

Imagining Impossible Virtual Worlds: Final Fantasy XI Private Servers as Imagined Living
Community Archives

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Abstract: Using modern archival theory and semi-structured interviews, this article examines how Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMO) private servers, and their participants function as imagined living community archives and the challenges that occur. The article presents findings of a series of interviews conducted with 15 members of the Final Fantasy XI (FFXI) private server community and investigates the value private servers provide to the preservation of virtual worlds. Player interviews speak to the power of private servers and their ability to allow them to relive past eras the virtual world in which they play and exist in, while interviews with private server developers uncovered the challenges of recreating past eras of a virtual world. Finally, this paper argues that by hiring the private server developers to help recreate these virtual worlds, game companies could address player demand, profit from the nostalgia, and compensate those who have already been voluntarily preserving their game.

Keywords: Community archives, Virtual worlds, Symbolic annihilation, Imagined records, Complex digital objects, Final Fantasy XI

As our lives have become increasingly digital, many people have created identities that inhabit online virtual worlds. However, online virtual worlds are not typically fixed in place. Incremental software updates over time can shift a world you once knew into something unrecognizable. Modern archival studies have researched the necessity of community archives when traditional archives have failed to meet a community's needs. While, Michelle Caswell and Anne Gilliland have "explored silences as potentially productive spaces in which communities can collectively imagine records that do not actually exist, but nonetheless have affective resonance."¹ Video game preservationists have had to reconceptualize traditional notions of recordkeeping when it comes to preserving virtual worlds.² Unfortunately, there has been a lack of research into how virtual world communities are reliving past eras of their virtual world due to a "difficulty in accepting the academic study of leisure."³ This paper investigates how the online communities of the massively-multiplayer online role playing game (MMO) *Final Fantasy XI* (FFXI) preserve their digital cultural heritage through recreations and reinterpretations of the past through unofficial private servers and what the challenges of doing so are. This paper also argues that by hiring the private server developers to help recreate these virtual

¹ Michelle Caswell et al., "'To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing': Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives," *The American Archivist* 79, no. 1 (2016): 60.

² Kari Kraus and Rachel Donahue, "Do You Want to Save Your Progress?: The Role of Professional and Player Communities in Preserving Virtual Worlds," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (2012): 2. Kraus and Donahue refer to the necessity of rethinking traditional preservation in video games: "While this position differs from that held by most in the recordkeeping professions for whom the integrity, fixity, and accuracy of digital information are the cornerstone of any responsible preservation program, one of our objectives is to situate the transformational model within the context of cultural heritage studies more broadly, where it has been legitimated in a variety of disciplines. It finds expression, for example, in phrases such as "permanence through change" (museum studies); "transmission": transmission + transformation (textual scholarship); and "preservation through adaptive reuse" (architecture)."

³ Charlotte P. Lee and Ciaran B. Trace, "The Role of Information in a Community of Hobbyist Collectors," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 60, no. 3 (2009): 621–22.

worlds, game companies could address player demand, profit from the nostalgia, and compensate those who have already been voluntarily preserving their game.

Background

Final Fantasy XI

Final Fantasy XI is [a] persistent-world MMORPG(MMOs) produced in Japan, for a global market, by Square-Enix in 2002.⁴ Bonnie Nardi explains that MMOs are “a digital universe” that “couples the richness of the experience of viewing the action in a film or play with the participatory experience of athletics.”⁵ MMOs are not static objects. To keep the player base engaged, MMO developers provide continuous updates to the game through software patches and intermittent expansions.⁶ Square-Enix charges players a monthly fee for access to the game’s virtual world.⁷ Once players have access to the game, they create a customizable character and choose a job or role that their character will fill within the game.

