Gamers' Relationships with Their Avatars & Fanfiction: An Exploration of Player-Avatar Relationships Through a Digital Project

by

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Digital Art History/Computational Media
Duke University

Defense Date: November 27, 2023

Approved:

Mark Olson, Supervisor

Victoria Szabo

Augustus Wendell

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Art, Art History & Visual Studies in The Graduate School of Duke University 2023
ABSTRACT

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In this thesis, I discussed video game players’ relationships with their avatars, and how further differentiations can be made from the existing categories using fanfiction as an avenue. Past studies on player-avatar relationships and fanfiction surrounding the questions of identity and the process of identification have been examined. Among those studies, the player-avatar categories proposed by Jaime Banks and Nicholas David Bowman in their 2021 article served as the baseline for this project's development. Drawing upon Jon Robson and Aaron Meskin’s concept of “self-involving fictions,” or SIF, I proposed a new type of player-avatar relationship, “avatar-as-SIF.” This relationship emerges when players decide to embark on a journey with their avatar relationships beyond the original scope provided by the game, through fanfiction. This relationship manifests that which was previously digital into products that have impacts in the real world, for both the players and the audiences. This project then provides an actualization example of the “player-as-SIF” relationship through two videos composed of animated composited photographs between the avatars and the real world, featuring a narrative aligned with fanfiction.
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1. Introduction

In an age of ubiquitous digitalization, an increasing amount of people have one, or in most cases, multiple representations of themselves, or avatars, in digital realms. For instance, both Apple and Samsung allow their users to turn themselves into customizable emojis which are essentially personalized avatars. One major advertising point for Metaverse is its promise to allow the users to turn themselves into increasing realistic avatars that can perform a multitude of activities in the digital space. Among these different areas, video game players are arguably the most notable; the ability of players to represent themselves as customizable avatars in a game world has become a common feature.

With a projected total industry revenue of $334 billion dollars in 2023, the video game has become a dominant form of entertainment across the globe.¹ A major factor behind its success is the video game's interactive nature.² One of the main ways interaction is achieved is through a digital representation of the player in-game, with an avatar.³ The actualization of avatars varies greatly among different games, yet their

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purpose remain the same: an invitation or bridge for the players of the games to connect with the constructed virtual world.\textsuperscript{4} With this purpose in mind, it is essential for the avatars to be able to relate to the players, cementing their connection.\textsuperscript{5}

As a video game player myself, this connection has always deeply fascinated me as it heavily revolves around the concepts of the players’ “presence” and “co-presence.” These two concepts focus on creating a stronger sense of immersion for the players and stem from an identification process that can be fully understood through Carl Roger’s self-concept theory, and it is key for this project to take the initiative in further understanding this connection. Roger’s theory prompts a differentiation between an individual’s “actual” self and an “idealized” self.\textsuperscript{6} As these concepts will be elaborated later, Rogers describes the identification process of the players projecting themselves, mainly and importantly their “idealized” selves, onto their game avatars. As a result, personalized but parasocial relationships, which are relationships that only entail emotional investment from one person, will emerge between self and avatar, at least initially. The relationship between an individual and the respective avatar will then


\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.

evolve into myriad forms, yet few differentiations have been made among them. This project argues that this entire identification process is analogous to the relationship a fanfiction writer takes on with different source materials. Both fanfiction and player-avatar relationship entail the audience’s superimpositions of their interpretations and personalities onto the sources, displayed through alternated narratives. For some game players, the player-avatar relationship evolves through further emotional investment from the player’s side, prompting some to participate in fanfiction to actualize this relationship in a narrative form.

I theorize this new player-avatar relationship through a deliberate study on the limited existing studies on player-avatar relationships and the relatively more robust research into fanfiction. My thesis is an exploration of how fanfiction and theories of avatar identification help us explain a genre of augmented-reality-like machinima, in which digital game elements are seamlessly composited with real-world photographs and video image sequences. I explore this genre in a hands-on way by exporting my avatar model from the MMORPG, Final Fantasy XIV, a game that I have emotional and time investment into, out of the game. Then through re-texturing and rendering them in different 3D software such as Adobe Photoshop and Houdini, I composited them with different real-world photography, and edited the compositions into two videos.7 This

narrative, which traces my own encounter with my avatar, productively can be understood through theories of fanfiction and avatar identification. As I will lay out in chapter 1, I extend Bank & Bowman’s four categories of avatar-self relationships in a new dimension, drawing on Robson & Meskin’s theory of video games as “self-involving-interactive fictions,” to derive a new category of “avatar as self-involving interactive” fiction or “avatar-as-SIF.” My motivation to pursue this project emerges from my own avid game play, as well as my hope to contribute further studies into the topic as a way of reflecting on the larger human-avatar relationship.

The relative history of both fields will be conducted in detail in this chapter as they offer critical precedents for the creation of this project and how this project constructed a link among all of them. From there, the chapter will offer a brief discussion on the project’s engagement with models’ agencies as it was an unexpected but intriguing topic that emerged during the production. As the term model is attached to numerous concepts, the term used in this project strictly refers to digital avatars. The chapter will then provide a discourse on past projects that have both directly given inspiration to the project or engaged in similar discussions. Finally, the chapter will explain the theoretical aspect, or the general rationale, in developing a new player-avatar relationship. The following chapter will then discuss the production details of the project; and the final chapter will offer a data analysis on the audience’s reception to the project, its limitations
and future trajectories, and conclude with a reflection on the project’s findings and its implications.
2. Project’s Theoretical Approaches

2.2 Relationships Between Video Game Players and Avatars

As raised earlier, one common method for video game industry to cement a player’s interest and investment in a game is through the use of the in-game avatars.\(^8\) Youngnam Seo et al conducted an experiment that involved a process of recording participants’ response after exposing each of them to “two types of image presentations (photo image vs. avatar image) and four categories of human faces (self-faces vs. famous faces vs. ideal faces vs. unfamiliar faces)” to discern the impact of avatar’s appearance to the players.\(^9\) The result indicates that the “users would pay much more attention in response to their own faces than to the other faces regardless of the image type (i.e., photo vs. avatar) because the virtual personas wearing their faces can be considered as the same as themselves, at least at the neurological level.”\(^10\) Their findings are further solidified through subsequent research projects such as Damar Kristanto’s 2018 study, where he suggests that the detailed customization of a video game avatar can significantly increase a player’s game loyalty.\(^11\) The explanation for this increased

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\(^8\) Ibid, 11.
\(^10\) Ibid.
engagement between a game and a player through customizable avatars stems from the fact that it facilitates an process of “self-identification” to happen for the players. This process in return allows the game to “improve the playing experience, improve the perceived quality of the video game played, increase the flow and immersion of players, and increase gamer loyalty.” Another study conducted by Selen Turkay and Charles Kinzer in 2016 also finds that customization of an avatar can decrease self-discrepancy from the players side. The self-discrepancy theory is proposed by E. Tory Higgins which ultimately describes the difference between individuals’ internal comparisons of their “actual” self to an “idealized” version of themselves. A wide discrepancy between the two versions can lead to the presence of self-dissatisfaction, and thus it is normally beneficial to narrow the gap.

On the other hand, the self-identification process mentioned by Kristanto can be considered as a development of the players’ “presence” and “co-presence” in a game, which allows the players to derive a higher sense of immersion in the games. This

12 Ibid, 86.
13 Ibid.
The concept of “identification” is also argued to be the best way to describe how “players deal with characters or social roles in video games” in Christoph Klimmt et al’s 2009 article. In their article, the researchers approach this relationship through the application of the existing models of self-perception and self-concept. Self-perception as a concept is proposed by Daryl Bem with the central idea being that we perceived and develop our own characteristics through observations of our own behaviors. On the other hand, the self-concept theory is developed by Carl Rogers which entails the belief that a human being’s personality is split into the “real-self” and the “ideal-self,” and the latter drives the former to develop. The research reach the conclusion which hypothesized that the players in video games project their personalities, predominantly the “ideal-self,” onto the avatars they created and thus establish a personal level of connection between the two. Through this identification procedure, the players will go on to adopt the game characters’ perspectives and personalities to a degree as the players merge their own traits with their avatars. Moreover, this identification influences the players cognitive and

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19 Ibid.
affective response during their game play. The article proceeds to point out that both positive and negative implications can be derived from such behaviors. The positive effects of players’ projections of their ideal selves onto video game characters include an increase in players’ motivation to reduce “self-discrepancy on relevant dimensions with greater sustainability,” which as mentioned prior, can benefit an individual in decreasing self-dissatisfaction and contribute to positive self-development.

On the other hand, this identification has also been argued to harm the players, which was implied by Klimmt and elaborated by Kim Szolin et al. In the latter's study, the researchers have found a consistent positive association between "avatar identification and GD across many of the studies." Gaming disorder, or GD in short, is described by the World Health Organization (WHO) as people who prioritize gaming over the majority of other aspects of their lives and thus show impaired social and personal mental functions. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this study only adopts papers that focused on user-avatar relationships, which may cause the study's conclusion on the relationship between GD and identification process to be relatively

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23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid, 368.
Furthermore, the WHO’s description of GD cites studies that have shown that GD only affects a minor fraction of the gamer population and it can be easily averted through moderations. Szolin et al.’s study suggests that players with GD often design an avatar representing the ideal version of themselves that may be too farfetched from reality and include fantastical elements from video games. Nevertheless, the article also states that given the often excessive creation freedom offered by many video games when it comes to customizing a player's character, an overlap between "utopian and idealized avatar types may exist," which is unexplored in the article. In other words, when an individual is faced with myriad choices in customization, augmented by the different games' innately fantastical setting, the development of a self that exceeds the reality's counterpart may be utterly normal, a notion that I concur with. As it is nearly impossible, and arguably pointless, to re-create a "faithful" version of a player in a video game with the given tools and options, players can reasonably choose to construct a fantasy or idealized self they may see themselves partake in under that particular setting.

Furthermore, there exist different degrees of GD that the health industry has yet to provide a clear clinical definitional guideline on, and Szolin et al.’s study may have been

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30 Ibid, 9-12
operated under a GD guideline that deviated from the severity of the situation it was attempting to convey. This means that Szolin et al.’s study may have converged different degrees of GD into one category, disregarding the difference in severity among those degrees. However, the additive nature of video games is an undisputable fact. Video games often deploy different tactics in making their games as addictive as possible, and avatars is just one example of this.31 For instance, the setting of a video game itself can be considered as a safe environment, detached from reality, where the users do not need to be “concerned with the long-term effects of their actions.”32 Video games also often features a streamline experience that the players will only to focus “on what needs to be done, that could be the mission or rewards.”33 This streamline experience foster long session of gaming, aided by the different dopamine stimulations from the game.34 Although not the focus of this thesis, there is a thin line to traverse between video game engagement and video game addiction and more future studies can be conducted upon this subject matter.

