Of Heroes and Heartbreak: Digital Fantasy and Metaphors of Affect in *Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch*

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Abstract

This article uses a psychoanalytic framework informed by Fantasy theory to investigate how the Japanese Role-Playing Fantasy video game *Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch* offers a depiction of, and engagement with, emotional issues via its deployment of literalised metaphors of affect. In doing so, it considers the overlaps between Fantasy and video games, coining the term 'Digital Fantasy' to describe video games which evoke Fantasy worlds and use the imagery of Fantasy as a means of communicating emotion. The close reading provided uses the work of Fantasy theorists such as Rosemary Jackson and Kathryn Hume, combined with Freudian psychoanalytic theory, to explore how Digital Fantasies use varying degrees of Fantasy and mimesis to offer interactive representations of affective processes such as mourning and melancholia. The analysis demonstrates the continued influence of psychoanalytic imagery as a means of understanding emotion, whilst posing that its deployment within Digital Fantasy situates the form as one of exploring and understanding the emotional challenges of everyday life.

Keywords

Digital Fantasy, JRPG, Psychoanalytic Theory, Game Studies, Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch

Introduction: Video Games and Psychoanalysis

Research into video games suggests that they can contribute to players' emotional wellbeing. Jeroen Bourgonjon and colleagues posit that video games can serve as "equipment for living" as they "offer a perspective on how other people interpret specific problems, dilemmas, and situations in life and suggest potential ways of dealing with them" (1740). Furthermore, they found that players described using games as a means of "self-medicating" to treat stress and trauma, and to achieve "a release of stress and sadness" (1745; 1742). The body of research into the benefits of both serious and entertainment video games is growing[1], and researchers have suggested "the potential for positive mental health outcomes from casual play of entertainment games is worthy of exploration" (Fleming et al., "Serious Games" 5). Fantasy video games are of particular interest as Fantasy, like video games, is researched in relation to its benefits for the reader. This article uses a psychoanalytic framework informed by Fantasy theory to investigate how the Fantasy video game *Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch (*hereafter *Ni No Kuni*) offers a depiction of, and engagement with, both "stress and sadness" and more complex processes such as mourning and melancholia through its literalised metaphors. The effects of this representation on the players are known only to the players themselves and can be deduced by the publication of self-disclosures or by analysts conducting studies to provide insights into a game's effectiveness via quantifiable results. This article makes no claims as to the impact of Fantasy video games on mental health. Instead, it provides insight into patterns of metaphor in the game that are used to articulate and literalise emotional processing. The psychoanalytic framework is used not as a means of deducing the game's efficacy as mental health treatment, but instead as a method for understanding art, one which can be applied to other Fantasy video games. Furthermore, analysing games using psychoanalytic theory may provide a new perspective on these theories. Freud is often dismissed as "an intellectual dinosaur" (Flieger 7), but his work is regularly used as a framework for interpreting Fantasy literature. It is also argued that his theories anticipated the fluid modalities of the digital world (Flieger 50), suggesting there is scope for their applicability to video games. The resurfacing of psychoanalytic metaphors in video games demonstrates their profound influence and use as a shared language that articulates complex emotional experiences that are challenging to understand. Applying Freudian theory in this manner pushes back against the perception that this theory is outdated. By applying psychoanalytic theory to a video game, this article draws attention to their similarities and compatibility: both video games and psychoanalysis are technologies of affect, and both have the potential to be technologies of coping, or at least ways of understanding emotion.

