

Video Game Review — Final Fantasy XIV: Level Up Forever

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After a disastrous premature release, a complete design and programming team change, and a sweeping revision of battle and interface systems that continued until the very last minute, Final Fantasy XIV (FFXIV) is at last online for good now and humming along smoothly. This addition to gaming's most legendary franchise is rich, beautiful, addictive, and just plain fun. Final Fantasy XIV is so very well put together, such a massive time suck, such a brilliant combination of story, franchise-history, and gameplay elements that upon close inspection its true nature becomes clear: FFXIV is a work of evil calculating corporate genius that will conquer us all.

Think I'm exaggerating? Try this, if you've ever played a MMORPG (massively multiplayer online roleplaying game): name everything that ever annoyed you in those games — EverQuest, World of Warcraft, FFXI — then see how FFXIV systematically, craftily takes the edge off those irritating elements. For example:

(1) “Leveling up happens quickly at first, but that thrill goes away too soon.”

In FFXIV you can level up pretty much any time you feel like it, forever. If you'll pardon my quoting myself, I wrote this a few years ago: “[L]eveling up is unbelievably rewarding. It sounds repetitive and idiotic when broken down: players kill enemies to become stronger, so they can kill stronger enemies, so they can become stronger, so they can kill stronger enemies, and so on. Nevertheless, Skinnerian principles make the process incredibly addictive.” (http://www.intelligentagent.com/archive/Vol4_No4_gaming_cowlshaw.htm). Each “DING” provides another shot of classic positive reinforcement: “Congratulations,” it tells the player, “you've officially accomplished something!” The nature of RPGs is such that as levels increase, each new level takes longer to reach than the last, in a simple geometric progression. A player can typically reach, say, level 8 the first night; the next, 12; then 14; then 15; 15.5; 15.75; etc. Normally, then, players level up more and more slowly; the refreshing hits stop coming. But in FFXIV, if “grinding” (mechanistically accumulating experience toward the next level) is getting players down, they can simply switch classes. Switch a bow and arrow for a wand, talk to the designated NPC (computer-controlled “non-player character”), and BAM! the bored nearly-level-16 Archer becomes a level 1 Thaumaturge. That spellcaster will then be dinging 3, 4, and 5 within the hour. Aahh, yeah, that's the good stuff!

Then, too, jobs can deeply satisfy the jones for progress. Certain levels and classes combine to create advanced specialties called “jobs.” For example, an avatar that reaches level 30 as an Archer and 15 as a Pugilist becomes eligible to become a Bard, which specialty provides satisfying bonus abilities. 30 Conjurer + 15 Arcanist = White Mage; 30 Lancer + 15 Marauder = Dragoon; and so forth. Jobs give potentially mindless leveling-up an overarching goal and purpose, then a pleasing permanent reward.

Finally, “crafting” offers yet another huge set of leveling-up possibilities. Players can ding to their hearts' content in “disciplines of hand” (cooking, jewelry-making, blacksmithing) and “disciplines of land” (mining, botany, fishing). All crafted items are useful *somewhere*, if only to sell for cash, so crafting becomes worthwhile for practical reasons, as well.

Square Enix was somehow, preternaturally, able to make this panoply of things to do/ways to level up not only universally available but also *totally optional*. Players can learn not only any given class and job and craft; they can learn *all of them* and work on *any combination* of them at *any time* — and just as importantly, change around at will. Everything is possible, everything is satisfying, and nothing is required. That may well be the definition of “addictive” right there. The challenge remains, for when players desire one; only the irritating parts have been extracted.

To make these possibilities all the more attainable, racial differences have been minimized. Ordinarily in MMORPGs (or even just regular RPGs), certain combinations of race and class simply work better than others. For example, one would never create a “tank” (damage-absorbing melee warrior) out of a high elf (typically possessing low strength and stamina), nor a wizard (high intelligence, weak body) out of a burly dwarf. But the five physically diverse “races” in FFXIV's world, Eorzea, perform similarly statistics-wise. Avatars' race is finally just an aesthetic choice, not a strategic one. Go ahead and be a tiny cat-person tank or an eight-foot-tall, four-foot-wide arcanist, and your stats won't suffer for it. Most MMORPG gamers wind up creating several avatars so that between their “main” (character receiving the most play time) and “alts” (alternate characters) they can experience different play styles and sets of bonuses/shortcomings; here, mains and alts can easily be the same avatar.

(2) “Two words: ‘corpse recovery.’”

