The Parallel Aesthetic Evolution of Silent Film and the Final Fantasy Series

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ABSTRACT

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The Japanese Role Playing Game (JRPG) series *Final Fantasy* series undergoes an almost identical aesthetic evolution to that of narrative silent film. Through an exhaustive formal analysis of the first four games in the JRPG series and a comparison to the development of the language of the film medium, this thesis aims to expose these common evolutionary threads and offer some insight into why these temporally and medially disparate objects develop in such similar fashions. Simultaneously, the thesis serves as a methodological template for how videogames could be studied from a film studies perspective. By focusing on an empirically-based case study approach (inspired by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll's volume *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*), the study aims to demonstrate the value in moving away from the large all-encompassing Grand Theories that dominate most film studies discussions. Due to the form of the medium that is constantly in flux (based on unpredictable player interactivity and an infinitely wide genre spectrum) an all-encompassing theory cannot define the medium as a whole, and can only be developed through a specificity (isolated case studies) over generality (Grand Theory) approach. The study also takes into consideration similar efforts of translating film studies methods into studying videogames. For the majority of its lifespan the *Final Fantasy* series set the standard for storytelling in its genre and influenced the industry as a whole. A thorough analysis of the series should be considered a crucial step in eventually understanding the video game medium and should prove useful in any peripheral studies of a similar nature.

DEDICATION

To Fiorello Milo,

For your unrelenting love and support.

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Silent film and the *Final Fantasy* series share a common aesthetic evolution. The exact reasons for this are uncertain, and not yet investigated. The aim of this thesis is hence to map out the common evolutionary paths of these disparate objects through a formal analysis of common conventions, codes, and tropes. Distinctive in both medial and temporal contexts, based on these very basic levels the objects should take on very distinctive forms. Why would a modern object, consisting largely of moving images, take up a form similar to a series of objects from the formative years of the prototypical moving image medium? Why not draw from more modern, refined examples of the language of moving imagery instead? Very little information can be gathered from the early days of the Japanese Role Playing Games (JRPG) development, so design intentions are not a feasible source for answers when considering the specifics of the video games' forms. However, in interviews Hironobu Sakaguchi, often dubbed the father of *Final Fantasy*, has stated at different times the influence narrative film has had in his approach to storytelling. To Sakaguchi, the process of dramatic construction is a constant no matter the medium, "…I am interested in dramatic presentation and visuals. Whether a movie or an interactive game, your sense of direction does not differ"[1]. While his broad film influences are discernable, the specifics of why his games utilized antiquated filmmaking techniques specifically are never really addressed. In his book, *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich sheds some light on a similar phenomenon and outlines why some of these earlier filmmaking practices may be surfacing in the newer digital medium.

[1] Sakaguchi, Hironbu. Trans. Sachi Coxon. "Interview." *Playstation Japan* (Famitsu, June 5th, 1999. Web), accessed November 12th, 2011.

> *Because of these particular hardware limitations, the designers of CD ROMs had to invent a different kind of cinematic language in which a range of strategies, such as discrete motion, loops, and superimposition—previously used in nineteenth century moving image presentations, twentieth century animation, and the avant garde tradition of graphic cinema—were applied to photographic or synthetic images. This language synthesized cinematic illusionism and the aesthetics of graphic collage, with its characteristic heterogeneity and discontinuity. The photographic and the graphic, divorced when cinema and animation went their separate ways, met again on the computer screen.* [2]

Certain aspects of *Final Fantasy's* design can be explained through this logic of technique reappropriation. Discrete motion, animation loops, and superimpositions, are all techniques used throughout the majority of the series. However, other techniques, associated with the early years of filmmaking also surface in the series in addition to these animation techniques Manovich lists. A limited variety of shot scales, tinting, intertitles, and artifacts from the formative years of continuity editing are all constants in *Final Fantasy's* form. By looking closely at the technological limitations surrounding these games, the platforms on which they were released, and some common problems of video game visual design, this thesis will suggest possible answers to the question of why the early *Final Fantasy* form recalls the form and techniques of silent cinema.

The visual form of early *Final Fantasy* must be attributed in part to the specificity of its console. With all console video games the degree of interactivity is a factor in

[2] Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2001), 311

deciding the resulting quality of its visual form. This is mostly due to the fact that these moments, being interactive, have to be produced and projected visually on the fly in "real time." The visuals must be produced with technical efficiency in mind. For this reason the antiquated techniques from animation and film were mimicked and drawn on. Discrete motion, animation looping, and super impositions were all production efficient techniques in their original medial context. For this reason they were appropriated by the newer medium and became an integral part of any video game's graphical rendering. However, due to the limited amount of memory and processing power of the software and hardware respectively, the greater form of the visuals being produced required compromise and a careful allocation of resources. This was a problem reserved mostly for console game designers and developers as the capabilities of these machines would be constant for years at a time, forcing everyone to work using the same constraints. This compromise of resources takes form in a negotiation of quality and quantity across three video game design variables: depth of interactivity, graphical fidelity, and size of the explorable world. Picture if you will a three way continuum with interactivity, graphical fidelity, and world size at each end. If a game has more options for interactivity (i.e. increased amount of actions available at the player's disposal at any given time) and maintained a high level of graphical quality (i.e. larger sprites, more elaborate animations, more detailed world, etc.), the world in which it takes place in would be relatively small in size. For instance, in the game *Contra (Konami, 1990)* players take control of a highly mobile, highly animated, large character sprite in a lushly rendered and fleshed out world. Adding to the depth of the game's setting, the designers appropriated another technique familiar with animation: parallax scrolling. Parallax scrolling uses multiple two

dimensional planes integrated onto a single screen moving at different speeds to give the illusion of depth[3]. At any given time the player is able to shoot one of several different weapons, each with their own distinct animations and behaviors, in eight different directions. On top of all that, a second player can join in the game to play simultaneously. With so many resources allotted to a highly variable interactivity and sophisticated visual presentation, in accordance to the continuum's laws the size of the explorable world is quite small, only taking an hour or so to fully complete the game, assuming the player plays a perfect game (i.e. progresses without failing or starting over) **[*figure 1.1 to 1.4*].** In comparison to the other games and genres contemporary to the JRPG's inceptive years, the worlds of JRPGs were massive. So massive that both interactivity and graphical prowess was limited. Take the JRPG archetype *Dragon Quest (Enix, 1986)* for instance; over the majority of the game's duration players are limited to moving their small, poorly articulated character sprite in one of four directions and initiating conversations with like rendered characters **[*figure 3.2*]**. In contrast to *Contra*, however, the game could take dozens of hours to fully experience its quest. In addition to the exploration allotted in these larger worlds, the JRPG housed much more lengthy and complex narratives. The massive scope of the world, and the burden it placed on the game's ensuing visual form, placed these games in an awkward position on the continuum. In an interview with the popular Japanese magazine *Famistu,* Sakaguchi said the following, indirectly addressing this continuum,

[3] "Parallax scrolling." *Wikipedia*. (Wikipedia. N.d. Web), accessed November 13th 2011.

Of course there are many games that can move you emotionally without relying on visuals. But, in a time where the hardware develops so quickly, I want to take great advantage of this to make something that will move people's feelings even more. The visuals that can be used depend on the development of hardware, so I want to push it to the highest possible limit.[4]

With a stunted resource pool allotted to graphical fidelity, how could these games aptly convey their stories visually? In response to the technological limitations designers had to devise a system that made best of the limited elbowroom left by a given hardware's maximum capabilities. The resulting form cleverly combining text based story telling with simple, efficient, and minimalist visual cues. This unique combination of techniques meant that designers could convey high amounts of information with relatively little demand placed on hardware and processing. Coincidently, it took a lot less memory to mimic antiquated filmmaking tropes than it did for modern ones (i.e. *Contra*). A lesser variety in shot scales meant less character sizes that had to be produced, jarring transitions between shots took attention away from the often incongruous actions, and tinting efficiently conveyed different times of a day and types of topographies without having to process new settings to represent these variable conditions. This unique blend of circumstances resulted in the production of a visual dynamic that resembled early narrative cinema in many different ways. The techniques employed by designers almost immediately referred to the techniques used in narrative cinema's early years, reflecting a moment where cinematic language was still being developed. While this is

[4] Sakaguchi, Hironbu. Trans. Sachi Coxon. "Interview." *Playstation Japan*. Famitsu, June 5th, 1999. Web. November 12th, 2011.

definitely a possibility, this has been largely a conclusion based on speculation. Aside from some very general stated influences (i.e. Sakaguchi's general cinematic influence as stated above) there is no concrete evidence that these games were directly influenced by early narrative cinema. Additionally, the question of "why" these two objects have so much in common will not be explored here. Instead, this thesis will focus on the aesthetic "how" of their similarities, through the formal analysis of visual empirical data present in both objects.

Conventions, tropes and shared terminology for discussing the stylistic tenets for video games have not really been developed. Thorough explanations of game play elements exist and have been used since the very beginnings of the medium from both the reception and design sides of the object. Instruction manuals, game reviews, previews, and design journals all have contributed and have had a somewhat consistent accordance of terms surrounding the rules and ludic components of these games. The discussion of stylistic or aesthetic factors, on the other hand, has not been as fleshed out. The technical components resulting in these games' aesthetic systems are thoroughly understood, and for the most part dominate popular discussions of video game aesthetics (i.e. video game reviews, previews, etc.). When stylistic factors are discussed the terminology is mostly taken from surrounding media, namely film. Each medium's objects are consisted mostly of moving imagery, thus the transference of terms and subsequent appropriation and recontextualisation of tropes and conventions is an easy and natural association. This transference of film terms is true on both sides of the video game. Developers and designers use film terms in the production process to communicate the desired visual effect. Reviewers use film terms in order to better communicate with a readership already

familiar with these terms. Continuing and elaborating on this trend, many academics over the last ten years have adopted film terms, and film studies approaches, to looking at these objects.

ENTER "VIDEO GAME STUDIES"

One of the very first attempts of applying film studies to video games was in actuality one of the very first attempts at an academic study of video games at all. In 2001, Mark J.P. Wolf, assembled an anthology attempting to define and categorize video games through a study of its history and, most prominently, through a comparison to the prototypical moving image medium, film. In *The Medium of the Video Game* Wolf formulates his mapping of the medium based on several different categories, and then more specified topics therein, mostly concerned with the native medium of his comparison. The book is separated into three sections categorized by three perspectives. The first section, titled "The Emergence of the Video Game" Wolf discusses the medium's history in both technical and stylistic contexts. The second section of the book, entitled "Formal Aspects of the Video Game" Wolf defines, categorizes, and articulates the formal stylistic elements of video games through a comparison to other mediums, most prominently film. Here, he looks at issues of space, time, narrative, and genre separation, attempting to define each element in relation to film's handling of each respective topic. In the final section, "The Video Game in Society and Culture", Wolf takes three disparate essays that look, as the title of the section explains, at the various roles and functions of video games in society and culture. While Wolf's early attempt to map ontology of the video game was a noble one, as with many early medium studies,

there are some major problems with his approach. A passage from his introduction best outlines this overarching issue. In a sub section titled "Difficulties in Studying the Video Game" Wolf states:

> *Early games were also very simple graphically and narratively, and rather limited in subject matter. Since then, however, both graphics and storylines have improved, warranting more analysis and comment. Greater complexity and depth give the video game designer more opportunity to embody a message, worldview, or philosophy into a game in the same way these elements can be incorporated into novels and films. While it is true there are still a good number of games which are the gaming world's equivalent of slapstick comedies or plotless action films, more serious work continues to emerge and develop.*[5]

Wolf suggests that the legitimization of the video game occurred to when its form grew in sophistication in areas that brought it closer to film. In the process he does not even mention interactivity, the main discerning quality of the video game medium, as a component in its legitimization. In short, Wolf only believes video games were worthy of study once they achieved a more sophisticated visual form, completely omitting what makes the medium unique in the process.

In his book Wolf attempts to study the video game as a whole, however, as showcased in the quotation above, he has an intrinsic bias towards studying mostly (and relatively) passive objects such as film. While narrative and graphics are indeed integral

[5] Wolf, Mark J. P. *The Medium of the Video Game.* 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 6 7.

parts of many video games, in the end they are exactly that: parts, passive, non interactive, visual parts. Without question the interactive component of the video game medium is its most discernable quality. By stating that due to a limited sophistication of the medium's passive systems it was not considered an appropriate object worthy of academic attention demonstrates Wolf's inability to look at video games without an association to other mediums, more specifically the medium of his own expertise, film. While comparisons to film can and should be made, as is the basis of this thesis' formal analysis, determining an entirely separate medium's worth based on factors central to a different medium is extremely troublesome. In effect, through an omission of acknowledging interactivity Wolf is trivializing what makes video games unique. While he does not completely ignore the interactive component of the medium, this bias places his study under a rather troublesome light. For instance, in his discussion of temporal elements of the video game, Wolf often refers to the FMV (Full Motion Video) video game that was mildly popular in the late eighties and early nineties[6]. Essentially these games were glorified electronic versions of the "choose your own adventure" type books, limiting player choice and interactivity to a series of branching choices resulting in which video segment would be played next. These objects are more familiar and convenient for his analysis and dissection due to his disciplinary background. However, considering he is attempting a complete video game ontology and not that of a specific genre, defining an issue as large as time through the discussion of a single type of video game that is at once not representative of the larger medium's form and not as widely circulated as other more interactive games during the same period of time, the validity of his discussion

[6] Wolf, *The Medium of the Video Game,* 78 85.

becomes seriously compromised. That being said, while the choices of objects and subjects in his discussion leave a lot to be desired, his overall methodology could be useful if re appropriated and brought into the right context. The specifics of this will be discussed at greater length later on as I outline my methodology in this thesis.

RULES RULE

Some years later another interdisciplinary scholar threw his hat into the video game discussion pool. Written in 2003 and published in 2005, Jesper Juul's *Half Real*, like Wolf's book, is another attempt to map out a general video game ontology. While Wolf subscribes mostly to film studies approaches with a greater emphasis on aesthetics, Juul's break down and articulation takes much greater account of the ludic component of the medium. Looking at the book's sectioning this more complete prioritizing can easily be seen. The book is split into the following four sections: "Video games and the Classic Game Model", where Juul outlines a brief history of games in general, not exclusive to more modern electronic renderings; *Rules*, where he explores the role of rules and game play components in video games; *Fiction*, where he explores the role of fiction and narrative in video games; and finally *Rules and Fiction*, where he discusses the relationship that exists between these two ever present video game components. Ultimately, Juul believes that fiction in video games is optional, serving merely as a wrapping to the more essential rules governing the ludic. He believes more successful games are conceptualized from a game play standpoint first, and that narrative is essentially an afterthought. The closing paragraph of Juul's conclusion best summarizes his work's thrust:

> *That the rules of a game are real and formally defined does not mean that the player's experiences are also formally defined. However, the rules help create the player's informal experience. Though the fictional worlds of games are optional, subjective, and not real, they play a key role in video games. The player navigates these two levels, playing video games in the half real zone between fiction and the rules.* [7]

While he acknowledges the presence of fictional worlds, he classifies them as "optional", a non essential factor in the make up of a game's form. This comment and resulting stance is too broad, and does not take into account games with strong narrative foundations. While some types of games may exist without a narrative or fictional wrapping (i.e. *Tetris, Pong, Pacman*) others simply cannot (i.e. *Final Fantasy*). Without a narrative *Final Fantasy*, and JRPGs in general, would be nothing but a series of incoherent rule systems incoherently connected. The narrative is both central to keeping the player's interest and allows the game play elements to function in a larger context. By merely stating that fiction and narratives are optional assumes that these types of games are not games at all which is obviously not the case.

Throughout Juul uses several allegories and comparisons to film in order to communicate to his readers in familiar terms to better communicate his argument. He uses both specific examples (i.e. referring to *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941) when discussing the use of disjointed narrative time) and some non specific ontological examples of the film medium as a counterpoint to his concepts of video game fiction. He

[7] Juul, Jesper. *Half Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005), 202.

even provides a table, titled "Video games and six different definitions of narrative", to display the inherent differences, and some similarities, between the two mediums handling of narrative.

In comparison to Wolf, Juul's usage of film studies, and his credence to film's influence on video games, is significantly stunted. While his emphasis on rules and game play is a welcomed compliment to Wolf's own biases, his trivialization of fiction's role in the video game is quite troublesome. While video games are indeed a new and separate medium, considering the inherently linked essentials of both film and the video game as primarily moving image based, more credit should be attributed to the fictional and visual systems in any video game ontological study. By summarizing all aesthetics as "fiction" and then describing this umbrella term as a mere wrapping of the more essential rules, Juul further undermines film's influence in the process, indirectly trivializing the medium's influence as a small part of an essential piece. His stance basically discredits video games as a viable or optimal platform for storytelling. While his use of film studies' methodology of formal analysis is welcome (particularly in view of this thesis' primary focus on formal analysis, both in terms of methodology discussion and practical application) in consideration of the greater context of his perspective on fiction, this application is essentially moot. In many ways Juul's attempted ontology represents the other extreme of Wolf's film centric attempt.

AN EASY MEDIUM

Alexander R. Galloway represents a more balanced approach to studying video games. Galloway similarly uses his knowledge and experience to formulate a video

games ontology, and like Wolf, situates himself from a predominately film studies approach. Serving as a mediator between Wolf and Juul's differently weighted approaches, Galloway places equal importance on both the interactive and passive aspects of the video game medium. Avoiding the interdisciplinary problems of Wolf's approach, instead of pulling the medium towards his own disciplinary motivations and analytical limitations, Galloway uses his knowledge in order to create a new, more finely nuanced discussion of what makes games, games. In his collection of essays, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Cultures,* Galloway presents both an all encompassing ontology and several specialized case studies. In the opening chapter entitled "Four Gamic Moments", Galloway makes it very clear into what direction he believes Video Game Studies should go into. He states,

> *If photographs are images, and films are moving images, then video games are actions. Let this be word one for video game theory. Without action, games remain only in the pages of an abstract rulebook. Without the active participation of players and machines, video games exist only as static computer code. Video games come into being when the machine is powered up and the software is executed; they exist when enacted.*[8]

From the beginning Galloway defines video games not through its similarities to other mediums (as with Wolf) or as an object of contrast (as with Juul) but rather defines the medium on its own terms. While later on he uses film as a point of comparison, he does

[8] Galloway, Alexander R. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture.* Electronic mediations, 18 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 2.

so only in the context of thinking of games as actions, never undermining his initial ontological claim.

After establishing this call for a focus on action, he sets up four gamic moments that he believes all video games contain. These moments are: the diegetic, the non diegetic, operator acts, and machine acts. He believes that all moments in games fall into the spectrum in between these four posts. Examples of the extremes of this spectrum are: diegetic machine acts, which he describes as ambience acts, and machinima, the world moving around the player, and the cinematic interludes between chapters; non diegetic operator acts, which he describes as player controlled acts of configurations, the set up act (navigating a menu screen); diegetic operator acts, which he describes as movement actions, essentially the player manipulating the onscreen avatar directly; and lastly the non diegetic machine acts, which he describes as the surfacing of power ups within the diegetic space (non diegetic item within a diegetic space), the computer shutting down or freezing, the game booting up, etc.[9]

Where Wolf's book assumes a sort of effective spectator stance, where the player is more of an audience member than an active participant, Galloway's assumes an affective one, where the player and machine work together as enablers. Throughout the book Galloway uses specific instances of film theory and then changes them in order to create a suitable context more relevant to the newer medium. In the chapter "Countergaming", for instance, he cites Peter Wollen's seven theses on counter cinema and then systematically adapts each thesis in order to work with gaming more appropriately.[10] In the process he even drops a couple of points out of a lack of

[9] Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture,* 8 38
[10] Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture,* 109 110

correspondence to the video game medium. For instance, he scraps Wollen's "single diegesis versus multiple diegesis" thesis due to the inherent fluidity video games have between multiple diegetic and non diegetic planes. Menus, heads up displays (HUDs) and setting options are all foregrounded and central to most video game experiences. [11] Ironically in modern gaming the elimination of these elements are considered avant garde. This subtle transformation of elements of this film studies discourse demonstrates that his priorities lie with studying games. Instead of trying to fit gamic instances into an established film discussion, Galloway changes the latter at the discretion of the medium he himself is adapting to.

Of the three scholars discussed thus far, Galloway's approach is closest to my own. His balance and consideration of both the passive and interactive, and his adaptation of film theory and studies for the new field he is attempting to define, are both considerations that inform the concerns of this thesis. That being said, while I believe interactivity is inseparable from the medium, I do believe that the passive and interactive can be discussed separately, particularly in the form of specialized case studies. Video games come in an impossibly wide variety of forms. When discussing one aspect of a game, whether it is of passive or interactive concern, seldom can the same discussion be appropriated to another genre, and can even prove difficult within a discussion within that same genre. Hence the usage of continuums in many attempts of video game ontology (i.e. Galloway), as most articulate classifications cannot function to define the medium as a whole. This inescapable multiplicity of the medium's form almost demands more specialized studies to be a main method of analysis. While Galloway's continuum based ontology works fine, his specialized studies are the most compelling. For instance, in the

[11] Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture,* 123 124

second chapter in the volume, "Origins of the First Person Shooter", Galloway discusses the various forms of the marginalized subjective optical perspective (first person perspective shot) in narrative films and how when re appropriated to the video game medium gains not only new meaning but becomes the most effectively affective interaction with perspective across any medium.[12] For the most part, throughout the chapter Galloway uses his own formal analysis of both film and video game objects to articulate his conclusion. Thus, I believe that if a proper video game ontology could be constructed it can only be through a series of specialized case studies in the same vein as Galloway's and as a good portion of this thesis will demonstrate. To be sure, a proper video game ontology cannot be reached from the outset, as the multiplicity and inconsistent form of the medium prevents this. Rather, arriving at this hypothetical apex has to be a cumulative effort over a long period of time over the course of many studies. Whether or not a definitive ontology can be constructed remains an open question. However if we were to arrive at one it should be through these means.

Galloway's approach in general (i.e. the usage of formal analysis and specialized case studies) in this chapter exhibits synchronicity with the methodology promoted by David Bordwell and Noel Carroll in the seminal film studies methodological discussion, *Post Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies.* After a brief introduction and summary of *Post Theory's* discussion, I will introduce my own methodology for this thesis.

[12] Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture,* 68 69

POST-THEORY

Present day university film studies programs across the world use the introductory textbooks written by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. These volumes of history and cinematic style are steeped in discussions and conclusions based on a means of formal analysis. The first volume of these was written well before *Post Theory* and no doubt had an influence on its fruition and assembly. The highly influential and controversial volume of essays, *Post Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, sought out to do exactly what the title claims: to reconstruct film studies. And as evidenced by the influence the volume has had on the field, it was rather successful at doing so. Or at least it forced the field of film studies to reckon with its arguments. After its release similar volumes had followed promoting its bold suggestion. For instance, four years later in 2000, the volume *Reinventing Film Studies* edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, saw renowned film scholars such as Henry Jenkins and Tom Gunning continuing to proliferate Bordwell and Carroll's call by presenting specialized case studies of their own. While this legacy is impressive, the focus of this paper is not on the work's influence, but rather in going back to its core argument and applying its basic fundamentals to help formulate a methodology of studying video games.

Within two introductory essays, David Bordwell and Noel Carroll begin their bold endeavor by outlining the historical context and formation of film studies and its proliferation into a legitimate academic discipline. Like many burgeoning fields, film studies borrowed from other academic disciplines and traditions in its infancy. However, where other humanities based disciplines such as literary studies, art history, musicology, developed rich research traditions beforehand, film studies did not have the same

opportunity before the influence of what Bordwell and Carroll deem "Grand Theory" intervened.[13] These "Grand Theories", which Bordwell separates into two trends of thought subject position theory and culturalism[14] discussed cinema "framed within schemes which seek to describe or explain very broad features of society, history, language, and psyche".[15] Taking into consideration the broad strokes these "Theories" aimed to paint, Bordwell argues that it is no surprise that these discussions seldom dealt with more localized, specific film medium problems. While these more local film subjects and issues did eventually come to the foreground of discussion, Carroll believed it was a matter of too little too late, stating, "It is my conviction that as long as these obstacles [remnants of "Theories" influence] continue to grip the imaginations of scholars, fruitful *theorizing* about film will be unlikely".[16] Practitioners of the "Theories" saw the use of empirical, in depth research as a contradictory approach to any notable theoretical discussions.[17] To simplify and summarize Bordwell and Carroll's argument, being the dominant manner of looking at film, "Theories" saw that many discussions did not discuss filmic problems of at all, but rather ideas around film.

