Final Fantasy VII Remake:
In Search of Queer Celebration

Nicky Heijmen
Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences
Amsterdam, the Netherlands
n.heijmen@hva.nl

Mirjam Vosmeer
Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences
Amsterdam, the Netherlands
m.vosmeer@hva.nl

ABSTRACT

Inspired by the notion that online sources had declared *Final Fantasy VII Remake* as a celebration of queerness, this study analyzes the ways in which the game has been adjusted. After an exploration of the concepts of queergaming and queer representation, the promotion of homophobia and heteronormativity that was abundant in the original *FFVII* is discussed. An in-depth description of main character Cloud Strife is provided in which his androgynous masculinity is viewed from the perspective of specific Japanese aesthetic traits. By focusing on two scenes that have their roots in the 1997 original - and were rewritten for the remake - the representation of (non-)heteronormative identities, desires, and practices is analyzed. It is concluded that although the term 'queer celebration' may be exaggerated, by drastically removing *FFVII*'s efforts to degenerate any form of homoeroticism, at least the most prominent of disadvantageous social dimensions in the game have been considered.

Keywords

gender, Final Fantasy VII, queergaming, representation, sexuality

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of two and a half decades, *Final Fantasy VII* (Square Co. Ltd. 1997) firmly cemented its presence in videogame culture. When released in 1997 for the original PlayStation console, the game immediately acquired widespread praise (Interactive 1998; Gamefan 1997). By now, it has sold over 12,8 million copies worldwide (Square Enix 2021) and is considered to be the first Japanese role-playing game to cover substantial ground in Western markets (Eurogamer 2013; Reddit 2018). Part of its long cultural lifeline can be accredited to a multitude of re-releases on various platforms, successful follow-up titles within the series, and the film adaptations *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children* (Tetsuya Nomura 2005) and *Last Order: Final Fantasy VII* (Morio Asaka 2005). Yet, to many, it is the game's mature story, charming character design, and memorable music that positioned *Final Fantasy*

VII as a pinnacle in videogame history, acclaimed as "one of few games to achieve truly legendary status" (Wired 2019) .

With such a broad audience and cultural legacy, it should come as no surprise that, back in 2015, the mere announcement of *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (Square Enix 2020) stirred up a variety of emotions ranging from blisfull joy to disconcertment (Wired 2015) . After all, many years had come and gone since the release of the original game. Graphical and audio quality had evolved, new gameplay dynamics had surfaced, and the relationships between gamers and the medium had become distinctly multifaceted. Besides technical aspects that, from a sales perspective, are expected to match current-day standards, a from-the-ground-up remake also invites developers to reconsider a text's overall narrative. Fans worldwide worried whether this would imply the introduction of novel ideas to an established and beloved universe but many of them also pointed out the need for the adjustment of older scenes and tropes that carry cultural values which may no longer be shared by contemporary audiences and developers.

A recurrent topic in the discussion on game culture revolves around the fact that video games still vastly mis- or underrepresent a broad variety of social groups - and are considered to be one of the least progressive forms of media representation (Shaw 2014, 9; Passmore et al. 2017, 146). Since Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins published their classic volume *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* in 1998, numerous studies regarding gender, race, sexuality and class in video games have followed (cf Kennedy 2002; Consalvo 2003; Williams et al. 2009; Vosmeer 2010) . Many authors pointed out the overrepresentation of white, male, cis-gendered heterosexual player identities and the original *Final Fantasy VII*, for that matter, also did not shy away from promoting homophobia and heteronormativity (Glasspool 2016, 109) . Glasspool states that while one of the games' interesting points is that it is not marked by an imbalance in male/female player ratios, this certainly does not imply that it is free from hegemonic gender norms. In both the character design and the narratives that unfolded throughout cutscenes and gameplay, the game frequently attempted to deletigimize homosexuality through humorous degeneration. By doing so, the characters' suggested heterosexuality was framed as natural and self-evident, in contrast to "unnatural" or even "bizarre" alternatives.

Given the original game's heteronormative urges and the medium's ongoing tendency for mis- and underrepresentation, it was rather unexpected that reviewers praised *Final Fantasy VII Remake*'s willingness to "break with tradition" and even championed it as a legitimization of sexuality and gender identity (Arstechnica 2021) . Jubilating, Gaymingmag.com declared the game's reiterations as "what was once an invitation to sneer at the idea of queerness has morphed into a celebration of it" (2021) .[1] While the series has shown a variety of queer characters and events in the past, and authors have discussed elements of queerness in the franchise (Filipowich, 2018; James, 2018) and interviewed queer players about their affective responses to the game (Ruelos 2018) , to speak of queer celebration was of a whole other level.

In this paper, we further explore the notion of *celebration*, aiming to contribute to the study of the ever-evolving role of gender and sexuality in society as portrayed on screen. By close-reading and close-playing two expressive scenes whose predecessors in the original game led to Glasspool's statements about its promotion of homophobia and heteronormativity, we intend to determine whether *Final Fantasy VII Remake*

(from here on referred to as *FFVIIR*) can indeed be considered as a celebration of queerness. In search of queer representation and queer forms of play, we will approach the game through the sub-questions: "How does *FFVIIR* portray (non-)heteronormative identities, desires, and practices?" and "How does *FFVIIR* enable or obstruct multiple disparate realities in its narratives, temporalities, and spaces?"

