Fictive affinities in Final Fantasy XI: complicit and critical play in fantastic nations.

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ABSTRACT
Like many massively-multiplayer role-playing games, Final Fantasy XI is a persistent world with a heroic fantasy setting. This paper discusses fictive player identities, and describes specific visual and ludological tropes of race and nationality, and the techniques by which the game engineers the complicity of the player in the problematics it represents. Some of these are coherent with themes and structures developed in earlier (single-player) iterations of the Final Fantasy franchise; others are original to the multiplayer title. This treatment of the game-as-text is offered as an exercise in critical close-play, and as an example of a necessarily hybrid approach to the study of game genres.

Keywords
MMORPG, fantasy, genre, Japan, ideology

To interrogate the game as a text (that is, as an object, rather than as a space of social practice) is to ask, *for what question is this artifact an answer?* When this method is applied to an open-ended, massively-multiplayer role-playing game (MMORPG), we can look at the ways in which the game generates the space of play and the tasks of play, and at the positions in which the player is situated by the game. *Final Fantasy XI* [12] is persistent-world MMORPG produced in Japan, for a global market, by Square-Enix in 2002. Content is added continuously to the game, and it remains among the most popular MMORPGs on the market as of this writing.

If we apply a revised version of Altman's[1] synthetic model of genre, the game is semantically a fantasy game, and syntactically a massively-multiplayer role-playing game; these two categories of genre are not completely autonomous from each other, as the most popular massively-multiplayer games have consistently been those set in fantasy environments.[4] [16]

Fantasy in literature and in game
Anglo-American modern heroic fantasy as a genre in literature and film has its immediate origins in 19th century romantic literature, particularly the work of William Morris. A pronounced sense of geography informed his work, and this sense of geographic displacement and imagination becomes more pronounced in the work of Edward Plunkett Lord Dunsany, C.S. Lewis, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and J.R.R. Tolkein. In the interwar period in Japan, fantastic literature was also

negotiating questions of fictive and real spaces. Miyazawa Kenji wrote of *Ihatov*, which was a project of an imaginary Slavic identity onto his home prefecture, Iwate. There are marked differences between the Anglo-American and Japanese traditions of fantastic space and displacement (and, at least until recently, the latter often critiqued or nuanced the former without reciprocation or recognition.) These differences are part of a broader range of characteristics marking the Japanese fantastic tradition [11], particularly its readiness to insinuate the heroic-fantastic into the real world.

The two strands of fantastic literature described here both emerge in the setting of the consolidations of nation-states and the emergence of discourses of the folk (see Harootunian [5]), of what Marilyn Ivy [9] described as a "discourse of the vanishing," which informed and mobilized the discipline of anthropology [3]. The genre of heroic fantasy can be seen in this light, as one by which questions of race, nation and ethnos are worked out in fictional geographies. By migrating these questions to the game environment, different modes of articulation become possible: the relationship between the player, the terrain, and the fiction of the nation becomes playable as procedure, rather than received as narration. Theorists such as Tristan Todorov [15] and Rosemary Jackson [10], have offered structural and psychoanalytic readings of the genre. However, these readings do not easily survive application to the game environment; instead, those theories of fantasy which emphasize its relationship to mimesis, such as those of Katherine Hume [6] may be more suitable. The fantastic is ultimately an *episteme* which, as Hume describes, is created by processes such as replacement, subtraction, and augmentation. In this sense, the game-as-fantasy might be seen as the fulfillment of the logic of the heroic-fantastic, at least that of utopian or dystopian national landscapes. In this sense, the game-as-fantasy might be seen as the fulfillment of the logic of the heroic-fantastic rendering of utopian or dystopic landscapes. The process by which the familiar is mapped selectively by addition (adding magic, binding race and nation) or subtraction (compressing class difference, removing technology, fixing categories of nation and race) is by necessity ideological. That the fantasy-game may fulfill the fantasy-narrative is predicted by W.R. Irwin's theory of the (literary) fantastic as game [8].

