FOUCAULT FANTASY VI: A ROLE-PLAYGROUND FOR POSTCOLONIAL THOUGHT

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Abstract: Examining the claims of the Foucauldian discursive approach adherents and objectors, this paper considers how *Final Fantasy VI* provides a conversational meeting ground for the two groups by playing out 1) friendships that cross moral aisles, 2) experiences of divided identity and loss, and 3) human connectivity in the midst of *clown-nihilism*.

Introduction: Omen[1]

On that day, the world was changed forever. These words hang in the air as we hunker down in our small home, reeling from the global crisis. This catastrophe turned the towns of the world – once filled with the lively anthems of merchants, travelers, and kids running through the streets – into ghost towns haunted by melancholy ostinatos of emptiness, stillness, and silence. We process this new way of life in a surprisingly-bright, torch-lit room with one bed, a wood-burning stove, and a desk for storing money and possessions. These indoor comforts barely shield us from the awareness of the outdoor threat that has shattered the world's geography and threatens to break its people. The challenge is to find a reason to keep living in a world that was ruined by an unprecedented capriciousness.

This experience sounds like living in a pandemic hotspot, in the aftermath of tragedy or personal loss, yet it is not found in the created world. Rather, it is life on the Solitary Island, in the video game world of *Final Fantasy VI (FFVI)*.[2] *FFVI* is a Super Nintendo role-playing game, or RPG, which Techopedia helpfully defines as "a genre of video game where the gamer controls a fictional character (or characters) that undertakes a quest in an imaginary world."[3] Before the experience of the Solitary Island, *FFVI* offers the exploration of a world of remote villages, mining towns, mobile castles, imperial strongholds, secret hideouts, mysterious forests,

[1] The different parts of the article are also are named after songs from the *Final Fantasy VI Original Soundtrack*, composed by Nobuo Uematsu, found in the following playlist: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLeQxM9apjlUFass1oHPxKf7gcPxxOEmJs.
[2] *FFVI* was known as *Final Fantasy III* in North America from 1994-1999, because the Japanese company Square only released two other *Final Fantasies* in North America prior to this game – the original *Final Fantasy* (NES) and *FFIV* (SNES, known in North America as *FFII*).
[3] "Role-Playing Game (RPG)," Techopedia, accessed May 6, 2020, https://www.techopedia.com/definition/27052/role-playing-game-rpg.

sprawling deserts, enormous caves, towering mountains, predatory jungles, opera houses, underwater mazes, floating islands, a coliseum, and even a magical realm sealed off from human contact, all spread over three large continents that sit on vast oceans. This exhaustive description of *FFVI*'s "World of Balance" begins to articulate how the game is a *role-playground* for understanding and sharing interpretations of an experience. This means that *FFVI* is common gameplay that people of differing worldviews can access, share, and enjoy.

This article adopts the player-focused approach[4] of studying video games to articulate how *FFVI* can be involved in turning the adherents and objectors of Foucault's discursive approach toward one another in conversation. It advances the thesis that *FFVI*'s video game experiences – 1) building friendships between members and victims of the Empire, 2) exploring a world ruined by a maniacal striving for power, and 3) confronting radically destructive despair with a shared sense of life-preserving human connectivity – are avenues for authentic and constructive conversations about the strengths and weaknesses of postcolonial thought that is driven by the discursive approach. This thesis unfolds in three "acts," just as *FFVI* plays out like a theater experience. The first section briefly summarizes Foucault's discursive approach that postcolonial authors embrace in their calls to hear the voice of the "other." Next, Foucault's successors are contrasted with objectors who claim that the discursive approach turns opportunities to hear the voice of the other into impossible and non-allowable tasks. Finally, *FFVI*'s immersive video game experiences spotlight opportunities for friendly and meaningful conversations about the strengths and weaknesses of postcolonial thought.

Key Clarifications

[4] Joshua A. Irizarry and Ita T. Irizarry, "The Lord is My Shepard: Confronting Religion in the Mass Effect Trilogy," *Religion in Digital Games: Multiperspective & Interdisciplinary Approaches* 5, (2014): 224-248. This player-focused approach explains how video games "use the narrative as a mechanism to subtly engage players in conversations about ideology, faith, and free will, guiding and shaping their perspectives on religion."

Before unfolding the thesis, some key clarifications are necessary. First, I am intentionally using the term *conversation*. This term points to the habit of *talking with* – rather than *talking at*, or *talking over* – differing people. I want postcolonial authors and their critics to talk with one another. These habitual conversations can play a part in eroding the despair over our modern polarized climate with the hopeful notion that a person is more than just a container for another person's ideas. It is also important to clarify that I appreciate the discursive approach as one theory among many, and not as the exhaustive explanation of reality. A wide variety of scholars valuably and eloquently articulate its claims. This paper, however, is written by a theologian who values play for clarifying complex ethical and epistemological concepts. The target audience is people who enjoy and embrace video games as avenues to convey deep insights about life. As neither an endorsement or attack on Foucault, this paper can be used to advance conversation about the strengths and weaknesses of the discursive approach.

This paper considers moments in *FFVI* that resonate with the strengths of Foucauldian thought. His discursive approach is good at reminding us that 1) knowledge requires hearing repressed voices, 2) grand narratives that hurt humans need to be challenged, and 3) language has the power to be destructive. Also, this paper analyzes moments that spotlight the weaknesses of Foucauldian thought. The discursive approach struggles to 1) explain how those who are in positions of power can hear the voices of the marginalized without further oppressing them, 2) acknowledge forms of relationality that defy the "force-relations" of oppressor and oppressed, and 3) invite collaborative, rather than foregrounded, knowledge-creation. Overall, this paper achieves its goal to the extent that it describes how *FFVI* is a game that both "sides" can play to know one another better, through characters who portray a praxis of conversation.

