

But I've Never Even Been to France: Empathy and Jean Passepartout in *80 Days*

by Brittany Larsen

Every day, most of us go about our days as chameleons, subtly adapting ourselves for each situation we are faced with. However, we still mostly believe that there are some core aspects of our personalities that don't change. Our values, our strengths, our weaknesses: these components are considered key in our discovery of our identity. To identify these core values, we often look to fiction to see which characters we identify and empathize with. The concept of fictional empathy becomes increasingly important, however, in video games and interactive fiction, where the player and the character are one and the same. One particular case that highlights this is the game *80 Days*, by Meg Jayanth. By looking at the many layers of protagonist Jean Passepartout, we as game players learn about identity in general and about ourselves, and are forced to confront those values that form our identity and our existence. By forcing the player to confront our own biases through deep empathy with a character unlike ourselves, the game helps us to examine those values closest to us.

To begin, *80 Days* is an adaptation of the novel *Around the World in Eighty Days* by Jules Verne. The novel chronicles the tale of Phileas Fogg and his valet Jean Passepartout as they attempt to circumnavigate the globe in eighty days for a wager. The game follows the same basic premise, but it seeks to eliminate the overwhelmingly colonialist slant that the original novel holds. It does so by including a variety of dynamic characters from many different backgrounds and cultures, and more importantly, making their plots as integral to our advancement in the game as our own needs. Therefore, throughout the game, we learn about other cultures and people instead of simply using them to advance us through the game. As creator Meg Jayanth states in a blog post for *The Literary Platform*, "whether it's games, books, television, or even a

dinner party, other people's stories are interesting" (Jayanth). By putting the focus on characters that are not the protagonist, the player sees the game as more than a race to the end, but as a means to discover more about the world and other people. The player finds themselves caring deeply about the fates of the people Passepartout runs into on their travels.

That being said, we have a unique relationship with Passepartout. This is because, as a work of interactive fiction, we are playing as both ourselves and as him. The game reads like a novel, but the player can choose between different sentences to decide how to advance, similar to a choose your own adventure novel. The player also has the ability to decide which city to move to next in the journey. This dual nature of the point of view character complicates our perceptions of the events of the games. As many players begin an interactive game, they make choices with two things in mind. First, they want to make choices that will prove advantageous to them in the game. Making choices in this manner means that players will anticipate what conversations will open up travel routes, or which routes will get them around the world faster. Another consideration is forging Passepartout's relationship with Monsieur Fogg. Sometimes the player is asked whether they want to attend to Fogg or explore a city to find more routes. Therefore, we have to decide between fostering the relationships we have or meeting new people and having new experiences, even though Fogg is the safe choice.

Being forced to make these decisions and balance these competing interests leads to the second factor that players take into account when they first begin the game, which is making decisions in accordance with how that player characterizes Passepartout. There are often options for Passepartout to respond to questions by either being rude, kind or disinterested. As the player progresses through the game, their sense of who Passepartout is solidifies and instead of simply making choices based on what will get the player further, they instead ask themselves what their

Passepartout would really do in this situation, even if it may not necessarily be helpful. This is because of our immersion with the game and our connection and empathy with Passepartout. We feel invested in the game's outcome, and especially how the outcome is achieved, because of what is referred to as player agency. Player agency, as defined by Joey Gibbs, a writer on *Gamasutra*, a video game creation blog, is "knowing actions taken by the player that result in significant changes within the world" (Gibbs). In other words, player agency is when the player does something in a game that affects the outcome of the game. This is certainly true in *80 Days*, where there are virtually endless possibilities available for the player to take.

Therefore, since the player cannot always see a direct line to their end goal, they end up making choices in accordance to what they would do in the situation instead of viewing the game as purely strategic. This was Jayanth's intent in the game, as she says, "players will care as much about how they win Fogg's wager as they do about whether they win" (Jayanth). Therefore, the player is faced with progressively more difficult decisions and often ends up making decisions that run counter to their goal of completing the game. One example of such a decision occurs if the player ends up in Houston. A man confronts Passepartout and asks him to go into a tavern with Mexican travelers and get them to rob you. The implication of this exchange is that doing this will give the man a viable defense for killing the men. From a purely player standpoint, it may be advantageous for Passepartout to go along with this man's plan. Additionally, it actually hurts the player when they defy the man, for when you get on a train out of Texas, he follows and the player spends the train ride paranoid and attempting to avoid retaliation from the man. It would have potentially been more beneficial for the player to go along with the man, but as with many decisions in the game, the player may find themselves unable to make the decision that

would further the game. They instead make decisions based on their own values and identity, which in turn forms Passepartout's identity.

While the reader does form much of Passepartout's identity, there are some elements of him that are inherent in the game. One such element that we view as key to someone's identity is their name. However, when it comes to Passepartout, it is telling that even the player who should know him most intimately knows him for a majority of the game only by his last name. This tells us two things about Passepartout. First, it says that he is a rather private person. He is reluctant to use the familiar and get really close to anyone. This is also indicative of his position, as he is a servant of Monsieur Fogg. Therefore, by using last names, they indicate that their relationship is more professional than personal. Later in the game, in certain playthroughs, the player has the potential to learn some more information about Passepartout's view of his name. In New Orleans, for instance, when Passepartout is talking to Death, the player has the option to say, "I hate my first name." This is a rare moment of vulnerability for Passepartout and while we don't learn why he hates his name, "Jean," we do experience Jean choosing to call him something else, "Laurent." This shows how fluid Passepartout's sense of identity is and how no matter how many playthroughs the reader goes through, we are never entirely sure of who Passepartout is, since his identity is so purposefully fluid.

