

Well Played Single

A Cure for Toxic Masculinity:
**Male Bonding
and Friendship
in Final Fantasy XV**

Dr. Amy M. Green



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*Male Bonding and Friendship in Final
Fantasy XV*

DR. AMY GREEN

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A CURE FOR TOXIC MASCULINITY

Male Bonding and Friendship in Final Fantasy XV

Square Enix's 2016 North American release of *Final Fantasy XV*¹ represents the culmination of an extended and painful development period of some ten years, including a complete recasting of many of the original concepts related to the game's plot, structure, and characters.² What emerged, despite the protracted length of time from concept to finished product, proves well worth the delay in the form of a subtle, nuanced, and bold storyline exploring the pull between the epic, the magical, and the achingly relatable. I have enjoyed playing nearly every *Final Fantasy* game and have frequently been struck by the power of the series' storytelling, perhaps most especially that these narratives never present a happy ending simply for the sake of doing so. Even given this previous gaming experience, I found myself profoundly moved by *Final Fantasy XV*. At its heart, the story of *Final Fantasy XV* considers the friendships among

1. This article takes as its source the Royal Edition of the game released in March 2018. The Royal Edition consolidates the game's downloadable content story pieces, originally released separately, and contains added narrative content integrated into the main story. Of these additions, the most notable is a significant extension of the game's final chapter, chapter 14: "Homecoming." This article adapts its title from one of the main story line quests in that chapter entitled "The Cure for Insomnia."

2. Final Fantasy XV had originally been titled Final Fantasy XIII Versus and was originally announced at the 2006 E3 event.

four young men, bonds refreshingly and importantly free of the hallmarks of toxic masculinity or the propagation of the idea that men must not form deep homosocial and emotional bonds with other men for fear of ridicule. Despite the epic and entertaining battles faced by the player in the game, it is the simple, quiet, and profoundly felt moments that form its critical scaffold. I find it to be crucially important that the game explores male friendship in the honest, considering way it does and that this game, given the series' overall popularity, has spread that message across a vast and global gaming audience. That the game is rated T for teen—the video game rating equivalent to the PG-13 rating given to films—proves of great import because the audience for the game, especially the younger male audience, is not kept away as they might be by an M rating for mature audiences, which is the equivalent to a film with an R rating. Karen Boyle and Susan Berridge argue that “the homosocial and homophobic typically go hand-in-hand in the bromance” (356), creating a dysfunctional construct of male friendship as one based in cruelty and fear of emasculation. And therein lies the continuing no-win situation for many men today, young and old. They are frequently trapped by society's limited sliver of acceptance by which men are allowed to show emotional depth with one another. Too frequently, the image perpetuated through our popular media culture is one in which male friendships are mocked, predicated on aggression and competition, or only possible if one or both parties are inebriated. Through *Final Fantasy XV*'s bold depiction of male friendship and the emotional vulnerability that can exist therein, a diverse body of

gamers experiences a positive depiction of the importance of homosocial bonds in men's lives, and this depiction has become a profoundly important example of the importance of digital storytelling.

A LIFETIME OF GAMING

I am a lifelong gamer—I cut my teeth on the Coleco Vision and the Atari—and a lifelong lover of stories in all formats, from written to digital. I began my academic career having completed a traditional and very safe doctoral degree emphasizing Shakespeare and nineteenth-century American literature. My dissertation focused on the influence of Shakespeare on the novels of Henry James. Again, quite traditional, quite safe. Yet something was missing—not my love of stories or of teaching undergraduates how to appreciate literature as a fundamental expression of our shared humanity or of the works of Shakespeare and Henry James. What I was missing was something deeper and more vital to my identity as an academic. I must have known subconsciously what was missing before the thoughts percolated to the forefront of my mind and coalesced into a goal I could succinctly put into words: I wanted to study storytelling in video games. I felt that this form of digital storytelling was a critical, crucial, and forward-looking means by which stories could be transmitted to a wide and diverse audience. I knew that game studies had been a vibrant field since the advent of those first and now seemingly ancient 8-bit consoles, but I worried that to turn away from the possibility of a traditional academic career toward the relative unknown might end my career.

However, I could not deny that I had seen and continued to see powerful and compelling stories every bit as rich as their counterparts in other formats. Still, I hesitated. And then in 2013 *BioShock Infinite* was released. I was moved beyond measure by its devastating narrative, and so I leaped. Since that time, my scholarly work has focused on video game study,³ and I incorporate the teaching of storytelling in video games into my college courses. I believe that today's student of the humanities, especially English majors, should be versed in storytelling in all formats, video games included, because through storytelling we can learn from folly and atrocity and see better ways forward.

REFINING MY PERCEPTIONS OF MALE FRIENDSHIP

As I played through the first couple of hours of *Final Fantasy XV*, witnessing Noctis, Ignis, Prompto and Gladio, the game's four protagonists, express deep bonds of friendship even as the world through which they traversed grew in threat, I recognized the expression of a vital and timely message. The genesis for the concepts I explore in the present article began to take shape in my mind, but I realized that my perception of friendship was from that of a heterosexual woman and that my reactions to what struck me as a radically refreshing depiction of male friendship were sound but lacking necessary depth of knowledge. My friendships with women have always included a high degree of emotional intimacy and bonding, with no recriminations over tears making a

3. I have published a number of articles and two books considering storytelling in video games both in general and in specific game titles, as I do here.

female friend less feminine. We laugh, talk, link arms, and lean in close to whisper. Society expects us to form rich bonds with one another, and so we are free to engage in deep and important bonds with other women without fearing insult, accused of being gay as a slur, considered weak, or facing any of the other penalties men might face for open emotional vulnerability. This experience is quite different from what I have observed most male friendships to be.

Before I delved into research studies and critical articles to deepen my own understanding of the construction of male friendships in Western culture, I talked with my husband about his and my perceptions of male friendship in our popular media culture and how the unrealistic and unhealthy constructions of masculinity therein have had a negative impact on men forming strong and emotionally rich bonds with one another.⁴ My husband is in his mid-forties, and one of his first comments was that men of older generations, such as his father, tend to shy away completely from embracing as a form of showing affection. A handshake is their most typical form of emotional expression. I have witnessed my father-in-law, who is a caring and wonderful person, and my husband awkwardly hug in a way typical of a lot of male hugs I have seen: the hug doesn't move their bodies very close, usually just their upper bodies lean in, and they pat each other high on the back instead of engaging in a fuller embrace. My husband believes that

4. He knows that our conversation is included in this article and he had the opportunity to review it to make certain that his ideas and thoughts were captured accurately. He wants me to emphasize that he realizes that his opinions are born out of his own particular experiences and he does not wish to imply that they are universal to all men. Although we had a wide-ranging conversation, I have the space here to share only the most directly related points, but I found the overall disclosures and information to be fascinating and they have informed my work here.

there is more of an acceptance of embracing among younger men, but this display is culturally new and its level of acceptance may vary widely depending on where one lives. He said, “The embrace is somewhat of a tenuous cultural evolution—it goes against the grain of how men generally are or are supposed to be.” I asked him if he thought it would ever be acceptable for non-related male friends to kiss on the cheek in a non-romantic fashion, the way women might, and he was adamant in his belief that this would never be widely accepted under any circumstances in American culture.

Our discussion then turned to the specific ways in which men form friendships. His comments are consistent with the research presented later in this article, that men tend to form friendships centered around a particular activity or a particular interest, such as math or cars. He then indicated that “men definitely have difficulty relating emotionally in an intimate way, specifically with other men,” and that they will instead turn to what may appear to be shallower methods to try to connect, including using humor or speaking of deeper matters indirectly. His view that heterosexual men find their primary emotional confidant almost exclusively in their romantic partner is similar to a conclusion reached by researchers examining male homosocial bonds. My husband does not necessarily think that these shallow methods are harmful, and they can sometimes be more effective than they may appear to be, but he believes that deeper emotional engagement is missing. He points to the role of Ignis in *Final Fantasy XV*, specifically Ignis’s cooking for his friends to ensure they are eating properly,

saying that this characterization is an effective means of showing that the character cares for his friends.

We concluded our conversation by turning to the depiction of masculinity in the media as well as specifically in *Final Fantasy XV*, discussing whether my husband believes that the game's positive depictions of male friendship can both be culturally important and serve as a means to help enact positive change. My husband feels that media culture can provide a negative depiction of male interaction, as the construction of masculinity for men in our culture is similar to that of body image for women. He argues, "The media ought to promote service, rather than competition or physical combat, that allows a man to stand on his own two feet and have a sense of pride in a positive way." By service, he means depictions of men helping their communities. The physical competitive sports that are promoted in the media and Western culture as appropriate expressions of masculinity are problematic in not offering a more positive image. He is adamant that boys must see positive constructions of masculinity, with male friendship being one of them, so that they can avoid feeling trapped by negative and narrow constructions of masculinity.

Because *Final Fantasy XV* is an inherently Japanese story—developed, written, and directed by Japanese staff at Square Enix over a number of years—my final step in the development of the thesis for the present article was to assess whether the game reified an image of closer male friendship in Japan for a Western and non-Japanese audience, or whether the game's depiction of homosocial bonds would be a positive change for Japanese audiences as well. What I learned was that the game's cultural

relevance is crucial to changing cultural norms not only in the West but also in Japan⁵. Eryk Salvaggio, an American who teaches English in Japan, maintains a blog called “This Japanese Life” and considers in one entry the particular features of friendship in Japan. He notes,

The expat community tends to resemble native Japanese communities in that both have low levels of *relational mobility*, the word researchers use to describe the flexibility that a culture allows for making new friends. North American bus-chatterers rank quite highly in relational mobility: Strike up a conversation in a coffee shop, a bus, the toll booth guy. Japan ranks quite low, because making new friends requires an enormous effort.

In situations like Japan, where relational mobility is low, there is also a lower degree of effort required to maintain those friendships once they’ve been formed. Friends won’t go away, because they can’t. In high mobility cultures, like the US, you spend more time making sure your friends know they are appreciated, because at any point they could decide they’d really rather not hang out with you and run off with someone else—friend-dumped for the toll booth guy (n.p.).

Both of the key points here, that of the differences between how North Americans and Japanese individuals

5. I cannot speak as an authority for constructions of masculinity around the globe, but given what I do know and have learned, I think the game is of vital importance to cultures across the world.

socialize and how friendships are maintained once they are forged, prove of interest. In the game, the four protagonists, perhaps with the exception of Prompto,⁶ are in many ways tied together via a lack of relational mobility. However, unlike in Japanese culture, they do not cease working on their interpersonal bonds just because this is the case.

While the above blog post deals more generally with friendship that is across and between genders, Genaro Castro-Vazquez and Izumi Kishi explore in their research the issue of the intersection between male friendship and constructions of masculinity in Japan. Although their work is primarily concerned with the attitudes of young Japanese men toward sexuality and women, an intriguing point emerges that dovetails with the concept of male friendship. They write,

Relevant to our analysis and methodology are our findings in relation to a rigidity in the construction of categories that refer to the construction of identity among young Japanese. Contradictions and inconsistencies in the statements of our informants showed the difficulties in constructing categories as “ideal types” to depict their identity as males. Most of our informants agreed with a hegemonic model of masculinity and objectification of women that feeds into a competitive and limited conception of male sexuality (31).