Act One: Awakening

Foucault and his postcolonial successors would appreciate *FFVI's* opening scenes, because they illustrate the knowledge-producing capacity of language. Players read narration about events that happened one thousand years prior to the events of the game. Three battling goddesses called "The Warring Triad" fought a war against each other using innocent mortals, who were turned into magical soldiers called "Espers." The Triad realizes this was a mistake, and seal themselves into three statues, freeing the Espers. The age of peace eventually turns into "The War of the Magi," where humans tried to steal the powers of the Espers. To end the war, the Espers hide the Triad statues and themselves in a magical realm hidden away from the humans. Over the years, the knowledge and practice of magic is replaced by human science and technology. Gradually, the Gestahlian Empire rules the world, and seeks to use technology to invade the Esper realm and exploit it as a power source. The Empire enslaves Espers, and fuses their magic power with human technology to create "Magitek" weaponry. However, a resistance group known as the "Returners" opposes the oppression of the Empire.

Players begin the game as a woman named Terra, who leads two soldiers into the mining town of Narshe, on an Imperial mission to capture a frozen Esper. When they reach their target, a feedback loop of magic power occurs between Terra and the Esper. The energy from this encounter vaporizes her comrades, while Terra is knocked unconscious. She is brought to safety by a Narshe resident named Arvis and Locke, a treasure hunter and member of the Returners. As Terra awakens, Arvis informs her that the Empire used a machine called the "slave crown" to control her mind and actions. Although the encounter with the Esper freed Terra, she must gradually recover her other memories of life before her enslavement to the Empire. Refuting her Imperial identity, Locke introduces her to the Returners and brings her into the resistance.

These scenes resonate with two key Foucauldian terms: discourse and power. Chris Weedon explains that *discourse* involves knowledge-production through social contexts and practices such as language, that involve subjugating people. [5] Yet, language is also involved in the resistance to being dominated.[6] Weedon insists that language either dictates the meaning of a person's existence or grants them agency to determine their own meaning. Thus, discourse is a form of *power,* which Richard Lynch summarizes as "force relations," or "whatever in one's social interactions that pushes, urges, or compels one to do something."[7] Lynch's force relations is an umbrella term for the three forms of power that Foucault describes.

First, "sovereign power" is Foucault's description of a pyramid-shaped power scheme where the singular supreme ruler at the top exercises the maximum ability to dictate the meaning of a person's existence the closer one is to the bottom. Second, "disciplinary power" is described by Marcelo Hoffman in terms of useful bodies being enslaved.[8] This is done in order to advance the interests of the powerful with the skills of useful bodies, while preventing such skills from being used to rebel. Here, Foucault uses his own words to describe Jeremy Bentham's idea of the perfect prison: "[The Panopticon] … automatizes and disindividualizes power. Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up."[9] Rather than using force, disciplinary power thrives by being internalized. Third, Chloë Taylor explains that "biopower" involves the norms internalized by disciplinary power functioning to control the life of individual bodies and large populations. She describes a wide spectrum of such control that can dictate which bodies are worth keeping, because of their

[5] Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice And Poststructuralist Theory, Second Edition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 105-107.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Richard A. Lynch, "Foucault's Theory of Power" in *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts*, ed. Dianna Taylor (Durham: Acumen, 2011), 19.
[8] Marcelo Hoffman, "Disciplinary Power" in *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts*, ed. Dianna Taylor (Durham: Acumen, 2011), 28-29.
[9] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), *202*.

usefulness to the ruling elite, and which bodies are considered expendable, because they do not serve imperial interests.[10] Foucault details his conviction that power ceaselessly dominates human ways of being, thinking, and acting, so that he can also discuss possibilities to resist and escape being dominated by the powerful.

Foucauldian scholars would call Terra and Locke's brief conversation above a *discourse of power*. Terra's recovery from her encounter with the Esper and being brainwashed conveys the experience of power dominating human life. She mentions the "Empire." This is the sovereign power that attempts to dictate the meaning of her existence. Terra identifies as a "soldier," which evidences the imprisoning and internalized disciplinary power of the slave crown. Further, Terra states that she is "a soldier of the Empire," which describes the biopower that the Empire exerts over her. On the other hand, Terra's discourse with Locke articulates what it means to resist power. He rejects the Empire's dictation of Terra as a soldier (*That's not true*), interrupts the internalization of Imperial subjugation (*They were using you*) and offers a new way of life (*Things are different now*) that does not involve being controlled by the Empire. This discursive approach opens the door to say that Locke and Terra are delinking from and deconstructing colonial power, and reconstructing a postcolonial identity.