33 Ibid.
Conversely, a study conducted by Benjamin Li and May Lwin in 2016 delves into the psychosocial impact of avatars in “exergames,” (exercise game.)\(^\text{35}\) The study shows that avatars in digital games have shown a sign of encouraging physical activity, on players, based on the social cognitive theory and developed through 322 participants.\(^\text{36}\) The positive relationship between avatar and players is supported by the previously mentioned Klimmt's study, as well as by Jillian Hamilton’s study that places an emphasis on the avatar-player's relationship's role in helping the player to better express their self-identity and in facilitating embodied interactions.\(^\text{37}\)

This project argues that the player-avatar link is both an identification process and a process of the players superimposing their personalities onto their avatars. Where a player can experience a fantastical digital world through their avatars first-hand, the result may not only be a more immersed gaming experience for the player but also an enhancing opportunity for the player's sense of self as they experience fantastical scenarios encountered through virtual experiences that would not happen in real life. Such a relationship may not only narrow the gap between the "real" and the "ideal self" and lead to the players adopting more positive activities in reality, as Klimmt suggests,


\(^{36}\) Ibid, 355.

but also challenge the player's "ideal self," which can lead to enhancement impacts on the players' "real selves." This concept stems from Jaime Banks and Nicholas David Bowman's article on players' mental models of avatars. Banks and Bowman argue that since the avatars are defined as a "body that extends agency and (sometimes) identity into a gamespace," and players and avatars can be considered "an assemblage and are situated within and across assembled spaces." The implications of their assemblage theory thus imply that to some players, avatar exists as a tangible entity capable of initiating different forms of relationships with the players. Their study identifies four types of player-avatar relationships (PAR): "avatar-as-Object, avatar-as-Me, avatar-as Symbiote, and avatar-as-Other." The "avatar-as-Object" contain the players treating the avatars almost as "toys." This relationship usually develops when a player has "little emotional investment" in the avatars and consider them merely as tools to play the game. On the polar opposite side, the "avatar-as-Me" entail players who consider their avatars as extensions of themselves in the digital realm. These players do not “distinguish between themselves and the avatar” and cannot be “construed as social relationships because they

38 Ibid, 6.
40 Ibid. 3-4.
41 Ibid. 4.
largely represent a monadic or merged orientation: The player and the avatar are one and the same entity.\textsuperscript{42}

Following the two extremes, the "avatar-as Symbiote" embodies a relationship where the avatars manifests as an “entanglement of self and other.”\textsuperscript{43} As this relationship often resembles a form of “identity laboratories” for the players, they are different from the “avatar-as-Me” relationship in the sense that more “agency and personality” are assigned to the avatars but still “anchored in the self.”\textsuperscript{44} Often times, this symbiote-relation have players who experience an avatar as an “separate social entity that serves as an affective and behavioral exemplar.”\textsuperscript{45} In other words, “avatar-as Symbiote” players often project their “ideal selves” to their avatars. Finally, the "avatar-as-Other" have players who identify the avatars as "authentic and self-differentiated social entities- not so different phenomenologically from friends."\textsuperscript{46} That being said, this project mainly concerned the concept of "avatar-as-Symbiote" and "avatar-as-Other." These two relationships are chosen for their potential as relationships that can be developed and evolved in multiple different directions and out from a pure parasocial relationship like the other two.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, 3-5.
However, while the question of how relatable an avatar can become with a player through its appearance or characteristics is important, the fact that the games impose a narrative frame on avatars limits the agency that users have for self-definition. Yet for the group of people who wish to continue developing this relationship beyond the original horizon offered by the game, fanfiction offers a potential site of further self-avatar exploration. This can be viewed as a way of allowing the PAR to carry over beyond the game that Klimmt discussed and as an extension of Banks and Bowman's contention for the "avatar-as-Symbiote" concept, which functions as a way for the players to bring this relationship outside of the game to further "experiment" with. My project can also be viewed as an extension of the "avatar-as-Others" theory through its narrative elements. Banks and Bowman's study finds that the "avatar-as-Others" players' investments into the games are less about the "time and activity and more about a commitment to crafting a cohesive persona that exists separately from the player."\textsuperscript{47} This project then takes this effort of crafting a believable separate entity that exists outside of the players out of the original context and into the realm of fanfiction, where relatively lesser boundaries exist for creativity. Nevertheless, this project cannot be entirely conceived from the "avatar-as-Others" theory, as the project also utilized a narrative that put the "avatar-as-Symbiote"

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, 24.
into effect the bridge between the two theories' practice was fanfiction. This notion will be fully explained in the final section of this chapter.

2.3 Fanfiction

Within studies of fandom, fanfiction's origin has been a point of contention among many scholars. Some say originated with 1960s publication of the Star Trek fanzines, whereas others argue that the practice can be traced further back, to the Jewish midrash and to 18th century "unauthorized sequels to Gulliver's Travels." However, most seem to be able to agree upon the internet’s influence on the growth of fanfiction. Generally speaking, fanfiction is a practice where fans of a media take the pre-existing "canonical" storyline of that medium into narrative directions beyond the source. Bronwen Thomas argues that there have been "three waves" of fanfiction research. The first wave categorized the audience as a "homogenous group" rather than a group comprised by a multitude of interests connected by a "loose affiliation." This limitation has caused the first wave of research to be heavily criticized. The second

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51 Ibid, 3-5.
52 Ibid, 3.
wave of research on fanfiction recognized the fans as a mainstream powerhouse with enough capacity to change existing structures. At the same time, it did not consider them as "operating outside of social hierarchies as themselves participating in the construction and maintenance of the uneven distribution of power." The third wave is marked by a "shift in emphasis" towards the "actual contributions of fans to the contemporary culture." Instead of conducting a wave of research that will end with a conclusive definition of the activity, researchers are attempting to "examine fan engagement as part of an ongoing experience."  

One prominent scholar among the third wave, Henry Jenkins, theorizes the "participatory culture… in which the industries increasingly share spaces with their audiences and spur them to become cocreators." Jenkins' positions participatory culture in opposition to the "consumer culture." In the former, consumers of media cease to be mere consumers, instead they become "active producers and manipulators of meaning." More specifically, Jenkins argues that the practices of participatory culture enable readers to articulate their individualized prescriptive ideas on various topics in ways that challenge the "canon" portrayed by the mainstream media.

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53 Ibid.
54 Ibid, 5.
57 Ibid.
fanfiction has allowed a wave of "feminine style of media fandom" to emerge in a domain that is traditionally male-dominated. Building on top of Jenkins' theory, Richard Gerrig theorizes three types of participatory responses, determined by three areas that will affect an audience's experience: "(1) his or her narrative hopes and preferences, (2) the suspense he or she feels about how things will turn out, and (3) the mental replotting that takes place when he or she wishes things had turned out differently." In this context, fanfiction generally revolves around a fan's preferred characters, desired relationships among characters, and replotting of the original storyline to alter unwanted outcomes.

In other words, fanfiction is a form of "imaginary play that reflects both emotional engagement with and resistance to the source material," as Jennifer Barnes argues. Barnes also suggested that fanfiction can be seen as a parallel to other ways readers "derive pleasure from their imaginative participation in the fictional stories they consume" such as daydreaming. What generally prompts people to write fanfiction is an intense "emotional investment in the original story and resistance toward or a desire to

58 Ibid, 48
61 Ibid, 69.
62 Ibid, 72-73, 80.
subvert or reinterpret the source material."\(^{63}\) This parasocial relationship, or one-sided emotional investment, is a common theme that exists between the fanfiction write and the original story, which the former hope to extend these imaginative relationships into their own writing as a form of managing or deepening the connection.\(^{64}\) Furthermore, the phenomena of *Real Person Fiction* (RPF) illustrate the extent of these parasocial relationships by allowing writers to insert themselves or real people into fictional worlds.\(^{65}\) Similar to Jenkins argument, Barnes considers fanfiction as a form of resistance against the authoritative control of original creators over characters and worlds, enabling fan writers to assert their own interpretations and desired narratives.\(^{66}\) As Barnes notes, there is strikingly little research conducted on the "relationship between the act of writing fanfiction and imaginative engagement with fictional stories more broadly."\(^{67}\) This project argues that the fanfiction writers' interpretations that stem from the audience's personal understanding and relationship with the work are not so different from the relationship between the players and their avatars. Both acts contain a strong parasocial emotional connection between the audience and the canon story, revealing the potential for the former to enact this emotion into the physical realm through their interpretations.

\(^{63}\) Ibid, 75.
\(^{64}\) Ibid, 77-78.
\(^{65}\) Ibid.
\(^{66}\) Ibid.
\(^{67}\) Ibid.
This similarity can be better explained when one understands video games as a form of fiction. In Jon Robson and Aaron Meskin's article, "Video Games as Self-Involving Interactive Fictions," they point out that most video game fiction should be considered the "most prominent example of 'SIF,'" or "self-involving interactive fictions." They suggest that the best example for their argument is "focusing on the degree of first-person discourse that is found in talk about our interactions with them." This notion of first-person is explained as when playing a video game, the players actively make decisions in interacting with the media and carve out their own paths based on their engagements, that the players "make these things fictionally true of some identifiable fictional individual (avatar, my note) whom we imagine ourselves to be…"

To further solidify the connection between fanfiction and video games, or importantly, the PAR, I will briefly discuss Nicolle Lamerichs's argument on fan identity. Through his research, Lamerichs identifies four potential identities that a fan can manifest: "creative (Glee), playful (Firefly), interpretive or critical (Sherlock), and affective (cosplay)." Out of the four, the "creative" and the "playful" identities are crucial as they can be somewhat compared to a mixture of "avatar-as-Symbiote" and

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69 Ibid. 167.
70 Ibid. 168-169.
"avatar-as-Other" from Banks and Bowman's theory. The "creative" fans have been shown to deploy "literary strategies to develop their own styles;" have different stances towards "the source text in terms of focalization, genre mediation, and gender" and their mediation processes were "not simple mimicry but were about transformation and the creation of new meanings." These traits parallel with "avatar-as-Other" as both identity revolves around the fans and the players manifesting new identities through their imaginative plays. On the other hand, the "playful" identity includes fans who "dabble with existing content and adopt a playful disposition of imagination and make-believe" and engage with the content "through their fantasy and playfully recreate it within a social group." I argue that this identity can be seen as similar to the "avatar-as-Symbiote" relationship as both involve oneself with a source material but do not fully identify with the source and, instead, create a new identity based on the source and personal needs or fantasy. However, I suggested that these are a mixture between the two PARs because there are traits from each of the two identities that can be found in each of the PAR. I theorized that the existence of this mixture is due to how, as previously mentioned, there can be further sub-divisions among the four PARs that Banks and

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73 Nicolle Lamerichs, Productive Fandom (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018): 237.
74 Ibid.
Bowman proposed or that these relationships and identities do not exist in their separate realms entirely but can be viewed as intertwined.

Another concept from Lamerichs is how fanfiction writers actualize "a narrative and its meaning," which leads to an actualization of "their own identities." In other words, this can be seen as the fans superimposing their identity on to the source for creating their narratives, which again, correlates with the PAR as what Klimmt argued. This connection is reflected through an abundance of fanfiction born regarding various video games. However, these fanfictions have sparked little academic interests, and even less that connect the intertwining relationship between fanfictions and PAR.

One study that did delve into this subject was René Glas's book, *Battlefields of Negotiation* published in 2013. In chapter 13 of the book, Glas focuses on players who seek ways to expand or otherwise "manipulate the fictional world." Glass brings the audience's attention to machinimas, or fan-made videos of remixed gameplay, which more often than not contains narratives composed by the fans or fanfictions. The machinima format is similar to the form my digital project has taken, though with the significant underlying difference being that this project advanced the game characters outside of the game instead of remaining inside of the game's digital worlds. This key

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75 Ibid.
77 Ibid, 144.
difference has created an additional concept of a model agency, or attributing further meanings to the game's avatar models, to this project, which will be elaborated on in the next section. However, as the central idea of instilling new narratives in the game media remains the same between machinimas and this project, Glas's research is critical in understanding the context that my project operated under. Past machinima examples will be explored in the fourth section of this chapter; for now, I will mainly focus on the arguments that Glas has suggested through his case study. Glas argued that in a video game, players act like "active readers" in a traditional fiction setting. This process can take place both when the player is not playing the game and playing the game in the setting of machinima. As the players become active participants in the crafting of a game's narration, Glas argues that the authority over the "fictional universe" ceased to lay in the hands of the game's design team to a degree. Instead, the textual authority becomes "negotiated, shared and staked." At first glance, the concept of a game's canon setting becoming negotiable between the developing team and the players seems irrational, yet it becomes more plausible when one is to consider that many of these machinima projects that the fans have created serve as excelling way for other players who share similar ideology to "re-engage" with the game. Many players who play a

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78 Ibid, 145.
79 Ibid, 150.
video game, or in fact any media type, that contains a dense narrative often have their own "head-canons," or imaginative scenarios that a player wishes to happen in the actual game, even when the imagined story is directly opposed to the game’s canonical narrative of the game's canon.81 While most of these "head-canons" do not translate to fanfictions, they exist as a predecessor to fanfiction, and presents themselves as a form of how a player's investment in a game moves beyond the game into the realm of imaginative play.82 Thus, when enough players who share more-or-less the same "head-canons" gather to appreciate a fanfiction or fan-work in general that embodies their beliefs, they would become an considerable force in that game or media's community.83 In a sense, video game fanfiction and fanfiction as a whole can almost be viewed as supplement to the media's original story. These supplements prompt more interaction between the audience and the media, which ultimately would benefit the media's company even when the fanfictions’ narratives can be fundamentally contradictory to the source.

Overall, for my project, if the identification process resulting from the PAR serves as the first layer, or the initiation, of a comprehensive identification procedure, then fanfiction can be considered a potential way of continuing into the second layer where the author extends the act of superimposing one's identity onto the in-game avatar beyond the

82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
game's original purpose. The two acts exist in an intertwining relationship, present in multiple other projects for reasons mentioned previously.

2.4 Avatar as Model

With the key premise of the narrative being the arrival of a game's character into reality, this project creates an exciting point for contention on the model's agency. More specifically, the potential imaginative agency that the model of an avatar may obtain once exported out of a video game. Such imaginative agency can be viewed as a side-product of “avatar-as-SIF” and though this section is not the project's focus, I will briefly discuss my findings on the area as it could be of future research interest.

