

Old Pleasures, Dying Flames: Final Fantasy XIV and the Evolution of the MMO Genre

Benjamin Horn

University of Hong Kong
Pokfulam Rd, Hong Kong
bhorn@hku.hk

Keywords

MMO, Final Fantasy XIV, Game History, Game Archaeology

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In a late 2025 interview with Korean gaming magazine *Inven* (Vještica 2025), game director Naoki Yoshida reflected on a decade at the helm of *Final Fantasy XIV* (Square Enix Creative Studio 3 2013) and hinted at further changes to come in the future to help adapt the game for a more contemporary audience. “MMORPGs [Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games] are a genre built around investing lots of time, so I think they don’t fit very well into today’s era,” he said. “I think it’s unfair that a player can’t experience the fun unless they invest hundreds of hours.”

Yet spending hundreds or even thousands of hours playing the game has been the pleasure of the game’s user base for over a decade. *FFXIV* originally released in 2010. It was a critical and commercial failure to such an extent that the company brought in a new director - Yoshida - for a total revamp. *A Realm Reborn*, the game’s re-release in 2013, was by contrast very well-received, and the game has now maintained a strong, global community of players for over a decade.

Yoshida’s remarks to *Inven* imply that MMORPGs as a genre have fallen by the wayside. Conclusive data on the matter is hard to come by, given that companies generally keep it confidential. Community estimates for *FFXIV* in the form of the Lucky Bancho survey (February, 2026) put the most recent number of active players at time of writing at 934,000 globally, which certainly seems to suggest continued player interest and support. Nevertheless, Yoshida’s remarks also obfuscate the fact that MMOs in general and *FFXIV* in particular have continued to evolve over the course of their existence. The *FFXIV* of 2026 is almost unrecognisable from that of 2013. What changes have been made as the years have stretched long? Why?

This paper offers a historical analysis of *FFXIV*’s evolution. Diving deep into the game’s paratexts in the form of patch notes, community forum discussions, and in-game elements, among others, from past to present, it seeks to contribute to the discussion around MMOs and their presence as a genre in 2025. What does *FFXIV*’s steady evolution say about how the pleasure of playing it has developed? How do

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

© 2026 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

the incremental changes represent different eras, if at all? Are MMOs really a dying breed? This paper is an early-stage research project of which the author would greatly appreciate feedback.

While *FFXIV* has received significant scholarly attention, its steady evolution has remained relatively unexplored. Korkeila and Hamari (2018), Kaufmann and Diez-Morel (2022), van Heerden (2025), and Zhou and Sharma (2025) for instance, have utilised sociological approaches to investigate, respectively, the player's social and cultural capital in the *FFXIV* virtual world, player personality and its effects on generating a sense of psychological flow, identity construction in *FFXIV* as a "gaymer", and finding romantic partners. Appignani, Kruzan, and Hoch (2015) and Wong (2025) have both explored ghosts in the game's world; the former as a hauntological metaphor for the avatar experience, the latter in a close-reading of the unique horror-themed Tam-Tara Deepcroft questline.

Huber's (2022) paper explores the game as allegory, specifically political and historical allegory. Importantly for this project, Huber touches upon the historical context of the game itself, noting how the *Final Fantasy* series has a history of being "read as having allegorical content" particularly in regards to "the conflict between industrialisation and environmental sustainability" (255-256). He also highlights how the Japanese games industry was somewhat late to producing an MMO, but that the success of *FFXI* paved the way for *FFXIV*'s development.

Methodologically, the paper will be informed by a combination of paratextual analysis and in-game "archaeology." Paratexts are texts that surround the main text. In terms of paratextual analysis, Vichot (2024), writing about *FFXIV*'s localisation, understands that these paratexts help to build the world of the game "similar to transmedia storytelling" (p.49) and are therefore critical to analysis. Seiwald and Vollans (2023), in their discussion on history and paratexts, go further in arguing that "paratexts shape our understanding of the connected text, giving us clues how we might engage with it, what it is, and how we should make sense of it" but also that "paratexts can easily become (lost to) history" (3). Thus caution must be exercised in crafting a paratextual analysis, as one must consider what paratexts could be missing.

