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Stoicism And the Black Mage Hero: A Literary Stoic Examination of A Japanese Role-Playing Game Character

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine the philosophical principles of Stoicism as portrayed in the *Final Fantasy IX* game. The focus of this investigation centers on the character development of Vivi Ornitier. This qualitative descriptive study involves data collection through note-taking, where the researcher plays the game, watches the playthrough multiple times, and takes notes on the dialogues and actions that demonstrate the philosophical values of Stoicism. The collected data is then analyzed using content analysis. The findings reveal that Stoic values empower the character to maintain self-control and manage emotions during challenging situations, as well as to embrace fate. Characters embodying these values tend to exhibit perseverance, integrity, and a strong moral compass. The Stoic philosophy plays a significant role in shaping a fictional character, providing depth, complexity, and strong motivation. The combination of these values results in a hero capable of confronting challenges with tranquility, adhering to moral principles, pursuing their passions, making meaningful contributions, and integrating values.

Keywords: *Philosophical Values, Stoicism, Hero, Video Games, Character Development*

1. Introduction

Each person on earth has a philosophy. The grounding behind why every human being has a philosophy can be made clear through various factors such as one's own culture, experience, values, and characteristic reflection. Everyone has his or her individual journey which is shaped by his or her environment and influences. The cultural context an individual grows up in has a big impact on his or her own worldview and principles. The good and the bad affairs of life also play a crucial role in shaping a person's perspective on living. His or her own



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education from family, friends, and society has a part too in molding views on personal morals and ideals. Additionally, actively asking about these that make up a person's existence invigorates one to search for a deeper understanding of life and the point of living. This process can lead to the development of a person's own philosophy, which takes in ethic views and existential meaning. Generally, cultural background, experiences, values and personal reflections are key elements that shape an individual's unique philosophy. Since each human being has a unique combination of these factors, the result is the diverseness of existing personal philosophies.

Philosophy, in its broadest definition, is an act of seeking and understanding essential truths. One example of this school is Stoicism. Stoicism is an ancient Greek-Roman philosophy founded by Zeno of Citium (modern day Cyprus) in the 3rd century B.C. Stoic philosophy helps people in overcoming negative emotions and producing mental toughness in dealing with the fluctuations of life.

Manampiring (2018) asserts Stoicism as a non-dogmatic philosophy because it is not an absolute religion with a belief of eternal punishment to those who do not follow it. As a philosophy, it is open to criticisms, dialogue, debate, or adaptation. Commonly known as a guide for persons to go through life and its precariousness, the Stoic philosophy of Schumann (2023) is described as a heroic ability rather than a school of thought. Schumann claims this ability to surface and take place in a crisis when the hero remains calm and detached during the event. Joseph Campbell (1949) terms this crisis as the ordeal, the innermost cave, and the belly of the whale.

A story's crisis is the tensest event of the plot. Here audiences in movie houses fall silent as the hero is on the verge of defeat and turmoil. To put it simply, without crisis there is no suspense, drama, and ultimately – no story. After all, it is the crisis that triggers change and shapes the heroic consciousness of the story's protagonist (Allison, 2019). Every single hero of any story encounters a crisis. At one point on their journey, the hero is hit by it severely. Often the collision is so hard that it looks like all could end tragically for the poor hero. If he or she survives the collision with crisis, the encounter becomes the pivotal moment in a hero's journey. It's the make-or-break event. Only such trouble and conflict teach the hero the needed skills to succeed in the fight against evil. The skills the hero acquires from a dire crisis are what Schumann (2023) refers to as Stoicism.

In the shaping of fictional characters, the concept of Stoicism can bestow the character with resilience and discipline in facing various hurdles and hindrances in the story which turns



the character into a strong figure, full of a sense of responsibility, and always accountable for their actions, even when things go awry for him or her. He or she accepts his or her destiny elegantly and endure such difficulty calmly and patiently.

Previous research is an important foundation for the author in developing the theory used in the present paper. Although the author did not find any research similar to the title of his research, several previous studies were used as references to enrich the study material. One example is from Fitri, Syarifuddin, & Mayasari's (2021) research where they explored the concept of Stoicism in overcoming negative emotions. Stoicism, as a concept, teaches the use of reason or rationality through principles such as dichotomy, control, trichotomy of control, understanding the essence of 'amor fati', and liberation from a sense of dependence and worry that does not necessarily occur in life. Another example is of Sagala, Soidi, & Rakian's paper where the researchers watch the anime *One Piece* several times and take notes on the dialogues and action showing the philosophical values of stoicism demonstrated by two of the anime's most prominent characters.