The complete structure of any fantasy MMORPG is very complicated, and any exhaustive outline is far beyond the scope of this article. However, certain features are fairly universal—the player-avatar is a collection of values, some of which are static—race, name, gender—and some of which are dynamic—jobs, skills, abilities, health, and inventory. The player then participates in a persistent world by fighting opponents, completing missions, augmenting his abilities, etc. The motivations for play range from the challenge of improving performance, to conviviality, to participation in a fictional world and aesthetic enjoyment.[1]

Epistemes of place

Final Fantasy XI contains elements consistent with other games in the Final Fantasy franchise. The series does not, as a rule, consist of true sequels: each game is fictively autonomous from the others, yet share certain mechanics and features, such as monsters, systems of mobility, skill

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[1] Richard Bartle's typology of MMORPG players are helpful, yet the player motivated by exploration of the world has varied characteristics in visual worlds than in textual ones, and I would suggest that the visual fictions of place, of represented otherworldiness, are distinct from those of the narrative fictions, or "lore." The possibility of the visual and spatial exploration of the persistant world harkens back to the experience of Myst. See Bartle, R.A. *Designing virtual worlds*, New Riders Publishing, Indianapolis, Indiana, 2004.

systems, etc.

After installation, the game begins with a cinematic cut-scene, a dramatic representation of the sacking of a human city by monstrous *Orcs*, one of the *beastmen* races against whom the playable races fight (see below.) The scene depicts a young boy who is saved from massacre by the self-sacrifice of his sister. It is then revealed that this event took place "twenty years ago;" the next scene shows an advancing column of warriors of the playable races, carrying banners of three countries, returning to the sacked city. The young boy, now a grown man, is among them. The scene depicts a harmony of these races and nations in their *Reconquista;* they glance towards each other with comradely assurance and purpose. In fact, this reference to the reconquest of European lands from Moorish invasion is clearly not accidental: the very landscape of the city in the cut-scene markedly resembles that of the medieval Spanish countryside.

Specifically, the war was waged between the "free nations" (i.e., the homelands of the player-characters) of the world of *Vana'diel*, and a collective of "partially sentient" races called the *Beastmen* led by a "Shadow Lord." In this introduction, and in the extra-textual material that accompanies the game, the player is led to assume that these bestial monsters are an ongoing menace to the well-being of the civilized world. Thus, the historical context of the game is the wake of a destructive total war; players are told that they, as adventurers, are chartered with the recovery of territory in the name of civilization.

Character creation follows this introduction, in which the player selects the character's race, gender (one race is all female, one is all male, and the others are dimorphic) and appearance. The player selects their initial job class and selects a nation from which to begin. There are 3 cities from which the player can begin, and this choice will determine the initial relationship with the fictional elements of the world. The cities are metropoles of empires, dominated by different racial groups. These national identities are constructed through techniques drawn from the actual history: the discourses of cartography [14], of visuality [2], and of ethnology.

The city of *Bastok* is dominated by *Humes* (humans), who are described as versatile, industrious, and technical. Their cardinal flaw is revealed, by a mechanism quite late in the game, as *apathy*. They dominate the hulking *Galka*, a playable refugee all-male race that provides heavy labor to Bastok, characterized by *anger*. Bastok is visually represented by a pastiche of references to actual historical places and culture: the racial tension in an industrial republic strongly suggests the American experience of race, particularly in the era of industrial growth in the early 20th century. While certain other tropes suggest other elements—many names are vaguely Germanic, and the Galka are depicted as having dual identities, having been given "English" names like "High Bear" and "Wandering Eagle" by the Humes, and often reverting to "authentic" Galka names as an act of protest. The architecture of the city suggests Chicago in its early years; artifacts that are marked as originating in Bastok are functional, utilitarian, and suggest mid-20th century philosophies of design.

The city–nation of *San D'Oria* is dominated exclusively by the *Elvaan*. In an idiosyncratic departure from the post-Tolkein fantasy-literature tradition, the *Elvaan* are militaristic and suspicious of both magic and technology. Their cardinal vice is *arrogance*. San D'Oria is a monarchical empire, described as being in a state of decline, eclipsed by the emerging

technological republic of Bastok. The names of non-player San D'Orians are vaguely French; the architecture is a mix of pre-modern European styles, with something of a northern European early Renaissance tendency. San D'Oria is also the seat of Vana'diel's religious authority, with a papacy (the *papesque)* ruling from a central cathedral, and an activist clergy engaged against apostasy. These images of Catholic authority have a pre-history in earlier Final Fantasy games, particularly Final Fantasy X. It may be appropriate to see references to national religion as a reflection on the history of the so-called "state Shinto" in the Meiji period, which would play an active role in Japanese politics until the US occupation, as much as it is to the role of Christianity in Western social and political history.

