

BRAVA, CELES: SHARED NARRATIVE ELEMENTS IN VIDEO GAMES AND
OPERA AS A FRAMEWORK FOR GAME APPRECIATION

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to: my father William, who fostered my work ethic while never discouraging my passion for storytelling; my stepfather Bruce, whose wisdom and generosity built a lifetime love for the medium; to my extended family the Weigends, who built my appreciation for games as a family activity; to my collaborators at Winterion Game Studios, that keep me engaged on a daily basis; and to the community, whose devotion to gaming is reflected daily in everything from the largest conventions to the smallest blogs.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Entertainment Software Association	ESA
Final Fantasy (series)	FF
Final Fantasy VI.....	FF6
Non-Playable Character	NPC
Playable Character	PC
Role-Playing Game	RPG
Super Nintendo Entertainment System	SNES

ABSTRACT

**BRAVA, CELES: SHARED NARRATIVE ELEMENTS IN VIDEO GAMES AND
OPERA AS A FRAMEWORK FOR GAME APPRECIATION**

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George Mason University, 2017

Thesis Director: Sang Nam

This thesis takes a critical eye to the 1994 title *Final Fantasy VI*, and in particular, its famous opera scene. Using examples from prior works of opera, the scene is deconstructed in full, and its various literary elements are compared to those in traditional operas, to find points of congruence. These intersections serve as touch-points to begin framing intersections of appreciation between the two media, and aid in defining the toolkit one would need for engaging in game appreciation.

INTRODUCTION: WHY ARE YOU HELPING ME?

In the wake of the Second World War, advances in computing technology and experimental utilizations of it led to the first flickers of light in the proverbial library of video games. While minds may vary as to the first video game, the advances made in this period, from the proliferation of Russell's 1962 *Spacewar!* to the commercial success of Alcorn's 1972 *Pong*, laid the groundwork for a new medium – the video game (Donovan 11, 23).

If we attribute the 'debut performance' of video games to the general public to the famed *Pong* deployment at Andy Capp's Tavern in Sunnyvale, California in September of 1972 (Donovan 23), then we are 375 years removed from the first 'debut performance' of modern opera, Jacopo Peri's *Dafne* as performed in Florence in 1597, tragically lost to history, three years prior to *Euridice* (Kobbé 3). Opera is a storied form, whose maturation and development over the centuries led to masterful works, particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

At first blush, these do not seem like congruent subjects. Separated by the wide gulf formed by time, origin, and public opinion, it is not hard to ask why these two subjects would become the focus of a paper designed to identify points of overlap.

However, there is more to the relation between the two forms than would seem to be immediately apparent. Both are complex multimedia experiences that use novel methods to convey their narratives, even as those specific methods change with time and technology. There are questions of adaptation, of where the video game has decided to leverage the tools that were forged in the centuries of development that opera had to refine and perfect its methods.

```
.RUN ADV11

WELCOME TO ADVENTURE!!  WOULD YOU LIKE INSTRUCTIONS?

YES
SOMEWHERE NEARBY IS COLOSSAL CAVE, WHERE OTHERS HAVE FOUND
FORTUNES IN TREASURE AND GOLD, THOUGH IT IS RUHORED
THAT SOME WHO ENTER ARE NEVER SEEN AGAIN. MAGIC IS SAID
TO WORK IN THE CAVE.  I WILL BE YOUR EYES AND HANDS. DIRECT
ME WITH COMMANDS OF 1 OR 2 WORDS.
(ERRORS, SUGGESTIONS, COMPLAINTS TO CROWTHER)
(IF STUCK TYPE HELP FOR SOME HINTS)

YOU ARE STANDING AT THE END OF A ROAD BEFORE A SMALL BRICK
BUILDING . AROUND YOU IS A FOREST. A SMALL
STREAM FLOWS OUT OF THE BUILDING AND DOWN A GULLY.

GO IN
YOU ARE INSIDE A BUILDING, A WELL HOUSE FOR A LARGE SPRING.

THERE ARE SOME KEYS ON THE GROUND HERE.

THERE IS A SHINY BRASS LAMP NEARBY.

THERE IS FOOD HERE.

THERE IS A BOTTLE OF WATER HERE.
```

Figure 1 Adventure by Will Crowther

There are more existential questions beyond that, however. One of opera's last internationally acclaimed composers from Europe, Benjamin Britten, passed away in late 1976 (Brann); this is the same year that *Adventure*, the Will Crowther text adventure and one of the first recognized digital interactive works of fiction, was released on the PDP-10 mainframe computer (Donovan 51). The significance of this timeline cannot be understated; though the stage remains a vibrant setting for musical theater, traditional opera is a genre in its twilight. According to Routledge, the average age of an operagoer is well over 65, and increasing. The socio-economic numbers indicate that the medium is locked, largely, behind a wall of advanced age and advanced wealth that hide it from large sections of the public (O'Reilly et al. 395).

Video games, on the other hand, have a pronounced and growing share of the public's interest. The 2016 demographics reports on video game consumers as prepared by the ESA show gamers are, on average, a full 30 years younger than their opera counterparts (Entertainment Software Association). Two-thirds of households in the United States have the equipment necessary to play video games. For video games, the barrier to entry has never been easier to overcome. The battlefield for the cultural acceptance of games remains that of content and perception. From their arcade origins, games have fought an uphill battle against their perception as at best a dalliance of youth, and at worst, a call to arms to eschew the better angels of our judgment and engage in, reward, and reinforce bad behavior. The sphere is not lacking for investigations into video games and violence. Noted film critic Roger Ebert pointedly penned in 2010 that

“no video gamer now living will survive long enough to experience the medium as an art form.” In his discourse with Kellee Santiago, he arrives at two interesting and critical points for his argument: first, he details that the rules and outcomes of games, their mechanical nature, acts as a delineation from art, and that video games devoid of these barriers are better thought of as digital representations of stories than as games. It is on this point, and not his more controversial latter argument of a strictly qualitative nature, that we come to an important structural question (Ebert).

Transmediation, defined as the migration of a work to another medium, is a pattern of part-and-whole to adaptation of semiotic media, in which substitutions are made as necessary, and the work is reconfigured to account for the differences in the communicative capacities and practical limitations of one or another form of media (Leitch 521). The first piece of our puzzle, then, is an acknowledgement that the ability to convey a narrative, and the manner in which that is done, is in some way practically altered by the medium that is chosen to do so. Opera has experienced shifts in the centuries of its existence alone, from the original visions of the Camerata in Florence devising the instrumented voice (Plotkin 9) to the evolution of “set pieces” or “number opera” elements such as the *recitativo*, aria, the different story patterns and styles of *opera seria* and *buffa*, and the codification of roles and patterns that defined the works of the eras that followed. *Opera has, in a way, mechanics*. Defined, and in flux through its years, but mechanics nonetheless.

Video games have, for decades, contained elements that can be viewed in a lens of strictly mechanical definition that are easily understood, and elements of aesthetic, plot, characterization, and narrative conveyance that are sometimes less-so. On the surface, this is understandable; the high score, extra life, and secret stage are not complicated to describe in how they impact a game at a mechanical level, but can prove elusive to describe on a narrative front, particularly in light of a game's dualistic nature of presenting both an experiential narrative and a pre-programmed one. That said, at this point, we can start to see where these elements might line up when held to comparison, be it through the process of transmediation or otherwise.

How might a video game present an opera, though?

In this paper, the well-understood methods by which opera is constructed – its established literacy, appreciation, and critique – are used as the toolkit by which elements of a video game opera are weighed and deconstructed. This is done in the hopes of establishing observable similarities, breaking down comparative barriers, and providing measurable opportunity to both forms. Opera's hundreds of years of established stories offer a trove of narrative value that has been minimally explored by games, a genre frequently engaged in traditional Hero's Journey storytelling. Conversely, video games are woefully devoid of an established language for literacy, appreciation, and critique. Though exceptions exist, the primary reviews for games are too often of a commercial

variety, numerically scored and intended to grade the economic value of the experience rather than its artistic depth.

If games are to be properly critiqued, appreciation has to be better framed. This is done through the recognition of patterns, periods, and tools. It is here we get to the real ‘why’ of *Brava, Celes*. Video games and opera stand to benefit greatly from each other. The former has a wealth of storytelling tools at its disposal, but needs a prism by which to frame and appreciate those experiences, while the latter is replete with narrative and established patterns, but struggling to find a fresh audience to tell its stories to. Should the pattern between these forms be better understood, it could enable great benefit on both sides; games are better perceived as powerful tools for narrative conveyance that are capable of bringing audiences along on the deep, emotional journeys that opera’s library of titles have to offer, and opera can find new stages to present on, new audiences to sing to, and perhaps, inspire the composers and librettists of the future.

To wit, what do they have in common?

The decision on which video game to deconstruct in order to form this analysis was, perhaps, the briefest part of the exercise.

OVERVIEW: LIFE... DREAMS... HOPE... WHERE DO THEY COME FROM?

Among the most storied pieces of narrative video gaming ever developed, Square released the role-playing title *Final Fantasy VI* in early 1994. Since then, it has been frequently placed atop all-time listings of video games, and is lauded specifically for its dramatic literary complexity and engrossing score (IGN). Moreover, one of the principal moments of the game is, in fact, an opera. Known as Maria and Draco, or the Dream Oath Opera, it functions both as a brief respite from the overarching plot of the RPG and an illustrative moment by which a blitz of characterization comes together to enrich it.

Synopsis

The complexities in FF6's plot are many, but can be boiled down thusly: magic is long forgotten, but an evil empire has started to reawaken it through the discovery and subsequent abuse of Espers, hidden refugees from a magical war many centuries ago. The acts of this empire and the resistance movement that opposite it result in a cataclysmic event that the very world's willingness to resolve through adversity.

This story is told through a diverse cast of characters. Terra Branford, half-Esper and half-human, is naturally gifted with magical power. Celes Chère, a general of the Empire, is artificially imbued with magic through a facility designed to leverage Magitek (magical technology) through the conduit of captured Espers. Though FF6 has no true

central character rather than an ensemble cast who rotate their moments in the spotlight, the plot follows these two women more than any other protagonists. They are both aided by anti-Empire forces known as the Returners, and chiefly by treasure hunter Locke Cole, who comes to Terra's aid in the game's onset, and Celes' as she is held prisoner for turning traitor to the Empire. The expansive cast also includes Returner sympathizer and monarch Edgar Roni Figaro, his twin brother Sabin Rene Figaro, knight Cyan Garamonde of Doma, gambler Setzer Gabbiani, mercenary Shadow and his faithful Doberman Interceptor, feral child Gau, wizened caster Strago Magus, his artistic granddaughter Relm Arrowny, among others.

The principal antagonist in this conflict is not the Emperor Gestahl, but rather, one of his generals, Kefka Palazzo. Throughout the plot, he is given ample opportunity to demonstrate his villainy, from attempting to burn down the castle Figaro to poisoning the water supply for the citizens of Doma, killing fellow Empire general Leo Cristophe, killing Emperor Gestahl, and in stunning fashion, devastating the planet's landscape, sundering the continents and rearranging the newly-formed World of Ruin, with himself as a self-appointed, and wholly wrathful, god.

It is roughly one-third into the game's overarching plot that the scenes involving the opera come into focus. Locke, Celes, and to illuminate maximum dialog, Edgar and Sabin, travel together in the hopes of discovering a means of infiltrating the Empire. They arrive in the wealthy town of Jidoor, only to discover that the owner of the world's only

airship (a flying ship-dirigible of sorts), Setzer, aims to abduct the leading lady of the opera, Maria. The director of the opera, Impresario, fears for his Maria, but the group hatches a plan predicated on the convenient fact that Celes is, in appearance, a dead ringer for Maria. Celes will perform in the opera, acting as a decoy to lead the others to the airship after her capture, with aims of using it to reach the distant island the Empire resides on.

The opera itself is a story of war and love, where conflict between the West and East has separated the former's great hero, Draco, from his love, Maria, only for circumstances in battle to force him to be missing in action, and her to be pushed into the arms of Ralse, prince of the East, in an effort to bring peace between the nations. It is a work divided into four parts. "Opening", the first, features Draco, and is wholly automated, as the player takes the role of the audience. "Aria di Mezzo Carattere", the second, is the famous aria in which the player takes the role of Celes as Maria, professing loyalty to Draco and pretending to dance with him. (We will go more into this later.) "The Wedding", the third, features Maria and Ralse waltzing among wedding guests only to have Draco return from war and call to Maria. "Grand Finale", the final act, is to have Draco and Ralse duel, with the victorious Draco and Maria singing their devotions, though things take a decidedly different turn in the game.

External to the opera itself, the octopus Ultros has taken it upon himself to interfere with the team's plans. While the opera is progressing, Locke and Edgar are

watching alongside Impresario, uncertain as to how this will be done, until Locke spies the purple antagonist in the rafters, attempting to drop a four-ton weight upon Maria. The frantic scramble up there to thwart him results in that cast careening down onto stage, knocking out both Draco and Ralse. This forces the improvisation of a battle between Ultros and the party, with the orchestra in full swing and the narration accommodating on the fly as things get underway.

Despite these complications, the plan is met with success. In the fracas, Celes is swept off her feet by Setzer, the Impresario spins it to be part of the opera, the crowd raucously approves, and the scene transitions to Setzer's airship, where a tense negotiation ends with a new party member and renewed purpose.

