The J in JRPG
Finding collectivism or individualism in games
Author: Anton Classon

Faculty of Arts
Department of Game Design

Bachelor’s Thesis in Game Design, 15 hp
Programme: Game Design and Programming

Supervisor: Ernest Adams
Examiner: Masaki Hayashi

May, 2017
Abstract

This paper covers the JRPG subgenre as it compares to the greater RPG genre. These will be compared through how games can, through their mechanics, be traced back to which types of society the games originate from. These societal types are collectivism and individualism, as defined by Richard Brislin (2000). The games are divided into Japanese games and Western games, and are examined for evidence of societal ties in their gameplay mechanics that tie them to their country of origin, or evidence that contend those ties.

Keywords: Roleplaying games, JRPG, combat, collectivism, individualism
Abstrakt


Keywords: Roleplaying games, JRPG, combat, collectivism, individualism
# Table of Contents

**Glossary of Terms**
1 Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1  
2 Background .................................................................................................................... 2  
3 Purpose .......................................................................................................................... 3  
4 Method ............................................................................................................................ 4  
  4.1 Limitations ................................................................................................................ 4  
5 The Games ..................................................................................................................... 6  
  5.1 The Japanese Games .................................................................................................. 6  
    5.1.1 Pokémon Sun/Moon ......................................................................................... 6  
    5.1.2 Final Fantasy VII ............................................................................................ 7  
    5.1.3 Dragon Quest IX: Sentinels of the Starry Skies .............................................. 7  
    5.1.4 Chrono Trigger ............................................................................................... 8  
  5.2 The Western Games ................................................................................................. 9  
    5.2.1 Dragon Age: Origins ....................................................................................... 9  
    5.2.2 South Park: The Stick of Truth ...................................................................... 9  
    5.2.3 Shadowrun Returns ...................................................................................... 10  
    5.2.4 Child of Light ............................................................................................... 11  
6 Analysis .......................................................................................................................... 12  
  6.1 Collectivism and Individualism ............................................................................... 12  
  6.2 The Japanese Games ............................................................................................... 12  
  6.3 The Western Games ............................................................................................... 12  
7 Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 13

References

Appendices
Glossary of Terms

Combat

Combat is how the player is able to defeat the various enemies that they encounter. When a player enters a combat encounter, they are often taken to a separate screen that is not part of the game’s overworld. The combat encounters are initiated through two primary methods. Either they are initiated randomly as the player traverses through the game without warning. Or through encountering an enemy as the player travels through the game’s world that initiates combat. Which method is used is dependent on each game, and some games use a mix of both.

Party/Party member

The party is the collection of characters that the player can control in the game. The members of the party can change throughout the game’s runtime. If a game has many party members, often more than three, then the party can be divided up into active party members and non-active party members. The active party members are the ones that are currently active in a combat encounter. Swapping party members between active and non-active is often done outside of the combat encounters. Some games allow for the party members to be swapped during an encounter, but at some cost, often in the of the character losing their turn.

In this paper, the term party member and character is used interchangeably.
1 Introduction

This thesis is meant to discuss the differences between certain games within the broad genre referred to as role-playing games (RPGs). Specifically, the differences that define the sub-genre known as Japanese role-playing games (JRPG), as opposed to others that are part of the larger genre. In order to properly define the uniqueness of this subgenre every aspect of the genre would have to be examined and studied. This paper looks at how some of the games in the JRPG sub-genre handle the aspect of party building and management, and comparing these to other games that share similarities with JRPGs but that are not part of it, either by definition of its country of origin or by some mechanical difference.

When referring to the West in this paper, the intent is to refer to the collective of the western world, as in not part of the East/the Orient. This collective mainly contains the countries that are part of North America and Europe, but will most often be referring to America(USA).
2 Background

Adams (2014, p.521) defines roleplaying game as:

A game in which the player controls one or more characters, typically designed by the player, and guides them through a series of adventures or quests. Character growth in power and abilities is usually, but not necessarily, a key feature of the genre.