In response Bordwell and Carroll made a call for a greater emphasis and legitimization of more traditional academic scholarship that concentrates on in depth research rather than the omni applicable vagaries proliferated through "Theory" discourse. According to the authors, this more traditional approach of study always existed and developed along side the rise of "Theory" but had nowhere near as much

[13] Bordwell, David, and Noël Carroll. *Post Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies (*Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 29
[14] Bordwell and Carroll, *Post Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies,* 4
[15] Bordwell and Carroll, *Post Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies,* 3
[16] Bordwell and Carroll, *Post Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies,* 39
[17] Bordwell and Carroll, *Post Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies,* 34

proliferation in the film studies world. Theorizing (with a small "t'", as italicized in the quotation in the last paragraph) is what both Bordwell and Carroll believe to be the proper manner by which to study film. Combining empirically based "middle level" type of research, and original theoretical problems, studying subjects of greater specificity with more relevance to the film medium itself is what, if simplified, the two scholars wished for the future of the main discourses of film studies. For instance, questions surrounding film exhibition, style, history, were previously treated as afterthoughts, and most often times were summarized in volumes based on specific nations or provided general worldwide surveys.[18] Between the mid seventies and eighties, however, revisions of these volumes began to surface. Based on in depth research with the then more readily available primary resource materials (i.e. trade journals, newspaper articles, films, production notes, etc.) more extensive, accurate and specialized history volumes were published and proliferated. This revival of middle level work also saw a renewed interest in subjects previously avoided. For instance, discussions of film style, and the inherent film language proliferated by this style, were looked at differently. Using mostly formal analysis and comparison, scholars began taking film examples outside of the traditional narrative continuity style into consideration when analyzing film. While Bazin and his contemporaries in the *Nouvelle Critique* had already done this to a certain extent, these newer studies aimed to rethink cinematic language rather than merely add to the established canon.[19]

[18] Bordwell and Carroll, *Post Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies,* 27
[19] Bordwell and Carroll, *Post Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies,* 28

Bordwell ends his introduction with a very direct and concise summary of his points:

> *Middle level research programs have shown that an argument can be at once conceptually powerful and based in evidence without appeal to theoretical bricolage or association of ideas... In particular, we do not need to understand a film by projecting onto it the semantics fields "privileged" by this of that theory. Most important, the middle level research programs have shown that* ***you do not need a Big Theory of Everything to do enlightening work in a field of study****. Contrary to what many believe, a study of United Artists' business practices or the standardization of continuity editing or the activities of women in early film audiences need carry* ***no*** *determining philosophical assumptions about subjectivity or culture,* ***no*** *univocal metaphysical or epistemological or political presumptions – in short,* ***no*** *commitment to a Grand Theory.* [20]

This thesis aims to bring the methodologies developed in Bordwell and Carroll's volume to bear on the study of video games. In fact that its form is constant flux, I feel that this "middle" road of close analysis may be the only way to approach it. Using the three previously discussed video game studies texts as a context, all the while using Bordwell and Carroll's overarching discussion as the spine, I will now outline my own methodology.

[20]Bordwell and Carroll, *Post Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies,* 29 (author's bold emphasis)

METHODOLOGY

My methodological concerns stem from one main idea: there should not and cannot be a single methodology, discipline, or dominant discussion when studying video games. On the whole, due to its multiple forms, platforms, and inter medial influences, video games should be discussed with as many points of view as possible. My own method is that I deploy a limited scale methodology that can only be applied to very specific discrete portions of the medium. Video games are constructed in an impossibly wide range of forms, and due to the interactive component at its core, countless numbers of forms and relationships are then possible within each of these constructed objects. For instance, the findings of this type of study, a comparison of the aesthetic development of silent cinema to that of the *Final Fantasy* series, would have very little use in analyzing the aesthetics for more ludically motivated games (i.e. *Tetris*). While this study's discourse would work better in discussing games within the same genre, its findings cannot be considered absolute or totalizing in these potential peripheral discussions. Rather this study should, at most, function as a starting point to more tailor made specificity centered discussions. By that same token there is a possibility that these findings may work with other types of games or genres, but I believe that this potential compatibility is completely up to coincidence and will not be explored or tested. To reiterate, the ontological character of games is that they have no definitive ontology, they are multiple and diverse and cannot be reducible to one thing. This irrefutable ontological characteristic is a problem no matter the disciplinary approach or even field when looking at the video game medium.

Part of this thesis focuses on the problem of approaching the discussion of the video game from a film studies perspective, most specifically in the vein of formal analysis based discussions of aesthetics and style. Considering that, let us look at a hypothetical (but ultimately inevitable) problem that would potentially arise in this type of discussion. The video game series *Grand Theft Auto* is renowned for many things. Most prominently amongst its distinctive characteristics is its open world game play and high production cinematic storytelling. With the latter, come many different adopted cinematic tropes in the storytelling component of the game. However, married with the highly open ended nature of the game play, many of these tropes will not be experienced by all players. The game's main story arc could be completed with literally dozens of hours of passive story moments not experienced by the player. Thus, extracting any conclusive or exhaustive analysis of any of the game's cinematic tropes is an impossible endeavor. In a discussion of any particular game, in any particular a genre, if one were to make assumptions in their analysis based on personal game play experiences its relevance becomes troublesome based on the simple fact that everyone can play that same game in a multitude of different ways. Making any bold or broad conclusions based on said analysis is in turn impossible, as it will not be applicable from one person's experience to the next. While a similar case can be made in the interaction of a film's text, since a viewer may choose to pay attention to different things or interpret objects differently than the next viewer creating unique experiences, in the end the relationship and influence of a film spectator has significantly fewer variables than those of a video game player. Galloway addresses this distinction by delineating the difference between the "active audience" theory of media and the notion of the "active medium" from discussions

surrounding cybernetics and informational technologies.[21] He argues that a truly active medium is one whose "very materiality moves and restructures itself –pixels turning on and off, bits shifting in the hardware registers, disks spinning up and spinning down".[22] Video games are constantly reforming themselves according to the player's input. What is being displayed on screen is constantly changing form. A film will not change form once its creative team has finalized the postproduction processes. While a viewer may interpret a film in anyway they'd like, they generally have no say into the direction or form it will ultimately take. Taking this comparison even further, Galloway addresses the ever fluctuating video game form in the context of Gilles Deleuze's cinematic concept of the "action image". He states,

> *With video games, the work itself is the material action. One* ***plays*** *a game. And the software* ***runs****. The operator and the machine play the video game together, step by step, move by move. Here the "work" is not as solid or integral as in other media… With video games, the "action image" has survived but now exists not as a particularly historical or formal instance of representation but as the base foundation of an entirely new medium.*[23]

How the world is viewed and experienced in a video game is hence entirely reliant on the input of the spectator. That being said, while games cannot exist without a player's input, the type and level of input does vary from game to game. Some games are

[21] Galloway, Alexander R. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture.* Electronic mediations, 18 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 3.
[22] Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture,* 3
[23] Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture,* 2 (author's bold emphasis)

more constrictive in the allowed freedom a player has in experiencing the world. In games like these, where the experience varies less and less between prospective players, the method of formal film analysis could be applied more successfully. In these instances Wolf's more passively focused study could be a viable methodology. Wolf's mistake was not an adherence to his native discipline or his biased choice of non representative objects, but rather trying to craft an ontology of video games from that perspective using those objects. If his methods and subjects were re contextualized to a more specialized study then the resulting conclusions would not be so problematic. Galloway's method veers closer to this application, as demonstrated earlier in his inclusion of specialized studies in his volume. Instead of focusing just on film studies methodologies and issues, Galloway combines discussions of ludology and deals with the active components of the video game. Considering his choice of subject discussed in the particular study outlined earlier of the First Person Shooter, a combination of these discussions and issues was not only inevitable but also completely appropriate. This adaptability is the factor of Galloway's methods that I feel is most useful to looking at the medium. As touched upon earlier, Galloway demonstrates that he is willing to adapt his own methodologies to not only the medium but he also demonstrates a specification and specialization of these methodologies based on the specificity of the objects being discussed. In essence the object determines his methodological approach, not the other way around. This basic sentiment is a foundational point in this theses' own methodological approach, something that will be expanded on a little later on.

Returning to his discussion of experimental gaming development practices in his essay "Counter gaming", Galloway cites Peter Wollen's seven theses on counter cinema

in order to help define the yet to be defined video game movement. After a systematic outline then discussion of each of Wollen's theses in a video game context, Galloway presents a viable adapted set of theses more appropriate to the applied medium. Eliminating two and adding one theses of his own, based on relevancy and need respectively, Galloway demonstrates that he is willing to transform film theory to better fit the nature of video games.

To reiterate, what I am suggesting here is when approaching video game studies the subject and object should determine what discipline is appropriate, not the other way around. For instance, while Juul's handling of game rules and the interactive was comprehensive, his dismissal of narrative and fiction's importance to the medium made his study somewhat lacking. Coming from a predominantly computer engineering/programming background[24] this perspective, while expected, nonetheless limits his discussion of stylistic and formal concerns. Further enhancing this bias, Juul, a part time game designer, carries these sentiments into the type of games he develops.[25] By looking at each of his product's narrative and fictional components this bias becomes even clearer.

Essentially my methodological argument can be boiled down to this: due to the ever fluctuating form of the video game, any "Grand Theories" arrived at from one discipline is impossible to apply to games. In its stead, taking heed from Bordwell and Carroll's arguments from *Post Theory*, a series of specialized studies should aim to define or discuss specific parts rather than the whole. These specialized studies' approaches should first be appropriate to the subject or object and then adapted to the specific

[24] Juul, Jesper. "Curriculum Vitae Jesper Juul." And "Teaching and Lecturing."(*Jesperjuul.net*. N.p. to, n.d. Web), accessed February 1st 2012.
[25] Juul, Jesper. "Gameography." (*Jesperjuul.net*. N.p. to, n.d. Web), accessed February 1st 2012.

medium's characteristics that surround the items of discussion. Embracing my film studies background, particularly Neoformalist film analysis (a methodology championed and practiced by David Bordwell), I have chosen an object and subject that can best be analyzed with these areas of expertise. While my methodology may initially seem to fall into the same trap of Wolf's disciplinary biases (as I am choosing objects based on my academic background) the main difference here is that I am not attempting to construct an ontology, or a "Grand Theory" that should or could be applied to all video games, or even video games of the same genre or type. Rather this case study will look at a very specific comparison of two objects' similar aesthetics and their parallel development paths, and keep the observations and conclusions self contained to the study. As mentioned earlier, the objects of this comparison are silent film, and the Japanese Role Playing Game (JRPG) series, *Final Fantasy*. By using the former as an establishing point (as it has been studied and catalogued extensively), this study will attempt to understand and define various aesthetic tropes of the latter. So while my study will also have intermittent commentary and reference of/to other methodological approaches, it will predominately serve as a specialized case study. This study and approach is important in that I hope to both contribute to a larger discourse of specialized studies concerning video games, and to demonstrate the value and potency of this approach. Not many studies of video games exist with this particular lens. At the very least I hope to continue the efforts started by Alexander Galloway, and at the most propel and motivate this type of study. In essence the thesis will work both as a study of methodologies, and a practical application of the accrued methodological reasoning in the former.

THESIS STRUCTURE AND CASE-STUDY OUTLINE

To date the *Final Fantasy* series has spawned fourteen main installments with countless spin offs, remakes, and reinterpretations across many medial forms. Saying the series is highly influential and incredibly popular is something of an understatement. For instance, as of June 2011 the series in its entirety has sold upwards of one hundred million copies since its inception in 1987.[26] The series' wide reaching influence has been one of the most powerful driving forces behind the JRPG genre's popularity as a whole. So much so it would be tempting to say that any conclusions reached in a series wide analysis could have some application to understanding the genre at large. Despite the likelihood of that, keeping with the methodological motivations of this study, there will not be any claims or attempts of anything of semblance.

Over two chapters my thesis will discuss the first four iterations of the *Final Fantasy* series. While initially the choice to limit the study to these first four games was merely a space saving decision, conveniently there exists an aesthetic evolutionary completeness across these four games' formal systems. Many techniques that were attempted in the first three games only came to fruition in the fourth installment. If considering aesthetics alone, the first three games can be considered prototypes of the mastery achieved in *Final Fantasy IV*. The reasons behind this can be attributed in part to technological reasons, as *Final Fantasy IV* was the first game in the series to be developed for the significantly more powerful Super Famicom/Super Nintendo Entertainment System. Using this convenient cyclical completeness, this study will map and compare the parallels between mediums in order to better understand these common

[26] Rose, Mike. "Final Fantasy series hits 100 million units shipped." *Gamasutra* (UBM TechWeb, June 7th, 2011. Web), accessed February 23rd, 2012.

tropes across two temporally and medially disparate objects. Simultaneously, the resulting comparison and analysis will define and distribute both aesthetic tropes and convention classifications that will be assigned to this video game series. The inherent similarity between the two objects provides a tremendous opportunity to systemize and establish points of articulation for the newer medium, and in this case, genre of games.

Starting with the 1997 release of *Final Fantasy VII*, the series diverged from this intermedial parallel and began to draw its influences from more contemporary objects. As mentioned earlier in the quotation from the Famistu interview, Hironobu Sakaguchi said the following in regards to the development of *Final Fantasy VII*, "The visuals that can be used depend on the development of hardware, so I want to push it to the highest possible limit".[27] To briefly reiterate the speculation from earlier in the introduction, it can be assumed that this divergence of influences and style with the later Final Fantasy titles had to do with an increase of technological sophistication. Final Fantasy VII was the first of three iterations to be developed and released for the Sony Playstation system (PSX) that saw this first instance of divergence. Hardware upgrades aside, when considering the utilization of the CD ROM format alone this speculation can be justified further. Due to the exponential increase of memory storage allowed by the format (relative to the cartridge based proprietary formats used for all *Final Fantasy* games before on both the Famicom/Nintendo Entertainment System and Super Famicom/Super Nintendo Entertainment Systems respectively) resource dispersion based on the three point continuum delineated earlier could be renegotiated. By keeping the size of the worlds and the allowed player interactive therein relatively the same, Sakaguchi was able

[27] Sakaguchi, Hironbu. Trans. Sachi Coxon. "Interview." (*Playstationjapan*. Famitsu, June 5th, 1999. Web), accessed November 12th, 2011.

to invest extra memory in the visual components of the game. For instance, characters were now rendered using polygons instead of sprites; environments were now constructed from high resolution computer generated images rather than pixel based discrete constructions; non interactive, high octane cut scenes using highly sophisticated, out of game engine 3D animation tools were littered throughout the game bringing the relatively crude polygonal characters to life. Essentially, more elaborate images were being created, ones that relied less and less on a seemingly coincidental memory efficient mimesis of antiquated cinematic techniques.

The original *Final Fantasy* was one of the first instances of an RPG that was predominantly rendered graphically. The first examples of computer based RPGs were of Western origin and were typically text based. From his extensive retrospective on the Computer Role Playing Game (CRPG), Matt Barton of the website Gamasutra summarizes the genre's illusive beginnings best: "Hackers on university mainframes got an early start on developing these CRPGs, trotting out games as early as 1974. Unfortunately, the history here seems a bit murky and declaring which game was the "first" seems a bit foolhardy."[28] With these early games all ludic and narrative representations were completely reliant on text. For instance, players had to type in commands to guide their assumed avatar rather than directly controlling an animated character onscreen. *Rogue,* developed by Michael Toy and Glenn Wichman in 1980, is one of the earliest recorded examples of the CRPG using graphics in its representation.[29] While text was still the main mode of fictional conveyance, there was indeed a greater reliance on images to convey story information and to create atmosphere (i.e. maps

[28] Barton, Matt. "The History of Computer Role Playing Games Part 1: The Early Years (1980 1983)." (*Gamasutra*. UBM Techweb, February 23rd 2007), accessed January 23rd 2012
[29] "Rogue (video game)." *Wikipedia*. Wikipedia. N.d. Web. November 13th 2011.

drawn out using text characters helped players keep track of their location) **[*figure 2*]**. Most of these games were electronic iterations of the pen and paper RPGs series *Dungeons and Dragons.* Many times, both directly and indirectly, games borrowed from the popular series lore and game play tropes (i.e. types of monsters, weapons, character progression, dungeon exploration, etc.). It is of no surprise then that their initial forms were predominately text based.

Where these North American games held closer ties with literature in terms of its narrative conveyance, *Final Fantasy*, and its greater reliance on images and animation, held a much closer relationship to more visual mediums. The series' aesthetic influence reaches across many different mediums that came before it: theatre, painting, and even some elements of photography can be found in its various means of presentation. However, like no other medium before it, this series draws most of its visual influence from the prototypical moving image medium, cinema. As gathered from the speculation earlier, instead of drawing on techniques and tropes from films more contemporary to the games' release, most of its influence can be linked to the aesthetics from film's formative years, a time where film itself was still very reliant on the tropes of other mediums. The aesthetic parallels between this JRPG series and silent film occur right from the very beginning and due to this there exists a trickling down of film's own inter medial influences. For instance, early examples of narrative film were often described as mere recorded versions of stage plays, part of this was due to its static camera presence. *Final Fantasy* has a very similar aesthetic, in that its simulated "camera" is most oftentimes static.

In order to better map the parallels between these two disparate medial objects in their respective fledgling states, this study will categorize each aesthetic element into different sections to segregate the analysis**.** Each section will take these elements introduced from the games, as they appear and evolve chronologically within the series, and compare them to their filmic counterparts. The reasons for this are both organizationally motivated, and serve as credence to Galloway's prioritizing. This study aims to shed a light on a segment of the video game medium, and as such will use its history and development as the center of discussion. Converse to this logic, however, all terms used in the analysis will be from that from film studies, more specifically those derived from formal film analysis. As touched upon earlier, the utilization of film studies terms is due to the lack of any video game articulations or descriptors for these common aesthetics. The areas of comparison, and dually, the headers to each section, are as follows: ***shot scale, intertitles, tinting, set design, and editing.*** These will be the main points of comparison for the study, and will be touched upon in every chapter with each of the four games to be discussed.

The first chapter will revolve around the analysis of *Final Fantasy* and *Final Fantasy 2*; games that were both released for the Nintendo Famicom in Japan, on December of 1987 and 1988 respectively. Both share exceedingly close art styles and due to this the mapping of the stylistic progression between these games will be a relatively simple process. However, while there are few discernable changes between titles, the changes that do occur have an air of clairvoyance in their foreshadowing of the changes to come. Their stylistic relationship serves as a sign into what direction the series will go towards on a whole: towards an increased emphasis on innovative and intuitive

storytelling steeped in narrative film influences. The gradual assimilation and appropriation of increasingly elaborate and sophisticated filmmaking storytelling techniques demonstrates this trend. The series' first installments, much like film in its formative years, attempted to establish a visual language of their own. These games are successful at doing so, and form the basis of the visual language and overall aesthetic codes to be used in the series as a whole for the years to come. Considering this, ample time will be spent in the first chapter describing these establishing aesthetic rules in detail. This is important considering these rules and techniques will be referred to constantly throughout the study. This portion of the chapter will at once articulate these foundations for purposes of creating a fluid understanding of the evolutionary track, and serve as a glossary of sorts.

The second chapter will revolve around the analysis of *Final Fantasy III* and *Final Fantasy IV*, games that were released in Japan on the Famicom in 1990 and the Super Famicom in 1991 respectively. Where the previous two games were essential in developing the genre/series' visual language, these latter two entries saw a greater emphasis on pushing the boundaries of what was established through experimentation and then a subsequent refinement of these experiments. The increased development time on *Final Fantasy III* (six months more than the previous games) can easily been seen in its aesthetic and formal design, as there was a significant expansion and revision of many aspects. While very ambitious, *Final Fantasy III's* experimentation and revisions had mixed results. Simply put, some aspects worked, and some didn't. By comparing it to *Final Fantasy IV*, it becomes clear that processing and graphical technology, or the lack thereof, was the ultimate determining factor in the failed aesthetic experimentations.

Final Fantasy IV, the first in the series to be released on the significantly more powerful Super Famicom system, saw developers fully embrace the new technological elbowroom. While innovative in many regards, the game can be seen more as a mastery of the experiments from *Final Fantasy III*. This fact can be further emphasized when considering the shorter development cycle for *Final Fantasy IV* (only about a year). During my research it became clear rather quickly that the designers used many of the same aesthetic properties from the previous game. Thus, it can be assumed that in spite of being released on a newer system, the development cycle was shorter because of this. Where, instead of creating new properties designers were tasked with merely adapting the already developed aspects to the newer console's framework. This chapter will compare this expansion and refinement of language and aesthetics to a similar process that took place in film's history, namely the international assimilation and appropriation of stylistic techniques born of national cinemas.

While this was mentioned in passing earlier, there exists a game that should be mentioned before proceeding. Before *Final Fantasy* there was already one graphically based console JRPG released, *Dragon Quest* (1986, Enix). While some audiences/players may have had some exposure to visually based JRPGs before *Final Fantasy*, it can be assumed that there was still a collective naivety to this new brand of visual storytelling and genre aesthetics. Like any developing medium, genre, or movement, the development of language does not occur across a single work, let alone with the very first work. While a few salient characteristics of *Dragon Quest's* visual design can be seen in the *Final Fantasy* games, its execution is much more reliant on text in all aspects of its conveyance. Additionally, if considering the aesthetic developmental paths of both series, the

omission of *Dragon Quest* in this type of study can be justified even further. The *Final Fantasy* series can be seen as a constantly evolving entity. From title to title, its visual design sees both a fine tuning of some aspects and a reinventing of others, constantly setting a new precedent for the genre in the process. Comparatively, *Dragon Quest*, even to this day, has made very few changes to its overall aesthetic treatment **[*figure 3.1 to 3.8*].** For instance, some sound effects from the very first *Dragon Quest* were used in the series' latest release, *Dragon Quest IX* (2009) twenty four years later. In terms of aesthetics, *Dragon Quest* is a series that revels in nostalgia, while *Final Fantasy* is one that establishes influence. Thus, while *Dragon Quest* will not be considered or discussed in this analysis, for the aforementioned reasons, this should not be of any grave concern. While the series is exceedingly important in regards to the JRPG and its overall history, and is incredibly popular worldwide (more so than even *Final Fantasy* in Japan), for the purposes of this study, the tracking of a parallel evolution of aesthetics across two medially separate objects, any prolonged discussion is not really essential. This study cannot deal with the *Dragon Quest* series aesthetic development because it is not relevant to the overarching point.

The following study will demonstrate the parallel development between the *Final Fantasy* series and the era of film where its language and conventions were being established. In addition to comparing to the early silent film era, this study will look at films towards the end of the silent era, more specifically and exclusively, classical narrative films. As previously mentioned this game series is heavily based on telling stories. As such this comparison will focus primarily on films that deal with similar aesthetic issues of narrative dissemination and establishing a diegesis. Every facet and

aspect of cinema began from the same technological gene pool. Once the medium was grounded and established technology wise, it branched off into various creative directions forming different genres, styles, and functions. Video games began in a similar fashion, and disseminated themselves similarly as well. Theoretically it would be of no surprise then if similar movements and genres between the two mediums could actively be compared in studies similar to the proceeding discussion. In Galloway's essay "Countergaming", for instance, he actively compares alternative and experimental video game development techniques to those of counter cinema's. Considering the goal of specificity in this thesis' methodology, and its prioritizing of the video game form in the discussion, it should be expected that its comparisons will be to objects of similar form and motivation (i.e. classical narrative cinema). Thus, when discussing matters of "progression" or "evolution", it should be considered so within each of the discussed objects' genre or stylistic paths. The evolutions and progressions discussed, therefore, are not to be considered medium spanning but rather steps in each corpus' canon. All value judgments made will revolve around this notion. What is "correct" is ultimately so relative to the foundations of classical narrative cinema and its goal of striking a balance of efficiently and compellingly disseminating narrative information. However, what will be considered "correct" or "incorrect" in the video game examples will also take into account the context of the aesthetic technique in question and whether or not makes sense as a part of the game's own internal narrative and aesthetic systems. This will be most apparent in the latter chapters where *Final Fantasy III* and *IV* will be discussed. As the series became more aesthetically sophisticated in its conveyance of narrative, as did the objects housing the selected points of comparison (i.e. the films). The first chapter will

compare and explore the various embryonic elements that eventually grew into the discrete conventions making up these classical narrative films forms. The goal here is to demonstrate the parallel growth of these similarly motivated objects across two medially and temporally separate objects.

CHAPTER 1

SETTING THE GROUND RULES:

FINAL FANTASY AND FINAL FANTASY II

The manner in which *Final Fantasy* and *Final Fantasy II* were constructed allows for quite an easy adaptation of film conventions and the various understandings surrounding film aesthetics. As touched upon in the introduction, Lev Manovich pointed out the need to use familiar animation techniques in the establishment of this new language due to hardware limitations and the added interactivity component. While Manovich only applies this logic to the Full Motion Video (FMV) type of video game or games that follow a similar aesthetic logic (i.e. *Myst, The 7th Guest, Braindead 13*, the type of games Wolf based his ontology on) this notion can aptly be applied to many other games and game types. The key idea here is separation. The application of discrete motion, loops, and superimpositions are all based on the notion of separate development of different elements eventually brought together to make a whole. In all two dimensional *Final Fantasy* games the basis of design stems from this notion of separation. Character sprites are created and animated separately from the world around them. Adhering to the rules of discrete motion, different parts of a character sprite will move while the remaining stays motionless. Adhering to looping, many parts of the environment are simply copied and pasted to efficiently fill up the massive world. And in the end all of these disparate elements are carefully superimposed in order to give the illusion of a single, congruous world. Because of this inherent developmental isolation, each element can easily be discussed both on their own accord and then when need be, in

comparison or in combination with each other. Here, familiar film conventions can be applied and adapted. However, when taking into consideration the interactive component of these games the idea of an aesthetic convention from a passive object being applied to an inherently active one seems implausible. In *Post Theory,* David Bordwell, through an exhaustive semantic analysis, reevaluates the notion of the "convention", which if taken into consideration can rectify the potential problem of analyzing an ever changing object.

Veering away from the Structualist and Post Structualist's influence of strict adherence of specific meanings behind specific conventions, Bordwell suggests a more open ended interpretation of the term "convention":

> *Meanings are cultural; where there is meaning, so goes the reasoning, there must be codes. Instead, though, we may think of works as producing* ***effects****, of which meanings are certain types. If we take the artist's goal to be that of eliciting, discriminable effects, we can consider a wider range of theoretical possibilities. Now we can conceive of conventions as part of the artist's means for producing effects of many sorts. And these effects take their place in the fabric of human action; they are consequences of practical action on the part of artists, and grasping the conventions is bound up with larger activities pursued by perceivers.*[30]

Keeping with this study's stance on not formulating or endorsing any "one size fits all" theories, I will not claim overall effectiveness or attempt to apply this notion elsewhere.

[30] Bordwell, David, and Noël Carroll. *Post Theory :Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 93.