Terra's discourse with Locke is a video game moment that generally summarizes the main features of three postcolonial authors whose work considers the use of language. To be sure, a full discussion of postcolonialism goes beyond the scope of this paper. These authors can only be considered as loosely representative of an ever-evolving postcolonial tradition. Each author commonly adopts the Foucauldian discursive approach to power in order delink from

[10] Chloë Taylor, "Biopower" in *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts*, ed. Dianna Taylor (Durham: Acumen, 2011), 48-51.

what Patricia Hill Collins terms the "Matrix of Domination,"[11] deconstruct what Frantz Fanon calls "the colonial situation,"[12] and reconstruct a way of being human that is free from what Walter Mignolo names the "colonial matrix of power."[13] Edward Said employs this discursive approach in his historically-based rejection of Orientalism as a "coercive framework" that reduces people in the Orient to what European scholars say about them.[14] Agnes Brazal recognizes that Said expands Foucault's discursive approach beyond linguistic theory and into linguistic activity.[15] Brazal advances a vernacular-based postcolonial praxis that prioritizes hearing the voices of women with subaltern "lived feminist spiritualties" and using narrative theology that centers on their experience in order to interrupt internalized colonialized norms.[16] Similarly, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz insists that Spanish language is central to both Latina self-understanding and agency. Isasi-Diaz describes a *proyecto historico* that uses the language of Latina popular religiosity to reconstruct the idea of community that is not tied to being dominated by oppressors and those not in solidarity with those "in the struggle."[17] This brief survey highlights a Foucauldian common denominator in postcolonial literature: a consensus that "the Empire" is founded upon a linguistic preservation of power that pervades every aspect of life. Foucault is a foundation for much postcolonial literature, and a target for several objectors.

Act Two: Terra's Theme

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[11] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, Revised Tenth Anniversary Edition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 18, 228-231. Collins defines this matrix, in contradistinction to intersectionality, as the way oppressions of black women are organized.

[12] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2007), 5. Fanon's description of the colonial world as a "Manichaean world" reflects the absolute racism of colonialism, and Christianity, the "white man's Church," further perpetuates this racist worldview.

[13] Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) 2-3. Mignolo describes this matrix in terms of Western powers seeing themselves as heroic shapers of history.

[14] Edward Said, *Orientalism, Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978) *203, 267.*

[15] Agnes Brazal, *A Theology of Southeast Asia: Liberation-postcolonial Ethics in the Philippines* (New York: Orbis, 2019), Introduction, "Streams of Postcolonialism," Kindle.

[16] Ibid., chap. 3, "Key Characteristics of Bai Theology," *Lived Feminist Spiritualities in Subaltern Religious Communities*.

[17] Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *En la Lucha / In the Struggle: A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology (Biblical Reflections on Ministry)* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 34-52. On page 35, Isasi-Diaz describes a three-part Latina struggle strategy: 1) fully understand which structures are oppressive, 2) denounce those structures, and 3) announce the goal of the struggle. This struggle is the starting point for postcolonial Latina identity.

As the plot of *FFVI* unfolds, players enjoy a surprising diversity and complexity of its characters. Terra's conversation with General Leo, one of the Empire's greatest leaders, highlights one such moment. This conversation follows key events which require the Empire to negotiate a peace treaty with the Returners. Here, players learn that General Leo, while loyal to Emperor Gestahl, is actually a noble and compassionate man who tries to preserve life on both sides of a battle. Leo is the contrast to Kefka, who explicitly devalues life, morals, and compassion, and embraces maniacal brutality and power-acquisition. When one gets to know General Leo in conversation, one sees someone from the Empire who cannot be called "evil." This point is appreciated by objectors to the discursive approach, who insist this critical theory makes it impossible and unallowable for those identified as "powerful" to hear the oppressed.

One such objector is public intellectual James Lindsay. With degrees in math and physics, much of Lindsay's academic focus concerns the intellectual validity of postmodern and critical theory-influenced research. Lindsay is an avid tweeter, so it is appropriate to begin a consideration of his views by looking at his Twitter feed. In one tweet criticizing standpoint theory[18] he writes: "it's the birthplace of the impossible double-bind commonly employed by CRT/I (Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality) devotees: 'you need to understand me' AND 'you can't understand me,' with you being a racist as a result of this certain failure" (@ConceptualJames, December 9, 2019). Lindsay insists that the discursive approach does not allow the voice of the marginalized to be heard, because it cynically presumes that the non-marginalized, being a disqualified identity, lacks the ability to hear. For Lindsay, the postcolonial authors tell him "you need to hear me so that you can know me on my own terms, but you

[18] The key point of standpoint theory is that a person's social and political experiences shapes a person's view of the world. To further understand Lindsay's approach, see: "Standpoint Epistemology," New Discourses: Pursuing The Light Of Objective Truth In Subjective Darkness, last modified March 9, 2020, accessed May 6, 2020, https://newdiscourses.com/tftw-standpoint-epistemology/.

cannot, because you are you." Further, Lindsay alleges that any attempt he would actually undertake to "shut up and listen" or "educate himself" would be considered as some form of oppression in the Foucauldian mindset, because they are undertaken with the disqualified language and lived experience of the powerful. He explicates his claim on his website:

> This Foucauldian line of thought established a postmodern epistemological era, in which "truths" are to be seen as utterly contingent on the culture that produced them, and thus "truth" in the sense that most of us understand it is unobtainable, if not mythological (see also, metanarrative). In this sense, Foucauldian postmodernism is a kind of "waking up" to the fact that we can't really know anything at all.[19]

Lindsay says that Foucauldian discursive approaches make truth something that is constructed through the language of one's preferred cultural narrative. Such approaches cannot account for someone that is constructed as an "enemy" acting in non-enemy ways, such as listening to a victim's voice or showing compassion for the opposing side in battle. Since reality cannot be known except as the narrative one chooses to embrace, it is impossible for someone who is constructed as "the powerful" to hear the voice of the oppressed, because the only relational options for the powerful are dominating others or being resisted. Lindsay would likewise argue that Foucault's discursive approach does not allow for the powerful to attempt to hear the other, because being the powerful entails activity that can only be understood as a form of dominance that must be resisted. Lindsay insists that Foucauldians have no way of knowing the nobility and compassion of General Leo, even though it is known by Terra, a victim of the Empire.

