A Recipe for Disaster? The Emerging Ludo Mix and the Outsourcing of Narrative

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ABSTRACT

Employing The Final Fantasy XV Universe as a case study, this article examines how the changing climate of game development, in tandem with established media mix strategies, contributes to the emergence of the ludo mix as media ecology. Through a comparative analysis of the climate of modern game development and the adoption of media mix strategies, as they relate to the franchise in question, the case is made that these two distinct phenomena intersect to create novel challenges and incentives for a particular kind of game development, wherein the mitigation of mounting production costs has resulted in the strategic outsourcing of *Final Fantasy XV*'s core narrative, negatively affecting the games critical reception. These findings posit challenges for the future of the ludo mix as the evolving technological, aesthetic and economic climate of game development continues further down the path that has led to this outcome.

Keywords

Ludo mix, *Final Fantasy XV*, media mix, game development, narrative, critical reception

INTRODUCTION

The term media mix refers to a specific media ecology that is especially prevalent in Japan, wherein publishers employ marketing strategies across different media in order to promote and expand on a common franchise (Jenkins 2006, 110). Video games have played a significant role in these marketing practices and have to a larger extent than before become a dominant feature of individual media mix hierarchies. Noteworthy examples of gaming franchises that have utilized this approach are the .Hack series and the Pokémon franchise, both existing across different media ranging from anime to toys, all the while being centered around gaming properties. This increased focality of games has led to the coining of the term ludo mix, as the evolving media landscape of Japan invites researchers to explore in what way games have become the driving force behind the production and consumption of certain media franchises (DiGRA 2018). The Final Fantasy XV Universe is a recent and notable example of such a franchise, featuring a host of interlinked gaming properties, coupled with transmedia tie-ins and spearheaded by Square Enix, one of Japan's most prominent game developers.

The Final Fantasy XV Universe is a sub-franchise in the Final Fantasy series of games that centers on the 15th numbered title in the series, namely *Final Fantasy XV* (2016). The game was originally announced in 2006 as *Final Fantasy Versus XIII* and advertised as an independent spin-off of *Final Fantasy XIII* (Square Enix 2009).

However, due to the mixed reception of *Final Fantasy XIII* it was ultimately rebranded in its current incarnation for marketing purposes. Over the course of its long development history the project was turned into a transmedia property, under the banner of The Final Fantasy XV Universe, consisting of a CGI feature film, anime, an audio drama, a novel, manga, 6 separate games including the main game and last but not least episodic DLC released in installments post-launch. Aside from *Final Fantasy XV: Pocket edition* (Square Enix 2018), which is an abridged version of the main game designed for mobile devices, the installments in The Final Fantasy XV Universe feature supplementary experiences to *Final Fantasy XV* as opposed to exploring alternative versions of events. This classifies the project as a work of transmedia as opposed to multimedia and emphasizes the fact that the individual installments are intended to work together to convey the story as a whole (Jenkins 2006, 95–96).

The games plot revolves around Noctis Lucis Caelum, heir to the throne of Insomnia, and his entourage, consisting of his three close friends, Gladiolus, Prompto and Ignis. The four of them set forth from Insomnia on a mission to rendezvous with lady Lunafreyja, Noctis's bride-to-be, but soon after they depart from the citadel the city is invaded and Noctis's father killed in the onslaught. The game never explores this attack in depth, even though it is the catalyst that sets Noctis upon his path of opposing the empire and eventually laying claim to his father's throne. The CGI film *Kingsglaive* (2016) explores this opening setup in its place and puts the main game's story into some much-needed context (Webster 2016). The audio drama, *Final Fantasy XV Prologue Parting ways* (2016), which was only released as a transcript in English, further bridges the gap between the game and the film by having otherwise exclusive characters on either side interact with one another. The remainder of the original roster, however, predominantly features character development as opposed to being plot-driven, such as *A King's Tale: Final Fantasy XV* (Square Enix 2016), which tells the story of Noctis's father recounting his glory days in the guise of a bedtime story while the anime, *Final Fantasy XV: Brotherhood* (2016), and first batch of DLC episodes focus predominantly on Noctis's teammates. The second season of DLC, conceived of post-launch and in conjunction with the game's reception, was also intended to delve deeper into selected characters as well as alleviating some concerns relating to the integrity of the plot – filling in some gaps and securing the story (Parish 2018). *Episode Ardyn* (Square Enix 2019), titled after and focusing on the games main antagonist, was the only second season DLC to get released. The remaining three DLC relating to Aranea, a mercenary in the service of the empire, Lunafreyja and Noctis himself ultimately being novelized as *Final Fantasy XV: The Dawn of the Future* (2019) as a result of their respective DLC being cancelled.