In the context of this thesis' subject, the *Final Fantasy* series, the notion of conventions as a point of eliciting varying effects works remarkably well. Interactivity and player control allows for numerous interactions with various stylistic conventions of the game's aesthetic design. Considering that, applying any one meaning or effect to a specific convention is counterintuitive. By understanding a convention as an object to elicit a certain range of effects or meanings fits the variable interactions the player can have with the aesthetic system more appropriately. For instance, a single colored tint may have many different meanings or effects depending on its appearance and trigger. A dark blue tint may at one moment be used to indicate nightfall, a familiar code in film, while in a different context serves as a mere aesthetic compliment to the representation of a player triggered ice spell, something unique to the game. The dark blue tint aesthetic, thus, can be understood as having a range of applications and meanings.

This idea of a range of effects drawn from a single convention works well with Galloway's approach to a video game ontology from his chapter "Gamic Action, Four Moments" as touched upon earlier. Further cementing Galloway's methodological approach to have accordance with my own**.** While his efforts were put into place to define video games as a whole (outside of just the limited scope of the aesthetic and passive this thesis deals with) on a smaller scale in a specialized context, this sort of thinking also works. Albeit in slightly different applications, Galloway's methodology proves that this type of thought can work in the context of defining the ever fluctuating object of the video game. Continuums and ranges allow for the incorporeal form and constantly variable interactions to be defined or classified in relation to one another. As will be

made apparent in this chapter, many of the conventions explored appear in different contexts and thus serve multiple functions.

SHOT SCALE

A good place to start this analysis is with the series' iconic use of *shot scale*. Beginning the analysis here is essential due to it being a characteristic that will be referred to at great frequency throughout the study. Every other visual element to be discussed happens within the parameters of these scales' framings. While it will be referred to often, this object of analysis sees very little evolution or change to its basic structure throughout the series. There does exist some minor tweaking between *Final Fantasy* titles (i.e. in the angle, proximity, and placement of the "camera") but these changes are mostly relevant to the context of their usage and are not repeated.

Established in the first two games, and only completely re imagined within the series some fourteen years later[31] the series' use of shot scale can be broken down into four different categories, with small deviations within each **[*figure 4*]**. All narrative and game play moments occur in the following framings.

1. The "Overworld" Scale

This scale is of the world at large and is the furthest away in camera perspective. This can be comparable to an *extreme long shot (ELS)* from an extremely high angle (camera approximately seventy five degrees from the ground). In the traditional film

[31] The iconic scale system was completely re imagined with 2001's *Final Fantasy X* where there was no discernable separation between scales as most sequences adopted the long take moving camera aesthetic. *Final Fantasy VII, VIII, and IX* while different from the 2D entries more strict usage of scale, it merely was a variation and expansion of what was established.

sense, characters are typically dwarfed in this scale, with a greater prominence on the surroundings.[32] While this remains true in the *Final Fantasy* application, the world is presented in relatively small proportions to the player's avatar and character. While the world does take up most of the screen's space, the character sprite stands tall in comparison to the objects in its surroundings. For instance, ten character sprites take up the same space a typical city would in this scale. In three of the four scales the character sprite remains the same size, no matter the presentation or scale of the surrounding world. For this reason the usage of traditional film definitions of scale in this study will not place the character onscreen as the unit of measurement, but rather the "zoom" of the game's "camera" on the diegetic surroundings. In sync with the angle of the perspective, the character sprites are also presented at a high angle aesthetic. For instance, the sprite's head is proportionally larger than the rest of the body, as the head is closer to the "camera".

In this scale the character sprite ultimately serves the same purpose a playing piece would in a board game, functioning merely as an indication of the character/player's location in the world. The rest of the world's presentation reflects this utilitarian notion. Most of its geographical elements, i.e. the mountains, towns, swamps, oceans and deserts, are displayed in a rather topographical aesthetic, using a quasi iconography of their real world counterparts. As with iconography, little differentiates each respective representation in this scale aside from its spatial context. Appropriately fitting its utilitarian aesthetics, this view serves as the navigation hub between towns,

[32]Hayward, Susan. *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts.* 3rd ed (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 356

castles and various other locations. In the end this scale can be seen as a interactive and lightly animated map **[*figures 4.1, 4.5, 4.9, and 4.13*].**

In terms of scale and angle, an apt filmic comparison can be made to a series of shots used in F.W. Murnau's late silent era film *Faust (1926)*. To capture the flight of a magic carpet ride over a mountainous landscape, Murnau fastened tracks to the ceiling of the studio allowing the camera to swoop above the action of an elaborate model.[33] While the angles are not exactly the same between film and game, this was one of the first examples of such a far away distance being filmed at such a high angle. The fact that there is a model being used brings the sequences even closer together. As previously mentioned, this scale holds a rather functional, topographical aesthetic, aptly reflected in the synthetic construction of the model used in the film.

2. The Town Scale

The *town view* is the second furthest away in scale, coming after the *overworld view*. In filmic terms this is closer to a *long shot (LS),* where typically the subjects are framed at some distance from the camera, with still a greater emphasis on the surroundings.[34] To further articulate the scale and to place the perspective in relation to the previous one, allow me to use the character sprite as a unit of measurement once again. Where previously ten character sprites would roughly make up the size of an entire town, in this scale the same amount would not even make up the size of a building. Different from the OW view, the angle is not as high, and closer to a seventy degree

[33] Thompson, Kristin, and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. 2nd ed (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), Pg.112
[34] Hayward, Susan. *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts.* 3rd ed (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 356

elevation. This particular elevation can be identified by the stunted view of the fronts of buildings or any front facing walls and greater proportions dedicated to the roofs. In the first *Final Fantasy* the game cuts to this view once the player walks onto a town or dungeon's[35] icon from the OW view (the aesthetic conventions for "dungeons" change in *Final Fantasy II*).

As touched upon in the previous scale articulation, in this view the player's avatar remains the same size as it does in the OW. However, due to the relatively larger size of the buildings and the presence of uniformly sized NPCs (non playable characters[36]) the player's sprite loses its aura of a board game piece, and garners one closer to that of an actor. Everything appears in much greater detail: buildings have texture, grass blades are identifiable, rivers, bridges, and other details that were not in the OW's depiction of the town, shape and give character to the zoomed in location **[*figures 4.2, 4.6, 4.10, and 4.14*].**

3. The Battle Scale

While exploring either a dungeon or the overworld, there is the constant threat of being attacked and subsequently being engaged in randomly placed battles. Once the battle begins the perspective changes to the *battle scale*. The closest in scale, the battle scale changes many elements from those previously outlined. Where the other scales

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[35] Due to universal aesthetic rules, over the course of this paper the term "dungeon" will apply to a much wider spectrum of locations than its name alone suggests. Essentially this wider spectrum of locales includes any place that is not a town (i.e. mountain passes, caves, castles, towers, and forests).

[36] *"A non player character (NPC), sometimes known as a non person character or non playable character, in a game is any character not controlled by a player. In electronic games, this usually means a character controlled by the computer through artificial intelligence."*

"Non player character." *Wikipedia*. Wikipedia. N.d. Web. November 13th 2011.

presented the world in a high angle view, this scale is now places the "camera" much closer the ground. The easiest comparison can be made to a spectator's perspective of a stage play if they are seated in the center of the lowest balcony (approximately a 45˚angle). Appropriately, this scale resembles one of the most popular framings of the pre war era narrative film, "Theatrical framing". In an effort to make the action easily comprehensible to viewers, initially camera placement was mainly functional. Mimicking the medium of its name, "Theatrical framing" saw all action occur in frame with the entirety of the actors' bodies being visible.[37] In addition to sharing angles with this type of framing, characters are also presented in a more efficient manner. Where in the previous views only one character was shown as a representative of the entire party, now all the characters in the group are displayed. Sprites are now rendered in a full body profile, and much larger than they were previously shown. With this greater size comes a greater level of detail placed on each character's presentation and movements. For instance, specific movements are now allotted to characters attacking, casting a spell, and using curative items, details that are not represented in the other scales. In this scale only (with some very limited exceptions) monsters and enemies are visible. Unlike the character sprites, however, they are completely static and exist only as portraits.

While this perspective boasts more detail in its rendering of the characters and enemies, there is a significant drop in detail of the surrounding world. The only connector to the original location where the fight randomly occurred is a small, banner like illustration spanning the top of the screen. Depending on the location of the battle, the appearance of this banner varies. If exploring a forest when a battle is enacted, a forest

[37] Thompson, Kristin, and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. 2nd ed (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), 44 45

backdrop of trees and bushes is displayed; if in a castle, a hallway with mounted torches and pillars is shown, and so on and so forth. While small in size, the banner is integral for this scale to achieve an illusion of diegetic integration. The greater detail in the image helps realize the closer perspective and accentuate the lower angle. For instance, the horizon is often visible, something that was impossible to see in the other scales due to their higher angles **[*figures 4.4, 4.8, 4.12, and 4.16*]**. Without this small strip of pixels the scale would be completely incoherent, presenting an otherwise abstract moment alienated from the rest of the game's diegesis.[38]

Final Fantasy II saw the addition of one more scale, and with it the redefining of a previously established one. Where in *Final Fantasy* the dungeon/town scale were one and the same in terms of proportions and aesthetic rules, *Final Fantasy II*'s new scale separates them.

4. The Interior Scale

The interior scale, more closely resembling the surrounding proportions of a *medium long shot (MLS),* takes place whenever the player enters any building or dungeon. In the first *Final Fantasy* all the buildings that could be entered in town were only of commercial and functional ludic nature, (i.e. item shops, weapon shops, inns, etc.). Understandably the designers chose to represent them appropriately, through a series of text based menus, and as such the interiors of buildings were never represented visually.

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[38] *"An incoherent world is characterized by the fact that we cannot reasonably fill in the gaps in the world. It is not easy to generalize about where the border lies, but an informal test is the retelling test: For a given game, is it possible to describe what really happened in the game without resorting to describing the rules, props, or real world situation where the game was played?"*
Juul, Jesper. *Half Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005), 141.

With *Final Fantasy II* came an increased focus on narrative and an enrichment of the diegesis. As such many non ludic, narrative elements were added to the game. Towns, for instance, saw the addition of residential buildings. Due to the difficulty to represent homes through a series of functionality serving menus, the decision to visually render the interior of buildings came about. The closer scale allowed for the interiors of these buildings to be rendered with a greater level of detail. For instance, the walls have more detailed textures, the floors are tiled, rooms are furnished, etc. Dungeons were now rendered with the same consideration, adding a whole new level of depth and ambiance considerations to their designs. In addition to this closer framing, there was a slight revision of angle. Where in the town view the angle is closer to a seventy degree elevation, the interior view sees something closer to sixty degrees. This difference is clear when comparing the variance in proportions between walls and ceilings. Where in the town view the tops of buildings are proportionally larger with the outside walls being stunted, the interior view sees a greater emphasis on the walls proportions, making them appear longer and taller. Another indication of this angle change can be found in the game's presentation of stairs. For instance, in F*inal Fantasy 1's* dungeons stairs were represented by a small square space, about the size of the character sprite. In the square three stairs (going up or down) are squished together on top of each other, aptly representing the perspective of an elevated angle. In *Final Fantasy II*'s dungeons the stairs are stretched out and have a much more gradual inclination. No longer are they the size of a character sprite, but in relation to the taller walls, are stretched out over the size of many squares. Due to the relatively "correct" proportions in this scale (in respect to the aforementioned views), the interior view can be considered the "neutral" scale. For

instance, going back to using the character sprite as a measuring stick, in a residential building two character sprites would make up the size of a bed, having closer accordance to real world proportions **[*figures 4.3, 4.7, 4.11, and 4.15*].**

As previously mentioned in the opening paragraph of this section, there is very little change in these shot scales over the series entirety. Aside from some slight reviews of angle and scale like in the transition between *Final Fantasy I* and *II*, no other changes of noteworthy mention occurs. Instead, in the next chapter, in addition to discussing the tweaks to the system, a greater emphasis will be placed on *how* these scales are used.

INTERTITLES

Much like shot scale, the use of intertitles plays a huge part in the presentation of *Final Fantasy*. Initially in the series all dialogue, narration, and many actions were presented through the use of text. What differentiates the games from the traditional film usage is the manner in which the text is delivered. While in film text is most often separated unto another shot entirely, *Final Fantasy* integrates the text into the existing shots in the form of text boxes. For instance, when prompting a conversation with an NPC a blue box will appear, slowly crawling down from the top of the screen, accompanied by a sound cue, and present what that particular character has to say. Once the player is finished reading, via button prompt, the screen returns where it came using a reverse of both the introductory animation and sounds **[*figure 5.1 and 5.2*]**.

In each view the text box has a different function and form. The above described example is how it appears in the town/interior view. In these views the text box will appear every time the player talks to an NPC, reads a sign, interacts with the environment,

picks ups an item, or uses an item, either presenting what is being said or describing the action ("picked up a potion", "the lute begins to play a somber tune", etc.). In instances of conversation, the text boxes only represent the words of the NPCs. The game presents its main characters as silent protagonists, with their intentions only implicit through their (and the player's) actions and what the surrounding NPCs have to say.

Aside from some minor cosmetic differences, the text boxes remained mostly unchanged in the transition to *Final Fantasy II*. Gone are the accompanying sounds with each text box appearance, and the slow crawl from the top of the screen. In its stead the boxes crawl at a much quicker pace and are completely silent. Perhaps the most important change is that text could now scroll within the box. With *Final Fantasy* each text box was limited to whatever was written in the space initially. As such, all story information and conversations were at the mercy of the dimensions of the text box. *Final Fantasy II* eliminates this limitation with scrollable text, allowing for more dynamic conversations to be presented. This change serves the now represented voices of the main characters/player's avatars quite aptly. In *Final Fantasy II* characters are no longer talked "at" but take an active role in the conversations that could now aptly be represented.

Text in the overworld view is almost non existent, and remains that way for the duration of the series until the first 3D polygon based installment (*Final Fantasy VII*, 1997). This absence of text in the OW helps maintain the functional aura of this view as an interactive map. Under this logic, conversations and descriptions of actions could not be displayed, as this view is largely a topographical representation of the world and the sprite on it a mere avatar of the "real" character sprite. Only in the neutral proportioned

scales of the town/interior views could conversations and more discernable actions logically take place and therefore be represented.

On the other scale extreme, text in the battle scale is central in its presentation. For instance, this scale sees more than half of the screen dedicated to static text boxes. Where in the town/interior views the text boxes appeared and reappeared when needed, the battle view contains two large areas, laid horizontally at the bottom of the screen and vertically on the right, which are dedicated solely to displaying text ***[figure 4.4]***. The bottom horizontal portion of the screen relayed information both of a narrative and ludic nature. Here, dependent on the player's input and the enemies' actions, attacks are described (i.e. the amount of successful hits landed, the type of spell being used, when a character/enemy died, if a battle was won/lost, etc.) and in addition information more central to ludic concerns are also relayed (i.e. the amount of damage points reduced from the character's/enemy's total health, the amount of experience points gained, etc.). Moreover this is where the "command box" appears, a dropdown menu where the player chooses what type of actions they would like their character to do, another game play centric feature. In the vertical space on the right of the screen exists a constant display of the party's status (total number of health points with their respective names). It could be argued that all of the aforementioned ludic centric text boxes help in the creation of the battle's narrative by adding to the atmosphere of the fight and the physical states of the characters.[39] However, the manners in which they are displayed (i.e. through numbers and menus, the latter housing an implication of choice and active spectatorship) segregate

[39] *"Rules and fiction interact, compete, and compliment each other. A video game may project a world and the game may be played in only a part of this fictional world. Examining a number of game examples in detail, it turns out fiction in videogames plays an important role in making the player understand the rules of the game."*
Juul, *Half Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds, 163.*

it from anything possible in film, and thus fall outside what could be covered in the overall corpus of film studies. Because of its form, and its function being predominantly ludic, these two facets of the battle view will not be explored any further.

With *Final Fantasy II* we see a more streamlined version of the battle view. In this slight reiteration the design allows alleviation from descriptive text in favor of more elaborate visuals. For instance, when the party escapes a battle there is no longer a message indication but rather the party just runs off screen. The space of the screen is also realigned, removing some of the static text boxes. The vertical status bar has now been removed and reformatted to the bottom of the screen. In its stead the battle scene is greatly increased lengthwise, allowing more breathing room for the characters sprites, enemies, special effects, and animations to play out **[*figure 4.8*]**.

The aforementioned usage of text in the two games is evocative of two different types of intertitles employed in early silent film: *expository titles*, and *dialogue titles*. Expository titles, the most common of the two types used in film, is essentially the voice of a non diegetic narrator. This voice took the role of introducing scenes, situations, indicating a passage of time (i.e. “several hours later”) or chapters of a book in literature adaptations (example: *The Inherited Taint* (1911)). One of the earliest examples of this can be seen in the film *The House that Jack Built* (1901). In this film intertitles are used to prepare audiences for an upcoming special effect. Here, a small boy knocks down a castle just constructed by a little girl out of children's building blocks. At that moment a title appears onscreen reading “Reversed”, and the action repeats in reverse to give the illusion that the castle reconstructs itself. This rather jarring juxtaposition of titles was put into place so the contemporary audiences would not miss the visual novelty the film

attempts to convey. The coddling that this implementation of intertitles provides was common in early narrative films in order to keep audiences afoot while experiencing this new and confusing visual medium. During the nickelodeon era as film durations increased, so did the number of intertitles being used.[40] In *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903, 13 minutes), for instance, an intertitle was placed at the beginning of every shot to introduce the situation and upcoming events.[41]

Non diegetic narration is almost a constant presence in both *Final Fantasy* games discussed thus far. As discussed earlier, in the town/interior views expository titles appear in numerous situations by means of the dropdown text box. In battles large portions of the screen are dedicated to a space where descriptions of the actions, that may not be immediately apparent through visual means, are provided. Much like these early film examples, the games coddled the spectator's viewing experiences by being as literal and descriptive as possible. As with film this is something that changed over time. As the languages for each medial object were being established, and simultaneously understood, the usage of these expository titles eventually disappeared.

In cinema's historical timeline, dialogue titles appeared quite some time later with a consistent and diffused usage only established by around 1908. *An Auto Heroine,* or it's alternative title, *The Race For the Vitagraph Cup and How it Was Won (1908, Vitagraph)* was one of the earliest examples, and therein only containing a couple of dialogue titles. In these formative years the precise integration of titles was inconsistent. For instance, initially the titles are placed between shots, creating a rather jarring disconnect between when the character gestured and when the words appeared on screen. By 1912 films saw

[40] Thompson, Kristin, and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. 2nd ed (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), 44.
[41] Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 30

a different trend in dialogue titles placement. Around this time filmmakers began to place them before characters gestured to talk integrating them within the shot. This became the standard by 1914, resolving any exceedingly jarring disconnects as a result of the older placement practices **[*figure 6.1 to 6.3*].**[42] With the rise of more elaborate, lengthier narratives came an increased focus on character psychology. And as such dialogue titles progressively became a key technique filmmakers would rely on. The titles were able to suggest characters' thoughts more precisely than gestures could alone.[43]

Final Fantasy saw a similar change of its use of dialogue across its first two installments. In comparison to the later titles, the first game is rather thin in dialogue. Moreover these infrequent moments of dialogue held mostly a functional role. They ultimately served a ludic function, aiding in the player's directional progression and exploration, essentially guiding their game play path. Very seldom did dialogue add to the lore or enrich the diegesis of the game. Combining the rather informative nature of NPC dialogue with the fact that the main characters were completely silent, it is to no surprise that individuality and character psychology was not a priority in development, an observation that could aptly apply to the usage of dialogue titles in early narrative film. As previously touched upon, *Final Fantasy II* saw an implementation of individual character identities, a design choice that would eventually become a hallmark and defining characteristic of the series. Where previously characters were only being talked at, they now had an active participatory role. Conversations and dialogue between the protagonists and NPCs would become a key vehicle of narrative progression. In addition to divulging ludically charged information, characters would express emotions,

[42] Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 44
[43] Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 44

motivations, and showcase individual character traits via these exchanges. Unfortunately, where films had the luxury of character movement and acting to compliment the dialogue text, *Final Fantasy* did not, at least not for another two installments. Due to the tiny character models' rather harsh animation restrictions in the designated narrative scales (town/interior), and to the limited graphical capabilities of the NES/Famicom platform, much greater pressure was placed on text to express character psychology and actions. Naturally, with this change there was a substantial increase in the amount of text.

TINTING

Like the applications of *shot scale* and *intertitles*, *tinting* sees very little evolution from within the series after a certain point. Most of the variations and their associated meanings are infused and established into the series' aesthetic language by the first entry on the Super Nintendo/Super Famicom, *Final Fantasy IV*. In the later entries, while the basic meanings are still present, there is a refinement of the formula, with greater variations within each tint's application. Where in the initial games the usage is rather formulaic, the latter games handle each moment uniquely and deserve a proper analysis due to this. For the moment this section will concentrate on the origins of tinting in the series in the first two games, and the problematic classification in its initial identification due to some basic discrepancies within the medium. Before coming to the game, however, I will briefly explain the history of tinting in cinema.

The exact chronology of where and when tinting was first applied in film, and by whom it was first used, is not very clear. Film scholars maintain that the exact date of

inception was not recorded due to it originating in several places at the same time.[44] Its proliferation into regular filmmaking practices was a slow one with very few notable examples prior to the end of the 19th century.[45] The first significant example to surface was with James Williamson's *Fire! (1901)* where red was effectively used to enhance the title subject. Regular usage only occurred after 1908, and previous to this year very few standout examples existed.[46] By definition, tinting is a simple, post production technique of bringing color to black and white films. The result of the tinting process saw the coloring of the whites of the film stock, while maintaining the blacks and darker portions of the frame relatively intact.[47] Imagine watching a black and white film through a colored filter, if you will. However, considering that all of these games are in color, how could this technique even be relevant in this analysis? Why would designers turn to this formal technique used in an initially colorless medium? Looking closer at its original contextual definitions and applications in cinema, and comparing it to the nature of video game productions makes a relevant compromise into why this older technique made a reappearance here.

Tinting was a post production process specifically because it brought something to film that was not possible during actual production: color. While bringing extra dynamism and realism (i.e. coloring an object its natural colors) were some of the goals of this process, another function was adding visual clarity to an object or scene. For instance, considering the reliance on artificial, indoor sets in narrative filmmaking's

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[44] Cherchi Usai, Paolo, and British Film Institute. *Silent Cinema: An Introduction* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), 23.
[45] Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: An Introduction,* 23
[46] Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: An Introduction,* 23
[47] Thompson, Kristin, and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. 2nd ed (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), 45.

formative years (to be discussed in the next section on ***set design***) filmmakers had some trouble relaying the intended time of day. In addition to the expository intertitle route, many filmmakers turned to tinting, early on establishing color codes into which color meant what. In the case of night scenes different shades of blue were typically used, and for day scenes sunlight was represented by yellow, or sepia **[*see figure 7.3*]**.[48]

Final Fantasy's world is one that is stuck in a state of perpetual daytime. There is not a single instance of night, or the darkness that accompanies it. With *Final Fantasy II* came the first instance of night being represented visually in the series, albeit in a very limited number of scenes. The only time night appears is when the player/character goes to sleep in an inn. Over the course of a couple of seconds the game's screen fades from its lively, bright color scheme, into one shrouded in a dark blue veil. In accordance with the same color codes established in early filmmaking practices, blue is associated with night. However, what makes this process *tinting* specifically? While the means of how it occurs is completely different, the basic idea behind it, more specifically the philosophy of its application, is almost identical. As with *Final Fantasy*, *Final Fantasy II's* world was constructed as one devoid of darkness. Aside from these brief nighttime interludes, everything else in the world is presented as if it is the middle of the day. No matter how long the player walks across the world, climbs a tower, or stands idle in town, the game never represents any instance of daylight or nighttime cycles. Instead, its contrived application and representation of night is overlaid the existing world template in the form of a blue veil **[*figure 7.1 to 7.3*].** This is exceedingly similar to early filmmaking practices where tinting is a process occurring after the film has already been shot. Both products

[48] Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 45.

had their initial forms (black and white film and pre constructed worlds respectively) and are only subsequently manipulated when they need be.

Over the course of *Final Fantasy II* tinting occurs in three distinct situations, two of which are isolated moments, and the third is a regular occurrence over the course of the game. The regular application, as previously mentioned, is the tinting of the screen blue in night scenes, only occurring in the context of sleeping in an inn. The other two are slightly different in motivation, but very similar in execution. One instance sees the game screen tint to a dark purple. Looking at the scene that it occurs in, the desired effect becomes quite apparent. At a late stage in the game the player and party, in search of a missing princess, enters a room of an enemy's castle. Upon entering the room, in the distance the princess can be seen. However, once the player begins to talk to her, uncharacteristically she begins to seduce the main character in a rather suggestive fashion. Sensing something's amiss the protagonist questions the princess' identity. At this point the game screen tints to purple, and the imposter reveals herself as a lamia: a half snake, half human demon seductress. The purple in this situation enhances and foreshadows a seduction spell being cast on the main protagonist. Unlike the blue tint, in which it aims to represent a physical state (nighttime) the purple tint solely exists as a mood enhancer. The remaining example functions in a manner similar to this one as a mood enhancer. This occurs right before the final encounter with the game's main antagonist, the evil emperor of the Palamecia kingdom. Upon initiating a conversation with the emperor, the game screen slowly darkens eventually being covered by a dark haze, aptly reflecting the evil nature of the emperor.

Several instances of tinting for the purposes of mood enhancement can be gathered from early silent film. For instance, yellow was often associated with cowardice, red with anger and violence. Many other colors were used and were presented as options for filmmakers. A Kodak Sonochrome sample plate, for instance, showcases sixteen different options for tinting ranging from cold blues, warm reds, to leafy greens (a purple not unlike the one used in the *Final Fantasy II* included).[49] However, due to these colors never being codified with meaning or at the very least having a public consensus, form and meaning were always in flux.[50] The *Final Fantasy* series, however, maintains the meaning of each tint once it has been introduced. Night is always associated with blue, and purple with seduction, and in later entries red becomes associated with fire. I will come back to additional moments of tinting in *Final Fantasy* later in this thesis.