The genre of RPG in the world of videogames came about as an interpretation of the tabletop roleplaying games that came before them (Barton, 2007). Since the tabletop RPGs were popularized around the same time in both the East and the West, they were interpreted separately when they became translated to the medium of video games. From the East came the genre of JRPG, and from the west came the genre of the computer roleplaying games (CRPG. Referred to in this paper as western RPG or WRPG). This is a unique occurrence as this sub-genre is the only genre that is defined by its country of origin (Extra Credits, 2012).

Other genres were popularized in one country to later be emulated in the other, such as the platformer being popularized in Japan to later be emulated in America, or the first-person shooter being popularized in America to later be emulated in Japan (Extra Credits, 2012).

The difference in JRPG and WRPG could be traced to the cultural differences between the two countries of Japan and America. While Japan has a long ancient history shaping how their civilization was created, America is relatively recent in terms of historical presence and depth. (Reese, 2013)

One of the differences of the cultures and societies is in the dichotomy of individualism and collectivism (Brislin, 2000). In individualist societies, as in America, the individual can choose if they want to work in a group in order to achieve a goal or work alone without much interaction with others. In collective societies, as in Japan, there is an expectation that people will integrate themselves and their wishes with those of others. As such the individual is less likely to work alone. Another difference between the two types of society is in how groups are maintained regarding time frames. Groups in individualist societies are more likely to exist for as long as it serves the individuals of the group. While in a collective society, the individuals of the group are more likely to become permanent part of their lives. (Brislin, 2000, p. 286)

Looking at how different the games produced in each region are, can show how they hold different values and how these values are emulated in the content that they create.
3 Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to find whether or not societal roots exist for mechanics in games based on the type of society that they were developed in. The genre of JRPG was chosen since it is the only videogame genre that has the name of its country as a part of its name.

The paper attempts to demonstrate the differences between games that are part of the JRPG genre and other games that are part of the broader RPG genre that share similarities in their mechanics, specifically team-based mechanics, in order to find what differentiates them. The primary difference that was examined is how each game adheres to either collectivism or individualism, if there is any interpretation to be found.
4 Method

The games were analyzed through playing the games and documenting the mechanics that were relevant in integrating teamwork into gameplay. The mechanics related to the combat of the games were looked at more meticulously as these represent the majority of the gameplay of the games, and were seemingly the most obvious, to the author, way of representing teamwork within the game through their mechanics. The mechanics of each game were then studied for the purpose of finding traces of the societal type, collectivism or individualism, that is associated with the game’s country of origin.

The games chosen were gathered from the online database MobyGames (MobyGames, 2017). This database is moderated by the users of the site and as such may not be a complete database nor fully accurate. However, this database was only used to gather titles to be studied, and therefore the results gathered from this does not affect the conclusions drawn from the titles selected.

4.1 Limitations

In order to select the games to examine, a number of limitations were set up to help select appropriate games. Following are the steps that were taken to reach the final list of games.

The first limitation was to choose roleplaying games that were released between the years of 2000 and 2016. Using this as a guideline and MobyGames as a source, a total of 4414 titles were gathered. These were gathered in a Microsoft Excel workbook divided into separate sheets by year.

After doing a first quick manual pass of the list, removing games that were not primarily RPGs or seemingly redundant entries, the amount of titles remaining were 3706. Then using the tools in Excel to remove non-unique entries for a second pass a total of 2162 titles remained.

The second limitation was to choose games that were team-based RPGs. This limitation was selected as it is one of the similarities that a lot of JRPGs shared and as such, this characteristic was chosen to be observed in how it is handled between JRPG. The third limitation was that only one game from a series was to be studied so that the games observed were not simply repeats of their predecessors.

A third manual pass was done removing games that were part of the same game series, rereleases that had been missed in the first pass, and games that did not fit the second limitation. Judging if a game passed the second or third limitation was done by recognizing the games title and as such was at the folly of the memory of the author. However, as stated earlier, this process is only to narrow down the selection of games to observe within reasonable limits. After this pass 1349 games remained.

The fourth manual pass was done by going through the remaining list of titles and looking at each game individually by searching online for information about them and checking if they passed the set limitations. This resulted in a list consisting of 157 titles.