The author of this paper uses the concepts of Stoicism to examine the hero-building values of fiction, by strengthening the theory using Nicolai Schumann's research of Stoic heroes. This research helped the researcher understand in detail the teachings of Stoicism as a concept and philosophical study. The main difference between the previous study and the author's research lies in the approach used. While Schumann's paper is purely theoretical, the author puts to use the theory itself and apply to a Japanese role-playing game (JRPG) narrative. Thus, this study is conducted to analyze the philosophical values of Stoicism as reflected in JRPG, specifically *Final Fantasy IX*. It is the ninth game in the main Final Fantasy series. The researcher focuses his analysis on the character development of the character of Vivi Ornitier.

2. Stoic Heroes

Stoicism was embraced by several Greek philosophers, starting from Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius. It is implied in Stoic belief that one hopes for the best, but prepares for the worst. One of the key tenets in Stoicism is about keeping self-control and objectivity in critical situations. Stoicism preaches emotional detachment from any situation and change views so that the only consideration given is to undeniable facts. This philosophy does not mean all emotions be completely eliminated before making any decisions. It means trying to eliminate those emotions that haze decision-making: the ones, according to Schumann (2023), which lead to anger, rage, or apathy. With a clear and unbiased perspective, one can



make well-reasoned decisions even in times of suffocating distress. Often in their moment of crisis, heroes find that what they first wanted has become misaligned with their values and principles. They must now make a tough choice that goes against their beliefs and perceived reality. But it is only through the crisis and the tough choices that come with it that these heroes find their true selves (Schumman, 2023; Allison, 2019).

2.1 Hero Building Values

Hero building values are character building values that frame a person's character and attitude in life. These values can be found from a wide range of sources, such as religion, education, environment, culture, and others. These values can help a person to live a meaningful and more purposeful life. All in all, values are values that shape a person's character and attitude in daily life, and can be found from various sources. Lawrence Kohlberg, as mentioned by Nida (2013) in Sagala et al.'s (2023) study, has an idea about the formation of values, particularly that moral values develop along with the individual's development stage from motivation based on external laws to appreciation of universal moral principles. Thus, the theoretical emphasis is on how one decides to respond to a predicament, not what one decides or what one actually does. Stories involving a crisis has the hero showcase his or her ability to manage and resolve the crisis using Stoicism as an effective strategy of wise detachment and emotional regulation.

3. Research Method

The method used in this research is a qualitative descriptive method which is a research that aims to understand the meaning and human interpretation of the object or phenomenon under study. According to Nasri (2023) In qualitative research, the researcher is the main data collection instrument. The researcher examines why events occur, what happens, and what those events mean to the participants studied. This research is conducted in a way that involves collecting and analyzing in-depth data.

This research uses the classic JRPG, *Final Fantasy IX*, as the main data source. Specifically, the data comes from the narrative in-game script and actions shown by Vivi Ornitier. The ludological or gameplay element of the JRPG is not part of this paper's references. The data collection technique used by researcher is the note-taking technique. Note taking in this study is the process in which the researchers play the game *Final Fantasy IX* and watch the playthrough in YouTube by Dansg08 several times and take notes on the



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story and interactions showing the philosophical values of Stoicism. The purpose of note-taking is to identify patterns, themes, messages, or certain characteristics in the material.

The data analysis technique used is a data analysis technique where content analysis is a method used to analyze and interpret non-numerical data, such as written text, images, audio, or visuals. The main purpose is to identify patterns, themes, concepts, or meanings that appear in the material. In this data analysis technique, the researcher uses the textual and visual narrative of games as a means of research. The content analysis method used is the Qualitative Content Analysis method. This method enables a systematic analysis of textual and visual material. Transcripts from open-ended data collection methods present insights in inner processes of literary investigations which includes the process of identification, classification, and interpretation of the unit of analysis. Examples of this are text and images. It puts more emphasis on the deeper understanding of meaning and context compared to statistical quantitative analysis. According to Kyngäs (2020), content analysis is a systematic approach to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within qualitative data to explain a phenomenon. In essence, the aim of content analysis is to describe the characteristics of the material's content by examining words, actions, and their influence and effect with the purpose of describing the elements of communication and inference about the meaning intended by the author.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Hero Building Values according to Stoic Philosophy