Helen Pluckrose, a researcher of late medieval/early modern women's religious writing and editor-in-chief at *Areo* magazine, echoes Lindsay's concern about being unable to know anything outside of cultural narratives. She makes distinctions between how liberal and postmodern scholars address culture, narratives, and human biases. Pluckrose makes a distinction between knowledge as a societal *product* ("a claim that knowledge is produced by societies of

[19] "Foucauldian," New Discourses: Pursuing The Light Of Objective Truth In Subjective Darkness, last modified March 23, 2020, accessed May 6, 2020, https://newdiscourses.com/tftw-foucauldian/.

humans, which is accepted by nearly everyone") and knowledge as *construct* ("radical scepticism that objective knowledge can be obtained, suspicion of the political motivations of those who claim to have found it and advocacy of accepting multiple knowledges founded in cultural beliefs and lived experience and foregrounding those of the historically marginalized").[20] This distinction allows Pluckrose to suggest alternatives to "a false dichotomy" of embracing Foucauldian methodologies or rejecting "Social Justice ideas."[21] Her capitalized term denotes a religion-like critical ideology of foregrounding marginalized identities and deconstructing Western society with an unassailable sense of victimhood and moral authority. She offers an alternative "social justice" to the cult-like orthodoxy and orthopraxy of "Social Justice":

> Liberals who find themselves being told that they have the choice of uncritically accepting grand narratives—often described as accepting the status quo—or subscribing to Social Justice ideas in order to dismantle the (often invisible) forces of patriarchy, white supremacism, imperialism, heterocentrism, ciscentrism, ableism and fatphobia and *heal from their whiteness* or *detoxify their masculinity* should feel quite confident in rejecting this false choice. As liberals, we can, instead, eject both the conservative impulse to keep things the same and the radical one to turn a largely liberal society on its head. We can seek to reform and improve society by identifying specific injustices, providing evidence that they exist, making reasoned and principled arguments for ending them and appealing to the predominantly liberal culture's sense of fairness and empathy to bring this about.[22]

Well aware that this optimism in an "evidence-based reasonableness" could be dismissed in the manner that Lindsay previously describes, Pluckrose concedes that Social Justice activists correctly caution us about the dangers of internalizing ideas that cultivate hidden biases. She also agrees that language can be destructive. Pluckrose rejects the notion that *only* postmodern methods, such as the Foucauldian discursive approach, can effectively address problematic grand narratives, biases, and language – even if she does not fully detail how that is accomplished. Pluckrose's view resonates with General Leo's assurance that "people are people." This invites

[20] Helen Pluckrose, "What Social Justice Gets Right," *Areo*, October 8, 2019, https://areomagazine.com/2019/10/08/what-social-justice-gets-right/.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.

Terra to view the members of the Empire based on knowledge gained through direct observation, rather than the radical presumption that they are all a bunch of Kefkas.

Lindsay and Pluckrose agree that human life cannot be reduced to a series of linguistically constructed power relations between "dominators" and "resistors." These objectors sharply disagree with postcolonial authors, but these differences are not limited to producing a non-conversational impasse. Rather, both sides can be brought together to address a compelling question that neither side can answer without the other – how can one assess postcolonial thought and address its valid concerns without being accused of either finding the malevolent in the incidental or refusing to acknowledge the malevolent in the institutional? One answer emerges by looking at *FFVI* as a game that both sides can play to know one another better, through characters who embody a praxis of conversation.

Act 3: Searching for Friends

Camille Paglia harshly criticizes Foucault and his successors for ignoring the insights of popular culture and ordinary life, representing "a cold, desiccated fetishism of pure I.Q. divorced from humor, compassion, ethics, eroticism, and wisdom."[23] This paper does not endorse the tone and substance of her attack on Foucault. It does, however, hear her insistence for all scholars to be in touch with "nonacademic" ways of thinking and expression. Paglia's comment helps to explain why we are looking at a 1994 video game – rather than a traditional text – to better understand postcolonial thought. *FFVI* offers many avenues of expression – it is a combination of a novel, movie, art gallery, theater performance, and orchestra concert which creates an interactive virtual world for you to explore with a "party" of digital friends. Terra is only one of fourteen characters whose story is played out in *FFVI*. Yet, her journey from Empire pawn to

[23] Camille Paglia, "Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders: Academe in the Hour of the Wolf." *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 1, no. 2 (1991): 189, www.jstor.org/stable/20163474.

dictating her own purpose, embracing her own identity, and wielding her true power entails the game's experiences of building friendships, exploring a ruined world, and battling cataclysmic nihilism. While Foucauldians and detractors know friendships, ruined worlds and nihilism in their lives, it is less common that they have enjoyed the shared vantage point into these experiences offered by *FFVI.* This common perspective is also valuable in times of pandemic, where we are all developing new approaches to these three groups of experiences.

Building Friendships

In the 35-60+ hours that it takes to play through *FFVI*, invested gamers spend that time strengthening and getting to know virtual characters who gradually become like friends and family of their own, whether or not they are members of the Empire or members of the Returners. Much of the gameplay involves controlling a character's movement, walking up to someone nearby, and talking with them. Seeing *FFVI* as game of talking to people, gamers play out the story of these characters seeking out a sense of connection in a world where the new ways of technology, industrial cities, and imperialism are at odds with the old ways of magic, medieval castles, and spiritual dimensions.