By bringing something that is simulated into a different reality from a digital world, this project alters not only the audience's memory of the avatar but also the avatar's memory of itself through audience’s engagement. In its original setting within the virtual realm, the avatar's memory is a function of machine memory and learning, which means that the original avatar was "set-in-stone," where it was only meant to exist within the bounds of its original code, contained within the same programmed systems that birthed it.84 Even though players, who are both the creators and pilots, of these avatars can navigate them in different ways to subjectify the purpose of the initially objectively constraints and thus develop "unique" or individual machine memories for their own

avatars, which are essentially comprise of the players’ personalized engagement with the avatars. All these navigations are confined to take place within the digital environment of this game as argued previously when discussing the inevitable immersion breaking for PAR. In other words, though the avatars can gain "individual" memory represented through altered forms of the original bytes provided by the game through the piloting of the players, the avatars' memories can only remain as a single dimension of existence, which is within the game, and their memories can only be "augmented" or "altered" through the tools provided by the game.

When the avatar is transported from its original context into a different reality, the machine memory of the avatar remains valid since such memory was responsible for creating it, the act of dragging the avatar out of the game provides it with additional layers of memory or potential memories mediated by the players or creators through tools beyond that of the game tools. In other words, this new layer consists of the avatar's materialized existence in settings outside of its created context. While the extraction of 3D models preserves its morphology as a function of code and its rigged skeleton, the models’ experiential points can be argued to have not been extracted. However, depending on the extractor’s experience with the model, such experiential values can be seen as innately within the extracted model as well. It augments its machine memory through liberation from its "confinement," making the avatar's identity even more dependent on human memory and interpretation.
This dependency can be explored firstly through the convergence of the avatar and the codes behind it into a form that is now capable of "existing" in environments other than the original setting. The avatar can now be accessed by different platforms, which ultimately allows the end users to personalize the avatar in accordance with their imaginative plays or fanfictions without the interference of the pre-imagined tools provided by the game. The process of moving the avatar out of its original digital setting and into a new one thus resembles an initial stage of moving realities. Meanwhile, even when speaking solely of the digitally mediated realities, by adding onto the original qualities of the avatar, it prompts the avatar to gain additional memories that allow it to be substantiated in the "realities" that different player envisioned. This newfound freedom of the avatar when taken out of its original digital setting also gave the creator of the avatar a new degree of freedom in interacting with the avatar. Through the mediation of different digital tools, the players who created the avatars are now given the means to foster an infinite number of different realities and imaginative plays, and thus, an infinite number of dimensions of existence for the avatars. This project merely presents one possibility of such a reality where the avatar's actions are no longer constrained by the game, but entirely to the creator's imagination. Through similar projects, different avatars from the same digital asset now have the means to obtain memories beyond the scope of

their creations, thus becoming assets allowing for both logical and "illogical" imaginations. The imaginative paradigm of the video game avatar brought into the modern world invokes comparisons to Baudrillard, whose writing suggests that no meaningful "original" exists and that a simulation within the virtual world is just as accurate as an avatar within different worlds, just within a different dimension or mode of being. The present project is poised to challenge assumptions about the self previously restrained by unimaginative logic through an examination of the modes of being that could be experienced by such endeavors.

The genuine agency of the avatar in the different reality it has been summoned to, in relation to its creators and players, also introduces a novel perspective for considering the concept of agency itself. The research literature on video games has primarily focused on the agency of the players and how they might develop their agency by projecting it onto virtual avatars within the game's virtual realm. The literature generally does not address the specific topic of the agency that a video game avatar itself would be able to obtain if it can be mediated by sources outside of its original digital assets. The nature of the avatar would change as it gains new and distinctive agency in relation to its creators,

where the creators' visions entirely foster such agencies. Once it arrives in this new reality from where it originated, the avatar mixes realities and becomes part of an intersubjective world where it is one subject among others, furthering its relationship with its creators into one of mutual agency. While the avatars do enter new sets of constraints after the extraction, or a transference from one set of constraints to another, the new set of constraints can infinitely expand and preserve the avatars while its original setting may diminish through time. It is impossible for avatars to experience full “freedom” as it innately has a relatively constrained agency of its specific media forms, through the agency of imagination, the avatars are unbounded from a realm that fundamentally restricts the agency of imagination.

2.5 Past Media Example

While this project cannot technically be categorized as a machinima due to its different usage of the game's models, the overlays between the two cannot be denied as both embody a process of seeking ways to entail narrative through the original media's assets. Thus, the spectrum of machinimas that correlate with this project needs to be discussed. This section will also briefly discuss a past mainstream film that assumed similar concepts as this project.

Starting with the machinima examples that Glas brings up in his work, the game *World of Warcraft*, which heavily inspired the game chosen for this project- Final
Fantasy XIV- and is of the same genre, has been well known for its fanfiction and machinima community.\textsuperscript{88} While most machinima content creators publish their work on YouTube nowadays, most would post their works on some online forums in the early 2010s due to how YouTube was yet to gain the massive popularity that it has today. For World of Warcraft's machinima creators during that period, the site warcraftmovies.com held the majority of their works.\textsuperscript{89} Most of these works revolve around the re-creation of specific plot points or characters' developments in the game, and one of the most famous series, "Tales of the Past," has been viewed almost 10 million times on the site along, disregarding the re-uploads of the series to YouTube.\textsuperscript{90} Arguably the most famous episode out of the series, "Tales of the Past III" is an eighty-nine-minute long film featuring a cast made up entirely by the players of the game.\textsuperscript{91} According to the creator of the film, Martin Falch, the film took a year and a half to make with a three-hour time investment put into the film every single day during the time.\textsuperscript{92} In the film's description, Falch also expressed the notion that he "made it entirely from my own perception of how

\textsuperscript{88} René Glas, \textit{Battlefields of Negotiation} (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013): 150.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid, 147.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.
it should be." As he elaborated, his perception was developed through a deep dive into the parts of the game's canonical story that were related to the story he envisioned.93

Falch's style of machinima is the most traditional format. There is nothing wrong with this style, as works such as these paved the way for the styles that emerged later. I use the term traditional to describe such projects because most elements in such machinimas remain primarily within the boundaries set by the game. For example, the narrative and the characters in this film are derived from the original game and re-inserted into the game's environment after a round of re-imagination from the author, but the film’s game world remains largely consistent with the original. The success or failure of such traditional machinimas heavily depends on the player base’s reception of the project’s fan-fictional narrative: if the narrative is not enticing or relatable to at least a portion of the player base's "head-canon," the projects most likely will not gain traction within the community because they do not innovate on the visual aspects of the original game. If one wishes to realize their own "head-canon" in disregard for the potential monetary success of their project, there are no points in solidifying the narrative. World of Warcraft's community is also not the only game that has produced such projects as games such as GTA V natively allow players to go into the "cinematic mode" and record their desired footage. A few well-known machinimas from GTA V include "Heisters" by

93 Ibid.
Jacky, "Breakneck" by UHD Gaming, and "Heist Blockers" by JBS Gaming. All these have amassed millions of views on YouTube, and their presentation remains more or less in the same traditional machinima storytelling format.

I wish to turn the attention to the projects created by a particular YouTuber, Pint, who I would argue has been creating some truly intriguing machinima projects for the same game that this project chose. While his projects are similar at face value with the traditional machinima works with the usage of in-game characters in the game's original environments, his narratives are entirely different. Instead of using machinimas as a video-form fanfiction about certain parts of the game's story, Pint used machinimas to tell his own story. For instance, in his newest video, "I Destroyed the Oldest World Record in FFXIV," Pint utilized machinima almost as a documentation method entailing how he conquered a difficult challenge in the game. His narrative and journey have no relationship to the game other than the fact that the narrative was presented in the game's environment. When comparing Pint's machinimas with that of Falch's, two extremes of the use of machinimas can be viewed. Both happen under the game's setting, but one

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95 Pint’s YouTube Channel Page: https://www.youtube.com/@PintFrumpyrat/videos.
follows the game's narrative and logic (Falch), while the other completely abandons the game's narrative and only uses the game as a background in his storytelling (Pint). While Falch's work can be correlated to fanfiction relatively quickly, Pint's works linger on the borderline of the definition of fanfiction. Fanfiction has usually been considered a "re-engagement" with the story from the audience, as mentioned in the previous section; on the other hand, fanfiction has also been known as a way for the audience to express themselves through the original media. I will not define the nature of Pint's work concerning fanfiction as it is not the purpose of my mentioning his works, but his projects can be materials for future research in the realm of scrutinizing the purpose and meaning of fanfiction in a modern age. The reason for me to mention Pint is to offer a glimpse into the flexibility of machinima as a creation medium. While my project adopts a relatively innovative approach like Pint's in the sense that my project does not conform to that of the original game, my project's narrative finds similarity to that of the Falch where it extends and borrows a few key concepts from the source.

Moving onto the side of mainstream media, the film that is the most similar to this project is Ready Player One from 2018. "Ready Player One" stands as one of the few, if not the only, past media that can connect with this project, even when there are fundamental divergences between the two, which will be discussed shortly. "Ready Player One" is an adaption to its book counterpart with the same title written by Ernest
Cline in 2011. The central underlying conflict that pierces through the original work, and to a degree in the film, is the depiction of a future dystopian society where the world is both physically and culturally colliding but embodies the existence of a digital utopia named "Oasis." This theme was further underscored by the "anxieties and uncertainties of embodiment and identity in the digital age….” While many have argued that the film version is a failed adaption to the original work due to a lack of depiction of the previous two underlying conflicts, this discussion will still revolve around the film adaption for it is the same media type as to this project.

The most important aspect of "Ready Player One" that has inspired the theoretical part of this project is its depiction of the PAR and an implied relationship with fanfiction. Starting with the former, there is a clear identification process, the same one mentioned in the prior section, that took place in the film between the film characters and their avatars. It can be argued that the film demonstrated multiple types of PARs, with the most dominant two being the "avatar-as-Me" and the "avatar-as-Symbiote" relationships.
would argue that the reason for the lack of the two more dis-associated relationships was how the film operates under the pretense that if players die in-game, then the players will lose everything. This context would undoubtedly create a degree of intensity for the players when they enter the game world, which I theorize would decrease the occurrence of "avatar-as-Other" and "avatar-as-Object." This theory is up for debate as no empirical research supports this hypothesis, and it can be simply due to a lack of representation by the film.

On the other hand, the prominent example of "avatar-as-Me" from the film is Wade Watts, or the protagonist, and Samantha Evelyn Cook for "avatar-as-Symbiote." From the film's start, Watt demonstrates a strong bond with his avatar, modeled after his real-life appearance. Through his interactions with the world and with his friends in the game, it is apparent to the audience that Watt considers his avatar as an extension of himself in the game, or "avatar-as-Me," so much so that it can be argued that Watt most likely had some degree of gaming disorder at the beginning of the film with the primary symptom being a complete disregard of reality. Alternatively, Cook’s avatar shares no resemblance to the real version of her. Through later story development, we learned that her avatar was a way for her to cope with her real-life trauma or the scars on her face. In other words, her avatar was a mixed and experimental identity between herself and her fantasy that acts as a coping mechanism. Numerous other examples can demonstrate these two relationships; for instance, Daiko's avatar, a samurai, can also be viewed as his
experiment with his identity and ethnicity in real life, again an "avatar-as-Symbiote" relationship.

In terms of "Ready Player One's" relationship with fanfiction, although this was most likely not intentionally displayed or discussed, this film is an excellent example of the relationship between video game players and fanfiction. The most fitting example of this display is the scene where many players answered Watt's call to defeat Nolan Sorrento, the film's antagonist. In this scene, we can see that many players who arrived to help Watt showed up, resembling various real-life video game characters. Examples include Master Chief from the Halo series, Tracer from Overwatch, and Chunli from the Street Fighter series. Suppose we are to surmise the mindset of these players based on the previous discussions on PAR and fanfiction. In that case, it can be reasonably assumed that they are enacting some fanfiction in this scene and throughout the time they spent in this game. In other words, "Ready Player One's" game, Oasis, acted as a SIF that enabled the existence of personalized fanfictions for its players. Instead of composing fanfiction like it is usually conducted, Oasis's players can play out their fictions based on their interpretations of the games from which they obtained their avatar ideas and their varying relationships with their avatars. Such examples can be found throughout the film, with another example being the Gundam that Daiko summoned to battle Godzilla. This particular scene can be argued to be fanfiction on its own as the two combatants are not
from the same source, and it is based on not only the film's character's imaginative play but also the author's.

While these scenes demonstrate the connection between the PAR and fanfiction, which is similar to this project, the film did not develop upon this narrative. Thus, further analysis will not be hypothesized.