EverQuest, for one, presented horrible difficulties to players whose avatars died in-game. The deceased player would regenerate at one of a few designated spots, generally cities far from the site of combat death — naked, and therefore at a vast disadvantage, without any statistic-improving gear. Additionally, death subtracted significant amounts of earned experience, which often could not be restored. (De-leveling is as aggravating as leveling up is satisfying.) Sometimes the body was difficult to find and required the assistance of a necromancer or bard. And so it was all too common for an unlucky player to fall into a corpse-retrieval spiral: run naked back to the death site, die again trying to loot one's own virtual body; run naked back one more time; and so on. The next generation of MMORPGs, including World of Warcraft and FFXI, did away with corpse retrieval requirements, assigning instead financial penalties as death caused one's gear to suffer damage and require repairs.

Final Fantasy XIV now all but completely removes death penalties. When an avatar dies, s/he can just sit there while the real-life player requests a “raise” (penalty-free regeneration) on the spot; or else s/he can return to one's “home,” of which there is at least one option in each of the gameworld's several dozen regions. Neither time nor experience need be lost at all, nor does extra wear accrue to equipment. Death, in FFXIV, thou hast lost thy sting!

(3) “I don't like grouping. I want to play solo.”

FFXIV is surely the most solo-friendly MMORPG ever released. By far. Even healing classes/jobs can legitimately enjoy the game playing alone. Sure, players *can* group as much as they like. They form “free companies,” which are equivalent to “guilds” — player-initiated, optional groups whose members help and support each other — and each of the three in-game cities offers membership in a “grand company” in which players can earn military-style rank, special armor, and other perks. But it would be entirely possible, and not at all handicapping, to play FFXIV for months or years without ever conversing with or gaining assistance from another player. The few quests requiring groups utilize a “Duty Finder” to mechanize the group-finding process: the player signs up to do the quest, the computer finds the needed role-players who have also signed up (tank, healer, damage-doer), and the game deposits the group at the beginning of the dungeon. There's now no need to shout “30 CNJ LFG PST” (“level 30 conjurer [healer] looking for a group, please send tell”) all evening.

(4) “I don't have time to play 60 hours a week, so I'll never have decent equipment.”

As big a problem as this has been in earlier generations of MMORPGs, FFXIV just doesn't work that way. Very nearly all equipment used by all classes/jobs is purchasable — cheaply — from easily accessible vendors thoughtfully placed right where they're needed. Purchased equipment is all the same, and is only customizable in trivial details (e.g., one can add a free company's sigil, which affects no statistics). Thus, just about every Lancer level 8-10 (for example) would have identical equipment. There are effectively no “rare drops” (random items looted from dead enemies), so there are effectively no “uber” items to spend time and money acquiring. The only things resembling rare drops are also standardized: “aetherial” gear available only in dungeons, for quests for which one must have a group (see above). Stats are identical across like items, and these stats only improve on those of purchasable gear by small degrees. In short, the playing field is built to stay level; no way exists to “pimp out” an avatar.

Because this is true, I have to wonder how long the gold-sellers will last. From early release until today (five weeks later), in cities constant spam is broadcast advertising websites that trade real-world money for in-game “gil” (cash). When in-game money carries so little clout and is so readily harvested, why pay real-world money for it? Just FYI: gil is selling on my server today at the rate of “1000K [one million] for \$15.90 USD,” and power-leveling [raising one's character quickly from level 1 to level 50 in one class], \$159 USD. Why? In earlier games, one might have needed it for increasingly rare/costly mounts to show off with. Not here, though: in FFXIV, everyone earns a mount through a quest available at level 20 — and *no other way*. Later, fancier mounts work the same.

Players are voting on Square Enix's inspired, systematic correction of earlier games' flaws with their bank accounts, and they're shouting a loud “YES!”. “Version 1” of this game was actually released in Fall 2010 and stumbled along for two years before its life-support system was finally unplugged. That was an intriguing event in itself: Square Enix ended the game *inside the game*, with a world-destroying event it called the “Calamity” on November 11, 2012 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Final_fantasy_xiv). At that point, all servers went offline. The new subtitle, “A Realm Reborn,” thus refers both to the real-world game FFXIV and the in-game, reborn world of Eorzea. Between November, 2012, and August, 2013, SE made incredible improvements. The game once called “Most Disappointing Game of the Year” 2010, topping at least one “Worst Sequel Ever” list, was overruled by unexpectedly high player demand during its first two weeks after re-release. Most of the Japanese servers still currently limit players to one avatar; North American/European servers only dropped that limitation three weeks in. Although Square Enix's nine months offline and massive retooling of FFXIV cost them millions, the company will surely make the money back. SE itself has said that its other online game, FFXI — now celebrating ten years online and still going strong — has made more money than any other FF game, even fan favorite FFXII (<http://www.ign.com/articles/2012/06/24/the-most-profitable-final-fantasy-of-all-time-is>). Players have collectively spent 200,000 years playing FFXI; I predict confidently that FFXIV's profits and play hours will surpass that amount. After all, FFXIV systematically removes every single shortcoming of all past MMORPGs, leaving in only the most enjoyable, most addictive elements.