Ni No Kuni is but one example of how video games deploy psychoanalytic metaphors that provide insight into experiences of coping with affect, mourning and melancholia in particular. Affect here

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[1] See Barr and Copeland-Stewart, Dini, Ceranoglu, Granic et al., Hopia and Raitio, Li et al., and Fleming et al, 'Maximising'.

refers to emotional processing, defined by psychologist Stanley Rachman as "a process whereby emotional disturbances are absorbed, and decline to the extent that other experiences and behaviour can proceed without disruption" (51). The game does not teach the player about these processes explicitly but rather literalises them, turning the processes of mourning and melancholia into an interactive adventure. By using Fantasy imagery to literalise emotional processing, *Ni No Kuni* offers an experience that makes these emotional processes tangible; the emotional journey of Oliver (the protagonist of the game), who enters a Fantasy world, mirrors that of the player, who enters into the world of the game. This article will provide a close reading of *Ni No Kuni* using Freudian informed psychoanalytic theory to explore the relationship between Fantasy and emotional processing. More specifically, it will address the experience of coping with traumatic loss through the frameworks of mourning and melancholia. To do so, this paper will analyse representations of transitional objects in game, as well as considering whether video games function as literal transitional spaces. This paper coins the term Digital Fantasy to describe Fantasy video games that are uniquely situated to provide interactive experiences of emotional processing through the use of interactive Fantasy imagery that serves as literalised metaphor.

Digital Fantasies: Video Games and Fantasy Worlds

The Fantasy genre has traditionally been viewed as a lesser artform due to its apparent disconnection from 'real life,' which facilitates escapism. Kathryn Hume observes the perception of this disconnect, describing Fantasy as "departure from consensus reality" and outlining the ways that philosophy has "denigrated the non-real" in literature (21; 3). J. R. R. Tolkien also notes the connection of Fantasy to the fantastic, which he describes as images of things "'not actually present'" nor found in the world and judges to be a "virtue, not a vice" (16). Tolkien argues that framing escapism in terms of frivolity or cowardice undermines one of the key benefits of Fantasy texts as, in his view, escape is "as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic" (20). Video games have also been discussed in terms of their disconnection from 'real life': Thomas W. Malone and Mark R. Lepper broadly describe them as environments that "[evoke] mental images of physical or social situations not actually present" (240), and the negative perception of video games' escapist qualities is typified by the use of escapism as part of the criteria for Internet Gaming Disorder in the DSM-5 (1432). Recently, however, researchers have been reclaiming the term escapism. For example, Matthew Barr and Alicia Copeland-Stewart conducted a study on "Playing Video Games During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Effects on Players' Well-Being," which argues that the escapism offered by video games is a means of reducing stress and cites other notable research "suggesting that the ability to immerse oneself in another world is appealing to players irrespective of a global pandemic" (132). Whether or not a video game is of the Fantasy genre, it is similar in the sense that it presents a reality that is alternative to off-screen consensus reality and viewed as not real, or separate to real life, just as the Fantasy genre is. The similarity between the treatment of video games and the Fantasy genre, which have both featured

as part of cycles of moral panic, may be due to this quality of escapism, as both are considered a distraction from life, or make-believe. These similarities imply that Fantasy video games equate to escapism squared: an escapist form simulating an escapist world. Escapism as an end in itself should not be vilified, though some forms of escapism may also have practical functions that can form part of "equipment for living" (Bourgonjon et al. 1740). Tolkien argues that fairy stories, and certain kinds of Fantasy, can aid "recovery" because they help readers see things as they are meant to be seen: "as things apart from ourselves" (19). Fantasy recombines reality, allowing us to see things we think we know in a different way. The disconnection makes these feelings more tolerable to face.