SET DESIGN

The film studies term of "set design" works quite well when discussing video games. However, where in film "set design" mainly applies to instances where sets are designed and constructed and not instances of on location shooting, with video games it can apply to a much wider spectrum. Programmers, artists and designers construct and design everything in a video game. All of the game's rules, fiction, and everything in between, is carefully constructed and designed. In many ways a game's fiction and everything therein (i.e. the imagined world, the characters, etc.[51]) is the main focus of this study because of these contrivances. In terms of the inherent nature of these constructed

[49]Cherchi Usai, Paolo, and British Film Institute. *Silent Cinema: An Introduction* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), 25
[50] Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: An Introduction,* 26
[51]Juul, Jesper. *Half Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005), 123

worlds, games hold a situation very similar to that of early narrative film where constructed sets were the standard.

While initially the very first films (both fictional and "actualities") were shot outdoors (i.e. *Arroseur arosé*, Lumiere brothers, 1895) simple painted backdrops in indoor studios were soon adopted and remained popular for the decades to come.[52] The use of painted backdrops, an artifact of theatrical set design, essentially used paintings of flat surfaces to add a layer of depth that the limited space in a studio was not able to realistically evoke. After the construction of his studio in 1897, pioneer French filmmaker, Georges Méliès, used painted theatrical styled sets almost entirely.[53] The use of interchangeable canvas flats allowed for Méliès to have a greater control over the appearances and desired fictional locations his narratives could take place in. The function and aesthetics resulting from Méliès' constructed, two dimensional painted sets presents a useful analogy to the first two *Final Fantasy* games' set design. In terms of set design there initially seems to be very little difference between the first two games. However, several subtle but key changes in *Final Fantasy II* not only set it apart from its predecessor, but also set in motion many aesthetic changes that would remain in the series forever. These changes will be explored after the set up in *Final Fantasy* is presented.

This notion of a "painted set" works well with *Final Fantasy* on a few key levels. As mentioned previously, in the video game medium everything is constructed, reflecting studio set design on a whole. However, unique to the first *Final Fantasy* (relative to the

[52] Thompson, Kristin, and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. 2nd ed (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), 21.
[53] Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 24 25

rest of the series, not the medium) everything is exceedingly "flat" in the game, better reflecting painted sets more specifically. While "flatness" could technically be considered a characteristic of any of the first six installments (all are constructed with a 2D graphic aesthetic) all other titles attempt an illusion of depth. *Final Fantasy*, across every view and shot scale, has no techniques that attempt such an illusion, resulting in a set design that is completely static, reminiscent of Méliès' canvases. For instance, in both the overworld and town views, aside from the few NPCs walking around, the set design is composed entirely of a static image. Water stays still, doors remain closed after walking through them, and treasure chests remain closed even after extracting their contents. There is very little motion. When moving around, even though the world is presented at a slightly elevated angle, the player cannot move behind anything that one would assume would have an explorable space behind them (i.e. buildings, trees, etc.). Only the space that is visible on the map and viewable to the "camera" is accessible. Much like how in a painting or photograph a spectator cannot see behind objects and are only being able to access what is presented on the surface of the canvas.

The battle view provides another example that is directly comparable to film's usage of painted backdrops. This view, as previously established, already reflects early narrative film in both scale and perspective (see ***shot-scale*** section). In addition, the banner at the top of the screen during this scale not only reflects painted backdrops in terms of flatness, but in form and function as well. In terms of function the banner can best be described as a backdrop for the fight scene; without it the fight scene would have no connection to the world and shot scales surrounding it. In contrast to the rest of the game' set design, which holds more of a topographical function and cookie cutter

aesthetic than anything else, (i.e. most buildings, trees, mountains, lakes, or rivers look the same from location to location) the banner actually looks like a painting. The appearance is comparatively dramatic and dynamic relative to the rest of the set design, aptly reflecting the dynamism of the view's contained subject matter, the thrill of battle. Where previous incarnations of the same objects in the other scales are flat and repetitive, in the battle view forests are lush, rivers bubble with life, swamps are tangled in vines, and the horizon puts the vastness of the ocean into perspective. Furthermore, the wide variety of images being displayed in the banners, coupled with the consistent scale and framing of the battle view, recalls the interchangeability of Méliès' studio design **(see figure 9.1 to 9.4)**. The same space (the battle scale) regains new life dependent on the subject of the banner. The banner system remains mostly the same in the *Final Fantasy II* with the main differences being in the variety of banner types (reflecting the wider variety of locations and geography in the game) and a slightly wider form to accommodate the new layout of the textboxes **[*figure 4.8*]**. The fight banner remains a mainstay over the rest of the 2D installments. Its evolution and expansion will be discussed in the chapters to come. This comparison demonstrates that not only does the form of these two medial objects run parallel, but also certain modes of production as well.

Final Fantasy II sees several changes in set design across other shot scales. For instance, the overworld sees a greater variety in geographical locations (i.e. snow fields, volcanoes), movement is added to the oceans, and even natural disasters occur in some contrived narrative sequences. The richer design and increased movement in the landscapes transforms the overworld from a glorified map to a viable stage for narrative

events to take place in. The town scale sees several changes as well. From the barren, virtually identical locales and buildings of *Final Fantasy* there is a shift towards individuality in the design. Architecturally unique buildings adorn the streets within each town's layout. As in the overworld, water in the rivers sees motion; life literally runs through the towns. The new interior scale is perhaps the strongest example of this general increase of detail. Each accessible building and castle now has fully furnished interiors. Bookcases, lamps, fireplaces, tables and beds, all details integral in presenting a space that is livable to the NPC citizens. Furthermore, an increased variety in dungeon design reflects, even perhaps eclipses, the increased geography variety in the overworld. However, the greatest change, and most relevant to this analysis of inter medium objects, is the overall increased emphasis on depth.

In contrast to the flatness in *Final Fantasy*, *Final Fantasy II* employs several techniques, varying in effectiveness, to create an illusion of depth in the overworld, town, and interior scales. The "painted" aesthetic is traded in for a more haptic[54] design, a space that could be interacted with and moved through, instead of merely being moved on. Most of the techniques used in these two games to achieve this sense of depth can be traced back to innovations within several films dated between 1905 1912; an era that saw a global transition from theatrically inspired painted sets in favor of more three

[54] Haptic visuality is defined by Laura Marks as to be a more tactile viewing experience, "as if touching a film with one's eyes", and "the eyes themselves function like organs of touch." The film can "move over the surface of its object rather than plunge into illusionist depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture." The term works exceedingly well with the videogame medium as the player can maneuver their avatar, an extension of themselves, to touch the various objects in the game world.
Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 162

dimensional designs.[55] One of the first moves towards three dimensional set design can be seen in the film *100 to One Shot* (1906, Vitagraph). This film combined solid, actual set pieces with painted backdrops. For instance, in one particular scene, while the majority of the set is still painted (i.e. the back wall, fireplace, doorframe, windows, flowerpots, and even the sunlight coming from the windows) the table and chairs are real.[56] By 1909 most of the previously painted details saw real objects replace them. With this transition towards real sets, the actors could now interact with their surroundings. From opening windows to simply standing behind objects, sets were no longer static and passive representations, but now took an active role in the film and in the actors' performances.

The transition from *Final Fantasy* to *Final Fantasy II* was not as gradual as a process as it was with film. Instead, many of the aforementioned tactics were implemented in one fell swoop. These design changes are most apparent in how the characters interact with their surroundings and, as a result, the different relationship they have with the "camera". For instance, characters could now move behind structures and various objects, consequently placing them out of sight from the game's "camera". This demonstrated that the structures had their own geometry and no longer were simply "painted" on. Walking through a body of shallow water results in half of the character's sprite being cut off, mimicking a semi submerged state. This demonstrates the floor's presence in relation to its active surroundings. No longer acting merely as flat tiles, the floor now has variable textures and forms. Perhaps the most effective tactic of all is the addition of a "foreground." By placing objects on top of the character sprite, (i.e. vines in

[55] Thompson, Kristin, and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. 2nd ed (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), 46.
[56] Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 46

a cave, tree branches in a forest etc.), the designers suggest another plane of space. With these simple changes characters are able to interact with the environment in front of, below, and above them, effectively destroying the "painted on" effect from the last game. However, the changes in the set design did not stop here. In addition to changes in the most immediate surroundings of the characters, the game also uses the power of suggestion, referring to off screen space.

The films of Swedish set designer turned filmmaker, Af Klercher, aptly previews *Final Fantasy's* first foray into using off screen space. In his film *Mysterious Night of the 25th* (1917) by using background rooms, often just visible through beaded curtains, and mirrors, Af Klercher skillfully suggests off screen space, revealing action occurring outside of the frame.[57] While not as intricately designed, *Final Fantasy II* employs similar techniques with similar intentions, albeit with varying effectiveness. For instance, in most interior spaces the exit is represented on a back wall in the form of an open, arched doorway through which the exterior of the building/location is be shown. This effectively connects the currently occupied interior space with the exterior space from which the player had just entered from or is exiting to. While no visible "action" occurs in this archway, its presence reminds the player that a space exists outside of the one currently being explored. Another instance of using off screen space occurs at only one point in the game and has some rather dumbfounding results. On a multi leveled dungeon near the end of the game, the player encounters enemy soldier sprites walking about. When the player goes up a floor, the enemy soldiers, from the previously explored lower level, become partially visible through a grating **[*figure 8*]**. While the attempt is admirable and the intentions are clear, its execution is not. In the transition between

[57] Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 65

floors the enemy sprites remain the same size. If the desired effect of depth is to be understood the sprites need to shrink in order to represent the relative change in height. Furthermore the floor, on which the enemy sprites were once walking on, is non existent. Consequently, the enemy sprites seem to be floating in mid air in a room adjacent to where the player/character is. This multilayered use of off screen space took a hiatus after this attempt and only resurfaced in *Final Fantasy IV*, eventually becoming a mainstay and cornerstone of the series' set design and illusory depth techniques.

EDITING

Editing, or montage, defines film language as we know it.[58] While not as central to the video game medium, in this genre, and within the *Final Fantasy* series more specifically, editing is definitely the most frequent and obvious cinematic technique being used. Now that all the basics have been discussed, editing, being the element that unites all of the games formal systems together, appropriately, is the final comparison that I will make in this chapter. The basic foundational structure of the game's presentation (i.e. the four scales) depends entirely on editing to create a cohesive, comprehensible world. The editing matches numerous congruous and incongruous elements, making sense of the variances in the aesthetic laws across each of the scales. Over the course of the first two games there exists some moments of style based editing (in the *cut scenes*), however, the vast majority of editing occurs for the purposes of maintaining continuity. For this reason, the discussion will begin here. Typically, the game's other formal elements make continuity easy as they have several key design similarities across their respective scale representations. However, amongst these design choices there is a small amount of

[58]Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2001), 148.

formal elements that compromise this visual fidelity. Whether it is the sometimes inconsistent color palettes of the sprites between the overworld/town/interior scales and those in the battle scale, or the incoherent object to scale relativity, some elements are counter productive to the game's efforts towards creating an illusion of a continuous space **[*figure 4.1 to 4.8*]**. It is in these moments precisely, the transitional imperfections between scales, where the game's editing techniques and rules (there is an automated component to the editing, hence the word *rules* [59]) pick up the slack to make sense of the disparity.

By means of frequent exposure to situationally distinct transitions due to the repetitive nature of the game play, over time the player is able to match visual elements that may not make sense initially. Let us begin the discussion with the first *Final Fantasy*. In terms of continuity editing, the game cuts in several situations, each marked with one of two stylized transitions. The first transition occurs whenever the player enters or exits any location or moves between floors within those locations. In these situations a variant of the familiar cinematic "wipe" transition occurs. Here, two black screens, slowly crawling from the top and bottom of the screen, simultaneously meet in the middle whilst a descending in tone synthesized sound plays. Immediately after plays it is followed by the exact reverse of the transition, both in terms of the visuals and audio elements, with the crawl opening from the middle to reveal the character sprite in the same spatial positioning in the frame, however now in different spatial context. The transition initially seems jarring, but its purpose and function is immediately recognizable: the linking of

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[59] *A side effect of this automation is that once particular cultural codes are implemented in low level software and hardware, they are no longer seen as choices but as unquestionable defaults.*

Manovich, *The Language of New Media,* 63

two very differently designed spaces [***figure 10.1 to 10.4***]. Due to the frequency of exposure to this transition, over time it becomes invisible and its function eventually becomes inherent to the player's understanding of the aesthetic system. This repetition and the effects of over exposure occur with the game's other transition as well. This second transition takes place in four different situations: when entering/leaving a battle, and when entering/leaving a store in town. Here, two flashes of multiple colors overtake the screen followed by a quick fade to black. Uniquely used for entering a battle, the aforementioned flashes are accompanied by two crunching sounds effects. This difference is important, as it differentiates the two situations on a basic level, allowing the viewer/player to make distinctive, inherent associations. Eventually these transitions become invisible and the player primarily understands and focuses on their meanings: they are about to engage in battle or enter a store. The transitions become part of the game's language, with each preempting and foreshadowing a different perspective of the game space and visual style. The other visual details in the scales linking the spaces, such as the "painted backdrop" in the battle scale, the town iconography in the overworld with the matching buildings in the town scale, are all secondary connectors when considering the transitions. The visual details are noticed subsequently, and gain relevance because of the transitions' accrued, clear meanings.

Semblances of continuity editing in narrative cinema can be traced back to as early as 1898. In the opening shot of the film, *Come Along, Do!* (dir. Robert W. Paul), an old couple standing outside an art exhibition follows a group of people inside through the entrance. Continuing the action from the previous shot, the next shot demonstrates what the group does once inside. It was not until a year later did a true revision, expansion, and

conscious effort towards continuity editing begin. Known as the "Brighton School" (due to their being based in the resort town of Brighton, England), a group of filmmakers developed the fundamentals of continuity editing over a few short years. During this period both a refinement and establishment of new techniques surfaced.[60] For instance, the film *The Kiss in the Tunnel* (1899, dir. George Albert Smith) elaborates on the traces of continuity showcased in *Come Along Do!* from a year earlier. The film begins with a shot of a "phantom ride" at the entrance of a tunnel. From this shot the film then cuts to the interior of a railway carriage, where a man sneakily kisses a woman, after which the film cuts back to the initial shot, only now with the ride coming out of the tunnel. In 1900, with the film *The Big Swallow,* we see the first usage of invisible editing. The most remarkable example, however, can be found in Smith's 1903 comedy, *Mary Jane's Mishap*, and its valiant attempt of continuous action over several shots. From a basic, distant framing of a disheveled maid, the film is interrupted by several cut ins to medium framings to show a closer framing of her facial expressions **[*figure 11.3 and 11.4*].** Although the actor's position is not accurately matched between cuts, there is indeed an attempt at continuous action in the application of closer shots to guide the spectator's attention.[61] This example, including its basic concept and all of its intrinsic errors, best reflects the formative stages of *Final Fantasy's* scale system. In common with Smith's 1903 comedy, many instance in *Final Fantasy* attempt to show a single space through numerous different scales. For instance, at any given moment a player can stand outside of a town, inside of the same town (and in buildings starting with *Final Fantasy II*), and battle in a town, with each instance being represented by a different shot and scale of the

[60] Thompson, Kristin, and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. 2nd ed (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), 27.
[61] Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 27

same space. With both objects, while the images or actions may technically not match from shot to shot, the basic idea is understood, with the blanks and inconsistencies being filled in by the spectators and players' minds alike **[*figure 11.1 to 11.4*]**. They both serve as starting points, and make up the basic principles for the dominant editing style of each of their respective contexts over the years to come.[62]

The type of editing stumbled upon in *Mary Jane's Mishap* eventually became what was later named "analytical editing". This type of editing, developed between 1905 1911, and mostly practiced in the 1910s, explores a single space through several shots, using different shot scales to reveal finer details and new information of a singular space.[63] In its original cinematic context this type of editing was usually used in conjunction with a wider establishing master shot. *Final Fantasy* adheres to these basic rules of analytical editing, however, applies it to a constantly moving camera motivated by the main character's sprite placement in the center of the frame. Taking this variance into consideration, an appropriate title, in accordance to film studies terms, can be given to *Final Fantasy's* dominant aesthetic: *analytical moving camera editing.*

As with most of the outlined elements so far*, Final Fantasy II* saw some minor cosmetic changes with the addition of a few new techniques. For one, the animation of the black crawl transition was slightly modified. By removing the former half of the sound effect accompaniment of the transition, the game makes the process slightly subtler, putting a greater emphasis on the surrounding visual aspects. This slight change demonstrates the designers' gradual refining the game's visual language. They assume that players already understand the relationship between spaces and are slowly removing

[62] Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 27
[63] Bachman, Gregg, and Thomas J. Slater, *American Silent Film: Discovering Marginalized Voices* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 85 86

some of the aesthetic "training wheels", if you will. This motion towards streamlined transitions continues over the course of the entire series, eventually simplifying the process to mere fades to black, both to and fro (to be discussed further in ***Chapter 2***). The transitions used for battle sequences, however, follow a different evolutionary aesthetic path. Instead of slowly phasing out the transition, there seems to be an increased emphasis on its exposure. While *Final Fantasy II* sees no changes, over the rest of the series there is an increased emphasis on the battle sequence's transition to standout, effectively embracing its jarring origins. The reason for this is simple: to highlight the change in mood. This type of transition will be examined more thoroughly in the subsequent chapter.

Another new addition to *Final Fantasy II* is the implementation of non interactive narrative moments. These are the moments in the game where all control is taken away from the player in order to showcase a scripted event with the singular purpose of advancing the plot and narrative. In terms of editing all of these sequences in *Final Fantasy II* follow the basic rule set from the interactive portions of the game, with one glaring exception. Upon the destruction of a warship's engine by the main characters, one character explains that they must escape before they are caught in the ensuing explosion. At this point a non interactive montage of the party's escape begins. Cutting several times (using the double crawl transition for each cut), the game greatly elides the escape by only showing flashes of the main character sprite standing on various flights of stairs, reviewing all of the warship's floors in the process. The sequence ends with a shot of the warship (in the overworld scale) exploding with the main character sprite appearing in its place after the explosion animation is finished. The sequence is very odd, and nothing

like it appears in the rest of the game or even in the remainder of the series, for that matter. Numerous other escape montages occur throughout the series, yet nothing is presented in such a minimalist and efficient fashion. Even in the extra medial context of the era of film history that this study draws upon, there is nothing quite like it. There is, however, the origin of elliptical editing, which this montage marks a first in the *Final Fantasy* series.

Initially a phenomenon with the opposite effect of elliptical editing was the norm in silent narrative cinema. In the first multi shot films filmmakers would often repeat actions between shots, a phenomena commonly referred to as *temporal overlap*. This was at once done deliberately and could legitimately labeled a "technique". In these instances the technique was intentionally used in order to guide audiences by matching the seemingly two different scenes together through a singular action.[64] However, it also occurred accidently. In these accidental instances, as a result of misguided intentions, audiences were confused by the lack of temporal fluidity. An example of the latter can be found in Edwin S. Porter's *The Life of an American Fireman (1903).* With this film Porter had not yet worked out a logical rendering of temporal cutting.[65] In a rather confusing series of shots, we see the rescue of a child and her mother occur two different times in succession, from an interior and exterior view of the same building. Of course this logic towards a smooth continuity was quickly refined and mastered by Porter, as made apparent in his masterpiece, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) released later that year. Eventually, once the rules of classical continuity editing had been formalized, codified and diffused into the greater film language, filmmakers began to experiment

[64] Fell, John L. *Film before Griffith (*Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 314 316.
[65] Bordwell, David, and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction.* 8th ed (New York: McGraw Hill Higher Education, 2007), 469.

with more efficient ways of telling a story. Only several years later, techniques of temporal ellipses, favoring efficient storytelling by trimming the spatial and temporal fat, began to surface. This era of temporal editing will be discussed in the following chapter as *Final Fantasy III* adopts many of these innovations.

CONCLUSION

In sum, through the preceding comparisons and references to filmic examples, this chapter categorized and defined many portions of *Final Fantasy I* and *II*'s aesthetic design. Let us review these. In the *shot scale* section the specifics of the games' staging and framing choices were justified in the context of some eclectic early film application. With a limited amount of framings able to be rendered due to technological constraints and limited memory allocation, efficiency, particularly in regards to relaying diegetic information, can be considered the main driving factor in the angle and proximity choice of each scale. In the *intertitle* section the usage of the text, and its evolutionary changes between games, was defined then justified through a comparison to early silent film's own proliferation of the technique. The outline of the utilization of two different types of intertitles from film (expository and dialogue) was able to determine and segregate the initially unarticulated text function from the games. The battle sequences in particular benefitted from this comparison, as what was on the surface determined to be purely ludic in nature could be seen as a variation of expository titles, serving narrative and ludic purposes simultaneously. The slight veering away from expository titles between games, due to a comparison to similar phenomena in film, was ultimately determined to be a move to better accommodate the audience/player's increasing familiarity with the series

evolving aesthetic cues. In the *tinting* section, it was demonstrated that the same tinting color codes that were applied in early film were used in the games. Slight deviations between each medial objects usages (same color convention, different meanings) aptly showcased the value of David Bordwell's concept of multi meaning for conventions in the understanding of the ever changing medium of the videogame. This determined that while codes can be carried over, in a different context the same convention could acquire different meanings. Perhaps benefitting the most from the comparison to film's evolution was the understanding of both games' handling of set design. The almost identical developmental paths between the two objects allowed for a thorough comparison and a resulting equally thorough understanding of the functionality and form of the games' aesthetic composition. The common transition from "painted" sets to more haptic spaces was a particularly substantial progression, showcasing a simultaneous application and disavowal from antiquated theatrical design tendencies. And finally in the *editing* section, through an examination of early continuity editing experimentations and practices, *Final Fantasy's* basic stylistic structure could be defined as a combination of the cinematic moving camera aesthetic and analytical editing. Additionally, following similar evolutionary reasons to the usage of text across both games, I suggested why that the changes in the transition aesthetics occurred in order to remove the proverbial language training wheels.

In this chapter, David Bordwell's understanding of "convention" as a cultural object with many possible meanings and effects proved useful to make sense of the various contexts and meanings garnered from similar techniques. Trying to directly transfer conventions and the accompanying codes from one medium's context to the next

may work occasionally due to coincidence (as it did with *tinting*) but more often than not a variation of the original function or meaning was needed due to reasons based on the fundamental differences between mediums. By looking at a convention as an object with a range of possible effects, transference of logic becomes an easier process and gains a much wider spectrum of application. The discussion of *editing* benefitted from this notion the most. In most cases here the techniques used looked the same as from their original context, but almost exclusively have different effects. For instance, take into consideration the *transition* discussion. Instead of the "wipe" holding a particular meaning in its placement between shots (i.e. a "wipe" typically signals a significant jump in space and/or time usually placed at the end of a scene, a common trope used in the *Star Wars* films) with *Final Fantasy* the transition was determined as a negotiation and connector of diegetic and aesthetic fidelity. Comparing these instances from the games to early cinema enables this study to point to what is unique and singular about the aesthetic techniques and conventions when used in this different context.

This spectrum approach to understanding conventions, whereby one convention could elicit many different meanings, works due to the inherent interactivity of the video game medium. For instance, take into consideration the transition convention again. While experienced passively by the player, in most contexts the convention is triggered through the player's actions. The convention only appears in set circumstances, yet can be repeated infinitely because of this trigger mechanism. Applying any significant temporal or spatial passage to this convention's appearance is impossible because of this repeatable nature. While they do share the most basic function as being a connector between shots, any more specified cultural meaning accrued and associated in previous

contexts must be disavowed. It would be tempting to simply state that the application of the technique is incorrect, something a scholar locked into his or her own disciplinary biases may state. However, in the end the technique exists, and just because it shares a common form with that of separate medial object's application it should not be limited to either familiar reception interpretations or artistic applications. By identifying these moments through the film medium's aesthetic logic, certain expectations are set. These expectations garnered from the original convention's context should be a guide in the analysis and comparison, not the ultimate determining factor in its eventual definition. If we can avoid the pitfall of blindly transferring specific conventional meanings and codes, these aforementioned expectations can be a considerably useful tool in forming proper adaptations of the cinematic aesthetic technique when adapting to video games, both in terms of receptive understanding and artistic application.

CHAPTER 2:

EXPERIMENTATION AND REVISION:

FINAL FANTASY III AND *FINAL FANTASY IV*

It is with these last two games in the study, *Final Fantasy III* and *IV*, that the parallel evolutions across media become most compelling, and most evident. Where the first two games established the core aesthetic rules that the series was to follow for the years to come, it is with *Final Fantasy III* and *IV* that these aesthetic rules see the first true expansion and revision from this established core. *Final Fantasy III* was very ambitious in this role, pushing the aging Famicom hardware to its absolute limits, at once renegotiating the set up formal parameters and expanding on the size of the world that was expected by players. As such, designers played many visual tricks with memory and processing efficiency, each with varying results. Some of these tricks were failures, particularly in regards to maintaining an overall aesthetic congruity (to be discussed at length later on). Some of the core concepts behind these failures resurfaced in later titles as inspiration for later design choices (on more feasible platforms), while some remained exclusive to the title. By the same token some of the visual tricks were successes, remaining in the franchise for the years to come, while some were inexplicably left out. The developers and designers of *Final Fantasy IV,* with the aid of a new set of development tools and a stronger platform to work on, took the opportunity to not expand on the ambitions from *Final Fantasy III* but to master them, realizing their respective concepts' full potential. This is evident in that many of the same design assets were used. From character sprites to mountain textures, *Final Fantasy IV* reinvigorated the series'

aesthetic quality by adding higher resolution textures and more diverse color palettes to once familiar designs. These seemingly superficial improvements had an enormous effect on every aspect of the game, particularly the congruity and universal coherence of the constructed world's formal system. Aesthetic fidelity between scales reached a point where the editing tricks outlined in the previous chapter were no longer fully necessary to produce the viewer/player's suspension of disbelief. As a result these elements were somewhat simplified, and fidelity could be achieved largely based on the game's set design. Through formal analysis, this chapter will detail the status of *Final Fantasy IV* as a culmination and refinement of the series aesthetic rules and systems.