2.6 Rationale of the Project

As a conclusion of this chapter and as a transition to the next chapter, which will delve into the technical side of this project, I will discuss the theoretical practice behind this project in this section. As previously mentioned, the goal is to formalize the argument that there exists further differentiation in PAR through fanfiction by actualizing one player's or my personal head-canon regarding the game. For future references in this project, I will call this relationship as “avatar-as-SIF.”

Starting with the game that I chose to conduct this project, Final Fantasy XIV, this game was published in 2010 as an MMORPG, which stands for a massively multiplayer online role-playing game. In Glas's article, he argued that an MMORPG player is "allowed a more active engagement with their beloved fictional world and its inhabitants through play."102 With the goal of an MMORPG being longevity, it is in the game's best interest to craft a world with a robust story for its players to engage with. This active

player base and an ever-evolving world through an increasing number of updates create an environment for its player to "elicit great emotional investments from the players" as their time with the game progresses. This high emotional attachment to the game serves as the foundation for the project, and it stands as a theory that I can personally attest to as I have been a player of FFXIV for nearly a year and a half when initiating this project. While it is possible to develop the same project through a different perspective, the utilization of my emotional investment in the game was prioritized so that the narrative, or the fanfiction portion, of this project, can optimize the concept of how fanfiction reflects "both emotional engagement with and resistance to the source material." Thus, the project's story revolves around my relationship with my in-game avatar.

With the foundation being paved, this project experiments with the "avatar-as-Others," and "avatar-as-Symbiote" concepts. As mentioned previously, I believe further distinctions can be made from these categories as I consider both categories are only applicable to a state of mind at the beginning stage of a PAR due to both sides not changing the other yet. As soon as the players start to engage in the game worlds with

103 Ibid.
their avatars that bear these initial projections from the players, their relationships will alter. Based on such alterations, I believe both PAR categories are on a rather superficial level of understanding that neither can the avatar be considered a symbiote to the player but more in line with a logic born from a symbiotic pattern of thinking, nor a separate entity since without the players, these "Others" would not happen in the first place.

Therefore, I theorize an extended category from Bank and Bowman's four categories based on Robson and Aaron Meskin's theory of video games as "self-involving interactive fictions,” or “avatar-as-SIF.” This extended category explores a PAR that is on the surface, symbiotic, but the players subconsciously recognize the characters as separate entities through what the character would go through in the game. The players then proceed to extend their ongoing and evolving emotional investment into their avatars into reality through fanfiction that either exists in their imaginations or manifests into real-world projects like mine. In other words, they are bridging the gap between their self-involving and self-evolving symbiotic relationships with their avatars and the innate fact of their avatars existing on a different plane of existence. One way to view this experience is through the scenes from "Ready Player One," where players engage their avatars, which originate from different sources, in activities beyond their origins, and from Barnes's argument that the consumption of fictional stories would "requires
imaginative input on the part of the audience" to start with.\textsuperscript{106} This project converts this form of fanfiction from the players that would usually be conducted in their heads into a more tangible format that would better display this act. On this note, I will also now discuss how the choice of photography and videography allows me to leverage it as a proof of existence to allow the compositing to function as a bridge for the avatars to step into the real world. Since its creation, the utilization of cameras entails an indexical relationship between the photographic world and the real world.\textsuperscript{107} Through the camera lens, the authors establish the “veracity of the image,” or a proof of existence of the objects inside the photograph to the real world.\textsuperscript{108} Under this pretense, through a combined usage of the physical camera and the digital camera in the 3D modeling software, the veracity of the avatar’s “existence” in the real world is being constructed. This veracity becomes an integral part of this project’s narrative in both a figurative and a constructive sense. In other words, the use of cameras and the format of photography not only enables me to ground the sensibility of this project’s narrative on “realism” since it intended to portray the transfiguration of a digital figure, an avatar, into a real setting; and it allows the actualization of the “avatar-as-SIF” as a concept since the essence of the

\textsuperscript{106} Jennifer L. Barnes, "Fanfiction as imaginary play: What fan-written stories can tell us about the cognitive science of fiction," \textit{Poetics}, Vol.48 (2015), 70.


\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
theory proposes a relationship that centers around the entanglement between the real and
the digital world which ultimately impacts the real world.

To fully maximize this display, the project has chosen to compose a fanfiction
where the player, me, would physically encounter the avatar, substantiated by an
imaginative amalgamation of two formally divergent dimensions of existence. There are
two possible avenues to achieve this, with the first being the placement of me in the game
world and the second being the transportation of the avatar into the "real" world. The
project chose the latter option for two intertwining reasons. The first reason is the model's
agency theory prompted in the previous section. With the avatar's model remaining in the
game's native environment, there could only exist a limited number of new potential
agencies attributed to the avatar because of the stagnation of the model's "physical" form
as a product of data simulations. When it is the other way around, the model will be
forced to experience a round of alteration, which this act in itself is a process of
attributing new agencies to the model. While the process of alteration of this project
assigned to the chosen model follows the principle of a faithful re-creation of its original
form, which led to a relatively subtle implication of new agency, this process can take on
myriad directions that are all bound to each individual creator's imagination. Once the re-
created models are situated in projects like this, both audiences who have and have not
previously seen the model or played the source game will attribute new perceptions and
agencies to the models, differing from individual to individual. This project serves as one
such example of this practice. Through this new agency, I would argue that it also increases the tension of this project's story where there exists more dynamics in the conversation between the created and the creator; for while the latter has omnipotence over the former's world, the former would understand few and if any about the latter's "reality." In terms of how the narrative imagined the encounter between the two forces, the next chapter will explain in detail as the project utilized quite a few existing settings from the game. In other words, this part of the project is, like many other fanfictions, a direct extension/alteration of the source's logic and settings.

The overarching narrative of this project follows an abbreviated outline depicted in *The Hero's Journey* by Joseph Campbell.109 The initially envisioned story would complete the full cycle of a Hero's Journey, but due to time and technical limitations of the project, the abbreviated version was eventually adopted. Campbell's format was chosen due to its wide adaptation in the video game industry, which ties to this project's monetization aspect, which will be explained later.

I will mention a narrative choice here as it may perplex some potential viewers. Squareface was chosen as a character that would represent me in the digital project. The reason behind this choice was to mainly retain my anonymity on the digital realm; however, another way to understand Squareface’s role in this project is to perceive him as

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a witness to the manifestation of my project’s argument. Without going too much into
details as more will be discussed in the next chapter, some of the most important aspects
of this project was introduced through the conversations between two avatars that are
“teleported” out of the game world into the “real” world. Squareface then functions as a
witness, or a form of documentation for their conversations and actions. Also, with the
avatars being extensions of the selves, the audience can perceive this project as a
personified version of this thesis process of identifying its argument, though in much
lesser detail. This personified argument ultimately stems in Squareface, who is the
witness and the representation me, or the self, which can be interpreted as the players at
large.

Similar to how Stein and Busse have mentioned in their work, fanfiction is often
"not written for profit, but rather, as part of a wider array of activities that fans use to
engage with fictional stories, including fan art, fan videos, and critical analyses and
reviews," this project did not prioritize the profit aspect as the goal was to, through the
actualization of my head-canon, prompt my arguments. That being said, this project did
experiment with a potential way for modern fanfiction authors to profit from their works,
publishing on YouTube. With this aspect in mind, this project must accommodate an
audience outside my perspective. This accommodation was realized by adding various
fight scenes that hoped to stimulate an audience's viewing experience. On the other hand,
the central discussions of this project are all embedded in the dialogues among the
characters.

As the closing note for the first chapter, I will discuss this project’s intended
impact or utilization for the audience. With its close relationship to fanfiction, to fully
understand the narrative of this project, a certain level of understanding of the source
material, Final Fantasy XIV, is required. In other words, for an audience who has no
previous experience with the game, that individual will most inevitably have difficulties
in grasping the project’s narrative. However, to audiences who have no previous
experience, they can instead examine this project through the lens of an attempt in
actualizing the “avatar-as-SIF” relationship which is ubiquitous in its narrative. Their
lack of experience also complements the aforementioned model’s agency, that when
viewing this project, these audiences would spontaneously attribute new agencies
previously unattainable to the models of the avatars.

With this chapter explaining the literature context of this project and its rationale,
the next chapter will delve into the critique of the project and the technical side behind it.
3. Detailed Digital Project Description

3.1 Project’s Critique

The final presentation of this project is separated into two videos. The first video is 7:51 minutes, and the second video is 16:35 minutes. While the first video is separated into two sections with the focus being on the project’s description, the second is almost entirely composed of a display of the project. In total, the project is around 16 minutes discounting other video elements.

The first video starts with a picture-in-picture mode of me, Squareface, playing Final Fantasy XIV and attempting to teleport the avatar to a different location. While this picture-in-picture mode simulates the common format video game live streamers would use when live-streaming, it also serves the purpose of establishing a bridge between the “real” and the digital world.
The two scenes were recorded individually and later mixed. The first scene ends when Squareface receives a prompt indicating that the avatar is “vising another world,” a text produced through several in-game maneuvers and gives up in attempting to re-enter the game. The story then switches to the avatar’s perspective that starts with the avatar falling through a portal.
From this point forward, almost all scenes have been composited and the methods used will be discussed in length later in this chapter. The portal symbolizes a forceful break of the barrier between the two worlds and signifies a transitional point of the narrative that the discussion of the “avatar-as-SIG” officially starts. From there, the avatar lands in a forest, wanders out of it, and enters the neighborhood that Squareface lives in. Among these scenes, the internal dialogue that took place in the avatar when moving out of the forest is the most critical since his monologue marks the first time the narrative endeavored to separate the two worlds through the characters dialogues. The first video ends when the avatar encounters Squareface and the latter attempts to run away from the avatar who starts to chase Squareface in order to understand the current situation. The final scene resembles the opening scene in the way that it also features a
camera juxtaposition of Squareface which represents the “real” and the avatar, giving an indexicality of veracity to both figures in the frame.

![Figure 3: Juxtaposition of the Avatar & Squareface](image)

The second video developed its narrative by picking up on this scene, that after the two characters briefly conversed, an “echo,” which is a mechanism from the canon that allows the user to see a fragment of an individual’s past, took place that made the avatar saw Squareface’s entire journey in Final Fantasy XIV.
Figure 4: A Scene in the Avatar's Echo of Squareface's Memory

The use of echo in this scene represents the project’s first attempt at utilizing the canonical lore as way to extend an imaginative narrative. It also serves the purpose of demonstrating Squareface’s emotional investment in the game world and setting up the later conversation surrounding the two individuals’ relationship- the creator and the created. This conversation began in the next scene where Squareface invites his avatar to his home. Due to technical limitations, the audience is to assume that the two have already engaged in a preliminary discussion. The most important aspect that this conversation establishes is the two’s veracity of existence to one another. In other words, a reflection of the “avatar-as-Other” concept.
The conversation ends with Squareface’s request for the avatar to teleport back to the game world which ends in failure. The two surmise that the reason why the teleportation failed was due to the avatar’s incomplete soul, a mechanism extended from the game’s lore that will be explained in full later on in this chapter. Upon hearing an explosion, the avatar rushed outside to find an explosion in the distance. Recognizing the explosion as an event relating to his appearance in the “real” world, the avatar is surprised to realize that Square, who followed him to the outside, cannot see the distance explosion, which was written to further separate the two characters. Upon verbally entailing his plan of investigating the site of explosion to Squareface, the latter decides to accompany the avatar on his journey. At the end of this scene, Squareface asks the avatar
to elaborate on the game world. This question helps to reiterate Squareface’s attachment to the game world through his curiosity, as well as to transition into the next scene.

As the two walks towards the explosion site, Squareface and the avatar engaged in another conversation. From this conversation, the two discovered that although they are separate entities existing on two dimensions, Squareface’s emotional investment in the game can cause disruption to the game’s original lore.

![Image of Avatar and Squareface Engaging in the 2nd Conversation](image)

**Figure 6: Avatar and Squareface Engaging in the 2nd Conversation**

In other words, Squareface’s avatar corresponds more to Squareface’s head-canon instead of the canon. This disruption can be regarded partially as a reference to the “avatar-as-Symbiote” relationship, but more importantly, combining with the previous implication as the “avatar-as-Other” concept, the project has fully established the premise for the “avatar-as-SIF” argument through this conversation. With the two arrived at the explosion site, a warehouse appears and the two traversed into it. As soon as Squareface
and the avatar stepped into the warehouse, the former was attacked. The attacker was revealed to be the missing soul piece of the avatar, in other words, the other half of the avatar.