The reception of *Final Fantasy XV* has generally been favorable, with multiple sources praising the main cast for their chemistry (Carter 2016, Ingenito 2016). Another aspect of the game that's been praised is the curious inclusion of food, with Ignis constantly coming up with new recipes that have been painstakingly rendered digitally to reflect an array of appetizing dishes (Wilde 2018). However, changing up the recipe for the long-running Final Fantasy franchise hasn't always proven to be fruitful and might even end up spelling disaster. This time around, a major point of criticism has been the presentation of the narrative, which has generally been the main appeal of Final Fantasy games, as it appears to have glaring omissions in relation to some character motivations and plot details, leaving it relatively disjointed in comparison to previous entries in the series (Beck 2016). Players can fill in some of these gaps by familiarizing themselves with secondary content such as *Kingsglaive* although the problem appears to persist, the implication being that the narrative appears to be lacking, even as a work of transmedia. In addition, not everyone is

willing to do extra homework to make sense of the game. Curiously, this critique is not limited to the international sphere since even in its native country of Japan, where transmedia strategies are particularly common, the games plot has come under attack for the same reasons previously outlined (Fukuyama 2016).

According to an interview with Hajime Tabata, the games director who took the place of Tetsuya Nomura mid-development before ultimately resigning (resulting in the cancellation of aforementioned DLC) part of the reason for the transmedia approach had to do with marketing. Tabata cites two distinct demographics when it comes to the marketing of *Final Fantasy XV*: longtime fans that have followed every new development since the introduction of *Final Fantasy Versus XIII*, and potential players that aren't yet familiar with the series in general (Loeffler 2017). This duality of the game's target audience is further represented in a dedication in the opening of the game that reads: „A FINAL FANTASY for FANS and First-Timers" (Square Enix 2016). By adopting media mix strategies the team behind *Final Fantasy XV* has therefore attempted to create multiple points of entry for potential players, establishing a media world wherein, as often is the case with media mixes (Steinberg 2012, 141), the consumption of one element is intended to drive the consumption of others.

In a separate interview Tabata gave an additional explanation for this approach, noting that the reason the team opted for turning the story of *Final Fantasy XV* into a transmedia property was to avoid having to ship it as multiple games. This entailed a substantial amount of restructuring and the team ended up reallocating certain story elements to media properties outside the main game (Corriea 2016). What's curious about Tabata's reasoning is that it presupposes the need for multiple games to tell a single story. This has not been the case with previous installments in the Final Fantasy franchise, even those that featured elaborate narratives. For example, *Final Fantasy X* (Square 2001) and *Final Fantasy XIII* both inspired sequels but each game contained a coherent and independent narrative (albeit convoluted by some standards). If Tabata's comment is accurate, it must therefore reflect some changes in terms of the culture and limitations of game development within the company or the game industry in general.

