The Ludo Mix and the Loss of In-Game Narrative

A Case Study of the Final Fantasy XV Universe

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ABSTRACT

Employing the Final Fantasy XV Universe as a case study, this
article examines how the changing climate of game development,
in tandem with established media mix strategies, contributes to
the emergence of the ludo mix as media ecology. Through a
comparative analysis of the climate of modern game development
and the adoption of media mix strategies, the case is made that
these two distinct phenomena intersect to create novel challenges
and incentives for a particular kind of game development. This
has resulted in the strategic outsourcing of *Final Fantasy XV*'s in-
game narrative to outside the ludic sphere, and negatively affected
the game's critical reception. These findings posit challenges and

opportunities for the future of the ludo mix, noting that the evolving technological, aesthetic, and economic climate of game development continues further down the same path, while simultaneously advocating for the ludo mix as a framework for better understanding the disproportionate load imposed on media via transmedia collaborations.

INTRODUCTION

The Japanese term, "media mix", refers to a specific media ecology that is prevalent in Japan, wherein publishers employ marketing strategies across different media in order to promote and expand on a common franchise (Jenkins 2006, 110). Video games have played a significant role in these marketing practices, and have, to a larger extent than before, become a dominant feature of individual media mix hierarchies. This has led to the coining of the term "ludo mix", as the evolving media landscape of Japan invites researchers to explore in what way games have become the driving force behind the production and reception of certain media franchises (DiGRA 2018). The ludo mix might, therefore, be defined as a variant of the media mix that emphasizes or privileges the medium of games. The Final Fantasy XV Universe is a recent and notable example of such a venture, featuring a host of interlinked gaming properties, coupled with transmedia tie-ins, and spearheaded by Square Enix, one of Japan's most prominent game developers.

The Final Fantasy XV Universe is a sub-franchise in the Final Fantasy series of games that centres on the 15th numbered title in the series, namely *Final Fantasy XV* (2016). The game was initially announced in 2006 as *Final Fantasy Versus XIII* and

advertised as an independent spin-off of *Final Fantasy XIII* (Square Enix 2009). However, due to the mixed reception of *Final Fantasy XIII*, the game was ultimately rebranded in its current incarnation for marketing purposes. Throughout its long development history, the project was turned into a transmedia property under the banner of the Final Fantasy XV Universe, consisting of a CGI feature film, an anime series, an audio drama, a novel, manga, six separate games including the main game and, last but not least, episodic DLC (downloadable content) released in instalments post-launch. Aside from *Final Fantasy XV: Pocket edition* (Square Enix 2018), which is an abridged version of the main game designed for mobile devices, the instalments in the Final Fantasy XV Universe feature supplementary experiences to *Final Fantasy XV*, as opposed to exploring alternative versions of events. In regard to the game's narrative, this classifies the project as a work of transmedia, as opposed to multimedia, and emphasizes the fact that the individual instalments are intended to work together to convey the story as a whole (Jenkins 2006, 95–96). This is not the first instance of a Final Fantasy title being at the epicentre of a transmedia property; the Compilation of Final Fantasy VII series, for example, set a notable precedent. The way in which the Final Fantasy XV Universe differs from previous examples, however, is that the coherency of the narrative of the main game is, to a larger degree, reliant on these supplementary texts – requiring players to familiarise themselves with them in order to get the full picture.

The game's plot revolves around Noctis Lucis Caelum, heir to the throne of Insomnia, and his entourage, consisting of his three close friends, Gladiolus, Prompto and Ignis. The four of them set forth from Insomnia on a mission to meet up with Lady Lunafreyja, Noctis's bride-to-be, but soon after they depart from the citadel the city is invaded and Noctis's father is killed in the onslaught. The game never explores this attack in depth, even though it is the catalyst that sets Noctis upon his path of opposing the empire and eventually laying claim to his father's throne. The CGI film, *Kingsglaive* (2016), explores this opening setup in its