The opera was penned in concert between composer Nobuo Uematsu and writer Yoshinori Kitase, whose writing focus included the focal character of Celes. Their efforts, in concert, help craft the unified effort that is the Dream Oath Opera, and it is their collaborative vision as experts in independent disciplines that make the scene what it is (Skolnick 184). As we get into detailed observations of the operatic methods used, the usefulness of this cooperative effort is increasingly illuminated. For now, however, let's get into defining the *libretto*.

Focus

What proceeds in these roughly thirty minutes of gameplay, from the first encounter with Impresario to the airship flying to the horizon, is the focus of this paper's deconstructive efforts. Elements of the plot before or after will be alluded to, as the work must be considered in whole, but of primary focus will be this window of plot, primarily because of our choice of opera as lens.

This leads to a second, and equally important question, with respect to the scope of the deconstruction; which interpretation of *Maria and Draco* makes the most sense? The opera is presented in *Final Fantasy VI* uniquely, in that it does not simply project an opera for the player's consumption, nor have players interact strictly within the confines of the opera itself. Instead, control occurs both within the opera as Celes, singing the famed "Aria Di Mezzo Carattere", and outside it, as Locke, working to stop the opera's sabotage. Therefore, the first step is to determine precisely what is being analyzed – the opera by itself, the opera as it was naturally intended to be completed, or the complete narrative of the scenes, including context and events that occur off the stage. To decide this, each potential form is considered, and a choice made.

On Maria and Draco, In Entirety

The first form considered is that of *Maria and Draco* in its full, uninterrupted format. While this is not presented in *Final Fantasy VI*, it has made its way to other

venues through transmediation, particularly in later productions, such as the Distant Worlds performances held for the series' 25th anniversary, in early November 2012, at the Royal Albert Hall, or through assembled versions of the completed opera as constructed by fans (Elder Geek). These performances, as they take place entirely on stage, do not include Locke's character, nor do they include Ultros' interference. They instead present the opera sans the interruptions of the external cast, and in transmediative efforts, have eschewed the on-stage performances entirely, as they have ridden alongside orchestral events presenting the music of the series with no more than projected visual accompaniment. While the opera here feels complete, and has some additional weight as an artifact produced by Square years after the game as a means to perform its music, the purpose of the research in question is to determine if the game utilizes the operatic form. Therefore, the insertion of additional score and *libretto*, while compelling, are an artificial adjustment of the original work that force us to critique *Maria and Draco* as a standalone work rather than game-as-opera. When other considerations (cited later) are also factored in, this option is declined.



Figure 2 2012 Performance of Distant Worlds in London

On Maria and Draco, Truncated

The second form considered is that of *Maria and Draco* only insofar as it is presented within the confines of *Final Fantasy VI*. This means that the opening recitation “Opening” and the grandiose “Aria di Mezzo Carattere” are presented with the player’s full focus, while elements of the rest of the opera are obfuscated by the gameplay. While not without its uses, this is an incomplete view that forcibly removes focus on elements that, as discovered with the third method, share and emulate operatic structure in a way as to enrich the experience enough to feel as though they were the intended performance all along. Additionally, this method requires omission of parts of the work, where taking in the work in full makes for a more genuine critique with fewer subjective decisions on what does and does not constitute authorial intent. Therefore, this option is declined.

On Maria and Draco, Locke and Ultros

On its surface, this is not the first manner in which one would intend to comparatively analyze the *Dream Oath Opera* scenes. It is certainly the purest, in that it requires neither removal of content nor the addition of that which the game did not present in its interactive pre-transmediation state. It uses the game, precisely as given to the player, as the narrative. While this means the actions of Locke and Ultros must be taken into account, and the off-stage antics themselves considered part of the opera, this is not without precedent in traditional opera, such as in *Tosca*, a three-act Puccini opera, which premiered in Rome in 1900; the opera will come up many times in parallel to *Final Fantasy VI*, but for purposes of this point, its eponymous female protagonist is a celebrated singer, though the opera is instead viewed from the lens of the drama that surrounds her. Doing so brings the full ensemble into the review, while requiring the least creative license in determining what is worthy of deconstruction. This option, thus being the truest to the source material while having the most overlap with traditional operatic mechanics, is chosen.

LEITMOTIF: MIGHT AS WELL MAKE THE MOST OF THIS. MUSIC!

Though best associated with legendary opera figure Richard Wagner, the origins of leitmotif – of German *leitmotiv*, or leading motive, to indicate a musical phrase or cue to indicate a character or idea (Osborne 180) – date back to the work of his predecessor, Carl Maria von Weber, and his work on *Der Freischütz*, or *The Marksman*, which debuted in London in 1825 (Kobbé 132). The opera was notable for its careful use of the music not merely as an accompanying element, but as a way to communicate ideas to the audience about specific goings-on (Plotkin 46). Following a somber recitative by the soprano Agathe awaiting news of her lover Max, the orchestra builds up into a joyous melody coinciding with his return (Kobbé 134). These matters of narrated coincidence, coincidentally enough, also happen to pair with the *libretto*, in which Max's fortunate shot is unfortunately time-synched with Agathe's bump with the picture.

In *Opera as Drama* (originally penned in 1956), Joseph Kerman wrote the following on the subject of characterization and music:

If feeling can be presented directly in music, as opera composers seem always to have believed (though philosophers have not always agreed with them), one agency of music in opera is to round out information about a character's thought and action with insight into his or her inner life of feeling. (Kerman 215)

This multimedia approach to characterization is pivotal to our inspection of video games' ability to convey their characters through the complete tool set afforded to them by the medium. In addition to how the sprites themselves are visually presented and animated, we take cues from our interpretations of characters from the instrumentation and arrangement of their musical accompaniment and the timings therein. This patterning helps bring opera and games such as *Final Fantasy VI* that much closer, as the two use this tool repeatedly.

Thankfully, Wagner shared his ideas in his critical treatise *Oper und Drama* (Opera & Drama) in 1851, giving a window into the functional definition, if not the word, as it existed in Wagner's mind. He spoke directly of Weber's efforts, translated into English as:

Weber only opened his arms to the reception of the drama the wider in proportion to the degree with which his melody spoke the true language of the heart, pure and untainted. Whatever was wafted up into it was well protected and secure from all defacement. That which, in consequence of the limitations of this language, could not be expressed in it notwithstanding all its truthfulness even Weber had to strive long for in vain; and his halting amounts, for us, to a frank acknowledgement of the incapacity of music, by itself, to constitute the drama – or, to be more precise, to absorb the genuine drama, as distinct from that which is merely cut and dried to suit per purpose; in lieu of which it is music herself,

which, according to any correct reasoning, has to be taken up by the drama proper. (Wagner 85)

This notion of musical drama, of the deeply intertwined *Gesamtkunstwerk* (or all-encompassing artwork) that considers the music, the scene, the dramatic elements of the libretto and score in harmonious concert, rose up in this Romantic period and was recognized and championed by Wagner, as well as his contemporaries. (Plotkin 47)

Nobuo Uematsu, revered composer for a number of early titles in the Final Fantasy series, leveraged *leitmotif* in multiple ways throughout *Final Fantasy VI*, but two notable patterns of usage stand out during the opera scenes themselves:

As Theme

In the opera, we are introduced to the song “Aria di Mezzo Carattere”, or ‘air of medium character’. This tune does not simply exist within the realm of the opera itself, however. It is so integral to Celes’ characterization that it becomes her theme – the core melody is maintained and played during key moments in the plot that involve her, save for one – the introduction in that aforementioned cell prior to the opera. This highlights the opera’s import and a defining moment for Celes, in which her expression of self and liberation from Empire general to reformed Returner is made whole.

It is also played, tragically, at the nadir of her emotions. Atop both a literal peak and an emotional one, Celes stands alone on an island, the world in ruins and her only family perished from weakness. As her theme – the opera’s theme – plays in the background, much in the same way she casts flowers off the edge in that liberating manner, so too does she throw herself from the height. Tackling the concept of suicide alone is an ambitious effort for a video game to undertake. To demonstrate the practice with one of the two female leads is stunning.



Figure 3 Celes prepares to commit suicide. Note the perished bird on the cliffside.

Yet, much as Celes endures, surviving her leap and discovering the motivation to go on upon the beaches she collapsed on (in the form of Locke's bandanna tied to a living seagull), so too does her theme, playing most notably in the game's credits, which not only take the time to carefully address characters by name and offer individualized elements to the epilogue, but also finally unite Celes and Locke's intertwined lives by introducing them simultaneously in the credits with the discarded bouquet rendered on screen, a medley composed of both characters' themes, and a moment affording the

treasure hunter a chance at personal redemption saving Celes with an outstretched grab, where his prior attempts at the same for Rachel had failed and established his complex in the first place. Both on screen and in song, the two are clearly telegraphed as interlinked.

When characters are introduced, they almost universally are introduced not only in name, but in song. Each character in *Final Fantasy VI* has a theme, and that tune is played as the screen turns to black and a poetic one-liner describing them appears. This occurs more than once – Terra, Locke, Edgar, Shadow, Cyan, Gau, Setzer, Strago, Relm, Mog, Gogo, and Umaro are all introduced with their themes or variations thereof playing in the background. As mentioned before, only Celes is not introduced with specific music. This is notable – more than anyone else, there is something about the *Dream Oath Opera* to come that defines her; in the confines of the cell in South Figaro, she is only a traitor to the Gestahlian Empire.

As Cue

The timing of musical events in the opera scene also lends some weight to the theory that the best way to consider the opera is in its complete, expanded state, including the events both on and off stage. This is illustrated strongly in a cue that occurs between the second and third acts of the opera. After observing the opera, Locke begins to head back to his seat, only to spy a letter in the dressing room that indicates Ultros has motives to “jam up” the opera. Immediately, Locke things to tell this information to the

Impresario, which puts him back in the balcony of the opera house, where everyone is seated.

However, it is not until the moment that you declare this to Impresario and he responds, aghast, that the cue triggers. The orchestra strikes up with a cymbal crash and rolling percussion to signal the sudden invasion of the armies of the West, or what is left of them, including Draco. The screen pans from Locke and friends to the stage, where this happens. As he arrives, the two initiate their dueling voices in mutual pursuit of Maria's hand, and we return again to Locke and the Impresario talking. The orchestra once again strikes up its frenetic tune, not only to signal the duel between Draco and Ralse, but also, for Ultros, who has positioned himself in the rafters with a comedic four-ton weight (indicated by the 4t written on the side, no less) that will take him a precise five minutes to push off the rafters and onto Maria. In this way, the exciting combative music can remain emanating from the orchestra pit while the party rushes to thwart the octopus' plans.

This pattern is used multiple times throughout *Final Fantasy VI*. As the castle Figaro is set ablaze, and Kefka believes he's got Edgar forced to cooperate, a plan is executed. The music suddenly shifts to Locke's theme, the heroes escape on chocobo-back, and to the villain's surprise, the entire castle submerges into the sand, extinguishing itself and protecting its people. (It is also this moment that gives us the infamous "Son of

a submariner!” line, but more on that in Localization.) When the Returners’ hideout is endangered and the party is forced to flee on raft, the Empire’s theme interrupts Terra’s.

CHARACTERIZATION: W...WAIT! I'M A GENERAL, NOT SOME OPERA FLOOZY!

As opera continued to evolve over the centuries, composers and librettists took increasingly complex efforts into crafting memorable characters. Giacomo Puccini, in particular, offers a superb example of this for many reasons, the most important of which are the time in which he worked and the breadth of conventions that offered him. Being among opera's later composers helped him borrow from the form's numerous conventions established prior, while his specific stylings are rarely confined to a single convention or framework. In fact, this stylistic flexibility and scope are almost distinctive of Puccini, to be so widely interpreted, as noted by Frolova-Walker (Oxford 162).

In Puccini's work, we see a number of reflected characterizations that are codified conventions of opera. Certainly, the iconic *La bohème* could be seen as *verismo* (Osborne 330), or realism, as it captures the lives of the poor in Paris in the nineteenth century. His work also demonstrated command of both *opera seria* (serious), the modernization and removal of the mythic that came with *opera buffa* (comic), or in where elements of both are found, *opera semiseria*.

Puccini is also remarked as being very keen on getting to the psyche and core of his female characters, as well as having a sense for the theatric (Plotkin 42). This focus on female leads parallels nicely with *Final Fantasy VI* and its principal focus on the characters of Terra and Celes. While the former is a driving force for early plot and

explains a number of the Empire's motivations, Celes drives the latter half of the narrative, helps construct the real tension between the Returners and the Empire, and in the framework of the opera scene, helps explain not only nuances of her own character, but those of some of her closest allies.

As one of the principle creators of the game, Yoshinori Kitase described the team's efforts as being one to try and integrate mechanics into illustrations of the characters themselves. Unique gameplay mechanics were paired alongside deep-dive narrative to create characters that felt less like avatars for mechanical action and more like a true cast. He described it as such:

The idea was to transform the Final Fantasy characters of the time from mere ciphers for fighting into true characters with substance and backstories who could evoke more interesting or complex feelings in the player. Since the scale of each character's individual story was expanding, I began linking this to the concept of different dramas developing, according to the player's choice of character in the game. (Moher)

While *Final Fantasy VI* has a cast of dozens, we will focus on the characterizations of those that play key roles in the opera scene, and their performances therein. In order to best understand the narrative, it is best to begin by discussing the cast, both within the scope of the opera and of the game. To the former, the opera's cast

consists of the following: mezzo-soprano Maria, princess of the West; tenor Draco, Maria's love and hero of the Western forces; and baritone Ralse, prince of the East, whose marriage to Maria is arranged to facilitate peace between the nations. Narration is provided by Impresario.