It is critical to note that *Final Fantasy XV* does not

6. This will be explored more fully further on.

simply present a view of Japanese male friendship as superior to that of American—or Western—male friendship. The opposite proves true and arguably more intriguing. Instead, both cultures suffer from the lack of offering young men coherent, supportive, and culturally acceptable means by which bonds of friendship may be formed and endure.

A TWO-PRONGED PLOT

For a reader who has never played a *Final Fantasy* game, the story may at first seem impenetrable. Thus, I provide a summary here to give both a throughway into the narrative and context, offering explanations of characters and events throughout as needed. The story of *Final Fantasy XV* provides a compelling example of what I deem the multimodal story, meaning that although the game tells a complete and otherwise understandable story, a wider narrative exists should the player opt to explore the other storytelling forms. Those forms are, in chronological order of how they impact the story told in the game, the anime series *Brotherhood*, the short script *Parting Ways*—both of which are available free online—and the film *Kingsglaive*. Although these other narrative pieces explore to larger or smaller degrees the issue of male friendship, especially *Brotherhood*, it is the video game proper that brings this concept fully to bear. The main story arc of the game functions as two major, interlocking pieces: an epic fantasy story of a young man destined to save the world from evil, and a smaller, more intimate bildungsroman using as its foundation the exploration of the friendships among the game's four

main protagonists: Noctis, Ignis, Prompto, and Gladio. The story, then, unfolds in moments both grandiose and private, triumphant and agonizing.

Noctis Lucis Caelum,⁷ crown prince of the kingdom of Lucis, has lived an isolated and cloistered life in the Crown city of Insomnia, Lucis' last real seat of power. An ongoing, decades-long war with the Niflheim⁸ Empire finds King Regis, Noctis's father, with no good options left but to agree to sign a peace treaty, effectively ceding all of his power save for control of Insomnia. As a part of the peace treaty, Noctis is to marry Lunafreya (Luna), Oracle of the Astrals⁹ and an effective captive of Niflheim because her home country of Tenebrae was annexed some years before, in events chronicled in *Kingsglaive*. The marriage is to take place in the distant city of Altissia, capital of the Accordo Protectorate; thus, Noctis embarks on a road trip with his three close friends Ignis, Gladiolus (called Gladio by his friends), and Prompto. Unbeknownst to them, and regardless of whether the marriage takes place, Regis sends them out of Insomnia under false pretenses. He knows that Niflheim will use the pretext of the treaty signing, given that a contingent of Niflheim's troops will be in the city, to attack, and he wants to keep his son out of harm's way.¹⁰ However, the

7. Although Noctis's name translates literally as "night light king," it is better understood not as a literal translation but as something more along the lines of "the King of Light who banishes the darkness," in keeping with his role in the prophecies related to his destiny.

8. The game borrows "Niflheim" from Norse mythology, but otherwise there are no strong parallels between the two.

9. The oracle serves as the liaison between the Astrals, which are the game's gods, and human beings.

10. Niflheim also uses the excitement and tensions surrounding the treaty signing to quietly move in a number of its warships into position close to Insomnia. The game devotes only a brief amount of time to the empire's catastrophic attack on Insomnia, one which leaves dead Regis along with Gladio's father, Clarus, and many others. The film *Kingsglaive*, a narrative companion to the game, recounts the events in Insomnia from the time the four protagonists set out on the road through the fall of the city.

truth, as it is gradually revealed, proves not as simple as the story of a father who wishes to save his son's life. Indeed, Regis wants his son to live, but only long enough for him to fulfill his destiny as the prophesized King of Light. Eos, the world of which Lucis and the Niflheim are a part, has been progressively succumbing to the Scourge, a malignant evil that can corrupt and infect people and that has allowed horrifying creatures known as Daemons to roam the land at nightfall. The Astrals decree that the King of Light must purge the world of the Scourge, but what they know, and what Regis knows, is that to do so will cost Noctis his life. Regis follows the will of the Astrals and makes no attempt to circumvent or prevent his son's fate. Furthermore, this information has been deliberately kept from Noctis and his friends; thus, they go into the world outside of Insomnia, moving inexorably toward a wrenching fate, vulnerable and naïve about what they will face. It is only by virtue of the strengths of friendship bonding them that they are able to survive at all and even then, not without the exacting of harrowing cost. It is this theme of friendship and how it endures that is never far from the forefront, even as the game's narrative begins to explore its mythic, messianic savior arc.

The game situates the player in the midst of a supportive and emotionally deep friendship theme within its opening half hour through its use of Florence and the Machine's cover of the song "Stand by Me" to provide structure and context and to set up the symbolic importance of the road trip beyond the goal of reaching Altissia. I find Florence and the Machine's cover especially powerful and yearning; the original version

performed by Ben E. King conveys solidarity and friendship but without the agony present at times in this particular cover version. The song brackets the narrative, both by virtue of its lyrics and by the manner in which it is sung. It is played at the start of the game after the protagonists' car, the Regalia, breaks down early on in their trip and then reprised at the game's ending over the closing credits. The song's lyrics are prophetic at the start, most especially the first verse and the chorus, which speak of a world bathed in darkness and the power of a bond capable of overcoming any fear. Two parallels between the song and game are striking. First, the song effectively predicts what happens in the latter part of the game, after Noctis is pulled into a Crystal where he remains for ten years while the Scourge blankets the world in eternal night. Not only does the sun fail to rise, but the Daemons, who cannot abide the light of day, overrun most of Eos, killing untold numbers of humans and devastating animal and plant life. The song speaks to Ignis, Prompto, and Gladio's being left behind to both endure and also to hope, as they do, for Noctis's return. Although the song's title and repeated plea to "stand by me" communicate the power of a close bond, they are also reminiscent of the game's repeated reminder to "walk tall." The use of "darling" in the song's refrain as a particular term of affection fits in the game as well. This may not be obvious at the start of the game, but it is at the end, when the song plays over the credits, which feature snapshots of the four at earlier, happier points during their adventures. To be someone's darling is to be beloved, precious, as these young men are to one another. Scott Fabius Kiesling provides an extended analysis of the

film *Stand by Me*, which uses Ben E. King's version of the titular song, to find points of connection with *Final Fantasy XV*:

Some of the most powerful sources for finding and understanding these cultural discourses are films that men find compelling and somehow "truthful." One of these is the 1986 film *Stand by Me*, about four 12-year-old boys in a rural Oregon town who go on a two-day trek to find a dead body. Along the way they both test and revel in their friendships; it is a representation of "pure" homosociality (without the interference of heterosexual attraction). During the night, the boys sit around a campfire and talk, as described wistfully by the narrator (one of the boys who is now an adult): "We talked into the night. The kind of talk that seemed important, until you discover girls." The film ends with emphasis on the glorious, lost quality of the homosocial bond: "I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, does anyone?" This film thus artistically recreates a "golden age" of male friendships that resonates with many men. The discourse of homosociality is a desire to return to that golden age (702).

Certainly, the men of *Final Fantasy XV* are just that: young men, but men nonetheless. However, given their pervasive cloistering, Ignis, Gladio, and Noctis are not so unlike these younger boys, out on their own and exploring their identities free of the surveillance that would be part of life in the Citadel and of those who are either royalty themselves or who live and work within the

monarchy's framework. Prompto, the newest member of their retinue, grew up under alienating circumstances as well¹¹.

The campfire is a central symbolic touchstone of the game; the one safe haven in a dangerous world. The Havens, areas in the game where the four set up camps, are protected by very old magic and runes; thus, the Daemons loose in the night cannot breach the camps. The campsites, like the Regalia, come to represent this golden age, and they, too, evolve over the course of the narrative. At first, they mark the hopeful journey to Altissia and the young men knowing freedom for the first time. Later, they are necessary bastions against the Daemons. In the game's final major set piece prior to the player starting the quest that sets Noctis on the path with his destiny and death, the campsite is both a reminder and a tombstone. The four friends, though, even then do not yearn for the past the way that Kiesling describes, and it is for the better in the game. They spend their last night camping being together and preparing themselves to move forward. Their bond, unlike the bonds depicted in *Stand by Me*, never weaken and are reified even as Noctis confesses to them that he will not survive ridding Eos of the Scourge.

I will return later to this final night they spend camping and the significant way in which the English localization of the game fails not only the game's exploration of friendship but also the four main protagonists, as well as the player. For now, I will say this. The last night at camp before they return to Insomnia, with ten years having

11. Prompto's very fair hair and skin coloring set him apart and mark him as an outsider to Insomnia. Little is initially known of his history, save that he is adopted and spent most of his life terribly alone. Late in the game, Prompto and the others learn that he is a clone, created by Niflheim to be used as one of their infantry soldiers. Under circumstances never fully detailed, a Lucian soldier rescued baby Prompto from the facility where he was held and brought him to Insomnia.

passed, functions as an iteration of the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus agonizes over everything that is to come. There, he is failed by the apostles Peter, John, and James, who are unable to stay awake during this last vigil as he had asked of them. In *Final Fantasy XV*, Prompto, Ignis, and Gladio are fully present in that moment. But a player starting the game is still many hours away from this scene. Long before Noctis fulfills his messianic and prophesied role as the King of Light, the four friends must first be harrowed as they realize with dawning horror the extent to which they have been manipulated, and the player realizes this as well, piecing together inferences and implications right alongside the four friends. I watched *Kingsglaive* prior to beginning my first playthrough of the game, so the fall of Insomnia was not a surprise to me, and it would not be for many gamers because the film was released in advance of the game and is not a plot point intended to be secret. The narrative of the game pivots not so much, then, on the fact that Insomnia is razed but on how the losses of both life and home will test the bonds of friendship among the game's main characters.

This realization that their home is gone and that Regis has spared their lives while sacrificing many others begins in-game when the four friends reach Galdin Quay to board a ship to Altissia. While they are in Galdin Quay, Niflheim attacks Insomnia, razing parts of the city to the ground and leaving Noctis's father and Gladio's father dead. Presumably the four friends have lost additional family, colleagues, and friends, and Gladio does not immediately know whether Iris, his sister, has survived. Given the emotional intensity of the moment, it would be

easy to have one or more of the four react with violence to the news—perhaps smashing furniture, stalking out of the room, or a similar action—as a substitute for a more genuine and vulnerable emotional response. Admittedly, this was the response I expected the game to take, even though its narrative had already defied expected depictions of masculinity, and I was pleasantly surprised when their reactions proved to move against type. It was at this point that I became convinced of how important this game is as an example of positive homosocial bonds. Instead of reacting with violence, the four decide to return to *Insomnia* to confirm for themselves that the city has fallen. They make this choice not as hypermasculine warriors determined to single-handedly win back *Insomnia* but as four young men now nearly completely untethered from all that they knew only a few days before. Kathleen Elliott asserts, “Finding ways to promote healthy masculinity early and to teach boys and young men to recognize, reject and challenge simplified, toxic masculinity is essential for creating cultural change” (19). This early reaction of the game’s protagonists creates just such an opportunity, and there never comes a point at which any of them admonishes the others for showing grief. When they finally reach an overlook and can see both *Niflheim*’s armada of airships and smoke rising from *Insomnia*, a small moment underscores these men turning to one another for comfort and caring for one another. Prompto plays a news report over his phone’s speaker that confirms both Regis’s death and the false news propagated by *Niflheim* that Noctis and Luna have also died. Prompto becomes flustered and drops his phone. Ignis, without chiding Prompto for either his

clumsiness or the emotions behind it, bends, picks up the phone, and hands it back to his friend without a word, but not unkindly. The four are allowed to share and express vulnerability without fear of reprisal or of being mocked for not being sufficiently masculine. They do not need to confirm their masculinity by making ridiculous statements about charging into the occupied city to reclaim it with violence.