The third initial city-nation is *Windurst*, built by the diminutive, magically-powerful *Tarutaru,* who physically resemble children. They share control of the city – in a harmony which contrasts sharply with the racial tension that troubles *Bastok* – with the female[2] *Mithra*, who came to Windurst to support it during the past war, and remained as new citizens. In contrast to Bastokian technological dominance and San D'Orian militarism, the Windurstian *geist* is that of neutrality, magic, and academic research. The city is managed by five research ministries (mapping onto the traditional five modalities) led by professors. The architecture and flora of Windurst suggests that of Australia, Oceania and Indochina, with curvilinear stonework and oblong wood structures (often built on stilts over water). Much of the characterization of the place suggests a kind of Polynesian-centered pan-Asianism. This reference recalls the historical debates over *Yamatai* and Japanese ethnogenesis[13], which in turn informed and legitimized Japanese foreign policy throughout the 20th century. At the same time, another "East" is said to exist, associated with piracy (the *Tenshodo*, the organized crime syndicate active throughout Vana'diel), with specifically Asian items and job classes (*Monk, Ninja, Samurai*.)[3] The cardinal vice of the Mithra is *envy*; that of the Tarutaru is *cowardice*.

After the player has selected an initial city, the player is thrown into the game, and is soon chartered with a mission. The player will soon be engaged in conflict with aggressive Beastmen. Three of the Beastmen races dwell spatially proximate to the three major cities; a fourth, the *Goblins*, are largely nomadic (and, in some cases, co-exist peacefully with the playable races.) The Beastman live in cities that are pre-industrial. There is a language of visual metaphor which weds them to real-world ethnicities just as with the player-races, but the real-world ethnicities are those of subaltern or "non-national" ethnicities.

The ethnic references of the Beastman create a bridge which insinuates Vana'diel into earth history. The three major regional Beastman races are the *Orcs*, a vaguely frog-like people which inhabit the terrain near San D'Oria, the *Quadav,* a tortoise-like people dwelling near Bastok, and the *Yagudo,* a bird-like race inhabiting the regions near Windurst. The races are dissimilar to each other in both their cultures and their historical relationships with the playable races: the *Yagudo* are nominally at peace with Windurst; the *Quadav* are in a state of open war with Bastok. The visual depiction of Orc artifacts and dress link it with Native American cultures; that of the Yagudo with Micronesian (and to a lesser extent, African) cultures, while the Quadav are

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[2] According to extra-textual expository, males exist, but do not participate in public life`; they are never represented

[3] Recently added content in the game has made references to a "far West," describing a new food item—salsa—as having its origins there. For more on the nature of the creation of another "East" as a body of knowledge in Japanese discourse, see Tanaka (1993).

visually depicted in Greco-Roman military gear and described as having a caste-like society, suggesting the Hellenized sub-continent of antiquity. These references link the races here with those historically confronted with the expansion of modern nation-states (the subcontinental experience of British rule, the Native American experience of American expansion, and the experience of Oceanic societies under European and Japanese domination—though it is noteworthy that the relationship which maps most closely to that which involves Japan is marked by a truce absent from other relationships in the game.)

In game-practice, these distinctions initially mean little. The player is more likely to be attacked by these races without provocation while engaged in a mission early in the game. Players often describe themselves as having a vendetta against one or another of these races, based on the frustrations experienced attempting to accomplish goals within the game. This is the first mechanism of complicity in the relationship between the nation-states of Vana'diel and its aboriginal races.

The economics of Vana'diel resemble that of contemporary MMORPGs, with markets for in-game resources. A common activity of many players is *farming,* which refers not to agricultural labor, but of engaging in battle with creatures in order to obtain resources to sell or use in craft-industry. "Beastmen" races are frequently 'farmed' by powerful players, who kill dozens of them at a time to obtain valuable resources. Also, economic power is tied to mobility and strength. In the initial stages of the game, a player must purchase items locally—arbitrage is available only after considerable experience. Thus follows the second major game-mechanism of complicity: the *Conquest.*

The Conquest is an ongoing competition among and between the 3 player-states. According the game's expository, the conflict is managed by the Duchy of *Jeuno,* a neutral island-city that exists physically and politically as a cosmopole in between the three metropoles (and, according to exposition, the force responsible for the victory over the Beastman in the preceding war.) The goal of the *conquest* is to dominate various regions of the game by winning battles and extracting resources from it more successfully than the rival's nations. Players who obtain a *sigil* from certain non-player characters wins conquest points for themselves and their nation-state when fighting. If, however, no nation enjoys significant dominance over others in that region, it is said to be dominated by the Beastmen. Dominance in the Conquest lasts for a fixed interval of game time (about a week in real time), and members of the dominating nation enjoy certain benefits: a favorable balance of trade, lowered costs of goods, and access to the goods which originate from each region being dominated. When a nation-city does not control a region, the NPC[4] vendor reports that "it is difficult to obtain goods from a region which [our nation] does not control. [12]" This increases the cost of those goods for players, particularly those who do not yet enjoy significant mobility.[5] Players can join expedition parties to take regions in the name of their

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[4] A non-player character: that is, a computer-controlled agent and character whose behavior and speech may change, depending on the state of the world, the player, and the game.