ABOUT AND BEYOND REPRESENTATION

Straight lines and queer vibes in video games

Video games' relationship with straightness includes but goes beyond the heteronormative portrayal of gender performances, with male heroes saving feminine 'damsels in distress' (Summers and Miller 2014). Besides similar tropes that gradually manifest when a medium historically caters to a straight, male audience, video games frequently offer a predetermined experience that leaves little room for ambiguity and alternative modes of play. Contrary to the promises of freedom and exploration that are often found in titles' marketing material, their common appeal to linear storylines and boolean dynamics - including the unavoidable binary structure of digital computers - typically leads to direct paths towards a seizure of power and closure from which one can not easily stray (Chang 2019, 230). On their own, these patterns can lead to engaging and exciting experiences for a variety of audiences. Yet, as is also the case with dominant heteronormative portrayals, their repetitive appearance does color our understanding of what games are and ought to be.

Where heteronormativity aims to ground a ubiquitous state of the world, queerness is what occurs outside of these restrictive norms. Described by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw as a desire to live outside of normative boundaries (2017), queerness does not only entail a broad spectrum of identities and sexualities but also refers to provocative, divergent, and sometimes wonderfully non-productive ways of play. By going against the dominant grain, queerness in gaming - also described as queergaming - looks for alternative relationships between a game and its players (Chang, 2017). This way, queergaming as a practice can locate unspoken norms within the medium and its social environment, potentially destabilize those assumptions, and open up those fields "to a wider and potentially more liberatory set of possibilities" (Chang, 2017).

If then, we are to investigate whether *FFVIIR* indeed relates to - or even is a celebration of - queerness, we are tempted not to limit ourselves by merely investigating the diegetic representations of gender and sexuality, but also look into the notion of alternative approaches to play. Consequently, before analyzing those dimensions in *FFVIIR*, a clearer interpretation of (queer) representation, temporalities and spaces is in order.

(Queer) representation

The concept of representation, summarized by Stuart Hall as "the production of meaning through language" (1997, 14) is deeply rooted and widely theorized within the study of culture. It discards the notion that identities like gender and sexuality - among others like ethnicity, race, age, and class - (Butler 1990, 6; Rich 1980) are

purely intrinsic phenomena, and instead underlines how those dimensions form a historically constructed apparatus (Foucault 1978, 77; De Lauretis 1987, 2). In other words: the ways we think of, describe, and approach gender and sexuality are in a constant flux depending on various societal factors that employ practices of repetition and omission. These factors - by today's standards - involve a broad range of digital entertainment, institutionalized discourses, and more mundane, daily practices. Consequently, repetitive occurrences of representation have political and social consequences that further establish or challenge said ideologies (McIntosh & Cuklanz 2014, 266). These occurrences, as influentially argued by Judith Butler, take form through movements, gestures, enactments, and other acts of gender as performativity (Butler 1990, 6). That is to say, representation emerges through the act of doing rather than being. Therefore, one way of acquiring insight into a culture's dominant ideologies is through analyzing the ways in which representation does or does not occur.

In video games - a medium through which one not only observes but also acts - representation is established in a variety of forms. A top-down approach to representation would be through the developers' integration. The game in question would then feature a variety of scripted characters that look and behave as they are programmed to do. Throughout recent years, we have been introduced to a handful of interesting queer characters in games that are not specifically advertised as queer themselves, thus opening queer representation to a broader audience. Examples would include Ellie, Dina and Lev from *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog 2020), Dorian Pavus and Cremisius Aclassi from *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare 2014), and Lorelei from *Borderlands 3* (2K Games 2019). Another form of representation in the medium, and one that involves the audience's participation within the process, is the ability to customize the appearance of a game's characters. Whilst the amount of variables to work with wildly differs among titles, it does, as a concept, give the player an amount of agency when it comes to a character's overall appearance. Agency or not, this form of representation does rely on the player to do the heavy lifting, making it an optional form of inclusion, rather than establishing nuanced queer characters and experiences. A more radical and bottom-up approach would be the practice of modding a game. While this is only possible if the game's developers implemented a developer kit - or if the modder in question is skilled enough to enter a game's source files and modify its contaminants - it does open up a broad range of queer potential. An example of this would be the mod *Queering Skyrim - Lavender Menace Necklace* for the still immensely popular game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2012). This free to download, player-build mod allows players of the game's PC-version to "sweep the ladies of Skyrim off their feet and out of their humdrum heteronormative little lives!" (Nexusmods 2021), and is one of many player-build mods that queer Skyrim through the implementation of alternative narratives and modes of play. While it is wonderful to see these mods being crafted and shared, their mere existence underlines that a game's developer often does not take parts of an underrepresented audience into consideration.

Queer temporalities and spaces

Even though the presence of a diverse cast in a game is preferable, it does not approach the medium's full potential if the player still operates within a heteronormative grid. As addressed earlier, queergaming also focuses on the potential

to stray away from linear and productive norms, and entails both diverging and unresolved narratives. This dynamic, referred to by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, among others, as 'queerness beyond representation' (2017), has been analyzed in a variety of titles, ranging from smaller but praised and highly influential games like *Gone Home* (Fullbright 2013) and *The Binding of Isaac* (Edmund McMillen & Florian Himsl 2011) to grand blockbusters like *BioShock* (2K Games 2007) and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) (Ruberg 2020; Wood 2017; Chang 2017; Chang 2015). While the findings of these analyses often resulted in disillusionment - games are almost never as queer as they at first appear to be - they also bring forth exciting ways in which video games can be seen as spaces and temporalities that enable queer possibilities.