FFXI takes place within the fantasy world of Vana’diel. Players must level up and gain experience to progress through the game by defeating monsters, embarking on quests, and advancing the story line while interacting with other player characters and non-player characters (NPCs). FFXI consists of its own economy and culture dictated by those who

⁴ William Humberto Huber, “Fictive Affinities in Final Fantasy XI: Complicit and Critical Play in Fantastic Nations.,” *Digital Games Research Conference 2005, Changing Views: Worlds in Play, June 16-20, 2005, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, 2005*, 1.

⁵ Bonnie A. Nardi, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft* (University of Michigan Press, 2010), 8, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvndv9nw>.

⁶ Adam Cook, “The Days of Buying Yearly Sequels Are Numbered.,” Red Bull, January 15, 2018.

⁷ “FINAL FANTASY XI Official Web Site | SQUARE ENIX,” FINAL FANTASY XI Official Web Site | SQUARE ENIX.

exist within it and by the game's design.⁸

Many players have explored the lands of Vana'diel throughout the 22 years of FFXI's existence. Some have been around since the game's initial launch, others have joined midway through FFXI's long transformative development process, and even more have begun their journey into FFXI's virtual world as recently as today. However, not all players have been satisfied with the direction official FFXI game servers have taken in recent years. Veteran and fresh FFXI players often wish to relive the classic experience of FFXI in the modern day.

Private Servers

In online video games, private servers are often unlicensed, DIY custom copies of the official game servers.⁹ "Private servers are generally created and managed by small, committed development teams that spend long hours coding, scripting, and debugging their servers to provide smooth play for their communities."¹⁰ Players often join private servers "to return to games that they played long ago" or because they are dissatisfied with the current state of the official game.¹¹

As highlighted through interviews, players on FFXI private servers are largely dissatisfied with the current state of the official game. A few of these reasons include, but are not limited to:

⁸ Huber, "Fictive Affinities in Final Fantasy XI," 5–6; Nicole Crenshaw, Jaclyn LaMorte, and Bonnie Nardi, "Something We Loved That Was Taken Away": Community and Neoliberalism in World of Warcraft," 2017, 2036. Crenshaw et al. are writing about World of Warcraft (WoW), but the same theory applies to FFXI: "People embody the values of their culture through online activities. We argue that social experience in online venues is a product of two factors: the affordances of the technology and the influence of the culture in which the technology is created and used."

⁹ Holin Lin and Chuen-Tsai Sun, "Thrift Players in a Twisted Game World?: A Study of Private Online Game Servers," in *Online Gaming in Context* (Routledge, 2011), 60.

¹⁰ Crenshaw et al., "Something We Loved That Was Taken Away," 2037.

¹¹ Lin and Sun, "Thrift Players in a Twisted Game World?," 64–65; DAsoccer6, Twitch interview with author.

- The raising of the level cap above 75 making gear obtained through gameplay obsolete.¹²
- The introduction of Trusts, or summonable party member NPCs that allow for the game to be played without much interaction with other players.¹³
- Multi-boxing, or the ability for one player to simultaneously play on multiple characters at once through additional accounts.¹⁴
- The lack of “the grind”, or what players refer to as the time investment it takes to level up your character.¹⁵

Many FFXI private server developers recreate past eras of the game to appeal to FFXI players who are seeking to relive, or experience for the first time, the game’s past or a close reinterpretation of it.¹⁶ However, the foundation and infrastructure for all private developers must be maintained by passionate volunteers.

The Infrastructure

LandSandBoat (LSB) serves as the infrastructure and “the back-end software all servers [i.e. FFXI private servers] have their roots in.”¹⁷ LSB’s “primary goal is to have the

¹² DASoccer6, Twitch interview with author. A player, DASoccer6(DA) describes the pain of gear becoming obsolete “A lot of people thought once you started going above 75 it really changed the aspect of what Final Fantasy 11 became. With the gear that you spent weeks, if not months, being able to achieve... you're fighting... and trying to get it for six months. You get it now. All of a sudden, they raise the cap to 85 it's irrelevant [the gear the player obtained]. It's gone.”