![Figure 7: Juxtaposition of the Two Avatars](image)

The project distinguished the two avatars using the term “Warrior of Light” and “Warrior of Darkness,” with the former being the one who first met Squareface and the latter the one who attacked Squareface. These two names are from the game’s original setting that were both used to indicate the protagonist, or the player’s avatar. The conversation that ensues among the three characters is of paramount importance to the narrative and its argument. The “Warrior of Darkness” stands as a rejection towards all sorts of player-avatar relationships as he recognizes the parasocial nature of such relationships where the avatars simply would not exist without the players. This rejection
serves the purpose of progressing into the “Warrior of Light’s” perspective, which reflects the project’s argument. The “Warrior of Light” starts with an active recognition of the fact that the “real” world gave birth to the game world but transitioned into an appreciative tone for this fact by embedding the Squareface’s influence to the game world and the game world’s influence on Squareface.

Figure 8: "Warrior of Light" during the Conversation with Squareface and the "Warrior of Darkness"

While the latter point is implicit, it ties back to Chapter 1 discussion on how player-avatar relationships can lead to the players adapting different behaviors in the real world based on their experiences with their avatars and the game worlds. Overall, the “Warrior of Light” represents the argument that although the player-avatar relationship starts as a parasocial relationship, it allows the development of an indefinite amounts of personalized relationships, and some of them being able to affect the real world. While not mentioned literally by the “Warrior of Light,” the “avatar-as-SIF” relationship in this
case scenario leads to the creations of fanfictions that goes beyond the canonical limits of the video games which than correspond to an infinite number of potential agencies that can be attributed to the avatars from both the authors and the audiences.

A physical confrontation proceeds to take place between the two avatars and ends with the victory of the “Warrior of Light” who absorbed the “Warrior of Darkness’s” soul. As mentioned prior, the fight scenes mainly exist to capture the attention of the audience. The video ends with another conversation between Squareface and the “Warrior of Light” that re-emphasizes the “avatar-as-SIF” relationship by pointing to Squareface’s head-canon’s influence. An interesting note that I wish to point out in this scene is how as the “Warrior of Darkness” was re-absorbed into the “Warrior of Light,” the project signals the triumph of the latter’s argument but also points to the foundation of any PARs, which is its parasocial nature. Then, with the “Warrior of Light” teleporting back to the game world, the audience can then perceive the scene as a way for the avatars, or the extensions of the selves, re-emerging with the self, or Squareface in this case scenario. This re-emergence both accentuates the importance of the self in PARs. In the sense that while the players can be influenced, we are still the creators and thus the distributors of the imaginative plays and agencies that we have come to associate with PARs.
The easter egg of this project recalls the first video in terms of format-picture-in-picture. However, this time the avatar is implied to have remembered this encounter and waves farewell to the audience after Squareface disappears from screen. The intended interpretation for this easter egg is to indicate that the “avatar-as-SIF” remains true outside of this project and is not limited to this one form of actualization which is through the medium of Squareface’s relationship.

Behind the scenes, the creation of this project contained seven significant steps—writing a script, extracting the model from the video game, re-painting/texturing the model, taking real-life pictures, modeling the models, compositing the exported models with their corresponding images, and video editing.

3.2 Narrative Composition

Starting with the composition of the script, the most critical part of this task was to render a story that was believable to a mixed audience, composed of both avid players of the game, and, hopefully, those unaware of the game's setting. The second vital part of the story was to make it eventful, as the project was planned to be published on YouTube mainly as entertainment for the general audience. To achieve the second concern, an overall structure of the "Hero's Journey" by Joseph Campbell was selected to frame the story. As for the first concern, fortunately, Final Fantasy XIV contains robust lore

1 Joseph Campbell, The Hero's Journey (California: New World Library, 2014)
regarding teleportation, which I will briefly explain along with a few other key concepts that helped me construct the narrative. In the context of the game, there exists thirteen different "reflections" of the once whole world. Each of these "reflections" is essentially an entirely different world on its own. As the story progressed, the player's character, better known as the "warrior of light," would unlock the ability to traverse among these different worlds through teleportation, a concept that had existed since the game's beginning. The teleportation itself in Final Fantasy XIV is conducted through the "teleportation spell" and the "crystals" scattered around the world. Upon casting the spell or interacting with a crystal, a player's aether, the energy source that flows through everyone and everything in the game's world to its spiritual counterpart, and physical body will be teleport from the location where the player cast the spell to the crystal that they wanted to travel to. However, there is a significant difference between teleporting within one world and between the thirteen reflections. The former does not require anything special, but the latter requires the teleporter to carry a special crystal on them, so their souls remain whole while transporting. These three lore pieces from the game paved the road for the story's introduction. As the story progressed and reached the point of introducing the central conflict within it, another context from the game became useful.

3 "Teleport (Final Fantasy XIV)," Final Fantasy Wiki Online, accessed on October 28, https://finalfantasy.fandom.com/wiki/Teleport_(Final_Fantasy_XIV)
In Final Fantasy XIV, a player can unlock multiple different "jobs" for their characters. While there is a difference between the combat "jobs" and the non-combat "jobs," this project will only concern the former. With each of the combat "jobs," a player can engage in any battle-related activities in the game, and each of those jobs can perform different actions. Each job has its own "soul crystal" that the player will use to transform from one "job" to the other. "Dragoon" was chosen as the "job" for the character that first encountered the protagonist due to the "job" history of reaching reconciliation in a problematic situation, and the "Dark Knight" was chosen as the "job" that represented the missing half of the character who challenged the belief of "dragoon" because of the "job's" backstory of a struggle between one's desire to help/understand others and acting in a more self-preserving manner.

While the project attempted to give some "autonomy" to the two characters from the game through the usage of ChatGPT, the attempt ultimately was abandoned due to the software's struggle to formulate a consistent narrative without trailing off into directions that would be farfetched for the original scope of the story. Yet only some traces of this attempt can be seen in the current project. The attempt will still be documented for future

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5 "Soul Crystal (Final Fantasy XIV),” Final Fantasy Wiki Online, accessed on October 28, https://finalfantasy.fandom.com/wiki/Soul_Crystal_(Final_Fantasy_XIV)
endeavors toward similar goals. With a comprehensive outline containing all the context above and more provided to ChatGPT, I asked the software to generate lines for the two characters under various situations. While the software was successful in mimicking the tone of how the people in the game would talk, the actual lines generated often needed to be more desirable. For instance, when asked to create sequences for "Dragoon," seeing the buildings of this world for the first time, ChatGPT started off the discourse with reliability but produced self-contradictory lines to its previous statements. As the software continues to evolve, tasks like this may become possible, but as of September 2023, it remains unreliable.

3.3 Model Extraction

Starting with the extraction of the model from the video game, while this step could have been executed through some data mining of the game's local data folder, fortunately, there exists a tool made specifically for the extraction of the game's asset, FFXIVTexTools, which will be referred to as the text tool later on.7

7 The tool's website is the following: https://www.ffxiv-textools.net/
The text tool exists for a few reasons, for instances the community's need to create mods, virtual reality avatars for streaming, and 3D printing projects for the fans. For this project, the model that needed to be extracted was two complete sets of armor with a basic character model beneath it for the later modeling of movements, two weapons, and two sets of wings from the game. The basic extraction process is identical for all 3D assets. One would type in each armor piece's unique in-game name into the tool's search bar, select the armor piece, go to the "Models" tab, select a suitable race and gender for the model underneath the armor pieces, which in this case scenario, means the same race and gender as my in-game avatar, then click on the option "add to FMV."
Different races and genders for the model will alter the model's appearance beneath the armor pieces and their heights in the result export. The race and gender of "Hyur Midlander Male" were selected for this project for an accurate re-creation of my
avatar. Once an armor piece has been added to FMV, a window showing the added armor pieces will be automatically opened; from there, a user can again alter the race, gender, and skin tone of the model. With the FMV tab open, one can proceed to the following armor piece, where the same process will be repeated. With all the desirable details added to the FMV, the user can click on the "Export" button at the bottom of the FMV screen which the software will export the whole model, with a skeleton beneath, out to a local folder with the file being an FBX.

![Figure 12: FMV Preview of the Model](image)

Though explicitly made for extracting the game's models, the compatibility between the extracted models and various 3D modeling tools could have been more desirable. Starting with the 3D painting software used for this project, Adobe Substance
Painter, if a complete model is to be exported into the software as an FBX file, then there will be no way, as of now, for the user to paint over the model with the original texture being applied on there. While it is possible to paint the model without its original textures, so doing will exert a tremendous time investment as the original textures do indicate the minute details on the model. This project solved this problem by extracting the whole model as one FBX file and each armor piece as its respective OBJ file. One can remove the OBJ files by going to the "Models" tab under that individual armor piece, clicking on the "More" options tab shown by the downward arrow beside the "Export" option, and selecting OBJ from there. The tool will then generate the armor piece's OBJ files under a sub folder in the same folder where the FBX file will usually be exported. Then, each of the individual armor piece's OBJ files would be imported into Substance Painter, followed by the textures for that specific piece from the FBX file export, and then the issue can be circumvented from there.

In terms of the 3D modeling process, while the tool can purportedly export a model with texture attached to it into software without any problems, in my experience, when importing the exported model and its surface into a 3D software the texture would, inevitably become mis-aligned with the model. Blender, Cinema4D, and Houdini have all been tested for better export compatibility for this project. Houdini was eventually chosen because it was the most successful in properly mapping models to their textures; even
though some of the surfaces were placed in the wrong category under the model's node texture node, a reorganization fixed the problem.

Figure 13: Houdini's View of the Model Without Correction

Figure 14: Houdini's View of the Model After Correction
3.4 Model's Re-painting/texturing

As discussed earlier, Adobe Substance Painter has been chosen for the task of re-painting/texturing for this project. The software was chosen due to its capability to efficiently conduct the task, but if one does not have access to the software, then one can achieve the same result by using software such as Adobe Photoshop to directly paint on the exported texture files. The main reason for this step is to add a sense of credibility to the models under a "real-world" setting. Although the models' original textures would stand relatively well against the coming compositing step, there is a lack of "realness" of the original texture, possibly due to those textures' low resolution, their original fantastical setting, and the original purpose for the models. Therefore, adding more realistic textures to the model did, in a sense, amalgamate them with the real-life photographs.

Once the OBJ file and its corresponding texture files have been imported into Substance Painter, one must add a fill layer on top of the OBJ layer. Each texture file must be assigned to its designated location on the OBJ file since no materials will be set automatically onto the OBJ model when all are imported into the software. Then, a paint layer must be created above the fill layer so the user can finally apply textures to the model. For the "Dragoon" model, which was the first model to be painted, a mix of platinum and raw iron was applied to the original model to bring out the subtle differences between the different layers of coloring from the original model. Initially, the
project attempted to deviate from the original design of these armor sets to add a more personal touch to the models. However, this endeavor was quickly abandoned due to how it added unnecessarily tension to the otherworldly feeling that the model vibrated when the entire point of this re-painting/texturing process was to erase this otherworldliness; instead, the effort of adding personal designs to the game's assets was redirected to the special effects to reflect the author's "head-canon better." "Dragoon's" weapon was then colored with mainly pure gold and black plastic. Moving on to the "Dark Knight" model, a mix of raw metal and black plastic was applied.

![Figure 15: Dragoon's Painted Chest](image)
However, for one armor piece of "Dark Knight," a struggle ensued. The waist armor contains a red fabric with black letter engravings. All the default red materials from Substance Painter lacked the tattered and almost rust-like feeling of the original piece. Also, if the paint were to be directly applied onto the fabric, the engravings would be entirely covered, which rendered it nearly impossible to discern the underlying engraving.
While it is possible to mask and isolate specific areas of an armor piece in Substance Painter to conduct detailed paintings, the problem with the inaccurate paint persists. Eventually, the "Abstract Red" created by Natalja Voronkova, found on the Adobe community website, was used.\(^8\) Though this texture proved to be the best possible option, it exposed the weakness of using software where the less experienced users must rely on the default or community assets. This disadvantage became further apparent during the painting/texturing procedure of the two sets of wings. The issue with the waist fabric continued to be present for the "Dark Knight's" weapon, which also has an engraving. However, the case for the weapon was much less noticeable because, instead

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\(^8\) Natalja Voronkova, "Abstract red," *Adobe Community Asset* Online, https://substance3d.adobe.com/community-assets/assets/1b87365692368df6ed7eebfac85bd90ee0d26482
red being the dominant color, black was the primary color, and the software had a much more comprehensive array of sources to choose from.

Moving on to the wing stage, while the two sets of wings selected for this project were both of a singular color, white and black, this has proven to be the most challenging step in this entire procedure. There needs to be more painting texture for feathers now for the software, and the available ones often come with a color scheme that cannot be altered. The project attempted to counter this lack of resources by using fabric texture for the wings, but this attempt has proven futile because both sets of wings will become more or less transparent with any fabric texture being applied. Eventually, silver and black plastic were used separately onto the wings. Neither of these materials could completely encapsulate the sensation of the feather, yet they have been proven to function relatively best after numerous tests with different materials within the software and in Houdini.