Schumann (2023) explains a couple of hero-building values in the philosophy of Stoicism as follows:

1. Wise Detachment. Schumann taught detachment as recognizing that all these things are transient and on loan, that nothing lasts forever. Things come, go, evolve. Schumann borrows Seneca's philosophy of Stoicism that emphasizes the importance of accepting fate gracefully. Seneca preached that many aspects of people's lives are beyond control. In times of crisis, rather than being attached to specific outcomes or results, attention is shifted to the effort and intention put into endeavors. This gives a person wisdom. This wisdom is an inherent trait to those who tread the heroic path.



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2. Emotional Regulation. Schummann versed regulating emotion as intentionally deciding which emotions one allows to influence one own's behavior. In his book *The Obstacle Is the Way*, Ryan Holiday (2024) argues that emotional stoicism is considered a virtue with a high regard in the philosophy of Stoicism. Schummann's Stoic philosophy does not mean a complete elimination of emotions. It means trying to eliminate those emotions that hamper one's ability to make clear-cut choices and rational decisions. "With a clear and unbiased view, we can make rational decisions even in times of the biggest adversity (Schumann, 2023, p. 2)". Thus, heroes, having acquired emotional regulation, can do lucid course of actions even in tough crisis to demonstrate heroism which they are called to carry out.

In conclusion, the philosophy of Stoicism, in Schummann's view, teaches characters the value of crisis and how to respond to them in order to bring about heroic feats that makes people – heroes. As Schummann advises on his paper:

Don't let a crisis go to waste. Heroes don't; they use crises as triggers for their personal transformation instead It is wise to stoically greet crises and obstacles with optimism and pragmatism. Be aware that they will only be little bumps on the long way to fulfill our vision (2023, p. 4).

The vision, Schummann mentions, is that of goodness and the common good. He gives an example of Yoda from *Star Wars* being a prime example of a Stoic hero who displays wise detachment and emotional regulation. Even when the galaxy is on the verge of ruin and the attacks of the Empire are getting more grievous and more incessant, Yoda resists panic and vengeance but instead makes wise and logical decisions throughout; he pursues self-control in all his decision-making and stays Stoic until the end. By keeping calm and collected, he helps the good forces to come out triumphant in the end.

4.2 Hero Values Stoicism in the Character of Vivi Ornitier

In the *Final Fantasy IX* game, the character Vivi Ornitier does not directly reflect the values of Stoicism philosophy. However, there are some aspects in Vivi's character that can be related to the concepts in Stoicism. The following are some of the Stoicism philosophical values that can be seen in Vivi's heron character building:

1. Stoicism Philosophical Value helps Vivi Ornitier have the ability to detach from difficult people and situations which is critical for preserving peace of mind and staying centered.

Similar to Stoicism, Vivi Ornitier shows wise detachment in the face of obstacles and challenges. As charming as his character is, Vivi later finds out in the Village of Dali other black mages like him are being manufactured for the purpose of war and armed conflict. This is when the game starts to touch on its existential theme. Since Vivi was not aware of himself and the world's wickedness circling him before, now he has to come to the reality of finding his true identity inching its way to his journey of self-discovery and dilemma of existentialism (*see image 1*).



Image 1: Vivi is starting to finding himself and having dilemmas about his existence.

In the face of challenges and hardships, he persists in his beliefs, maintaining composure, inner peace, and unwavering focus on his goals. To illustrate the resilience and tranquility Vivi embodies through wise detachment, the researcher extracted clips from gameplay and playthroughs, as depicted in image 2.



Image 2: Vivi is detaching from things he cannot control and focusing more on what he can control.

For a prolonged stretch in the game, the only other beings like himself Vivi comes into contact with are mute mages or dangerous, magically-advanced weapons. The encounter devastated his sense of self. It has made all the grimmer when Vivi learns from a non-playable character named Black Mage No. 288 that most black mages only live for about a year. Plante (2020) comments on this harsh truth about Vivi. He says, “If he was built for destruction, what does his consciousness mean? If he’s just a freak accident, then is there any meaning to his life at all? (p. 1)”. This knowledge about his mortality is both heartbreaking and enlightening for Vivi since he gains a new perspective of life. He grapples with his existence in what it means to truly live.