FRIENDSHIP AS BROTHERHOOD

The bonds of friendship among *Final Fantasy XV*'s four protagonists serve as a consistent sanctuary against the events with which they must contend. Even once the events befalling them become bleaker, the four still find moments of levity and hope, reminding the player of the hopeful nature of their youth, even once the narrative skips forward ten years and Noctis returns prepared to die to save Eos. They are all young men: Gladio is the oldest at 23, Ignis next at 22, and Prompto and Noctis both 20. How they came to be friends proves complex but important to how the game constructs male friendship.

Gladio and Ignis both serve the Crown; thus, their ties to Noctis are a complex mixture of duty and brotherhood¹². Gladio is the king's shield, a personal bodyguard whose duty it might be to give up his life to save Noctis, and feels the weight of his role, as it is one his ancestors have played for generations. Ignis was selected to grow up with Noctis and serve as his chamberlain and

12. The complexities of this were explored in the Brotherhood anime series. Gladio, always serious in his duty, worries there that Noctis might not be ready to be king. Ignis even expresses concern about Noctis's seeming lack of interest in any of his duties as crown prince. Yet these professional concerns remain separate from their steadfast loyalty to Noctis as a friend. They know he can be better and push him to be thus.

advisor. The reality, though, given that Noctis's mother is dead and Regis has little time for his son, is that Ignis also takes on something of a parental role. Prompto is the only one with no ties to the royal family or to the nobility and is, in many ways, the first and only friend Noctis truly chooses for himself. They became friends during high school and are best friends at the start of the game.¹³ The player embodying Noctis participates in a scene with Prompto in which the pair discuss their friendship, with Prompto noting, "Behind all the quips and laughs, I'm a mess of hang-ups. I've always felt inferior to you guys. I'm not royalty and I'm not strong. I'm nothing, really." The player has some choice in terms of how to respond and how long to keep the conversation going, with one option seeing Noctis reply, "Think what you will, but I think you are good enough for me." Granted, one of the other options essentially trivializes or makes light of what Prompto says, and the player can certainly opt to move the conversation in that direction. However, this is perhaps one moment where the mechanics of the game do not completely match its thematic content. Noctis can certainly be dismissive of Prompto, but that runs counter to the manner in which he has been characterized throughout the game. While he often pretends to be disconnected from what is going on around him when it pertains to his duty as crown prince, that pretense belies his deep emotional vulnerability. As a player, I opted for the supportive dialogue because it made the most narrative sense—Noctis and Prompto are alone in the

13. "Episode Prompto" fills in Prompto's backstory more fully, as does the episode "Dogged Runner" from the *Brotherhood* anime series. Prompto's adoptive parents seem to be mostly absent, and young Prompto was overweight, shy, and never felt worthy of befriending Noctis. They attended the same school from elementary onward, but Prompto did not approach Noctis until after losing a lot of weight.

scene, out of earshot, so there is no reason for either one of them to avoid deeper emotional engagement. I appreciate that some gamers might choose more aggressive or contrary dialogue just to do so, or to see what might happen. I prefer to keep my choices in line with the characters as they were otherwise constructed, to maintain a sense of narrative fidelity.

I also appreciate that the four protagonists are neither identical to one another nor interchangeable. It is the varied backgrounds and the complexities of their ties that add depth and dimension to the protagonists' friendships, in addition to providing moments of levity as the narrative's tone darkens. They do not all share common interests, and their backgrounds are all quite different. However, throughout the game's narrative, they will find ways either to discover common ground or to share in one another's interests. Thomas Thurnell-Read considers that a "device commonly deployed by men in male peer groups is 'indirectness,' where expressions of homosocial connection are invariably filtered indirectly through, for example, mutual talk of shared interests or alternative social arrangements such as competition and playacted confrontation" (252). *Final Fantasy XV* proves powerful in that it resists such constructions of friendship. The four protagonists certainly have some shared interests, and many of those relate to their service both to Noctis and to the Crown. However, the game spends a significant amount of time detailing their diverging interests and deepening their individual characters through a series of quests, known as tours, that become available at various camping sites. The non-universal availability of the quests means that the player must stay at a wide variety of

havens, as each quest will trigger at a particular location. Although several quests are available for each character, I will detail only one for each character here.

Ignis relishes cooking, and a running joke in the game finds him conceiving of new recipes throughout their journey and often at odd moments, such as while defeating a particular monster. His particular exclamation, “That’s it! I’ve come up with a new recipe!” has gone on to find new life on the Internet as any number of memes. Yet despite his frequent moments of culinary inspiration, Ignis tends to be the most serious of the group, the caretaker who has spent most of his life trying to keep Noctis’s life in order. One particular detail is that Ignis wears glasses to correct nearsightedness, even though the player discovers that his vision really is not that bad without them. However, Ignis prefers the world to be “crystal clear.” One of his tours involves his glasses being absconded with by a chocobo¹⁴. I found the ensuing recovery effort to be both delightful and ridiculous in equal measure. The player embodying Noctis has to help Ignis distract the bird with treats, then move swiftly when its back is turned. Ignis’s indignation at the bird’s audacity reminded me that he is a young man, even though his role often forces him to act much older.

Gladio loves camping, a major component of the group’s travel across Eos. Although the others do not seem to hate camping, they will often express relief when they stop at a motel instead of a campsite. Perhaps even more than camping, though, Gladio loves Cup Noodles—yes, those Cup Noodles, meaning that its

14. Chocobos are a mainstay of the Final Fantasy series. They are large, flightless birds which serve as ground transportation and in XV are an alternate for the four friends to travelling either on foot or in their car, the Regalia.

manufacturer, Nissin, must certainly have paid quite a bit in product placement funding. This may at first seem ridiculous, especially when Cup Noodles is a dish that Ignis is willing to prepare at camp. Gladio's particular culinary obsession will eventually lead to the side quest "The Perfect Cup," wherein the player chooses from a list of options the perfect "protein" to go with Cup Noodles. The four friends hunt down the chosen creature, and then Ignis prepares the new and improved noodles at camp.

Prompto is passionate about photography and will often ask Ignis to stop at a particular location out of their way so that he can take a picture purely for aesthetic enjoyment. One of his tours, "The Hallowed Hill of Hammerhead," finds him wanting Noctis to join him as he seeks to snap the perfect picture of Hammerhead, the first place the four visit after leaving Insomnia, when they push the broken-down Regalia to a service station. As the player watches Prompto prepare, Cindy, mechanic extraordinaire based at Hammerhead and Prompto's crush, shows up unexpectedly¹⁵. The player's successful dialogue with Cindy, initiated to help out the increasingly frazzled Prompto, ultimately leads to Noctis snapping a picture of the pair.

Finally, Noctis takes great pleasure in fishing, and while the others will watch and support him when he lands a catch, they do not participate. There is a specific tour, "The Liege of the Lake,"¹⁶ involving Gladio, but the player

15. Or, Prompto knows she enjoys walking through that particular area in the morning as exercise and he is hoping to run into her. He is so nervous and flustered either possibility works.

16. I was, sadly, not able to successfully complete this quest. The Liege proves to be an incredibly difficult fish to catch, and my fishing skills, despite the in-game tutorial and Ignis, Prompto, and Gladio's yelling at me to reel the line one particular direction or another, never really reached the level I might have hoped for.

can opt to fish at any of the numerous fishing spots available in the in-game world.

The friendships among the four exist in how they bolster one another's interests through small actions, such as expressing enthusiasm for a meal Ignis might cook at camp or admiring the images Prompto captures. As a player, I found these quiet moments of poignancy, ridiculousness, and humor to be among the most effective narrative moments of the game, and not just as character-building tools. They brought me back to my own youthful friendships. I can remember having moments of sheer lunacy and insanity, giggling and laughing with my female friends over inside jokes and situations that were likely funny only to us. As a player, I had the opportunity to experience such moments between young men, rather than young women. In the game, I got to witness Ignis ruffled without his glasses, Gladio constantly searching for a perfect cup of instant noodles, Prompto reduced to an awkward grin and few words in the presence of Cindy¹⁷, and Noctis finding moments of solace while fishing. That these were moments shared between male characters was even more important because they are vulnerable during these tours and moments, subject, as they might be in other popular media offerings, to mockery by the others. The game's narrative never pretends that the challenges the four young men face will be easily overcome, or that their lives have been easy.

The issue of the balance between duty and friendship freely chosen provides moments of both tension and introspection as the narrative progresses without skirting

17. And no, Prompto does not ever "get the girl." Cindy, while fond of the four, has her own life and work, and the narrative avoids an easy solution of her suddenly falling for his charms.

over the work that all four of them must choose to invest in their relationships with one another. Allegra Frank notes,

At first, it seems as though what bonds them is their duties: Each one swears to protect Noctis, their kingdom’s youngest royal, as they journey across the land in a fancy car. As it turns out, they’re together for more than just obligation. These boys have legitimate affection for each other, and players can’t get enough of it (n.p.).¹⁸

Noctis is insecure, thinking that the others are with him only out of obligation. Certainly, Gladio and Ignis were pressed into service for the Crown at young ages. Prompto, therefore, is marked by being the friend Noctis met in high school. Frank continues,

Prompto and Noctis’ relationship is special, and that’s not just because players deem it to be so. *The Final Fantasy 15* prequel anime, *Brotherhood*, revealed the origin of their close friendship—and how it was built on Noctis’ unintentional encouragement of Prompto’s major lifestyle change. Previously overweight and lonely, Prompto became determined to dramatically change his look after Noctis made an insensitive comment to him on their first meeting (n.p.).

“Episode Prompto” also delves into Prompto’s isolation and his deep desire for friends. Prompto is the one

18. Although I call into question the use of the term “boys,”—as I would the use of “girls” for a similarly aged group of women—because it takes away from the bonds between grown men, the point is otherwise very well taken.

documenting the journey—he is the photographer and it is his eye framing the journey. While Prompto wears his insecurities fairly openly, the others have moments of equal vulnerability given that they have all, to varying extents, been robbed of their childhoods.