1) Friends with Painful Pasts. Terra's affiliation with the Empire does not prevent Locke, the thief who considers himself a treasure hunter, from helping her. Locke is driven to protect others from experiencing the sorrow he feels over a past incident. He was exiled from his home village and lost the love of his life in an attack by the Empire. Locke brings Terra to his friend Edgar, the king of Figaro Castle, who pretends to be loyal to the Empire while secretly helping the Returners. Edgar is a ladies' man who unsuccessfully flirts with women. He is also a king committed to protecting his people, forced into the role due to his father being poisoned by the Empire. Edgar did this to give his twin brother Sabin freedom from the responsibilities of the

kingdom. Sabin flees political entanglement with the Empire for the quiet life of martial arts. Sabin returns to save Edgar, Locke, and Terra when they run into trouble.

These friendships play out the experience of hearing the voice of the other, whether they are brainwashed Empire soldier, thief, king, or martial artist. As friends in conversation with one another, these characters realize that they are not alone in carrying pain from the past, which serves as a humanizing bond of relationality in the present. Terra comes to know Locke as generous (not just "thief"), Edgar as protective (other than "womanizing king"), and Sabin as loyal (beyond "runaway"). Likewise, Terra begins to be known for the woman she is, rather than as a disposable weapon. These friendships situate character narratives as parts, rather than the entirety, of their identities. This conversational frame holds together the pain inflicted by the Empire with the direct knowledge of people apart from understandings of the Empire. In these ways, existence in the Empire is not absolutized as institutional malevolence, nor minimized as incidental situations. Terra, Locke, Edgar, and Sabin are humanized as people with painful pasts in the intentional activity of becoming friends and having conversations with one another.

2) Friends with Hybridity. Gradually, Terra discovers that she is the daughter of a human woman and an Esper male who fell in love with each other. Being half-Esper and half-human grants Terra magical abilities and different forms. In her human form, she appears as a young girl with a green ponytail. In her Esper form, body wildly glows with magenta energy. Terra's hybrid nature opens the doors to friendships with other people who are caught between two worlds, such as Cyan, a middle-aged samurai in the kingdom of Doma. Cyan and his kingdom are trapped in the past; he speaks with an archaic style and he fears modern machinery. Tragically, Kefka poisons the river of Doma, and kills almost everyone inside Doma Castle, including Cyan's son and wife. Cyan is left with survivor's guilt and hatred for the Empire, as he is forced to navigate

an unfamiliar modern world. Unfortunately, this initially puts him at odds with Celes, another member of the party who belongs to two worlds. Like Terra, Celes is a soldier of the Empire. Yet, she is artificially infused with magic. Celes serves as a general in the Empire's army, until her morals lead to her becoming disillusioned. She is sentenced to be executed for her anti-imperial stance. During Locke's resistance against the Empire in South Figaro, he discovers Celes in chains and sets her free. Celes initially prefers to stay imprisoned, but decides to join the Returners. She is welcomed by Locke and Terra, but the rest of the group does not treat her kindly at first. Celes's part-Empire, part-Returner identity causes her friendships to form slowly.

These friendships escape the categories of relationality offered by Foucauldians and their detractors. The hybridity of Terra, Cyan, and Celes expresses an existence that is grounded in one world (the Esper world, the past, or the Empire) yet goes beyond that world to have meaning in another world. This meaning is embraced through conversations that place suspicion and coldness beside relational openness in the process of building friendships. In *FFVI,* this looks like Cyan telling Celes, "Don't think for a moment I trust you" to which Celes replies, "Fine. Use your own eyes, then decide."[24] The Returners gradually realize that Celes has the strength of an Empire general, which can also be understood as the driving force that protects her friends. Likewise, Cyan's archaic language and worldview can also be a lifestyle that avoids the pervasive influence of the Empire. Such friendships are more than force relations or instances of principled reason. Terra, Cyan, and Celes are embraced as the people they are through intentional friendship and expansive conversation.

3) Friends Who Are Outcasts. As Terra learns her true past and gains control over her magic powers, she considers her place in the world. She sympathizes with her friends who

[24] kWhazit, "Final Fantasy VI Storyline Text and Attempted Translation," Coal Mine City Narshe, accessed May 6, 2020, https://kwhazit.ucoz.net/trans/ff6/19remeet.html.

struggle with the pain from the past, and she empathizes with her friends who have hybrid existences. However, she still feels distant from them, because she is worried that she is unable to love. This drives her to ask others about their emotions. Terra's collaborative attempt to define love opens friendships with characters who do not fully belong to the Empire or the Returners.

One such character is Gau, a feral child who grew up on the open plains called "the Veldt." Gau's mother died in childbirth, which drove his father mad. Gau was thrown out onto the Veldt, where he learned to survive on his own. Even with his lonely upbringing among beasts and monsters, Gau understands human language and loves human contact, even if he uses poor grammar and etiquette. Notably, Gau quickly befriends Cyan and Sabin, traversing the wide social distance between their royalty and his feral nature. Setzer is another wildcard; he is a gambler and owns the world's only airship. Rather than fight the Gestahlian Empire, Setzer profits from them. He appears to be a carefree risk-taker. Yet, he is another character who is dealing with the loss of a loved one, which is learned when he befriends the party. Meanwhile, the mercenary only known as "Shadow" is a loner, even if he is accompanied by his loyal dog, Interceptor. Shadow is draped in black ninja attire and wears a mask to hide his face. He joins the party for limited periods of time, talks little, and leaves when he is paid. Yet, the more time he spends with the group, the more his kinship with the party grows. At one point, he warns Terra about people like himself, "who have killed their emotions" and hopes that does make the same decision.[25] Finally, there is the elderly Strago and his granddaughter Relm, who are descendants of humans who could use magic. They live in Thamasa, a town that tries to hide from the rest of the world. At first, Strago is very secretive. As he gets to know the party, and with Relm's

[25] kWhazit, "Final Fantasy VI Storyline Text and Attempted Translation," On a Boat, accessed May 6, 2020, https://kwhazit.ucoz.net/trans/ff6/32search.html.

prodding, Strago gradually reveals his magical abilities and joins the Returners. These meetings show people coming together, despite social, political, emotional, and geographic distances.