Using the sites Steam Spy and VGChartz to gather sales data for the remaining titles, the list of games could be sorted in a fashion to make the final selection possible. (Steam Spy, 2017. VGChartz, 2017) VGChartz was used as a primary source and Steam Spy was used for
additional data when it seemed lacking from the first source. Using this data as a reference to select games that were relevant, a final list of 8 games were chosen. 4 JRPGs and 4 non JRPGs. The list with sales data can be found in Appendix A.
5 The Games

These are the final games that were selected to be observed for their characteristics, both in the shared mechanics as well as what differentiates them. The primary focus of the observations will be in how each title handles the combat sections of the gameplay, and specifically how the combat gameplay relates to the team-based gameplay of each game.

The order that these games is presented are in an order based on the sales data acquired from Steam Spy and VGChartz, decreasing from the title with the most sold copies.

5.1 The Japanese Games

5.1.1 Pokémon Sun/Moon

Pokémon is a long running series of games since the initial release of the earliest versions in 1996. For this paper, one of games from the latest generations, Sun, was chosen.

The combat in Pokémon consists of a turn based structure, where the player issues commands to their currently active pokémon, as in the one currently out. Each pokémon has access to a maximum of four different moves that can be selected and the effectiveness of these moves are dependent of the type that the move belongs to as well as the type that the opposing pokémon belongs to. With 18 different types present in the game, the player is encouraged to manage their party of pokémon such that they can be prepared for whatever type of pokémon they encounter. See Appendix B for a diagram containing the various types (Bulbapedia, 2016)

During combat the player can switch out their current pokémon for a different one at the cost of the turn, allowing the player to select a type of pokémon that is suitable for the opposing pokémon. The player can prepare for encounters by having the first pokémon in their party be a suitable type against the current area that they are in.

The various areas of the game are usually populated by similarly typed pokémon based on the area they are in. For example, a water based area will be more likely to have water type pokémon so the player can prepare by having pokémon that are strong against. The most common of encounters are one pokémon against another, but there are some that have two against two or even three against three. This can vary the strategies used and the player must manage the order of their current party of pokémon such that they do not have to spend turns switching in pokémon that are more suitable for the current encounter.

The game encourages the player to form bonds with their pokémon, which is done through minigames: feeding the pokémon various types of food/candy, cleaning them up after battles, and playing with them through the use of the touchscreen. These minigames can, after a while, give the pokémon greater versatility in future battles. For instance, achieving the highest rank in how much the pokémon likes you, according to the meters presented in the game, can allow the pokémon to survive an otherwise fatal attack. This type of gameplay can show its Japanese roots with respect to how Japan is a collective society, in that the player is meant to form relationships with their pokémon outside of the battles.
5.1.2 Final Fantasy VII

Another long running series of games is the Final Fantasy series that started with the release of the first game in 1987. Final Fantasy VII (FF7) was chosen as it is the bestselling Final Fantasy game. (VGChartz, 2017).

The combat in FF7 uses a system named the Active Time Battle (ATB) system. This system works by having the player wait for a bar to fill up for each character before they can choose an action for that character to perform. This bar fills up as time passes during the combat encounter, the speed in which the bar fills up for each character is based on the speed stat of that character, which can be increased through various means. Once an action by the character is executed the bar is depleted and time must pass to allow the bar to fill up again. If no character has a bar full, then no actions can be taken by the player while waiting for them to fill up. The enemies also have a hidden ATB bar, meaning that they operate under the same rules as the player but the player is not aware of how full those bars are or how fast they fill up. Whenever a party member or enemy uses an action, the ATB bars of the other characters pause filling up while the chosen action is played out. After the action is completed, the bars return to filling up as before. The character that had just performed an action has their bar emptied and must wait for it to fill up again before taking another action.

The player can have three party members active at any time. The player can swap these party members around at a save point or at any time they are on the world map. Each character can be equipped with equipment that is in turn equipped with materia. These materia can give the characters boosted stats or the ability to cast spells. As such, the player can equip their party with skills that can prepare them for any given situation.

In addition, each character has a Limit Break, a powerful skill that fills up over the course of several actions. These Limit Breaks are unique to each character and can be individually levelled up by use of the characters. They all are executed in the same way between the characters and are essentially utilized in the same way that the player would cast spells, with the exception of one character whose Limit Break is used through playing a slot mini-game to achieve an action that is based on the result of the slots.