¹³ Rabadaba, “FFXI, Horizon, Conflict, Renaissance, and You. - FFXIAH.Com.” Rabadaba on FFXI forums describing how trusts have disincentivized social gameplay: “It's about modern FFXI and many other modern MMOs having so many quality of life additions that actively disincentivize group play for the majority of game... in FFXI's case trusts, no player interaction needed.”

¹⁴ DASoccer6, Twitch interview with author. DASoccer6 making a joke about players who play the game with many characters simultaneously through different accounts: “Technically MMO means massive multi-boxing online now where you don't need to play with other people you just create your own characters and rock and roll.”

¹⁵ Ibid. “Final Fantasy XI is based upon that grind to get to 75”

¹⁶ “EdenXI.” “Eden attempts to recreate the Treasures of Aht Urhgan era experience with a few quality-of-life additions... While all private servers have some deviation from era retail, we strive to be as close to possible, and as such do extensive research on everything before implementing it.”

¹⁷ GeoDude, Discord messages to author, October 19, 2024; “LandSandBoat/Server,” Lua (2021; repr., LandSandBoat, November 7, 2024).

retail game preserved as much as possible not any particular era of the game.”¹⁸ LSB developer, Geodude, explains that “servers [sic] [i.e. private server developers] fork the base branch... and then make their changes on top of it, committing those changes to their fork.”¹⁹ In other words, private server developers are able to copy LSB and make tweaks to the software to essentially roll back the clock to a previous era of FFXI.²⁰ “The technical requirements for setting up a private server (also known as an emulator) are not complex.”²¹ However, things become more complex when private server creators attempt to customize the emulator to fit their specific need.²²

Literature Review

Community Archives & Living Archives

Community archives is a concept in archival science that has been gaining traction in recent years. Caswell et al. referencing Reina Gossett, “points to the transformative affective potential of community archives as spaces for members of marginalized communities to represent themselves and learn about their histories... [as] connection to the past can be a survival strategy that enables people to counter feelings of erasure and

¹⁸ GeoDude, Discord messages to author, October 19, 2024. “Retail” refers to the current official version of FFXI distributed by Square Enix.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. GeoDude referencing LSB’s mission and how they can facilitate classic era servers: “When retail gets new stuff, eventually we plan to have that newer stuff. But to any extent possible we try to make configuration or modules able to toggle or change various things to help you have a “classic” experience if that’s your thing. The rule is we won’t sacrifice the ability to emulate the modern game or require client modification to do so.”

²¹ Lin and Sun, “Thrift Players in a Twisted Game World?,” 61. Lin and Sun describing private server development for other online games: “One interviewee with such experience told us that a ‘2D game such as Lineage requires only about an hour to set up. A more complex game such as Lineage II needs some research time, but can be done in two days.”

²² GeoDude, Discord messages to author, October 19, 2024. LSB developer, GeoDude, referencing private server developers who tweak LSB: “I was committed to making sure future generations could see it someday after SE pulls the plug. Along the way I’ve been an advocate for enabling people to do custom things in as safe a way as possible... because people who customize tended to break their compatibility.”

isolation.”²³ In this way, private servers can function as community archives with how they provide a place for the marginalized communities of players from previous eras of FFXI and new players who want to experience a “classic” version of FFXI to represent themselves in a virtual world that is not currently offered on official servers.

Private servers also function as living archives amongst the players and developers in the way they operate, for example, as Sabiescu writes, as digital “spaces created through the synergy of creative and archival practice and their potential for fulfilling one of the most significant functions of cultural heritage, its role as catalyser in processes of social transmission of memory and community building.”²⁴ Private servers are on the cutting edge of what constitutes as a living archive due to the digital medium in which they exist. Sabiescu further explains, “the advent of digital media have provided living archives with new creative valences, making them potent means for the social sharing of memory in ways that were not possible previously for the archive.”²⁵ Private server players engage in a “performative celebration of the past through contemporary acts of creation and transmission” in the way that players perform their roles and the way that memories are transmitted between new and veteran players.²⁶

²³ Michelle Caswell et al., “‘To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise’: Community Archives and the Importance of Representation,” *Archives & Records* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 5. A basic definition of “affect” as provided by Gilliland: “the human capacity that encompasses, independently and in various combinations, emotions of all sorts: positive or negative, paralyzing and disaffecting or energizing and rallying.”