Given that the division between obedient and disobedient forms of play has been granted a variety of descriptors within game studies, it is important to briefly address how queergaming stands in relation to other divergent types of play. René Glas and Jasper van Vught, for example, discussed instrumental and transgressive play as opposing attitudes for players to engage with the medium (2017). Described as 'playing' a game, instrumental play has the player linearly follow the game's lead towards completion and thus do what is necessary to advance; a style of play that is typically encouraged by the *Final Fantasy* series. In contrast, transgressive play refers to 'gaming' a game; driven by the urge to explore, push, bend, deviate from, and transgress its very rules. Here, the player ignores what is necessary to progress and enters a free form and/or disobedient type of gaming. This division between instrumental and transgressive play, in turn, partly echoes Roger Caillois' descriptions of ludus and paidia. Where ludus is often connected to sports or other forms of play with clearly defined rules and a strive for completion, paidia entails a type of play that is "common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety" or "uncontrolled fantasy" (Jensen 2013). Queergaming then, as a form of disobedient play, has substantial overlap with transgressive play and paidia but distinguishes and partly characterizes itself as an explorative disobedience towards normative tendencies, wholeness and productivity by either embracing failure, seeking out diverging and unresolved narratives, or preferring drifting above a game's suggested actions to proceed.

METHODOLOGY

In this current study, we do consider the entirety of the game but specifically focus on two expressive scenes that have their roots in the 1997 version of *Final Fantasy VII*. These original scenes, analyzed by Lucy Glasspool as a promotion of heteronormativity (2016, 109), have been radically transformed in the remake, and thus potentially further open up the franchise for queer representation. These scenes are *FFVIIR*'s reiteration of the original's *Gold Saucer Date Scene* that appears in *Chapter 14 - In Search of Hope* and a crossdressing/dance scene in *Chapter 9 - The Town That Never Sleeps*. In these scenes, we focus on the diegetic representation of gender and sexuality, as well as their potential for queergaming. Both lenses will be discussed more thoroughly in the subsequent paragraphs.

By zooming in on a scene's narrative elements, (non)heteronormative instances are highlighted and discussed. Taking inspiration from Dia Thorfinnsdottir and Helle Strandgaard Jensen's research on heteronormativity in children's television (2017),

the following dimensions were used to analyze the representation of (non-) heteronormative identities, desires, and practices: extreme gender performance, homophobia, (hetero) sexism, sexual orientation references, and instances of sexuality and intimacy (both implicit and explicit) .

Because gender performances occur each time a character shows up on screen,[2] and the game contains hundreds of human-like characters, this paper limits itself to *FFVIIR*'s playable main characters and secondary characters that play a significant role in the analyzed scenes. These (non) heteronormative instances are acquired by playing the game in an instrumental manner, which - as described in a previous section - is a playthrough that follows the game's lead from its start till the appearance of its credits (Van Vught & Glas 2017) . As the game has a handful of differing events depending on (un) conscious player choices, one instrumental playthrough of these events would result in an incomplete overview of its representations. To acquire a broader perspective, alternative portrayals have been considered through online video playthroughs on YouTube and Twitch, textual walkthroughs of the game, and experiences/interpretations of various other players found online.

To approach *FFVIIR*'s potential for queergaming, we analyzed these scenes' mechanics to understand how they influence forms of representation and gameplay. This lense is inspired by Jordan Wood's reading of *The Binding of Isaac*, in which he deploys J. Halberstam's notion of the queer archive and analyzes how the game combines and sustains "multiple disparate realities - whether historical or physical - in tension with one another" (2017, 217). Because *Final Fantasy* as a franchise is known for its linear approach to storytelling and gameplay, searching for queerness in *FFVIIR*'s temporal and spatial dimensions would help to more specifically determine in what ways the game celebrates queerness and/or continues its normative legacy.

Lastly, it is important to mention that while *FFVIIR* has been designed within Japanese culture - be it with a universal audience in mind - the game went through processes of localization, and with this was reformed through English translation and narration. This transformation does not stop at mere literal translations of the in-game texts, as the translation strategy of the *Final Fantasy* series is one of domestication (Costales 2016, 185-186), meaning that in-game elements are to be translated to suit cultural standards of the destination locale: bringing the game closer to its target market. Because of this, this paper only expresses claims concerning the English version of the game.

IN SEARCH OF QUEER CELEBRATION

Released on April 4th, 2020 for Playstation 4 and June 10th, 2021 for Playstation 5, *FFVIIR* is an action role-playing game that takes the original's first opening hours and expands it to an experience that lasts anywhere from 33 to 120+ hours. Instead of being a complete remake of the original, it is the first in a still unknown number of successive stand-alone titles that as a series reapproaches the original's formula (Inverse 2021).

Largely taking place in the dystopian metropolis Midgar, the player, who controls the 21-year-old mercenary Cloud Strife, co-operates with the eco-terrorist group AVALANCHE. Their goal, for most of the game, is to put an end to the abusive use of

Mako, being the planet's lifestream that is drained by the conglomerate Shinra Electric Power Energy. Gameplaywise, *FFVIIR* consists of traversing Midgar by foot in an often linear fashion, completing (fetch) quests, battling enemies, and by doing so slowly furthering the game's overall plot.

As there are very few moments throughout the game in which the player controls another character - not including the possibility to switch between characters in battle mode - it is through Cloud that she experiences most of *FFVIIR*. Not only is he the vehicle that the player inhabits to traverse the game's settings, he is also narratively centered, meaning that most of what happens within the game directly or indirectly involves his participation. Therefore, before diving into specific scenes, a general description of Cloud as a character is in place.