That being said, *Final Fantasy IV* does not limit its breadth of revision to just elements from its direct predecessor, but also draws from moments from earlier iterations. This multi faceted revision is a central reason why this study looks at these four games specifically. To a certain extent, in terms of formal and aesthetic considerations, the first three games can be seen as prototypes to *Final Fantasy IV*. Additionally, *Final Fantasy IV* is the last game in the series that adopts silent film tropes and conventions so densely. While the remaining two dimensional entries, *Final Fantasy V* and *IV,* still have some silent film aesthetic tendencies, the density of possible points of comparison is significantly lower. The experimentation and mastering of these revisions, and comparisons to similar moments in film history, will be the center of this chapter's focus. Both subjects see similar revisions, expansions, and eventual masteries of many conventions and aesthetic design choices, allowing more points of comparison and subsequent articulations of the JRPG series. Allow me to return to the formal analysis of

elements of the series in order to draw out parallels and differences that develop in *Final Fantasy III* and *IV*.

SHOT SCALE

With *Final Fantasy III* there were very few changes to shot scale in regards to the basic fundamentals established in the first two games. The changes therein are specific to this game alone, and do not reflect the direction the series goes into afterwards. As will be discussed shortly the exclusivity of these scale alterations works both in favor of the overall direction the series takes, and in some cases against it. These changes mostly concern the cohesiveness and aesthetic fidelity between scales. While some of the changes are handled rather intuitively and enhance fidelity in a manner never again explored in the remainder of the series two dimensional entries, on the other end of the spectrum, the coherence breaking additions were more destructive to the series' accrued understanding and language surrounding scale. Ultimately, the exclusion of both experimental alterations benefitted the series as a whole.

The first change to be discussed is the inclusion of a new "half scale". It can be considered as a "half scale" because it contains the exact aesthetic laws of the other dominant scales, but generates different meanings because of its context at large. The first appearance of this half scale occurs in the early stages of the game and adopts the familiar form of the overworld scale. Everything here leads the player to believe that they are in fact in the overworld. Namely, all the familiar ratios of the character sprite size to the environment are present (i.e. towns, mountains, bodies of water, etc, are relatively small to the sprite), or at least it seems so initially. This environment is eventually

revealed to be a floating continent existing over a larger world. When the player learns of this a plot device throws them immediately into this larger world and upon landing the game presents this new space using the same assets and player sprite ratios as in the overworld scale.

While initially this makes sense, as both indeed serve as "overworlds", just with one presumably at a different elevation than the other, it is soon revealed that the floating continent is much smaller than the rest of this stumbled upon larger world. This realization occurs once the floating continent can be revisited later in the game. In the middle of one of the larger world's oceans the floating continent can be seen taking up a space about the same size as a typical town would **[*figure 12.3*].** The size of the floating continent's larger world representation immediately creates a dissonance of the established scale proportion logic. While in previous games the incongruous proportions of character sprite between scales was somewhat jarring, a suspension of disbelief was possible. The relational proportions here are so staggering that this suspension of disbelief becomes impossible. For instance, in this floating continent towns exist with their own scales, therein exists buildings each with their own scales **[*figure 12.1 to 12.4*]**. The character sprite's proportions alienate the player's immersion and compromise the integrity and fidelity of the world's construction cohesiveness. A simple alternative, adopted later in subsequent *Final Fantasy* games, of having the floating island off screen altogether, and to represent it as a shadow on the ocean or a waypoint on a map, would have avoided this immersion breaking moment altogether. Of the many aesthetic experiments in this game this is by far the biggest failure, and appropriate to the series game to game evolutionary progression, was never repeated again. The delicate and

sophisticated balance of the series scale and aesthetic fidelity negotiation truly stands because of this. The inclusion of a single disproportioned sprite was able to completely throw off the accrued proportional logic of the game.

Where the previous example demonstrates a confusing step backwards, there exist some techniques that do just the opposite, adding an unprecedented level of scale proportion fidelity. Unfortunately in these cases, as with the previous examples, these moments were never to surface in the series again. While most of these techniques will be explored at greater length in the sections to come, a little bit of time should be spent on this here as an indication of this particular game's inconsistent handling of shot scale. One sequence in the game sees the quick transition between three scales with an object transforming itself three times to appropriately fit in the proportions of the contextual scales. Upon reaching the summit of a mountain (in the interior scale) the game cuts to the overworld where the player's sprite, still on top of a mountain, is picked up by much larger sprite of a dragon and is flown off screen. Here, the game cuts to another location (in the interior scale) where the player encounters a nest of dragon eggs. After a few moments into their investigation, the party is met with by the familiar sounds of flapping wings. At this moment the character sprite stops its investigation, runs about nervously, and eventually turns to face the top of the screen to point out the return of the dragon. Here, the game cuts to the battle scale revealing the dragon in a much different rendering. After a few turns of unsuccessful attacks on the gigantic, screen spanning dragon, the party is forced to flee the battle. Upon escape the game cuts back to the mountain summit (in the interior scale) where it is revealed that the dragon has left. Anticipating another attack, the party agrees to jump off the mountain at which point the game cuts to a black

screen with the sprite in the middle spinning with a dropping sound effect. After the jump is complete, the game cuts to the overworld again, with the accompanying sound of a crash while the screen and sprite violently shake (to imply a landing).

For the first time in the series an interactive object (i.e. an item, weapon, NPC, mode of transportation, etc.) is represented differently across three scales. Due to the strict aesthetic and narrative functions each scale held, prior to this entry most interactive objects did not need to exist in more than one scale. For instance, non interactive narrative moments and NPC interaction were completely limited to the interior and town scales, therefore NPCs did not need another design. Monsters were largely represented in the battle scale with some extremely limited appearances in the interior scale (where they would also serve as an NPC/point of narrative), again having no need for further designs. Large scale transportation (i.e. travel via airship or boat) was only represented in the overworld scale, therefore any sprites or representations of these modes outside the overworld scale's proportions need not exist. The dragon, for the first time in the series, represented an object that served all of the above functions. At once it was a point of narrative interaction, the characters talked to and referred to it in a non interactive cut scene; it was also considered a monster, as the player/characters engaged it in battle in the battle scale; and it served as a mode of large scale transportation, it flies the party in the overworld scale. With this first (and only) instance of legitimized multi scale representation, the designers carefully handled the design proportions so it would make sense in all of its appearances.

When the dragon is physically being rendered (in the battle and overworld scales) the dragon proportionally matches the size of the character sprite (roughly an 8:1 scale).

Ingeniously the dragon is not physically rendered in the interior scale, and due to the spatial context it actually makes more sense that way. For instance, if the dragon is supposed to be flying high above the mountain, logically, from the height of the top down perspective in the interior scale it could not be seen. Only when it swoops down to attack is the dragon physically represented, when it is at the same elevation of the party. In the interior scale it only exists through the use of familiar sound effects first established in the overworld scale rendering, and through the words of the party. Cleverly the designers avoid having to physically render the object a third time, simultaneously working around the limited memory capabilities of the platform and respecting the spatial and proportional relations between scales. In the previous games enemies were never represented in the overworld, and for the only instances of it happening in the interior/town scale the representations would always be the same size as the player sprite, no matter their "actual" size (as regulated in the battle scale, the primary and central area of enemy rendering). Sound effects were never implemented either. The level of innovation and ingenuity in also for proportion continuity here is not only a high for this point in the series thus far, but in regards to the series as a whole. Hence, this should be considered one of the aesthetic successes of this game. There are plenty of instances of proportion fidelity across two scales in the remainder of the two dimensional entries, but never again across three. Remnants of the techniques used here appear in the rest of the series, but are never as intricately interwoven as they are here.

While these examples do not relate to anything specific in early silent film, these moments are integral in mapping the evolution of the series, in particular justifying the direction the next installment goes into. And, for purposes of this study, this is also a

direction that leads to moments of greater accordance with early cinema in comparison. With *Final Fantasy IV* came a new console's technology, and with it the appropriate means to fully flesh out what was attempted in *Final Fantasy III*. The introduction of the "Mode 7" [66] graphics engine, unique to the SNES platform provided a useful manner in solving the confusing scale applications of its predecessor. Mode 7 allowed several dynamic changes across certain scales. Instead of cutting between scales to change certain parameters, Mode 7 allowed, over a single shot, dynamic changes in height, angle, and even allowed some limited zooms. In this game, and all subsequent entries in the series, Mode 7 is utilized primarily in the overworld scale, with some very limited applications elsewhere. These other applications will be examined afterwards in the appropriate sections, but in terms of shot scale its application in the overworld will be the main focus.

Final Fantasy IV wastes no time showing off this new technology and showcases it quite prominently in its rather elaborate opening sequence. Several dynamic changes in height occur over the sequence whose focus is on the flight path of a group of airships. This is where Mode 7 is primarily used, in the varying representation of height of the game's different means of transportation (i.e. walking, airship rides, spaceship rides all have different "heights"). Whereas in the previous games changes in scale often meant a

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[66] Wikipedia offers a useful definition of the Mode 7 graphics engine: *"Mode 7 is a graphics mode on the Super NES video game console that allows a background layer to be rotated and scaled on a scanline by scanline basis to create many different effects. The most famous of these effects this can create is the application of a perspective effect on a background layer by scaling and rotating the background layer in this manner. This transforms the background layer into a 2 dimensional horizontal texture mapped plane that trades height for depth. Thus, an impression of 3 dimensional graphics is achieved."* "Mode 7." *Wikipedia*. Wikipedia. N.d. Web. November 10th 2011.

change in character sprite size (i.e. from the town/overworld/interior scale to the battle scale) Mode 7 allowed for it to be handled in a different way. Between heights the sprite size would stay the same, instead the world below would dynamically change in size. In essence the camera would be locked on the sprite as a focal point (either the character, airship, spaceship, etc.) as it would move between heights.

There are three consistent levels of height in the overworld's presentation ("consistent" in that these are the heights that the game settles on in the specific transportation contexts). The camera's movement between these set heights can be seen though, without resorting to cutting as is used between the other more distinctive scales. The first set height will be referred to as the "neutral height": this occurs whenever the character sprite walks directly on land. Here, the world is rendered crisply and subscribes to the same environmental proportions as in the last three games. The second set height is the "airship height": this occurs whenever the player boards an airship. Here, the world shrinks and loses some of its texture. The oceans no longer have waves, the mountains are less rigid; the finer details are blurred, as would be in any realistic interpretation of increased altitude.

The last set height is the "spaceship height": this occurs whenever the player boards the spaceship. Building on the visual transformation from the airship height, the world shrinks even more and some details that were previously blurred out are completely lost. For instance, the entrances to dungeons disappear, some towns are reduced to mere specs, and forests are blurred into green texture less masses. The angles in the latter two heights are slightly lowered using the "neutral height" as a point of comparison. Where previously the overworld was presented at a seventy five degree

angle (as in all earlier installments, and by the current "neutral height"), these heights see a slight lowering to about seventy degrees. This change in angle is reflected in the form of both the airship and spaceship sprites. For instance, when traveling north, or upwards, the back of each vessel is more prominently focused on, appropriately adjusting to the world's presentation. In comparison the character sprites, which are presented in a world of a slightly higher angle, have more of a prominence placed on the top of their heads **[*figure 13.3*]**.

In contrast to *Final Fantasy III*'s ambitious yet sloppy scale additions, *Final Fantasy IV* went out of its way to make sense of its new changes in scale through other means. Instead of creating a series of confusing new scales separated by familiar means resulting in convoluted relational proportions, *Final Fantasy IV* went back to the basics and enhanced the core of the scale system in an elegant and intuitive fashion. For the first time in the series changes in scale occurred on the fly, relying on different cinematic techniques other than editing to connect them.

Camera movement, resulting in dynamic changes in height, angle, and framing were commonplace in film from very early on, particularly in the scenics.[67] As early as 1896, camera movement was being used in travel expositional films to gather more information across a single shot. Eugene Promio, for instance, a cameraman working for the Lumière brothers influenced many filmmakers by often placing his camera on moving boats, prominently displayed in his film *Égypte: Panorama des rives du Nil (1896).*[68] Mobile framing was an occasional occurrence in narrative films, albeit sometime afterwards. For instance, D.W. Griffith began and ended his film *The Country Doctor*

[67] Thompson, Kristin, and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. 2nd ed (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), 58.
[68] Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 21 23

(1909) with very long pans across a rural landscape. The Italian epic, *Cabiria* (Pastrone, 1914), consistently used slow tracking shots toward or away from static action.[69] In relation to the type of movement used between height changes in *Final Fantasy IV*, D.W Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) features the closest examples. For one particular scene, the film's cinematographer, Billy Bitzer, mounted the camera on a movable elevator to create swooping movements over the huge set of a Babylonian court. In a single shot, angle, height, and framing are all dynamically changed from their starting positions, exactly the same parameters in each of *Final Fantasy IV*'s dynamic height adjustments. In both medial contexts these movements were quite innovative.

Whereas in the previous games there was an effort to move away from the "painted set" aesthetic established in the first *Final Fantasy* through changes in set design, the usage of the Mode 7 technology takes the biggest step away from the archaic technique towards a true dynamism in the mise en scène. Previously, only the sets themselves were brought to life through subtle environmental movements. Mode 7, and its mimesis of the moving camera aesthetic, adds dynamism into *how* the world was viewed. As a result, the scale system loses even more of the visual segregation remnants established in the series thus far. By showing a zoom in its entirety in the OW scale connecting the scales into a cohesive world becomes less of cognitive stretch and more of a logical connection. By establishing the mere possibility of a zoom, the game shows that changes across scales are possible. The visual changes between scales become more believable, simultaneously helping new players understand the inherent logic of the scale

[69] Cherchi Usai, Paolo, and British Film Institute. *Silent Cinema: An Introduction* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), 97.

system, and alleviating some of the logical compromises of established players' suspensions of disbelief.

INTERTITLES

From 1905 to 1912 cinema blew up into an international phenomenon that saw domestic industries being established worldwide. During this pre war period most technical and artistic innovations made in one country were quickly assimilated elsewhere[70] (most prominently, continuity editing). This resulted in a universally and internationally understood cinematic language practiced and viewed by filmmakers and audiences alike. Due to the clearer storytelling methods developed in this era, many films were being produced with less of a reliance on intertitles with more of a reliance on visual storytelling techniques. This allowed an easy international diffusion of films, as little to no changes were needed in order for the films to be understood by international audiences. For instance, during this period the largely action oriented "chase" film became an international genre. The premise of one party chasing another was a highly visual type of film that needed very little language context in order to be enjoyed or understood by international audiences.[71]

Final Fantasy III saw a similar move away from text based storytelling. In its stead the game saw a greater emphasis on sprite choreography, an elaboration on set and prop design, and a more intricate application of editing in its cut scenes, all aspects to be discussed later on in this chapter. This push towards visual storytelling is reflected in most of the scales. For instance, in the battle scale there are fewer messages being

[70] Thompson, Kristin, and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. 2nd ed (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), 56.
[71] Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 50

displayed in the text specific area of the screen. No longer are there text boxes dedicated to displaying the amount of damage being dealt, instead the numbers appear directly on the enemies. While the numbers keep the information being displayed mostly ludically motivated, the mere fact that they appear on the enemy being attacked creates a greater visual association where the damage is being dealt specifically. In the town and interior scales, there is less of a reliance on description from both non diegetic and diegetic voices. For instance, where previously a character may state that they are about to do an action before they actually do it (example: "I'm going to move that boulder", followed by the appropriate sprite movement), in *Final Fantasy III* the sprite does this often without warning, jumping right into the action accompanied by the appropriate movement. Similarly, where previously a non diegetic voice was the sole means of representing acquirable items in the town/interior scale (open a treasure chest and a text box indicates the contents), with *Final Fantasy III* items were sometimes represented on screen. Whether it is a floating crystal (objects central to the narrative), a rare weapon on a podium, or even a mere medicinal herb growing on the top of a mountain, text was no longer the sole proof of these objects existence.

Converse to this simultaneous de emphasizing and complementing of text in the aforementioned scales, in the overworld scale there was the new addition of text boxes. While previously text was never represented in the overworld scale, in very limited instances *Final Fantasy III* features some conversations between the party members, a characteristic unique to this iteration alone. New to the series, the game sees the addition of temporary "guest" NPCs that join the main party for portions of the adventure. At any given time, in every scale but the battle scale, the player can prompt a conversation with

the guest character. Before *Final Fantasy III* NPCs were never represented in the overworld, so there was no need for conversations or the accompanying text boxes. This is the only instance of an increased emphasis on text in the entire game. Even when considering the series' aesthetic evolutionary path this is strange, and on the whole this moment should be considered an anomaly.

With *Final Fantasy IV* there are very few changes in the appearance and function of text. As previously mentioned in the discussion of *Final Fantasy III*, text boxes in the OW were unique to that entry and thus no longer existed in *Final Fantasy IV*. In its stead, however, was the addition of conversation text boxes in the battle scale. Both moves were wise on the part of the game designers and proved to benefit the storytelling capacities of the game. Due to the lack of interactive NPC sprites in the overworld (something that does not change for the duration of the 2D entries in the series) conversations in the scale were always awkward. While characters in the party would be represented by text, they would not be represented visually, making identifying the source of the voices a confusing affair. Additionally, due to the camera distance of the scale, conversations are logically inept. In film this implementation of text in the overworld would have the equivalent of a conversation happening in a shot with the distance of an expansive establishing shot with the subjects being represented onscreen. The logic does fit with the convention connotations of the scale. The addition of text boxes in the battle scale had the exact opposite effect. Because characters and enemies are fully rendered in closer proximity to the camera this scale allowed conversations to became more intimate. In film this move is akin to using closer framings to enhance the tension in heated exchanges. Whereas previously, verbal confrontations were limited in the wider scales

and physical in the closer battle scale, starting with *Final Fantasy IV* conversations could continue as physical confrontations were under way.

This simple implementation of text resulted in some of the most powerful moments in the series' history, and continued to be an invaluable narrative tool in the games to come. For instance, at about the halfway point of *Final Fantasy IV*'s narrative, the party confronts the then principal antagonist, Golbez, after scaling a large tower. One of the members in the party, Tellah, a sage seeking to avenge the death of his daughter, splits from the incapacitated party to confront Golbez, the target of his vengeance. After the two exchange words (in the interior scale) the game cuts to the battle scale where Tellah stands alone against Golbez. After casting several powerful spells with little effect while Golbez stands idly and taunts him, Tellah announces he will cast the forbidden spell, "Meteo". Established earlier in the game, if Tellah were to ever cast Meteo he would perish from over exertion. After announcing his rash decision some members of the party off screen yell at Tellah reminding him of the fatal consequences of his impending actions. In spite of this warning Tellah goes ahead and casts the spell, destroying Golbez. After Golbez slowly disintegrates the game cuts back to the interior scale where Tellah eventually collapses to the floor and perishes. Tellah's noble but rash actions are enhanced through Golbez' taunting and his own cries of sworn vengeance. The text allows a seamless transfer of tension from the interior scale to the battle scale, a space that inherently contains more tension **[*figure 14.1 to 14.2*]**.

Most of all, however, the biggest change lay in the quality of the text's content. Like no other game in the series before it, *Final Fantasy IV* developed its huge cast of complex characters on a level most uncommon to the video game medium as a whole.

Notably the game saw the extensive use of internal monologues and distinctive voices represented in the text. Taking cues from *Final Fantasy II* before it, the game placed a greater emphasis on creating character individuality on the physical, emotional and psychological level. In conjunction with many other aesthetic developments in the game (to be discussed later in the chapter), *Final Fantasy IV* was the turning point in the series in terms of presenting complex, and emotionally affective narratives. While there were attempts at this in *Final Fantasy II* (*Final Fantasy III* was more similar to *Final Fantasy I*, concentrating on the story at large, nixing character development) the results were often crude and awkward across all aesthetic levels. Continuing the trend towards a more visual storytelling, the game was impressively able to convey its complex narrative with even less text than in the previous games. Working together with the music and visual systems *Final Fantasy IV's* use of text was efficient and sparse.

TINTING

Final Fantasy III sees no changes to the color codes that were previously established and appropriated in *Final Fantasy II*. The only difference is the addition of one situational tint. This occurs in the undersea portions of the overworld where everything is tinted an aqua blue. The tint here has a dual function: first, it enhances the underwater motif being signaled at by the mise en scène's design, and second, it creates a greater contrast from the standard overworld landscape. The former function is rather obvious and a given in any underwater motif, but the latter is probably the more important of the two as many design elements from the above water overworld's terrain carries over. For instance, instead of using a new iconography to represent the underside

of the landmasses, the game utilizes the familiar mountain texturing and assets from the above water overworld. Without the inclusion of the tint the two areas would be almost indistinguishable **[*figure 15.1 and 15.2*]**.

In addition to several new tints, *Final Fantasy IV* sees a more creative and diverse application of some of the subsequently established ones. Additionally, in conjunction with the battle scale's expanded usage as a narrative platform, *Final Fantasy IV* sees tinting make an appearance there as well. In terms of color codes and tropes, *Final Fantasy IV* is at once the apex of tinting's usage thus far and the standard by which all of the remaining two dimensional entries refer to and work off of. Simultaneously, in regards to the objects dissected in this study, it represents the high point of pure code mimesis to the era of film history it draws from.

In addition to navy blue, aqua blue, purple, and "dark" tinting, *Final Fantasy IV* sees red, yellow, and green tints added to its repertoire. Whereas in *Final Fantasy II* and *III* each tint was limited to one meaning and function, *Final Fantasy IV* expands on each, both old and new additions, to a multiplicity of usages and meanings, all the while maintaining some codes and re establishing others. For instance, navy blue no longer represents night scenes only, but also replaces the "dark" tint established in *Final Fantasy II* that was associated with an evil presence in the interior and town scales. In the battle scale the "dark" tint gains new meaning, being associated with character revelation and transformation. The overall breadth of tinting is greater as well. In addition to the familiar mimetic and mood enhancement functions, it becomes central in establishing certain character motifs and themes, enhances many spell effects, and even supports the game's more elaborate temporal editing (to be discussed later on). The best way to discuss the

variety of each tint's usages is to separate them by color and outline them accordingly. Due to the relatively large amount of tints and limited space to discuss, I will limit the discussion to two colors: red and yellow.

Throughout the game's duration, red is always associated with fire. However, fire is used as a motif in many different contexts. Over the course of the game a red tint refers to fire directly or indirectly in three fashions. The first is in the familiar mimetic usage, similar to the navy blue tint used for night scenes. In this context the red tint is used to represent a widespread fire, more specifically an entire town set ablaze. Aside from some crude sound effects and it being referred to directly in the dialogue, the all consuming fire is most prominently represented in the crimson red veil applied to the scene. The fire here is widespread over a large area and is part of the environment **[*figure 16.1*]**. The second usage is in a context new to the series, the enhancement of spell effects. "Fire" (in addition to the more battle specific "Fire 2", "Fire 3", "Flame", and the "Jinn" spells) is a spell used by characters in both battle and narrative contexts. In these cases the primary representation of the fire is a series of animated sprites. The red tint here is employed as a secondary means of representation, enhancing said sprites. The tint no longer represents fire specifically as in the last case, but is a supporting graphical touch to emphasize the power of the sprite's flame. This specificity can be confirmed by text in the dialogue, and the usual degradation of the target being affected by the spell **[*figure 16.2*]**. The third and final instance of a red tint being used is in the association with a specific character, Rubicante, the fiend of fire. Rubicante, one of the game's antagonists, is a demon specializing in fire based attacks. Whenever he makes an appearance (in the interior scale specifically) the screen tints red **[*figure 16.3*]**. However, in these instances it is before the

battle has begun, so no actual fire spells have been cast, therefore no flames are present. Here, the red tint serves as a thematic device for a character that is associated with fire. In sum, the red tint is used in three distinct moments: representing a large environmental fire, enhancing a smaller flame, and introducing a fire associated character. This aptly demonstrates the more intricate usage of the tinting technique practiced in *Final Fantasy IV*. Essentially the tint tells the spectator that fire is in the vicinity, the surrounding elements (i.e. dialogue, sprites, battle behavior) help specify where it is and its form. The tint unites a singular element across many representations and scales. It is an apt example of *Final Fantasy IV* 's increased intricacy in using all of its aesthetic systems in conjunction with each other.

Yellow, on the other hand, does the complete opposite. It's meaning is not consistent, yet, due to variable narrative and formal contexts it's meaning is never confused and always appropriate. The yellow tint showcases the power of *Final Fantasy IV* to redefine it's own aesthetic rules frequently without confusion.