These two distinct reasons for the transmedia approach situate *Final Fantasy XV* at the nexus of traditional media mix strategies on the one hand and the constantly evolving landscape of game development on the other. The study of The Final Fantasy XV Universe as ludo mix must therefore take both of these distinct phenomena into consideration. By employing a comparative analysis of modern game development and media mix strategies, as they relate to the franchise, this article intends to clarify in what way they have interacted to create novel challenges and incentives for a particular kind of game development, wherein the mitigation of mounting production costs has resulted in the strategic outsourcing of *Final Fantasy XV*'s core narrative. The findings presented are primarily based on textual analysis of the game and its interaction with other media, media coverage pertaining to its reception as well as previously published interviews with developers. Due to the significant change in the visibility of developers such an approach has become increasingly viable regardless of its inherent limitations (O'Donnell 2014, ix). Employing this methodology, the case will be made that the outsourcing of the game's narrative is in part due to new challenges faced by game developers and that media mix strategies have prioritized character development at the cost of a well-constructed plot, negatively affecting the critical reception of the game. Ultimately, these findings posit certain challenges for the concept of the ludo mix going forward as the continually evolving technological, aesthetic and economic climate of game development continues further down the path that has led to this outcome

THE LUDO MIX AS MEDIA MIX

Media mix strategies have been a dominant marketing strategy in Japan with an emphasis on character merchandising, licensing and various collaborations. Accordingly, when Tabata and his team set out to reconfigure *Final Fantasy XV* as a transmedia property they could to a large extent rely on marketing practices that consumers and publishers were already familiar with. As a subject of study, these marketing practices have in particular been linked with anime and the anime media mix (Steinberg 2012). When it comes to the conceptualization of a ludo mix, such as The Final Fantasy Universe, it is therefore of interest to examine in what manner the game industry can employ or imitate media mix strategies and what effect those strategies can be said to have had on the narratological coherence of *Final Fantasy XV*.

Character vs. plot

Much like in the case of anime, games in Japan have been represented by a cast of iconic and marketable characters such as Mario, Sonic, Donkey Kong and more (López et al 2015, 8). This list could be extended in Japan to include characters such as Final Fantasy's very own Cloud Strife and internationally to include Lara Croft from the Tomb Raider series and Steven from *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011). What these characters have in common, aside from being well-known video game characters, is that they have all been reincarnated outside their original games in one form or another, with media properties including feature Hollywood films, TV shows, various toys and Lego-sets. The recognizability of these characters as well as their previous entanglements with multimedia is evidence to the fact that the emerging ludo mix can in part adopt comparable strategies to anime when it comes to the focus on character promotion. This approach is, however, much more common with Japanese franchises, a fact that reflects their socioeconomic history as developments within the Japanese market have cemented its usage locally (Picard 2013).

With that in mind, *Final Fantasy XV* features a heavy emphasis on character promotion and design, the four leads frequently being compared to a boyband (O'Connor 2017) as their diverse personality types seem configured to appeal to a diverse group of players. This supposed diversity might seem at odds with other entries in the series wherein the party is more racially and ethnically diverse as well as having party members of more than one gender – even genderless as in the case of Quina from *Final Fantasy IX* (2000). However, whether the game's notion of diversity is apt or ill-conceived, the designers of *Final Fantasy XV* present players with a range of personalities that manage to strike a chord with them for various reasons. The basis for these characters being an assortment of anime inspired archetypes that are even more palatable to some due to their relatability through an intertextual reading with other media properties. In Noctis's entourage Gladiolus wears the mantle of the wild and manly one, Prompto is the cute and feminine one and Ignis the serious and dependable one (with the glasses to back it up). This ensemble is reminiscent of the anime *Ouran High School Host Club* (2006) wherein Gladiolus, Prompto and Ignis roughly correspond to the characters of Takashi Morinozuka, Mitsukuni Haninozuka and Kyoya Ootori. Much like the gang from *Final Fantasy XV*, the host club members have their own sets of idiosyncrasies but can nevertheless be understood in conjunction with anime archetypes such as the strong and impassive one, "shotacon" and "megane" (literally meaning glasses) (Cavallaro 2013, 81). This inter-readability is likely to make the trio especially relatable to Japanese audiences or players that are in some way familiar with these specific tropes of Japanese animation.