[5] Accelerating mobility is a structural feature of all Final Fantasy games and many other fantasy role-playing games. In the Final Fantasy series, the modes of transportation are iconic of the game itself; the chocobo is a yellow ostrich-like bird that was introduced in Final Fantasy II, and can be rented by players in Final Fantasy XI after about 20 levels of job advancement--at least 30 to 40 hours of play, typically. Later, the player can teleport from zone to zone, or take an airship after completing some arduous prerequisites.

nations, by fighting and killing beastmen and other creatures.

A third mechanism of complicity is in the social nature of the mechanic of the game itself. Advancement in the game is virtually impossible without coordinated efforts between players. Most players form parties of six to increase their abilities. Optimizing performance in a party is the primary responsibility of a given player to fellow players, since performance failure by one player can lead to the death of the character (which is, in the structure of the game, a loss of valued experience points and the investment of time represented by it). Most inter-player conflicts (not in a competitive sense) come from frustration with inadequate performance by other players: online forums like *Allakhazam* (http://ffxi.allakhazam.com) and *Killing Ifrit* (http://ffxi.killvoid.com) have many angry denunciations of the abilities of others.[6]

Epistemes of time

The fictional "truths" of Vana'diel are revealed by different game mechanisms over time, in play. Non-player characters in different positions—some of considerable authority, some modest—relate bits of "oral history" to those who initiate discussions with them. While there are a number of devices operating to create a sense of world-immersion, there are two, closely related ones by which fictive episteme is revealed. There are *quests*, which are asks carried out at the behest of non-player inhabitants of the world and by which one builds one's *fame* (or reputation capital, a prerequisite for many game resources) and wins in-game rewards, and there are *missions,* which are always at the behest of the state; the successful completion of the missions raises ones *rank*.

The state of the world revealed by the missions is that of the uncertainty of recieved history. In the missions, one learns, among other things, that the Beastman were not singularly responsible for the state of hostilities; that the Quadav were, in fact, protecting their nurseries from marauding humes; that the Yagudo are a religious people aware of environmental degradation. This trope, of radical epiphany, recurs throughout the Final Fantasy series, but in the case of this game, the rhetoric of inescapable complicity is enforced structurally.

The quests also reveal the truth of the world, but largely outside the political apparatus of the city-nations. One noteworthy quest is an ongoing one, called *An Explorer's Footsteps.* The player can get this quest fairly early in the game, and can incrementally advance on the quest, but will probably not exhaust the quest for some time: though the quest is not required in the canonical advancement in the game, many players take the quest in order to receive specific rewards, including a valued map. The player is asked by the NPC mayor of the town of *Selbina* to obtain clay impressions from monuments which dot the landscape of the world, which were left by a duo of explorers in the past. Each of the monuments reveals the history of the exploration (and, in a sense, pre-conquest) of the region in which it was located. It is revealed in this quest, for example, that when the Quadav learned of the non-martial motivations of the explorer who visited their region, he was treated with hospitality and given a tour of their city. The narratives revealed by the quests act as a kind of alternate history, with a range of temporal scales, to that of the histories-of-state that the missions unfold.

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[6] In a personal interview with Yasu Kurosawa, US producer of Final Fantasy XI, I was told that the dominant complaint of Japanese players is frustration with the lack of preparation and discipline demonstrated by American players. In the same interview, he shared his feeling that, for the producers of the game, the cross-cultural play environment was its most important feature, and the one of which they were most proud.

Through these mechanisms of revelation, the complicity of the player in historical processes unfolds. This complicity is inescapable—one has many choices in the game, but none allow for significant historical agency. The only truly open narrative is that of one's performance as understood by other players. There is one subtle exception, but otherwise, one's political position is fixed by the circumstances into which one arrives by entering the game.

Additionally, this complicity is enforced socially: the game constructs obligations between players which overshadow any fictional choices one might take. In a sense, this can be read as a representation of the local nature of complicit action. As part of a contemporary Japanese discourse about war and complicity, this recalls the ongoing controversies surrounding the Yasukuni war shrine and references in textbooks to the actions of the Imperial Army during the Pacific War. It is in this light that the game itself (and, arguably, the entire Final Fantasy series) participates in a discourse of war, place and memory [7].

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