If the tours serve the purpose of underscoring for the player that these young men, so serious and staid in their duties, also yearn for the chance to simply exist, then the banter between the four, an integral part of the game's mechanics, sometimes stays light, but also delves into deeper matters. Prompto asks Ignis at one point what he had wanted to be when he grew up, and it is important that Ignis never answers. Instead, he deflects the question, not out of an overall inability to share but because he would never want Noctis to overhear and erroneously believe that Ignis finds him to be a burden. Gladio, for all of the strength in his muscular six-and-a-half-foot frame, worries that he will not be strong enough to defend Noctis¹⁹. Gladio further defies stereotypes of strong, muscular men through both his gentle and loving care of his younger sister Iris, who is 15 years old at the start of the game, and his love of reading²⁰. Throughout the time the four friends spend travelling²⁰ on the road, Gladio will often pull out a book and read intently. He also worries

19. Gladio is easily beaten by Ravus, Luna's brother and an antagonist during the first part of the game. During "Episode Gladio," his standalone story piece, he seeks out the ultimate warrior Gilgamesh as a test of his strength. For me, "Episode Gladio," while fun, was a bit of a misstep and a missed opportunity. It becomes a heavy-metal laced dungeon crawl featuring Gladio mowing his way through enemies, sometimes by pulling up columns of rock and swinging them. Although he ultimately does what he does for the right reasons—to increase both his confidence and his strength—I would have liked something here other than just the melee. The piece misses an opportunity to more completely develop his character along the trajectory found in the main game.

20. Later in the game the player can fast-travel between locations, meaning the player can move from linked points on the map without having to physically walk or drive there; however, some locations require that the group travel on foot or by car. During these sequences of car travel, members of the group will do various things, such as Gladio choosing to read, Prompto turning around in the front seat to talk to Noctis, and the like.

that Noctis is not emotionally ready to be king. Although the four protagonists are well beyond their young teenage years, their journey is about their coming of age by valuing the bonds of their friendship.

However, this is not to say that the four do not learn and grow over the course of the story, for their friendships would never have to be tested or challenged if they remained in a static emotional state or circumstances. The game's narrative combines elements of the traditional bildungsroman with elements of Campbell's cycle of the hero, but to tragic and devastating effect. Jennifer Bernstein says of the lasting interest we have in bildungsroman stories:

Who among us has not waited for the “magic moment” when we would find ourselves perfectly recognized by the world, and recognize it in return as a genial force? Though this urge to realize the truest version of ourselves never quite evaporates, it is strongest, most urgent in adolescence—in those formative years when we cannot help but reach toward the world with a kind of heady desperation born of hormones and the incorrigible hopefulness of inexperience.

Final Fantasy XV's four protagonists are older than characters typically populating the bildungsroman story, but their lack of experience and familiarity with the outside world sets them clearly within its structure. As they leave Insomnia, the four possess an inordinate amount of hope: that the war with Niflheim will end, that they will have an adventure on the road, and that Noctis will embark on a happy married life with Luna. Although they have lived under the shadow of war all of their lives,

it has been sufficiently distant that they lack a full sense of how deceitful, cruel, and dangerous others might be.

Perhaps the most poignant component to the depiction of the friendships among the four lies beyond the close of the game, as the world rebuilds and Prompto, Ignis, and Gladio move on with their lives without Noctis. The group as they are in the game, meaning these four caring and thoughtful young men, will be lost to the larger arc of history. Noctis, for example, will always be the King of Light, who sacrificed himself to bring back the dawn. He will become more a legend than an actual person, and while it might be widely known that the four men were best friends, brothers even, no one will truly know what that means. The smaller and quiet moments of the game, Noctis fishing, Ignis cooking, Gladio reading, and Prompto taking pictures, are intimate details of lives set aside by a public eager for a heroic saga. This loss of truth highlights the importance of Prompto's photography: the photos he takes via the system and those that the player can take document this friendship and provide a heartbreaking record of it.

FINAL FANTASY XV'S ANSWER TO THE "BROMANCE"

Final Fantasy XV avoids reducing the friendships among the four to a positive but shallow version of friendship that is typically referred to in Western media culture as a bromance, especially in comedy, a particular iteration that I find offensive and I imagine is also distressing to men. A bromance tends to be characterized as a close bond, but one that is always careful to set clear masculine

boundaries. Most often, this means establishing that none of the men involved in a bromance is gay, and playing off or deflecting deeper moments of bonding through a comedic mishap. An example of this depiction of friendship lies at the heart of the 2009 film *I Love You, Man*²¹ in which the main character seeks to find a male friend because he has no one to act as his best man for his forthcoming nuptials. The title of the film itself underscores the narrative's uneasiness with the subject matter. The "man" of the title certainly refers to the idea that Peter, the film's protagonist, seeks a male friend. However, the phrase ends up serving the larger purpose of blunting the emotional power of saying "I love you" in a homosocial context. Any number of comedies or comedic moments continue to make use of a male telling another male "I love you, man!" perhaps with hyperbolic crying, or while intoxicated, thus eliminating a depiction of deep male bonds presented without mockery. The disconnect between the media's depiction of the bromance in this manner and the ways in which men might view them prove critical to understanding why the friendships depicted in *Final Fantasy XV* are so important.

As a part of their research into the impact and presence of bromances in the lives of young men, Stefan Robinson, Eric Anderson, and Adam White recorded what the study participants themselves called bromances. The men took the bromances far more seriously than Hollywood depictions would have the general public believe and spoke of the importance of these relationships in their lives. The researchers note,

21. I use this example, out of many possibilities, because the very title of the film itself is often used between men in real life as a means not only to joke but also to deflect emotional honesty and intensity.

Before trying to unpack the bromance for its detailed constituent parts and characteristics, and with respect to the fluid and holistic nature of relationships, it is worthwhile briefly setting out the overarching insights that the men had in defining the bromance. In presenting his definition of a bromance, Patrick, for example, said: A bromance is someone who is literally there for you all the time. Someone you can relate to on an emotional level. Someone you can share secrets and pain with, and love, but there is no sort of sexual attraction. It can be intimate though. (Patrick) Similarly, Mark said: I've got really good friends that are guys and we call it a bromance. You can fully discuss your fears and problems with them, all of that. We are completely comfortable with each other and kiss and hug every now and then. You know they will always be there to back you up if you need it. (Mark) And Henry said: I have one [bromance] with my best friend. Like, he will do something for me and I'll feel really sentimental, like you really shouldn't have done that, but you did. He does more for me than a normal friend would. It creates a love feeling for me, not sexual though. (Henry) (98).

It is noteworthy that these young men were willing to share this information with the researchers, but Western

culture still does not allow men to express these sorts of feelings with this level of depth and honesty in most situations, and I wonder if they would have done so outside of the specific parameters and confines of being part of a research study.

Final Fantasy XV allows the friendships among its four protagonists to grow and mature over the course of the story and through the tragedies that they experience. One particularly striking moment occurs at the end of the game's main storyline during the events of the "Episode Ignis" downloadable content. I think that this moment represents one of the finest constructed scenes in the game, bringing to bear the compelling use of visuals along with the unique embodiment of the player within the fictive space. The scene expands on the group's last night of camping together depicted in the main narrative, after Noctis has been released by the Astrals following a ten-year absence to fulfill his destiny.²² In the early part of "Episode Ignis," the player sees through Ignis's eyes the moment he first came into service for the Crown, serving as a friend, companion, and later advisor to Noctis. In this moment, though, the boys are young: Ignis is six and Noctis is three. Noctis at first appears shy, even hesitant, because he has had no other friends. Ignis extends his hand and the two shake, and Noctis's face lights up with joy. At the final campsite, the scene is revisited. Now, Prompto, Ignis, and Gladio know that they are returning with Noctis to Insomnia but that he will not survive. Noctis takes Ignis's hand, as he did when they were little, and looks at Ignis with deep fondness and genuine love.

22. Noctis is effectively held captive inside the Crystal, viewed as an heirloom and the responsibility of the Caelum line of kings. While Noctis is imprisoned within the Crystal, the Astral Bahamut advises Noctis to prepare for his destiny, meaning his death.

Ignis, blinded after the events of Altissia, cannot see him, so the game's camera focuses on the reflective glasses he now wears to protect his eyes and partially cover his scarring. In that reflection, symbolically profound, is Noctis as Ignis last saw him in Altissia, a young man of 20, not a man of 30 with tears flowing down his face. Ignis is a man of tremendous strength and physical prowess who has spent long years fighting Daemons and awaiting Noctis's return. I have often wondered, as a gamer drawn into the storyline and the lives of these four compelling young men, what Ignis must have felt during all of those long years of Noctis's absence. Ignis knows of, and appears to have kept completely to himself, the full extent of the prophecy: Noctis will return, but only to be sacrificed²³. If the game's narrative opted to take an emotionally cheaper route, Ignis might have been transformed into a figure of wrath or of hatred, but even despite his blindness, he never thinks of himself as a victim, and he never regrets having been brought into Noctis's life. Ignis's vulnerability, coupled with his refusal to resort to victimhood, serves as an important counter to many iterations of toxic masculinity found in our modern society, especially now. Paul Elliott Johnson argues that in both the run up to and the aftermath of Trump being elected president, "claims of White, masculine victimhood encourage objectively well-off members of society to interpret the presence of difference and uncertainty as threatening the subject with unjust marginalization" (231).²⁴ But in the game, in this quiet

23. This is depicted in "Episode Ignis." Ignis receives a vision of the future from Luna's guardian dog, Pryna, counterpart to Umbra.

24. Noctis, Ignis, Gladio, and Prompto all appear to be white men in the game.

moment of personal tragedy, there is no turning of hurt to the outside, to the demonizing of women or the Other as blame for what is about to transpire as a cover for the powerlessness Ignis feels in this moment. Instead, Ignis is a friend, brother, and comrade trying to figure out how to say goodbye to someone he loves. To become toxic, aggressive, and hateful would only serve to denigrate the importance of the years they have spent in one another's lives.

A SCAFFOLD OF FRIENDSHIP

However, many hours of gameplay will have elapsed before the player reaches this moment of sorrow in the game. The narrative begins on a deceptively different note, and as I reflect back on my own experiences playing the game a number of times, I increasingly appreciate how carefully the narrative is crafted. At first, it might appear to be fragmented, as it did to me, vacillating perhaps jarringly between comedy and weightier matters. Yet now, after having completed the main game and its downloadable content, I appreciate why the game took such care to make sure to scaffold the friendship of the four protagonists before turning the narrative much more completely to its mythic/messianic arc. It gave me the chance to be with these four young men—to explore Eos with them for the first time, to marvel at the world outside of *Insomnia's* wall, to hope along with them as they looked toward the future. It is not my experiences, though, that are the most critical in considering the importance of the game's narrative as a cultural touchstone fighting against the construct of toxic

masculinity. I think, instead, of male gamers, perhaps most especially teens and tweens, who have played through this game and have likely experienced for the first time these sorts of positive depictions of friendship. Representation in all forms of popular media is critically important, and this exploration of homosocial bonds serves as a form of representation, one which goes against stereotypes and opens the possibility to young men to find a new way to consider the importance of friendship and emotional vulnerability.

For the first several chapters, prior to the point at which the group arrives at Galdin Quay and learns of the destruction of Insomnia, the tone is lighthearted as the four friends embark on their first road trip out of the city. It has been many years since they have been outside of Insomnia, if at all.²⁵ Not only are they sharing the excitement of exploring the larger world around them, they are embarking on the journey that will mark significant changes in their lives. They do not view these changes, most especially Noctis's forthcoming status as a married man, with any sense of dread or resentment. Instead, aside from some gentle teasing, they both support Noctis and express admiration for his wife-to-be. Scott Fabius Kiesling identifies "two clashing cultural discourses: male solidarity and heterosexuality. In the former men are supposed to form a close bond, but in the latter they are supposed to refrain from intimacy" (711).