place and puts the main game's story into some much-needed context (Webster 2016). The audio drama, *Final Fantasy XV Prologue Parting Ways* (2016), which was only released as a transcript in English, further bridges the gap between the game and the film by having otherwise exclusive characters on either side interact with one another. The remainder of the original roster, however, predominantly features character development, as opposed to being plot-driven, such as *A King's Tale: Final Fantasy XV* (Square Enix 2016), which tells the story of Noctis's father recounting his glory days, in the guise of a bedtime story, while the anime, *Final Fantasy XV: Brotherhood* (2016), and the first batch of DLC episodes focus predominantly on Noctis's teammates. The second season of DLC, conceived of post-launch and in conjunction with the game's reception, was also intended to delve deeper into selected characters, but this time with a greater emphasis on fleshing out their motivations, in addition to conveying certain key plot points that had been missing or portrayed poorly in the original game. *Episode Ardyn* (Square Enix 2019) was the only second-season DLC to be released, the remaining three DLC relating to Aranea, a mercenary in the service of the empire, Lunafreyja and Noctis himself ultimately being novelized as *Final Fantasy XV: The Dawn of the Future* (2019) as a result of their respective DLC being cancelled.

The reception of *Final Fantasy XV* has been, at least partly, favourable, with multiple sources praising the main cast for their chemistry (Carter 2016, Ingenito 2016). A major point of criticism, however, has been the presentation of the narrative, which has generally been the main appeal of Final Fantasy games, as it appears to have glaring omissions concerning some character motivations and plot details, leaving it relatively disjointed in comparison to previous entries in the series (Beck 2016). Players can fill in some of these gaps by familiarising themselves with secondary content such as *Kingsglaive*, although the problem appears to persist, the implication being that the narrative seems to be lacking, even as a work of transmedia. In addition, not everyone is willing to go to these lengths to make sense of the

game. Curiously, such critique is not limited to the international sphere, since, even in its native country of Japan where transmedia strategies are particularly common, the plot of the game has come under attack for the same reasons previously outlined (Fukuyama 2016).

According to an interview with Hajime Tabata, the game's director, who took the place of Tetsuya Nomura mid-development before ultimately resigning (resulting in the cancellation of aforementioned DLC), part of the reason for the transmedia approach had to do with marketing. Tabata cites two distinct demographics when it comes to the marketing of *Final Fantasy XV*: firstly, longtime fans that have followed every new development since the introduction of *Final Fantasy Versus XIII*, and secondly, potential players that aren't yet familiar with the series in general (Loeffler 2017). This duality of the game's target audience is further represented in a dedication in the opening of the game that reads: "A FINAL FANTASY for FANS and First-Timers" (Square Enix 2016). By adopting media mix strategies, the team behind *Final Fantasy XV* has therefore attempted to create multiple points of entry for potential players, establishing a media world wherein, as is often the case with media mixes (Steinberg 2012, 141), the consumption of one element is intended to drive the consumption of others.

In a separate interview, Tabata gave an additional explanation for the transmedia approach, noting that the reason the team opted for turning the story of *Final Fantasy XV* into a transmedia property was to avoid having to ship it as multiple games. This entailed a substantial amount of restructuring, and the team ended up reallocating certain story elements to media properties outside the main game (Corriea 2016). What is curious about Tabata's reasoning is that it presupposes the need for multiple games to tell a single story. This has not been the case with previous instalments in the Final Fantasy franchise, even those that featured elaborate narratives. For example, *Final Fantasy X* (Square 2001) and *Final Fantasy XIII* both inspired sequels, but

each game contained a coherent and independent narrative (albeit convoluted by some standards). If Tabata's comment is accurate, it must, therefore, reflect some changes in terms of the culture and limitations of game development within the company or the game industry in general.

These two distinct reasons for the transmedia approach situate *Final Fantasy XV* at the nexus of traditional media mix strategies on the one hand, and the continually evolving landscape of game development on the other. The study of the Final Fantasy XV Universe, as ludo mix must, therefore, take both distinct phenomena into consideration. By employing a comparative analysis of modern game development and media mix strategies, as they relate to the franchise, this article intends to clarify in what way they have interacted to create novel challenges and incentives for a particular kind of game development. The findings presented are primarily based on textual analysis of *Final Fantasy XV* and its interaction with other media, media coverage pertaining to its reception, as well as previously published interviews with developers. Due to the significant change in the visibility of developers, such an approach has become increasingly viable, regardless of its limitations (O'Donnell 2014, ix). Since there is always a risk that such accounts might misrepresent the game development process (Whitson 2020), they will only be employed herein to the extent they are thought to be substantiated by textual evidence from the end product itself.

