

Final Fantasies: *Final Fantasy III/VI* Authenticity Hacks

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Few Super Nintendo / Super Famicom (SNES/SFC) titles have received as much attention from videogame hackers as *Final Fantasy III* (Square Soft 1993). The fan archive ROMhacking.net currently hosts over 200 different hacking projects for the game, ranking it among the console's most intensively modified titles. One key trend that has emerged amongst these projects is a desire to transform *Final Fantasy III* into something more authentic, with many hacks claiming to repair, uncensor, or restore the game in various ways. These discourses are primarily concerned with undoing changes that occurred when the original Japanese release was localized for North American audiences—citing censorship issues and an uneven translation by Square Soft localizer Ted Woolsey—but also look toward official re-releases, fan critiques, and other franchise entries as points of reference.

Authenticity is a paradoxical construct; it is often imagined to be pure and unmediated, yet those involved in elevating its importance “plan, strategize, and design to signal this purity and lack of mediation” (Juul 2019, 9). When plotting to “restore” *Final Fantasy III*, fans develop an idealized meta-text comprised of the narrative and ludic values they feel embody the core elements of the game. These activities represent both a “negotiation of textual authenticity” (Whiteman 2008, 33) and a nostalgic longing for a return to an idealized state (Boym 2007). Tracing these fan activities reveals competing discourses and the impossibility of establishing a definitive version of a game that exists in multiplicities, while providing insight into how fan translations create chimeric games that bridge Western and Eastern ideals and aesthetics (Consalvo 2016, 64). Such discussions also tie into broader scholarship surrounding emulation (Murphy 2013; Vanderhoef 2017) and legality (Jenkins 2006; Postigo 2008), as fans document and alter games in ways the original developers do not necessarily condone.

In this presentation for the Digital Games Research Association's 2022 conference – which draws upon my ongoing doctoral research – I analyse several hacks for *Final Fantasy III* to dissect the emergent, sometimes contentious, notions of authenticity that permeate their communities. The three hacking projects that serve as the foundation for my presentation are *Final Fantasy VI: Ted Woolsey Uncensored Edition*, *FF6: Brave New World*, and *Final Fantasy VI: Retranslated* — all of which claim to offer more accurate or complete renditions of *Final Fantasy III*. My investigation begins by examining the hacks themselves, alongside hacker-made documentation posted on ROMhacking.net and its affiliated communities, to determine what changes have been made to the base game and the rationale behind them. Drawing upon results from ongoing digital ethnographic research, I trace how

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these arguments formed, following up on references made to fan translations, official re-releases for the PlayStation (1999) and Game Boy Advance (2006), and community archives such as The Cutting Room Floor that claim to unearth and research unused and cut content from videogames. In addition to censorship and translation changes, I discuss the role that game mechanics play in arguments of authenticity. *Final Fantasy III* is notoriously rife with glitches that heavily impact gameplay, and both fans and hackers debate whether such glitches are an integral part of the game experience (Boluk and LeMieux 2017, 46) or development oversights that require fixing.

ROM hacks are an intriguing point of study as they destabilize the idea of a singular game, crystallizing various fan alteration activities and highlighting the ongoing churn of developer re-releases and revisions. Translation and localization projects are one of the most prevalent forms of ROM hacking, often spurring the growth of online communities and the development of hacking tools (Consalvo 2016). Fan discourses of authenticity challenge the finality of published media (De Kosnik 2016), creating diverse, unauthorized afterlives for *Final Fantasy III* that make claims related to truth, accuracy, and restoration.

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