Video games feature differing ratios of generic Fantasy, which can be understood by further applying Hume's theory. Hume describes mimesis and Fantasy as impulses: mimesis is an impulse that arises from the desire to "imitate" and "describe" whereas Fantasy arises from the desire to "alter reality" (20). Hume explains that although mimesis has generally been privileged in literature, the two impulses are symbiotic and can be found in different proportions across form and genre (20). The same formula can be applied to modern video games, which combine both mimetic and Fantasy impulses to offer interaction with Fantasy worlds grounded in experiences of off-screen reality. Using grounded cognition theory, Katherine Isbister explains that games elicit emotions from players partly because "they mirror the way our brains make sense of the world around us" (7), so not only is reality represented, but mimesis is achieved at the level of neuropsychology through the player's participation (79). This mimesis is present in its highest proportion in more aesthetically realistic video games such as *Heavy Rain*, an action-adventure where the player is encouraged to build a relationship with the protagonist's family by completing mundane tasks during the tutorial. When there is a higher proportion of Fantasy, the mimetic aspects function like a skeleton encased in the flesh of Fantasy: concealed, but essential to its operation. For example, interacting with a non-player character (NPC) merchant in *Skyrim* and making transactions using currency may feel reminiscent of shopping off-screen—the merchant just happens to be a Khajiit (cat person). Buying into the verisimilitude of the video game environment enables the merging of Fantasy with off-screen experience by providing a mundane template over which Fantasy elements can be transposed and made plausible. This paper uses the term Digital Fantasy to describe games that contain more features of the Fantasy genre and use its imagery in a literalising manner. Fantasy, and Digital Fantasies by extension, never entirely depart from consensus reality, but literalise aspects of it that are intangible and difficult to express, recombining them in novel ways.

Notable Fantasy theorists have been influenced by psychoanalysis. Scholars such as writer Ursula K. Le Guin and Joseph Campbell propose a Jungian approach, while researchers such as Bruno Bettelheim, Tzvetan Todorov, and Rosemary Jackson are influenced by Freudian thought. A Jungian influenced style focuses on universal recurring narrative patterns and archetypes, whereas a

Freudian analysis (which this paper conducts) studies characters in a narrative more individualistically, drawing attention to how affective processes and emotions of specific characters emerge throughout the text. Although *Ni No Kuni* contains patterns amenable to Jungian analysis, it is particularly suited to a Freudian approach as it is a narrative concerning the treatment of repressed emotions. Jackson argues that Fantasy "attempts to create a space for discourse other than a conscious one" (62)—what is not conscious is repressed. In psychoanalysis, confronting the repressed is challenging because it involves overcoming the resistance that the conscious mind puts in place to preserve the ego of the subject (Freud, *Dictionary* 161). Although this psychoanalytic terminology may no longer be considered a working model of the mind, it provides a metaphor for why trauma or emotions can be difficult to discuss and how Digital Fantasies can combine Fantasy with mimesis to present these feelings implicitly. As Hume argues, Fantasy is the "need for metaphoric images that will bypass the audience's verbal defences" (20), suggesting its usefulness to express feelings repressed by resistance. This is further supported by Le Guin's description of Fantasy as "language of the inner self," which in psychoanalytic theory contains such repressed material (148). Furthermore, as Jackson argues, Fantasy "takes its metaphorical constructions literally" (41), which means that in Digital Fantasy, players can interact with emotional processes in a way that combines the grounded cognition of video games with the literalised metaphors of the Fantasy genre. Taking a psychoanalytic approach to analysis provides a way of understanding these literalised metaphors.

Digital Fantasies as Transitional Spaces

By enabling the player to interact with Fantasy worlds, Digital Fantasies provide an external representation of the process of play as conceptualised by the language of psychoanalysis. Donald Woods Winnicott, who developed theories of play based on Freudian theory, studied the effect of interaction between the external environment and the development of internal identity (xii). Winnicott describes play as taking place in "potential space" located "between the individual and the environment" (135), defining the individual as "inner personal or psychic reality" or interiority (138), and the environment as external "objects and phenomena outside omnipotent control" (135), otherwise known as the "actual world" (138). Winnicott describes the potential or "third area"— play—as a transitional space between individual and environment created through "living experiences" (138; 146). Matt Hills further develops this theory, one of the key changes being his clarification of Winnicott's vague definition of culture, and his explanation of the distinction between "the transitional object proper" and the "secondary transitional object" (75; 77). The primary transitional object (PTO), which forms the basis of Winnicott's theory, is located in the infantile stage of childhood development. This is a toy, or object, provided by the mother that facilitates the transition from the omnipotence of *in utero* existence, where the child's needs are automatically met, to the harsh realities of the external world (Winnicott xii). The object acts as a mid-point, transformed through the imaginative act of play, remaining under the child's control (a receptacle of