Employing this methodology, the case will be made that the game's core narrative has been strategically outsourced to other media on account of new challenges faced by game developers, and that media mix strategies have prioritized character development at the cost of alleviating the need for such concerns, and negatively affected the critical reception of the game. Ultimately, these findings posit certain challenges and opportunities for the concept of the ludo mix going forward, noting that the continually evolving technological, aesthetic, and economic climate of game development continues further down

the path that has led to this outcome, while simultaneously advocating for the ludo mix as a framework for better understanding the disproportionate load imposed on media via transmedia collaborations.

THE LUDO MIX AS MEDIA MIX

Media mix strategies have been a dominant marketing strategy in Japan with an emphasis on character merchandising, licensing and various collaborations. Accordingly, when Tabata and his team set out to reconfigure *Final Fantasy XV* as a transmedia property, they could, to a large extent, rely on marketing practices that consumers and publishers were already familiar with. As a subject of study, these marketing practices have been linked with anime and the anime media mix (Steinberg 2012). When it comes to the conceptualization of a ludo mix, such as the Final Fantasy Universe, it is therefore of interest to examine in what manner the game industry can employ or imitate media mix strategies and what effect those strategies can be said to have had on the coherence in narration of *Final Fantasy XV*.

Character vs plot

Much like in the case of anime, games in Japan have been represented by a cast of iconic and marketable characters such as Mario, Sonic and Donkey Kong (López et al. 2015, 8). The list could be extended in Japan to include characters such as Final Fantasy's Cloud Strife, and internationally to include Lara Croft from the Tomb Raider series, and Steven from *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011). What these characters have in common, aside from being well-known video game characters, is that they have all been reincarnated outside their original games in one form or another, with media properties including Hollywood feature films, TV shows, various toys and Lego sets. The recognizability of the characters, as well as their previous entanglements with multimedia, is evidence of the fact that the emerging ludo mix

can, in part, adopt comparable strategies to anime when it comes to the focus on character promotion. This approach is, however, much more common with Japanese franchises, a fact that reflects their socioeconomic history, as developments within the Japanese market have cemented its usage locally (Picard 2013).

It is important to note that the concept of transmedia is not limited to the notion of narrative, as can be observed by the fact that the aforementioned characters have more often than not been redistributed across media with little regard to the coherency of their plot of origin. In this regard, characters can be seen as independent components of the stories in which they were originally conceived (Bertetti 2014). The same can be said for the study of transmedial worlds, as various worlds can be said to be recognisable without referring to the narrative that takes place in said world – leading to the study of such worlds across media (Klastrup and Tosca 2004, Wolf 2012). Even though the article at hand is focused on the ludo mix and its possible impact on the *Final Fantasy XV*'s in-game narrative, such alternative frameworks for the study of transmedia properties might nevertheless shed some light on the issue – at least to the extent the game's development can be said to have prioritized such concerns over the narrative.

With that in mind, *Final Fantasy XV* features a heavy emphasis on character promotion and design, with the four leads frequently and aptly being compared to a boyband (O'Connor 2017), as their diverse personality types seem calculated to appeal to a diverse group of players. The designers of *Final Fantasy XV* present the players with an assortment of anime-inspired archetypes that are more readily palatable due to their relatability through an intertextual reading with other media properties. In Noctis's entourage, Gladiolus wears the mantle of the wild and manly one, Prompto is the cute and feminine one, and Ignis the serious and dependable one (with the glasses to back it up). This ensemble is reminiscent of the anime *Ouran High School Host Club* (2006) wherein Gladiolus, Prompto and Ignis roughly correspond to the

characters of Takashi Morinozuka, Mitsukuni Haninozuka and Kyoya Ootori. Much like the gang from *Final Fantasy XV*, the host club members have their own sets of idiosyncrasies, but can nevertheless be understood in conjunction with anime archetypes, such as the strong and impassive one, "shotacon" and "megane" (literally meaning glasses) (Cavallaro 2013, 81). This inter-readability is likely to make the trio especially relatable to Japanese audiences or players that are in some way familiar with these specific tropes of Japanese animation.