For the second layer of the opera, there are many characters of note. First, the heroine Celes Chère, raised to be a general in the Empire with intentions of forcibly marrying her to fellow general Kefka Palazzo, made to play the role of Maria in the opera by virtue of an uncanny likeness. This is done in the hopes of securing an airship to return to the empire and infiltrate it, this time as a member of the resistance faction known as the Returners. Second, there is Locke Cole, treasure hunter and Returners member suffering from a white knight complex borne of the tragic loss of his would-be love Rachel. Locke is responsible for breaking Celes out of Empire custody not long ago. Finally, the octopus Ultros, equal parts villain and comic relief, previously thrashed by members of the Returners, is present and equipped with a revenge motive. These characters, along with additional appearances by Impresario, make up the 'external cast' of our opera scene, lending important context throughout.

With that, let's examine how each of these characterizations are handled.

On Celes Chère

“Product of genetic engineering, battle-hardened Magitek Knight, with a spirit as pure as snow...” (Final Fantasy VI)

Our introduction to the general is in a makeshift room-as-cell in the basement of a structure in the occupied town of South Figaro. Held prisoner against a wall, a soldier of the Empire strikes her repeatedly, calling her a traitor and implying she is to be executed the following day. Her disdain for the Empire’s tactics, particularly Kefka’s intentions to poison Doma, are demonstrated, and overheard by Returners member Locke, who breaks her free, despite her affiliation, to which Celes demonstrates a burden of guilt that actually has her try to turn down the rescue.

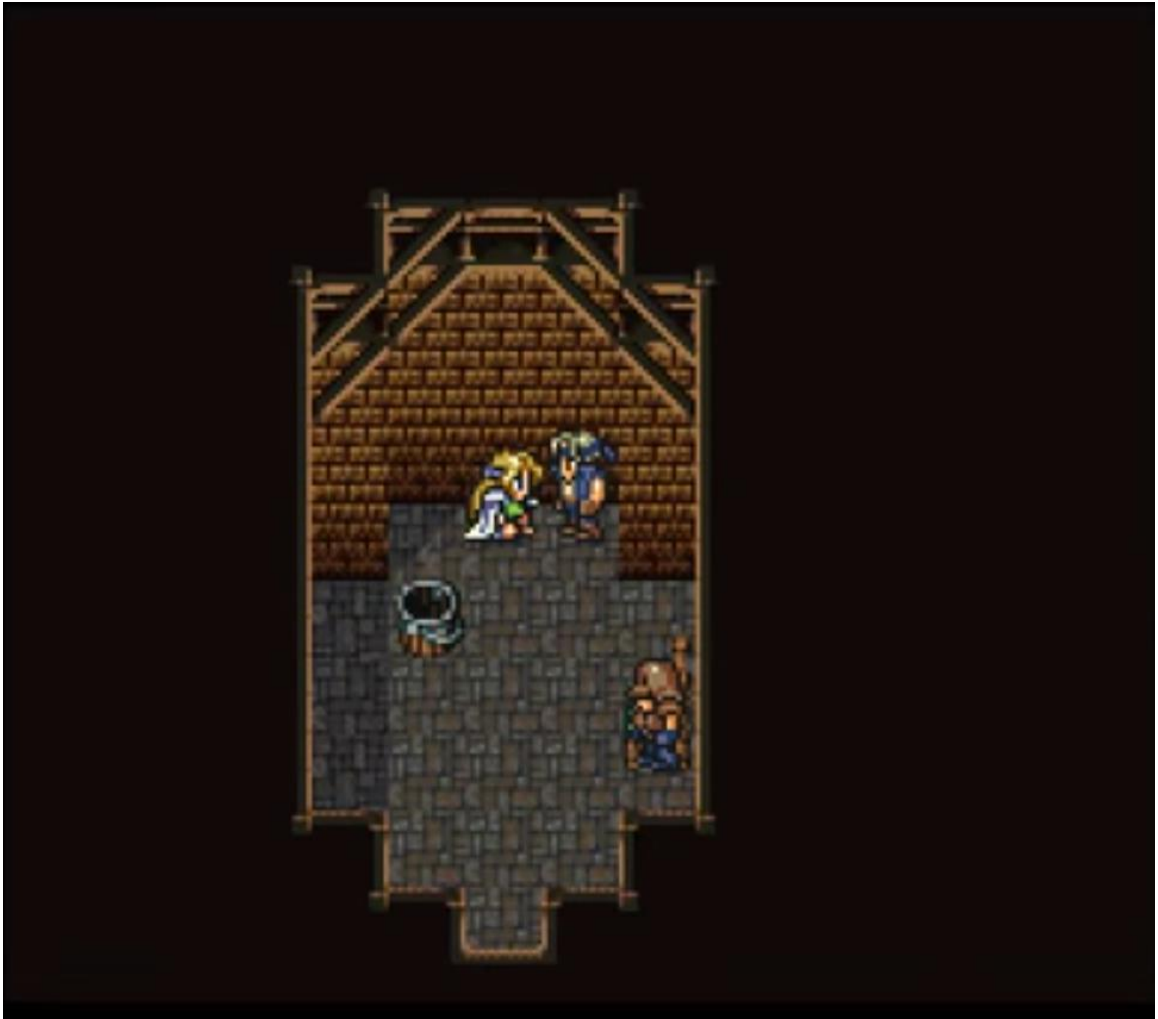


Figure 4 Celes is rescued from imprisonment by Locke.

In *Final Fantasy VI*, Celes serves as a principal actor in the plot. It is her journey, both alone and when alongside Locke, that uncovers the depraved nature of Emperor Gestahl's activities, and in the darkest moments of the story, begins reuniting the party against the deific figure of Kefka. However, much of her internal monologue is spent absolving herself of the guilt for having spent her earlier years on the villainous side of

this conflict, often flat-out asking members of the player-characters assembled how it is they can trust her.

The weight of this is demonstrated in the party's convergence in Narshe prior to the opera scene. As Celes is introduced to the rest of the Returners, she is confronted with a reminder that she is responsible for the burning of the town of Maranda and accused of acting as a spy on the Empire's behalf – it is only an emergency, the attacking of the Empire at Narshe and her battling against Kefka and with her new allies that she starts to build trust amongst them. It is also where she witnesses Locke's white-knight complex once more, in concern for Terra's transformation and departure, and begins to question his motivations for rescuing her once more.

By the time the party has reached Jidoor and the events of the opera begin playing out, Celes has traveled for some time with Locke and the other Returners members. She's established, both through the exposition, her innate magic, and her useful Runic mechanic (which effectively neuters enemy spell-casters) as a powerful character. She even protests being used as bait at first, reminding the party that she is “not some opera floozy!”, only to take to the role effectively enough to not be booed off stage, while being granted license for the first time to do something other than engage in battle.

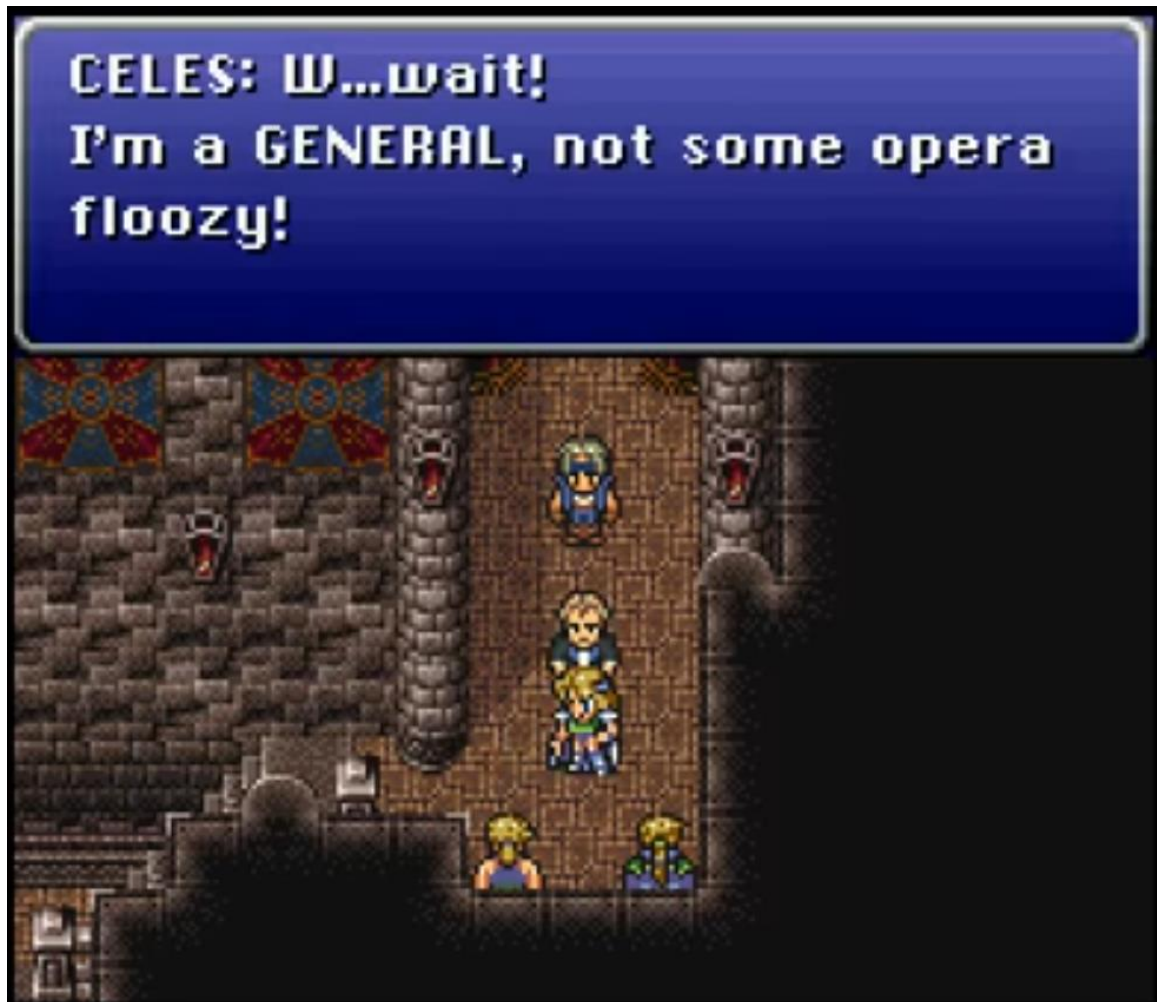


Figure 5 Celes protests her role in the plan.

As the complete-opera methodology was decided upon earlier, *Tosca* was among the reasons why – and again, we revisit the Puccini work to better understand Celes. Just like the eponymous heroine in *Tosca*, Celes is simultaneously a character of bravery and emotion. Her role in the *Dream Oath Opera* is that of Maria, the lead, an act of both poetic beauty, but also secretly as Celes to trick Setzer, a cunning subterfuge, as it leads to the group's acquisition of an airship and infiltration of the Empire through a stone-faced bluff against the gambler using a double-headed coin. As *Tosca* struck the vile

Scarpia to kill him, Celes dealt a near-fatal blow to Kefka upon the Floating Continent, only for her efforts to be thwarted by his machinations. Additionally, at her darkest point with the loss of Cid, Celes too attempts suicide, leaping from a cliffside from the island she is stuck on in the earliest days of the World of Ruin. Unlike Tosca, however, Celes survives, discovers Locke's bandanna, and with renewed hope, sets out to reunite the party and begin anew the struggle against their common foe. (Kobbé 948)

Celes' first name, a shorthand for celestial (of Celeste, meaning heavenly in French) pairs with the last name of Chère, or treasured/dearest, also of French) to form the portrait of someone whose name was entirely to attribute value. This pairs with Celes' origins – as a child raised by the Empire and a subject imbued with magic through experimentation, she is certainly a symbol. To Emperor Gestahl, Celes is viewed as a treasured object, but also as a guiding force, something to attribute the future to. He fully intends to pair her with Kefka, and states as such bluntly atop the Floating Continent: “Celes, child... You alone are special. Why don't I give you and Kefka the task of creating progeny to populate my new Magitek empire?” (Note: The original English release of the game, in keeping with Nintendo's censorship procedures, altered the line to the following: “You and Kefka were given life to serve me!! It is your birthright to rule the world with me!!”) (Final Fantasy VI)

This import and mysticism that surrounds Celes' character is shared with the other female protagonist of the party, Terra Banford. Though Terra does not play a role in the

opera, it is important to note the two characters for whom magical ability is bestowed upon (one by birth, and one by science) are also the cast's two leading ladies. Moher notes this distinctly in his retrospective:

Final Fantasy VI was a step ahead of the genre, and, frankly, the popular fantasy genre in its entirety, by framing its narrative around two women. And not just female characters as voiceless avatars for the player, but genuinely powerful and authoritative women around whom the world is shaped. Celes is a high-ranking and powerful general in the Gestahlian Empire, and Terra is the Empire's greatest weapon. Together, they have the power to reshape the world. (Moher)

The use of female leads might be less common for other forms of media, and certainly for games – this is, for example, the only Final Fantasy game to feature what could be considered female leads until fifteen years later, when *Final Fantasy XIII* would feature the character of Lightning Farron.