There are, however, some elements of Passepartout's identity that remain constant throughout the game, no matter what direction the player takes. To begin, as his name suggests, Passepartout is French. His native language provides the player with several opportunities throughout the game. Passepartout uses this to his advantage when he and Fogg encounter groups of French speakers, particularly in Haiti and New Orleans. Here, Fogg comments on Passepartout's "ability to make friends". His nationality comes as a disadvantage, though, in

cities where they dislike “foreigners.” Here, Passepartout’s accent and multilingualism puts a target on his back. What this shows the player is that his nationality has the ability to strain or build his relationships, as well as inform who his allegiances lie with. Passepartout, and thus, the player, is able to empathize with characters from different areas more easily than Fogg because he knows what is like to feel “outside” the norm and have to work to enter different communities. Fogg, who very much represents old world thinking, is unable to empathize with the people they encounter on their trip and thus spends the trip isolated from everyone, including Passepartout.

Another element that leads Passepartout to enter into conversations Fogg cannot is his profession. In fact, Passepartout’s profession leads to some important conversations about his identity. For example, there are several instances in the game where players ask who Passepartout is. The options for the player to respond vary from introducing himself, saying that he is a traveler, or saying that he is a valet. By framing the conversation in this way, Jayanth is forcing the player to be very direct about how they see Passepartout. If they answer with his name or that he’s a traveler, they are saying that they see Passepartout as a free agent who can act as he pleases. If they answer that Passepartout is a valet, though, that answer brings with it certain expectations, such as the fact that Passepartout is privy to Fogg’s needs and that he is a servant, which puts him in a slightly lower class. This can affect how other characters view him, as well as who he can converse with.

For example, in one scene, Passepartout and Fogg make contact with another traveler and his valet. During this scene, the two valets have a conversation while the two employers talk. The conversation between the valets quickly becomes competitive and confrontational, with them comparing their employers and trying to keep the other from desiring to take their position.

This scene, if one gets it, very keenly describes the difference in Fogg and Passepartout's social standings in a way that having them travel in tandem doesn't. The point this brings up about the identity of Passepartout is that his interactions are always with a certain amount of awareness of his social standing. Thus, the player is led in conversations with individuals of higher social standing in a different way than they would be if they were talking to members of the general citizenry.

The piece of Passepartout's identity that is the most controversial to some and that limits some player's ability to empathize with Passepartout, though, is the fact that he is most likely bisexual. Passepartout has flirtatious encounters with members of different sexes and he seems indiscriminate. What's more, this element of the game is never directly addressed by Passepartout. He never talks about his sexuality, but instead the reader interprets his feelings through his actions and how he interacts with different characters. In fact, the only real indications we receive about Passepartout's feelings about his sexuality are that whenever he says how he feels about male characters, he ends up saying he will burn the pages of the journal or that some things are better left undiscussed. What's more interesting than how Passepartout himself interacts with his sexuality is how players react to being put in these situations. The player often can actively choose how involved Passepartout becomes with different potential romantic partners. For example, the player can choose either to flirt with Death or throw a drink in his face in New Orleans. In this way, the player is directly confronted with the choice of how to define Passepartout's sexuality in their experience of the game.

However, some players have still complained, saying they do not like that "there are gay characters I don't have the option to turn off" (Jayanth). This is telling because none of the other layers of Passepartout's unique identity were unavoidable either. However, there is clearly a

difference for some players between being forced to empathize with someone of a different nationality than them and empathizing with a character of a different sexuality. Because the character's identity and the player's identity become so conflated, it can be alarming for some players to be forced to experience situations such as this that they were not expecting. However, this is the point Jayanth is aiming to make, as these are the stories we do not experience in the mainstream media.

Ultimately, the complexity of determining Passetout's identity exists because there needs to be options for each player to come to their own conclusions about how to empathize with Passetout. However, the non-negotiable elements that Jayanth includes are there because her purpose in writing this game was to show that the main character is not always the hero and to bring light to marginalized views that we don't usually hear from. By forcing players to grow so close to Passetout and to see him as an extension of themselves, Jayanth introduces a layer of empathy impossible to reach in traditional narratives. The consumer cannot opt out of the elements of the story they don't want to see. In empathizing with characters in this way, the reader can learn about themselves and about the cultures and people they either haven't come in to contact with or haven't wanted to come into contact with. If the player is unable to empathize with those unlike them in the game, they end up isolated, like Fogg. This is important because it is analogous to what happens in an increasingly digital and therefore global world, where when people are unable to empathize with those unlike them, they become isolated.

What ultimately makes this game successful, then, is that through its immersiveness, the player is able to reach a deeper level of empathy with Passetout and the other characters in the game. Therefore, the player is made to engage with questions of their own identity, values and

biases. By confronting these biases in a fictional, interactive world, they get a true look at how others live and what is important to them when deciding how to live.

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