousness and emphasis information that turns out to be useless. A cow announces for instance: 'All cows, no matter what they're thinking, go, "Moo." It'd be handy to remember that.' The affirmation has all the aspects of a tutorial, especially since it is delivered at

Figure 3.4 Anti-tutorial in *FFVI* (left) and fake tutorial in *EarthBound* (right). Gameplay screen captured by author.

the very beginning of the game by an animal that could have been a guiding-mascot. However, it delivers information that is both obvious and unsettling (since in *Mother 3*, precisely, the cows do not just go 'Moo').

If the tutorials are already metadiscourses through which a game comments on its own functioning, these fake tutorials are *metadiscourse about metadiscourse*, very characteristic of *MOTHER*'s tone, a series that never stops talking about what it is to play. The existence of this category of fake tutorials shows that the conventions determining tutorial characters in JRPGs are so well established that they can be parodied and leave room for new archetypes of characters: if the tutorial avatars can exist, then it creates the way for their opposites.

CONCLUSION

The exposition of all the forms and categories developed above was based on what *Final Fantasy* and *MOTHER* had in common, with the objective of determining, through their comparison, the potential traits that would be characteristic of JRPG's guiding-characters. From this inventory of traits, it is possible to imagine a multitude of new archetypes of tutorial characters: mascots expressing themselves in the form of metaleptic hints, tutorial avatars privileging metaphors and imperative discourses, and so on. However, it was seen that certain combinations are preferred in either series: fictionalized metalepses are proper to *MOTHER* games and participate in defining their reflexive and auto-parodic tone, while *Final Fantasy* favors the description and the use of characters that are not limited to a tutorial function. Another specificity of *Final Fantasy* that has been little mentioned is its use of redundancy: in these games, information is usually repeated several times,

via several different channels. For example, in *FFXII*, the rules explained by characters' dialogues are often repeated by the interface. Because of this organization, *Final Fantasy* games are presented as organized and sensible universes.

In contrast, *MOTHER* games are rather determined by a principle of diversification of tones, which leaves more room for mystery and contradictions. Moreover, the ambivalence of guiding-characters and the ironic dimension of the tutorial actually set the tone for the entire games: through their mocking and self-parodic tutorials, *MOTHER* games invite players to adopt a similar reflexive posture in relation to their playful practice and to their life.[14]

While the comparison of the two series reveals commonalities, the many differences in tone and discourse in these games thus show the internal diversity of the JRPG genre. These differences would nevertheless deserve to be contextualized in relation to these games' production and distribution contexts: the meta and political nature of *MOTHER* (see Giner, 2020) is certainly linked to the fact that this series remains a niche production, compared to the worldwide popularity of *Final Fantasy*. As such, it would be useful to extend this study by comparing its results to games distributed on different platforms, aimed at other audiences and situated on a spectrum of international ambitions.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note here that, despite its singularity, the *MOTHER* series had an undeniable influence on the JRPG genre, still visible in its contemporary successors such as *Undertale* (Toby Fox, 2015). Although it is produced by an independent American developer, *Undertale* revives many features of *MOTHER* JRPGs, whether in terms of aesthetics, gameplay, or narrative. Moreover, *MOTHER*'s heritage is also apparent in the construction of parodic guiding-characters. Indeed, the two main tutorial avatars encountered in *Undertale* also play on the trust that players have learned to attribute to tutorial figures by delivering information that is either false, in the case of the character Flowey, who expresses itself through fictionalized metalepses and antiphrasis, and who will turn out to be the main antagonist of the game, or useless, in the case of Toriel, a maternal character who produces a simulacrum of a tutorial through tutorial metaphors, since she prepares players for trials that never happen and solves the problems for them. Through the confrontation of these two opposite characters, *Undertale*'s tutorial phase does not stop subverting its own message and system of values, which leave players puzzled about what is true or false in this universe, and which invites them to wonder what would be the 'right' way to complete the game.

The fact that this motif of the 'unreliable guiding-character' (also sketched in *FFXII* with the example of Basch) is still present in *Undertale* – a game that addresses a player already familiar with JRPG conventions – is revealing. It proves that, as the genre becomes more transnational and diversified,

the relation between tutorial and characters is an element that is being carried over in new titles. It shows the perennity and relevance of the concept as a central element of the genre, and also furthers the potential of making tutorial characters central to the game's narrative.

NOTES

1. See Blom (2020), Delbouille (2019), Lamerichs (2019), Jørgensen (2010).

2. Bechler (2010: 84). This is reminiscent of Azuma's (2009) concepts of database and database consumption, with the difference that Bechler does not dwell on the 'attractive' (*moe*) nature of the characters, but attributes to the NPCs of RPG cities a merely informative function.

3. The game was originally titled *Dragon Warrior* in English, but it is now commonly known as *Dragon Quest*.

4. Following convention, the *Final Fantasy* titles will be abbreviated as *FFIII*, *FFVI* and *FFXII*. Numbering follows the order of Japanese release. For more on *EarthBound* see Ben Whaley's chapter in this volume.

5. For translation notes, see the website 'README,' *MOTHER 3 / EarthBound 2 Fan Translation*. http://mother3.fobby.net/or/ Accessed 10 October 2020. Note also that *EarthBound Beginnings* is the title of the first localization of *MOTHER* in North America and Europe, and thus the official translation of this game.

6. See 'Translations – Final Fantasy III,' *Romhacking.net*. https://www.romhacking.net/translations/141/ Accessed 10 October 2020.

7. We find a similar tone and aesthetics in the RPG *Undertale*, produced in 2015 by the American developer Toby Fox, which explicitly draws inspiration from the *MOTHER* series. *MOTHER* has been so influential in a certain part of the modern indie RPG scene that some do not hesitate to consider these games as forming a subgenre in their own right: the 'Mothertales' (Giner 2020).

8. Blom (2020) analyzes Frow's (2014) concept of the quasi-person in more detail.

9. Gil is the currency in *Final Fantasy* games.

10. Better known by the spelling 'Biggs', under which he appears in other titles of the series.

11. According to Greimas' actantial model (1983), characters can be reduced into broad categories following the function they play in the development of the narrative. *Helpers* and *opponents* respectively assist or hinder the *subject* in their quest for the *object*.

12. Allain (2018: 1). All translations from French-language works in this essay are my own. Genette defined metalepsis further in his book (1982: 527).

13. Prior to the 1990s, most tutorial discourses were delivered through manuals, and there is a great deal of variety and richness of discourse in these texts. Some passages are also attributed to characters (via drawings or small comic strips), so these could be considered as another case of 'tutorial character.'

14. This capacity of Japanese video games to be the support of a 'thought-provok-ing play' has been well described in Roth (2017).

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