To complement the paratextual analysis, the paper proposes to also conduct an in-game archaeology, following the lead of what Reinhard (2018) has championed as "archaeogaming." Reinhard broadly defines archaeogaming as "the archaeology both in and of digital games" (2). There are a number of themes operating under the banner of archaeogaming - Reinhard is himself an archaeologist and interested in archaeology as it is represented in games - but of relevance to this paper is the idea of "the application of archaeological methods to synthetic space" (p.3). This involves "the in-game fieldwalking, artifact collecting, typologies, understanding of context, even aerial/satellite photography" (Ibid.).

The author would like to apply this aspect of archaeogaming to the identification of what this paper calls "evolutionary outliers." These are elements of the existing live version of the 2025 *FFXIV* game that are inconsistent with other elements and cannot be explained without reference to a past version of the game. An example of this is the Magic Power (MP) bar. It used to be the case that Hit Points (HP) and MP scaled together with level. At a certain point, however, all MP was standardized to

be 10,000 for all classes at all levels. This leads to a strange numerical disjunction between HP, which, at early levels, may be as low as 100-200, and MP, which will always be 10,000.

FFXIV has had a remarkable life for a game, creating and supporting an enormous, worldwide community for over a decade. This paper hopes to demonstrate through its historical-archaeological analysis that it is the length of this life, its accrued history, and the hundreds of hours of play needed to unpack it all, that make the pleasure of playing an MMO in today's temporally squeezed society more important and relevant than ever before.

REFERENCES

- Appignani, T., Kruzan, K., and Hoch, I. N. 2015. "Spirits in the Aether: Digital Ghosts in Final Fantasy XIV." *Gamevironments*. 2: 25–60.
- van Heerden, K. 2025. "Queer(ed) Avatars: Exploring Visual Identity Construction in Final Fantasy XIV Online Gaymers." *Games and Culture*. 0 (0). <https://doi-org.eproxy.lib.hku.hk/10.1177/15554120251346824>
- Huber, W. 2022. "The Pseudo-allegory of Final Fantasy XIV." In R. Hutchinson and Pelletier-Gagnon (Eds.), *Japanese Role-Playing Games: Genre, Representation, and Liminality in the JRPG*. Lexington, 255–276.
- Kaufmann, D. and Diez-Morel, S. 2022. "Examining the Flow Experience in Final Fantasy XIV Online through the Lens of Player Personality and Motivation to Play." In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2022*.
- Korkeila, H. and Hamari, J. 2018. "The Relationship Between Player's Gaming Orientation and Avatar's Capital: A Study in Final Fantasy XIV." In *Proceedings of the 51st Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS)*. <https://doi.org/10.24251/HICSS.2018.239>
- Lucky Bancho. 2026, February. "[Lodestone Census] World Specific Statistics Updated! (2026/2/23)." *The Lodestone*. <https://luckybancho.ldblog.jp/archives/59706955.html#more>
- Reinhard, A. 2018. *Archaeogaming: An Introduction to Archaeology in and of Video Games*. Bergahn Books.
- Seiwald, R. and Vollans, E. 2023. *(Not) In the Game: History, Paratexts, and Games*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg.
- Square Enix Creative Studio 3. 2013. *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn*. Square Enix.
- Vichot, R. 2024. "At the Heart of the Mothercrystal: Final Fantasy XIV's Approach to Localization and Lore as a Virtual Contact Zone." *Loading*. 16 (26): 40–64. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1111259ar>
- Vještica, A. 2025. "Final Fantasy 14 director Yoshi-P is 'rethinking the game from zero' as players' free time dwindles." *Automaton*, <https://automaton->

[media.com/en/news/final-fantasy-14-director-yoshi-p-is-rethinking-the-game-from-zero-as-players-free-time-dwindles/](https://www.gamespot.com/en/news/final-fantasy-14-director-yoshi-p-is-rethinking-the-game-from-zero-as-players-free-time-dwindles/)

Wong, K. 2025. "Invitation to Party: MMORPG Heroism and the Metafictional Horrors of Social Interaction in Final Fantasy XIV." *Game Studies*. 25 (1). <https://gamestudies.org/2501/articles/wong>

Zhou, Y. and Sharma, T. 2025. "Honey Trap or Romantic Utopia: A Case Study of Final Fantasy XIV Players' PII Disclosure in Intimate Partner Seeking Posts." In *Extended Abstracts of the CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI EA '25)*. Yokohama, Japan. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3706599.3719831>