These friendships play out collaborative knowledge-creation. Terra's search for the meaning of love is informed by the experiences of outcasts gradually fitting in with the party. Gau brings his knowledge of the Veldt into the lives of the people who serve as the family he never had. Setzer shares his airship expertise with the friends who let him open up about his past. Shadow grants the tactical advantages of a mercenary to people who function as his partners. Strago and Relm provide long-forgotten magical expertise to people who make it safe for them not to hide. Thus, Terra's understanding of love is grounded in a frame of giving deeply of one's self while others give deeply of themselves to you. Such friendships avoid making knowledge-creation the exclusive right of institutional outcasts or the sole domain of incidental insiders. Gau, Setzer, Shadow, Strago, and Relm are veiled as outcasts, until friendships and conversations uncover their unique personalities and humanity.

In summary, building friendships in *FFVI* allow those who adopt and reject the Foucauldian discursive approach to know and inhabit each other's perspective. Lindsay's and Pluckrose's suspicions about foregrounding the experience of the marginalized are allowed to be revised in the journeys undertaken as Edgar, Sabin, and Cyan, who have lost loved ones to the Empire. Likewise, Said, Brazal, and Isasi-Diaz are permitted to reconsider the adequacy of their force-relations epistemology in the stories they would engage as Terra and Celes befriending Locke and the Returners. Both viewpoints are given a creative license to expand their perspectives as they meet and make sense of the other characters. Players learn that these characters need their story to be heard, because the grand narrative and language of the Empire is destructive. Also, the game experience fills in what is missing in the discursive approach – the

powerful and the marginalized hearing each other, relating to one another, and creating knowledge together. In these ways, *FFVI*'s friendships allow proponents of the Foucauldian discursive approach to think about its strengths and weaknesses with their opponents.

Exploring a Ruined World

In addition to talking to characters, much of *FFVI*'s gameplay involves traveling through a virtual world. In this journey, players randomly encounter monsters as they walk upon the overworld or progress through dungeons. These encounters can be avoided entirely by using vehicles such as the bird-like Chocobos and Setzer's airship, or special equipment. In the midst of battle, players can use weapons, magic, and even call upon Espers to defeat monsters. Each character brings a different skillset to help the party survive their journey in this world. Even though The World of Balance is generally safe, the monsters that live outside of the cities and within dungeons still provide a formidable challenge.

However, in the midpoint of *FFVI*, Kefka transforms The World of Balance into The World of Ruin. It turns out that he was using the Empire to gain access to the godlike power of The Warring Triad. After Kefka kills General Leo and Emperor Gestahl, Terra and the party stand in the way of his insane ambition. Unfortunately, they fail to stop him from absorbing the power of the goddesses. The World of Balance is destroyed, and The World of Ruin is born. Continents tear apart into islands. Grassy surfaces are scorched and plants refuse to grow. The skies turn red and the seas are stained purple. Ancient evils are unsealed. Monsters already on the surface grow stronger. Many people and animals are hurt and killed. Terra and her friends are separated in the chaos. Kefka has won. He has reshaped the world in his image by ruining its geography, enslaving its creatures in despair and fear, and being worshipped as a god. As the

world's ultimate power, Kefka punishes dissidents with his "Light of Judgment" from Kefka's Tower, a monument to destruction. *On that day, the world was changed forever.* Game over!

This moment stands out not only in *FFVI*, but in video game history, as a 16-bit depiction of cataclysm that captures the shock and hurt of unavoidable tragedy. Players do everything they can to stop Kefka, and still lose at the moment where they can least afford to fail. Yet, the story continues – this "Game Over" is only the beginning of *FFVI*'s final act! A year after the cataclysm, Celes wakes up on a tiny island, and has to figure out a way to continue living in The World of Ruin. Playing out the end of the world, *FFVI* provides an accessible experience of the shock, hurt, and failure inflicted upon victims of those who maniacally strive for power.

AVClub writer Anthony John Agnello describes how *FFVI* "uses its gutted world to explore how people overcome failure and loss to build hope in new lives."[26] He traces how the game shifts its center of focus from Terra to Celes in the journey through The World of Ruin. Celes is the one who brings everyone back together, but the reunion is gradual. When players inhabit her perspective, it looks like the world has been reduced to a giant ocean surrounding a tiny island. You share a small house with Cid, the person who took care of you while you were in a coma. Now, Cid is sick, and it is your turn to take care of him. For a while, the only gameplay that occurs is catching fish and feeding Cid. Agnello identifies this as beginning stages of recovery: "The landscape and experience of The World of Ruin should be familiar to anyone who's been truly hurt. If a loved one dies or you're traumatically injured, recovery starts small. Myopia is a crucial part of the healing process: You focus on the small things in front of you to get through the day."[27] Agnello insists that myopia is the foundation for building a new life.