Figure 18: Dragoon's Painted Wings
Once a subject has been re-painted/textured, the newly designed materials were exported as PNG files into a local folder.

### 3.5 Taking Real-Life Pictures

The most critical component of this step was the selection of locations for the pictures. The choice of the sites resulted in a much more condensed result, with multiple cuts on top of the original story. Initially, the project wished to take pictures across Durham, North Carolina, due to its vicinity to the working station. However, this idea was soon abandoned due to the scale it would have involved. For the pictures to be ready for compositing in the later steps, relatively controlled environments would be desirable, and this project lacked such resources to conduct this step under the scale of an entire city. For instance, the project initially had plots regarding the model walking at some of
the crossroads in the town. Considering the facts such as lighting, ideal traffic, shadows, shots like the crossroads contained a vast array of unpredictability that would greatly hinder the result, not to mention that grave safety risks were present. One of the greatest hindrances to this lack of resources for this project was the scene where the two characters meet in the old warehouse. It would have been complicated to find an ideal place like that and with enough time to manage all the lighting and do the actual shootings. Nevertheless, this location was too vital to the story to be left out like some of the other scenes, and thus, the project eventually decided to use a 3D asset to recreate the background and explain that in the story.

With this difficulty in mind, the final location was chosen as the neighborhood of the workstation alongside a construction site nearby. This decision limited the plot development of the story yet contributed to the tightness of the plot. While some of the pictures, mainly from inside the housing, were taken by me, a great portion of the outdoor shots were taken with the help of Voranci Zhang, who is much more experienced in photographing. During this step, pictures with me being the motion reference for later modeling were also taken, and a Canon M50 camera was used for all the pictures taken for this project. All the real-world pictures were taken in 6000 x 4000 resolution. Regarding the pictures taken with a green screen, two standing lights were utilized at different positions to provide enough lighting to erase the green screen during the later
stage and emulate lighting from various sources and angles. The same camera with the exact resolution was used.

Figure 20: One Picture Out of the Series of Photos where Dragoon Was Falling from the Sky

For one section in particular, the project could not have conducted the undertaking of shooting photos directly- the scene where "Dragoon" fell from the sky. Stock photos of sky and ground from a high vantage point were found on Adobe Stock and utilized instead.⁹

3.6 Modeling

Unlike the Substance Painter, an FBX file containing the entire model must be imported into Houdini first for this step to initiate. During this step, all import settings

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can be left as default except for the option of importing cameras being unchecked. If one chooses to import the armor pieces individually into the software, then the pre-generated skeleton underneath the armor will disappear and thus a new model must be constructed under that case scenario. An interesting aspect regarding the imported FBX model resides in the fact that the model would initially be almost miniature compared to other objects constructed for 3D modeling. Thus, if one is to build a miniature world for the model in the future, the process would be much simpler.

Figure 21: Material Node of a Model

With the model imported, one must delve into the model's node under Houdini and find the material sub-net node. Within there, a user can find all the principal shader material nodes corresponding to different armor pieces of the model. From there, each material category, such as base color, opacity, etc., should be matched with the exported
Substance Painter materials exported during that step. While almost all categories’ sliders can be left untouched, there are three that the user may be required to alter depending on the exported armor set- displacement, metallic, and emission. For displacement, the default value in Houdini is 0.05.

Figure 22: Metallic, Displacement, and Emission Setting for Dragoon

After the displacement material is attached, the model will look normal under the standard viewing window, but once the viewing is changed to Karma, the render engine used for this project will become inflated beyond use. The value this project settled upon was 0.003, yet this value is up for alteration depending on the materials used. The default Houdini value is zero for the metallic slider, and if the matter remains, then the metallic shader will not be applied to the model. This project's value was 0.75 for all the
applicable pieces. Finally, the same issue as the metallic slider would occur for emission, and the value used for all applicable pieces at the end was 1.

However, there is another issue with the new materials that this project still needs to be resolved. With the materials attached to the original model, areas that seemed mis-colored would appear. While I first thought of this problem as residual mistakes from the Substance Painter step and attempted to fix the areas by re-doing them, the issue persisted. Then, different values with essentially all of the materials' sliders were tried to no avail. This issue is evident in the "Dark Knight's" weapon: once the emission slider is changed to 1, the emission will become completely mismatched. The project eventually chose to circumvent this problem by including this miss-alignment as a plot device in the
narrative, but for the actual issue, a problem with the exported model's opacity materials was suspected. A potential solution could be altering the opacity materials through tools similar to Photoshop. However, the project needed more time to verify this theory; thus, future users' mileage may vary. This problem could also be caused by the particular models chosen for this project since each weapon's reaction to the emissive texture seemed to be vastly different, as the lighting problem with the "Dark Knight's" weapon did not happen with the "Dragoon's" weapon under the same conditions.

![Figure 24: Dark Knight's Weapon When Emission Is Turned On](image)

One can proceed to the actual modeling phase with the armor sets and the weapons correctly situated with their materials. This phase rotates different joint nodes under the model's node. Reference pictures taken during the last stage, reference pictures found online, and pictures of the characters performing specific actions in the game were used as references for the poses. Though both armor sets of areas of movement are the same
under their respective node, the armor set will look drastically different under the same pose. This is due to how differently the armor pieces attach to the model beneath it.

Two areas that stood out more than the rest were the arms and the waist area. For the "Dragoon" model, the arms were clearly distinguished in three major areas- the shoulder plates, the arms, and the lower arm. Each of these three parts could be maneuvered with great ease. On the other hand, the "Dark Knight" model's arms were also distinguished into three areas, but its plates and arms were attached much closer. In other words, there was no possible way to move the arms of "Dark Knight" without pulling on the textures of the shoulder plates. As for the waist area, while both models' waist areas have a piece at the center of it, they were modeled in quite a different way. The "Dragoon's" waist could be controlled with greater nuance since the centerpiece was separated from the rest of the armor piece with two sets of chains. This meant excellent freedom of movement, such as horizontal and vertical rotation. For the "Dark Knight," however, the centerpiece was closely attached to the rest of the pieces, and thus its maneuverability was again hindered significantly. Accordingly, for "Dark Knight," most of its more dramatic poses were handled in a more limited way, meaning that angles were carefully chosen to conceal the incorrect areas caused by the joints' movement as much as possible.
With the characters' poses set, the rest of this step was to set up the environment they would find themselves in and to create as accurate lighting as possible. The first step usually consists of creating a modeled environment for the models or finding a proper online representation of the ideal environment. The latter was only conducted once,
which will be explained in greater detail soon. In terms of creating a modeled environment, it mainly affected one sequence of events for the final project: the character was invited into the housing area and eventually ran out of the room where he was situated into the balcony area. Both the indoor environment and the outdoor environment were re-created within Houdini, with the exceptions of the chair that the character was sitting on, the table he was facing away from, and some of the objects on the table that would emit light. All of those objects, as well as the rest of the 3D objects used, were freely available via TurboSquid, an online 3D marketplace. For the rest of the models, they were conducted under a singular geo node in the software with multiple subdivisions within the node to assimilate the environment or modify the existing geometry to its real-world counterpart.

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With the basic geometry completed, the materials for the environment were found on Ambient CG and connected to the geometry through a Houdini principal shader material node.\textsuperscript{11} The latter step could also be completed through the usage of MaterialX's shader in Houdini since the models' shaders have defaulted to the principal shader, the project decided to extend this option to the rest of the materials used to avoid complications. Adding materials to the created geometry was optional to conduct this project since the primary purpose of having the geometry in the first place was to render the shadow of the characters, and Houdini's geometries had their default shader that would generate shadows. However, the project recognizes that having an accurate

\textsuperscript{11} Ambient CG Online, https://ambientcg.com/
material attached to the geometry will significantly impact the shades of the shadow once rendered.

Figure 28: Exterior of the Warehouse Under Global Illumination

Figure 29: Interior of the Warehouse Under 20+ Lights
The primary asset that the project used was the warehouse mentioned in the last chapter. After re-shaping the building to better fit the project's purpose, numerous materials found on Ambient CG were utilized to offer different parts of the building a desirable look for the project. With all the digital assets set in stone in the OBJ tab of the software, the project proceeded into the stage tab where one can import all the assets into here through the import scene node, create cameras for later rendering process, and view the assets under a rendered view.

![Figure 30: Two Models in Stage Mode with Lightings](image)

Under the stage tab, one would also create all the lighting for the project. This project chose first to use a dome light, which would provide a general and ambient light to the pictures. Different HDR material filters were applied to the dome light to emulate natural light better. Then, for indoor scenes, including the warehouse, aerial lights were
used to provide the necessary lighting. For the scene where the character was talking while sitting in front of the workstation, different point lights were utilized to simulate the lighting the objects at the desk would generate. Point lights were also used to exaggerate the shadows of the characters if necessary. Some point lights were altered from their default color in the hope of emulating sunlight. With all the lighting set in motion, a Karma render node was dropped at the end of the node chain in the stage tab. This project changed the render size to 6000 x 3333 to match the picture taken in the previous step while not altering other values in the render node. After hitting the render button, one can expect a render time of around fifteen minutes to an hour and a half, depending on the assets and lighting in a specific scene. For the first half of the project, the option of rendering to MPlay was used, and the result was saved as a JPG to a local hard driver. For the second half of the project, the option of rendering to disk was selected. This option exports the rendered subject matters into EXR files which not only functions as a PNG file that ensures the background transparency of the file but also maintains a higher definition for the exported file than the JPG format. The render time between these two options was the same.

3.7 Compositing

The compositing procedure for this project could be separated into two parts. The first part is the compositing between real-life photographs and the models, and the second
is the compositing between pictures of the protagonist, me, and the generated 3D scenery. In other words, one can consider this stage as first the character "traversing" into the "real world" and then a human "traversing" into the "digital world." For the first part, most challenges lay in the scenes where the character's shadow would typically be visible under those shots. The technique used to create the best shadow quality for the character was through two layers of the rendered pictures. The first layer contained solely the character, and the second layer had only the shadow of the characters. From there, the brightness level, contrast, opacity, and the filled amount of the shadow layer were altered to compose a credible scene. For both these scenes with the shadow and those without, brightness, color balance, and vibrance/saturation levels were adjusted to ensure a unified art style. Moving onto the second part of the compositing procedure, this part focused on the erasure of greenscreen situated at different positions. A few settings, such as brightness and contrast, were tweaked slightly to compose the picture with the rendered ones better.
During this step, special effects were also applied to the pictures. The results were done through reference pictures taken from the game directly where the characters perform the same action in their original setting and, more general, special effect photos found online. The composition of the effect was usually conducted through layers of the same PNG/JPG file piled on top of one another (FIG) since the project aimed to mimic the original effect as much as possible and add a level of personal designs onto them. The latter half was mainly conducted by altering the actual effect's color and through the composition of newfound products. The project has realized that the majority of these effects would best juxtapose with real-life pictures through the overlay option of "lighten." In some cases, however, other overlaying options, such as "hard light," performed better, yet almost none of the effects were conducted under the default overlay.
setting. Different blurs, such as motion blur, gaussian blur, and radical blur, were applied to the scenes with actions, but considering how short most of those shots would appear in the final video, they were done in a relatively subtler degree.

Figure 32: Example Compositing File with Special Effects

Finally, all the pictures composited were exported out in JPG format with the highest quality selected.

3.8 Video Editing

This step consisted of numerous different steps. The editing of the pictures into a video through motions and transitions, sound design, voice acting, and special effects. Due to time limitations, this project acquired some outside help during this step, mainly the special effect stage.
Starting with the editing stage, all the pictures were first imported into Adobe Premiere Pro. Then, all the images would be arranged in the sequence they would appear first to ensure efficiency in editing. Then, motions would be created for these pictures either through the software directly, which mainly consisted of keyframing and animating some elements of the scene, or through a re-composition of the photographs by animating the background pictures and the rendered model separately. Images featuring motions, such as the ones where the character was falling from the sky, usually consisted of around 3 seconds of screen time to exaggerate the movements, while the ones where the characters were talking, the screen time would be much longer. The project initially attempted to add movement to every single picture, but as the number of views increased, the motions became chaotic and thus lost their purpose of engaging the audience. During this phase, some preliminary special effects were added. This was mainly done through self-made animated adjustments layers placed on the pictures and non-copyright greenscreen on YouTube. The transitions between images were either conducted through Premiere Pro's video transition library or through animated adjustment layers that featured simple motions such as zooming in/out, swiping left/right, rotation, etc.
After the pictures' animation, sound design was the next crucial step. Most of the sound used for this project came from three sources: YouTube, the original game, and self-made sounds. Arguably, one can find abundant resources to choose from, a source dedicated to sound designs, but those sources are usually predatory. After much research, other websites that are not locked behind a paywall featured much fewer options than YouTube. Given this project's budget limit to test different sources, YouTube was still regarded as the relatively best option. While there is a vast amount of non-copyrighted sound that can be found on YouTube, this selection will become much narrower if one is to have a specific type of sound in mind. For instance, a user can find many armor clacking sounds on YouTube, but there are very few choices, if any, for the sound an
"armor would make when walking across a concrete floor." Even with the YouTube feature Creator Music, which is offered to all YouTube content creators that offer professional-grade sound designs, the resource still needs to be explored. Thus, the project sought different approaches to manipulate the downloaded sound designs to suit the original vision better. This often entailed the addition of bass, changes made to the speed of the audio, and layers of different audios for one area.