It is not uncommon, however, for opera. Some of opera's most famous works feature powerful female characters at the forefront of the narrative. Beethoven's Leonore in *Fidelio* discovers her husband is imprisoned and bravely masquerades as a man to rescue him, including facing down the murderous Pizarro at knifepoint (Kobbé 127). In Donizetti's *La fille du régiment* (The Daughter of the Regiment), Maria is raised by the grenadiers, their drums central to her theme, and it is her commanding vocals in the

second act that move her from an arranged marriage to one of her choosing (Kobbé 376). Even when their actions seem cruel, as Puccini's Turandot has would-be suitors brutally murdered, there is a distinct independence to the character that seeks to escape perceived servitude (Kobbé 976). The term *prima donna* (from Italian, 'first lady') (Osborne 251) may have questionable connotations outside of opera, where it is leveraged more as a pejorative, but they are often central to opera, where their vocal talents and personalities can carry powerfully written characters to great effect.

On Locke Cole

"Treasure hunter and trail-worn traveler, searching the world over for relics of the past..." (Final Fantasy VI)

The introduction to Locke is through an act that comes to define him throughout the series; he has rescued a damsel in distress. Introduced earlier in the game than any other member of the 'cast' of the opera, Locke dismisses the thief label and immediately goes about demonstrating his instincts, even in the face of her recent assault upon Narshe. Helping Terra escape Narshe starts the player off on the primary plot's journey.

This is just the first of many times Locke functions as a vehicle of driving events forward that he is not necessarily the principal actor for. In *Final Fantasy VI*, Locke is personified *semiseria* – his introduction includes a whimsical double-take at the label

given to him, but the origins of his white knight complex are mired in tragedy. He at one point lurches over a ship's railing while struggling with sea-sickness, and another lowers his head in reverence for a friend captured by the Empire and a mistake he vows not to repeat. This dichotomy Locke is burdened with, to be the free-spirited rogue and at the same time shackled with the burdens of his past, allows him to slip into either comic or serious roles with ease, and provides a flexibility utilized throughout the narrative.

First, Locke must rescue Terra from Narshe. This is an immediate demonstration of his compulsive need to help damsels in distress, eschewing his concern for Terra's witchcraft and Empire-aligned actions to save her. After that, it's off to meet up with Edgar in Figaro, where he functions as the means by which Edgar's sympathies to the Returners can be illuminated. This permits the now-larger party to traverse Mt. Kolts, find Sabin, and reach the Returners hideout on the other side. Once there, Locke's expertise as a rogue gets him nominated to sneak into South Figaro to stymie the Empire's advance, only to be confronted with another white-knight scenario in which he must rescue the (former) Gestahlian general Celes from captivity and bring her to the party at Narshe.



Figure 6 The first of many times Locke's complex to save women in danger manifests.

Once there, he defends her from the doubts of the party upon her introduction, to which Edgar inquires, “Are you still thinking about... that?” implying an awareness of Locke’s burden. Even after defending the Esper at Narshe from Kefka, Locke’s first thoughts upon waking are for Terra’s safety, and as the group convenes, he blurts out, “Let’s go! I promised her I’d...” Celes simply responds, “Locke...” Again, there’s a clear cue that the group is increasingly aware of his internal struggles. (Final Fantasy VI)

This is repeated multiple times throughout the game, in which Locke's motivations are painted in the hue of his guilt about Rachel's demise. The tragedy of Locke and Rachel is not fully revealed to the player until the moments before the *Dream Oath Opera*, in which the party stops by the town of Kohlingen on the way to Jidoor. Upon entering a vacant home, Locke immediately starts to ponder his failures to save someone. The music cues to a somber tune entitled "Forever Rachel". In sepia-tone, the treasure hunter is seen being saved from a collapsing bridge by Rachel, only for her to suffer amnesia from the fall. Her parents, devastated, kick him out, despite their apparent engagement. Rachel, having forgotten Locke, sides with her parents. He returns a year later, only to have learned she's perished in an Imperial attack, having regained her memory and uttered his name with her final breaths. This internalized failure to be there to defend her has anchored Locke with a compulsive need to defend the women he is surrounded by – namely, Terra and Celes. Upon ending the flashback, his first words are an admission of failure.

This is reinforced with a second flashback in the apothecary's house on the other side of town. His "treasure", namely Rachel, is lying in repose in a bed surrounded by roses. The medicine man's words here are particularly interesting, particularly in their relation to the opera to come:

I used some herbs to put her into suspended animation. She won't age a day!
Uwaa, ha! That's what you wanted, right? Had to use my herbs, I did! (Final Fantasy VI)

There is a noticeable and specific choice of words there. She won't age a day. Locke has clearly not given up on Rachel, even after her death, and in the flashback that follows, is clearly pondering some means of reviving her. Again, however, upon exiting the flashback, his first utterance is that he's failed her. Only Celes returns to Rachel's side, pauses, and speaks Locke's name, as her character struggles to resolve her potential feelings for the treasure hunter and his own grief in trying to cling to a love lost.

Those words are also repeated in the *Dream Oath Opera*. When Celes sings the "Aria di Mezzo Carattere", her initial lyrics of romantic love seem quite aligned to Draco. Her dance with the knight, retrieval of the roses, and stand upon the edge of the castle walls, all seem scripted entirely with the opera itself in mind. It is not until the symbolism of the second half of the aria that Locke becomes a potential subject of the lyrics. As much as Celes' discarding of the flowers can be seen as personal liberation, the lyrics that follow echo the rogue's flashback:

'ere I walk away, let me hear you say. I meant as much to you... So gently, you touched my heart. I will be forever yours. Come what may, I won't age a day, I'll wait for you, always... (Final Fantasy VI)

Locke's past has left Celes with a great deal of uncertainty about their relationship, and this is repeated throughout the game. Here, in the place where Celes' very theme song is defined, there are numerous reasons to believe the relationship begins in earnest. Her lyrics of forever, not aging, waiting to be saved, meaning as much to her significant other as he does to her – these are all elements that can just as easily be attributed to Locke as they can be for Maria to Draco.



Figure 7 Celes (as Maria) casts the bouquet over the castle walls during her performance.

Sure enough, as Locke watches from the curtain, his reaction is the only one that's given to the player as to the quality of her performance, potentially hinting at the audience Celes sings to is not the one presented throughout the opera, but the treasure hunter shown in the moments after the aria is completed.

There are other moments of Locke's slow shift in character that occur during the scenes surrounding the opera. Prior to the performance, checking up on Celes, he turns

beat read upon seeing Celes in costume, and is somewhat lost for words. She inquires as to why he aided her in escaping back in South Figaro. Locke mentions abandoning someone when she needed him, and Celes responds knowingly, “Somewhere inside you were saving... her, weren’t you...?” The comment on-point, Locke defends with a simple “That ribbon suits you.”



Figure 8 Locke confronts Celes before the show begins.

Additionally, Locke further blurs the line between opera and overarching plot when recovering from his fall onto stage. In his haste to declare himself the savior of the damsel, he states, “Neither Draco nor Ralse will save Celes!” He is the only character in the opera to refer to her as such, and not Maria. Even when Setzer comes to abscond with Maria, the Impresario keeps in character, up to the end.

Finally, at the conclusion of the opera’s part of the plot, when Celes is negotiating with Setzer for the use of the Blackjack in flying to the Empire, Locke, unaware of the plan she’s got to use Edgar’s double-heads coin, is positively apoplectic about the prospect of Celes marrying the gambler.



Figure 9 Locke reacts to Celes' gambit to enlist Setzer's aid on a coin flip. He is unaware she plans to use the Figaro double-heads coin.

On Ultros

“Thwarted again! I feel like such a sucker. Well, kids, hate to ink and run... but I AM an octopus!” (Final Fantasy VI)

Acting somewhat in the role of villainous comic relief, side antagonist Ultros is an octopus that assails the Returners, causing the cast to be sent careening in different directions. His antagonistic relationship with the player-characters is established prior to the opera, but he plays a pivotal role in the performance, apropos for a character whose personality is heavily mired in mirthful malfeasance.

The initial introduction for Ultros comes as the party of Terra, Edgar, Sabin, and Returners leader Banon are on a raft, escaping the approaching Empire with plans to meet up at Narshe with the others. The octopus charges the raft, triggering a fight scene with the pairing of the same boss music used frequently throughout the game, “The Decisive Battle”. The sprite of Ultros belies the song’s intense and dramatic implications, however. His toothy grin and rolled-up eyes stick out of the water like caricatures, and rather than start fighting immediately, he begins with dialog – laughter, “Game over!”, and famously, “Don’t tease the octopus, kids!” He is an antagonist, for sure, but quite unlike most of the silent and mindless foes faced throughout the series. Ultros, by comparison, is absolutely flush with personality. Not only that, but he’ll throw out lines depending on what’s happening in the fight. Hit him with fire, and he’ll cry “Seafood soup!” Attacks at Sabin are prefaced with “Muscle-heads? Hate ‘em!” His lecherous side is on display when attacking Terra – “Delicious morsel! Let me get my bib...!” Even the end of his fight cannot help but end in comic fashion; rather than simply evaporate, Ultros dips under the water, and proclaims an end to the scene with “Th.. that’s all, friends!” The music cuts to the mirthful “Unknown”, with the party looking over the

raft's edge. Ultros attempts to accost Terra, but Sabin leaps into the water to battle it. This serves as an *exeunt* for both Ultros and Sabin, as the former disappears and the latter is tossed the other way down a fork in the river, splitting the party.



Figure 10 Ultros makes his first appearance, assaulting the party on the raft.

There are no other appearances of Ultros until the opera itself, but from his early arrival, there is no doubt that Ultros is directly painted into the role of *buffo caricato*

(elaborated in the Basso Buffo section). Yet, many events occur between this point and the opera itself, including Locke and Celes' meeting, the reuniting of the Figaro brothers, the exposition of Locke's past with Rachel, the twins' royal coin flip, and other points of great import to the plot. By the time we get to the *Dream Oath Opera*, Ultros is an afterthought in the player's mind, with the greater machinations of Kefka and the Empire front and center.

This makes Ultros a refreshing selection for the villain of the opera. There is a certain absurdity to the plan at its face, and the elaborate mix of drama and comedy that makes up the scene as a whole, so where Kefka functions as a loathsome antagonist, Ultros can be just as charismatic while taking down the 'stakes' of the scene to a level more befitting the surrounding plot points.

Ultros, concealed behind a curtain in the lobby, listens in and discovers the plan that Locke has hatched. He tosses a note in the direction of the backstage door, only to have none of the group notice it. This does not deter him from his task, but does help construct a couple elements; one, Locke would not discover the note on the way back to his seat after witnessing Celes' performance if not for thinking to check on her beforehand, and two, that nothing in Ultros' plan to push a four-ton weight upon Celes requires he inform the party of his malevolent plan to "jam up your opera!", let alone sign it with his name. This sort of aside communication, where Locke monologues his concern to the player/audience, then returns to the Impresario at the very cue of the dramatic

moment of “The Wedding”, is in keeping with Ultros’ penchant for describing his actions in a unique voice.



Figure 11 Ultros takes center stage. Notice the audience has become the backdrop for the battle, turning the perspective from opera-viewer to opera-participant.

When the party and the octopus both go careening to stage, and Locke attempts to improvise, it is only natural that the *caricato* goes into full-blown acting. “Silence! You are in the presence of octopus royalty! A lowborn thug like you could never defeat me!”

The act is as much, if not more, of Ultros' motivations, than the results. He takes center stage, with the party members flanking him, when the battle begins, presumably because the attention outweighs the strategic advantage the mechanics of the game give to surrounding your opponent. And, once more, rather than vaporize like most enemies, his defeat results in an "Adios!" and a rapid flight off-screen, stage right.

Ultros makes one later return to the Opera House. When the world has collapsed and civilization is at the brink from Kefka's oppression, the once-dignified structure has been reduced to a gladiatorial colosseum, and the debt-riddled octopus working at the betting desk. Yet, even here, a callback to opera exists in the form of the rare opponent, Siegfried, the name of Wagner's third entry in his famous Ring Cycle (Kobbé ???) and its tenor protagonist. He is highlighted earlier in the game during a scene involving Cyan, Shadow, and Sabin, though it is conveyed in dialog that prior instances of Siegfried were imposters, and his increased difficulty in the colosseum backs that notion up (Final Fantasy VI).

On Kefka Palazzo

"Bleh! You people make me sick! You sound like lines from a self-help book! If that's how it's going to be... I'll snuff them all out! Every last one of your sickening, happy little reasons for living!" (Final Fantasy VI)

The chief antagonist of the story, Kefka is initially portrayed as an unstable clown of a commander; his wild appearance relative to his subordinates and his dry wit in strong-arming Figaro to cooperate with the hunt for Terra establish him as an antagonist equal parts cruel and comedic. This burn-the-world mentality is strongly reinforced shortly before the opera scene, when rather than continue to siege the fortress of Doma, he instead poisons the water supply, reveling in the mass murder. Even the lives of his own men are held in no regard, as he muses on the POWs held in Doma, “Who cares? They’re the ones who were stupid enough to get caught by the enemy!”