Given his status as prince, it seems quite straight forward to classify Noctis himself as the typical "ouji" character, meaning prince. Such characters typically embody

virtuous behavior and are held in high esteem by their peers. As royalty Noctis is indeed cut from a different cloth but he has many character flaws, including being a notoriously picky eater and having a hard time coping with responsibility. By the end of the game Noctis has, however, come to terms with the burden he must bear and completed his Hero's journey, having outgrown his boyband persona during the course of the game and made his way back a new man. For the sake of media tie-ins such as Noctis's inclusion in *Tekken 7* (Bandai Namco Studios 2017) and *Dissidia: Final Fantasy NT* (Team Ninja 2015) Noctis's character development is however kept in a state of perpetual infancy and transmitted one dimensionally across media. The emphasis on his character archetype as opposed to his archetypical story therefore being the predominant feature of his media mix persona.

The way The Final Fantasy XV Universe has been structured to a large degree around the concept of character as opposed to plot is further emphasized in its transmedia incarnations. For example, *Brotherhood: Final Fantasy XV*, the anime series, mainly focuses on developing the characters and their relationship to one another as opposed to being predominantly plot driven. The same can be said for the DLC additions of *Episode Gladiolus* (Square Enix 2017), *Episode Prompto* (Square Enix 2017) and *Episode Ignis* (Square Enix 2017). These episodes recount the exploits of the characters off-screen from the main game in addition to fleshing out the world and supporting characters. Character and worldbuilding take center stage while the core narrative is left wanting. This would not count as distracting from the overall plot if it wasn't for glaring omissions in the coherence of the story presented in the main game to begin with. Rather than prioritizing a fully coherent plot, the team behind *Final Fantasy XV* opted for character building.

The *Kingsglaive* film breaks up this pattern in favor of delivering a plot-heavy experience that is to some degree crucial to understanding the plot of *Final Fantasy XV*. The films cast is nonetheless notable for not including the four protagonists of the main game so it is partly excluded from such concerns. The audio drama however acts as a sort of bridge between the film and the game, featuring Noctis and his pals along with characters from the film in a mostly plot-driven scenario. It would therefore be a false dichotomy to declare that the entirety of The Final Fantasy XV Universe is focused on character promotion, as opposed to plot development, since it is not a question of one or the other. There is nevertheless a great tension between character development and the development of plot which the game has been criticized for, caused by an imbalance between these two approaches that favors character over plot, feeding into the focus on characters that is representative of media mix strategies.

Merchandising and advertising

Taking notes from the character merchandising that has proliferated the Japanese media scene since the advent of the *Tetsuwan Atomu* (1959) anime series (Steinberg 2012), a variety of merchandise has been released in conjunction with *Final Fantasy XV*. The DLC itself could be considered a form of character merchandise since it offers players new and novel ways to engage with the characters. In addition to that are the customary action figures, plushies and more. A more novel addition to this ecology is a collaboration with the Japanese fashion designer Roen, credited with designing the clothes of Noctis and his party that were made available for real life purchase (Ashcraft 2016). This is reminiscent of *Final Fantasy XIII*'s Lightning venture into fashion in collaboration with Louis Vuitton, where the digital character was made out to be the model for the brand (Louis Vuitton n.d.). Other examples of product placement in the Final Fantasy XV Universe are the inclusion of an Audi in *Kingsglaive*, American Express stickers on windows in the main game and the Coleman camping gear which the foursome use to camp outside – the camping gear

being prominently featured on the box art for the game. In regards to the question at hand however, what matters is to what degree, if any, said merchandising and advertisements have affected the narrative of the game.