On the other hand, the sounds from the original game were recorded through OBS and placed in areas where needed. These sounds did not require many alterations; at most, their speed was changed slightly or cut into smaller pieces to fit the scene better. Thirdly, the self-made sound designs mainly concerned ambient noises due to the lack of professional recording gears. The sounds were recorded through a Canon M50 camera and an iPhone 13 Pro Max. The process was separated into 4 general layers for this project's sound design. The first layer consisted of the characters' audio, which will be discussed shortly. The second layer contains multiple layers, for most of the subtle sounds, such as the sound of the character's footsteps, the combat sounds, and other minor details, take place. The third layer consisted of the ambient sound of the different environments that the characters found themselves in. The fourth and final layer had background music mainly from the game.

Moving on to the voice acting stage, this project utilized AI voice-over for both "Dragoon" and "Dark Knight" for the entire project, and the voice of “Squareface”
originates from real voice acting. While this project considered either hiring voice actors or using real-time AI voice converter for the 2nd project to make the voices more realistic, both ideas were abandoned due to budget concern and the AI voice converter’s poor performance.

For the first half of the project, three voices were utilized- the voice of the narrator, the voice of "Dragoon," and the voice of the protagonist. With the last one coming from voice acting, the other two were generated by AI. The software used in this project for this step was ElevenLab, which is the chosen software for the 2nd project as well.\footnote{Elevenlab, https://elevenlabs.io/speech-synthesis} The narrator's voice came from one of the built-in voices of the software, Adam. On the other hand, "Dragoon's" voice was generated through the voice sample of one of the significant characters from the game, Ardbert Hylfyst.\footnote{“Ardbert Hylfyst,” Final Fantasy Wiki Online, accessed on October 28, https://finalfantasy.fandom.com/wiki/Ardbert_Hylfyst} Ardbert's voice was chosen specifically due to how he "represented" the main character in the game from a different world, and the game used to use his portrait as the depiction of the main character in the trailers. For both AI voices, the software would provide pre-written dialogues to generate the lines.
For the second half of the project, Ardbert's voice was still used for both "Dragoon" and "Dark Knight" with the differentiating feature between the two characters being their tones. When a user generates a line in ElevenLab, the result would vary significantly in tone, and when moving on to another line, much of the varying tones will appear again. Thus, it is possible to produce two versions of the same voice through repeated generation of a line. Since the 2nd project has substantially more dialogues than the 1st project, the project utilized an abundance of punctuations, mainly ellipses and exclamation marks, to manipulate the voice output as much as possible. Without these punctuations, the project has found that the voices produced often lacked emotions which was the most significant downside of using AI voice-over.

Once all the lines were recorded, they were imported into Premiere Pro for volume adjustment. Interestingly, the audio files from both ElevenLab and MurfAI have
minor volume differences among their files. The project is near completion, with the
volume corrected and situated in the video's corresponding location.

3.9 Summary

While each step was difficult, the 3D modeling process was the most arduous.
With each model having to be modeled bone by bone, it required a tremendous amount of
time to be dedicated. However, what indeed exacerbated this step was the render time for
each picture. When an image is rendered, the workstation this project was using would be
rendered entirely unusable as all the CPU and RAM resources will be funneled to
Houdini. An AMD Ryzen 9 5900x CPU and a set of DDR4-4000 64GB RAM were used
for context. After the completion of the rendering, the rest of the compositing can be
completed under a much more reasonable and negotiable timeline. In the next chapter, I
will discuss the audience reaction and statistics of the released project, along with a
summary of the entire project both on an academic and commercial basis. A reflection on
the creation process and a discussion of the future implications of the project will also be
discussed there.
4. Project Discussion

In this chapter, I will offer a detailed analysis of my project's reception through data provided by YouTube, limitations of the project and potential future trajectories, and a conclusion for the thesis. However, before these discussions, I will first provide a theoretical content analysis of my project here as both the theoretical and the technical perspective of the project has been explored. From a narrative standpoint, my project was founded on the player-avatar relationship and developed through different fanfiction elements, in other words, “avatar-as-SIF.” Originating from my personal relationship with my avatar, the fanfiction was written in a way that ultimately functioned as an extension to this particular relationship. For instance, the confrontation between the two characters can take on myriad forms, yet “Dragoon” and “Dark Knight” were chosen in specific as a direct reflection of my connection with the avatar that these two “jobs” are my personal favorites for my avatar. As such design choices filled the narrative, this project reflects the “self-involving” attribute of “avatar-as-SIF” that the narrative evolved from this relationship caters to the personality of the individual player. As such, “avatar-as-SIF” can be actualized in an infinite number of ways as its appearance will drastically differ from one player to the other. This infinity extends to the number of agencies that the avatars can now obtain as a model through different audiences. That by exporting the avatar out of the game’s boundary, its morphology can now experience an indefinite number of imaginative agencies and traverse through originally unintended horizons, or
software. On the other hand, the presentation of this project lays in between the traditional *machinima* format such as the films from Falch and the more innovative approach from the likes of Pint. While this format also falls under the personal realization of an “avatar-as-SIF” relationship, it was also a metaphorical manifestation of such relationship’s impact on the real-world; through the indexicality of photography and videography which gave the avatar a proof of its existence in “reality.”

Before I can provide a complete analysis of the project's publication reception, a few premises need to be laid so that the following discussion can be understood. First, YouTube videos' statistics usually become stable after 14 days after the video's publication. It is possible for unforeseen algorithmic changes to significantly increase the view count of a video after that period. However, those cases occur relatively rarely, so this will not be factored into this analysis. Secondly, this project was published on a channel that has around 2,400 subscribers and has been receiving an average view count of around 2,000 to 5,000 per video at the time of the publication. The size of the channel will significantly influence the views a video receives since YouTube will prioritize pushing a new video to the existing audience of a channel. In other words, for a channel that has many subscribers its new videos will garnish significantly more views than a channel that has fewer subscribers, regardless of that video's content in most cases. Thirdly, the channel that published this project is a channel that falls under the category of "Let's Play." Finally, the view count is directly related to the creators' revenue.
YouTube calculates its creators' revenues through the intertwining system of Revenue Per Mile (RPM) and Cost Per 1,000 Impressions (CPM).\(^1\) RPM is a system that represents what a creator has earned per 1,000 video views, and CPM shows how much money advertisers have spent to show their advertisements on that creator's video.\(^2\) RPM is usually significantly lower than CPM due to how the latter shows the revenue prior to YouTube's revenue share, which is 55% from the total revenue.\(^3\) CPM also varies from categories to categories as the purchasing power of different audience groups mainly determines it. In other words, it is in YouTube's best interest to promote a video that would attract a large audience in a category. There are multiple ways in which YouTube's algorithm "decides" whether a video is worth promoting, which will be discussed in length shortly.

\subsection*{4.1 Data Analysis & Reception}

Until October 24, 2023, six days since the publication of the second half of the project on October 18, the project has gained a total of 968 views.

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item \(^1\) "Understand ad revenue analytics," accessed on October 25, 2023, \url{https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/9314357?hl=en#zippy=%2Cwhy-is-my-rpm-lower-than-my-cpm}.
  \item \(^2\) Ibid.
  \item \(^3\) "YouTube partner earnings overview," accessed on October 25, 2023, \url{https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/72902?hl=en#zippy=%2Cwhats-my-revenue-share}.
\end{itemize}
Although within the 14-day window, this view count is still significantly lower than other recent videos published on the same channel. Take this video's data published two days before this project's release, it has 3,701 more views than this project.
Even if one is to divide the view count by days, this video would still have nearly 423 average views per day lead over this project. On the contrary, the first half of the video published on May 24, 2023, has a view count of 2,686.

![Figure 37: View Count of the 1st Project](image)

While this is still lower than the average view counts the channel was receiving back then, which is around 5,000 views, it nonetheless still performed much better than the second half of the project. While there can be numerous potential reasons attributed to the two videos' different view counts and the lower performance of the project's second half, keep in mind that these explanations are both subjected to the currently available data and hypothesis, as it is impossible to find a, or at least one, definitive answer for a video's performance on YouTube.

Starting with an analysis of the second half of the project, which will be abbreviated as 2nd project from now, there are three potential reasons for its low
performance if one is to disregard the previously mentioned channel size: a dis-match between the channel's category and the project's, a misaligned purpose of the project, and the production quality. As aforementioned, the channel that published the project falls under "Let's Play," which attracts viewers through commented playthroughs of different video games. While this category is a subbranch of the larger "Gaming" genre on YouTube, the difference among the subbranches can be substantial. These different subdivisions all have their unique viewers, and there exists a convergence of audiences among these subdivisions. Nevertheless, even with convergence, it has generally been advised for a smaller channel to stick to one genre subdivision. This advice is a direct product of the second premise on the difference between a larger channel and a smaller channel. Since a smaller channel would not have a large subscriber base for the YouTube algorithm to promote the channel's content, those content creators should endeavor to stick to one subdivision to gain more popularity within that category and increase their subscriber base through higher recognition. As a channel grows, the content creators will have fewer risks when experimenting with other categories since it has a substantial audience for the system to publish the content to. This results in fewer concerns from both the creator and the system's side for a low-performing or low-viewing video. This project's category can be vaguely defined as "Video Game Fanart," vastly different from the "Let's Play" category. The audience convergence between these two categories exists,
but they do so when the publishing channel has been creating "Let's Play" content of the same game as the "Video Game Fanart's" game.

At the time of the publishing, the publishing channel of this project has not been creating content related to the project's chosen game, FFXIV, in any shape or form. It should be noted, though, that the same channel started by publishing "Guide/Opinion" type FFXIV content and has accumulated around 1,500 subscribers before switching categories later. However, the newer subscribers mostly come from the channel's "Let's Play" videos about different games. As these new subscribers engage with the channel more recently, any new videos will likely be promoted to them first, rather than the old subscribers. Then, combining this dis-engagement between the channel and FFXIV contents and the fact that the project's category, "Video Game Fanart," match neither the "Let's Play" nor the "Guide/Opinion" category, a sequence of event starting with the algorithm trying to promote the 2nd project first to the new subscribers, who are neither interested in the game nor the category, can be rationalized to have happened. As those subscribers were less likely to click on the video, which is reflected in the project's first 24-hour click-through rate, the rate at which the project gets further displayed to both old and new audiences, would slow down, which is reflected in the "Impression" tab in 2nd project's YouTube studio page.
The "Impression" tab is when a video gets promoted and displayed to different audiences. As a comparison, another video by the same channel published two days prior to the 2nd project received an "Impression" of 33,856 times within the first 24-hour period, almost 6x the 2nd project's "Impression." Although the mismatch between the video and its audience caused a combination of a low click-through rate and a low "Impression," which impacted the initial performance of the video, there are multiple other reasons that can contribute to this combination.

When a video receives an initial low click-through rate due to a mismatch in interest between the video and the existing audience, even though the "Impression" speed will slow down, it will still be gradually displayed to new audiences. These new
audiences have varying interests, which can be more aligned to the video's category. If these audiences demonstrate high interest in the video through a high click-through rate and high average watch time, the "Impression" will regain traction, and the view count of a video will see exponential growth. This was different for the 2nd project for two possible reasons. What generally determines the click-through rate of a video are the thumbnail and the title of a video, with the former usually being the more important aspect out of the two since a thumbnail is the first impression a viewer would have of a video. The design of the 2nd project's thumbnail is relatively simple, with an emphasis placed on the interaction between my avatar from the game and me.