interiority) whilst existing in the external world. In Winnicott's writing this is sometimes conflated with the realm of culture but, as Hills points out, unlike objects or toys, culture is collective and "intersubjective," and cannot be entirely under the subject's control (77). Therefore, the secondary transitional object is a part of culture that has resonated with the subject and been absorbed into the third space. It is a "region of 'personalised' culture'" (Hills 77): a transitional space between the subject's inner self and the external world.

Hills studies fan culture generally, rather than video game fans specifically, but considering the overlap between gamers and fandoms, his development of Winnicott's work is applicable to those who play video games in a similarly engaged manner. Though any media can be absorbed into the third space, video games are suited to categorisation as transitional spaces because they enable the player to maintain some level of autonomy in a safe fantasy environment. Like off-screen reality, the virtual world has rules that limit the player and contains potentially hostile beings that are a threat to the player's virtual presence but incapable of inflicting physical harm. Interacting with fantasy threats enables players to experiment with their agency through play. Games with tutorials and graduated levels of difficulty function as a Winnicottian parent: allowing players to learn their limits without being harmed. The type of transitional space the video game functions as depends on its type and complexity. At the simplest level, video games like *Pong* and *Tetris* operate similarly to PTOs, as the player controls an object at the mercy of the external environment. Incremental difficulty, and its resulting frustrations, mirrors the infant's transition from omnipotence to impotence as the player acclimatises themselves to failure and must develop resilience against forces beyond their control in order to progress and improve. At the most complex level, games such as role-playing games (RPGs) that include Fantasy cultures can function as secondary transitional objects, as the player can explore their identities within the parameters of the game; they must choose whether to abide by its laws, imbibe its lore, perform within the narrative, and meet the demands of gameplay. Through the act of play, the player personalises the game's culture, transforming it into a secondary transitional object, or third space, which Hills argues can be utilised in adulthood as a "a way of maintaining our mental/psychical health" (80). In addition to Hills's work, Winnicott's theories have been applied to digital spaces[2] and discussed with regards to their psychological effects. Without attempting to evidence their psychological impact in this paper, analysing Digital Fantasies demonstrates that games can offer avenues of confronting problems in a manageable way. As affective technology, video games are capable of evoking emotions, and the transformative nature of Fantasy has the capacity to depersonalise them. Like a polished shield, Digital Fantasy empowers players to confront their gorgons without looking at them directly.

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[2] See Dini, Genvo, Lafrance and Libbrecht, Murray, Perron, Shaw, and Turkle.

Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch

Ni No Kuni is a Digital Fantasy video game for Playstation 3 (PS3) that literalises psychoanalytic processes. The game features and functions as a PTO, provides a literal representation of a third space, and literalises the language of Freudian psychoanalysis such as mourning and melancholia – making these concepts easier to engage with. As the game is a Japanese role-playing game (JRPG), applying psychoanalytic theory—a predominately Western tradition—may seem universalising, especially as Freudian theory has been accused of being "inattentive to cultural difference" (Flieger 131). However, JRPGs form part of the "Cool Japan campaign," a collaboration between "government and industry" to "create a Japanese brand it projects overseas" (Schules 58). *Ni No Kuni* was created in an attempt to appeal to a global audience. Japanese video game company Level 5 partnered with Studio Ghibli because their popularity "helped expand their market reach to the West," a collaboration that resulted in a product that is a "hybrid of Japanese and Western style" (Fleury n.p.). As the game was created for a Western target market, it is no surprise that it seems to fit theories that are Western in origin, though untangling the origin of any influence, especially with regard to intentionality, is complicated in itself.