Managing the party of characters in FF7 comes down to how the player wants to utilize the individual characters own strengths, through their Limit Breaks, coupled with the players management of the materia that they find throughout the game. This gives the player freedom in how they can create their own party with the characters that they most enjoy, either through the story or through gameplay.

No particular mechanics could be found that lead to the game showing roots in either a collectivist or individualist type of society.

5.1.3 Dragon Quest IX: Sentinels of the Starry Skies

The combat in Dragon Quest IX (DQ9) uses a turn based structure. However, unlike other turn based games where the characters perform a selected action as soon as their turn comes up, in Dragon Quest IX the player chooses all of the actions for the active party members and then watch the round play out as the characters and the enemies take turns performing the chosen actions.
Dragon Quest IX allows the player to customize their own character that they use primarily throughout the game. The player can also create their own party members, allowing the player to customize their party as they want. This allows for great strategic freedom, but places all of the responsibility on the player to have learned the game properly to be able to fully utilize the tools that they are given. The party members have various skills that are based on which class the player chooses to assign them. This can give the player a wide variety of options when faced with the combat encounters if they manage to properly create and customize the characters.

Since the player can create all of the characters in the party, this puts the onus on the player to ensure that the party can function as a cohesive unit, essentially allowing the player to create their own collective through their individualism. This is unique amongst the games that were looked at for this paper, and does put greater emphasis on an individualistic type of game which contradicts its country of origin.

5.1.4 Chrono Trigger

In Chrono Trigger, the player takes control of three active party members during combat. These party members can be swapped out for other characters at certain points outside of combat or when the player is navigating the overworld, during travel between locations. When the player engages in the combat portions of the game, both the active party members as well as the enemies take up random positions on the screen. These positions dictate how certain attacks and skills will affect the characters and as such, the player must learn how each skill is affected by the positioning of the characters to utilize them to their full effect.

The combat plays out using an early iteration of the ATB that is present in FF7, and it functions much in the same way. The higher a character’s speed stat is, the faster that character can act again after performing an action.

The skills the character has access to are called Techs, that are unlocked by gaining Tech Points that are earned by having the character as part of the active party. If a certain character has a certain Tech unlocked and is in the active party at the same time as another party member with a certain Tech, the player can choose to perform a Double Tech. This set of Techs are unique as they require both of the characters to have their ATB bar filled and are ready to act. For the player to have access to these types of Techs, they must have unlocked the compatible Techs for the active party members.

The Double Techs are more powerful than the regular Techs, but as they require the risk of waiting for a characters ATB bar to fill up they carry the risk of letting the enemies perform attacks against the players’ party members. There are also Triple Techs that require all three of the active party members to have unlocked Techs which are compatible with each other. How the player chooses to utilize the Techs and how they approach the strategies offered by the Double and Triple Techs is how the player can express themselves through the gameplay.

In order to unlock the stronger Double- and Triple Techs, the player have to make a choice with which characters that they use to form their party. By using some characters more than others, they naturally become stronger/more useful than the other characters that are not currently in use. This can cause the player to connect stronger with the characters that they choose to use over the others.
Through the game providing the ability to unlock the Double- and Triple Techs, the player is given incentive to maintain certain party configurations for an extended period of time, which could be interpreted as the game attempting to emulate the party members forming stronger bonds over the course of the game. This could then in turn be interpreted as the game showing its roots of Japans collective society.

5.2 The Western Games

5.2.1 Dragon Age: Origins

In Dragon Age: Origins (DA:O), the player creates their own character that they control through the story of the game. During the combat scenarios throughout the game, the player has access to four active party members, including their own character, that they can switch between during gameplay. The active party members can be changed at the campsite when not exploring the world. The characters have classes with unique abilities so that the player is encouraged to create a party with a balanced mix that can be suited for the various situations.

The combat plays out in real time and the player can position the party members for various strategic solutions for each encounter. The player can pause the game to create a break in the action and observe the situation, taking their time to decide on how to proceed with the current battle. The player can select behaviors for the party members that they follow when they are not controlled directly by the player. These behaviors can allow the player to customize their party so that they the members will act a certain way under certain circumstances.