The androgynous masculinity of Cloud Strife

Physically, *FFVIIR*'s version of Cloud portrays an interesting mix of gender signifiers that result in a form of androgynous masculinity that is not a Western norm but which has been interpreted as an articulation of masculinity based on specifically Japanese aesthetic traits (Glasspool, 2016). Adorned with protective metal gear that fails to conceal his tanned and toned physique, Cloud's appearance does radiate traditional Western signs of manliness. Yet, his clean, delicate face and striking eyes echoes bishōnen: a Japanese aesthetic referring to a young man of androgynous beauty. This combination of signifiers is found less clearly in Cloud's character traits. Especially early in the game, his modus operandi involves being reticent and vocally indifferent towards the world around him. When too occupied to be aloof, he engages in extreme masculine performances: displays of extraordinary physical strength, high-speed motor-racing, and the (violent) wielding of his iconic six foot long sword. These actions, in turn, are commonly framed as pragmatic practices rather than clear expressions of emotion. After all, Cloud is a man with a mission. On the one hand, this lack of emotional expression potentially creates a sense of mystique that allows the player to read the character in a variety of ways - stoic, insecure, anxious; to name a few - and thus project motivations that are not clearly stated within the text. His ambiguity and androgynous beauty then touches upon what is popularly described as *gap moe*: a character's contradictory characteristics or behaviors that make them more charming or likeable (Shibuya, 2019). On the other hand, Cloud's emotional withdrawal falls in line with the "complete unblushing male" trope: a male character in total control of his emotions, bathing in emotional inexpressiveness (Shamir & Travis 2002). In other words: boys don't cry, and thus neither does Cloud.

Image 1. Cloud Strife.

Eventually, the ways in which players read and ground Cloud's general aloofness will vary. Yet, this trait should not merely be perceived as a blank slate on which the player can freely project. As will be addressed below, it is Cloud's dominant attitude, his ambiguity rather than explicitness, that directs, opens up, and simultaniously obstructs the game's potential for queer narratives involving its main protagonist.

Gold Saucer Date Scene / In Search of Hope

The first specific scene of this analysis is *FFVIIR*'s reimagination of *FFVII*'s mandatory sidequest *Gold Saucer Date Scene*. In the original game, one of Cloud's party members invites him to spend the evening alone with them in a towering amusement park. This assertive character is mechanically chosen due to unaware player decisions up until that very moment. Depending on player responses in earlier conversations, a hidden value in- or decreases, resulting in a date with either Aerith, Tifa, Yuffie (all female characters), or Barret (male). Not only does this prioritize a male/female date due to the 3 to 1 ratio, overall chances to unlock a date with Barret are much smaller, further implying the uncommonness of this variable. Additionally, where dates with female companions involve romantic gestures and intimate moments - although never explicitly physical besides a kiss on the cheek or hand - with Barret there is no such thing. Instead, the conversation between the two men focuses on which of the girls they would rather be on a date with, including some generally displeased remarks about their current homosocial situation. Besides Cloud and Barret expressing discomfort, non-playable characters (NPCs) express the inability of two men being on a date together, and thus further underline the idea that male-male sexuality is not a serious possibility (Glasspool 2017, 112). When entering the park's theater with a female companion, the receptionist will congratulate you for being the 100th couple that night, inviting you to participate in that night's theater play. When with Barret, the receptionist proclaims: "You are our 100th couple tonight… Oh, wait… no you're not. Sorry.", causing Cloud and Barret to leave.

Are things considerably different in *FFVIIR*'s reimaging of this dating scene? While unconscious choices still result in a private moment with one of the party members, the environment, context, and conversations are vastly different. *Chapter 14 - In Search of Hope* replaces the amusement park's blazing fireworks and thrilling rides

with a cutscene of Cloud waking up due to hearing footsteps at night. He leaves his room, enters a quiet, dim-lit garden, and finds either Aerith, Tifa, or Barret standing on top of a small, flowery hill. The setting itself is a rather romantic one but the conversations that follow the encounter dominantly focus on, or insinuate, the dreadful times that are behind and ahead.

Aerith, who appears as a specter, talks of her current situation as a captive in Shinra's headquarters and warns Cloud that, whatever happens, he can not fall in love with her. While their conversation can easily be read as one between a tragic, romantic couple, there is a calculated distance between the two. Physically, the scene shows Aerith's capability to touch Cloud. Yet, when the latter tries to attempt the same, his hand moves through Aerith's spectral form. Combined with the couple's conversation, the scene becomes delightfully meta, as if Square Enix is reacting to the player's constricted conditions, potential desires, and narrative expectations.

Image 2. Aerith intimately touches Cloud.

Unlike with Aerith, Cloud's encounter with Tifa does not verbally center on their interpersonal relationship. Instead, Tifa expresses a deep sorrow about Shinra once again taking all that gave meaning to her life by violently demolishing her previous neighborhood, claiming countless lives and treasured places. She slowly approaches Cloud and cries on his shoulder. After a moment of immobility, Cloud, while gazing into the distance, embraces Tifa, who eventually responds that he is seriously hurting her due to his firm grip. They step away from each other. Tifa claims crying to be a waste of time. Cloud shows emotional development by disagreeing. The scene ends with the camera moving away from them, eventually placing the characters out of view.

Image 3. Tifa cries on Cloud's shoulder.

Where the scenes with Aerith and Tifa include various forms of intimacy, with Barret, Cloud remains at a rather grand physical and emotional distance. After noticing Cloud's presence, Barret sidesteps a moment of personal vulnerability by praising lesser-mentioned AVALANCHE members, like Al, who is described as often wooing "the ladies" with flowers, or Nellie, who Barret insinuates to have had a more intimate relationship with Jessie (both being female characters). Eventually, Barret gives a backhanded compliment to Cloud and both decide it is time to go to sleep.

Not unlike Cloud, Barret hardly expresses himself explicitly, unless it is - of course - through violence. While the character's obvious urge to keep up with appearances is in line with his hypermasculine stereotypicality, the complete absence of any homosocial intimacy in what can be considered one of the game's most emotionally-loaded moments, is in stark contrast to the scenes with Aerith and Tifa. Still, the casual - and thus not dismissive - suggestion of same-sex intimacy amongst two other (female) characters is, while still not addressing intimate male/male relations, miles away from the portrayed homophobia in the original game.

Image 4. Two bros, chilling in the garden, five feet apart.