Instead of wasting energy and emotional resources on things he cannot change, Vivi focuses on what he can influence — his thoughts, actions, and attitude. By accepting the limitations of control through Stoic action of wise detachment, he frees himself from the burden of trying to manipulate external events and find peace in surrendering to the natural flow of life and embrace his real self and impermanence. In the end, all he can do is “sit” with his fellow black mages and comfort them as they were heartbroken to know there is no escaping their temporality (*see image 2*). This is representative of Vivi’s transformation from a naïve and lost individual to a character of profound depth and wisdom earning him a spot in the group of outstanding JRPG heroes.

- 2. Stoicism Philosophical Value helps Vivi Ornitier have the ability to gain control of emotions, weakening trigger, shrinking ego, and reducing sense of entitlement by focusing only on the self.**



In *Final Fantasy IX*, Vivi displays emotional regulation by acceptance of his destiny and fate. He accepts the consequences of his actions and accepts that not all things can be controlled by him. He does not get caught up in resentment or anger towards his existential situation, but rather accepts and adapts to what happens, what is meant by accepting fate here is that he has come to terms with his origin, but that does not mean it is easier for him to deal with. Vivi's short life span has him contemplate about death. The battle between Queen Brahne and Kuja at the Iifa Tree gives Vivi a chance to learn about death from a different perspective. The clash between the two of the game's antagonists had Brahne losing the fight and her life. In that moment, the player is given the chance to look at Vivi's thoughts (*see image 3*) where the player gets an understanding that even though he hated the queen for her hand in the mass production of black mages to be tools of war, that does not dispel the pain of those affected by her death especially Garnet, also known as Dagger, one of the protagonists in the game.

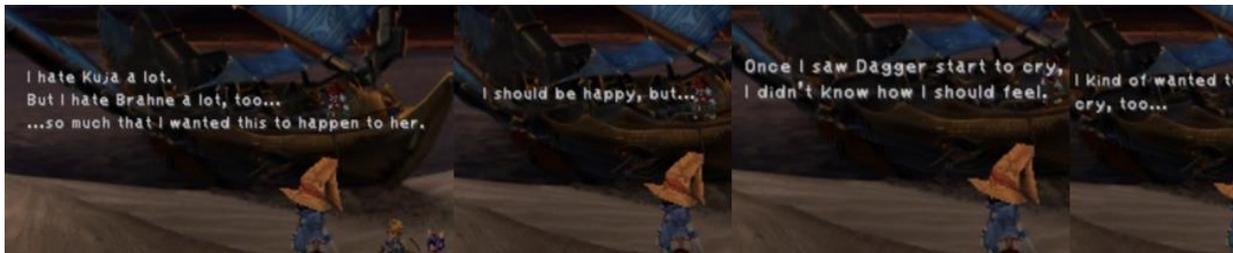


Image 3: Vivi is regulating his emotions upon seeing the death of Queen Brahne.

Existential plights are what is seen in Vivi's character in *Final Fantasy IX*. Many philosophers (Alleyway Jack, 2015) preach that existence precedes essence. This is one of the fundamental conundrums of being human that is crystallized perfectly in the story arc of Vivi who has to reconcile himself as a living, breathing, and rational being for a finite amount of time but with purpose which is wholly self-determined and it is up to him to find meaning in it. So, this aspect of identity within the framework of limitedness of living is delivered in quite a harrowing way in the game mainly because Vivi is a child. With Vivi being a child hence through child eyes, players explore these themes with a degree of naiveté. Death, as mentioned earlier and as an example, is referred to as 'stopping'. Vivi, at various points in *Final Fantasy IX*, finds it hard to understand why someone would 'stop' if they were not sick



or injured. One instance is his grandfather's demise. Another example is a scene in the Black Mage Village when the question is being considered by the newly self-aware Black Mage no. 56 who just buried his friend, Black Mage no. 36 (*see image 4*).



Image 4: Black Mage no. 56 wonders about the death of Black Mage no. 36.

Vivi is an interesting character to analyze under the Stoic lens of emotional regulation. Although he is scared at the prospect of dying, he remains moral in his actions and attitude in the game. When Kuja offers to extend the lives of all the black mages if they fight for him, Vivi is horrified that most of the black mages in the village accepted the offer. Still, he remains calm and collected, choosing to bring them back to their village home. This puts him in the arena of Kantian ethics as his self-determinism is geared towards a collective good (Becker, 2023). It is opposed to selfishness and individualism displayed by the black mages who decided to fight and kill purely to increase their own lives.