25. The events of the episode "Warmth of Light" from the anime series *Brotherhood*, a companion narrative piece to the game filling in backstories for each of the four protagonists, recounts an eight-year-old Noctis being injured by a Daemon while travelling with an escort outside of the city. He is gravely wounded, and his father takes him to Tenebrae to recuperate. After they return, there is no mention of Noctis leaving Insomnia again. Given that Ignis, Gladio, and Prompto all express uncertainty about what it will be like outside of the crown city, it is clear that if they have been outside of it, this would have been when they were very young.

The friends defy typical bachelor road trip–style stories that feature some form of mockery of the forthcoming marriage, perhaps through raucous or comedic encounters with strippers or by lamenting how awful married life will be, both of which fuel any number of narratives across all storytelling formats. Thomas Thurnell-Read’s research into homosocial bonds looks at the extended stag party, or bachelor party, which takes the form of a group of men travelling for a number of days as they celebrate an impending marriage. Thurnell-Read notes, “The stag tour is symbolically marked as a time and space for men to be together and pursue a range of notably male interests, typified by the consumption of alcohol and the pursuit of drunkenness” (258). Although the core narrative drive of the early part of *Final Fantasy XV* lies in the road trip serving the purpose of getting Noctis to Altissia to marry Luna, this becomes complicated early on by the fall of Insomnia and the group being hunted by their enemies. Prior to that, however, the road trip can be seen as a type of stag or bachelor tour, the last journey of four friends before their lives move to their next phases, and, as such, they avoid the stereotypical hallmarks of such adventures like partying and carousing.

Frankly, I was afraid that the narrative would turn down this path, and I kept waiting for it to do so. Their training probably tempers such instincts, but they are young men effectively away from home for the first time and their status as royalty and the members of royal party would have allowed for a degree of negative behavior, especially acting out sexually, without consequence. Thurnell-Read further observes of the structure of these

stag tours that “the objectification of women was therefore a notable means of bonding with each other within the homosocial group. Through such acts, it seems no surprise, the masculinity enacted by stag tourists is constructed as being overtly heterosexual (259)” as he describes male behavior, such as ogling women or having sex with them, although the latter is also seen as intruding on the male bonding purpose of the trip. All of these traits of the stag tour taken together, most especially regarding the men’s treatment of women and of one another, identify this behavior as toxic masculinity. Mike Parent argues that “toxic masculinity is characterized by a drive to dominate and by endorsement of misogynistic and homophobic views. A large body of literature has linked endorsement of misogynistic and homophobic attitudes with scores on measures of masculinity ideology and adherence to masculine gender role conformity” (2). To counter these destructive depictions and attitudes, a quest given to the player soon after the arrival in Altissia directs the four friends to the storefront where Luna’s wedding dress has been put on display in advance of the wedding. The moment is not played for comedy. Instead, the four react thoughtfully, even introspectively.²⁶ As I played through this scene for the first time, given that I have been accustomed to negative depictions of masculinity, I kept waiting for the punchline. Perhaps one of them, maybe Prompto, might make a quip to bring humor to the scene, or one of the others might comment about how they should avoid being seen staring at a wedding gown in a shop window.

26. This particular moment in the game is lampooned in Conan O’Brien’s *Clueless Gamer* series. O’Brien comments about the ludicrous nature of the scene and how men really wouldn’t do that. Perhaps that is the point and why this scene proves integral to the theme of homosocial bonding.

THE INTERSECTION OF FANDOM AND HETEROSEXUAL FRIENDSHIPS

A bit needs to be said here about fandom culture, referring to those who express a deep love for a particular video game, show, anime series, and the like. There has been a tendency in the fan culture of *Final Fantasy XV* to take the signs of friendship and to deem one or more of the main protagonists homosexual, perhaps most especially so in fan fiction. Fan fiction comprises millions of stories, ranging from very short flash fiction to full length novels, that expand on the universe of its chosen fandom. Whereas some works carefully avoid moving too far outside the boundaries of the original narrative, others disregard part or all of it in works usually referred to as “alternative universes” or AUs. Fan fiction remains the primary domain of women, both as writers and as consumers. Although numbers can be hard to track, given that major fan fiction sites do not require the disclosure of gender in profiles, research I have found frequently cites percentages as high as 80% women. Pamela Kalinowski considers, “Unsurprisingly, fandom communities appeal to women a great deal; by sharing their viewpoints through fan fiction, women spare themselves exposure to the biased and discriminatory world of male-centered mass media” (662). Many fandom representations of one or more of the game’s four male protagonists focus on them being gay, often in relationships with one another. While the depiction of loving and normalized homosexual relationships is still very much lacking in modern media culture, even in digital narrative, that issue is separate from that of

examining the depictions of friendship as they exist in *Final Fantasy XV* and automatically reacting to these characterizations by reading them as homosexual desire. If anything, that persistent attitude reifies the fear heterosexual men may have of being perceived as gay should they express deep love and friendship for one another. Certainly, I do not intend here to imply that such characterizations made by fan fiction writers are inherently wrong or should not be explored, as I believe that fan fiction provides an important emotional and creative outlet for communities of women. What I do find fascinating regarding *Final Fantasy XV* specifically is this tendency in fandom to conclude that emotional closeness and physical proximity, such as the four share, necessarily imply romantic desire. Such a tendency to read homosexuality into close male friendships runs counter to the complex ways in which men construct and understand their own homosocial bonds. Stefan Robinson, Eric Anderson, and Adam White argue, “The absence of sexual attraction distinguishes these men as heterosexual to both themselves and others. More importantly, these men share a progressive understanding that love can exist between two people without the need or requirement for sex with each other” (100). The young men in their study felt that “they were free of judgment, which permits them to push the cultural margins of traditional masculinity toward more intimate and expressive behaviors” (Robinson 101). *Final Fantasy XV* proves critical from a storytelling perspective in that it defies toxic masculinity primarily by ignoring it: these four men do not engage in toxic masculine behaviors;

therefore, the narrative does not have to spend time showing how they overcome negative masculine traits.

Some male gamers and game critics have considered part of what drew me to this particular analysis of the game: that as a woman, I was seeing a view of male friendship that was both important and rare. Brett Williams considers the structural differences between male friendship and female friendship and argues, “A male relationship is inherently different than a female relationship or mixed relationship. *Final Fantasy XV* gives women, in many cases, a never before seen glimpse into the male relationship” (n.p.). Although Williams raises a profound point about the importance of depicting caring homosocial bonds, his ideas are also problematical in that most depictions of male friendships are not as positive or honest and that male friendships in the real world may not be as caring or supportive as those the game shows are possible. Certainly, the game’s bold choices create a starting point, and an important one, but more of these stories are needed. Stefan Robinson, Eric Anderson, and Adam White maintain that “for its comedic connotations and depiction, social scientists have failed to consider the bromance as a serious and legitimate relationship type and have ignored its importance in the lives of everyday young men” (95). The key point here is the disconnect between how these friendships might be depicted in media culture versus the importance they have to men in their real lives. These authors continue:

Homophobia as the fear of being socially perceived as gay—something made possible because heterosexuality cannot be definitively proven among straight men in

a culture that is both aware and fearful of homosexuality. Subsequently, men were culturally compelled both to perform certain overtly heterosexual behaviors and to avoid engaging in those that would feminize them. It is important to understand that this cultural landscape has left a generation of heterosexual men with a life of no intimate connections, as well as with friendships that may never achieve the level of intimacy to which they should have been entitled (95).

Noctis, Prompto, Ignis, and Gladio never tease one another about being gay or in any other way denigrate one another for particular traits that might be perceived as more feminine than masculine. A primary example of this lies in Ignis's caretaking duties of the others. Ignis almost always cooks for the others whenever they camp, and, if anything, the others are always appreciative for having well-made meals. Even in their banter, with their conversations and topics of discussion occurring at random as the player explores the game's world, they never engage in typical "dude bro" talk. Danny Kaplan and Amir Rosenmann in their studies of homosocial bonds note that "whereas most friendship scales presuppose and focus on dyadic ties, we developed an inventory of emotional experience that would cover both dyadic and group settings, include emotions of both positive and negative valence, and may reflect variations in social legitimacy between homosocial and heterosexual context" (14). They speak here of considering how male friendships exist both in terms of

private friendships and bonds developed in such settings as fraternities and the military, which reminds me of what my husband said in our discussion about men tending to bond over shared activities and identities, such as being soldiers. Of note is the consideration here of negative valence, which includes behavior such as verbally belittling one another, perhaps through insulting nicknames, or through more aggressive physical behavior, such as physical contact or embraces that read more as violent than comforting. While Gladio does refer to Noctis by nicknames like “Prince Charmless,” he never comes across as attempting to belittle his friend and charge. Similarly, when the group drives into a rest stop containing a Kenny Crow diner, akin to a real-world Denny’s, Prompto will often express excitement, which is immediately tempered by Ignis’s reminder that this type of food will cause Prompto to gain weight. On the surface, this could be read as insensitive or cruel, given that Prompto is easily, while muscular, the thinnest member of the group. However, supplementary pieces of the game’s narrative, such as “Episode Prompto” and the *Brotherhood* anime series reveal that Prompto used to be very overweight and it crippled him emotionally. Ignis, knowing of Prompto’s history, instead can be viewed as gently reminding Prompto of how far he has come. The snippets of dialogue and banter occur regularly throughout the game and do not focus solely on the player who embodies Noctis. As is the case with the example of Ignis and Prompto, the characters will engage in different dynamics with one another.

THE OPEN WORLD

Up to this point, I have considered the overall structure of the game with its firm scaffold of male homosocial bonding. However, it is not just within the game's overarching narrative that friendship is explored; it is an inherent part of the game's mechanics as well. The easiest way to distinguish game "mechanics" from "narrative" is that mechanics refers to what the player needs to do to achieve the overall goals of the game, whereas narrative refers to the game's story. In the case of *Final Fantasy XV*, the mechanics include the overall set of rules governing the player's traversing of Eos to accomplish the main narrative's quest and how the four protagonists interact in combat. The mechanics of the game also intersect seamlessly with the emphasis on open world adventuring, most especially in the early chapters of the game. *Final Fantasy XV's* explorations of friendship and of the oftentimes painful knowledge born from experience are why the open-world format proves so critical to the game and to establishing each character separately and their shared ties of friendship. Richard Moss provides the following definition of an open-world video game: "There should be a sense that, within the rules of the game world, you can do anything at any time while freely moving about the space. It's essential for true open-world games to offer the freedom to decide when to do things, which by extension means a freedom to do things other than moving on to the next main story beat" (n.p.) and in this game, the player can choose in the early chapters to undertake a variety of quests, or even just explore the environment, before completing main story quests. In

addition, unlike many role-playing games in which players level up immediately on reaching the next level, *Final Fantasy XV* requires players to rest before they can level up. The camping scenes all follow the same domestic and peaceful pattern: the player selects which dish Ignis will cook for the group, they sit around the campfire to eat, and experience points are tallied in the foreground, with the four in the background. Their activities and actions change at random, as they may talk to one another, goof around, and the like.