[26] Anthony John Agnello, "*Final Fantasy VI* Explores Human Pain Through Its Shattered Geography," *AVClub,* June 4, 2014, https://games.avclub.com/final-fantasy-vi-explores-human-pain-through-its-shatte-1798269163.
[27] Ibid.

Celes cannot stay on the island; Cid provides her with a raft to sail into the unknown. Celes finds that the world is still there, beyond the tiny island, but in a state of "altered familiarity."[28]

One by one, Celes finds her friends living in their own forms of the tiny island, isolated by their failures. Terra lost her fighting edge and lives in the village of Mobliz, caring for orphans. Locke goes solo, searching caves for the magic that can revive his lost love. Sabin tries to protect the town of Tzen on his own. Gau returned to the Veldt, hoping his friends would return for him. Setzer spends his time in a bar in Kohlingen. Shadow fights without purpose in the newly-constructed Coliseum. Strago joins a cult of Kefka-worshippers, thinking Relm was killed. The actually-alive Relm pursues her painting career in Jidoor. Cyan exiles himself to the top of Mt. Zozo, writing letters and sending hand-crafted silk flowers to a woman who lost her love in the cataclysm. Here, Agnello comments, "Everyone is more broken and isolated than they were before, but they're tied together through their shared failure. The World of Ruin draws you to each of them, using that altered familiarity as a lure to your lost friends."[29] This compelling insight envisions failure and loss – inevitable human experiences – as motivations and foundations for relationality. One navigates their ruined world by searching for lost friends.

Thanks to Celes, the lost friends find each other. This recovery is vividly captured in the experiences of Cyan and Terra. The party learns that Cyan is afflicted by Wrexsoul, an evil entity feeding on Cyan's confusion and doubt. Through teamwork, Cyan's friends vanquish Wrexsoul, and Cyan is physically healed; the full set of his samurai skills are unlocked. Yet, friendship also heals Cyan spiritually and emotionally. In his final letter to the mourning woman, he writes "We humans tend to allow the past to destroy our lives. I implore you not to let this happen. It is time to look forward, to rediscover love, and embrace the beauty of life. You have so much of life left

[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.

to live…"[30] Cyan's insistence and hope in the future resonates with Terra's discovery of love, as a caretaker of orphans, which motivates her to fight again. When the evil beast Phunbaba threatens Mobliz, Terra transforms into her powerful Esper form out of desperation, to protect the children. Terra's transformation is radically different than her human appearance. Initially, she frightens the children, who momentarily think that she is another monster. Yet, a little girl gradually recognizes Terra in Esper form. This enables the other children to see and embrace her as "Mama Terra," because of the protective love that is central to her character. Terra's capacity to deeply love and protect these children who are not her own is the culmination of everything Terra has learned from her friends, who shared her journey of pain, hybridity, and loneliness. Terra's discovery of her purpose and agency on her own terms embodies the journey of the entire party in The World of Ruin, and prepares them for the final confrontation with Kefka.

FFVI plays out the shock, hurt, and loss of cataclysm. The experience reminds proponents and opponents of discursive theory that on each side, there are fellow human beings who know failure and loss. The World of Ruin is a playground for reassessing one's own epistemology. Those who see maniacal power acquisition in everything can rethink their stance as they undertake Celes's search for friends. Those who explain away institutional malevolence as incidental can reconsider their views as they travel through a world shattered by maniacal power acquisition. The World of Ruin does not present an absolutized or minimized concept of power – it *humanizes* the meaning of power by viewing it through the lenses of loneliness and friendship. This human framing of power challenges both proponents and opponents of the discursive approach to expand their positions conceptually and relationally, in order to look forward, rediscover love, and search for beauty in post-cataclysm life. This happens when one

[30] kWhazit, "Final Fantasy VI Storyline Text and Attempted Translation," Town of Maranda, accessed May 6, 2020, https://kwhazit.ucoz.net/trans/ff6/43extra.html.

side talks with the other side, because The World of Ruin is fully interpreted only with both sets of insights. Players navigate The World of Ruin by searching for friends, only if they have ways of explaining *why* there is a ruined world and *how* there are friends to search for.

Confronting Clown Nihilism with Human Connectivity

Just as *FFVI*'s friendships and ruined world resist neat categorizations, its true villain does not qualify as a figure of institutional malevolence or principled reason. Kefka is not a colonialist; he is a *clown-nihilist*. This term, homophonically similar to colonialism, signifies a destructive derision of morality and reasonableness, mocking imperviousness to ethical and intellectual appeals for restraint and compassion, and a laughing embrace of despair and meaninglessness. Kefka does this as he progresses from comic villain to godlike figure by the end of the game. Known for his clownish attire and behavior, Kefka views life as meaningless, and takes sadistic pleasure in inflicting suffering and destruction. His defining trait is his maniacal laugh, which cements his standing as a notoriously evil video game villain.

FFVI provides brief insights into Kefka's villainy. He was the first person that the Empire experimented on with magic in a process that would eventually create warriors such as General Leo and Celes. Kefka was successfully infused with magical power at the cost of his mind. As a magical maniac, Kefka sets the *FFVI*'s events into motion; he is the one who controls Terra with the slave crown and sends her to the mining village. At the end of *FFVI*, players see that Kefka destroyed the world and embraces destruction and despair, not out of revenge, not because he is a tragic figure, but because he truly enjoys it. Kefka portrays the *clown-nihilism* that looks at a ruined world brought to despair and laughs at how *hilarious* it all is.