Figure 12 Kefka poisons the water supply at Doma, killing many innocent people, escalating the threat he poses.

Many stories use techniques to make villains relatable, help explain the war from their viewpoint, or give the sense of a moral quandary gone awry that helps enrich the story and bring the antagonist closer to both the protagonist and the world setting. There are times, however, when a villain is defined by a madness and cruelty that escape the reasonable bounds of humanity. Kefka is one such fellow – but he is not without parallel.

Baron Scarpia, famous among opera antagonists, is the chief of police in *Tosca*. A man quite devoid of moral anchor, or in the words of Pogue, “so loathesome and cruel that he makes Darth Vader look like a soup-kitchen worker.” He is not above murder, double-crossing, or rape. Introduced by the pursuit of a fugitive Angelotti, Scarpia is given ample stage time to reinforce his depravity, and does to in memorable fashion (Pogue).

Kefka is similarly introduced. His approach to the castle Figaro is in the pursuit of a fugitive, in this case Terra Branford, the Empire’s weaponized half-Esper. He insists that cooperation will ensure Figaro’s safety, only to set the castle ablaze in an effort to press King Edgar to cooperate. Thankfully, the heroes have an ace up their sleeve, and thwart his pursuit by fleeing while the castle submerges under the sand to extinguish itself, but it is a similar circumstance of introduction that helps reinforce a pattern of cruelty that is followed by demonstrations of murder, betrayal, and madness.

Both Scarpia and Kefka find themselves run through by the female leads that oppose them – in the former, Tosca takes Scarpia’s life with a fatal strike, only to commit suicide as his machinations thwart her happiness posthumously. In the latter, Celes attempts to strike down Kefka, but is undone by his pure hatred and the power he gains from the Warring Triad. His apocalyptic actions thereafter bring Celes to the point of attempting suicide, but Celes’ inner strength is revived by a serendipitous and familiar bandanna tied to a gull. Where *Tosca* opts for a righteous climax and a tragic finale, *Final*

Fantasy VI gives its villain his victory at the height of the story, but uses the remainder to tell a story of finding hope, purpose, and love despite overwhelming odds.

Palazzo ('palace' in Italian) is an interesting selection for surname for Kefka. It conjures immediate comparison to the Palazzo Farnese, where Scarpia's offices are situated in *Tosca*, and his self-indulgent evils can be monologue to the audience (Plotkin 215). While Scarpia is in some ways motivated by the conquest of *Tosca*, however, Kefka shows no parallel interest in Celes. It is actually Emperor Gestahl that intones he intends for the two to bring him magically-gifted progeny, a fate from which one imagines Celes' defiant freedom expressed in the opera has a powerful source of inspiration. Kefka, by contrast, is Gestahl's broken experiment, and though both Scarpia and Kefka have machinations and a keen interest in murder, the latter does not revel in conquest, but sheer destruction. Once Kefka ascends to nigh-godhood in the game's second act, his home is in the eponymous Kefka's Tower, a 'palazzo' within which he can direct the Light of Judgment to obliterate the landscape of the world and cast civilization into the hopeless dread he relishes.

Kefka is not present during the opera scene itself, but it is hard to ignore his influence upon it. He is emblematic of the Empire in a way that none of its other principle figures are (Cid's naiveté, Leo's honor code, and Celes' righteous traitor-turn all clearly divest them from Kefka's maddening evil.) Celes' liberation in the opera is as much for her own growth as it is to symbolize her defiance of the Empire and its arranged

‘marriage’ of her to Kefka. She is as much defined by her self-discovery as foil. Kefka and Celes are both products of the Magitek Knight program; the farther Celes goes on her path of redemption, the higher Kefka builds his revulsive reputation.

On Setzer Gabbiani

“A blackjack-playing, world-traveling, casino-dwelling free spirit...” (Final Fantasy VI)

Setzer’s introduction occurs during the events of the opera’s preface. A wandering gambler whose freedom has gone unhampered from the Empire in the way it has for others is infatuated with Maria, the star soprano of the show. He sends notice to the Impresario that he intends to abscond with Maria, a sure sign of bravado backed up by the Impresario’s own theory that “He’ll probably appear right at the climax of Scene 1. He loves an entrance...” This holds true; Setzer casually waits for the completion of the battle between Ultros and the party before the lights are killed, Maria is spot lit, and Setzer descends to the cue of his own theme music and his complimentary exclamation, “What a performance!!” He spins Celes-as-Maria around, tells the Impresario he is a man of his word, and just as quickly, zips back into the sky with his abductee in tow.

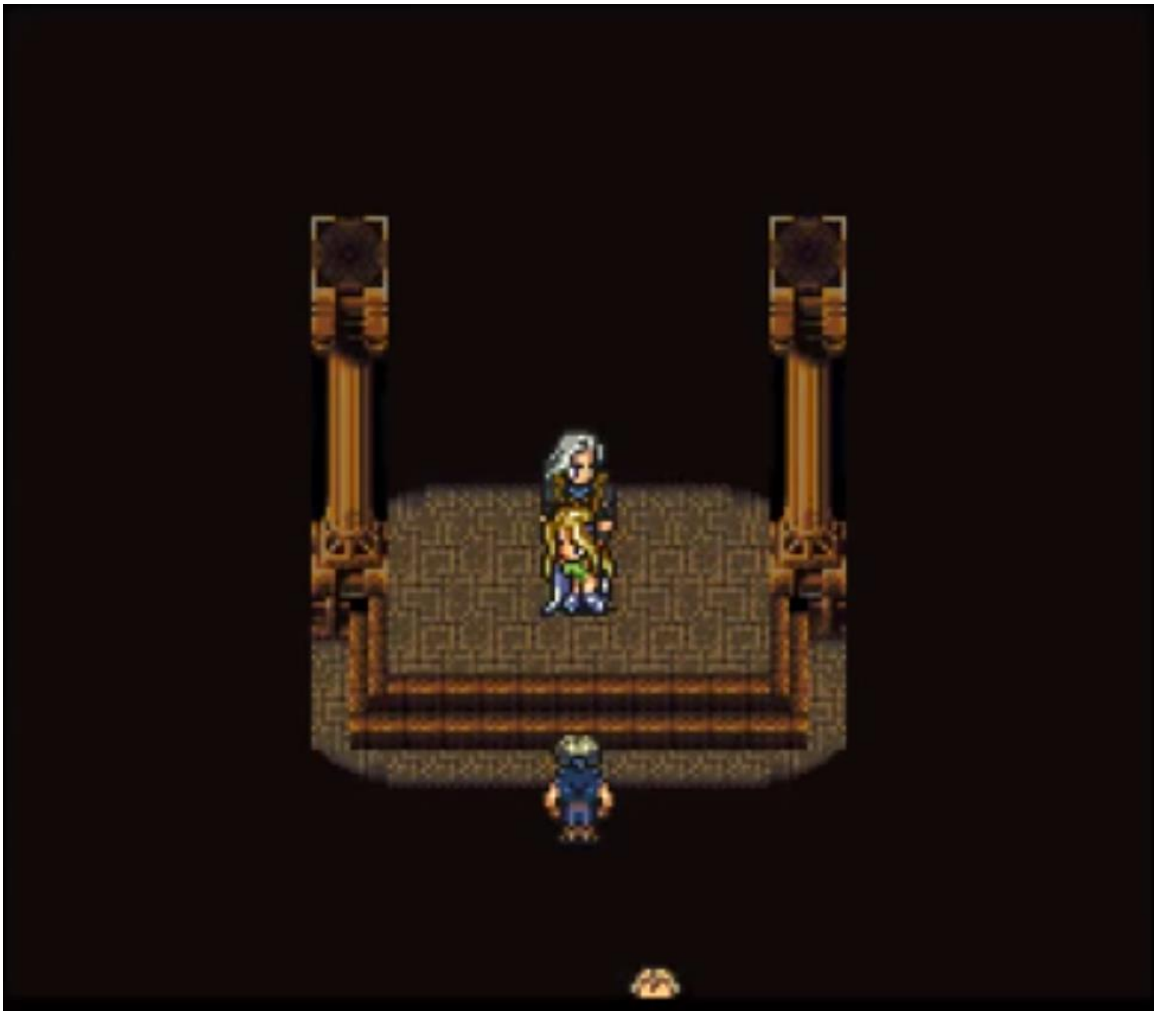


Figure 13 Locke looks on as Setzer abducts Celes, thinking she is Maria.

Celes' arrival on the Blackjack occurs with the music from Setzer's arrival at the opera house being unbroken, even as that scene has faded to black. This, combined with her wink to the player moments later, as she aids the rest of the party on board, helps migrate the scene from set to set, along with Locke's line, "But this is the tough one! Part 2 begins now!"

This is precisely the truth – a second ‘act’ takes place, where the party truthfully confesses their anti-Empire sentiments to Setzer, where they seem to only be met with marginal understanding. Setzer’s ambitions, however, remain paramount. He offers a proposition; Celes’ hand in marriage for his cooperation. Celes calmly counters with a conditional proposition the gambler can’t resist in the form of a coin flip. Heads, Setzer is committed to help. Tails, the gambler and general are betrothed. He not only accepts, but does so with aplomb – “Oho! Fine! I accept!” This is, of course, his undoing, but even upon discovering that Celes has used the famed double-headed coin acquired from Edgar, he revels in the chicanery. “Ha! How low can you get?! I love it!” (Final Fantasy VI)



Figure 14 Caela takes the double-headed coin from Edgar, telegraphing the ruse she is about to employ on the gambler.

As the party starts to fly to Vector, Locke unwittingly takes his role as facilitator of character growth and asks if the airship could fall. Setzer foreshadows his backstory with Darill by lowering his head, then looking aside and stating that “When things fall, they fall! It’s all a matter of fate...” As they plan the landing zone, the scene transitions to the Blackjack cruising at low altitude, slowly approaching the spotlights and ziggurat

of Vector. The scene fades out, and returns with the ship parked by the Empire occupied town of Albrook.

Gabbiani ('seagulls' in Italian) is yet another character whose name is borrowed from Italian, and again, the symbolism behind the surname is leveraged by the game. The seagulls, a representation of flight and freedom, are part and parcel with his role as the only living owner of an airship in the world, and the freedom that vessel provides to both the characters in the game's purposes and for the player to explore both the World of Balance and the World of Ruin. The birds make other critical appearances throughout the story, however, including on the island Celes is stranded upon early in the game's second half. It is a seagull sporting Locke's bandanna that revives her hope and spurs her on to travel by raft. In Maranda, Lola, a worried wife of a soldier in Mobliz has not received a letter from him in some time, while a seagull remains perched on her rooftop – unless the player, by their actions earlier in the game, has ponied up the postage to write her back, in which case her dialog is not of worry, but of relief. When in the World of Ruin, a wistful citizen opines about better days in the World of Balance, and the flashback includes a flock of seagulls flying overhead, only for Setzer to be found at the café, mourning his situation and lack of wings.

In truth, Setzer has them, but needed the optimism of friends to set them free. Spurred on by conversation, the party heads to the tomb of his departed girlfriend Darill, where the exposition of his past takes place. The player discovers that Setzer's Blackjack

was no match for Darill's Falcon, but that her speed was also her undoing, and he discovered the Falcon's wreckage a year after she failed to meet him at "our hill", hiding it in her tomb.

With an airship and airborne again, and Setzer at the helm, Celes spots a seagull flying by. Shocked, she tracks its flight; the camera follows it to a town, and Celes commands Setzer to "follow that pigeon", certain it will lead them to her friends. Sure enough, the song playing in the background, and the song that replaces the windy and morose organ-and-piano sounds of "Dark World" is the rising notes and revived orchestrations of "Searching For Friends".



Figure 15 The birds that fly alongside Setzer's airship. They are a symbol leveraged repeatedly in Final Fantasy VI.

This theme continues throughout – where Setzer and his airship are introduced, hope abounds, be it getting to the Empire, finding friends, or reaching Kefka's tower for the final confrontation. Even in the game's epilogue, as the Falcon sails overhead and Terra lets her hair blow in the breeze at the ship's helm, as the party revels in its victory, the birds are heavily featured in the imagery, either flying through vistas that the player has visited throughout the game, or sailing alongside the airship, indicating that the entire

world has just been granted the hope and freedom that it was robbed of by the Light of Judgment and Kefka's machinations.

On Edgar Roni Figaro

"The young king of Figaro Castle, ally to the Empire, and a master designer of machinery..." (Final Fantasy VI)

Edgar's introduction is that of a manipulator and flatterer. He labels himself as an ally of the Empire to Terra, tells her that her beauty outclasses his interest in her powers (a "distant 3rd"), then asides about his rusty technique as Terra questions his mannerisms.

While most of the dialog around the castle either details the Empire's activities or Edgar's womanizing, one important exception stands out. An early cutscene with the Matron of the castle introduces Edgar's twin brother Sabin Rene Figaro and hints at their father's impending mortality. Even his initial counter-argument to Kefka's pursuit of Terra is cloaked in his proclivities: "You see, there're more girls here than grains of sand out there. I can't keep track of 'em all!" The line doesn't stop Kefka from setting the castle on fire when he doesn't get his way, as the madman is wont to do, but it demonstrates clearly that the young king is as much a machinist as he is a crafter of machination.