The yellow tint is used in three very different contexts: to indicate a flashback sequence, to signal a certain type of magic being used in the town/interior scale, and as a thematic device defining a specific character's appearance. As with the fire/red tint examples above, in each instance the surrounding aesthetic systems help define each usage. However, whereas in the fire/tint examples the outlying systems served as points of articulation under the same thematic umbrella, the yellow tint uses the systems to alienate each application of the technique as much as possible. First, let us discuss the tint in its usage in flashback sequences. In the opening sequence of the game the main protagonist, Cecil, standing near the mast of an airship, reflects on some recent actions he

took based on some questionable orders from his king. As he reflects the game dissolves into a sequence, tinted in yellow, where the player sees the actions Cecil is brooding over play out **[*figure 16.4*]**. After the sequence is done, another dissolve cuts back to Cecil with his head tilted down to demonstrate his continued state of reflection. Using dialogue, a dissolve, and a consistent tint, the player understands that this is how the game will handle flashback sequences. The same combination of techniques is used at other points in the game, keeping the language for flashbacks consistent throughout the game's duration. The second instance of a yellow tint being used occurs whenever "white" magic is cast in the interior/town scale during cut scenes. "White" magic is defined as any spell that is curative, including any resurrection spells, ailment healing spells, or wound healing spells. Whenever a character casts one of these spells, in addition to a temporary tint covering the scene, it is referred to in the dialogue, referred to by a character sprite animation, and accompanied by the familiar sound associated with the spell when used in the battle scale (where the spells are used in much greater frequency due to their primary ludic function) **[*figure 16.5*]**. The third and final usage of the yellow tint is in the introduction and as a thematic association with the character Odin, a powerful but friendly monster. This moment essentially holds the same contextual usage as from the described Rubicante example from above. However, the main difference here being that yellow is not logically a color associated with this character. It is, however, the main color used in Odin's design, so when the player is introduced to him in the interior scale, and subsequently in the battle scale rendered in much greater detail, the tint makes associational sense **[*figure 16.6*].**

What can be gathered from the examples above is not only a progression of intricacy of the tinting technique from *Final Fantasy III* to *IV*, but also the general trend across all aesthetic systems between games. From the isolated and narrow usage of tinting in *Final Fantasy III*, to the intricate camaraderie of the various aesthetic systems in the development of different meanings, articulations, and functions in *Final Fantasy IV*, it seems at once the series is becoming less fragmented, more united, and less reliant on film specific codes and meanings.

This usage has similarities with the development of tinting in film. Excluding the most latter conclusion, this statement can also be applied to film, most notably in the years after the First World War. Between 1913 1919, after an interim international film language was established, countries, and filmmakers therein, began to play with these conventions to develop their own distinctive styles.[72] From the rigidity of the standardized film conventions, filmmakers began to explore the expressive qualities of style by experimenting with lighting, editing, set design, etc. For the purposes of this section, I will limit my examples to tinting situations. The evolution from *Final Fantasy III* and its predecessors to *Final Fantasy IV* can be summed up with the relationship that exists between the films *Fire!* (1901) and *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalyps*e (Rex Ingram, 1921). In the former film the tint ultimately serves a mimetic purpose, enhancing the flames onscreen by adding color to them. In the latter film sees three juxtaposed shots changing from blue to white to red tints while a character sings the 'Marseillaise' alluding to the French flag[73]. Here the tints serve a symbolic function, enhancing a theme

[72] Thompson, Kristin, and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. 2nd ed (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), 55
[73] Cherchi Usai, Paolo, and British Film Institute. *Silent Cinema: An Introduction* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), 26

in the film. *Final Fantasy IV*, in many ways, is the series' apex of the technique's accordance to the film era it draws upon. In that regard, it was at once the peak of the technique's frequency (as there is a drop off of usage in the latter two two dimensional titles) and intricacy of application. Once more practical and realist favoring techniques of adding color to film came into play (popularized and mastered by Technicolor over it's many iterations[74]) one color tinting was eventually rendered obsolete, only appearing as a throwback technique in art films years later.[75] *Final Fantasy IV* in effect, at least in terms of tinting, is the series last true representative of this ages old technique.

SET DESIGN

Bigger is better. Ultimately, that is the philosophy that can be attributed to the changes in set design from *Final Fantasy II* to *III.* More dungeons, bigger dungeons, more towns, bigger towns, more settings, bigger settings, more worlds, bigger worlds. Quantitatively, *Final Fantasy III* was comparatively gigantic to its predecessors. Where it grew in quantity, it also grew in quality. Much more detail was supplied to the entire world's rendering across all scales. Water and waterfalls are imbued with slight movements bringing them to life. Cities and towns hold unique designs from the inside out. More objects in all settings are now interactive, giving life and a hefty, haptic presence to even the most mundane of details. These represent only a few of the improvements over the last game's set design. Given that it would be impossible to give an exhaustive list of all the changes between games, this portion of the study will be limited to just a few key objects. The game's biggest change, the implementation of two

[74] Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: An Introduction,* 37 39
[75] Abel, Richard. *Silent Film* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 25 27

new overworld maps, will be one focus. Additionally, I will also consider the issue of depth. Before this, however, we must acknowledge the game's relationship to another of film's parallel developments: the rise of the historical epic.

While historically based films existed and were popular before its seminal release, the Italian film *Cabiria* (Pastone, 1914) has been regarded as the epitome of the genre during this era.[76] Set in the Roman Empire in the third century B.C., the film involves kidnapping and human sacrifice, as the hero Fulzio and his strongman slave Maciste, try to rescue the titular character. Expansive sets and intricate set pieces alike adorned the majority of the film. An erupting volcano destroys an entire palace, a temple is reduced to rubble in a pagan sacrifice ritual gone wrong; to say the least, just based on its scope and grandeur, it was a novel viewing experience for most international audiences. However, it is not this film that is most easily comparable to *Final Fantasy III*, but a film that was heavily influenced by it. Amongst many other characteristics and techniques (as discussed in the ***shot scale*** section), D.W Griffith aimed to mimic *Cabaria's* grandeur with a highly influential film of his own, *Intolerance* (1916).[77] In terms of international appeal, due to its American bias of issues and values, the film was not as great of a success financially nor was it considered as epic a venture.[78] *Intolerance*'s ambition, however, cannot be denied. Set across four historical epochs, Griffith intercut four stories with the linking theme of intolerance. In terms of production scope, filmmaking innovations, and duration (the film was three and a half hours long) *Intolerance* was gigantic. Unfortunately, as with many pioneering works, the film was riddled with many

[76] Thompson, Kristin, and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. 2nd ed (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), 58.
[77] Anthony, Slide, and Paul O'Dell, *Early American Cinema (*New York: A. S. Barnes, 1970), 71 72.
[78] Slide, and O'Dell, *Early American Cinema,* 71 72.

problems and this was reflected in its box office returns. After the financial failure of *Intolerance,* Griffith concentrated on making simpler films and did so for the remainder of his career.[79]

In many ways the transition from *Final Fantasy II* to *III* can be linked to the relative triumphs and failures of these two films. *Cabaria* was indeed epic, as was *Final Fantasy II*, however, their grandeur was limited to one overarching location and one thematic motif therein. They were also both relatively "safe" productions as they drew from past popular sources. For instance, other epics like *Quo Vadis?* (1913, Guazzoni) for *Cabaria*, and *Final Fantasy* for *Final Fantasy II*. *Intolerance's* epic scope expanded *Cabaria's* by simultaneously using and depicting four different historical epochs, each with their own massive sets and thematic motifs. *Final Fantasy III* did the same. Expanding on the single overworld in *Final Fantasy II*, the game grew to three sizable varied locations each with discernable aesthetic motifs. Unfortunately, we find similar flaws in *Final Fantasy III* as we first see in *Intolerance*. While the reasons behind the flaws were completely different, the fact remains that each ambitious expansion was an ultimately flawed object. As a historical epic, *Intolerance* was too convoluted and narrow in its appeal for the contemporary international market. With *Final Fantasy III,* while much larger than its predecessor, was almost nonsensical in its relationship between scales, making it difficult for both returning and new players to exhibit any suspension of disbelief towards diegetic congruity. In both instances, however, each object helped lay the groundwork for many innovations and techniques for the years to come. *Intolerance's* influence will be discussed at greater length in the editing section.

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[79] Brownlow, Kevin. *Hollywood: The Pioneers* (London: St. Jame's Place, 1979), 71 72

The biggest change to *Final Fantasy III* was the addition of two new overworld maps **[*figures 17.1 to 17.3*]**. In addition to the hub overworld map (considered the "hub" overworld as all the other maps are only accessible from there) there is a floating continent, and the hub's seabed. The floating continent, the space where the game begins, looks exactly like the larger hub world over which it floats. The seabed map, aside from it being underwater, does not stray too far from the design of the other two. As such the discussion will begin with the former two maps and then comparatively outline the latter. For the most part the overworld receives a visual overhaul from what was being used in the last two games. All basic foundational assets were revised: mountains, towns, forests, deserts, caves, and dungeons alike were all rendered with more detail, color, and texture, moving even further away from the topographical aura of the scale from the previous games. Town layouts are unique and larger, taking up much more real estate. Dungeons take shape in many different forms. Whether it is a tower, a lake, cave, or haunted castle, most areas on the overworld are unique in their representation, and are no longer dependant solely on their topographical surroundings as a means of identification.

The seabed design takes a few elements from the other overworld maps and appropriates them in a context to suit the attempted underwater motif. In contrast, however, the design is a much more simplified one. The entirety of the landscape is rendered using the mountain and desert assets from the other maps. For instance, mountains are used to represent the underside of the continents, and the desert design replaces the areas where the ocean would be. What ultimately identifies the undersea motif is the aqua blue tint veiling the entire map design. Some smaller details help in this identification, for instance the occasional bubble rising to the surface, or a stray fish

swimming by the party's submarine, but in the end they are just that, details. Therein lay the problems with *Final Fantasy III*'s design, at least in regards to the overworld. Yes, it expands on previous games by tripling the navigable space, however it does so in a rather sloppy, confusing, and not particularly meaningful way. As discussed in length in this chapter's *shot scale* section, the relationship between the floating continent and the larger hub world is a proportional mess. In the hub overworld the player's sprite is about an eighth the size of the continent. Yet upon entering, the player's sprite is dwarfed by the size of the continent's new representation. Fortunately the other transitions between scales are much more gradual and not as jarring, allowing some space for the player's suspension of disbelief to take root. That being said, the relationship between the hub world and the floating continent is so jarring that it completely breaks this suspension, resulting in a game play experience that is marred by the game's illogical proportions. With the seabed overworld map, while it is a nice addition, its usage and design are so limited that its place is barely justified in the larger scope of the game. In very few instances does the player need to explore this area in the plot, and due to its dull and bleak design, there is no real reason to explore here outside of these limited, required moments.

The manner in which *Final Fantasy III* handles depth is essentially a continuation of what was started in the entries before it. For instance, *Final Fantasy II* introduced the ability to go "behind" objects in the mise en scène. Whether it was going behind buildings, walls, being submerged underwater, or the hanging objects in the foreground, this visual touch was essential in breaking from the "painted set" aesthetic used in *Final Fantasy*. *Final Fantasy III* takes this notion, a mostly visual accent from *Final Fantasy II*,

and puts it central stage. Entire dungeons are designed around this concept using enhanced versions of the same techniques. Heightened walls hide main paths, hanging objects in the foreground obscure plot progressing objects; rather quickly it can be seen that in *Final Fantasy III* this emphasis on depth becomes a full fledged design consideration. In addition *Final Fantasy III* sees a slew of new visual accents that only serve the game's aesthetic depth. Floors in dungeons, and even some interiors of buildings in towns, are now layered. No longer are floors separated by an edit or transition, but rather stairs and ladders are intuitively integrated to expand the space and height of each navigable section. This is implemented in many contexts: different parts of a floor are raised, making altars or hills; balconies overlook different navigable spaces; series of cliffs can be climbed, connected by slopes or ladders in mountainous landscapes. Different details help establish this illusion of depth by referring to familiar height spanning objects and placing them on the back walls of these areas, the only visible wall allowed by the game's set perspective. For instance, waterfalls are sometimes used to connect the different levels, even taller background walls help establish the increased heights of the various rooms, trees, vines, and various growths adorn the back walls emphasizing each room's distinctive height. These examples are the most effective additions, adding more texture to the various dungeon and town visual designs. The former, the increased emphasis on depth aesthetics in the more ludic exploratory portions of the game, were mixed in effectiveness. These design tenets and motivations sometimes result in incomprehensibly convoluted areas where navigation is severely impaired. These instances seem to fall back into the familiar relationship between *Cabaria* and *Intolerance*, pushing innovations too far and resulting in unnecessary convolution.

However, all of the elements in this game that befall similar fates ultimately prove to be beneficial to the series as a whole. Not only do most of these elements return in *Final Fantasy IV*, but they also finally achieve befitting iterations as, I imagine, was initially intended.

With *Final Fantasy IV* came a new hardware, the SNES. With the new hardware developers and designers at Square were given a bigger platform to map out ideas that were previously not possible, or merely realize ideas that were once attempted. *Final Fantasy IV* in many ways is the culmination of all of these design ideas, complete and incomplete, from all the previous games. The many innovations the game does house are completely overwhelmed by the sheer mass of elements that are fully realized from previous entries. This sentiment carries over to all of the game's aesthetic systems. To maintain the flow from *Final Fantasy III's* discussion mostly the same topics will be discussed (i.e. the biggest changes, and a discussion of depth). The content to be discussed allows for many more aesthetic intersections to be made with film movements and specific films alike.

Set design, being the most encompassing of the visual design elements discussed in this study, was effected by the SNES's hardware upgrade the most. Every aspect of the game's set design received an unprecedented amount of polish and consideration. As a result, *Final Fantasy IV* was by far the most aesthetically pleasing entry in the series by the time of its release. While it did not increase that much in size (like *Final Fantasy III* it still housed three distinctive overworld maps) or exhibit the greatest innovations[80], the game was beautifully crafted. As previously mentioned, the game can be considered the

[80] The game's usage of *Mode 7* was innovative by the series standards, but in the end should be considered mostly a systematic innovation. Similar techniques were used with many contemporary games released for the SNES.

ultimate form of the converging design paths from the last three games. Under this guise it is no surprise that the visual framework of the previous games stayed mostly intact. The designs for most of the environmental objects, in all scales, return (i.e. mountains, forests, buildings, water, towns, bridges, etc.). These returning assets are all enhanced in some shape or form. The upgrades these assets received can be delineated as a combination of one to three of the following parameters: an increase in resolution (or pixel density, allowing rounded edges into the design, a general increase in detail articulation), an increased color scheme, or the addition of animation. Considering this general trend, it is fair to avoid an unnecessarily long listing or outlining of these basic design elements by stating that *Final Fantasy IV* is an aesthetically more attractive game, (i.e. more colorful, more texturally varied and detailed) than its predecessors. Instead a focus will be placed on the larger details, implicitly taking the "upgraded" nature of the aesthetics into account.

The biggest changes to the game's set design are reflected in the battle scale and the rendering of the game's two alternative overworld maps. First let us discuss the changes to the battle scale. Where previously the battle scale relied solely on a banner spanning the top of the screen to articulate its contextual setting, *Final Fantasy IV* uses the entirety of the screen. No longer is the "floor" on which the characters and enemies stand merely black, but is designed with the same detailed considerations as with the fight banner. Like the fight banner, the floor adapts to the setting unto which the battle was started from the corresponding scale **(see figure 4.16)**. For instance, in a forest the floor will be covered in dark, shade covered grass; in the desert, sand; in a castle, stone tiles, etc. The variety of battle locations is also increased and is no longer dependent on the room's general characteristics (as with the other games) but the specific "square" on

which the character sprite lands. For instance, earlier in the game the party has to navigate through a lake cave. If a battle is activated on the cave floor the battle scale will reflect the geography, with stalagmites adorning the background and a dirt and stone motif covering the floor. A few squares down the player may be pulled into battle on a creek. Here, the battle scale will keep the same background but the floor will be covered in water. This addition not only is a big step in fortifying visual fidelity between scales, but also virtually eliminates any suspension of disbelief the viewer/player may have had to employ in the previous games **[*figures 4.4, 4.8, 4.12, and 4.16*]**.

Continuing the trend of having multiple overworld maps, *Final Fantasy IV*'s diegesis is split across three locations: the earth, the earth's underground, and the moon **[*figures 17.4 to 17.6*]**. The earth's design is familiar to what is presented in *Final Fantasy III* (albeit "upgraded" as previously discussed), more specifically its hub world. In regards to the other two maps, this is where the aesthetic similarities end. Where in *Final Fantasy III* the other worlds were generally sloppy in terms of design considerations and execution (in terms of scale fidelity, narrative purpose, and visual distinction) *Final Fantasy IV* does away with all of these problems by showcasing three meaningful, clear, and distinctive worlds. Aside from the familiar camera angle, every aesthetic element in each respective world sets them apart from each other. For instance, each world has its own distinctive designs in even the slightest geographical details, no longer are assets carried over between worlds as evidenced in the seabed design from *Final Fantasy III*. The underground has seas of lava; red, molten rock makes up most of the geography; fields of sand and bone replace the hub world's forests and deserts **[*figure 17.5*]**. The moon is bereft of anything with a semblance of water or bodies of liquid at all; craters of

different depths and widths are peppered throughout; grey, dust covered plains make up most of the geography covering the landmass; and perhaps the greatest detail is the relative smaller size to the earth **[*figure 17.6*]**. The transitions and connections between each world are handled with the utmost attention and elegance. It is as if the developers directly addressed the scale inconsistencies in the last game.

Final Fantasy IV's handling of illusory depth in its set design is probably the most discernable instance of convention amendment and adaption when compared to the rest of the games cumulative "upgrades". While most of the aesthetic upgrades in *Final Fantasy IV* can be linked directly to *Final Fantasy III*'s form, the latter title even draws from earlier iterations in the series. As discussed in the last chapter's set design section, in *Final Fantasy II* there was a moment where the game attempts to represent multiple floors on a single plain **[*figure 8*]**. While the idea was novel, the execution was flawed, at once confusing the player and disrupting the consistency of the game's aesthetic logic. *Final Fantasy IV* revisits this experiment, this time with resounding success. This is no doubt in part due to the system's increased processing and graphical capabilities, but when looking at the subtleties of the design's execution this should be considered primarily a design innovation. The technique in question, exclusive to the interior/dungeon scale, is the integration of an unexplorable background space in the negative spaces of an explorable floor's design. In other words, using the film terminology, we find the integration of fake perspectives and models to expand illusory space.

The concept and application of false perspectives first arose in post WWI Germany within the expressionist film movement. The technique itself was not inherently

expressionistic, but was nevertheless popular and then popularized in and through this movement. Basically the technique combined fake perspectives and models to make the existing sets look bigger.[81] The expressionist film *The Street* (Karl Grune, 1923) was one of the first to use this technique. To stand in for the cityscape of a scene, Grune places an intricate model in the background to artificially expand the space. Meanwhile, a real car and actors occupy the foreground space. The two images juxtaposed onto each other give the illusion of a city in the distant background, creating a false perspective. The technique was popularized and diffused internationally some years later when expressionist filmmaker F.W. Murnau moved to the U.S. and directed *Sunrise* (1927). Murnau was given creative free reign in the construction of the film, and as such was able to use various aesthetic techniques he learned and practiced in Germany.[82] Although the film was relatively muted in its expressionist style, some influences still managed to bleed through the seams, one of which was the usage of false perspectives. Frank Borzage's film *7th Heaven* (1927), for instance, is a notable example of this technique's international proliferation and Murnau's influence.[83]

Final Fantasy IV is a great example of this technique being used in great quantity and quality. Its usage adds a dimension of space to the variety of locations presented. Much like the film integration, the technique essentially fills in the background space of a scene where the action is not occurring, or more specifically to video game logic, has no possibility of occurring. For instance, in the higher up floors of the lake cave dungeon

[81] Bordwell, David, and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction.* 8th ed (New York: McGraw Hill Higher Education, 2007), 111
[82] Brownlow, Kevin. *Hollywood: The Pioneers* (London: St. Jame's Place, 1979), 262.
[83] Bordwell, David, and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction.* 8th ed (New York: McGraw Hill Higher Education, 2007), 161 162.

mentioned earlier, the areas of the screen that cannot be explored are occupied by the image of a river running through a massive chasm **[*figure 18.1*]**. Like the models being used in the film example, this space is false. It is not a larger space being rendered from a distance, but an image constructed to look like it is so. The scopes of the false perspectives are not limited to such massive scales, but also consist of closer, more haptic spaces. For instance, in a later portion of the game the party has to scale the interior of a mechanical giant. In the negative spaces therein the game takes the opportunity to depict the proximate inner workings of the giant, a series of turning gears and cogs **[*figure 18.2*]**. This later, more intimate distance can be segmented even further. As mentioned earlier, these false perspectives have at times an aesthetic touch (as with the aforementioned gears) and at other times they are referential, drawing upon the images of a space that has yet to be explored or explored already. For instance, late in the game the party is tasked with finding a secret society dwelling at the bottom of a cave. In this dungeon's particular design the floor is porous, and as such the descending floors can always be seen through the openings. As the party approaches the lower levels of the cave, the secret society's encampment can be seen through the floor, signaling the end of the party's spelunking.

While placing something in the background that is proportionally smaller to the foregrounded image will increase the illusion of size and depth in a static image, that alone is not sufficient for images in motion. If the false plane is left alone the illusion is completely destroyed, reverting back to the problematic of the "painted set" phenomena from *Final Fantasy*. To avoid these familiar problems, the designers of *Final Fantasy IV* implemented the technique of *parallax scrolling* in these instances. Parallax scrolling is when the images in the background move by the camera slower than foreground

images.[84] This was (and still is) an essential technique in the creation of illusory depth in two dimensional video games. That being said, this technique did not originate with this game, rather it can be dated back to 1982 with the popular arcade game *Moon Patrol*. Going even further back, the technique grew out of traditional animation practices started in the 1940s through the usage of the multi plane camera where animations and movements were separated into different layers.[85] While perhaps the video game technique stemmed from animation and not film per say, the ultimate goal within both media was to mimic the relational movement of planes that is captured from the film camera, a phenomena discovered with the very first instances of camera movement.

In terms of the series' progression of the construction of depth illusion, this is by far the biggest step. While previous techniques were essential in moving away from the "painted set" aesthetic, they still required compromises on behalf of the viewer and player to truly immerse themselves into the world. The implementation of parallax scrolling in combination with the usage of false perspectives is akin to the film's transference from partially painted sets to those completely occupied by three dimensional objects. Combining the sheer size of the worlds introduced in *Final Fantasy III* and subsequently mastered in *Final Fantasy IV*, the aesthetic design progression here is huge.

Over four short years the *Final Fantasy* series set design evolved from an object akin to the modest, theatrically inspired painted sets of Georges Melies to the massive, diverse and immersive sets similar in scale to those found in Giovanni Pastrone and D.W Griffith's epics. While the innovations were not completely in sync sequentially, for

[84] "Parallax scrolling." *Wikipedia*. (Wikipedia. N.d. Web), accessed November 13th 2011.
[85] Paul, Wyatt. "The Art of Parallax Scrolling." *mos.futurenet.com*. (Futurenet, August 2007. Web), accessed October 23rd 2011.

instance parallax scrolling mimicked an inherent film phenomena relatively late, its basic reference to film's innovations is worthy of mention. What was applied and integrated into the collective film language over twenty years took a mere four in the *Final Fantasy* series. This exponential rate of re appropriation only increased with time, eventually breaking from this parallel development completely and establishing its own visual innovations completely unique to its genre and native medium as a whole.

EDITING

The editing in *Final Fantasy III* does not see much change. A little speculation here will provide some insight into the possible reasons for this. As with all previous titles, the manner in which the games transitioned between locations was not only a stylistic choice but also one with the hardware's limited processing power in mind. Due to these transitions being mostly triggered by player input (i.e. entering a town, building in that town, etc) in order to load this quickly the game would have all the accessible locations from the then occupied location already loaded in the system's memory. Thus, any cuts to a scene far away in the game's diegetic world with different a character, for instance, would not be possible unless this cut was scripted and out of the players control. It is for this reason I speculate that the overarching editing style for the first three entries in the series largely remained the same (all being released on the same hardware platform and subject to the same limitations). Later in this section a sequence late in the game where this previously impossible type of editing occurs will be explored, a series first deviation from the previously dubbed *analytical moving camera style*.

In terms of the series formal handling of transitions there is some refinement present with *Final Fantasy III.* As established in the move between *Final Fantasy* and *Final Fantasy II, III* continues the trend of simplifying the games' transitional effects. Whereas between the former two titles all transitions saw some form of change, with the latest entry change is exclusive to the moments between the non battle scales. The only difference here is the removal of a sound cue with each transition. The proliferation and significance of this change is further minimalized as it is applied only to the ending's cut scene sequence. Thus, for the vast majority of the experience, the game's transitions are handled identically as they were in *Final Fantasy II*. While the change is small and infrequent in its appearance, it still reflects the rest of the series usage of transitions thereafter. From this point on there are no longer any sounds used in the transitional effects between non battle scales, making the process completely visual. The only other editing change is exclusive to the ending as well, and sees a refinement of the series first, rather confusing foray into elliptical editing from *Final Fantasy II*. This change will be discussed at greater length as it not only innovates in terms of the series' temporal editing, but also foreshadows the series next innovation in spatial editing: crosscutting.

In *Final Fantasy III's* closing moments the party is reunited with several characters encountered from throughout the journey. After a short conversation, the party decides to return home via airship, agreeing to drop off their friends along the way. From a formal standpoint the main portion of this ending sequence (and most relevant to this analysis) is broken up into three types of shots: the interior space of the airship, the exterior of the airship traveling across the overworld, and the various drop off points of the party's accrued group of friends. The sequence is repetitious, following the same

pattern for every friend dropped off. Each cycle begins with the exterior of the airship traveling for a few seconds **[*figure 19.1*]** and then cuts to the interior space where all of the characters can be seen facing the ship's hull **[*figure 19.2*]**. After a few seconds in this interior scale, a character will state that they have reached their drop off point prompting the next cut. Here, the game cuts to the corresponding character's drop off point where the party says their 'good byes' **[*figure 19.3*]**. However, instead of cutting to the overworld scale, as is common practice throughout the game when cutting from the interior of the airship, the game cuts ahead to either the interior scale or town scale rendering of each character's home. From this shot the pattern starts up again, however, another ellipses is applied here. After leaving the room/space where the characters are dropped off, the game cuts to the airship already in midflight, much further from where it was last seen in the overworld scale **[*figure 19.4*]**. The ellipses are intuitive to the audience/player's familiarity of temporal editing from other mediums, and for that reason seems perfectly natural. It also sets the sequence apart from the series' strict, no cheat, match cut editing previously defined as *analytical moving camera editing* (articulated in the *editing* section in the first chapter) dominating the player controlled sequences making up most of the games.