Figure 1: Allie's death (*Ni No Kuni*, Screenshot by author)

Figure 2: Drippy Toy Form (*Ni No Kuni*, Screenshot by author)

Drippy as a Transitional Object

Ni No Kuni is a coming-of-age story that demonstrates how transitional objects and spaces can be used to cope with emotional difficulty. A character called Drippy serves as both the protagonist and player's guide: a primary transitional object brought to life. The hero of the story is a thirteen-year-old boy called Oliver who travels into the Fantasy realm of the Another World after his mother Allie dies of a heart attack that was triggered by saving him from an accident (Figure 1). Drippy helps Oliver cope with his grief and learn to live without her. He begins as an inanimate doll given to Oliver by his mother to keep him company whilst she goes to work: a PTO as described by Winnicott. The temporary absence of the mother is the first developmental step towards independence: it is when infants realise that the mother is "something outside and separate" and will not always be present to meet their needs (Winnicott 20; xii). The doll enabled Oliver to manage his loss through play by allowing him to retain a sense of agency, as it is external to him but under the control of his imagination. The moment of Allie's first departure is thematically linked to her death by a flashback (Figure 2), which conveys that every temporary disappearance of a parent is emblematic of their inevitable permanent departure: a process that gradually acclimatises the child to the pain of their loss. After Allie's death, Oliver's tears break the spell on Drippy, turning him back into the "High Lord of the Fairies" (Figure 3). He becomes a living transitional object, making the pain of Allie's sudden death more manageable by telling Oliver that there is a chance they can bring her back (Figure 4). This possibility lessens the immediacy of Allie's death, giving Oliver more time to process it.

Figure 3: Fairy Form (*Ni No Kuni*, Screenshot by author)

Figure 4: Hope for Allie (*Ni No Kuni*, Screenshot by author)

As a living transitional object, Drippy is a stand-in for a parent: nurturing but imperfect, remaining close at hand but outside Oliver's direct control. His role is similar for the player; he is not a playable character during battles, assisting by dropping orbs that restore health and using his move "Tidy Tears" if the battle becomes too difficult (Figure 5). This eases the process of the game by turning battles into "manageable frustrations" (Winnicott xii), which helps Oliver, and the player, cope with the demands of the Fantasy world. Drippy is both encouraging (Figure 6) and mean (Figure 7). Though Drippy's insults may seem severe, this "tough love" acclimatises Oliver to the realities of the outside world by showing him that despite the hardship he has encountered, he will not always receive special treatment and must try and cope with his past experiences, rather than let them define him. In his role as a transitional object brought to life, Drippy's actions literalise the role of transitional objects in emotional processing, making these processes visible by incorporating them into the gameplay. As a living transitional object, Drippy serves as an initial point of access for Oliver into the Fantasy world, a literalised third space of play, and a tutorial character who helps the player navigate through the Digital Fantasy.

Figure 5: Tidy Tears (*Ni No Kuni*, Screenshot by author)

Figure 6: Encouraging Drippy (*Ni No Kuni*, Screenshot by author)

Figure 7: Mean Drippy (*Ni No Kuni*, Screenshot by author)

The Another World as a Third Space

Oliver's journey into a Fantasy realm where he has the power to help people mirrors the journey of the player into the video game where they accomplish tasks in safe and manageable environments. They both gain access to Another World by casting a spell using an in-game spell book called *Wizard's Companion*. The book originally had a more prominent role in the first version of the game, *Ni no Kuni: Dominion of the Dark Djinn,* which was released in Japan for Nintendo DS. In this version, players cast spells by drawing symbols directly into pages of the book using a touchscreen. This was scrapped in the PS3 version, which lacked touchscreen functionality, and instead hard copies of the book were released with the Wizard's Edition of the game. The tome's centrality to the game's original concept and its existence across off-screen reality, the mimetic Motorville (Figure 8), and the Fantasy world (Figure 9) serves as a point of convergence reinforcing the status of the game as a literalised third space accessible via a play object. The existence of a physical book emphasises the similarities between Oliver and the player as both would be using the same object to enter and interact with a Fantasy world. Using a book to enter a Fantasy world also gestures towards Fantasy's roots in literature, linking the Digital Fantasy with the tradition of portal-quests in Fantasy literature (Mendlesohn xiv). Digital Fantasies, Fantasy Literature and spell books all have the imaginative capacity to conjure, recombine, and create space for imagination, allowing for alternative ways of thinking, feeling, and perceiving.