Edgar and machinery function as mutual reinforcements. He is at times outclassed, be it by the Empire, magic users, or monsters. Much as he demonstrates his ability to socially engineer, he too does with actual machinery. In addition to his Tools ability in combat, Figaro is a mechanized castle capable of submerging, maintained by his own hand.

This clever side of Edgar is most evidenced in the famous “coin flip” scene explaining his acquisition of the throne. Upon discovering the death of their father, neither Sabin nor Edgar is terribly interested in leading the kingdom. It opens with “So... they went and told you...” demonstrating Edgar’s desire to shelter his brother from the harsh news. Sabin is angry and distraught, while Edgar maintains a stoic if somber demeanor. He follows his brother to the top of the castle, and once there, hears his brother’s desire to be free of Figaro. Edgar has entertained such thoughts as well, but knows the realm can’t be left without a ruler. So, taking a special coin given to him from his father, Edgar offers to settle the decision. Heads, Sabin may choose his fate. Tails, Edgar. “This is for Dad!” With that exclamation, the coin sails skyward as the scene fades out. The implications are known by the player at this point; Sabin wins the toss and takes his freedom, while Edgar remains behind to rule Figaro. The trick, however, is the rigged coin, each side having one of the two sons’ faces on it. Edgar, manipulating his brother, gives him the illusion of equal opportunity for burden, while the truth is that Edgar had sacrificed himself before ever tossing the coin.



Figure 16 Edgar tosses the double-headed coin into the sky, effectively taking the burden of leadership upon himself and liberating his brother Sabin.

The two do later discuss the implications of the toss from ten years ago. Sabin recognizes the freedom let him grow in strength and understanding, while Edgar gets assurance from his brother that he's done his father's legacy proud as king.

Besides explaining the relationship between the brothers, Edgar's manipulation skills come into play when Celes confronts Setzer upon the Blackjack. It is this same coin

that double-crosses the gambler that causes Sabin to suddenly realize the implication of his brother's decision all those years ago. "That coin...?! BIG BROTHER!!! Don't tell me...!" Edgar is willing to push all his cards on the table, so to speak, in order to ensure securing the Blackjack.

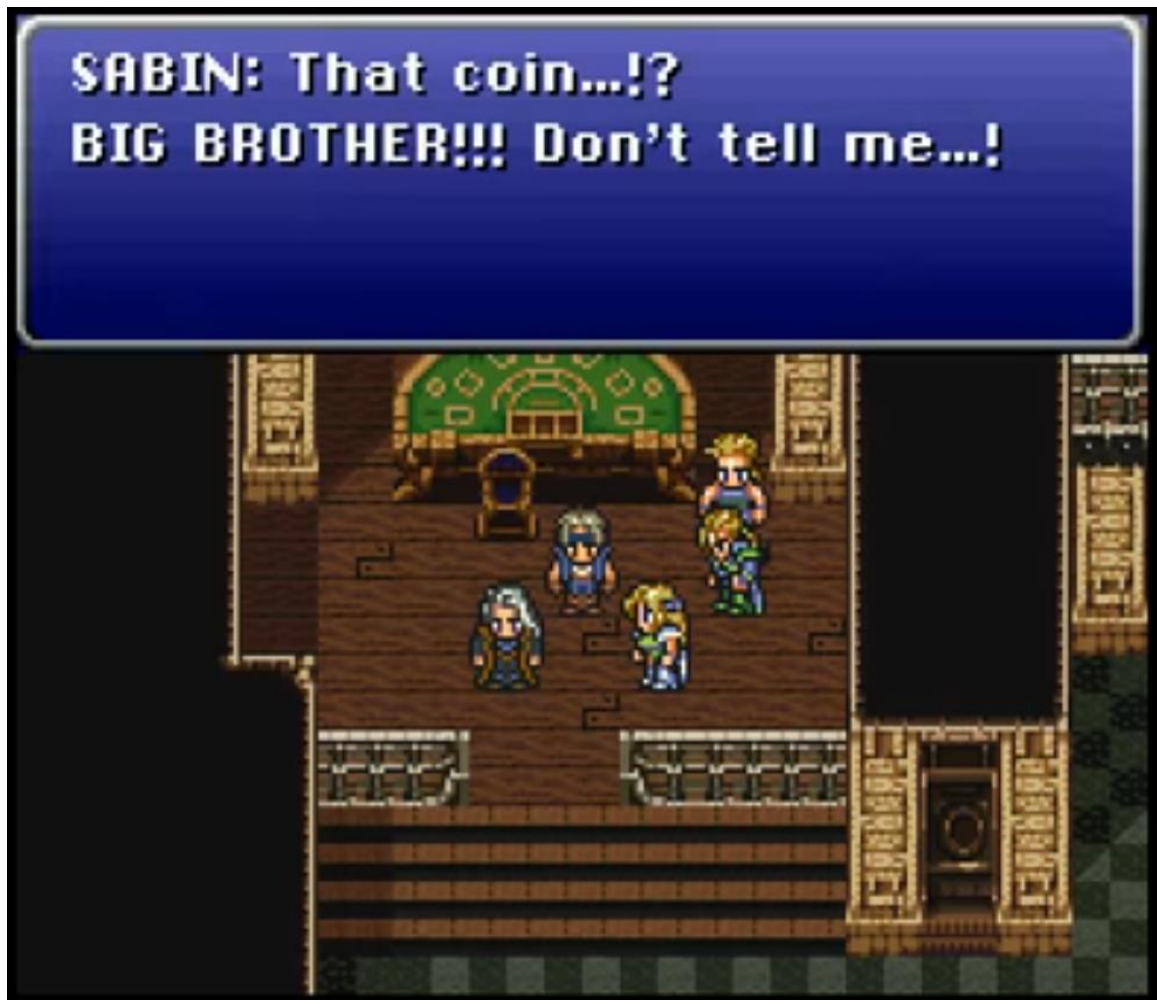


Figure 17 Sabin discovers the truth behind his brother's actions. Note Edgar's downcast head, hinting at guilt.

The name Figaro is of particular import in our analysis. It has great weight in opera, as Figaro was the main character in a number of operas, including *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (*The Barber of Seville*, Rossini 1816) and *Le nozze di Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro*, Mozart 1786), both based on plays previously penned by Pierre Beaumarchais (Kobbé 324, 83). In the former, Figaro is a clever barber whose manipulations go to the benefit of Rosine and Almaviva, while in the latter, his razor wit is used against the womanizing of Almaviva. In both cases, Figaro is portrayed as a cunning character with a distinct personality. *Final Fantasy VI*'s Edgar possesses that same keen sense for social trickery, but also uses Mozart's Almaviva as a mask, a façade of womanizing that affords him cover, but also occasionally betrays him.

The nation of Figaro is itself a curious place – in addition to the castle submerging, it also has the ability to travel west. If only for coincidental irony, *Il barbiere di Siviglia* also traveled west, as the first performance of opera in Italian in America (Kobbé 332).

On Impresario

The formal definition of an impresario is not unlike that of an organizer or patron; they are the individual responsible for planning and/or funding an opera. The term came to prominence in Italy's opera scene in the heart of the 18th century, and his roles were many, but principally focused on arranging a season through negotiations with the

theater's controlling interests and the performers themselves as a sort of "intermediary, a fixer" (Rosselli 5).

As he is first found in *Final Fantasy VI*, Impresario is visiting a mansion owned by Owzer in the wealthy city of Jidoor. He is pacing frantically, while the patron in the loft above seems comparatively relaxed. He is stressed about Maria, and drops a letter in his wake as he flees. Master Owzer addresses the group afterwards, stating that he is the director of the operas in the area, and is simply referred to by his title. The panic is understood when the party unfurls the letter, seeing that a man that describes himself as the Wandering Gambler ominously pens the following: "My Dear Maria, I want you for my wife. I'm coming for you..." (Final Fantasy VI)

This permits Owzer the ability to provide an introduction for Setzer Gabbiani, explaining he has an airship, and giving the party all the breadcrumbs they need to devise their plan of using Celes as bait to lure Setzer out and utilize his ship to reach the Empire's continent. It also effectively paints a picture of the importance that a good singer has to an impresario.

He also manages the on-stage performance as narrator. When the performance is going as planned, he delivers his lines with stoic precision. However, when things go awry, he begins to panic, concerned that "If the two heroes are flattened, the opera's over!" His exclamation leads to murmurs in the crowd, but when Locke leaps to the

scene's and Celes' mutual rescue, the Impresario momentarily asides "Aya... What awful acting!" despite the crowd's cheers, but realizes not all is lost for his performance. His words are cue for the tune Grand Finale to begin, setting the stage for Ultros and the party to fight to the band's high-tempo tune. "Hmm... Might as well make the most of this. MUSIC!!"



Figure 18 The Impresario attempts to maintain cohesion as his opera falls apart before his eyes.

ARIA: THAT RIBBON SUITS YOU.

If opera is defined by anything, it is the transmission of a story through the cooperative efforts of the orchestra and the vocalists, or by the simpler Italian *opera lirica*, a “work of theater that is set to song” (Plotkin 3). As the form evolved from this seed, the means by which lyrics could convey narrative fell into different categories.

The first of these, *recitativo*, dominated early opera, where minimal accompaniment, either by minimal instrumentation (*secco*) or a full orchestra (*stromentalto*), but principally for the purpose of advancing the plot rather than conveying specific emotional or feelings for the character in question (Osborne 259). The second, *arioso*, can be thought as a midpoint between aria and *recitativo*. It can at times be used to transition from one to the other, or to inject more melody to a plot point, but was seen as a more engaging advancement, and was a favorite of Wagner (Osborne 21; Plotkin 10). The third is aria, which underwent tremendous transformation from its origins in the public operas of Monteverdi, to the *bel canto*, to the complex and multimodal grand arias of the 19th century, but is clearly defined as the opposite of *recitativo* – in the aria, the vocalists are given great opportunity for ornamentation, orchestras can play up thematic elements, and a character’s internal state or emotional core can be bared to the audience (Koopman; Balthazar 30-34).

Arias have been categorized in many ways over the centuries, with some descriptors giving a window into the particular form to follow (*da capo, rondo, etc.*) and others providing insight as to the timbre and contents (*di bravura, parlante, etc.*) (Opera 101). No two are truly alike, but many function as both emotional and creative high points for the operas in which they reside.

The central moment of *Maria and Draco*, and perhaps most memorable among scenes in *Final Fantasy VI*'s entirety, is Celes' famous performance as Maria in singing "Aria di Mezzo Carattere". As she stands atop the faux castle walls, Maria sings long, ornamented notes of undying love, dances with her imagination's Draco, tosses unwanted flowers from the edge in solidarity with her lost love, and finally, being made to return at the behest of the Chancellor to dance with the prince Ralsei, walks off stage with one last glance back at the moonlit backdrop before departing with the lights fading out.



Figure 19 Celes, as Maria, performing the *Aria di Mezzo Carattere*. The player must make the correct lyrical selections to advance.

The performance is, perhaps by operatic definitions of the form, not particularly emblematic of the ‘mezzo carettere’ (from Italian, meaning of medium/mid character), but rather of a tone that resides somewhere between entirely serious and entirely comic; this should not be confused with the singing range of mezzo-soprano, which rests between contralto and soprano (Osborne 207). In truth, the “*Aria di Mezzo Carattere*”

better describes the incidental performer, Celes, than it does the rather *serie* Maria and her tune.

The Rossinian triangle casts the *prima donna* in either a soprano or contralto, as the role entails (for example, Angelina/Cinderella is a contralto, while it is the love interest, and not she, that takes on the mezzo-carattere) (Senici 100). It does seem to come to be that, in *Maria and Draco*, Celes/Maria is not performed in the pattern that the title of her aria; rather, perhaps, it is the subject of her affections to whom that outpouring is directed, and in that sense, the only character that meets the *semiseria* criteria is not Draco, interestingly, but Locke.

The song itself is not terribly long – including the orchestral elements, it clocks in at under four minutes, of which Maria is only singing from 0:25 to 1:48 for the first three stanzas, followed by the spectral dance, and again vocals from 2:35 to 3:27. Structurally, it utilizes a *dal segno* (Italian, ‘from the sign’), returning to the familiar melody for all five sections of Maria’s lyrics. This is an evolution from the origins method of *da capo* (‘from the head’), which had risen to prominence in Italy’s opera houses as a tool for *seria* and *buffa* alike (Balthazar 31). It follows the common four-line convention in five parts; the *ritornello* parts between the vocals forming R-A-A’-B-R’-A’-B-R’.