In the *editing* section of first chapter we discussed the very beginnings of elliptical editing in both film and the *Final Fantasy* series through a discussion of continuity editing. Whereas with the film discussion I outlined the gradual development towards a standardization of classical continuity editing, *Final Fantasy* took the opposite route, beginning with abstract, relatively incomprehensible ellipses and then moving on to more comprehensible applications. Before delving into the discussion a bit of

distinction is in order. Some forms of elliptical editing work on a large scale skipping over large periods of time and/or space. In early film many of these instances are accompanied by expository titles to ease the transition (i.e. “some time later”, “meanwhile…” etc) before or after these larger ellipsis occur. Invisible elliptical editing, on the other hand, occurs on a much smaller scale. This type of editing is considered an extension and refinement of continuity editing as it aims to maintain the illusion of continuity between shots, while shaving off segments of unnecessary action or time. For instance, in a particular sequence in Jack Adolfi’s *The Bank Burglar's Fate* (1914), the film cuts right as the actor is leaving the frame to a shot of him soundly inside the next frame in a location adjacent to the last one. Here, Adolfi cuts the spatial and temporal chaff out from a more direct juxtaposition by starting the second shot with the actor already mid frame deep into another space. By maintaining the actor’s gestural and directional position between these shots, the space lost and time ellipsis are invisible to the inattentive eye, completely concealing the efficacy being practiced. The sequence in *Final Fantasy III’s* ending outlined in the previous paragraph is the equivalent of this type application of invisible elliptical editing. It marked an important point in the series where cut scenes began to have a distinctive flow from the rest of the game. No longer did these sequences look as if another player was playing the game, but now had their own style, something that was impossible in game play sequences **[*figure 19.1 to 19.4*]**. *Final Fantasy IV* expanded on this in a big way. In addition to invisible elliptical editing being integrated throughout the game, larger scale ellipses were integrated, taking form in many different meaningful ways, one of which was cross cutting.

Crosscutting (also referred to as inter cutting or parallel editing) first surfaced as a filmmaking technique rather early in film history. Prototypical examples of the technique can be traced back to as early as 1906 with the short film *The 100 to One Shot* (Vitagraph).[86] In the film's final minute it cuts back and forth over four shots between a car speeding and an old man about to be evicted from his home. In the final two shots the car arrives at its destination, cutting to the driver entering the home of the old man. While he was not the first filmmaker to use the technique, D.W. Griffith was by far its most famous practitioner. Usage of the technique can be traced back to his Biograph days, as crosscutting was very apparent in both *A Corner in Wheat* (1909) and *The Lonedale Operator* (1911). Both films display much more advanced applications of the technique than was displayed in *The 100 to One Shot.* For instance, in *The Lonedale Operator* the ending sequence sees a cutting back and forth between four different perspectives (the title character, two bandits, a male telegrapher, and two train engineers) over several dozen shots before the perspectives are all reunited and the film comes to a close. Despite the technique being practiced before his input, filmmakers were most influenced by Griffith and these two works.[87] Over the next several years Griffith continued to develop the technique, producing increasingly complex results. The complexity of his usage reached a peak in his second and final epic, *Intolerance (1916)*. No doubt aware of its potentially overwhelming complexity to spectators, Griffith integrated intertitles and the allegorical figure of a woman rocking a cradle to announce the cuts between the film's parallel eras and stories therein **[*figure 20.5*]**. However, by the end of the film Griffith abandoned these guides and cut freely between each era and story. For its time the film

[86] Thompson, Kristin, and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. 2nd ed (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), 46.
[87] Thompson, and Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 48.

was considered a daring experiment, most notably its ending sequence.[88] A short comparison of the beginning and ending of the film will aptly demonstrate this progression. The film's first three shots are enough to explain the initial guiding Griffith employs in the film's early moments. Here, a series of non diegetic narration title cards explain not only the content of the film's narrative and themes, but also prepares audiences for the film's ensuing form. Across the three shots the narration reads,

> *Our film is made up of four separate stories, laid in different periods of history, each with it's own set of characters. Each story shows how hatred and intolerance, through all the ages, have battled against love and charity. Therefore you will find our play turning from one of the four stories to another, as the common theme unfolds in each.*[89]

The titles are blatantly explicative, preparing and addressing audiences directly for the editing experiment they are about to witness. After this intro the film continues its guiding nature by employing text between each change of era. By the end of the film, however, this guiding is lost entirely, and Griffith relies on the audiences accrued knowledge and experience from watching the film in order to make the connections between the images onscreen. For instance, prompted by the death of a female archer in the Babylonian era, Griffith cuts directly from the end of the epic battle to the now familiar woman rocking the cradle. The latter shot is on screen for less than a second before cutting to another era and series of characters. This subsequent era begins with a

[88] Brownlow, Kevin. *Hollywood: The Pioneers* (London: St. Jame's Place, 1979), 71 72
[89] *Intolerance*. Dir. D.W. Griffith. Perf. Mae Marsh, Robert Harron (Triangle Distribution Company. 1916. Youtube), accessed December 12th 2011.

shot of a train moving towards the camera **[*figures 20.4 to 20.6*]**. By displaying such a specific technological object in the opening of the sequence Griffith at once tests the audiences' ability to connect the various stories logically and aptly identifies the era from the others ("how could a train exist in Babylonian times? It can't, therefore this is a new era"). By this time in the film it can be assumed that the audience understands the non causal form of the editing, and Griffith uses specific images to merely identify the change in era. Titles are no longer necessary, and attentive audiences should be able to understand the various juxtapositions.

Final Fantasy IV houses the entirety of the previously described evolutionary path of the crosscutting technique over the course of its duration. From the prototypical practices in *The 100 To One Shot* all the way to its contemporary apex in Griffith's *Intolerance*, *Final Fantasy IV* begins with simple, guided cutting, and ends with complex juxtapositions. The game, in essence, is a microcosm of the innovations from the ten year span of film history outlined above. As touched upon earlier, the reasons for crosscutting only appearing in this entry is most likely a technological reason, as the NES/Famicom's memory limitations would not allow instantaneous loading of further away locations and character sprites. Therefore any frequent cutting between disparate locations would be impossible. The reasons behind why the game developed its intricacy of cross cutting gradually over its duration probably follows the same logical vein as Griffith's, to familiarize its player base with the new storytelling technique. While it can be assumed that the player base has already been exposed to crosscutting through other mediums by this point, in the end this is a new context in a new medium and the handling of the technique, no matter how similar, is ultimately different than that of its influences. In

addition, players familiar with the series thus far would not be accustomed to this technique being used in this context. The gradual progression of intricacy at once helps audiences understand that this technique is now a viable story telling means in this context and adds a set of training wheels, so to speak, for the technique's integration into the new medial context (for both reception and design purposes). The ability to cut between varied locations and characters on the fly took form in other narrative functions as well. Crosscutting was not just integrated into cutting between locations and events happening simultaneously, but also events that have already occurred.

Prior to *Final Fantasy IV* the narrative always took place in the space immediately surrounding the party. The range and depth of story information was always limited to local spaces and superficial dialogue (i.e. internal character subjectivity was not explored). *Final Fantasy IV* expands on both of these areas seeing a wider range of spaces being explored away from the main party and simultaneously placed a greater emphasis on character psychology. The latter takes form in numerous ways. The most prominent form is that of the flashback, many of which are placed throughout the game, exploring memories and past experiences of many of the playable characters (as briefly discussed in the ***tinting*** section in this chapter). Some "camera" effects also enhance this increased emphasis on character psychology. For instance, as a character would fall in or out of consciousness the screen would lose focus reflecting their fleeting lucidity. Both techniques of materializing character psychology were staples of the French Impressionist film movement (approx. 1918 1929)[90], which similarly saw an increased importance of exploring character psychology in narratives. The exploration of spaces

[90] Thompson, Kristin, and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. 2nd ed (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), Pg. 91.

away from the main party, is the more relevant area to this section's discussion due to its frequency of use throughout the game. While crosscutting in the form of flashbacks does not occur as often it is important to mention for a reason brought up earlier in the chapter. The varied usage of the crosscutting convention is another example of Bordwell's notion of a convention with variable meanings. As with the tinting examples, it this notion that has significant relevancy here, further demonstrating the usefulness of Bordwell's approach. That being said, due to the overall greater frequency of the technique used for the purposes of cutting between distanced present actions/locations, this aspect will be the brunt of the proceeding formal analysis. One of the biggest developments in the series thus far, *Final Fantasy IV's* comparatively omnipresent narration takes form through the varied and frequent application of crosscutting.

Initially the usage of crosscutting in the game is rather simple, and like some of the prototypical moments in film's history, is supported by extra diegetic devices. The game's progression of the technique is similar to that in Griffith's *Intolerance*. Through the outlining of two examples from the game these similarities can easily be seen. Similar to *Intolerance'*s opening sequence as outlined earlier, the game's first usage of crosscutting deploys both diegetic and non diegetic text cues to ease the player/audience into the logic behind the sudden location change. During a conversation between party members a character mutters to himself the name of the game's main antagonist, Golbez. From here the game fades to black and then cuts to a text bubble with the words "meanwhile…" written. There, the game cuts to a different location where Golbez is seen planning his next moves. While not as didactic as Griffith's supportive text, the game's method is still blatant in the mapping of its intentions. As the game progresses, like in the

closing moments of Griffith's magnum opus, these supportive textual details are eventually lost. Take this example from later in the game for instance. After a lengthy spelunking the party is left paralyzed by a particularly strong enemy's attacks **[*figure 20.1*]**. Just when all hope seems to be lost the game cuts directly, without any textual support, to the bedside of a previously injured ally. After realizing something is amiss, the injured character, Edward, crawls out of his bed and towards his harp, the source of the aforementioned enemy's weakness **[*figure 20.2*]**. This is a fact that is learned from earlier in the game when the party visits Edward, whom due to his bedridden state, is unable to join them and instead he gives the party a matching harp with the ability to mimic the songs he plays from a distance. Back to the sequence, after finally reaching his harp in a slow crawl Edward begins to play the song of the enemy's bane. Here, the game cuts back to the incapacitated party as they are slowly revived and strengthened by their distanced ally's actions while the enemy is simultaneously weakened and cowers in fear **[*figure 20.3*]**. In this sequence only facts accrued by playing the game, and the knowledge of said facts, connect the two spaces. No character refers to another in the opposite space, nor is there text to indicate that these events are connected. Like the closing moments of *Intolerance*, the game designers assume that the player/spectator can make the logical connection between spaces due to the supporting devices mentioned earlier in the game. After this point and for the remainder of the game all instances of crosscutting maintain this form, progressively increasing the complexity of its execution with each reiteration. Cutting across scales, multiple locations, and further apart locations, culminating in an ending sequence that compiles everything. Never is the editing or its

logic confusing, all thanks to a parallel learning curve appropriated from the years where motion picture visual language was still being established.

The techniques connecting the game's scales and spaces would not be as effective if it were not for the increased visual fidelity between scales due to the SNES platform's increased graphical capabilities. As outlined earlier in the shot scale section of the chapter, objects, spaces, and characters mostly retain their aesthetic themes and form between scales, and thus less of a suspension of disbelief is required of the player/spectator in connecting them in creating a single, cohesive world. As such, the handling of transitions, previously a crutch in connecting the scales, is decidedly different in this game. Continuing the general trend of simplification from entry to entry, *Final Fantasy IV* finally sees the transition becoming an invisible technique. For instance, with the exception of the transitions into battles (which follow another trend altogether), all other transitions no longer have sound cues attached to them (as discussed earlier in this section). Where previously transitions had a mostly unified form regardless of the context, *Final Fantasy IV* is different and follows two general rules. The first type occurs in the transitions between scales and the floors of a dungeon. Here, the transitions take the form of dual wipes with a simultaneous dissolve. While the dual wipes are a returning design element the dissolve is a new addition, and like the omission of the sound cue, is instrumental in the new efforts towards a more invisible integration. The dissolve works with the game's increased fidelity between scales, namely the consistent color palettes, to merge the spaces. The dissolves muddle the articulation of the spaces, but emphasize their common colors, increasing the congruity between scales. The second type of transition occurs only in specific non controllable narrative moments (i.e. cut scenes) and

when in the same scale. Here, the transition is simplified to a mere fade to black, varying in rates of the fade speed dependant on the desired dramatic effect. This type of transition does not occur very often relative to the first type. However, as in the discussion of *Final Fantasy III* transitions, this infrequent transition is a signal of the direction the transitions form will take in subsequent entries of the *Final Fantasy* series. For the remaining two SNES *Final Fantasy* games the fade to black becomes the most prominent means of cutting between spaces.

CONCLUSION

As suggested in this chapter's introduction, *Final Fantasy III* and *Final Fantasy IV* served as the grounds for the series' first significant moments of experimentation and expansion. In many instances, the former game's failures served as the ground for the latter game's refinements. In the shot scale discussion it was demonstrated how *Final Fantasy III's* expansion of overworld maps caused a stir in the delicate balance of scale fidelity established over the first two games. *Final Fantasy IV* took the core of this expansion idea and refined it resulting in the opposite effect; the series' clearest scale fidelity to date. Intertitles followed a similar causal relationship. Amongst other more successful changes, *Final Fantasy III* saw the integration of dialogue text boxes in the overworld. In *Final Fantasy IV* we saw those removed in favor of an integration of a much more logical dialogue title placement in the battle scale. The set design section outlined that in an attempt to further the previous games advances in illusory depth, *Final Fantasy III* over saturated its foreground space making navigation in the game's various dungeons an unnecessarily complex endeavor. Doing the exact opposite, by occupying

the game's negative background spaces with false perspectives and applying parallax scrolling techniques, *Final Fantasy IV* saw the series reach finally reach the threshold of true illusory depth.

All these things considered, let's take a momentary step back out of this thesis' role as a formal case study and look at what the terms of "experimentation" and "refinement" mean in this context. In order for something to be considered an experiment it must break from the norm, take a plunge into the unknown and tread new grounds. What then determines the norm in this situation? The answer to that question is twofold. The norm ultimately depends on two things here: the overwhelming general form of the surrounding systems of the object, in this case the tropes of narrative cinema, and its aesthetics; and secondly, the perspective through which this object is being looked at**.** Classical Hollywood cinema and its various aesthetic systems (i.e. editing, set design, etc.) has become the visual norm for which popular cinema, television, and other moving image media has used as a base. Games, in deviating from these rules, deviate from the norm. In the context of looking at this game series from a film studies, formal analysis perspective, breaking from the norm, in effect an "experiment" would mean to break from what is to be expected of the codes and conventions of classical Hollywood cinema, or more specifically due to the scope of comparison, the progression towards this style in early silent narrative film's development. For instance, let's look at the changes in integration of text boxes between the last two games again. In relation to the beginnings of narrative film logic, instances of dialogue or self reflection occurring in an exceedingly wide establishing shot is counterintuitive to the intimate, psychologizing

function of the close up.[91] Because of this expectation, the integration of text boxes in the overworld was regarded as a failure by this analysis. When the problem was "corrected" in *Final Fantasy IV*, it was considered so because the convention returned back to the familiar narrative film application, dialogue occurring in a closer framing. Thus, the term "refinement" in this context can be considered when an aesthetic returns to a form closer to that of early narrative films. Were these "failures" trying to achieve something different altogether? Were they just failures at intentional film mimesis? Or, more importantly, for the purposes of this case study's methodological legitimacy, were they purely objective failures?

The best way to address these questions is by looking at these moments in regards to the series' internal logic, in other words, in consideration of the aesthetic rules of its surrounding systems. Do these "failures" make sense in the series' greater aesthetic context? In short, no, they do not. All three of the aforementioned failures from *Final Fantasy III*, the confusing scale fidelity between the multiple overworld maps, the dialogue text boxes in the overworld scale, and the convoluted foreground clutter in the dungeon designs, broke fundamentals that were consistent in the series internal logic, regardless of film aesthetics outside of film's guided articulations. Careful attention was spent on the games prior to *Final Fantasy III* to give the player a sense of world congruity between scales. All that *Final Fantasy III* did, in that regard, was break the previously established efforts towards scale congruity. Before and after *Final Fantasy III* the overworld served mostly as a topographical reference of location for a reason. *Final Fantasy III* tried to expand its narrative platform in a space that served a mostly ludic,

[91] Hayward, Susan. *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts.* 3rd ed (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 355

utilitarian function. And finally, as already implied when the problem was first brought up in the last paragraph, the convoluted foreground design did more harm to the game on a ludic level than anything else, in regards to the series adherence to cinematic congruency. While the "corrections" of these moments in *Final Fantasy IV* were all inherently cinematic in nature, these failures, while coincidently failures in the mimetic cinematic sense, were also failures in their own right in the series' overall aesthetic context and logic.

No two mediums, no matter the amount of comparative compromise, adaptation of conventions, or inherent similarities, are the same. And as such, the utilization of an established one to define another will have some inconsistencies. In the context of a study comparing a relatively understudied object to film in order to define some of its specific aesthetic discrete parts, while certain compromises will be made to adapt to the unknown object's form, in the translation it should be expected that some areas not be defined as best as possible. While this may be the case in some regards, these essential and deliberate limitations were able to unearth much more than a totalizing overview ever would have. The subtleties of the games' aesthetic design, their functions, and the reasons behind their evolution over the course of the series would not have been possible without a detailed tracking through formal analysis. In fact, not only were the items discussed principally, i.e. shot scale, intertitles, tinting, set design, and editing, able to be understood in greater depth, but the resulting articulated parallels point to a potentially universal trend.

CHAPTER 3:

THESIS CONCLUSION

This thesis used film history as a guide and subsequently used formal analysis as a mediator, common conventions and techniques used with early silent film in order to better understand the aesthetic beginnings and development of the *Final Fantasy* series. While this was helpful in understanding and articulating the latter's form, as stated in the thesis' title, the ultimate purpose of these articulations was to map out the larger parallel evolutions between the two objects: early cinema and the *Final Fantasy* series. These comparisons to early cinema helped shed some light unto the JRPG series' similar usage of conventions, and were integral in the understanding of these recontextualizations. However, going into this study there was an expectation that certain details would not share identically sequential evolutionary paths. This expectation was implicit in the organizational decision of using the *Final Fantasy* series' chronology of the to be discussed conventions and techniques as the order of when they were to be analyzed in the study. In some cases this expectation turned out to be true. For instance, the discussion of shot scale began with characteristics not present in the film mediums' first works.

While this case study's purpose was mostly motivated in pointing out and outlining these parallels in this isolated situation, Lev Manovich's discussion of the evolution of the Graphical User Interface's (GUI) visual language uncovers a similar trend. Taken out of context Manovich's observation could potentially shed some more

light onto the "why" of this common evolution in addition to my earlier speculative reasoning.

Manovich begins by pointing out that text, words, or essentially any written form of language, is part of most media forms on some level.[92] Beneath the surface, and/or in the preparation stages of these forms, text is an essential component in the resulting visual stimuli's form. For instance, theatre uses scripts to inform the players of their actions, what words to be spoken, and generally organizes the drama; cinema uses screenplays to inform camera movement, maps out the plot, gives specific vocal, psychological, and movement cues to the actors; computers use text at its basic level in the writing of code, resulting in a more intuitive graphical user interface (GUI).[93] As these medias develop even further the seams of production are being tightened, and many forms of text are losing their place in the final product. With film, intertitles slowly disappeared to be replaced by visual and audio equivalents. Even in the isolated time period discussed in the study this was proven to be true. For instance, where initially a time of day would be indicated through an intertitle prompt, tints and some aspects of set design eventually replaced the need for direct textual reference. As the medium evolved technologically and artistically, this trend continued. Where intertitles previously represented the voice of characters onscreen, recordings of the actors' voices eventually replaced the need for textual representation. Outside of the film medium the clearest example of this notion of text behind visuals can be seen in the evolution of the GUI. Before the popular dissemination of the GUI, more archaic operating systems such as Microsoft DOS (disk operating system) were the norm. Visual representation was almost

[92] Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2001), 63.
[93] Manovich, *The Language of New Media,* 63.

non existent as white text dominated the black screen of DOS' interface. Users had to learn abstract textual prompts and commands in order to access different programs and information. In 1984 Macintosh introduced the first GUI. Relying on a more streamlined means of prompting programs and viewing information stored on a computer, this new operating system appealed to users directly through graphical means. Straight lines and rectangular windows that contained smaller rectangles of individual files arranged in a grid, dominated the user's screen.[94] This being the progenitor of all current operating systems (i.e. Microsoft's Windows, Apple's iOS, Linux, etc.), based on the above description it is clear that a movement towards a more graphically centered communication base with its users continued over the years.

The *Final Fantasy* series takes aspects from the different stages of both cinema and the GUI's visual development paths in its own interface's evolutionary motivations. In the case of its usage of intertitles many aspects that begin as mostly functionality based text for the game's ludic component are traded in for more visual, cinematic aspects as the series progressed. Over the course of the *Final Fantasy* series new features are almost always introduced through text and then are eventually replaced by more visual means. For instance, in *Final Fantasy I* dealing damage to an enemy and its eventual defeat were represented through five separate text boxes (text boxes dedicated to the amount of damage being done, the enemy being attacked, the number of hits landed, and to indicate it's eventually defeat). By *Final Fantasy IV* all of the text boxes had disappeared and were replaced by specific sprite movements and graphical cues. Going even further back outside of the series' own internal evolutionary path, as discussed earlier, the Computer Role Playing Game in general followed this general trend as well.

[94] Manovich, *The Language of New Media,* 63.

What began as games entirely made of text as a means of conveyance eventually evolved into the highly cinematic influenced *Final Fantasy* series.

Manovich sees this movement from text to the cinematic as all encompassing, being a trend across all of modern society. He justifies this, "As new generations of both computer users and computer designers grow up in a media rich environment dominated by television rather than by printed texts, it is not surprising that they favor cinematic language over the language of print."[95] While I do not agree with it being a societal shift on the basis of this study distancing itself from universal theories, I do believe this theory can be applicable in more individual contexts than the intertitle example presented. For instance, silent film and the *Final Fantasy* series can serve as microcosmic examples of this theory. As the cinematic language developed it became more visually based, and like it *Final Fantasy*, being developed in the midst of this modern age Manovich speaks of, can serve as an example of this tendency towards visual languages. In short, the usage of intertitles or text in the series, from both computer based origins and those of the proto cinematic, are eventually traded in for more graphical alternatives.

The greater point of interest here is not the specific movement from text to the cinematic, but rather the general gravitation of the series towards cinematic language. All of the aesthetic parallels explored throughout this study can be seen under this light. As proven in the preceding analyses, the evolution of *Final Fantasy's* tinting, set design, and editing can be subsumed under this progression, becoming more cinematic with each title's revision. *Final Fantasy* repeated film history by starting in early cinema conventions, and moving towards classical Hollywood conventions. By going even

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[95] Manovich, *The Language of New Media,* 93

further back and looking at the broader ontological progression of developments leading to the eventual film medium, this tendency can be seen as a more universal trend going beyond the textual application outlined earlier. Comparing the inception and progression of the cinematic CD ROM games (the games favored by Wolf in his attempted video game ontology) to cinema's emergence one hundred years prior, Manovich outlines this common trend:

> *Indeed, as the speed of computers keeps increasing, CD ROM designers have been able to go from a slide show format to the superimposition of small moving images. This evolution repeats the nineteenth century progression—from sequences of still images (magic lantern slide presentations) to moving characters over static backgrounds (as in, for instance, Reynaud's Praxinoscope Theater) to full motion (the Lumières cinematography).*[96]

In conjunction with the results of this case study, it has become apparent that this broader progression can be applied to many different contexts, on both macro and micro levels.

On the macro we already have the examples with the aforementioned GUI, CRPG to JRPG, CD ROM game, and cinema, both in the moments leading up to its inception and internally thereafter. On a micro level we have the various internal and specific outlined evolutions of the *Final Fantasy* series and early silent film. For instance, consider the development of the *Final Fantasy* series' set design in regards to the above quotation. In *Final Fantasy*, most of the game was composed of a static "painted set" motif with some superimposed characters. *Final Fantasy II, III and IV* saw the

[96]Manovich, *The Language of New Media,* 313.

beginnings and complete conversion to dynamic sets, a dynamic camera, and illusory depth being integrated. This trend did not stop with these entries either. As the series progressed, more and more cinematic tendencies emerged. As hardware platforms grew in sophistication, as Sakaguchi expressed earlier, so did the means of visual storytelling. This tendency reached a boiling point at two different moments of the series evolution and proliferation. The first moment saw the series jump into the medium and genres it drew upon so freely with Sakaguchi producing and directing the narrative film, *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within (2001)*. More recently, and more controversially, was with the release of the game *Final Fantasy XIII (2010)*. Upon its release the game was heavily criticized for its incredibly restrictive game play and exploration. While the game was beautiful to look at it was at the cost of the freedom of exploration and overall interactivity, as producing graphics of such a high caliber over a large area was developmentally impossible. Interestingly, taking a polar opposite position on the hardware and memory resource spectrum outlined in the introduction from the very first *Final Fantasy*. In the criticisms the game play was often described as an experience limited to walking down a hallway between cinematic cut scenes. Aside from jumping directly into the medium itself, *Final Fantasy XIII* was the closest the series had veered towards the cinematic medium by at once undermining interactivity and showcasing a sophisticated narrative cinematic form.