²⁴ Amalia G. Sabiescu, “Living Archives and The Social Transmission of Memory,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 63, no. 4 (October 2020): 497.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 497.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 497; greg404, Reddit message to author, October 19, 2024. A player greg404 describing the transmission of memory: “I... am connecting with a part of FFXI's history! I have all these experiences on FFXI, all these milestones that I share with people who played in that era. I have friends who don't play on Horizon but did play FFXI in 2002-2007, and they know exactly what I'm talking about when I describe my frustrations with a bad experience party, my excitement over getting a powerful piece of equipment. The knowing looks and nostalgic wistful smiles, I do think there's a connection there... I am connecting with a living community in an ongoing present era. I don't have nostalgia for this game, I'm experiencing it all for the first time and making the memories that I will be nostalgic about in the future”

The benefit of community and living archives is the way in which they combat symbolic annihilation in the way they can provide representational belonging to the communities they serve:

In archival studies, Michelle Caswell has adapted the term "symbolic annihilation" to denote how members of marginalized communities feel regarding the absence or misrepresentation of their communities in archival collection policies, in descriptive tools, and/or in collections themselves. She asserted that community archives can serve as powerful forces against symbolic annihilation.²⁷

Gilliland explains that "representational belonging... serves as a counterweight to symbolic annihilation and describes the affective responses community members have to seeing their communities represented with complexity and nuance."²⁸ Private server communities promote representational belonging in the way that they help players reconnect with the past through community interaction.²⁹

Archival Imaginaries and Imagined Records

Michelle Caswell first introduced the concept of archival imaginaries and describes it in this way:

the archival imaginary is the dynamic way in which communities creatively and collectively reenvision the future through archival interventions in representations of the shared past. Through the archival imaginary, the past becomes a lens to the future; the future is rooted in that which preceded it. Through the archival imaginary, the future can be conceived through the seeds of what was possible in the past.³⁰

Imagined records is a concept introduced by Anne Gilliland and Caswell, building off

²⁷ Caswell et al., "To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing," 59.

²⁸ Ibid, 75.

²⁹ Desert, Discord messages to author, October 18, 2024. A player, Desert, expressing representational belonging: "The community is pretty important to HXI, just as it was on retail in the 00s. I think the experiences I've had with other players have been just as varied as i would have seen back in the day. You get the whole spectrum from egoistical players to seemingly highly altruistic people."

³⁰ Michelle Caswell, "Inventing New Archival Imaginaries: Theoretical Foundations for Identity-Based Community Archives," in *Identity Palimpsests* (Litwin Books, 2014), 49.

Caswell's previous work. They argue that imagined records are "records that, while not actually existing, meet pressing social needs in the present."³¹ Records of previous eras of FFXI's past have largely been erased through incremental updates over time. However, private server developers can stitch together and weave threads of the game's past in the present to imagine what the world of Vana'diel once was, providing players the space to inhabit the worlds they once knew.

Imagining the record is a necessity because of game companies' lackluster preservation practices and the nature of MMOs to be in a constant state of flux, there are often not many records to refer back to the original source code of the game.³² Akihiko Matsui, an FFXI producer explained when discussing the possibility of creating a level 75 era server, "truth be told, we have no snapshot data of the level 75 era, which would make it very difficult to replicate things as they were back then on this type of server."³³ Square Enix would not have the ability to rebuild past eras of FFXI with 100% accuracy even if they wanted to. Developers of private servers can imagine the record and implement close to accurate recreations of the past of FFXI.³⁴

Current Video Game Preservation Praxis

Because of the transitory nature of complex digital objects, preserving video games is a formidable challenge. Physical degradation of hardware is of concern and if hardware

³¹ Anne J. Gilliland and Michelle Caswell, "Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined," *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 65.