Given his status as prince, it seems quite straightforward to classify Noctis himself as the typical "ouji" character, meaning prince. Such characters typically embody virtuous behaviour and are held in high esteem by their peers. As royalty, Noctis is indeed cut from a different cloth, but he has many character flaws, including being a notoriously picky eater and having a hard time coping with responsibility. By the end of the game, Noctis has, however, come to terms with the burden he must bear, and has completed his Hero's journey, having outgrown his boyband persona during the course of the game, and made his way back a new man. For the sake of media tie-ins such as Noctis's inclusion in *Tekken 7* (Bandai Namco Studios 2017) and *Dissidia: Final Fantasy NT* (Team Ninja 2015), Noctis's character development is, however, kept in a state of perpetual infancy and transmitted one-dimensionally across media. This is a common element of the Japanese media mix, as the coherent identity of individual characters become discontinuous in the process of them being dispersed across multiple media (Blom 2020). What remains is the recognizability of Noctis as a sort of mascot character for Final Fantasy XV – serving as an entry point for prospective players of *Final Fantasy XV*.

The way the Final Fantasy XV Universe has been structured to a large degree around the concept of character, as opposed to plot, is further emphasized in its own transmedia incarnations. For example, *Brotherhood: Final Fantasy XV*, the anime series, mainly focuses on developing the characters and their relationship

to one another, as opposed to being predominantly plot-driven. The same can be said for the DLC additions of *Episode Gladiolus* (Square Enix 2017), *Episode Prompto* (Square Enix 2017) and *Episode Ignis* (Square Enix 2017). These episodes recount the exploits of the characters off-screen from the main game, in addition to fleshing out the world and supporting characters. Character development, and to a lesser degree worldbuilding, takes centre stage, while the core narrative is left wanting. As has been demonstrated by scholarship pertaining to transmedial characters and worlds, these components can be said to be separable from the direct concerns of the overarching narrative, and cultivated independently. In general, this would not count as distracting from the overall plot if it were not for obvious omissions relating to the coherence of the story presented in the main game to begin with. Judging by a textual analysis of the works from within the Final Fantasy XV Universe itself, it can, therefore, be claimed that rather than prioritizing a fully coherent plot, the team behind *Final Fantasy XV* opted for character building.

The *Kingsglaive* film breaks up this pattern in favour of delivering a plot-heavy experience that is, to some degree, crucial to understanding the plot of *Final Fantasy XV*. The film's cast is nonetheless notable for not including the four protagonists of the main game, so it is partly excluded from such concerns. The audio drama, however, acts as a sort of bridge between the film and the game, featuring Noctis and his pals along with characters from the film in a mostly plot-driven scenario. It would, therefore, be a false dichotomy to declare that the entirety of the Final Fantasy XV Universe is focused on character promotion, as opposed to plot development, since it is not a question of one or the other. There is nevertheless a great tension between character development and the development of plot, which the game has been criticized for, caused by an imbalance between these two approaches, which favour character over plot.

Merchandising and advertising

Taking note of the character merchandising that has proliferated the Japanese media scene, at least since the advent of the *Tetsuwan Atomu* (1959) anime series (Steinberg 2012), a variety of merchandise has been released with *Final Fantasy XV*. DLC itself could be considered a form of character merchandising, since it offers players new and novel ways to engage with characters, aside from more common forms of character merchandising such as action figures and plushies. Perhaps the most novel addition to this ecology is a collaboration with the Japanese fashion designer Roen, credited with designing the clothes of Noctis and his party that were made available for real-life purchase (Ashcraft 2016). This is reminiscent of *Final Fantasy XIII*'s Lightning venture into fashion in collaboration with Louis Vuitton, where the digital character was made out to be the model for the brand (Louis Vuitton n.d.). Other examples of product placement in the Final Fantasy XV Universe are the inclusion of an Audi in *Kingsglaive*, American Express stickers on windows in the main game and the Coleman camping gear, which the foursome use to camp outside – the camping gear being prominently featured on the box art for the game.