The game's emphasis on the four friends spending time together—whether in leisure or completing particular side quests—serves as an important expression of friendship. Danny Kaplan and Amir Rosenmann consider their research into men's friendship, including theories of "men's inexpressiveness, suggesting that male friendships are oriented toward doing things together, mutually engaging in tasks and activities, but not toward intimate knowledge of one another, and that men display little emotional support and physical affection" (12). They also consider constructions of "friendship as a predominantly dyadic relationship characterized by a heightened sense of self, emotional expressiveness and reciprocity, while associating comradeship with membership in a group and adherence to group norms" (13). *Final Fantasy XV* integrates both modes of friendship into what the game's narrative often refers to as brotherhood. One of the game's major series of side quests involves collecting the dog tags of fallen hunters, men and women who fight the monsters roaming the landscape during the day and the Daemons who prowl it by night. Dave Auburnbrie, leader of one of the major groups of hunters, impresses on the

four friends the importance of giving the families of the fallen hunters both piece of mind and a memento of their loved ones. The first dog tag side quest can be obtained by the player relatively early on in the game, and when it is given, marks the first time, given their reactions, that the four have really understood the depths of the devastation the war and the Daemons have had on everyone else and, by extension, their own privilege. This knowledge starts them down the road of growing up.

Later in the game, once the group reaches Altissia, the main storyline begins to take precedence over the open-world freedom of the early chapters. Indeed, the game's narrative begins to take on an increasingly linear format, meaning that the player will be moved along the main quest line as each event is completed and a point is reached after which the player can no longer take on side quests or hunt in the game's present. The only option from that point forward to return to the freedom of the open world lies in travelling back to the past, an option provided via Umbra, a faithful and otherworldly servant of Luna who takes the form of a black and white dog. I remember the first time I was given this option as a possibility, when the group encounters Umbra in the lobby of their hotel in Altissia, prior to the disastrous events that happen there. I found it both odd and terribly disconcerting that I would require such an option, and as a particular gameplay mechanic, I think it is deeply effective. Returning to the past at that point took on a special and profound poignancy, given the nightmare of Altissia and the main narrative's inexorable movement toward Noctis's ten-year imprisonment in the Crystal, the world's plunge into darkness as the Scourge takes

over, and Noctis's eventual return and death. The return to the open world thus reminds the player of the men when they were young and relatively carefree, and of the singular importance of their friendships. On a larger scale, it also reminds the player that Eos is worth saving, that it is a beautiful, wondrous place, and that all the places the four had visited, including the cities, gas stations, and fishing spots, and all of the people they had met deserve a life free of the darkness and the Scourge.

The mechanics of *Final Fantasy XV* gameplay with regard to its battle engineering serve to further the depiction of the friendships among the four protagonists, and this occurs in small and easy-to-miss moments during the chaos of combat as well as in the more prominent displays of their closeness. In my own playthroughs, I found that the combat itself could become chaotic whenever there were multiple enemies on the battlefield, not to mention the particular frustrations I had trying to exterminate a group of giant Killer Wasps for one of the hunts I had taken on. However, when I stepped back from the intensity of combat in the moment—I could do this by moving Noctis away from the immediate combat zone—I could observe the other three. The game's artificial intelligence positions characters, as their skills develop, to help fallen or injured characters. Thus, I enjoyed watching the moments of interaction among the friends even as I made no real headway killing the Wasps.

This final example relates to how the mechanics directly inform and add to the friendships developed among the four major protagonists. As the characters level and gain access to more complex skills, the player

decides which skills to unlock in the Ascension Grid. A section of the Ascension Grid is labeled “Teamwork” and increases the effectiveness of the four as they fight in combat. Although the player has the choice to increase skills in other areas of the Ascension Grid, given that the game’s artificial intelligence controls the other three characters in combat, it makes far more sense to strengthen how they interact and cooperate with one another before powering up other options. Even before the player unlocks these skills, and even if the player opts not to do so in favor of obtaining other skills, the artificial intelligence–controlled characters will frequently assist the others. This can be as simple as one of the characters lending a hand to help another stand up, or administering an antidote to a poisoned friend. These game mechanics dovetail with details depicted in the narrative. Post Altissia, Gladio often guides the now blinded Ignis via a hand on his lower back. One especially quiet but telling moment occurs in chapter 13, verse 2²⁷, which finds Prompto imprisoned by Ardyn and finds Noctis, Gladio, and Ignis separated during their rescue mission, leaving Noctis on his own. Gladio helps Ignis to stand up, hands him his cane, and guides him forward, all without a word exchanged. Ignis accepts the help without this having to be about a loss of perceived strength or masculinity. Brett Williams wonders: “Battles, the open world, leveling and even simple car rides are all enhanced by an unwavering sense of camaraderie. If such a realistic bond between friends can prop up as many shortcomings as *Final Fantasy XV* has, why do games rarely aim to capture this

27. Chapter 13 provides the player with two narrative options to follow. The player can opt to play through both choices. In the first, the player embodies Noctis, and in the second, Gladio.

universal emotion?” (n.p.). That the game focuses the core components of its mechanics and its story on the friendships among four men, some of whom have known each other since they were very young, raises an important point about the reach of the digital narrative as a form and its ability to convey themes such as this. Williams continues:

Like all friend groups, they are brought together by a specific goal or interest, in this case their duty to Noctis as royal advisors, but once together their shared experience forged an obvious bond that would urge them to see each other to the end of the line, no matter what. They don't know what they are getting into, and at this point in the game neither do I, but it is only natural for friends to bite off more than they can chew. Whether exploring or in battle, your friends are by your side and behaving in ways that your real-life friends would, whether they are chiding Noctis for complaining about heat or teaming up to damage a large foe. In one instance, Noctis was put into danger mode and moved behind a nearby car for cover and much-needed healing. Ignis stopped what he was doing, scanned the general vicinity for where I had gone, found me, and helped me back on my feet. It was a small touch, but this character reaction was symbolic of the powerful interactions the characters have as a whole (n.p.).

At every point, the game's mechanics serve the overarching goals of the narrative and the player remains an integral witness to all of these moments, which blend seamlessly within the game's story moments.

RESPECT FOR WOMEN

In addition to their respect for one another, the four act in similar kind when they speak about or interact with women: it is either with respect, or with some humor, as in the case of Prompto²⁸. Although Prompto will make flirtatious remarks about women, such as Cindy, a competent and independent auto mechanic who upgrades and fixes the Regalia, it is clear that this is born more out of his own insecurities, and his need to be liked sometimes by being the clown, than out of aggressive or misogynistic behavior. For all of Prompto's pining for Cindy, the game's narrative resists having her eventually fall for him. They remain friends, but nothing more. Thomas Thurnell-Read argues, "While male friendship groups, particularly in adolescence, help establish and sustain a viable masculine identity, it has been shown that such also has a restrictive and often negative effect" (251). This negative impact takes the form of young men both competing for status and higher standing within the group and also reifying expected, detrimental social norms. A clear view of gender roles and conceptions of masculinity in *Insomnia*, the last concentrated holding of the former kingdom of Lucis, eludes the player given

28. In the *Assassin's Creed/Final Fantasy XV* crossover downloadable content, which finds the four enjoying a festival, Gladio is seen at various points trying out truly awful pickup lines on women. He isn't aggressive, though, and the implication is that he has consistently been rebuffed throughout the evening. As the player embodying Noctis, I found these moments hilarious. All of Gladio's stereotypically positive male traits—tall, handsome, muscular, and strong—cannot overcome the fact that he is terrible at talking to women.

the lack of women in the immediate lives of the four young men. However, they seem to be impressed by the independent women they meet during their journey, as is the case when they reach the city of Lestallum. Lestallum is effectively and efficiently run by its women, which includes maintaining the Exeneris power station, a critical resource in the area. The four protagonists do not appear to have many women in their lives owing to circumstance: Regis is widowed; Gladio's mother is not specifically mentioned, but the implication is that she died when Insomnia fell; both of Prompto's adoptive parents appear to have little active role in his life; and Ignis was put into the service of the Crown at six years old, and he never mentions either parent. The narrative would have turned out significantly differently, and not for the better, had the game developers taken a more stereotypical or expected route and had the four acting like fools in front of women or treating them poorly. Instead, they treat women as their equals. Megan Farokhmanesh notes, "There are important female characters present throughout the game, but your main party are the aforementioned four dudes. *Final Fantasy* games usually have mixed-gender parties, but Square Enix has done this kind of thing before. *Final Fantasy X-2's* playable cast was three ladies." The game's narrative does not set out to deliberately exclude or diminish women, and the series has not previously set that as a precedent. The key to this narrative is its emphasis on male friendship. Farokhmanesh continues, "Four cute boys get bit with wanderlust. Sometimes they go camping! In a medium largely dedicated to emotionally closed-off meat bags, here is a sincere celebration of

young male friendship.” Indeed, there is no antagonism between the male protagonists and the female characters they encounter. There is an initial exception when Aranea Highwind attacks the group and is initially depicted as an adversary, but later, when she defects from Niflheim, there is camaraderie and respect there. Brett Williams quotes from an interview that game director Hajime Tabata gave, noting:

In an interview with Gamespot in March 2015, director Hajime Tabata said, “Speaking honestly, an all-male party feels almost more approachable for players. Even the presence of one female in the group will change their behaviour, so that they’ll act differently. So to give the most natural feeling, to make them feel sincere and honest, having them all the same gender made sense in that way . . . we think, male or female player, that everyone will feel a certain connection and bond with the four characters” (n.p.).

Indeed, given that the narrative places great effort in removing harmful stereotypes from male friendship and in giving each of the four friends a distinct personality and history, players from all backgrounds are able to see the four as human. As a female player, I did not experience any problem becoming involved with the narrative because its main protagonists were all male nor embodying a male, Noctis, throughout. Instead, I enjoyed a refreshing opportunity to experience a different construction of masculinity. Without having to worry that the four were going to become offensive toward the

female characters in the game, I could put down my guard in a sense and immerse myself within their story.