Figure 8: Motorville (*Ni No Kuni*, Screenshot by author)

Figure 9: The Another World (*Ni No Kuni*, Screenshot by author)

Facing Your Demons

The Another World is a Fantasy realm that functions as a literalised third space of play where inner and external realities intermingle; affective processes are made tangible, making them easier to perceive. The Another World is inhabited by Fantasy creatures that are collected and used in battle, serving as a visual metaphor tracking Oliver's emotional journey and developmental progress. In her analysis of creature collection games, Sonja C. Sapach argues that although the creatures of *Pokémon* and *Ni No Kuni* share a similar style designed to endear the creatures to the player (56), the playstyle of *Ni No Kuni* fosters stronger attachments between player and creature because the creatures have "a direct link to Oliver's mortality" (61). Looking after their wellbeing using battle strategy and power-ups is integral to keeping Oliver alive. Oliver's first familiar "Mite" is conjured directly from Oliver's heart (Figure 10) and, unlike Drippy, is under the direct control of Oliver/the player. Mite is a representation of Oliver's transitional self, existing between his "inner psychic reality" and "the external world" (Winnicott 69). Mite is Oliver's fighting spirit in physical form, which becomes stronger and gains experience points (XP) with each successful battle. The Mite's changing appearance and growing attributes as it evolves (Figure 11) is a visual indication of Oliver's progress as he builds resilience. By taking part in battles, both Oliver and the player are able to face increasingly difficult challenges at a manageable pace.

Figure 10: Summoning the Mite (*Ni No Kuni*, Screenshot by author)

Figure 11: Mite-amorphosis (*Ni No Kuni*, Screenshot by author)

After summoning his first companion, Oliver can use it to weaken and capture other creatures to expand his pool of familiars. Unlike Mite, they have not been summoned from within; therefore, Oliver must bring them under his control, or absorb them into his third space, through his interaction with them. This forms part of Oliver's "symbolic project of self" (Hills 77), a quest to understand the world and his place within it by interacting with his environment. Furthermore, the creature collection can be significant for the player depending on their playstyle. Sapach analyses the game using Terror Management Theory, drawing the conclusion that the process of creature collection can give players a feeling of symbolic immortality (71). If so inclined, players can use their creature catalogues to contribute to fan-driven databases, immortalising this knowledge in digital networks (71). Following this logic, collecting and training familiars enables both Oliver and the player to attain a feeling of autonomy. Oliver learns to cope with his mother's death by strengthening his fighting

spirit and develops different aspects of his personality by catching and training new creatures, whilst the player can use the creature collection to lessen the urgency of their mortality by etching their experiences into digital stone.

Figure 12: The Another World & Motorville Soul Mates (*Ni No Kuni*, Screenshot by author)

As Oliver and the player make their way through the Another World, they meet Fantasy versions of Motorville's inhabitants. The two versions of the characters are "soul mates" (Figure 12): the wellbeing of a character in one realm depends on that of the other. In Motorville, Oliver's neighbours are largely beyond a child's capabilities to help, and their emotional problems remain internalised. In the Another World, Fantasy "recombines and inverts the real" in a way that brings hidden emotions to the surface in the form of visual transformation, allowing Oliver to access them (Jackson 20). When their emotional pain reaches its peak, characters become corrupted by their broken hearts, taking a monstrous form (Figure 13). This corruption comments on the intensity with which the emotions of others can be felt, especially by children. Emotions are at their most monstrous and terrifying when they are not adequately understood; literalising emotional processing as a battle, and emotions as monsters that can be defeated, makes them more manageable to deal with, at least within the video game.