The most gratuitous example of advertising for many players has been the inclusion of Nissin Cup Noodles in the game itself. In addition to TV-spots that linked these two elements, the game gets players excited about a non-existent game titled "Cup Noodle XV", and players can visit a noodle truck in the city of Lestallum and purchase noodles from a street vendor. Gladiolus favours Nissin Cup Noodles, and his noodle-mania even goes as far as to trigger an in-game mission centred on procuring ingredients for the ultimate cup of noodles. According to Ray Chase, the English voice actor for Noctis, the cast recorded two versions of the dialogue relating to the noodles, one in earnest and the other ironically, with the latter making its way into the game (Reddit 2016). This sense of irony further establishes the inclusion of an actual noodle brand as a foreign element.

Figure 1: Lunafreyja holding up a cup of Nissin Cup Noodles for a TV-spot as a part of the collaboration between Nissin and Square Enix.

In-game advertisements have become a major advertising medium, the presence of in-game advertisements becoming less and less of a novelty. Such advertisements may even play a part in enhancing a game's sense of realism, as in the case of sports games that replicate sport venues commonly laden with various advertisements (Nelson 2002). Being mindful of the type of game or genre being considered for such advertisements might, therefore, be of great import to potential advertisers, considering that, depending on the game, a certain advertisement might be considered too disruptive to be considered appropriate (Terlutter and Capella 2013). In the case of *Final Fantasy XV*, the inclusion cup noodles might break the immersion for some players by blurring the line between the world of fantasy and the interests of real-world capital. However, even though this publicity stunt could be criticized for breaking the fourth wall, it does not mean that it will detract from the narrative in any meaningful way. With regard to the structure of the game, the only concern is suitable representation, requiring a receptible character such as Gladiolus to be a sort of spokesperson for the brand, and that the in-game noodles are rendered with adequate care. In this regard, the merchandising and advertising associated with *Final Fantasy XV*

has applied a very limited set of restrictions, allowing developers substantial creative freedom. As a part of general media mix strategies applied to the transmedia property in question, these factors have, therefore, seemingly had a minimal effect on the narrative of *Final Fantasy XV*, even though such concerns have the potential to become leading factors, for example, if game development becomes less financially independent.

THE CHANGING CLIMATE OF GAME DEVELOPMENT

Being somewhat synonymous with the medium of games, research into the emerging ludo mix must take into consideration not only the generalities of transmedia collaborations, as exemplified by established media mix strategies, but also the way the changing culture and limitations of game development itself shape the medium and its connections with other media. The culture and climate of game development is constantly in flux, as technological advancements, as well as innovation and aesthetic expectations within existing parameters, reframe the way games are conceptualized and critiqued. In the case of the development of *Final Fantasy XV*, it can be said that the current climate of game development has incentivized the development of a particular kind of game. Such incentives can, for example, be of a technical nature, catering to the current possibilities and limitations of game development, aesthetic, in the sense that the expectations of players and the aesthetic palette of games is constantly changing, and last but not least, economic, adjusting to the rising cost of development and new opportunities for monetization.

Technological incentives

Final Fantasy XV had an infamously long development history, spanning the better part of 10 years, 13 if the development of DLC is included. During the early years of the franchise, fans of the series could expect a new instalment within regular short

intervals of one or two years, whereas players now can expect to wait several years until a project becomes marketable. This development is not limited to the management of Square Enix, as AAA development has been getting less manageable across the board, with larger development teams working for longer periods on single projects (Koster 2018). As technological advancements make designing games more accessible by making the core game development toolkit more readily available and powerful, they simultaneously raise the bar for technological excellence expected of mainstream AAA titles, making development of such titles exponentially more demanding and resource consuming.