Vivi suffers recurring persecution from this game. Many of the inhabitants of Gaia, the game world, mistake him for one of the soulless black mages and frequently react with fear and anger towards him. Vivi is mortified that these people judge him based on how he appears to be. The encounters make him wonder in introspective if he is indeed a monster. Because of his self-awareness that connects well with his ability for emotion regulation, he rejects these stereotypes and prejudices fundamentally. Throughout his travels, Vivi's character evolves as he grows more self-assured and courageous when confronted with crisis of jaundice, identity, and peril. Vivi's regulation of emotion in the face of suffering and choosing to take the brunt of these difficulties and doubt is a clear example of dedication and passion in living the role of a Stoic hero.

5. Summary



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As the game progresses, Vivi gradually finds comfort in his limited lifespan. Regardless of the answers to the existential questions that trouble him, he remains a pillar of support for his companions. This is evident when the primary antagonist, Kuja, deceitfully offers the black mages false hope of extended life as they desperately seek salvation from their short existence. Vivi turns to Zidane, the protagonist, and inquires, “Zidane! What am I supposed to tell them!?” Without waiting for a response, Vivi approaches his fellow mages and solemnly states, “All I can do... is just sit with them.” (*see image 2*).

Vivi encountered the same challenges that his black mage brothers are currently confronting. Instead of succumbing to despair, he made the decision to confront his issues head-on. This exemplifies his Stoic value of wise detachment. He transitioned from shock, denial, and fear to embracing his destiny. As time passed, Vivi became more confident and courageous which illustrates his Stoic skill of modulating emotions. He aimed to safeguard his loved ones and understood the importance of making the most of his limited time. This, in time, makes Vivi heroic.

In the conclusion of the game, Vivi’s narrative concludes with a heartfelt monologue directed at Zidane. The game strongly suggested that Vivi had “stopped”.

I always talked about you, Zidane. How you were a very special person to us, because you taught us all how important life is. You taught me that life doesn’t last forever. That’s why we have to help each other and live life to the fullest. Even if you say goodbye, you’ll always be in our hearts. So, I know we’re not alone anymore. Why I was born... How I wanted to live... Thanks for giving me time to think. To keep doing what you set your heart on... It’s a very hard thing to do. We were all so courageous... What to do when I felt lonely... That was the only thing you couldn’t teach me. But we need to figure out the answer for ourselves... I’m so happy I met everyone... I wish we could’ve gone on more adventures. But I guess we all have to say goodbye someday. Everyone... Thank you. Farewell. My memories will be part of the sky...

6. Conclusion

The conclusion obtained in this research is namely in the philosophical value of Stoicism in the formation of a fictional character in a JRPG epic. The culmination of Vivi’s story arc



in *Final Fantasy IX* is quite bittersweet. He ultimately finds a reason for being and oddly manages to create progeny which is never explained to players. Vivi eventually dies at his predetermined lifespan by the time the player gets to the end of the game. Vivi's story is both touching and tragic because Vivi toiled throughout the JRPG. The game narrative exhibits Vivi's anguish, suffering, and finally, death. The character's solution to these is a rational utilization of free will – to find meaning in an inherently irrational universe. He is able to detach from things he cannot control and regulate emotions to put more emphasis on ethical behavior and well-being. So, this entire philosophical framework being played out by Vivi is one of the most interesting and moving lore in *Final Fantasy IX*.

Overall, the character of Vivi Ornitier illustrates the hero-building values in Stoic philosophy very well. He is a remarkable character, his greatness stemming from not being the main protagonist. In the initial stages of the game, he lacked the drive to progress on his own. Throughout the first plot points of *Final Fantasy IX*, up until his discovery of the Black Mage Village, Vivi heavily relied on Zidane, the lead character, and the rest of the group to support him, encourage him to persevere, and inspire him to embrace life. While he eventually discovers his own motivation, he initially struggled with a sense of purpose and meaning, which he had to uncover. His journey of self-discovery can be likened to the Hero's Journey of Campbell (1949). In the journey, he acquires then possesses distinct objectives, aspirations, and fervor, along with qualities like bravery, altruism, self-control, and awareness that play a crucial role in molding his character into a formidable hero.

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