After defeating their monstrous forms, Oliver can mend NPC's broken hearts with pieces collected from characters with heart to spare (Figure 14). These quests enable Oliver to realise that although the external world is beyond his control and difficult to cope with, even the competent adults in his

life struggle with similar emotional problems and need help: the same message that is conveyed to players. The configuration of the Fantasy world makes the effects of emotional work tangible, as characters visibly revert to their true forms when their broken hearts are healed. Life may be difficult, and emotions may turn people into monsters, but monsters can be fought and pain overcome.

Figure 13: Healthy Fantasy Form and 'Brokenhearted' Fantasy Form *Ni No Kuni*, Screenshot by author

Figure 14: Pieces of Heart (*Ni No Kuni*, Screenshot by author)

Metaphors of Grief

Figure 15: Shadar (*Ni No Kuni*, Screenshot by author)

Ni No Kuni's narrative and mechanics represent mourning and melancholia in a way that literalises the psychoanalytic processes described by Sigmund Freud, providing a means of understanding and articulating complex and latent emotional processes. As Oliver explores the Another World, he encounters NPCs who have had their hearts broken by the Dark Djinn Shadar (Figure 15). They have lost interest in the world and are incapable of activity or displaying emotion; in other words, they are experiencing melancholia, a concept that formed the basis of modern understandings of depression (Rycroft 35). Melancholia, as described by Freud, is similar to mourning in the sense that both involve loss: mourning is related to the loss of something external and melancholia to "internal loss" (Rycroft 33). Mourning is generally perceived as an understandable reaction to loss as the lost object is tangible, whereas melancholia is pathologised (Freud, *Mourning* 244). By making intangible emotional processes visible by externalising and literalising them, *Ni No Kuni* works to counter the Freudian understanding of melancholia, bringing it more in line with the process of mourning: a natural and proportionate response to loss, but one that has not been fully processed. Oliver meets Prince Marcassin who suffers from the loss of his father, who died, and his brother, who abandoned him. Although a significant proportion of time has passed since these events, Marcassin has not processed them and exhibits melancholia due to his internalisation of his anger and sadness (Freud, *Mourning* 249), which resulted in "brokenheartedness" (247): he displays the typical melancholic "self-denigration" (Figure 16) and has lost belief in himself and in others (Figure 17). In Freud's theory, melancholia occurs when the subject's ego identifies with the lost object and they internalise the idea of this person in lieu of giving them up (*Mourning* 249). Expressions of self-denigration reflect how the melancholic feels about the love object, which has been incorporated into their sense of

self. Their negative feelings towards the love object are turned inwards: obsession subsumes identity. Oliver cures the prince by collecting a piece of heart from Marcassin's younger self to heal his broken one; this aligns with Freud's theory, as it is a retrieval of a sense of self that was present before the fixation with and internalisation of lost love objects overtook him. The depiction of physical pieces of heart, which can be carried by and transferred from person to person (even across time), reveals "an absence of separating distinctions" between people, by making the process of emotional support visible (Jackson 48). By literalising these processes and providing the player a means to interact with them, the Fantasy world makes the hidden injuries of melancholia easier to identify, offering hope that, with enough work, they can be healed.

