

The Revolution Dances: The Pleasures of Transformation in Final Fantasy X-2

Luna Loganayagam

University of California, Davis
sloganayagam@ucdavis.edu

Samuel Pizelo

University of Toronto, Mississauga
s.pizelo@utoronto.ca

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INTRODUCTION

In 2006, a BGForum thread called “Is it me or does FFX-2 suck ass?” captured a highly gendered discourse on the validity of the sequel to acclaimed *Final Fantasy X* (2001) (hereafter “X”). User Dustinsp laments it as a game “for ‘girl power!’ [...] shut it off and gave [it] to [my] 12 year old female cousin.” Nearly a decade later, a 2014 GameFAQ forum thread titled “Im worried that X-2 might be too girly.” revisited this discourse. User Sand_Flare responded, “X-2 is indeed super girly. Sickeningly so at some points. Might want to keep the doors locked when you play this one.” Another decade later, in 2023, user olliedreamer on Instagram asserted “FFX-2 was made for the girls gays and theys 💜💙💛”. In the comments, both queer and nonqueer gamers converged to celebrate the very mechanics, dynamics, and story points that were earlier dismissed as “too girly” or “fanservice”. We position this debate as a pivotal entry in the framework of feminism and queerness in game studies (Chang 2017; Mortensen 2018; Ruberg 2019; Phillips 2020).

Final Fantasy X-2 (2004) (hereafter “X-2”) has indexed changes to gamer literacies around gender politics and feminism since its initial release in 2003, but has earned little attention from scholars of games. This evolving discourse prompts us to read X-2 as half of a mirrored narrative which grapples with playful and pleasurable resistance to patriarchy. We incorporate fandom analysis with a close reading of both X and X-2 for their narrative and formal design, and historicize these games within a longer tradition of Japanese transmedia storytelling. Where X situates male character Tidus as an interloper fated to contest traditional religious sacrifice and the burden of upholding oppressive patriarchal regimes, X-2 orients female main character Yuna in the aftermath of war and the decimation of X’s controlling structures. The decades-long discourse on X-2’s validity as a final fantasy game is actually an argument over what kinds of stories are legitimate, who is allowed to tell

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them, and which player demographics are willing to accept canonical feminist sequels to seemingly traditionally-masculine titles. The most polarizing additions to X-2—dressphere transformations, proto open-world movement, and a plotline centered on Yuna’s grief—attempt a marriage between traditional JRPG mechanics and what Ursula LeGuin calls the “carrier bag theory of fiction” to answer an unpopular question: is revolution a destructive act or the playful exploration that must come after (LeGuin 1996)? Do we even want to hear stories about dancing?

In the opening sequence of X-2, we witness Yuna’s transformation from her traditional religious appearance into a singing and dancing J-Pop icon before a stadium of adoring fans. This moment was jarring for many fans of X, who previously witnessed Yuna dancing for more somber occasions: as a ritual to guide the souls of the departed back to the Farplane. Tidus explains in a cutscene voiceover: “People die, and Yuna dances. When will she stop dancing? When will it stop? Yuna won't stop dancing—not until Sin is gone.” Sin is now gone at the beginning of X-2, along with the whole cycle of religious violence it embodied. Does this mean Yuna is no longer allowed to dance? She herself expresses this uncertainty in her opening voiceover: “My body just started dancing by itself. I didn't know what was going on. I was... frightened.” The anarcho-feminist icon Emma Goldman is often attributed with the quip, “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution.” But the actual quote from her autobiography goes further. In response to a comrade who called her dancing undignified, she states, “I did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal [...] for release and freedom from convention and prejudice, should demand the denial of life and joy. I insisted that [...] the movement would not be turned into a cloister” (Goldman 2006). Yuna’s dancing in X-2, along with the game’s lighthearted tone and playful characters, represent a feminist response to destruction and grief that insists on the life and joy of further transformations.

The vehicles for these transformations are the dresspheres, which replace summons in X as collectible items that enable continual swapping between jobs through mid-battle transformation cutscenes. These transformations, which can also be categorized as a kind of dance, have a lineage to magical girl anime like *Sailor Moon* (1991-1997), *Princess Tutu* (2002-2003), and *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (1997). Scholarship on this genre is extensive and rich, highlighting its importance for queer communities and women’s rights groups (e.g., Saito 2013; Mansky 2019; Karadovin 2022). We argue that transformation in X-2 uniquely employs the magical girl tradition to queer masculine gameplay expectations through the garment grid menu, which connects individual transformations of powers and outfits into a continual traversal of complex spatial relationships mid-battle. These spatial relationships highlight a key distinction between the sphere grid found in the original game and the garment grid in X-2— rather than emphasizing class-bound, linear character progression maps, the garment grid mechanically requires serious dress-up as a means of articulating a dynamic identity. This forces the player to reflect on the logics of continual transformation— a theme that proves essential to the game’s discourse on revolution. From the start, X-2 disrupts the linear pilgrimage narrative of the original game through nonlinear “mission” structures and quasi-open world access to Spira. Yuna and the Gullwings must continually transform themselves and their paths to reconcile with the radical political changes in a broken world.

In the last lines of X-2 Yuna reflects on her journey as an ongoing sequence of transformations: "So much has happened! And I'm sure it's only the beginning. Through the smiles, tears...through the anger, and the laughter that follows. I know that I will keep changing. This is my story. It will be a good one. It all began when I saw this sphere of you." Even this line refracts the plot of X, which begins with Tidus' words: "This is my story..." X-2 is a carrier-bag narrative that lingers with the joy and grief of quiet transformations and playful revolution. By returning to this neglected entry of an iconic franchise, we trace a lineage through magical girl transformations and dancing revolutionaries to the serious dress-up required to build new worlds. Ten years before gamergate, X-2 was a central object in conversations about gender, video games, and the evolving craft of playable narratives. This project positively centers *Final Fantasy X-2* as a still-needed articulation of flamboyant femininity that contests patriarchal storytelling methods.

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