The most gratuitous example of advertising for many players has been the inclusion of Nissin Cup Noodles in the game itself. In addition to TV-spots that linked these two properties together, getting players excited about a non-existent game titled "Cup Noodle XV", players can visit a noodle truck in the city of Lestallum and purchase noodles from a street vendor. Gladiolus favors Nissin cup noodles above the rest of the party and his noodle-mania even goes as far as to trigger an in-game mission centered on procuring ingredients for the ultimate cup of noodles. According to Ray Chase, the English voice actor for Noctis, the cast recorded two versions of the dialogue relating to the noodles, one in earnest and the other ironically, with the latter making its way into the game (Reddit 2016). This sense of irony further establishes the inclusion of an actual noodle brand as a foreign element.

Figure 1: Lunafreyja holding up a cup of Nissin Cup Noodles as a part of the collaboration between Nissin and Square Enix.

But even though the inclusion of such elements can break the immersion for some players, by blurring the line between the world of fantasy and the interests of real-world capital, such additions do not necessarily have to detract from the narrative in any meaningful way. With regards to the structure of the game, the only concern is suitable representation, requiring a receptible character such as Gladiolus to be a sort of spokesperson for the brand and that the in-game noodles are rendered with adequate skill. However, with the advertisement of Cup Noodle XV even Nissin seems to have embraced the absurdity to a certain degree. The merchandising connected with *Final Fantasy XV* has therefore applied a very limited set of restrictions that has allowed the developers substantial creative freedom. As a part of general media mix strategies merchandising has therefore had minimal effect in regard to the narrative of *Final Fantasy XV*, even though such concerns have the potential to become leading factors, for example if game development becomes less financially independent.

THE LUDO MIX AND THE CLIMATE OF GAME DEVELOPMENT
Being synonymous with the medium of games, research into the emerging ludo mix must take into consideration the way the changing culture and limitations of game development shape the medium and its connections with other media. The culture and climate of game development is constantly in flux as technological advancements, as well as innovation and aesthetic expectations within existing parameters, reframe the

way games are conceptualized and critiqued. This association with the game industry is what primarily differentiates the ludo mix from more traditional media mix strategies even though there is significant overlap such as an emphasis on characters, merchandising and product placement. In the case of the development of *Final Fantasy XV*, it can be said that the current climate of game development has incentivized the development of a particular kind of game, wherein narratological concerns have been made to take a back seat. Such incentives can, for example, be of a technical nature, catering to the current possibilities and limitations of game development, aesthetic, in the sense that the expectations of players and the aesthetic palette of games is constantly changing, and lastly but not least economic, adjusting to the rising cost of development and new opportunities for monetization.

Even though some of the issues with the development of *Final Fantasy XV* can be traced back to these incentives, the internal management of Square-Enix is also responsible for the games long development time and narratological shortcomings. For example, according to character designer Roberto Ferrari, who worked on the game and some of its key characters, the development team was highly disorganized, working on major designs while the story of the game still hadn't been finalized (Palumbo 2016). In addition, Tetsuya Nomura, the original director of the game was spread thin, working on multiple games and directing four of them, limiting his capacity to lead the project to its conclusion (Figueroa 2016). In regards to the concrete realities of development within the company it can therefore be speculated that the failings of the final product at least partly reflect the state of its internal management. However, regardless of the influence of such managerial mishaps the incentives present within the current state of the game industry remain a contributing factor that cannot be ignored.

Technological incentives

Final Fantasy XV had an infamously long development history, spanning the better part of 10 years, 13 if the development of DLC is included. In the golden age of Final Fantasy titles (ranging from VII to IX or X depending on who's counting), players could expect a new installment within regular short intervals of one or two years whereas players now can be expected to wait several years until a project becomes marketable. This development is not limited to the management of Square-Enix as AAA development has been getting less manageable across the board, with larger development teams working for a longer period of time on a single project (Koster 2018). As technological advancements make designing games more accessible, by making the core toolkit for game development more readily available and powerful, they simultaneously raise the bar for technological excellence expected of mainstream AAA titles, making development of such titles exponentially more demanding and resource consuming.