CLOSING REMARKS

Ironically, it seems that this study has arrived at the possibility of a thesis that has multiple realms of applicability. The word "multiple" has been used here deliberately, as I am not claiming a universal relevancy to this as Manovich claims there to be. The means unto which this conclusion has been uncovered, through a combination of my own middle work and formal analysis, and Manovich's own middle work and analysis, demonstrates the specific contexts within where this theory can work. Can it work in contexts outside of those explored? Perhaps, but following the methodological framework of this thesis, no claims of universality will be made until it is practiced and proven empirically.

By sticking to the fundamentals of the accrued methodological form outlined in the introduction, a more thorough understanding of the *Final Fantasy* series aesthetic form was attained. By limiting this study to this series, by limiting it to passive elements of the formal system (i.e. non game play elements), by limiting it to looking at it through a film studies formal analysis lens, and by limiting it to a comparison with early film and its history, an equal specification and articulation was be attained. How these aesthetic objects functioned, the reasons behind their form, and the reasons behind their change were also outlined. Ultimately, what purpose can this specificity serve? This case study had a two pronged goal. First, just as with any formally motivated case study of aesthetics, was to simply provide a better understanding of the object's formal system. In consideration of a lack of dedicated studies yet to be done around the formal concerns of specific video game genres, game types, series, or even single games, this simple goal is reason enough to conduct this study. Second, and more important in regards to the

methodological reasoning of the study, was to demonstrate the absolute impossibility of understanding this medium from a singular perspective. The variation in aesthetics and the ludic elements that exists between one end of the video game genre spectrum to the other is impossibly huge. Furthermore, taking into account the infinite manners in which these objects can be consumed and interacted with, the problem is exponentially increased. If considering Galloway's notion of *games as action*, more questions arise in favor of this. If games only exist when enabled by the computer and users collective input, what can be considered the complete and final form of any video game? Going back to the *Grand Theft Auto* example, a person that plays the game without following the main story arc has just as viable experience as the completionist who experiences everything the game has to offer. Because the object only exists with the players input, their interaction and their choices ultimately construct what is to be experienced. There is no right or wrong way to play the game in that respect. In analogous terms the player ultimately serves as the director of the experience. In this regard, then, the product constructed and provided by the designers and developers serves merely as a tool, a diegesis unto which the player maps their experience and own plot, creating narratives through emergence. In this case the narrative becomes another immaterial variable, something that cannot be properly analyzed without making the appropriate compromises.

This case study was careful in not analyzing or interpreting the narrative, but rather the aesthetic context around these moments. By isolating the analysis to passive moments and passive moments triggered by actions, the study distances itself from any incorporeal narrative or plot analysis issues. Rather, it concentrates on moments of likely interaction, focusing on the aesthetic template. The solid and indisputable form of this

template in the final product has a greater chance of interaction, and thus relevance, than any single player's constructed narrative experience through game play or interpretation would have. Potentially, if following a similar methodology, other games outside of this genre or series could benefit from this practice. By looking at passive moments that are solid in form and likely to be interacted with, similar understandings of aesthetic design could be reached. However, for now these claims will remain hypothetical. In order for the proteusian form of the medium to be understood it must be examined from the inside out, from the micro to the macro, the discrete to the whole. Ideally, similar studies to my own with similar methodologies of isolation and prioritizing for the video game medium will follow, leading to a greater understanding of the medium and its infinitely diverse forms and interactions therein.

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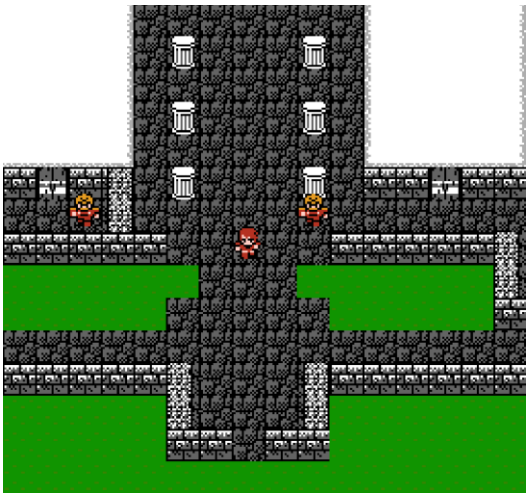
FIGURE 1: *CONTRA* VS. *FINAL FANTASY*

(1.1) Contra **(Konami, NES, 1990)**

(1.2)



(1.3) ***Final Fantasy*** **(Square, NES, 1987)**

(1.4)

FIGURE 2: *ROGUE*

Rogue (1980)

FIGURE 3: *DRAGON QUEST* EVOLUTION

(3.1) Dragon Quest **(Enix, FAM, 1986)**

(3.2)

(3.3) Dragon Quest 3 **(Enix, FAM, 1988)**

(3.4) ***Dragon Quest 3***

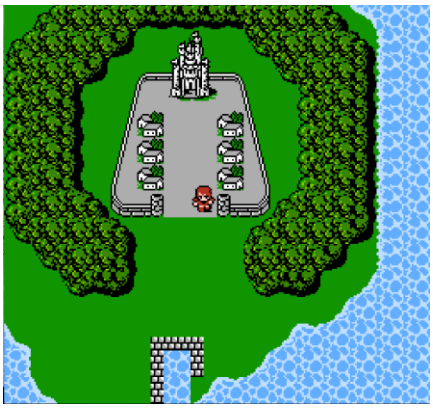
(3.5) Dragon Quest 6 **(Enix, SFAM, 1995)**

(3.6) ***Dragon Quest 6***

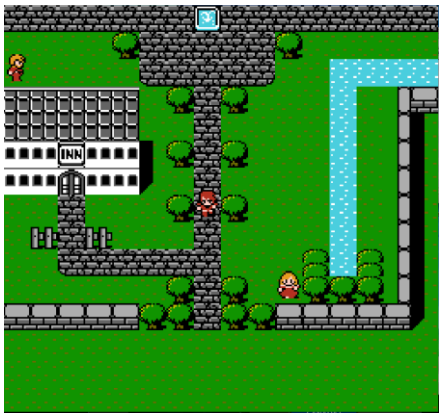
(3.7) Dragon Quest 9 **(Square-Enix, NDS, 2009)**

(3.8) ***Dragon Quest 9***

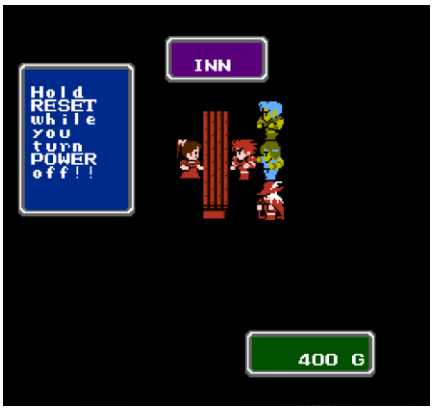
FIGURE 4: *FINAL FANTASY I-IV* MASTER SCALE LIST



(4.1) FFI: Overworld Scale

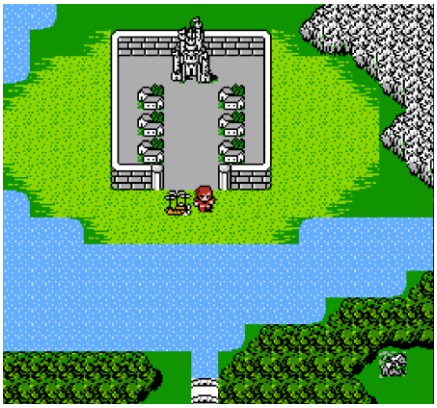


(4.2) FFI: Town Scale



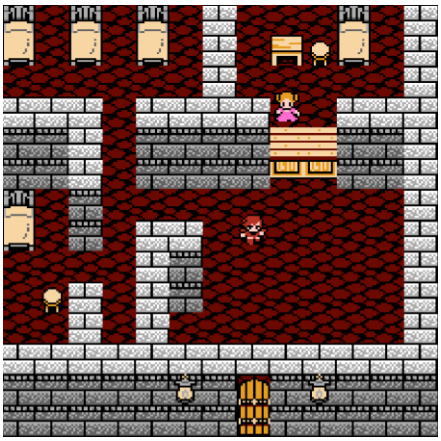
(4.3) FFI: "Interior" Scale

(4.4) FFI: Battle Scale

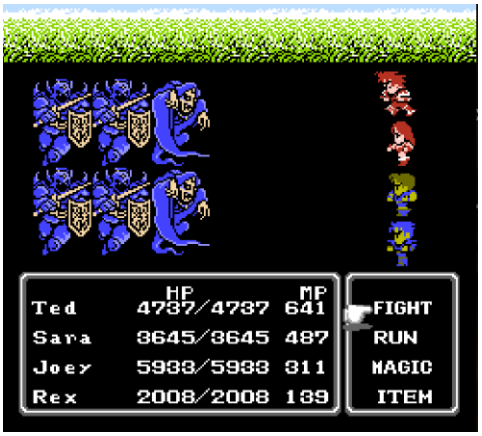


(4.5) FFII: Overworld Scale

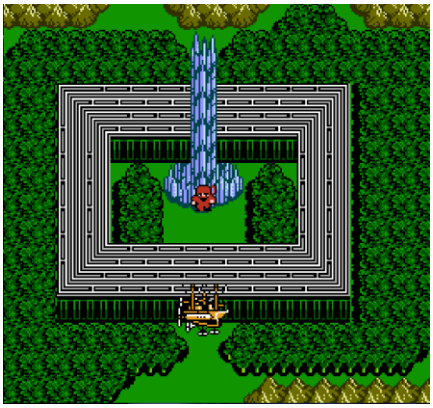
(4.6) FFII: Town Scale



(4.7) FFII: Interior Scale

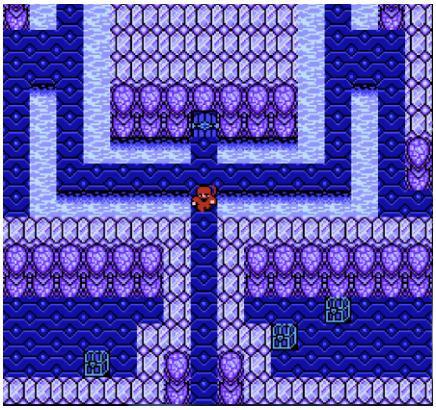


(4.8) FFII: Battle Scale

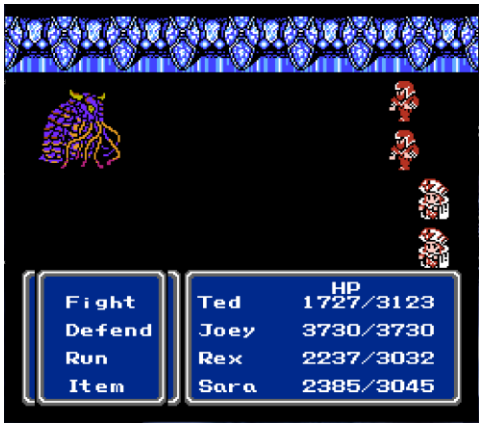


(4.9) FFIII: Overworld Scale

(4.10)FFIII: Town Scale



(4.11) FFIII: Interior Scale



(4.12)FFIII: Battle Scale

(4.13) FFIV: Overworld Scale

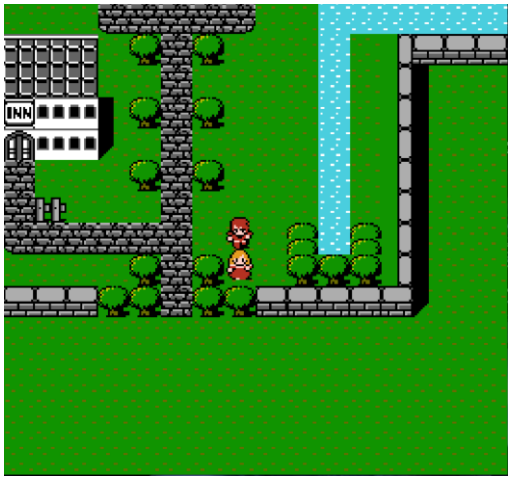
(4.14) FFIV: Town Scale

(4.15) FFIV: Interior Scale

(4.16) FFIV: Battle Scale

FIGURE 5: INTERTITLES

(5.1) Shot w/ textbox integrated



(5.2) Same shot w/o textbox

FIGURE 6: REGULATED DIALOGUE TITLE INTEGRATION

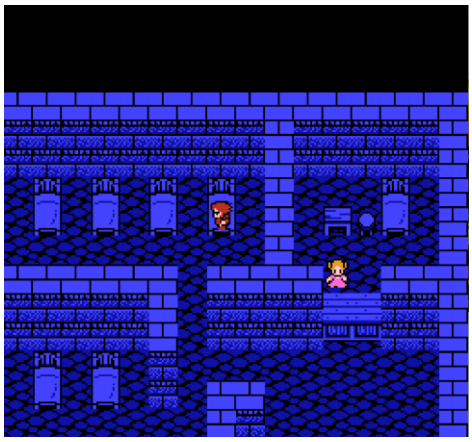
(6.1) Shot before dialogue title…

(6.2) …dialogue title…

(6.3) …returns to shot after dialogue title.

FIGURE 7: TINTING

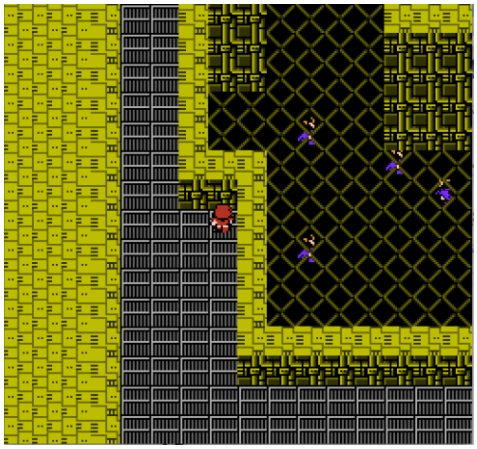
(7.1) Before tinting (daytime)



(7.2) After tinting (nighttime)

(7.3) Similar example from film. Blue represents the darkness and changes to sepia when light is switched on.

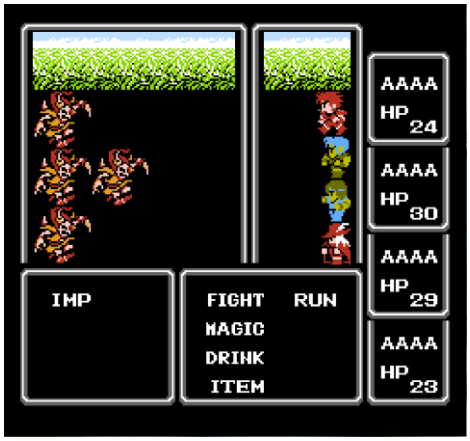
FIGURE 8: ATTEMPTED DEPTH



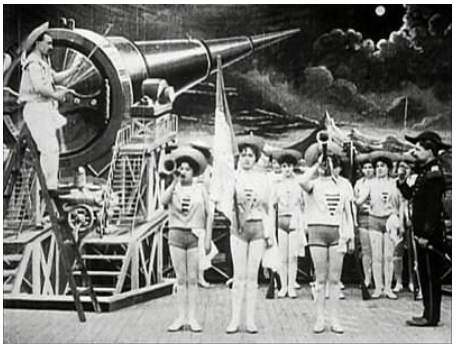
Figures on the right are supposed to represent enemies on the floor below.

FIGURE 9: "PAINTED" BACKDROPS

(9.1) Only the background changes from screen to screen.



(9.2)

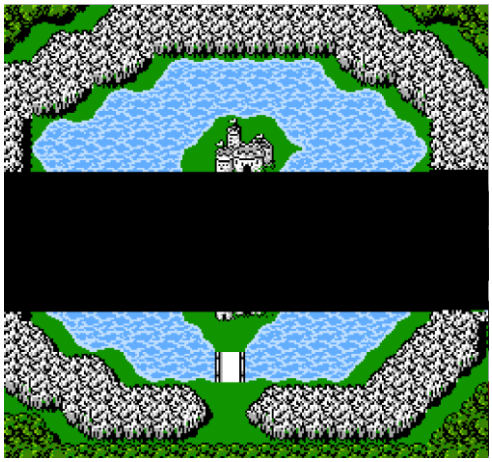


(9.3) Stills from "A Trip to the Moon" (1902).
Both scenes were shot in the same space with the background being changed between shots.

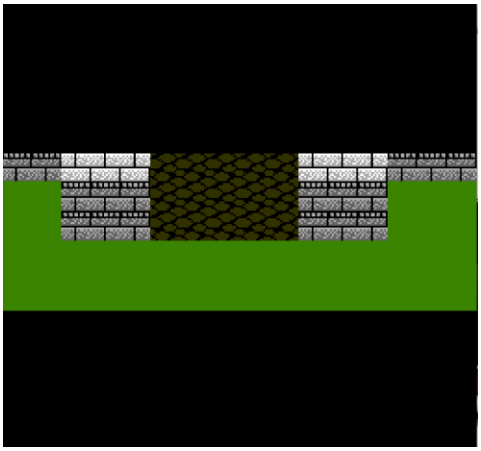
(9.4)

FIGURE 10: TRANSITIONS

(10.1) Outside location.



(10.2) Upon entering wipe variant begins.

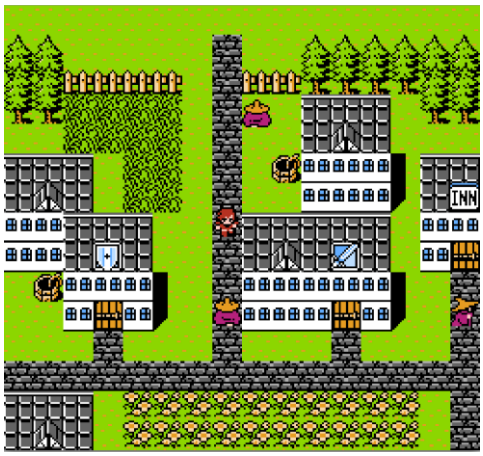


(10.3) Wipe continues.

(10.4) Finishes to reveal new scale and connect the two spaces.

FIGURE 11: ANALYTICAL EDITING

(11.1) Village from the overworld scale.



(11.2) Same village in closer framing.

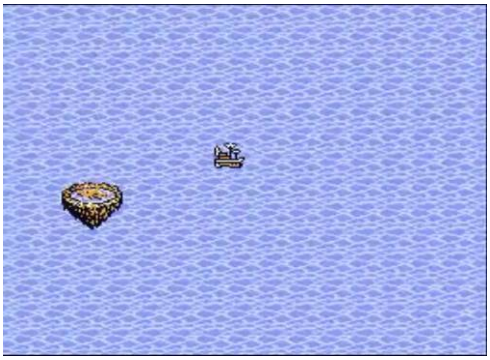
(11.3) Establshing shot.

(11.4) Closer framing, revealing more details.

FIGURE 12: FINAL FANTASY III'S INCONSISTENT PROPORTIONAL FIDELITY

(12.1) Inside of town on floating continent

(12.2) Outside of town on floating continent.



(12.3) In airship next to floating continent.

(12.4) City on surface world (same scale as left)

FIGURE 13: *FINAL FANTASY IV'S* "MODE 7" ADJUSTABLE HEIGHTS

(13.1) Neutral overworld height.

(13.2) "Airship" height.

(13.3) "Spaceship" height.

FIGURE 14: DRAMA ACROSS SCALES (FFIV)

(14.1) Conflict begins in interior scale.

(14.2) Continues in battle scale.

FIGURE 15: TINTING UNDER THE SEA (FFIII)

(15.1) Overworld

(15.2) Underwater

FIGURE 16: YELLOW/RED TINT USES (FFIV)

(16.1) Red tint as widespread fire

(16.2) Red tint as compliment to fire based magic

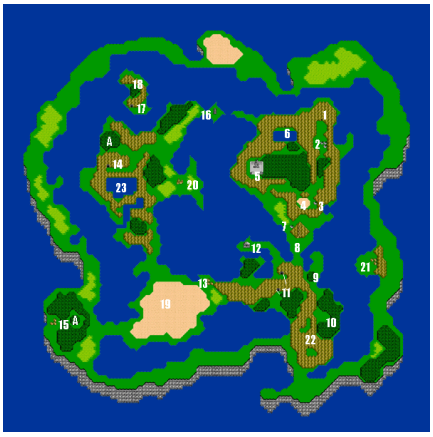
(16.3) Red tint as a symbolic compliment to fire-based enemy.

(16.4) Yellow tint as an indication of a flashback.

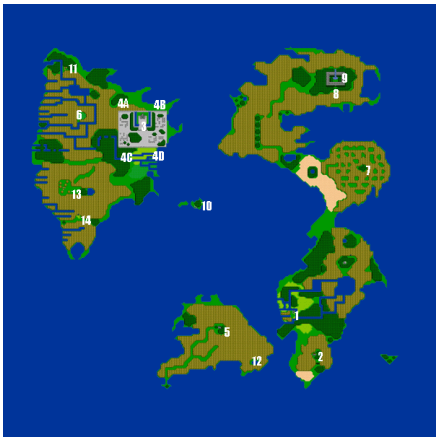
(16.5) Yellow tint as compliment to curative magic.

(16.6) Yellow tint as symbolic compliment to Odin.

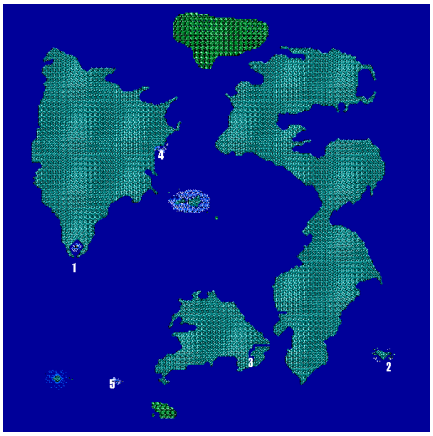
FIGURE 17: THE MULTIPLE MAPS OF *FINAL FANTASY III* AND *IV*



(17.1) Floating Continent (FFIII)



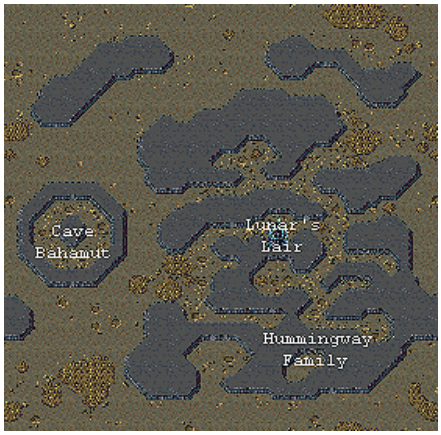
(17.2) Hub World (FFIII)



(17.3) Under the sea (FFIII)

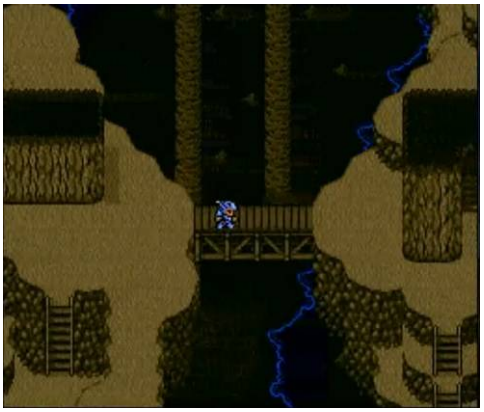
(17.4) Hub World (FFIV)

(17.5) Underworld (FFIV)

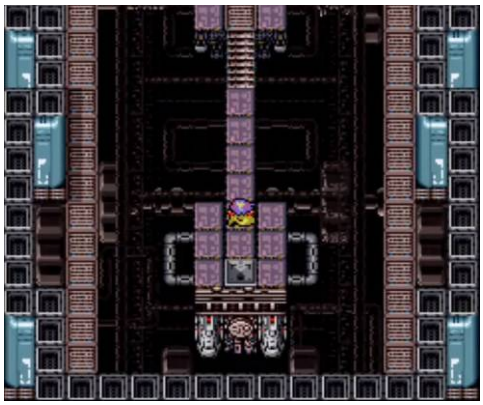


(17.6) The Moon (FFIV)

FIGURE 18: PARALLAX DEPTH (FFIV)



(18.1) False perspectives combined with parallax scrolling create a greater illusory depth.



(18.2)

FIGURE 19: ELLIPTICAL EDITING (FFIII)

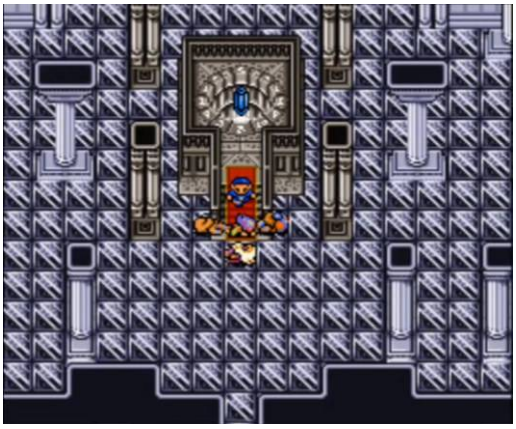
(19.1) Sequence begins.

(19.2) Cuts to airship interior.

(19.3) Cuts to drop off location.

(19.4) Cuts to exterior of drop off location.

FIGURE 20: CROSS-CUTTING (*FFIV* VS. *INTOLERANCE*)



(20.1) The party is defeated.

(20.2) Cuts to Edward crawling to his harp.

(20.3) Cuts back to the party being revived.

(20.4) Scene ends with the fall of Babylon.

(20.5)Cuts to allegorical figure of woman rocking cradle.

(20.6) Cuts to another scene set in modern times.