Given that the game's main plot point centers on the four friends journeying to Altissia so that Noctis can be married to Luna, and given that this functions as the only romance at all in the game²⁹, the depiction of this relationship merits consideration, as it denies many of the typical hero/heroine romantic pitfalls. Karen Boyle and Susan Berridge, in their study of male friendship—bromances—in comedies, found that “the heterosexual relationships more often exist before the male friends meet for the first time. This convention enables the films to, at least partially, assuage any homosexual anxieties from the outset” (360), meaning that the male characters are already in established heterosexual relationships and then meet the male friend within the context of the story. *Final Fantasy XV* moves away from this structure by portraying the four friends as unattached. Noctis and Luna were friends when they were young; she is older than he is by four years, making her twenty-four to his twenty. However, Luna is also bound to him by duty in her role as the oracle, a divinely ordained calling sacred to her and one that allows her to commune with the Astrals and to cure, on a limited basis, those who have been infected with the Scourge. The game features a few of their interactions when they were children, as Noctis recovered in Tenebrae from his injuries, and in these cases, they are clearly fond of each other, but Luna's dialogue tends to emphasize his future role as a king and her role as Oracle in support of him. Although they are

29. When the four are reunited ten years into the darkness, a randomized dialogue finds Gladio talking about a significant other although he does not mention her with much detail. The implication is that he worries that he will not survive the battle to reclaim Insomnia.

to be married, Luna and Noctis have only an idealized sort of romantic love for each other, and, with Luna, any romantic love she might feel always seems subsumed to her sense of duty as an oracle. Owing to the annexation of Tenebrae by Niflheim and Insomnia's increasing isolation, the two have not seen each other in twelve years and have exchanged correspondence only via a shared journal in which they had written short messages to each other and sent back and forth via Luna's dog Umbra. Luna and Noctis have a strong bond, but it is more a friendship than anything else. After Luna is murdered by Ardyn during the events in Altissia, Noctis does appear to be heartbroken, and Luna, in moments of retrospect and of limited interaction with him from the afterlife, appears to have had a deep love for him; however, the relationship is never more than a potential love story lost to violence. It is the friendships among Noctis, Prompto, Ignis, and Gladio that have endured for most of their lives. At the very end of the game, after Noctis has died, the player watches as Luna and Noctis are reunited. The two are together, albeit alone, in an afterlife version of Insomnia in which they are newly married, sitting side by side, with Noctis crowned king on the throne and Luna leaning close to him. They kiss at this point, and it feels sweet and gentle, but not passionate. While the relationship has endured even into the afterlife, the two had little time to develop a closer bond because they quickly fell into a deep slumber within the prison of the Crystal, perhaps for all eternity. Although I understand the argument that this scene is intended as a romantic moment, it never felt that way to me even after multiple playthroughs. The two are no longer suffering and are at peace, and certainly

have affection for one another, but the kiss is fond and sweet, not passionate or overly romantic. If anything, I found it profoundly sad to see Luna and Noctis, who by this point have given up everything, including their lives, for the machinations of the Astrals and the Crystal, forever asleep within the confines of this afterlife on their wedding day. They never move past it to actually live as adults or to grow as a married couple.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES?

Although I think that the narrative gets a great deal more right than wrong when it comes to characterizing male friendship, it is not without moments that give the player pause. When *Final Fantasy XV*'s narrative takes a dramatic shift after the events of Altissia, this tonal change comes with an opportunity to evolve and to consider with more depth the friendships among Noctis, Ignis, Gladio, and Prompto. In the immediate aftermath of the battle in Altissia, Luna is dead and Ignis is blinded. Noctis sinks into despair, feeling the weight of his duty as king of Lucis, albeit in exile, balanced against his need to mourn his personal losses. Each of the four friends copes differently, and, initially, the group loses a degree of cohesion and closeness as a result of their grief. Now unmoored and uncertain what to do, the four travel by train toward Niflheim's capital to retrieve the Crystal stolen during the attack on Insomnia. Although it is not clear precisely how much time has elapsed, a quick transitional placard to this scene indicates that it has been several weeks. Their voyage on the train leads to one of the more controversial moments of the game, one that

risks placing Gladio in the role of the stereotypical male who acts out his frustration with aggression and anger. He suddenly confronts Noctis, who has been detached and entrenched in his own sorrow. Gladio yells in part, “You think you’re a king, but you’re a coward!” and as Prompto tries to intervene in their fight, Gladio pushes him back. However, the key points in considering Gladio’s reaction lie in both the amount of time that has elapsed since the battle of Altissia and with Gladio’s larger concern, as Noctis’s shield, of his fitness to rule as king. Salvatore Pane analyzes the post-Altissia sequence in this way:

What follows is one of the best sequences I’ve ever played in a videogame, and certainly the best to nail teenage boys dealing with grief. Almost like a Goddard film, the game smash cuts to a train shuttling the boys to their next objective, but for once, everyone is silent. No jokes. No jostling. The boys sit and stare out the window and try to avoid Ignis clutching his cane, acting like nothing’s happened. Noctis mopes and sighs like a moody teenager, and finally, Gladio grabs him and starts screaming, tells him he has to shape up and act like a king, a leader, someone his friends can look up to. Noctis pushes him off, and finally you’re given control of the

character, but your only objective is to walk around the train until it arrives at the station. There are no goals for you to accomplish during this stretch. All you can do is walk around the train and think about how your friends have suffered and died, to imagine the ways they will continue to suffer and die as the quest continues (2).

Certainly, Gladio should not have laid hands on Prompto in any way, even to keep him out of the argument, and it might be easy to identify this sequence as depicting toxic masculinity or stereotyping Gladio as brutish. However, given Gladio's size and strength, he avoids hurting Prompto as he might have. I saw this as a moment where Gladio does show his restraint—a punch, for example, would have done unspeakable harm to Prompto. Furthermore, the story has established that Gladio previously had concerns over Noctis's suitability as king³⁰ given that the latter often feigns indifference to his duties and especially since their kingdom is at war. Gladio believes that Noctis can, and must, do better and must lead. By this point, weeks, not hours or days, have passed since Altissia, and they remain rudderless and directionless. Although Gladio fails to keep his temper in check, his concerns are not unwarranted. Gladio's outburst punctuates a crucial moment in all of their lives, and Noctis is not just the crown prince any longer, he is the king of Lucis. I think that this event would have been better concluded if Gladio had been shown

30. The Brotherhood anime explores this issue as a longstanding concern of Gladio's.

acknowledging he was wrong to Prompto, given that he knows that Prompto is especially concerned about not belonging.

This somber tone, during which the player considers how the relationships among the four will evolve in the aftermath of tragedy and fighting, continues even after Prompto is pushed off the train by Noctis, the result of an act of deceit perpetrated by Ardyn, and the remaining three continue toward Tenebrae and then Niflheim's capital. For example, the player embodying Noctis is once again called on to essentially wait for time to pass, for the group to move one step closer to *something else* and *somewhere else*. In this sequence, the player can encounter Gladio and Ignis sitting together in the dining car in companionship, but the tension in their bodies is clear to read. Eventually, the group finds its way back to brotherhood again, but the game does not pretend that this happens immediately and without both deep introspection and the value they place on their friendship. Gladio's incendiary calling of Noctis to task provides the necessary inertia they all need to deal openly and maturely with all that has happened and is yet to come.

In light of the game's increasingly dark narrative and tragic ending, that *Final Fantasy XV* is a Japanese game and narrative localized into English merits consideration. Western players might be expecting a happy ending, even if Noctis must ultimately sacrifice himself for the world. This ending could take the form of the main protagonists sharing happy memories of him, or raising families of their own, and the like. Instead, something far more harrowing and less defined occurs. Compared with typical Western stories, Japanese storytelling contains

some structural differences and leads—crucially in some places—to specific translation choices in the English localization of the game³¹. Marie Mutsuki Mockett considers:

Occasionally I would see something on TV that deeply captured my imagination and love, but which sent me into such a fit of tears that my mother would literally spend hours trying to console me over the injustice of a purely tragic ending while she cursed her culture for being irresponsibly sad. For in Japan, stories could be devastatingly, irredeemably wretched. Ghosts could triumph over the living. People also had sex on TV and there were breasts! The stories—life—felt at once more fraught, but more colorful, as if the very act of being alive was more daring on Japanese television than at home. But it wasn't a fake fraught. Innocent people suffered as a result of living in a perilous if vibrant world (n.p.).

Her thoughts about structural differences in storytelling between an American culture that still tends to favor a happier ending versus stories that are frequently bleak explain *Final Fantasy XV's* dark ending. Although the world is ultimately saved, it is at unspeakable personal cost. Noctis, the King of Light, dies at the hands of his ancestors—with the deathblow landed by his own father—all of whom are all effectively

31. One significant change in the translation from English to Japanese occurs late in the game, when the four friends camp for the final time. That localization choice is explored later in the present paper.

manipulated by the Astrals. Prompto, Ignis, and Gladio, although alive³², have been sundered too soon again from their dear friend, brother, and charge. Presumably, the people of Eos will remember Noctis—they will probably have parades, erect shrines, and the like to commemorate him—but they will, in so doing, hopelessly objectify him. It is the friends left behind who bear the weight of genuine grief.

As the player begins the game's final chapter ("Homecoming"), Noctis has been gone for ten years, trapped within the Crystal, and the Scourge has left the world in darkness. As a result, Daemons roam the landscape and whatever human survivors remain congregate in a few safe zones, such as Lestallum. When Noctis emerges from the Crystal, it is into the chaos of this dark, scarred landscape. He learns after being found by Talcott, grandson of one of Gladio's family retainers, that Ignis, Prompto, and Gladio have spent a good deal of the darkness apart, called to missions and to duties. Little more is said about this, so at first, it reads as though the ten years have strained the friendships. However, *The Royal Edition*, importantly, downplays and counters that Ignis, Gladio, and Prompto were never as estranged as

32. When the game was first released, debate focused around the ambiguous fates of Prompto, Ignis, and Gladio. They are last seen preparing for battle with Daemons so as to keep Noctis's path to the throne room of the Citadel clear. Hajime Tabata, the game's director, said in an interview, "The fact that they were a party of four and one of the party is no longer there, it'll probably be hard to say that they're fully happy. That said, they needed to do what they needed to do, so they had that sense of purpose. And I'm sure they're very proud of what they've achieved and what they've overcome. So in that sense maybe that overlaps with how we feel towards the game itself" (n.p.). Square Enix also released concept art showing the three walking through the sunlit ruins of Insomnia after Noctis's death brings back the dawn. Noctis has been gone for ten years, taken into the Crystal, connected both to the Caelums' ability to wield magic and also to the Astrals' power over them, to ensure that he will comply with his destiny. The game does not depict the ten years of his absence, moving instead as a time jump from chapters 13 to 14. The player embodying Noctis returns to an Eos engulfed in darkness and overrun by Daemons. The multiplayer add-on game *Comrades* takes place during the ten years of darkness and rounds out this part of the story.

the original game implies. Instead, it is made clear they simply had obligations to help others that took them to different parts of the world, but, now united, they fight with “perfect synergy.” Since I played both versions—the initial release of the game did not include these expanded scenes—I am left to consider what the changes added and if they were needed. I think that in its original form, the game hinted at something of an estrangement, but I also think that this was open-ended and not intended to evoke a sense of strife. The world had, effectively, devolved into chaos, and the four, with their unique skillsets and ties to Noctis, were better off going where they were needed, rather than remaining as one group. This willingness to go where needed—and to grow through the experiences they had—is what ultimately enables them to face Noctis’s final fate at his side. The expanded version of the game’s final chapter in *The Royal Edition* emphasizes on a number of occasions that the three were never estranged and that Noctis easily integrates back into their dynamic. I suspect that this was in response to gamers who both wanted more story material, attached as they remain to these four protagonists, and wanted to be reassured that no true estrangement existed during the years of darkness. Whatever joy the friends find in the reunion becomes tempered by Noctis’s revelation that he is fated to die³³. Salvatore Pane says of the last part of the narrative, finding the player embodying Noctis preparing to go to his death,

In the end, it’s Noctis who sacrifices himself

33. “Episode Ignis” reveals that Ignis learns of the prophecy when Pryna, the second of Luna’s companions who take the form of dogs, provides him a vision of the prophecy as Luna lays dead in Altissia, but Ignis has not revealed it to Prompto or Gladio. Although few details are given, the narrative implication is that Ignis makes it his goal to try to circumvent that fate.

for the good of the group. Not sweet Prompto, strong-willed Gladio, or even wounded Ignis. It's you, the player. Your friends know what you're about to do, and before the climactic confrontation with Ardyn, Noctis asks Prompto if he can take one of his photos with him. The game shows you all the pictures you've selected over your journey, all those selfies, all those adventures, and the friends comment on the good times they shared just like my friends do when we look back at old Polaroids from high school, when RJ and Mike were still smiling and alive, when we had no earthly idea how much our lives were about to change. You pick the photo that matters to you most, and then you die, returning balance and light to the world. Your ten year quest is finally over (2).