One of the challenges the team had to face was the implementation of towns and cities. Major towns and cities have been a stable of the Final Fantasy series up until the release of *Final Fantasy XIII*. These cities have come in all shapes and sizes ranging from the small mining town of Kalm in *Final Fantasy VII* (Square 1997) to the sci-fi metropolis of Esthar in *Final Fantasy VIII* (Square 1999). These towns and cities have been playable areas where players have been able to explore freely, perform various activities and interact with the inhabitants in meaningful ways. With rising demand for graphical fidelity and realism, such locales have become increasingly harder to configure with the team behind *Final Fantasy XIII* even going on record to say that technological difficulties have been the main reason for the exclusion of such locales (Schramm 2010). Needless to say, it is possible to make such cities in ways that satisfy demands, like in the case of *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games 2013) or *Spider-man* (Insomniac Games 2018). However, such

games focus mainly on the cityscape whereas in Final Fantasy games the city is traditionally only one part of a much larger journey, making it harder to justify the resources required to get the job done adequately.

In *Final Fantasy XV*, aside from modest pit stops and resorts, the largest playable locales are the town of Lestallum and the city of Altissia. There is nonetheless another city that is perhaps even more relevant to the plot of the game, namely Insomnia. Insomnia is prominently featured in *Kingsglaive*, the film, as well as in the anime *Brotherhood: Final Fantasy XV* and the audio drama while being relegated to a dungeon in the main game. However, in early promotional material parts of it appear to have been playable to a larger degree, showing Noctis fending off attackers at the time of the invasion and talking to Stella, the former heroine of the game before the advent of Lunafreyja, later taking to the streets to confront her (Weiss 2016). This shift to different media to tell the story of Insomnia situates it primarily outside the ludic sphere, making it unnecessary to spend excessive resources on the construction of an interactive cityscape for the player to traverse and scrutinize. The option for transmedia storytelling can therefore be said to incentivize the boycotting of certain technological limitations at the cost of the coherence of the overall narrative, since it is much more cost effective to depict a city in the guise of film or drama as opposed to having it be fully interactive – especially if it is intended to do justice to players' expectations. By embracing media mix strategies and formulating this particular ludo mix, the developers have therefore been led to re-examine the centrality of the city as an in-game motif, ultimately outsourcing its portrayal to other media.

Aesthetic incentives

Since the release of the first Final Fantasy title back in 1987 the aesthetic conceptions about what a game is and should be have been challenged multiple times with new genres coming into light and existing genres being extrapolated on – perhaps even refined. In recent years, Japanese roleplaying games have been criticized for not keeping up with these changes in comparison to their western counterparts. Keiji Inafune, best-known for his work on the Mega Man series, has voiced his concerns that the Japanese game industry, which had previously dominated the global market, lacks innovation and was at the time of his original statement "at least five years behind" (Tabuchi 2010). Even though Inafune attributes the shortcomings of the Japanese game industry to a lack of innovation he is vague about what exactly this entails. The only thing he can say for certain is that modern Japanese games seem to lack the global appeal of their predecessors.

One point of contention globally is the implementation of turn-based combat systems, often associated with Japanese role-playing games, as opposed to the more action-oriented titles from western developers. Even though turn-based combat retains a dedicated fan base, especially in Japan, the global appeal of such games has come into question in the last decade and with the lowering sales in the local market Japanese game developers have had to adopt and tackle foreign markets with more tact (Kitami et al 2011, 285). Another factor is the game industry's tendency for hybridization, as transnational influences are permitted to shape the production of games, catering to a global media culture (Consalvo 2006). In order to stay relevant, The Final Fantasy series has been grappling with this problem since the development of *Final Fantasy XII* (Square Enix 2006) seeing major changes to the formula with *Final Fantasy XV* ending up as a full-fledged action RPG, much like the Kingdom Hearts series. Square Enix further drives this point home by producing the remake of *Final Fantasy VII*, a game that originally featured turn-based combat, as an action RPG.