One of the challenges the team had to face was the implementation of towns and cities, major towns and cities having been a staple of the Final Fantasy series up until the release of *Final Fantasy XIII*. These cities have come in all shapes and sizes ranging from the small mining town of Kalm in *Final Fantasy VII* (Square 1997) to the sci-fi metropolis of Esthar in *Final Fantasy VIII* (Square 1999). As a form of digital architecture, such locales in the series have an interpretive dimension that can invoke a host of meaningful connotations. This has been demonstrated by William Huber in his analysis of the three main cities of *Final Fantasy XI* (Square 2002–), wherein he argued that the fantastical cityscapes found in the game bear representational traces of real-world cultures (Huber 2005). Such towns and cities also bear a functional dimension, having been playable areas where players have been able to explore freely, perform various activities and interact with the inhabitants in meaningful ways – the ways in which available actions can be said to be in line with a player's understanding of a city's function being paramount to conveying the embodied experience of the city (Vella 2018, 5). With a rising demand for graphical fidelity, such locations have become much harder to configure; the team behind *Final Fantasy XIII* even went on record to say that technical difficulties had been the main reason for the exclusion of such locales (Schramm 2010). It is possible to make such cities in ways that satisfy demands, like in the case of *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games 2013) or *Spider-*

man (Insomniac Games 2018). However, such games focus mostly on the city, while in Final Fantasy games the city is traditionally only one part of a much larger journey. The recent *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (2020) further emphasizes this point by dedicating the entire game solely to the city of Midgar, as opposed to featuring all the locales featured in the original *Final Fantasy VII*.

In *Final Fantasy XV* the largest playable cities are Lestallum and Altissia. There is nonetheless another city that is perhaps even more relevant to the plot of the game, namely Insomnia. Insomnia is prominently featured in the CGI feature film, *Kingsglaive*, as well as in the anime. It is also central to the audio drama, but has been relegated to a mere dungeon in the main game. The city still maintains the appearance of a city, but it does not function in the same way, its functionality having more in common with monster-infested caves and sewer areas found in the game. However, in early promotional material, parts of it were seemingly playable or at least represented in-game, showing Noctis in a penthouse suite conversing with Stella, the former heroine of the game before the advent of Lunafreyja, later taking to the streets to confront her (Weiss 2016). The extent of Insomnia's intended playability is ultimately speculative, but the shift to different media to tell the story of the city situated it firmly outside the ludic sphere, making it unnecessary to spend excessive resources on the construction of an interactive cityscape for the player to traverse and scrutinize. The option for transmedia storytelling, thereby may have incentivized the boycotting of certain technological limitations at the cost of the coherence of the overall narrative, it being more cost-effective to depict a city in the guise of film or drama, as opposed to having it offer a fully interactive and embodied experience – especially if it was intended to do justice to players' expectations.

Even though some of the issues with the development of *Final Fantasy XV* can be traced back to the pursuit of technological fidelity, the internal management of Square Enix is also

responsible for the game's long development time. Character designer, Roberto Ferrari, who worked on the game and some of its key characters, including Ardyn Izunia (the main antagonist), noted how highly disorganized the development team was, working on major designs while the story of the game still hadn't been finalised (Stine 2016). Tetsuya Nomura, the original director of the game, was also spread thin, working on multiple games and directing four of them (Figueroa 2016). Regardless of such managerial mishaps, however, the technological incentives present within the current state of the game industry remain a factor that cannot be ignored.

<div align="center">Aesthetic incentives</div>

Since the release of the first Final Fantasy title back in 1987, the aesthetic conceptions about what a game is and should be have been challenged multiple times with new genres coming into light and existing genres being extrapolated on – perhaps even refined. In recent years, Japanese role-playing games have been criticized for not keeping up with these changes in comparison to their western counterparts. Keiji Inafune, best known for his work on the Mega Man series, has voiced his concerns that the Japanese game industry, which had previously dominated the global market, now lacks innovation, and was at the time of his original statement "at least five years behind" (Tabuchi 2010). Even though Inafune attributes the shortcomings of the Japanese game industry to a lack of innovation, he is vague about what exactly this entails. The only thing he can say for certain is that modern Japanese games seem to lack the global appeal of their predecessors.

One point of contention globally is the implementation of turn-based combat systems, often associated with Japanese role-playing games, as opposed to the more action-oriented titles from western developers. Even though turn-based combat retains a dedicated fan base, especially in Japan, the global appeal of such games has come into question in the last decade, and with falling

sales in the local market, Japanese game developers have had to adapt and tackle foreign markets with more tact (Kitami et al. 2011, 285). Another factor is the game industry's tendency for hybridization, as transnational influences are permitted to shape the production of games, catering to a global media culture (Consalvo 2006). In order to stay relevant, the Final Fantasy series has been grappling with this problem since the development of *Final Fantasy XII* (Square Enix 2006) seeing major changes to the formula, with *Final Fantasy XV* ending up as a full-fledged action RPG, much like the Kingdom Hearts series. Square Enix further drives this point home by producing the remake of *Final Fantasy VII*, a game that originally featured turn-based combat, as an action RPG.