But what about Cloud? Throughout the game, and up until this moment, all participants - including Barret and a variety of others not included in the garden scene - have shown affectionate interest towards the game's main character (Inverse 2020). To cite Gaymingmag.com: "in the game's universe being gay, straight, or anywhere in between doesn't matter - everyone is Cloudsexual" (2020). Cloud, on the other hand, does not appear to share the same urges. In online articles and message boards, his reluctance to play into others' advances - both in the remake and the original - has occasionally but very rarely been read as asexual (SMPollard 2019). Most of the time though, it is explained away as shyness or a suppression of emotional/sexual feelings and desires (Arstechnica 2021; GameFAQs 2020). These readings highlight potential queer narratives but also underline that any reading will be - at best - one of subtext. The closest authoritative explanation of Cloud's behavior is found in an interview with Kazushige Nojima, one of the game's main writers. In this paratext, Nojima describes Cloud as a 21-year-old that missed out on five years of social development due to his military training (Game8 2020). The brief physical moment between Cloud and Tifa then, according to Nojima, is Cloud mimicking Barret, who, earlier in the game, comforted Tifa after the destruction of Sector 7. While this does not obstruct diverse readings of Cloud's sexuality, it also fails to confirm the idea that Cloud is written as an explicitly queer character. Instead, through narrative ambiguity, Square Enix hands out a subtextual character creation kit, outsourcing the interpretive workload to an audience that is severely underrepresented. All the while, a more heteronormative crowd can sit back and relax, as Cloud is simply "lacking in development" and mere moments away from "straightening his act". Even if, in the end, Cloud does turn out to be queer, developers went out of their way to make sure that female advances towards him are far more fleshed out than any form of same-sex attraction, no matter how much Cloud professes that he is simply not interested.

Until now, we have only addressed the scene's narrative elements. Mechanically though, to progress the story, one of the three cutscenes will occur regardless of (un)conscious player decisions. When looking at the specifics that determine with whom Cloud will share this moment, it becomes clear that these decisions do not feature any interaction with Barret. Instead, the outcome is determined by being

(un)involved in sidequests and events that are related to either Tifa or Aerith, making the scene with Barret a consequence of a rapid, linear playthrough in which the player did not take the time to wander and get side-tracked. In a way then, ironically, the most straight form of playing does not lead to a shared moment with a female companion. In another, less ironic way, players who hope for a personal moment with Barret ought to ignore multiple aspects of the game. Where in the original game chances were slim to go on a date with Barret, in *FFVIIR* it is determined by the player's attitude towards Cloud's female companions, rather than towards Barret.

One could argue that the chapter selection screen that is unlocked after completing the game's storyline allows the player to traverse time and thus experience the alternative scenes, combining and sustaining their multiple disparate realities. This way, she bypasses a more liniair telling of *FFVIIR* and opens up unexplored dynamics between its characters. The question remains though if these scenes do portray real alternatives, as they are not in friction with each other. Their appearance is not pivotal, they do not contradict each other nor do they influence any of the following gameplay, Cloud's overall character, relations, or actions. Rather, these three encounters neatly exist next to each other in a vacuum, radiating a form of importance - partly due to the mechanics that unlocks them - but failing to conceive narrative and ludic impact. That is, if we ignore the intention of the player. To some, the character selection screen might only tickle completionist fantasies. To others, it can provide a means to explore different readings of characters and their relationships. While our reading of Cloud's and Barret's scene does not suggest male-male attraction, others have read it as an early moment in their potential "from enemies to lovers"-arc (pastelcheckereddreams 2020; Hadrian_x_Antinous 2021). In ways, alternative readings then seem to rely on the promise of future titles - not the actual game itself.

Taking the above into consideration, *FFVIIR*'s reimagining of the Gold Saucer Date Scene does not radically alter the contraptions of its source material. Where the original *FFVII* uses its date mechanic to favor male/female relations and downplay forms of homosociality in fear of homosexual associations, its remake still struggles to break free from its predecessor's heteronormativity. Despite this, it needs to be acknowledged that the revisioned material fully descards the original game's attempts to devalue homosocial/sexual relations through the use of jokes or dismissive character attitudes. Where mechanically not too much has changed, the need to express homosocial discomfort seems to be no longer present.

Crossdressing / The Town That Never Sleeps
The most discussed scene within *FFVIIR* is by no doubt the crossdressing scene that takes part in *Chapter 9 - The Town That Never Sleeps*. To enter a villain's mansion and rescue Tifa, Cloud needs to be perceived as a woman; a scenario of which the *FFVII* version has been described as a string of "homophobic micro-aggressions in the form of jokes directed to non-normative gender and sexual articulations" (Glasspool 2017, 111-112). For example, when gathering the required clothing in the original game, the player visits the member's club/brothel Honey Bee. In it, stereotypical gay characters are given lines like "why don't you stick around an play a bit? Daddy's so lonely…" (2017, 112), to which - to Aerith's amusement - Cloud responds with extreme discomfort.

In *FFVIIR*, Square Enix vigorously morphed the homophopic content of the original to a much more celebratory moment in which Cloud's transformation is one of glamor and grandeur rather than abnormality and ridicule. The scene itself now takes place in the Honeybee Inn, now a Parisian cabaret and burlesque-style dance venue. It starts with a sensual dance-off between Cloud and Andrea Rhodea: the male owner and lead dancer of the locale. After the dance-off, to which Cloud reluctantly agrees after being forcefully pushed in, Andrea proposes to transform Cloud into "a vision of beauty". An upbeat track featuring lyrics about self-acceptance and enjoyment kicks in, HoneyBee Inn dancers seat Cloud center-stage and a nameless Honeyboy works his magic, finishing the transformation with an encouraging "you were born for this". The result is a dashing Cloud Strife, adorned with one of three elegant dresses (their color and shape depends on earlier unconscious player choices), on-point eyeliner, and complementary bowties in his braided hair. When Cloud is revealed to the public, he is cheered on tremendously, Aerith gasps with delight, and Andrea lets go of an intrigued grunt. When leaving the Honeybee Inn in his new attire, Cloud remains addressed as a female character by the public, and even Tifa at first does not recognize him; such is the perceived naturalness of Cloud's gender performance.