Some characters can cast spells that do damage to both the enemy and friendly characters. As such, the player must maintain situational awareness and make sure that when controlling a character that is casting a spell, there are no friendly characters that can be caught in its’ effect or accept the damage that is done. They can also choose behaviors that can cause the characters, when not controlled by the player, to not cast spells such that they could cause harm to friendlies, or cast the spells disregarding the damage to their fellow party members.

The game encourages the player to spend time interacting with the other party members outside of combat in order to get more of the characters’ backstory and unlock new abilities for other characters. This is told to the player as the other characters teaching each other their own abilities so that the whole can become stronger. This is more indicative of a collective type of society, rather than the individualistic type that DA:O originates from.

5.2.2 South Park: The Stick of Truth

The combat in South Park: The Stick of Truth is turn based. Either the player’s party members will perform their actions in turn first followed by the enemies, or the enemies will perform their actions first followed by the player’s party members. This order is determined by whether the player managed to land a hit on the enemy before initiating combat. If they do, their party will begin and vice versa if the enemy manages to land a hit on the player’s character.
When it is the player’s turn to perform actions, they can choose an action for the current party member to perform, followed by performing an ability that is specific to the selected action. These abilities come in four categories that decide on how to perform them. The first is to press the appropriate button at the right moment, either indicated by a prompt on screen or by the character’s weapon shining. The second is to hold the appropriate button for a certain time, depending on the ability. The third is to press the appropriate button several times in quick succession. The forth is to use the directional inputs to cause the character to spin around.

During the enemies turn, the player can time a block input to reduce the damage that their character would take. This timing is dependent on which action the enemy has chosen to perform.

The player has access to two active party members, including their own character, during the combat and can switch out the non-player created party member. Switching characters during combat is an action that spends that characters turn.

The characters in the game has access to skills that are based on the class that the character is. These skills can be chosen as the characters gain levels throughout the game, and either grants new abilities or strengthens already existing ones. The player is limited by the level cap and as such, must plan the characters’ growth in order to achieve the most powerful abilities.

As the game limits the players ability to customize the party and places greater weight on the players own character, traces of individualism stemming from the western society can be found through these mechanics.

5.2.3 Shadowrun Returns

In Shadowrun Returns, the combat has a turn based structure for commanding characters, and uses a grid for moving around the several party members that the player can control. Each character has a certain number of Ability Points (AP) that can be spent moving the characters to new positions allowing them to be in cover from the fire of enemies, or flanking enemies that were in cover from a certain direction. Positioning the characters so that they are in cover or in flanking positions is important and as such, the player must maintain strategical awareness and play tactically with the party member at the player’s disposal.

AP can also be spent to use the characters’ weapons to perform attacks against the enemies. These attacks vary depending on what type of weapon the character is equipped with and the player can swap between equipped weapons in order to have access to a greater variety of options to attack. Each weapon in turn have certain abilities that can be unlocked by spending Karma Points that are gained by progressing through the game. These abilities are tied to specific stats that can be upgraded by spending more Karma Points.

Only the player’s own character can be equipped with weapons of the players choosing. The other party members come with their own equipment that cannot be changed. The player can still swap between the equipped weapons that the other party members are carrying.

As only the player’s own character is the only character that the player can customize to any extent, the game shows traces of the individualistic type of society that the game originates from.
5.2.4 Child of Light

In the combat of Child of Light, the player issues commands to the main character as well as a secondary party member that can be swapped out at any point during combat without spending the characters turn. The party members all have their own set of unique skills and varying usability depending on the combat encounter that the player is faced with.

The game uses a version of the ATB system similar to that of FF7. What makes Child of Light different in the utilization of this system is twofold. Firstly, all characters have small icons indicating their progress on a single ATB bar and with this the player can see when the enemies’ turns are coming up and can plan accordingly.

The second difference is through the integration of a third party member. This character can be moved across the game screen through the use of a directional input tied to that character. This character can be moved so that it is placed on top of enemies or allies. When it is placed over an enemy, that enemy’s progress along the ATB bar is slowed down, allowing the other characters to act more rapidly that the enemy. If the third party member is placed over an ally, that ally receives healing, removing the damage that character has taken during the combat. The third party member can also be used to gather resources that pop up during the course of an encounter in various places on the screen.