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Volume 1, Issue 1: Classics and Contemporary Popular Culture

Table of Contents

Editorial

Moving Popular Culture Studies Scholarship into the Future
Lynnea Chapman King and Anna CohenMiller

Guest Editorial

“καλὸν ἀνθρώπινου βίου κάτοπτρον”:
Popular Culture as a Pedagogical Lens on Greco-Roman Antiquity
Kirsten Day and Benjamin Haller

Part I: Epic Reconsiderations

Wounds That Will Not Heal: Heroism and Innocence in *Shane* and the *Iliad*
Carl A. Rubino

O Homer, Where Art Thou?: Teaching the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* through Popular Culture
Mallory Young

The *Odyssey* and its *Odyssey* in Contemporary Texts: Re-visions in *Star Trek*, *The Time Traveler's Wife*, and *The Penelopiad*
Mary Economou Bailey Green

Part II: Reception and Re-narrations

Theseus Loses his Way: Viktor Pelevin's *Helmet of Horror* and the Old Labyrinth for the New World
Alison Traweak

300 and *Fellini-Satyricon*: Film Theory in the Tertiary Classroom
Leanne Glass

Part III: Gender in Cinematic Narratives

The Labyrinth of Memory: Iphigeneia, Simonides, and Classical Models of Architecture as Mind in Chris Nolan's *Inception* (2010)
Benjamin Haller

Ovid and Mel Gibson: Power, Vulnerability, and What Women Want
Geoff Bakewell

Experiments in Love: Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* and Henry de Vere Stacpoole's *The Blue Lagoon*
Kirsten Day

Part IV: Reviews

Graphic Novel Review — The Adventures of Johnny Bunko: *The Last Career Guide You'll Ever Need*
Robert G. Weiner

Video Game Review — Final Fantasy XIV: *Level Up Forever*
Brian Cowlshaw

Issues	Dialogue is indexed by Google Scholar
Volume 9, Issue 1 & 2 — Teaching and Learning with the Grateful Dead	
Volume 8, Issue 3 — Traversing Borders, Transgressing Boundaries in Popular Culture and Pedagogy	
Volume 8, Issue 2 — Infusing Pedagogy with Empathy, Social Action and Value through Popular Culture	
Volume 8, Issue 1 — Evolving Awareness in Popular Culture and Pedagogy	
Volume 7, Issue 3 — (Un)conscious Representation: Race, Gender, Ideology	
Volume 7, Issue 2 — Engaged Popular Culture and Pedagogy: Awareness, Understanding and Social Justice	
Special Series: Pedagogy During COVID-19	
Volume 7, Issue 1 — Bodies in Motion: Challenging Imagery, Tradition, and Teaching	
Volume 6, Issue 3 — <i>Otherness</i> , Survival and Hope: Pedagogies in Popular Media	
Volume 6, Issue 2 — Criminals as Heroes: Problems and Pedagogy in Popular Culture	
Volume 6, Issue 1 — Reinterpretation: Situating Culture from Pedagogy to Politics	
Volume 5, Issue 3 — <i>Otherness</i> , Survival and Hope: Pedagogies in Popular Media	
Volume 5, Issue 2 — Reading into Creativity: New Approaches in Concept and Practice	
Volume 5, Issue 1 — Visualizing Popular Culture: From Theater to the Graphic Novel	
Volume 4, Issue 1 — Intersections: Belief, Pedagogy, and Politics	
Volume 3, Issue 2 — Engaged Popular Culture and Pedagogy: Awareness, Understanding and Social Justice	
Volume 3, Issue 1 — Popular Culture Pedagogy: Theory and Application in Academia	
Volume 2, Issue 1 — Traversing Realities: Genres, Histories, and Politics in Popular Culture	
Volume 1, Issue 1 — Classics in Contemporary Culture	