Interestingly, as so much of *Final Fantasy VI* draws from later Italian operas, there is a little bit of *cavatina* to the performance in that it is the first appearance of Maria and a shorter performance than a full *de capo*. It is also lacking in the complexities of the grand

aria found in later operas (Balthazar 33). Despite the emotional weight of the movement on stage as it pertains to the *libretto* and Celes' struggles alike, the best efforts of the sampled choral instrument understandably fall well short of opera's best known Maria, the renowned Maria Callas. The legendary Greek soprano made her name performing arias with similar patterns in the 20th century, notably focusing on the very Italian operas *Final Fantasy VI* so heavily draws from, and principally *Tosca* (Osborne 63). It is also worth noting that these same observations come to Plotkin as he looks to Callas' *Tosca*, noting "she had few rivals in her ability to plumb the musical and textual meanings of a character she played" despite "not the most beautiful voice", in the aria "Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore", where he sees:

It is at moments like these that people who are critical of opera complain that opera is not real. Well, opera is real: it is a real art form with conventions that we who love it understand. *Tosca* is reflecting on her life in a thought process that takes three minutes of opera time... and enjoy it for the music and the emotion it powerfully conveys. (Plotkin 217)

In this moment, Maria Callas' *Tosca* is Celes Chère's Maria; carried in a lauded aria not by practiced method, but singularly by the emotional weight and strength of their character. While *Tosca*'s monologue is internal to the moments before her heroic apex, Maria's is the closest the script of the *Dream Oath Opera* brings her to such agency, rebuffing Ralse and affirming her commitment to Draco.

Assuming the performance goes as planned and the player is not made to replay the part due to missed cues or lines, the next scene starts; the only reaction the player is given comes from Locke, standing behind stage and watching through curtains, speaking to himself – “Well done, CELES.” (Note: Names in FF6 are capitalized by default, but can be changed by the player upon their introductions.)

However, should the player miss a line or fail to move correctly on stage, the performance is scuttled, and the player will have to attempt the opera again. This is an interesting approach for *Final Fantasy VI*, which could have just as easily forced the player to resume again from their previous save point if the opera fails, but instead builds multiple attempts in. The Impresario will insist that the performance be better on the next day, Locke will remind Celes to study the *libretto* carefully, and the next day’s opera will proceed. Even in something as simple as recognizing that the same opera will be performed over multiple days at the venue is a nice touch that helps reinforce the opera influence in the game.

BASSO BUFFO: DON'T TEASE THE OCTOPUS, KIDS!

While comic characters had been a part of opera in the past, they had not had prominence in the genre in the era of the *opera serie*. The origins of this change is the Italian city of Naples. At the start of the 18th century, humorous compositions and characters found their way onto the stage, and by 1733, Pergolesi provided *La serva padrona* (*The Maidservant Turned Mistress*) to the Teatro di San Bartolomeo in Naples as an *intermezzo* to be performed between acts of an *opera seria*, Pergolesi's *Il prigioniero superbo* (Kobbé 57). This *intermezzo* would prove to be a seminal work in the genre to become *opera buffa*. While not immediately recognized, its migration to the *Querelle des Bouffons* (*Quarrel of the Comic Actors*) nearly twenty years later sparked the fires of its advances outside Naples. The famous Teatro di San Carlo, built in Naples in 1737, would come to host a number of these, as it took the seat of prominence for performances in the genre's hometown (Balthazar 237). In the latter half of the 18th century, and into the 19th, the form would be codified by productions from some of Italian opera's biggest names, including Mozart, Donizetti, and Rossini.

The *basso buffo*, specifically, arises from this form. A comic character defined by vocal inferiority to the other performers offset by techniques like patter and acts that are at times character flaws, physical or emotional, that serve as barriers to heroism or otherwise distinguish them from the position (Bokina 72).

These characters can serve critical roles in the plot, or as sidebars to more featured performers. Uberto, the prototype of the basso buffo found in the aforementioned *La serva padrona* (Plotkin 16), is beguiled by Serpina via Vespone's performance as the Captain Tempest. His *da capo* of protest is scripted to be outdone (Kobbé 58).

The *basso buffo* was also defined by agility over talent – take Don Magnifico's complex lyrical pieces in Rossini's *La Cenerentola* (Cinderella) as the Baron of Mountflagon during “Sia qualunque delle figlie” the aria in Act II (range 3C-4F):

Sarò zeppo e contornato di memorie e petizioni,
Di galline, di storioni, di bottiglie, di broccati, di candele e marinate,
Di ciambelle e pasticcetti, di canditi e di confetti,
Di piastroni, di dobloni, di vaniglia e di caffè,
D'ogni lato sono zeppo
Basta, basta, basta... (Aria Database)

The demand here is not in the range, but in vocal agility, and that freneticism lends itself to the stage performance, creating a device that is uniquely comic, yet fits

well either as centerpiece or comic foil. This characterization is also found in characters such as Don Alfonso (of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*) (Kobbé 103) and Don Pasquale (the titular character of Donizetti's work) (Kobbé 385). This can often, however, result in the intentional distinction of the buffo from the other performers on stage, as if to single them out for their relative incompetence. In this way, the vocal talents and the characterizations performed on stage have coalesced into the singular form.

The introduction of the comic relief villain Ultros in *Final Fantasy VI* occurs as the heroes of the plot are fleeing Returners headquarters on a raft. The octopus is bested in combat, and for quite some time, is an afterthought in the mind of the player. Numerous plot points come up between his introduction and return – Locke and Celes meet in South Figaro, the Figaro brothers Edgar and Sabin are split, travel, and reunite, and the group travels west in search of Terra after the successful Esper defense in Narshe. This brings a final group of Locke, Edgar, Sabin, and Celes together for exposition involving the royal coin flip scene, the loss of Rachel, and other integral plot points to be referenced in the Dream Oath Opera (*Final Fantasy VI*).

This also puts Ultros squarely in the role of the comic villain for his role in the opera (or rather, the opera around the opera, returning to our decided perspective of consuming the entire scene for our purposes). It begins with a written note of warning left

to the players: “I owe you one, so I’m gonna jam up your opera! –Ultros”. While not explicit, there’s a distinct indication that the malicious mollusk is aware of the substitution of Maria for Celes, as his eventually-discovered plan is directed at her demise.

In a sense, this depicts Ultros as a sort of *buffo caricato*, or caricature villain. This is a low-comic pattern in the Italian terminology, akin to a Doctor Bartolo, but distinctly takes his behavior – from being thwarted by Locke to battling in Ralse’s place on stage with a bewildered cast against the rafter-heroes, to Setzer’s ultimate acquisition of Maria-as-Celes and the subsequent epilogue as a sort of *lieto fine*, or happy ending, that felt far more whimsical and satisfying than the rigidity of its *serie* counterpart (Warner xvi).

In a demonstrated bit of pure camp, the method of the demise is revealed during a striking bit of *leitmotif* (see section As Cue). As Draco’s lost unit is descending upon the capital of the West to pursue Maria in the wake of the war, Locke has identified Ultros in the rafters, laboring with a comical four-ton weight, going so far as to explicitly state how many minutes it will take him to complete his treacherous task.

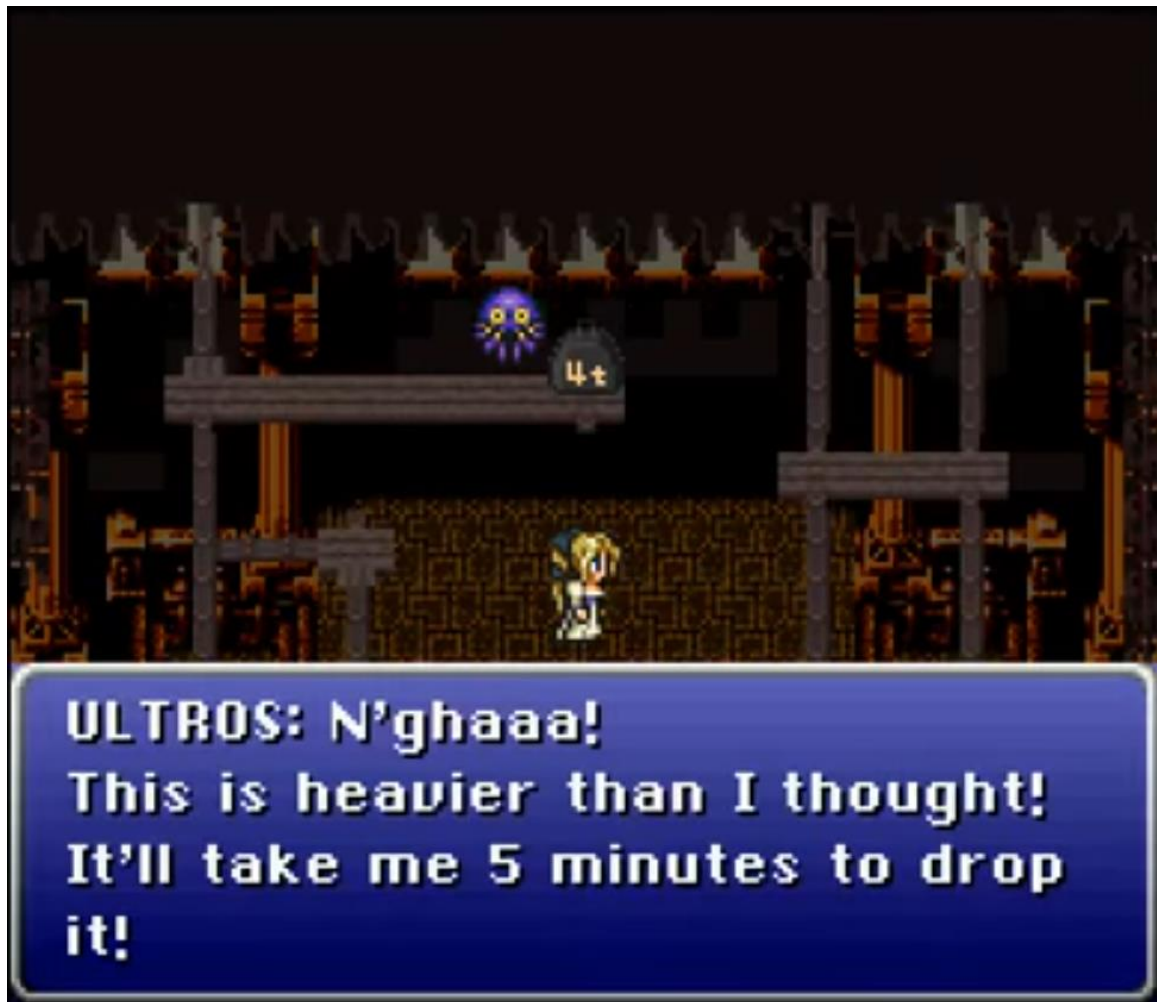


Figure 20 Ultros telegraphs to the player how long they will have to attempt to stop him from dropping the weight onto Celes.

However, Ultros is not the only *buffo* to participate. If Ultros is the demonstrated comic villain *buffo*, his counterpart in the opera is Locke, who operates as an external agent to the Draco and Maria narrative, but due to an ironic juxtaposition of his white knight complex and Celes' impending doom, is forced to provide a defense of Maria and Celes simultaneously, the former through words and the latter through action.

Locke is a flawed character, as demonstrated early on with dialog from Edgar warning Celes of his complicated past, with the Rachel flashback, and the confluence of his actual feelings for the former Empire general and his instincts to respond to damsel-in-distress scenarios. However, the actions of Ultros – the discovery of the note and subsequent spotting of him in the rafters – are a call to action for Locke, who nobly attempts to engage the octopus, only for them to humorously plummet from the scaffolding and drastically impair the opera's operation by virtue of landing on the two male leads.



Figure 21 Ultros and Locke double-take in an exaggerated gesture as they both fall from the rafters.

It is worth noting the Impresario's exclamation here. "Aya, what awful acting!" This is a hallmark of *buffo*, specifically the *buffo nobile*. Unlike Ultros' *caricato*, Locke's instinct is to immediately defer to his nature as hero, and exclaim that he will rescue Maria. While the declaration itself can be thought of as improvisational for the moment, Locke clearly acts on practiced thinking, rather than taking on a role, and stands both in

the game's mechanics and the presented narrative as stark contrast to “octopus royalty”, the distinctly caricatured Ultros.

In the aforementioned Teatro di San Carlo in Naples, a family of *basso buffo* established a reputation for the form. The Cassacia family, starting with the elder Raffaele and later Carlo, dominated the role of *basso buffo* at its height and in its place of origin. Carlo, specifically, was a favorite of both Donizetti and Rossini, the latter of whom was particularly established in developing triangles that would become eponymous (Bel Canto Society; Mesa 321; Senici 100). These triangles were exemplified in operas such as *Il barbiere de Siviglia* (*The Barber of Seville*) and *La cenerentola*. The antagonist was clearly a comic *buffo* (Ultros in this case), and the love interest in question a *mezzo carattere* tenor (existing between serious and comic, a perfect description of Celes' predicament and, perhaps an intentional decision, the very name of the aria she performs the scene before, the famous “Aria di Mezzo Carattere”), leaving Locke forced to undertake the third role, that of the hero or *nobile*, even though they are clear substitutes for the real performers, whom they've felled with coincidental collisions.

The *basso buffo*, as created in Naples and evolved throughout the history of opera buffa, adjusted to fit the librettos they acted in and the performances demanded of them.

From *intermezzo* to feature, to archetype, their patterns and contributions to comic relief aptly extend beyond the stage, as functionally demonstrated in *Final Fantasy VI*.

LOCALIZATION: I'M A MAN OF MY WORD, MUSIC MAN!

Opera speaks to people, often in languages they do not know. German, French, Italian, Russian, English – an opera's *libretto* and lyrics are quite tied to the language of their origin. Moreover, the integration of the score and the pacing of those lyrics adds additional complexities. It is one thing to translate a word from one language to another, but the addition or removal of syllables can throw the pacing of the entire enterprise off. What if the word no longer fits with the notes, or in the space allotted to communicate an idea is not sufficient for one language, but is for another?