Image 5. Andrea and Cloud after Cloud's makeover.

Where Cloud's reluctant character occasionaly enables the readings of queer narratives, amidst Honeybee Inn's grandeur it somewhat obstructs it. At no point in time does Cloud give into his surroundings' urge to let this be a moment of identity. His face shows no sign of enjoyment, nor does he vocally respond to what is happening. When outside, he asks Aerith not to say a word. When complimented by Tifa, he cuts her sentence off in his own characteristically unaffected manner: "Nailed it, I know. Thank you. Moving on."

We see this lack of appropriation mirrored in the games' mechanics. Where in the 1997 original the player had to actively collect Cloud's attire, now, completely stripped of agency, she has no other option but to sit back and let other characters' involvement gulf over Cloud. No matter how she approaches the game, Cloud's transformation remains a temporal and surface one, unskippable yet never really attained. When crossdressing is no longer a necessity, Cloud's appearance returns to his previous, masculine attire. That is, if the player decides to only play through the

game once. After finishing the story, and thus unlocking the chapter selection, gamers who wish to relish the opportunity to further play around with Cloud's bishōnen appearance can acquire a form of agency by traversing back into time and completing side quests to adorn him in the two other optional dresses.

When taking a step back from Cloud to look at how the event relates to the world of *FFVIIR*, it needs to be addressed that it positions one specific form of queerness in a locked-off and restricted location. The Honeybee Inn, with its bouncers, entree fees, and services, is often described as a place of retreat and entertainment: an escape from the norm. While Andrea passionately advocates how notions of gender don't apply to true beauty, outside of the walls of his establishment, no such affirmative expressions seem to exist, besides perhaps in the mere existance of Jules, a gender nonconforming minor character stationed as a gymtrainer in the very same city.

So, to fully label this part of the game as a celebration of queerness would mean to ignore its contradictory elements. On the one hand, we have a variety of characters that are celebratory of the attempted transformation. While some of them are nameless stand-ins, others are established characters with whom the player can more easily identify - a possibility that is heightened due to the scene's third person perspective. Compared with its predecessor, *FFVIIR*'s reimagination fiercely avoids earlier attempts to delegitimize non-normative gender expressions. No longer is Cloud's transformation the target of cheap jokes. Instead, Square Enix elevated it to a grandiose moment, a celebration of beauty "to which gender norms do not apply" - to which also his two close female companions reacted with great enthusiasm. On the other hand, and from a more critical perspective, Cloud's attitude - which changes from pragmatic, to reluctant, to rejecting - and the framing of Honeybee Inn's affirmative environment as a secluded abnormality, limits the extent to which we can read into its queerness.

CONCLUSION

Can we state that what was once an invitation to sneer at the idea of queerness has indeed morphed into a celebration of it? It does seem that *FFVIIR*'s reimaginings of two classic but conflicting scenes show how, after more than twenty years, Square Enix transformed parts of their heteronormative past into a more considerate and ambiguous experience, catering to queer and non-queer players alike. However, despite welcome changes, both scenes fail to completely avoid heteronormative pitfals in their narrative structures and gameplay dynamics, making it difficult to wholeheartedly praise the title as celebratory. While enabling a player to dress a male protagonist in three different types of feminine dresses certainly accounts for some moments of carefree gaiety, it can hardly be considered as a wide and liberatory set of possibilities to explore and create new senses of queer belonging. In that sense, we conclude that by drastically removing *FFVII*'s "humorous" degeneration of any form of homoeroticism, rewriting locations, quests, personalities, and including new and more queer-friendly characters, *FFVIIR* shows that, despite the source's legendary status, Square Enix embraced their societal obligation to at least reconsider the most prominent of its disadvantageous social dimensions - and they have done so in a much more celebratory fashion.

FFVIIR thus stands as another example of a mainstream developer's willingness to

acknowledge individual forms of queer representation from a visual perspective but predominant negligence when it comes to environmental inclusion and gameplay. While its iterations and public praise signal sparkles of progress, gamers, creators, and scholars ought to remain critical towards reinforcements of normative forms of play and expression, especially when done by one of the industry's leading names. When not embraced by leading, mainstream developers, alternative engagement with the medium is left to flourish through smaller projects that are limited in reach and scope, produced by a marginalized audience that still needs to create their own space.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ENDNOTES

1) To read this quote isolated from its article could give the impression that the originating piece is entirely without critique. Instead, the opposite is true, as Caleb Wysor, whose writing we also refer to later in the analysis, gives a thorough and critical reading of the game's much addressed cross-dressing scene.

2) Of course, forms of gender expression do not need to rely on the visual actions and appearances of characters alone. For example, it is through Archival Adventuring that a player is able to obtain information through investigating objects found in characters' homes or other occupied areas (Kagen 2018). Sadly, while the world of *FFVIIR* is occupied with many NPCs in a wild amount of settlements, these environments do not allow the player to gain insight in other characters' daily routine or inner lives.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

2K Boston & 2K Australia. 2007. *BioShock*. Microsoft Windows. USA: 2K Games.

Arstechnica (January 25th, 2021) How *Final Fantasy VII Remake* legitimizes sexuality and gender identity. Available at: https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2021/01/how-final-fantasy-vii-remake-legitimizes-sexuality-and-gender-identity/ (accessed 12.10.21)

Asaka, Morio. 2005. *Last Order: Final Fantasy VII*. Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment Inc.