The major point of contention, however, in terms of the narrative of the game, is the question of linearity, Final Fantasy games and other Japanese role-playing games having customarily been fairly linear in comparison to western gaming properties such as the Elder Scrolls series. Even though it is not enough in and of itself to constitute a genre definition, one of the genre distinctions made by players and the media between western and Japanese role-playing games is that of sandbox vs confinement; in other words, open-world vs linearity (Schules 2015, 54). At the time of its release, *Final Fantasy XIII*, the game that *Final Fantasy XV* has had to distance itself from, was harshly criticized for being overly linear – its linearity even being the subject of academic scholarship (Cruz 2011). To avoid treading old ground, *Final Fantasy XV,* therefore had to avoid the perceived mistakes of its predecessor and adopt a more open concept.

In an interview with the Japanese game magazine Famitsu, Tabata explained that the first half of *Final Fantasy XV* was intended to be open world, while the latter half was designed to be more linear. This way he believed players would be able to enjoy the best of both worlds – taking on the freedom of open-world games without getting bored, while at the same time getting a taste for the more traditional Final Fantasy experience in the form of linear

progression (Famitsu 2016). This approach has received some positive feedback in terms of the game's global marketability, as the game has been compared to successful open-world games such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) (Roberts 2018). Tabata, however, noted that this shift was seen more favourably in the west than in Japan, with a more significant percentage of Japanese players being less impressed with the open-world style (Smith 2017).

In effect, this might have contributed to the game's disjointed narrative as the open-world structure does not fit well with the tightly woven narrative of *Kingsglaive* that is meant to precede it. While Noctis and his pals leisurely cruise around performing menial tasks for strangers and engaging in recreational fishing, the fate of his kingdom and the world supposedly hang in the balance. A certain suspension of disbelief is to be expected when it comes to Final Fantasy games, as in the past players have been afforded opportunities to engage with the game world, regardless of their most imminent duties. In this case, however, it seems as if the core narrative is held at arm's length from the player in order to serve a certain aesthetic that has hitherto been alien to the series, and is perhaps in some way foreign to the developers. It would be an overstatement to take this as evidence of the limitations in narrative of open-world gameplay, even though some claim that open-world structures can be detrimental to narratological ambitions (Rush 2010). However, coupled with the technological incentives and the focus on traditional media mix strategies, it becomes clearer how the outsourcing of narrative might become enticing in this climate.

Economic incentives

Lastly, the economic climate of games has shifted, ushering in new opportunities for monetization, along with challenges to remain profitable. In the case of the anime media mix, such strategies can be considered a lifeline for the medium, as the production of anime in and of itself would rarely be viable

(Steinberg 2012). In comparison, the medium of games has historically been financially independent as the advent of the medium can testify to (Kent 2001). As with the rising demands created by technological advancements, however, games have become more expensive to produce. To cope with the rising cost of development, and to make use of new opportunities for monetization, developers and publishers have resorted to various marketing practices, such as the sale of in-game items, subscription models and DLC sold separately to prolong the economic viability of individual games (Nieborg 2014).

According to Tabata, the episodic DLC content relating to Gladiolus, Prompto and Ignis were all planned prior to the release of the game (Parish 2018). With the introduction of the season pass, which entitled customers to all the episodes and more, Square Enix executed a plan to keep the game profitable post-launch. Each DLC episode takes place at various points throughout the story. This means that the trio had to disappear sporadically with Gladiolus leaving the party to take care of some unexplained business, Prompto getting kicked off a moving train, and Ignis being left with unexplained blindness after getting separated from the pack in the empire's assault on Altissia. To account for the existence of these DLC episodes, the game has therefore been intentionally structured in such a way as to create gaps in a narrative that was already loosely strung together.