Before the group heads to Insomnia, however, they camp one last time. Unlike the previous camping montages, this one is extended and depicts Noctis, Ignis, Prompto, and Gladio finding a way to say goodbye.

It is during this sequence that a particular, flawed choice in the English localization shifts the original intent of the story and the sequence. At that final campsite, Noctis says he loves the others. In the original Japanese, it is clear and unequivocal. In the Japanese version, Noctis tells them, "Omae no koto wa suki da wa." However, the English version of the game translates this as "You guys are the best," a phrase which cheapens the moment and fails to come close to expressing the spirit of the original. My initial reaction during this scene was one of disbelief—it was tonally off and bordered on the comedic

in a moment clearly not intended to be thus. Even though Noctis had previously been characterized as holding his emotions close to the vest as a means to protect himself, having that happen here made no sense. It set me down a path, since I do not speak Japanese, of finding out what the original Japanese dialogue said. The difference proves profound. Rhian George, a former student of mine who is fluent in Japanese, provides this extended and insightful understanding of the original phrasing:

Quite literally, it just means “I love you” in a general (not inherently romantic) way. As to what degree, I’ll get a tiny bit technical to explain. Noctis uses “omae,” which means “you/you guys” but suggests that the speaker is extremely familiar with the person they are addressing. He really could have just said “omae ga suki da wa” and retained the same meaning, but he adds “koto.” “Koto” is a word to refer to a nontangible thing, and placed after a person’s name (“omae no koto” vs. just “omae”) puts a greater emphasis on the strength of their relationship and his feelings. Rather than “I love you,” it conveys something closer to “I love your spirit/essence/soul/whole being,” or something similar. “I love everything about you.” It’s maybe not so dramatic as that sounds in English, but he is emphasizing that he loves his friends completely, particularly because he knows them as well as he does. Also possibly worth noting, saying this is not an everyday thing in Japanese culture, even with couples, so the

feelings Noctis is expressing would look pretty serious to a Japanese audience.

Certainly, localizing any game from one language to another proves a complex endeavor, one going far beyond a literal word-for-word rendering. Translator Jennifer O'Donnell considers the localization of the game from Japanese to English noting,

The localization doesn't just happen in the language but the characters themselves. The localization and the voice acting both play a part in this. One of fan's biggest complaints is the change in character with Ignis. He's a childhood friend and kind of servant to Prince Noctis. In the Japanese he acts very casually with Noctis despite Noctis' higher rank as a Prince. In the English localization Ignis is given a very still British butler type character who can be quite cold at times (n.p.).

The English translation, while failing to completely capture the higher degree of informality found in the original Japanese, showcases instead Ignis's complicated place in Noctis's life. He refers to him sometimes as Noctis, sometimes as Noct, and sometimes as Highness. Gladiolus and Prompto tend to act more informally in the English localization than Ignis does. Gladio will sometimes call Noctis Prince Charmless, while Prompto, given that his friendship with Noctis was never predicated on an already existing duty to the Crown, is probably the least formal of all of them. The point here is that the localization team found a way to take language

structures that do not exist in English and render a good approximation.

The camp scene's neutering of Noctis's sentiments are a shame in that the English speaking gamer will witness a moment far lessened in emotional intensity. It is important to note that this final camp scene is shown twice, first depicted chronologically in the game before they head back to Insomnia, but the player does not hear what they talk about, although their grief is evident. Instead, the scene is set to music. It is when the scene is replayed in its entirety, after the end credits, that Noctis says "You guys are the best." Noctis does say "I love you all" once he is alone in the Citadel's throne room preparing to fight Ardyn, but this certainly lacks the impact of saying that to Ignis, Prompto, and Gladio face to face. Instead, Noctis's parting words to the three are to "walk tall," and Ignis says to Noctis, "Godspeed and take care." Although these are emotionally resonant, they are still within the context of strength—the moment where Noctis has assumed the mantle of duty and it is as a king that Ignis addresses him. The camp scene is pure and unadulterated grief; the four weep openly over what is to come and the sacrifice Noctis will make of his own life. Perhaps to have Noctis say "I love you" at that moment was seen as more of a taboo because there was no blunting moment or way to deflect the intensity of the scene, no comedy, no fight, etc. Marie Mutsuki Mockett cites the research of Japanese psychologist Hayao Kawai, "In western fairy tales, Kawai notes, stories often resolve with a conquest, or with a wedding. Examples are numerous: Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White, etc. But in Japanese fairy tales, Kawai says, there is rarely

this kind of union. Frequently, stories resolve with ‘an aesthetic solution.’ And by aesthetic, Kawai specifically means images from nature” (n.p.). This explains the ending of the game. Immediately after Noctis dies, ends the Scourge, and kills Ardyn, the game moves first backward in time to an extended version of the four friends at their last camp. Next, as the game moves toward the credits, a montage of dawn breaking across Eos plays, with the last of these a scene in nature: sunrise over their last campsite, four chairs now abandoned. That is the scene I hold in my mind when I think of the game’s ending, those four empty chairs and the breaking dawn. Next, it ends with the odd pomp and circumstance of a newly married but dead Noctis and Luna who kiss and then fall into eternal slumber. They are resplendent, together to some extent, but without any subjects, friends, or family. This is a Western ending: a wedding. Reversing these last two sequences would have perhaps been heartbreaking, a reminder of loss, but would have also provided a sense of hope for those who survived the long darkness, including Ignis, Prompto, and Gladio.

A CULTURALLY RELEVANT GAME

Few stories are perfect, and *Final Fantasy XV* is no exception. The sequence of Gladio and Noctis arguing on the train would have been better resolved with Gladio rectifying the situation and apologizing to Prompto for his physical aggression. With regard to the English localization team’s particular moment of flawed translation, a choice likely made out of fear of how Western audiences would react to hearing a man tell his

friends that he loves them, does not ultimately diminish the dozens of hours of narrative focused on positive homosocial bonds. Instead, this moment asks the player to consider how much further Western society needs to come so that such a moment can be rendered in English as it was intended to be in Japanese. Kathleen Elliott argues of American culture's emphasis on working to promote and move women into places of influence and power without addressing men and their behavior, "This lopsided focus on femininity and women addresses only one part of the problem and, therefore, renders any progress partial as well. It leaves the power dynamics that support gender inequality unexamined and firmly in place. Further, it allows dominant or toxic masculinity, masculinity based on simplified norms" (18). The norms in this case speak to what is considered or generalized as "masculine" behavior, including violence and lack of emotional expression (Ibid). This reality creates a space into which a narrative like *Final Fantasy XV* can open a beneficial conversation about alternate ways in which to view and enact male homosocial bonds of friendship. The game could be critiqued for presenting an idealized view of youth and of the ability of these four men to sustain a friendship free of conflict until the events of Altissia, but such an understanding of the story proves shortsighted. If anything, the narrative reveals four men who choose to be friends, who choose to discover ways to find common connections and camaraderie among them. In the end, their friendships brought them through all of the terrible strife levelled against them, and this history will remain, insofar as Eos's history goes, largely lost to time in favor of a larger, epic, and more mythic narrative

of Noctis Lucis Caelum, King of Light and sacrifice. It will be the three surviving friends who will mourn their loss and remember their friend, perhaps reminiscing around a campfire.

Although I certainly think that *Final Fantasy XV* is culturally relevant and a crucial example of male friendship, I was interested in the thoughts of my students, both men and women, on this critical aspect of the game. As I previously explained, I am an English professor and my point of scholarly emphasis is the study of storytelling in video games. My students are assigned video games as required texts and I have assigned *Final Fantasy XV* in a couple of courses this semester.. I share here a few thoughts from one of my students (T. K.) exemplifying the views held by most of the other students that have been shared in my classes about the story of male friendship told by *Final Fantasy XV*. T. K. identifies as male, and knows that I am including his comments truncated and edited for clarity, but otherwise left intact:

As brothers, their relationship becomes one of serving one another, as opposed to trying to be better than the others. They are not trying to belittle or undercut one another as may be common today. In fact, when Gladio and Noctis argue before facing the Titan, Gladio tells Noctis “when you can’t focus, I focus for you.” Gladio will be for Noctis what Noctis cannot be for himself. This is similar to the same exchange that takes place when Gladio asks, “Are you a man of royal blood or aren’t you?” Gladio is helping Noctis to

understand his vocation as king. Supporting the idea of helping as opposed to subverting, one finds that each of them has a role to play on their journey in their fishing, cooking, picture taking, or camping skills. They are brothers. Brothers ought not to feel the need to counter affection with jokes on homosexuality.

Video games reach a broad audience of gamers of all ages and from all backgrounds, orientations, gender, and worldviews. Jane McGonigal posits in her intriguing book *Reality Is Broken* that games, into which millions of gamers invest countless hours of time and emotion, have the power to affect our reality if gamers can take the lessons learned within the digital space and apply them to the real world. This includes such traits as perseverance, overcoming failure, finding community, and more. I also think that gamers can take the stories they experience in video games—the stories that move them, as they have moved me, in the same way that film, television, and written stories move us as a human culture—and change the world for the better, even in small, incremental ways.

And this particular story told in *Final Fantasy XV*, that of the bonds of brotherhood between four young men thrown out into the world and forced to survive the loss of one of their own, comes at a critical juncture. Men of all ages deserve better than the persistent images of masculinity found in much of our storytelling that equate emotional vulnerability within a same-sex male friendship as emasculating and weak. Ignis, Prompto, Gladio, and Noctis serve as proof that friendship does

not have to be portrayed this way. I fell in love with storytelling when I was just a kid: I would read for hours, and I loved all the experiences the world's literature had to offer. As I grew older and made the study of storytelling my professional emphasis, I began to see that stories are a fundamental part of our humanity: they are us, for better or for worse. Stories record the vastness of human experiences across time and culture, and they find us at our best and our worst. Today, storytelling has evolved to include other forms, including film, television, and video games. Video games are close to my heart. Storytelling in video games, specifically, forms the backbone of my scholarly work, and I have succumbed to anger, to tears, and to laughter over the stories I have found in this digital space. *Final Fantasy XV* moved me to all three. I felt a frustrated sort of futile rage over how the four friends had been manipulated, grief at their final goodbyes with Noctis, but perhaps most of all laughter and joy as I watched these four young men have at least a brief shining moment of freedom and lightness as they set out across Eos.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Amy M. Green specializes in the study of video games. She is especially interested in the expanding presence of video games as a compelling source of narrative, one that is necessarily participatory by nature.

Further still, video games have long merited the right to be considered as important cultural artifacts and her study and analysis of their stories focuses especially on their historical, political, and social relevance.

She is the author of two books: *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Trauma, and History in Metal Gear Solid V* and *Storytelling in Video Games: The Art of the Digital Narrative* as well as numerous articles. She is an Assistant Professor-in-Residence in the English Department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

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