Similar to navigating The World of Ruin, encountering Kefka's clown-nihilism requires a conversation between proponents and opponents of the discursive approach. He bamboozles

institutional malevolence. Although he is a creation of the Empire, his lust for power surpasses the Empire's ambitions, and eventually causes its destruction. Thus, discursive approaches to power in terms of dominating and resistance miss the mark, because Kefka seeks to ruin and destroy everyone and everything; he mocks the social construct concept. Similarly, Kefka hoodwinks principled reasonableness; he is able to organize and execute his schemes, but he does so with absurdly sociopathic hatred. Thus, observations of incidental situations fail to account for the existence of Kefka; he lampoons the idea of a social product. Kefka's defiance of both approaches causes proponents of the discursive approach to hear the objecting criticisms and the objector to hear postcolonial claims. As a result, both realize the need to expand their viewpoints in order to interpret the meaning of Kefka and the experience of encountering him. This expansion happens in the human connectivity displayed in *FFVI*'s final battle.

When players journey through the nightmarish world of Kefka's Tower and finally track him down, he threatens to destroy everything in existence. He issues a cruel challenge to the party via destructive language: "Why do people rebuild things they know are going to be destroyed? Why do people cling to life when they know they can't live forever? Think how meaningless each of your lives is!"[31] One friend responds with the language of human connectivity: "It's not the net result of one's life that's important! It's the day-to-day concerns, the personal victories, and the celebration of life...and love!"[32] Person-by-person, each member of the party articulates the entirety of their journey of friendship in a phrase of human connection. This forms a unified opposition to the clown-nihilism Kefka embraces. In the face of despair and destruction, Terra proclaims her newfound knowledge of love. Locke counters the gnawing pain

[31] kWhazit, "Final Fantasy VI Storyline Text and Attempted Translation," Prelude to the Final Battle, accessed May 6, 2020, https://kwhazit.ucoz.net/trans/ff6/50final.html.
[32] Ibid.

of his lost loved one with gratitude for the living. Cyan comes to terms with the loss of his family by carrying them in his heart, mind, and soul. Shadow stands against meaninglessness by appealing to his knowledge of friendship and family. Edgar meets the inevitably of broken lives with his commitment to building a kingdom of freedom and dignity. Sabin declares that the renewed love of his brother keeps him going in this nearly dead world. Celes's experience of acceptance, despite being a member of the Empire, encourages her to fight on. Strago and Relm are driven to survive for the sake of one another. Setzer carries the love of his sweetheart into his struggle for new life. Gau's sense of family that he feels among the party empowers his living. Ever in character, Kefka mocks their power of human connectivity, scoffing "This is sickening...You sound like chapters from a self-help booklet!"[33] Yet, this battle of words prepares the player to combat Kefka in his four "clown god" forms, which parody religious imagery. This battle unfolds to the tune of "Dancing Mad," a classical music score with four distinct movements that challenge players with musical motifs of descending into lunacy and despair. [34] Ultimately, the power of a shared sense of human connectivity keeps the party from sinking into the depths of Kefka's clown-nihilism.

In summary, *FFVI* offers an interactive engagement with the human connectivity that counters and overcomes clown-nihilism. Negatively, this game experience is a warning: anyone lacking or avoiding a sense of human connectivity – whether they are Foucauldian discursivists or detractors – are vulnerable to being overcome by Kefka's destructive and despairing mentality. Positively, the encounter with Kefka offers a promise: the power of friendships is always available via intentional relationality and conversations as the means to survive, counter,

[33] Ibid.
[34] Sangnoksu, "Final Fantasy VI - Dancing Mad (Symphonic Arrange)," YouTube video, 18:18, March 3, 2015, https://youtu.be/-O-9U_QKhgA. This is an audio-visual update of the original tune, which must be seen and heard to be fully appreciated.

and overcome the temptation and threat of clown-nihilism. Through *FFVI*'s experiences of human connectivity, friendships are played out as prayers, in their conversational capacities to articulate and embody looking forward, rediscovering love, and embracing the beauty of life. In addition to a role-playground, a role-*prayground* could provide another meeting point in which those who explicate force relations can enter into conversation with those who insist upon evidence-based principled reasonableness, but that is a topic for another paper. If Evagrius teaches us "the theologian is the one who prays, and the one who prays truly is a theologian," it could be, that *FFVI* teaches us that the friend is the one who is a prayer, and the one who is a prayer is a friend. This maxim is known by those who follow "the friend who sticks closer than a brother"[35] – who is also the friend who promises to be with us, even to the end of the age.[36]

Conclusion: Prelude

FFVI plays out building friendships with differing people, exploring a ruined world, and human connectivity. These experiences spotlight opportunities for friendly and meaningful conversations between postcolonial theorists and detractors, because they resonate with the strengths and weaknesses of Foucauldian thought. This paper also lays the groundwork for further studies that can advance this conversation. One such study can further develop my idea of clown-nihilism, which could shed light on postmodern social and political epistemologies arising in response to critical theory and modern liberalism. Also, future studies can trace postcolonial themes in video games similar to *FFVI.* Of course, playing video games risks anti-social behavior, addiction, and escapist neglect of the created world. These risks are offset by the potential rewards of studying video games as immersive experiences, in the same way that we study the high fantasy and science fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Octavia Butler, and Stan

[35] Prov. 18:24 (ESV): "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."
[36] Matt. 28:20 (ESV): "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Lee, among others. *FFVI* is the avenue for such experiences that those who play video games long for in their lives, beyond the game. My hope is that this discussion of *FFVI* plays a part in clarifying the concerns of Foucauldians and their objectors to one another, and in breaking down the obstacles getting in the way of their friendships and conversations with one another.

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