There was a second season in the works, but after Tabata left Square Enix the only thing that remains is *Episode Ardyn* (Square Enix 2019). According to Tabata, the aim of the second season was to alleviate some concerns relating to the integrity of the plot – filling in some gaps and securing the story (Parish 2018). Although this content was not originally planned, it goes to show how new economic models seek to justify the release of the kind of games that would previously have been considered unfinished. This allows developers to relegate the burden of completion to the future while compromising the original launch of a title.

SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS

Considering the ludo mix at the junction of traditional media mix strategies and development within the game industry itself makes the study of the Final Fantasy XV Universe a fruitful endeavour. The team behind the franchise has implemented media mix strategies in addition to taking the current state of game development into account. This has resulted in a game that has been criticized for its narrative or lack thereof. Aside from alleged management issues within Square Enix itself, this outcome has seemingly been incentivized by a number of factors relating to the presentation of the game as a part of an expanded universe of transmedia properties, where key plot points have been outsourced to other media due to difficulties arising from the technological, aesthetic and economic climate of the game industry. In cases where these issues could have been alleviated, the focus on character development in the vein of media mix strategies has dominated, resulting in the favourable reception of the game's characters as opposed to its plot.

Regardless of the favourable reception of the main characters, the lacklustre presentation of the narrative has been the largest factor in devaluing Final Fantasy XV's critical reception, and there is cause to believe that going further down this path would lead to the further devaluing of individual gaming properties. The omission of Insomnia and its outsourcing to film, anime and drama might be viewed as prophetic, or at the very least as a cautionary tale, since incentives present in the current state of the game industry appear perfectly reasonable, yet at the same time undesirable. In the past, game developers could abstract the feeling of large cities, but they are now tasked with the almost insurmountable task of painstakingly rendering the minuscule aspects of city life. All the while, media such as anime remain relatively stable and cost-effective, making media mix strategies that take advantage of this more alluring to developers.

Even though this article has introduced a comparative analysis of the media mix and the climate of game development, as they comprise the ludo mix, there is a significant overlap where their interests might align—for example, the interests of merchandising and economic incentives. As previously stated, even though the franchise fraternizes with various merchandising and advertisements, it does not appear to be a dominating factor, aside from the existence of the franchise itself as self-promotion. Considering the rising developmental costs of games, future ludo mixes might be inclined to go further down this path as game development becomes less financially independent, or players more accustomed to in-game ads. This, however, presumes that the cost of game development will keep rising indefinitely or at least for the indefinite future. Such statements are mainly speculative since the industry might eventually stabilize itself.

Ultimately, the terms of the ludo mix are still being negotiated, and the Final Fantasy XV Universe only represents a certain point in its ongoing development. Developers such as Square Enix might be advised to be mindful of this constantly shifting landscape and work within their means, although that might entail having to tell stories that are structurally different from what the company has done in the past. However, due to rapid changes within the game industry, this advice might soon become obsolete. As the study of the ludo mix is tasked with monitoring these changes, it requires a comparatively high degree of adaptability, as opposed to the study of media mixes relying on media that is more stable, since the climate of the game industry continues to evolve in unexpected ways.

CONCLUSION

This article aimed at exploring how the current climate of game development, in tandem with traditional media mix strategies, operates to create what might be referred to as ludo mix in the case of the Final Fantasy XV Universe. Offering a comparative

analysis of these two distinct phenomena, at the point of merger, has shed light on the development history of *Final Fantasy XV* as well as positing more general speculations about the nature and future of the ludo mix.

In the case of the franchise in question, the technological, aesthetic and economic climate of the game industry has led to the outsourcing of the games' core narrative to more cost-effective media, and affected its critical reception in a negative way. Media mix strategies, as they have been employed in the case of *Final Fantasy XV*, favour character development and promotion, as opposed to plot development, resulting in the prioritization of character-focused content. This has, in effect, further marginalized the narrative of the game.

Lastly, the development of the Final Fantasy XV Universe raises questions about the way that ludo mix strategies might differ from traditional media mixes. Due to the fact that major incentives for this approach can be traced back to changes within the game industry and culture of games, it could be held that the ludo mix can be seen as an extension of these changes. To the extent that the climate of game development is changing more rapidly than that of other media, it can, therefore, be speculated that the study of the ludo mix is required to be more adaptable than the study of traditional media mixes based on more stable media.

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