Such a design lacks the necessary visual impact a thumbnail should contain to attract an audience. This theory has been mentioned by numerous large YouTube channels such as MrBeast and, most recently, by an interview between The Spiffing Brit,
who has 3.72 million subscribers, and vidIQ.⁴ In the interview, The Spiffing Brit argued that a thumbnail should not focus on being as elegant as possible, but instead focus on visual impacts that would grab the viewers' attention. However, he did not specify what he meant by visual impacts, which is understandable, considering that each category would have its own thumbnail style. The consensus is that if the click-through rate of a video is low, but the average view time, or on average how long a viewer would watch, of that video is high, the problem mainly dwells on the thumbnail since the average view time of a video directly reflects how interested and engaged the audience are with the video's content. For the 2nd project, the average view time is 1:50 minutes, which for a 16:35 minute video is an average percentage viewed of 11.1%. This shows how not only did the thumbnail of the project fail to capture the interest of the audience, but so did the project's content.

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The subsequent two major factors that led to a relatively poor reception of the project are- the format and the production quality, and the purpose of the project. With the project's foundation being motion pictures, it could have been better if it was published as a webtoon/web-comic on a different platform where the concern for motion is entirely erased. This project encountered many challenges when dealing with the animation, which will be elaborated on in a later section; without the concern for animations, the project could instead focus on perfecting each picture, which would then be made into individual panels. However, this path may be accompanied by legal issues, mainly copyright infringement, which will be discussed later. The format this project chose led to a lower production quality due to various limitations. However, ultimately, the production quality is related to a lack of experience in nearly all of the phases during production.

Without going further into details, as more will be explained in the later section, the final reason that I theorized to have caused the reception is a misaligned purpose of
the project. As briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, the project derives from my connection with my FFXIV avatar, and monetization considerations came later into the production as additions. This origin fundamentally narrowed the chance of the project succeeding as there are no guarantees for such personal emotions to be publicly appealing. If the goal were to make a project that will be received as well as possible, then the narrative would stem from a famous story plot from FFXIV instead of a completely generic narrative that only utilizes concepts from the game instead of expanding upon it. Although the concern did emerge during the production phase, the project decided to proceed with its narrative instead of an existing one from the game because of its purpose in demonstrating the connection between the player-avatar relationship and fanfiction. As mentioned in Chapter 1, what connects these two is the player's strong emotional connection with the source, and an emphasis on the monetization aspect, something that I only wished to test, will jeopardize an accurate representation of the project's goal.

On the other hand, the 1st project received 2,686 views as of now. While the 1st project outperformed the 2nd project significantly statistically, it still needed to be a successful video when looking deeper into it. Firstly, this video was published when the channel was publishing FFXIV content. Even though the category for those videos, "Guide/Option," did not correlate with the project's category, they were at least under the umbrella of FFXIV. In other words, an audience of FFXIV will be more likely to show
interest in a "Fanart" video of FFXIV compared to someone who is not at all familiar with the game, which is the case for the 2nd project.

However, even with this advantage in terms of the category, the 1st project still has the same underlying problems as the 2nd project. For instance, the average watch time for the 1st project is 1:35 minutes, which is still relatively low for a 7:51-minute video, making up only about 20.4% of the entire duration. This indicator for unappealing content is compounded by the fact that the average view count of the video the channel was publishing at that time was around 7000 views per video.\(^5\) Notably though, the 1st project's video format is vastly different from the 2nd project's format, as the 1st project contained around 2 minutes of the story while the remaining portion was a discussion of

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\(^5\) This number was deducted by dividing the sum of view counts from the video prior and the video after the release of the 1st project.
the production of the project. This format is a more traditional "fanart" video format on
YouTube, but it was changed in the 2nd project due to how through YouTube Studio's
audience retention graph of the 1st video where it shows how many audiences are
watching at a given point in the video, there was a noticeable bump of viewers when the
production discussion ended, and the actual project started to play. This graph meant
most viewers skipped through the discussion and went straight to the latter part.
However, as the 2nd project has proven, the alteration of video format did not impact the
reception of the video significantly.

Figure 42: 1st Project's Average View Duration & Retention Rate (The Project's
Description Ends at 4:50 Minutes of the Video)
4.2 Project Limitations & Future Directions

There were three intertwining limitations this project encountered: experience, time limit, and budget. Starting with experience, as one person completed this project except for a photographer, experiences with different production phases mentioned in Chapter 2 were critical. However, I did not possess any prior experience in most of those areas. While it is possible to compensate for this lack of experience with either a generous production deadline or a team composed of specialized personnel, or preferably both, this project enjoyed neither with a roughly eight-month timeline and a budget of around five hundred dollars. It should be noted that the project received countless help from different professors; without their advice, the project would not have happened in the first place. Nevertheless, their effort could only help so much when facing an absolute absence of expertise, a relatively strict timeline, and a budget that forbade the hiring of external help.

The most significant impact that these three factors have brought upon this project was its connection to the decision to cut away a significant portion of the project. As mentioned in previous chapters, a significant percentage of the narrative was abandoned. Initially, there were many more dialogues and actions, mainly from "Dark Knight." Instead of fighting "Dragoon" in the 2nd project, "Dark Knight" was going to kidnap "Squareface." Then, the two characters would have a period of interactions without "Dragoon" as a way of expanding the characteristics of "Dark Knight" and the tension
between his ideologies and the "Dragoon's." This sequence of events would not happen in the same episode as the final battle where "Dragoon" defeated "Dark Knight." Instead, the latter was planned for a third episode.

Such a narrative could increase the character development of fanfiction, but its impact on the audience's reception of the project cannot be ascertained. However, the absence of these contents did weaken the intended narrative that the project wished to display. In other words, though the central idea of displaying the connection between the player-avatar relationship and fanfiction remains present, the extent to which it was emphasized was compromised, even just from the perspective of the project's inability to fulfill fanfiction fully. The content cut was also caused by an obscure definition of scope prior to the project's production, which will be discussed later. While it was possible to compose these plots narratively, on the technical side, the rendering of the 2nd project alone took nearly two months due to a mixture of a high render time and the complexity of compositing the rendered pictures with real-life photographs. One might argue that with a budget of five hundred dollars, it would be possible to hire at least some external help in alleviating the rendering time through services such as cloud rendering. This would be possible if the different software this project has chosen to use was not locked behind paywalls. Even with Duke University's affiliation with different software companies, there are still outliers that require subscriber fees, not to mention that some of those affiliations do not function properly. If in a similar situation as this project, one will
also need to factor in the cost of purchasing different 3D assets to supplement the lack of experience and, ironically, the lack of budget.6

Secondly, the lack of experience also led to a compromised way of presenting the project. Initially, this project considered the possibility of fully animating the models, composited into real-life videos instead of pictures. This idea was dropped as it is significantly harder to learn the animation process compared to posing the models for renders. While one can still see residuals of this idea from the two videos, the motion-picture format was ultimately chosen as compensation for the lack of animation. This led to the earlier argument that this project may have been better presented as webtoons and manga instead of a video. Also, this project initially wished to hire real voice actors to voice "Dark Knight" and "Dragoon" but later chose to use AI voiceovers instead due to budget concerns. Again, it is difficult to speculate how much these two elements impacted the audience's reception, but they were nonetheless obstructions to the original visions I had for the project.

Thus, for future projects like this or an extension of this project, a few things can be adopted. First and foremost, it is critical to define the purpose of the project prior to its start. While this project mainly took a non-profit-seeking route, monetization may be

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6 A lot of scenes would not have to be purchased/downloaded if the budget allows the rental of a controlled environment.
necessary for others for various reasons. From experience, it can be challenging to integrate personal passion with monetization as, at some points, one will have to consider the audience's perspective and needs. If chances for such incorporations exist, the project that chooses to adopt the relative aspects will become a better example of illustrating not just this project's ideals but also how monetization works in modern fanfiction. Often, the creator must choose between a passion fan project and a for-profit project. The production between the two can be great as one does not have to cater to the audience's needs while the other is bound by it. Secondly, the scale of the project needs to be clearly defined before production so that situations where content needs to be later erased can be avoided. This project did not have a clear perception of scope when starting, which caused a mismatch between the scope the narrative would entail and the compositing phases.

On the one hand, this project was bounded by a time limit, but on the other hand, if the project had a perception of the duration of each phase, less narrative could be deleted. Thirdly, the project format should also be deliberately chosen based on concerns such as time limit and expertise in related areas. While the format this project chose was, in a way, a compromise, it allowed the completion of the project within the given time. However, this completion still came at the cost of the original vision due to my not recognizing the lengths for each phase of the project. Having a clear format and a degree of understanding regarding the time required can minimize the chance of having to
arrange accommodation for your projects. Finally, I recommend having the related expertise or assembling a team of specialized personnel for such projects while having a lenient deadline. In a multi-faceted project like this, one person's expertise may simply not be enough to fully actualize the project.

Therefore, I wish to briefly discuss how this project would have been developed if the premise is to solely foster the argument that the thesis wishes to present, with both unlimited time and budget. The most important aspect for that version will be the addition of the now cut content. In the original vision, the story after Squareface meets the “Warrior of Light” is drastically different from the current version. Instead of heading directly to the warehouse where the “Warrior of Darkness” resides, the two would have embarked on a journey into the city of Durham in search of ways to teleport the avatar back. There the two will engage in more conversations surrounding the “real” world, and its relationship with the game world. Although the current version does include similar conversations, the uncut version would arguably help to further foster the dynamic between the players and the avatars through a more robust discourse about both worlds. This conversation would also help the “Warrior of Light” consolidate his stance on PAR later during his confrontation with the “Warrior of Darkness. From there, Squareface would then be abducted by the “Warrior of Darkness” who would engage in a different conversation with Squareface, separate from the “Warrior of Light.” This conversation between the two would help to both introduce and develop the “Warrior of Darkness”
character, and in return, help the audience to better understand his argument for the parasocial nature of all PARs. After this conversation, the two avatars would then meet and let their ideologies collide, which was envisioned to be a much longer conversation than the current version. The same sequence of events would take place but most likely in a different environment.

This version would arguably be more inclusive in terms of the audience. On the one hand, the audience who are mainly interested in the PAR can obtain a better understanding for the thesis’s argument with lesser assistances from the thesis itself. On the other hand, Final Fantasy XIV audience would be able to better resonate with the narrative through the more developed characters. Finally, for the audience who share neither of these interests, they could also simply enjoy a more thoroughly elaborated story.

With that being said, I will now make a few suggestions for potential future studies. While this project argued for the existence of more player-avatar relationships illustrated by "avatar-as-SIF," there exist multiple other such relationships, whether linked to fanfiction or not. This project is also just one example of the "avatar-as-SIF" relationship, as the most critical aspect of fanfiction is the personalized representations. Different forms of "avatar-as-SIF" can take place between future researchers and different sources. While this project focused on the video game player-avatar relationships, the purpose is to ultimately contribute to studies on the larger human-avatar
relationship. Although much can be referred to from this project, a clearer picture of this subject will still require cross-disciplinary studies. Such studies may entail user-avatar relationships from other fields that may or may not see similarities to the player-avatar relationships discussed in this project. On the other hand, it is also possible for future researchers to focus entirely on the aforementioned model's agency in their studies. Such research can initiate new conversations surrounding agencies in digitalization from the model's perspective through rigorous discussion of agencies and tests devised to determine the formation of subjects' perceptions of agencies from different perspectives.
5. Conclusion

In conclusion, despite its limitations, this project has completed its primary goal-displaying a particular player-avatar relationship, "avatar-as-SIF." This argument is based on Jon Robson and Aaron Meskin's theory of video games as "self-involving interactive fictions" and Jaime Banks and Nicholas Bowman's four categories of player-avatar relationships.1 Through an analysis of the relationship between fanfiction and player-avatar relationships, this project argued that the Robson and Meskin's theory can be applied and be used to expand Banks and Bowman's player-avatar theory. This expansion of the latter's theory is founded upon this project's argument that while Banks and Bowman's theory is intuitive in constructing an initial understanding of the player-avatar relationship, their theory is limited to the beginning phases of such relationships. In other words, as the player-avatar relationship evolves through the players' interaction with the digital world, the four categories will no longer be sufficient in defining all the extended relationships. This project then uses the "avatar-as-Symbiote" and "avatar-as-Other" as examples in demonstrating how one such extended relationship, "avatar-as-SIF," can emerge. The project argued that "avatar-as-SIF" stems from an intense emotional

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investment a player has in a video game that transcends such relationship beyond the source material and into the physical realm, as fanfiction. Then, through two videos, the project showed how one such interpretation of "avatar-as-SIF" can appear. The project also tested the monetization possibilities of modern fanfiction, but the attempt was not necessarily monetary successful through both the fact that the attempt was not the central focus of the project and numerous limitations. Ultimately, the player-avatar relationship remains an under-studied area in an age where avatars are increasingly common in representing human existence in the digital world. Such representations take on myriad forms that require specialized research in the hope of fully cataloging and thus grasping their impact on society. This project endeavors to contribute to future studies in this area by laying down some research groundwork and a case study for one specific extended category.
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