Bethesda Game Studios. 2016. *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Special Edition*. Microsoft Windows. USA: Bethesda Softworks.

Blizzard Entertainment. 2004. *World of Warcraft*. PC. USA: Blizzard Entertainment.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender trouble*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Cassell, J., & Jenkins, H., ed. 1998. *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat. Gender and computer games.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Chang, Edmond Y. 2015. "Love Is in the Air: Queer (Im)Possibility and Straightwashing in FrontierVille and World of Warcraft" in *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking 2, no. 2*, 6-31.
DOI: 10.14321/qed.2.2.0006

Chang, Edmond Y. 2017. "A Game Chooses, A Player Obeys: BioShock, Posthumanism, and the Limits of Queerness" in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*. Jennifer Malkowski & Treaandrea M. Russworm. Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Chang, Edmond Y. 2017. "Queergaming" in *Queer Game Studies*. Adrienne Shaw & Bonnie Ruberg. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Consalvo, M. 2003. "Hot dates and fairy-tale romances: Studying sexuality in video games." in *The video game theory reader* (171-194). M. J. P. Wolf & B. Perron (Eds.). New York: Routledge.

Costales, Alberto Fernández. 2016. "Analyzing Players' Perceptions on the Translation of Video Games: Assessing the Tension between the Local and the Global Concerning Language Use" in *Media Across Borders*. Andrea Esser, Iain Robert Smith & Miguel Á. Bernal-Merino. London: Routledge.

De Lauretis, Teresa. 1987. *Technologies of Gender*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Eurogamer (June 2nd, 2013) Final Fantasy VII Retrospective. Available at: https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2013-06-02-final-fantasy-7-retrospective (accessed 12.10.2021)

Filipowich, Mark. 2018. "Maidens and Muscleheads, White Mages and Wimps, from the Light Warriors to *Lightning* Returns" in *Queerness in Play* by Todd Harper, Meghan Blythe Adams, Nicholas Taylo. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An introduction*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Fullbright. 2013. *Gone Home*. Microsoft Windows. USA: Steam.

Game8 (October 28th, 2020) Final Fantasy VII Remake Ultimania Interview With

Tetsuya Nomura | English Translation | FF7 Remake. Available at:
https://web.archive.org/web/20210118073949/https://game8.co/games/Final-Fantasy-VII-Remake/archives/286914 (accessed 12.10.21)

Gamefan (September 1st, 1997) Volume 5 Issue 09 September 1997. Available at:
https://archive.org/details/GamefanVolume5Issue09September1997/page/n25/mode/2up (accessed 10.12.2021)

GameFAQs (April 16th 2020) Is Cloud gay? Available at:
https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/boards/168653-final-fantasy-vii-remake/78589762 (accessed 12.10.21)

Gaymingmag (April 10th, 2020) The Big Question – How Gay is Final Fantasy VII Remake? Available at:
https://gaymingmag.com/2020/04/final-fantasy-vii-remake-gay (accessed 12.10.21)

Gaymingmag (June 11th, 2020) Final Fantasy VII Remake complicates its queer legacy. Available at:
https://gaymingmag.com/2020/06/final-fantasy-vii-remake-complicates-its-queer-legacy (accessed 12.10.21)

Glasspool, Lucy. 2016. "Making Masculinity: Articulations of Gender and Japaneseness in Japanese RPGs and Machinima" in *Transnational Contexts of Culture, Gender, Class, and Colonialism in Play*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hadrian_x_Antinous. Reddit (August 3rd, 2021) Sheesh, all these people claiming CLOUD'S NOT GAY forgot that Barret is a love option in the original. Available at:
https://www.reddit.com/r/FFVIIRemake/comments/ox2myp/how_would_you_feel_if_they_added_barret_as_a/h7jyifo/?utm_source=reddit&utm_medium=web2x&context=3 (accessed 12.10.21)

Hall, Stuart. 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. California: Sage Publications Ltd.

James, Eric Andrew. 2018. "Queer Easter Eggs and their Hierarchies of Play" in *Game Studies*, 18(3). Available at: http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/james (accessed 12.10.21)

Jensen, Graham A. 2013. "Making Sense of Play in Video Games: Ludus, Paidia, and Possibility Spaces" in *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture. 2013; 7 (1)*, 69-80. Available at:
https://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/view/vol7no1-4/7-1-4-html (accessed 12.10.21)

Kagen, Melissa. 2018. "Archival Adventuring" in *DiGRA '18 – Abstract Proceedings of the 2018 DiGRA International Conference: The Game is the Message*. Turin: Digital Games Research Association.

Kennedy, H. W. 2002. "Lara Croft: Feminist icon or cyberbimbo?" in *Game Studies*, 2(2), 1-12. Available at: http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy/ (accessed 12.10.21)

McIntosh, Heather & Lisa M. Cuklanz. 2014. "Feminist media research" in *Feminist research practice: A primer (Second edition)*. Sharlene. N. Hesse-Biber. Boston: SAGE.

McMillen, Edmund & Florian Himsl. 2011. *The Binding of Isaac*. Microsoft Windows. USA: Steam.