As the third party member is an extension of the player like the main character is, coupled with how little the game mechanically emulates the characters growing bonds through gameplay, the game does tend towards greater individualistic traces shown.
6 Analysis

6.1 Collectivism and Individualism

Looking for ties to either collectivist or individualistic societies came down to focusing on how these two types of societies could be represented through the mechanics in the game.

Collectivism could be found through how the game could emulate the characters forming bonds through gameplay, either inside of combat encounters or outside of them. While many of the games did have the characters forming bonds through the stories of the games, these were not taken into consideration of this paper as its focus is on the mechanics of the game, not the story.

Individualism could be found on how the game emphasized the players own actions over that of its characters. While all the games did function through the actions of the player, the key is in how the games emphasizes these actions.

6.2 The Japanese Games

Out of the games from Japan, the two titles that showed greatest ties to the collectivist type of society that is present in Japan were Pokémon and Chrono Trigger. Pokémon with its gameplay that extends beyond the battles; the minigames that are meant to enhance the player’s bonds with their pokémon. Chrono Trigger in how it emulates the characters’ bonds growing stronger through the use of the Double and Triple Tech mechanics.

DQ9 created a point of contention to the original question of the paper. It has a greater individualistic tendency than the other games from Japan in its party management mechanics where the player creates all of the party member characters. This makes it an outlier amongst the games when contrasted to its country of origin.

FF7 showed no tendencies either towards individualism or collectivism in its gameplay.

6.3 The Western Games

Out of the games from the West, most titles did show ties to the individualistic type of society that they originate from, the exception being DA:O.

South Park, Shadowrun, and Child of Light all show individualistic ties through their gameplay in similar manner. This was through how the games mechanically put greater emphasis on the players accomplishments over that of the characters that they control, especially the main characters, be they player created or designed by the game creator, as the case is in Child of Light.

DA:O created a point of contention to the original question, like DQ9 did for the Japanese games. The game did mechanically allow for emulation of the characters forming bonds through how they could unlock new abilities for each other.
7 Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, it was believed that the collectivist and individualist types of societies would be portrayed as diametrically opposites that could not overlap mechanically. Through the studies of these few games, this belief was put into question. There was seemingly no evidence found that this was true. It could just be a coincidence that the games that showed tendencies towards either collectivism or individualism did not have any signs that signaled the other. Or it could be that if a game begins to trend towards one, it naturally strays away from the other through design. Future research could be done with a larger sample size in order to determine this. Further research could also delve deeper into extending the search for ties to either collectivism or individualism beyond the games mechanics, as in the stories of the games.

As it stands now, I cannot draw a proper final conclusion based on the results found in the games examined. If I would, it would be: No, societal roots do not exist in the mechanics of the games based on the type of society that they were developed in. As mentioned above, further research is needed with an expanded sample size of games to examine.

What I did learn from studying for this paper is how games can be examined with a particular goal in mind, searching for specific evidence to find in order to support or dismiss a hypothesis. While the search during this period did not yield any conclusive evidence, I did find it rewarding nevertheless.
References


Bulbapedia, 2016. *Type/Type chart* [online] (20 December 2016) [Accessed 21 May 2017]


Games

Game Freak. 2016. *Pokémon Sun*.


Appendix A

The final list of titles with sales figures from Steam Spy (2017) and VGChartz (2017).

The sales numbers are in units of million units sold, based on how they are represented on VGChartz.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JRPG</th>
<th>Sales</th>
<th>WRPG</th>
<th>Sales</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pokémon Sun/Moon</td>
<td>13,55</td>
<td>Dragon Age: Origins</td>
<td>4,87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Fantasy VII</td>
<td>9,72</td>
<td>South Park: The Stick of Truth</td>
<td>2,06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Fantasy X</td>
<td>8,05</td>
<td>Shadowrun</td>
<td>1,37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dragon Quest IX</td>
<td>3,65</td>
<td>Child of Light</td>
<td>0,48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The full excel book with the full list of games can be found at: https://1drv.ms/x/s!ArNLLgDpg7tsgYtRTa0HxPXdxycCDA
## Appendix B

Type chart for Pokémon, taken from Bulbapedia (2016).

![Type Chart](image_url)

*These matchups are suitable for Generation VI.*