Ted Woolsey graduated from the University of Washington with a degree in Japanese Literature and a background as a writer. He took a position at Square assisting a company that basically was devoid of a localization department in adapting games for the North American market. As the principal architect for many English translations of Square's early titles, including *Final Fantasy VI*, Ted Woolsey was responsible for taking not only the script of the game and converting it from Japanese to English, but for making additional adjustments to get past the additional layers of censorship added by Nintendo as part of their requirements for releases in North America. Worst of all, these were tasks taken in extremely narrow time windows; *Final Fantasy VI* was given a thirty-day window for its localization (Johnston).

The migration from one language to another is fraught with peril. The loss or addition of context that is culturally dependent on phrases, symbolism, or the pairing of certain words, can completely devalue one phrase from poetic to hodgepodge. The rhyming scheme can be lost, or in efforts to preserve it, have context muddled. The strain is palpable for any one line; to endure this for the entire *libretto* is tragic. (Pogue 18) In short, *traduttore, traditore* (Italian, ‘translator, traitor’) (Lederhendler 35) maintains its wisdom for the medium of video games.

Thankfully, the advent of *surtitles* (projected text above the stage) mitigates this problem in modern opera. The beauty of the opera in its intended format can be left alone, while those unable to understand the foreign language can still consume the meaning behind their words by reading the translations that appear above the stage, be it projected there or displayed on some sort of screen.

This is, by a happy coincidence, precisely the route taken by *Final Fantasy VI* during the opera scene. The chipset inside the SNES permitted sampling, but there was no full vocal recording, so instead, the song “Aria di Mezzo Carattere” itself contains an instrumented version of what is to be Maria’s voice in the opera. Thus, the limitations of the SNES reduce, at first blush, Maria’s lyrics to simple waveform pitches that are shifted up and down as she sings notes. This provides an unexpected advantage. Rather than having to restructure any pace or strain to make those lyrics fit within the grand context of a localization effort, only the surtitles had to be changed. There is still the challenge of

tweaking those words to still fit nicely into the pacing of the tune while remaining true to their meaning, but that is a far lower bar than the translations of opera require.

Though Celes' vocals were simply digital samples pitch-shifted, the weight that these sounds possess for conveying emotion should not be underestimated. The sound produced by voice, as much as the words themselves if not more, can illuminate the feelings a character is vocalizing on stage. Plotkin approaches this distinctly while describing language and lyricism:

In *Carmen*, the title character sings about love in a languorous, sensual fashion, making the first syllable, *moor*, on a lower note. By contrast, the title character of *Tosca*, upon greeting her lover Mario, sings the three Italian syllables, *ah-moh-ray*, with equal emphasis on each syllable. This creates a wistful sound that could not be more different than *Carmen's* frankly erotic amour. The lesson here is that while the meaning of these words is always love, the nature of the love being described can be made specific by the musical sound to which the word is set. (Plotkin 99)

Celes is no different in this respect. Her long, ornamented, and romantic notes persist throughout the score (from sections B to C twice, then again C twice), the tone never wavering. This is consistent with the theme of the aria itself, prefaced by the narrator as such: "The forces of the West fell, and Maria's castle was taken. Prince Ralse,

of the East, took her hand by force. But she never stopped yearning for Draco...” (Final Fantasy VI). Even as the lyrics shift from version to version, based on localization mired in both technical limitations and conceptual variance, the tone by which Maria sings this aria maintain a cohesive devotion to Draco.

Yet, those lyrics remain a mystery to us if we attempt to listen to them independently. It is the display of the text, at times interactive and at times static, that gives us the understanding of what’s going on. The text that appears above the opera is localized English from the original Japanese, as written by Woolsey, who spoke on the scene in some detail as part of his interview with the Player One Podcast:

So I did spend a lot of time on that. That is one again where there were multiple files that combined to provide that experience. There were battle texts, there was the opera text displayed during the different cinematics on the screen. Then there was the usual screen text and they had to work that in concert. So I think that’s one where I spent a lot of time after I had translated the whole game going back in and trying to think about blocking that out in a way that seemed more poetic as best I could in the space provided of course to get the feeling out there. But that was just one of those wow moments where you... It’s the willing suspension of disbelief thing where you forget you’re looking at all these little kind of weevil characters on a screen and you’re sort of in there with the story. It’s kind of cool.

(Johnston)

The effort demonstrated by Woolsey and team shows in the end result. The opera scene, even in its migration across languages, with limitations to memory and dialog, still manages to convey both the overt meanings of the opera and the subtle details that go to build the larger narrative around the characters participating in it and the world's problems at large.

STAGE: RAISE THE FLOWERS TO THE STARS.

In the centuries predating opera, its predecessors in liturgical drama leveraged the acoustics of the Gothic cathedrals that they called home, where song was more effective than lecture, and lyricists practiced both with and without accompanying musicians. This evolution of song and voice conveying narrative began as such with a defined stage.

(Plotkin 5)



Figure 22 The stage at the Opera House as viewed from the upper level.

Maybe more than any other term, *stage* is understood clearly in both the worlds of opera and video games. To the former, it is the location of the action, where the scenes take place, the performers stand before the audience, and the action happens. The musicians are visible but hidden, in the orchestra pit; they are part of the performance and their input is readily consumed, but they are understood to be independent from the plot taking place just above them, even as their music might evoke themes or issue cues. Above and around them, lights, curtains, surtitles, and other ancillary elements complete

the opera stage, giving visual context to the setting, spotlighting specific locales or persons, and opening and closing phases of the narration.

In *Final Fantasy VI*, like many games in the role-playing genre of its time, this at time takes the form of the battle screen. When an encounter, either random or scripted, causes the current party members to do battle, they are clearly positioned to one side of the screen, while their monstrous foes are presented to the other. As each's turn in the combat is reached, a context menu provides options based on what the character is capable of doing. These mechanics are a debate onto themselves, but it is worth noting they do two things well – illustrate a specific character's uniqueness through their custom abilities, such as Celes' ability to harmlessly absorb enemies' magical attacks, or Locke's ability to steal items from foes, and illustrate a character's growth over time through increased strength, health, and prowess.

The battle screen is not unlike a traditional stage – it has a backdrop that is indicative of the setting for the fight, specific music to fit the narrative substance or weight of the fight, and fanfare for its completion. Though these fights occur, the overarching narrative is that the players win. If all the PCs are knocked out in a battle, with very limited exception, the player is forced to revert to a previous save point in the game – the programmed narrative does not account for branches like this. Though there is a battle, the results are very much 'staged' in the respect that the heroes are expected to win.

We can also look at the literal stage of the opera house south of Jidoor and consider its layout as a wholly different definition of the term. It is, in many respects, a fairly accurate parallel of the real-world equivalent. In the lobby, a check-in desk gives way to doors and stairs that lead to different entrances on the orchestral or mezzanine levels. The NPC audience is seated on the orchestral level, with the pit positioned just below stage. A conductor tends to them, while a wood-panel stage above them hosts the action. When the curtains are drawn, they are rich in texture and colored in the same gold and red hues that the palette opts for in the rest of the room, giving it a sense of wealth and prestige. When the action begins on stage, the backdrops are visible and the darkened house lights instead cast that same group in a muted tone with purplish implications of shadow, helping distinguish them from the lit performers on stage. A dressing room is to the far right of the lobby as a ‘backstage’ area, and up top, doors that flank the stage on the left and right lead to the rafters and a control room for the stage, respectively.

These two are combined during the battle with Ultros. The party is set on both sides of the stage, with the buffo octopus front and center, in the principle light of the stage. The orchestra and crowd look on as the literal backdrop, visible through the curtains, as the script playfully flips the notion of what is and isn’t part of the opera. Once again, even a simple decision like this, to make the otherwise external agents of the audience part of the battle’s background helps reinforce the idea that the interruptions are

part of the intended larger whole, and as such, should be factored into the comparison of usage.

CLOSING THOUGHTS: YOU REMIND ME OF SOMEONE...

Opera's place in culture as a high-brow, powerful, and expressive art form is anchored in centuries of tradition, from the earliest performances to the modern date. It is practiced in the types of emotional connections, dramatic moments, and compelling stories that make up performances such as *Tosca*, *La bohème*, *La cenerentola*, and so many others. (Plotkin xii). It is these same aspirations to realize emotional drama and depth that fueled the creators of the *Final Fantasy* series and drove its development of this iconic title. (Moher)

This focus on the depth and complexity of the human experience, even wrapped in this mythic plot of medieval steampunk, is precisely how Plotkin defines opera – an orchestrated enaction of emotion for the consumption of the audience. The Earl of Harewood remarks in his preface to Kobbe that he is “convinced that opera fulfills an aspect of human need, the transmission through music of one or another of the many forms of drama in which the human condition deals.” That the avenue of opera was used to highlight Kitase's Celes, the humanity of those involved in her struggle, and the depths of the characterizations within *Final Fantasy VI*, seems by its mutual motivations, sound.

Despite their highly divorced formats, the narrative overlap is stark. In many ways, *Final Fantasy VI* utilizes the storytelling methods of its opera ancestors, and to great effect. Its reverence among critical circles in the gaming community, however,

should illustrate that this is neither a matter of chance, nor without avenue for recreation. The developers of the game pointedly set out to tell a story that simultaneously challenged the limitations of the medium they were confined to while taking due diligence to craft a masterful narrative. As Kitase put it:

What made the *Final Fantasy* series so innovative was the emotion realized from drama within the game in addition to those other elements. I believe this innovation was more apparent than ever before in the sixth game. This game really brought that creative goal into full bloom. (Moher)

Video games like this are complex digital works that require not only attention to detail, but a specific harmony between the score, script, characterization, themes, staging, and mechanical elements. In this way, they are not unlike our aforementioned *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a synthesis of artistic elements that operate in tandem to communicate a cohesive work of art. Yet, demonstrated here, is a thoughtful example of a video game up to the task of leveraging opera's storytelling tools.

Much like the optimism in the party's collective hearts as they fly over the slowly rebuilding world in the game's closing minutes, I am lifted by the apparent viability of the two forms' interplay, and the potential wellspring that they present to aspiring designers of operas and video games as a promise of what's possible. Brava, Celes.

APPENDIX A: SHEET MUSIC

88

バイエル90番程度

Aria Di Mezzo Carattere

アリア

プレイング・ポイント ➡ ドラマチックにうたいあげて欲しい曲です。後半にむかって、ぐっともりあげる為にも、**[A]****[B]**は抑え気味にプレイしましょう。
また、**[B]**は、左手の内声の動きにも気を配って、のびやかにうたいあげてください。

♩ = 70

[A] D C

1 3 5 3 2 1 1 2 4 5 1 2 1

1

D C

3 2 (1)

[B] D F#m C# G D F#m C#

3 2 (1)

Em D G#sus4 C#7 F#m A7

B A G# G# C# C#

4 4 4 3 3

1 2 R.H.

3 5 3 5

$\text{♩} = 75$ (D.S. time with Repeat al Coda)

Chords and markings in the score:

- System 1: C , D , F^{\flat}m , G
- System 2: F^{\flat}m , E^{\flat}m , D , to C
- System 3: 1. $\text{C}^{\sharp}\text{sus4}$, $\text{C}^{\sharp}7$, F^{\flat}m , $\text{A}7$; 2. $\text{A}7$
- System 4: Bm , D , A , C^{\sharp}
- System 5: D , $\text{F}^{\flat}7$, $\text{G}^{\flat}\text{maj}7$, B , A , Bm

Sheet music for *Aria di Mezzo Carattere* (Final Fantasy VI, 1994). The score is in G major and 4/4 time. It consists of five systems of piano accompaniment. The first system has four measures with chords Em, G, F#7, Bm, E, G, and A7. The second system has four measures with chords Bm, G, Em7, and A7. The third system has two measures with a D chord and a Coda section with an A7 chord. The fourth system has four measures with chords Bm, E, G, A7, and Bm. The fifth system has four measures with chords Bm, G, Em7, A7, and D. The score includes various musical notations such as eighth notes, quarter notes, and rests, as well as fingerings and articulation marks like 'rit.'

Sheet music for *Aria di Mezzo Carattere* (Final Fantasy VI, 1994).

Composed by Nobuo Uematsu. Lyrics by Yoshinori Kitase.

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BIOGRAPHY

Daniel Greenberg is a longtime resident of the historic video gaming district of Clifton, Virginia. Fortunate to have been raised alongside the burgeoning medium, he has poured hours into games, both as a consumer and an academic. His research tackles the emerging topics surrounding digital games, including their defined role as an art form, the language used to describe them, the manner in which they convey narrative, patterns for developing game literacy, codifying game appreciation, comparing games to other established forms, contributing to the preservation and curation of existing works, and using new media to both illustrate and educate on gaming topics.

Daniel has a Master of Arts in Computer Game Design from George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, where he has also earned degrees in Applied Computer Science and Information Technology. He lectures on the subjects of game design and history, both as an instructor in the undergraduate program and as a guest lecturer at various national gaming conventions. He is the founder of Winterion Game Studios, which produces the online series IONGAMING. He is also the founder of Academic Excellence in Games and Interactive Storytelling, or AEGIS, an annual award at George Mason for students in the visual and performing arts to demonstrate collaboration in using game technology to convey their narratives.