Nexusmods (February 19th, 2021) Queering Skyrim - Lavender Menace Necklace. Available at: https://www.nexusmods.com/skyrimspecialedition/mods/27079 (accessed 12.10.21)

Inverse (November 4th, 2020) FF7 REMAKE TRANSFORMS THE HORNIEST FINAL FANTASY INTO A FULL-ON THIRST TRAP. Available at: https://www.inverse.com/gaming/final-fantasy-7-remake-horny-thirst-trap-everyone-is-hot (accessed 12.10.21)

Inverse (September 29th, 2021) FINAL FANTASY 7 REMAKE PART 2 RELEASE DATE, CHARACTERS, STORY, AND TIMELINES How many more entries will there be? Available at: https://www.inverse.com/gaming/final-fantasy-7-remake-part-2-release-date-characters-story-ending-compilation (accessed 12.10.21)

Interactive (2021) D.I.C.E. Awards By Video Game Details. Available at: https://www.interactive.org/games/video_game_details.asp?idAward=1998&idGame=722 (accessed 10.12.2021)

Nomura, Tetsuya. 2006. *Final Fantasy: Advent Children*. Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment.

Passmore, Cale, Rowan Yates, Max Birk, & Regan Mandryk. 2017. "Racial Diversity in Indie Games: Patterns, Challenges, and Opportunities" in *CHI PLAY'17 Extended Abstracts, October 15–18, 137-151, Amsterdam, Netherlands*. DOI: 10.1145/3130859.3131438, 146.

pastelcheckereddreams. Tumblr (June 5th, 2020) Anon is referring to this ask concerning an interview with co-director Toriyama Motomu. Available at: https://pastelcheckereddreams.tumblr.com/post/620122209939341312/bout-the-ask-with-if-bi-cloud-is-confirmed-now (accessed 12.10.21)

Reddit (July 19th, 2012) Why is Final Fantasy VII regarded as the best game in the

series by so many? Available at:
https://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/wt9uu/why_is_final_fantasy_vii_regarde
d_as_the_best (accessed 12.10.21)

Reddit (June 16th, 2015) Final Fantasy VII Remake Announcement. Available at:
https://www.reddit.com/r/Games/comments/39zkvh/final_fantasy_vii_remake_annou
ncement (accessed 12.10.21)

Reddit (October 28th, 2017) What exactly made FFVII the breakout JRPG in the
west? Available at:
https://www.reddit.com/r/JRPG/comments/799ing/what_exactly_made_ffvii_the_brea
kout_jrpg_in_the (accessed 12.10.21)

Ruelos, Spencer Taylor Berdiago. 2018. "Queer Gamer Assemblages and the
Affective Elements of Digital Games" in *Press Start Vol 4 No 2 (2018): Special Issue:
'Body Movements'.* Available at:
https://press-start.gla.ac.uk/index.php/press-start/article/view/86 (accessed 12.10.21)

Rich, Adrienne. 1980. "Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence" in *Signs,
5(4)*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Rosewarne, Lauren. 2019. *Sex and Sexuality in Modern Screen Remakes*. London:
Palgrave Macmillan.

Ruberg, Bonnie. 2020. "Straight Paths Through Queer Walking Simulators:
Wandering on Rails and Speedrunning in Gone Home." in *Games and Culture 15, no.
6 (September 2020)*, 632-652.
DOI: 10.1177/1555412019826746

Shamir, Milette & Jennifer Travis. 2002. *Boys don't cry?: rethinking narratives of
masculinity and emotion in the U.S*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Shaw, Adrienne. 2014. *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of
Gamer Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

SMPollard (June 11th, 2019) Not Interested: The Asexuality of Cloud Strife.
Available at:
https://smpollard.wordpress.com/2019/06/11/not-interested-the-asexuality-of-cloud-st
rife/ (accessed 12.10.21)

Ruberg, B. and Shaw, A., ed. 2017. *Queer Game Studies*. Minneapolis, MN, USA
Minnesota University Press.

Shibuya, Akiko et al. 2019. "Male and Female Game Players' Preferences for Game
Characters and Real-world Personalities in Japan." in *DiGRA '19 - Proceedings of the
2019 DiGRA International Conference*. Kyoto: Digital Games Research Association.

Square. 1997. *Final Fantasy VII*. Playstation. Japan: Square Enix.

Square Enix. 2020 *Final Fantasy VII Remake*. Playstation 4. Japan: Square Enix.

Square Enix (August 7th, 2020)『ファイナルファンタジーVIIリメイク』全世界累計販売本数500万本突破! Available at:
https://www.jp.square-enix.com/topics/detail/1339/ (accessed 12.10.2021)

Summers, A., & Miller, M. K. 2014. "From damsels in distress to sexy superheroes: How the portrayal of sexism in video game magazines has changed in the last twenty years". *Feminist Media Studies,* 14(6), 1028-1040.

Thorfinnsdottir, Dia & Helle Strandgaard Jensen. 2017. "Laugh away, he is gay! Heteronormativity and children's television in Denmark" in *Journal of Children and Media*.
DOI: 10.1080/17482798.2017.1312470

Van Vught, Japer & René Glas. 2017. "Considering play: From method to analysis." in *DiGRA '17 - Proceedings of the 2017 DiGRA International Conference*. Melbourne: Digital Games Research Association.

Vosmeer, M. 2010. *Videogames en Gender. Over Spelende Meiden, Sexy Avatars en Huiselijkheid op het Scherm*. Amsterdam: Universiteit van Amsterdam (PhD thesis).

Williams, D., Martins, N., Consalvo, M., & Ivory, J. D. 2009. "The virtual census: Representations of gender, race and age in video games." in *New Media & Society*, 11(5), 815-834.

Wired (17th June, 2015) Don't Just Remake *Final Fantasy VII*—Reimagine It. Available at: https://www.wired.com/2015/06/final-fantasy-vii-remake (accessed 12.10.21)

Wired (14th June, 2019) Final Fantasy VII Remake lives up to its legendary predecessor. Available at:
https://www.wired.co.uk/article/final-fantasy-remake-hands-on-e3 (accessed 12.10.21)

Wood, Jordan. 2017. "Romancing an Empire, Becoming Isaac " in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*. Jennifer Malkowski & Treaandrea M. Russworm. Indiana: Indiana University Press.