The major point of contention, however, in terms of the narrative of the game, is the question of linearity. Final Fantasy games and other Japanese roleplaying games have customarily been fairly linear in comparison to western gaming properties, such as the Elder scrolls series. Even though it is not enough in and of itself to constitute a genre definition, one of the genre distinctions made by players and the media between western and Japanese role-playing games is that of sandbox vs. confinement, in other words open world vs. linearity (Schules 2015, 54). At the time of its release, *Final Fantasy XIII*, the game *Final Fantasy XV* has had to distance itself from, was harshly criticized for being overly linear – its linearity even being the subject of academic scholarship (Cruz 2011). In order to avoid treading old ground, *Final Fantasy XV*, therefore had to avoid the perceived mistakes of its predecessor and adopt a more open concept.

In an interview with the Japanese game magazine Famitsu, Tabata explained that the first half of *Final Fantasy XV* was intended to be open world while the latter half was designed to be more linear. This way he believed players would be able to enjoy the best of both worlds – taking on the freedom of open world games, without getting bored, while at the same time getting a taste for the more traditional Final Fantasy experience in the form of linear progression (Famitsu 2016). This approach has received some positive feedback in terms of the games global marketability as the game has been compared to open world games such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) (Roberts 2018). Tabata, however, noted that this shift was seen more favorably in the west than in Japan with a larger percentage of Japanese players being less impressed with the open world style (Smith 2017).

In effect, this might have contributed to the game's disjointed narrative as the open world structure doesn't fit well with the tightly woven narrative of *Kingsglaive* that is meant to precede it. While Noctis and his pals leisurely cruise around performing menial tasks for strangers and engaging in recreational fishing, the fate of his kingdom and the world supposedly hang in the balance. A certain suspension of disbelief is to be expected when it comes to Final Fantasy games, as in the past players have been afforded opportunities to engage with the game world regardless of their most imminent duties. In this case however it seems as if the core narrative is held at arm's length from the player in order to serve a certain aesthetic that has hitherto been alien to the series and is perhaps in some way foreign to the developers.

It would be an overstatement to take this as evidence of the narratological limitations of open-world game play, even though some claim that open-world structures can be detrimental to narratological ambitions (Rush 2010). However, coupled with the aforementioned technological incentives and the focus on traditional media mix strategies it becomes clearer how the outsourcing of narrative becomes enticing in this climate.

Economic incentives
Lastly, the economic climate of games has shifted, ushering in new opportunities for monetization along with challenges to remain profitable. In the case of the anime media mix such strategies can be considered a lifeline for the medium as the production of anime in and of itself would rarely be viable (Steinberg 2012). In comparison, the medium of games has historically been financially independent as the advent of the medium can testify to (Kent 2001). As with the rising demands created by technological advancements, however, games have become more expensive to produce. To cope with the rising cost of development, and to make use of new opportunities for monetization, developers and publishers have resorted to various marketing practices such as the sale of in-game items, subscription models and DLC sold separately.

According to Tabata, the episodic DLC relating to Gladiolus, Prompto and Ignis were all planned prior to the release of the game (Parish 2018). With the introduction of the season pass, that entitled customers to all the episodes and more, Square Enix executed a plan to keep the game profitable post-launch. Each DLC episode takes place at various points throughout the story. This means that the trio had to disappear sporadically with Gladiolus leaving the party to take care of some unexplained business, Prompto getting kicked off a moving train and Ignis being left with unexplained blindness after getting separated from the pack in the empire's assault on Altissia. To account for the existence of these DLC episodes, the game has therefore been intentionally structured in such a way as to create gaps in a narrative that was already loosely strung together.

The cancelled second season of DLC, intended to flesh out the plot, was not originally planned although it goes to show how new economic models seek to justify the release of games that would previously have been considered unfinished. This allows developers to relegate the burden of completion to the future while compromising the original launch of a title. In addition and more relevant to the concerns of this article, the fact that the cancelled DLC was ultimately novelized as *The Dawn of the Future*, clearly exemplifies how the cost of game development can be mitigated by outsourcing the narrative to more cost-efficient platforms.

SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS

Considering the ludo mix at the junction of traditional media mix strategies and development within the game industry itself makes the study of The Final Fantasy XV Universe a fruitful endeavor. The team behind the franchise has implemented media mix strategies in addition to taking the current state of game development into account. This has resulted in a game that has been criticized for its narrative or lack thereof. Aside from alleged management issues within Square Enix itself, this outcome has been incentivized by a number of factors relating to the presentation of the game as a part of an expanded universe of transmedia properties, where key plot points have been outsourced to other media due to difficulties arising from the technological, aesthetic and economic climate of the game industry. In the cases where these issues could have been alleviated the focus on character development in the vein of media mix strategies has dominated, resulting in the favorable reception of the game's characters as opposed to its plot.

Taking note of the favorable reception of the game in general, the implication of some looming disaster, present in the title of this article, might appear nonsensical. However, as has been discussed, the lackluster presentation of the narrative has been the largest factor in devaluing its critical reception and there is cause to believe that going further down this path would lead to the further devaluing of individual gaming properties. The omission of Insomnia and its outsourcing to film, anime and drama might be viewed as prophetic, or at the very least as a cautionary tale, since incentives present in the current state of the game industry appear perfectly reasonable yet at the same time undesirable. In the past, game developers could abstract the feeling of large cities but they are now tasked with the almost insurmountable task of painstakingly rendering the miniscule aspects of city life. All the while, media such as anime remains relatively stable and cost-effective, making media mix strategies that take advantage of this more alluring to developers.

Even though this article has introduced a comparative analysis of the media mix and the climate of game development, as they comprise the ludo mix, there is significant overlap where their interests might align. For example, the interests of merchandising and economic incentives. As previously stated, even though the franchise fraternizes with various merchandising and advertisements it doesn't appear to be a dominating

factor, aside from the existence of the franchise itself as self-promotion. Considering the rising developmental costs of games however, future ludo mixes might be inclined to go further down this path as game development becomes less financially independent, or players more accustomed to in-game ads. This, however, presumes that the cost of game development will keep rising indefinitely or at least for the indefinite future. Such statements are mainly speculative since the industry might eventually stabilize itself.

Ultimately, the terms of the ludo mix are still being negotiated and The Final Fantasy XV Universe only represents a certain point in its ongoing development. Developers such as Square Enix might be advised to be mindful of this constantly shifting landscape and work within their means, although that might entail having to tell stories that are structurally different from what the company has done in the past. However, due to rapid changes within the game industry this advice might soon become obsolete. As the study of the ludo mix is tasked with monitoring these changes it requires a comparatively high degree of adaptability, as opposed to the study of media mixes relying on media that is more stable, since the climate of the game industry continues to evolve in unexpected ways.

CONCLUSION

This article aimed at exploring how the current climate of game development, in tandem with traditional media mix strategies, operates to create what might be referred to as ludo mix in the case of the Final Fantasy XV Universe. Offering a comparative analysis of these two distinct phenomena, at the point of merger, has shed light on the development history of *Final Fantasy XV* as well as positing more general speculations about the nature and future of the ludo mix.

In the case of the franchise in question, the technological, aesthetic and economic climate of the game industry has led to the outsourcing of the game's core narrative to more cost-effective media and affected its critical reception in a negative way. Media mix strategies as they have been employed in the case of *Final Fantasy XV* favor character development and promotion as opposed to plot development, resulting in the prioritization of character focused content. This has in effect further marginalized the narrative of the game.

Lastly, the development of The Final Fantasy XV Universe raises questions about in what way ludo mix strategies might differ from traditional media mixes. Due to the fact that major incentives for this approach can be traced back to changes within the game industry and culture of games it could be held that the ludo mix can be seen as an extension of these changes. To the extent then that the climate of game development is changing more rapidly than that of other media it can therefore be said that the study of the ludo mix is required to be more adaptable than the study of traditional media mixes based on more stable media.

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