Figure 16: Melancholic Self-Denigration (*Ni No Kuni*, Screenshot by author)

Figure 17: Loss of Self-Belief (*Ni No Kuni*, Screenshot by author)

Digital Fantasy Worlds as Coping Mechanisms

Oliver's journey into the Another World mirrors the player's journey into the video game. Both the Another World (the Fantasy world within the game) and the game itself as a Digital Fantasy are separate realms from Oliver's and the player's immediate lives. Games journalist Andy Corrigan describes how he could relate to *Ni No Kuni*'s representation of depression. At first Corrigan draws parallels between his gaming and Oliver's journey as escapism, stating that video games and the Another World were a place where his "problems couldn't hurt [him]" (n.p.). Indeed, it can be tempting to label Digital Fantasies as simulating a form of "hallucinatory wishful psychosis" (Freud, *Mourning* 244): the denial of reality in an attempt to cling to or ignore what is lost. It could seem that Oliver retreated from his problems by venturing into the Another World rather than dealing with them in Motorville. As in the process of mourning, which involves denial, Oliver's determination to save his mother prolongs her existence in his mind; however, eventually, "respect for reality gains the day" (244). Towards the end of the game, Oliver recovers his mother's last memory, which reveals that she cannot be saved and that Oliver's soul mate is Shadar (Figure 18). Like Oliver, Shadar suffered loss, but instead of working through his emotions, he repressed them and broke others' hearts to re-enact his trauma, enabling him to take an "active part" in an experience that was overpowering and unpleasurable in an attempt to gain mastery over his heartbreak (Freud, *Beyond* 10). Shadar is confined to the realm of Fantasy, only leaving his castle to enact his evil plans, whereas Oliver becomes powerful enough to defeat him by flitting between the Another World and Motorville to help others. Shadar is the form that Oliver's emotions, driven to their extreme, take in the Fantasy world; Shadar does not process his emotions in a healthy way, but rather than engaging in self-denigration as a melancholic does, he directs his pain at other people. By working through his problems and defeating Shadar, Oliver faces his difficult emotions by confronting them in a way that is (initially) depersonalised and tangible. Corrigan draws a parallel between Oliver's journey through the Another World and playing video games, stating, "Like many of those who turn to games as an escape, though, Ollie's never actually free of his guilt or of his relationship with the real world." Just as the Another World is populated by reminders of Motorville, Digital Fantasies (being a combination of Fantasy and mimesis) contain markers of off-screen reality alongside the potential to represent its struggles as removed from it. Corrigan describes his affinity with Oliver: "I found common ground in the ways in which we both chose to cope with our own sadness, our acceptance, and our recovery." This is how Fantasy, as theorists such as Jackson and Hume suggest, exists in relation to reality: not as escape, but as an alternative means of understanding reality through its reconfigurations. Fantasy's literalisation of emotions offers a way of evaluating and rethinking one's relationship with them, just as encountering Shadar does for Oliver. Digital Fantasies provide the opportunity for the player to interact with and, through gameplay, overcome emotional challenges analogously. After Shadar is defeated, he severs the link between him and Oliver, allowing Oliver to overcome his mourning for his mother, admit her death, and continue with his life (Figure 19).

Figure 18: Oliver's Soul Mate (*Ni No Kuni*, Screenshot by author)

Figure 19: Overcoming Mourning and Melancholia (*Ni No Kuni*, Screenshots by author)

Conclusion

Even if the game was not intentionally created with psychoanalytic theory in mind, the applicability of the framework demonstrates that the imagery of psychoanalysis, which surfaces throughout the game, continues to be ubiquitous: if not as psychology, then as a shared language for articulating feelings that are often left unsaid. By featuring transitional objects and representing a literalised third space, *Ni No Kuni* functions as a video game about video games that examines players' relationships with them and explores how Digital Fantasies can be used as a tool to cope with reality. The game uses the literalising, recombinative functions of the Fantasy genre, which combines Fantasy with mimesis, to represent emotional processes in a way that makes them tangible, and therefore easier to understand. In doing so, it draws parallels between the use of video games and immersion in Digital Fantasy as a means of building emotional literacy in a safe environment, which is divorced

from the 'real-world' problems of the participant. Further research of this topic might consider the applicability of this framework to other video games (such as to contrast the use of psychoanalytic imagery in JRPGs and Western RPGs). Furthermore, this study could also be used to inform game design, to enhance their emotional representation, and further their functionality as technologies of affect.

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