³² Scott Baird, "Square Enix Is Safe From Final Fantasy Leaks (Because It Lost The Source Codes)," ScreenRant, February 4, 2021.

³³ reseph, "PAX East 2020 Interview with Yoji Fujito & Akihiko Matsui," Reddit Post, *R/Ffxi*, April 10, 2020.

³⁴ "Nasomi Community FFXI Server - Party like It's 2005!," accessed November 7, 2024. "Nasomi is a free to play, non-official FFXI server based around the 2005 era of the game. We provide an old school style of play in the world of Vana'diel for players who want to re-live the nostalgia of 2005."

becomes obsolete, so does the software.³⁵ Video game preservation is not a priority for game companies because of the challenge of balancing profitability against the recognition of cultural heritage.³⁶ In fact, we have already lost access to one of the original ways people played FFXI. FFXI was originally released for both Microsoft Windows and the PlayStation 2 (PS2). FFXI is no longer playable on the PS2, and it is only a matter of time until Square Enix shuts down the FFXI servers for Windows completely.³⁷

One way to counter the corporate decision making that leads to a game's obsolescence is through the powerful tool of emulation. Guttenbrunner et al. noted that "in order to augment the preservation of the original game system, techniques of emulation... can be used to provide game play experiences on newer hardware."³⁸ LSB is an emulator of the current retail version of FFXI which private server developers can modify to preserve specific moments of the game's history with the tools they have. Emulators are not always an exact copy of the original game. Jerome McDonough pointed out that "emulation allows [players]... to experience game play through its reimplementation and reinterpretation of software and hardware... emulation untethers the game from its original hardware and software so that obsolescence does not spell the end of 'the game.'"³⁹

³⁵ Mark Guttenbrunner, Christoph Becker, and Andreas Rauber, "Keeping the Game Alive: Evaluating Strategies for the Preservation of Console Video Games," *International Journal of Digital Curation* 5, no. 1 (2010): 66.

³⁶ Chris Arneil, *International Video Game Preservation Survey Report*, version 1.1 (National Film and Sound Archive of Australia and the strong National Museum of Play, 2024), 22.

³⁷ *You Can't Install Final Fantasy XI on the PlayStation 2 in (2024) | PS2 - Every Day Retro Gaming*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zt1ypC4oYHA>; Bad4Bill, Discord messages to author, October 21, 2024. LSB Developer, Bad4Bill, expresses concern for the inevitable shut down of FFXI: "We are keenly aware that the game has been 'circling the drain' for the best part of 10 years, and Square Enix could announce they're pulling the plug at any time. Our goal is to make sure that the game we love is still available to play accurately once the official servers are shut off."

³⁸ Jerome McDonough et al., "Preservation Strategies," in *Preserving Virtual Worlds Final Report* (2010), 61.

³⁹ Raiford Guins. "Museified," in *Game After* (The MIT Press, 2014), 34.

It is hard to preserve a digital object that is in a constant state of flux. As Ayse Gursoy observes in her paper about preserving complex digital objects, “progressive changes that ostensibly improve the object and destructive changes that make the object difficult to access... make preservation difficult.”⁴⁰ Also, video game companies themselves do not have good record keeping practices.⁴¹ On top of all this, in an online massively multiplayer game, the community of players who existed on these servers were a large part of what defined the game.⁴² Rigid traditional archival standards make it impossible to archive something that is so ephemeral. Fortunately, theories of imaginary archives and imagined records, and community and living archives, along with modern theories of game preservation allow for a more inclusive view of what an archives is.

Methodology

In October 2024 I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with members of the FFXI private server community. I interviewed 10 players and 5 developers. I chose to conduct interviews with members of the FFXI private server community to gain a better understanding of how “the roles of individual and collective imaginings about the absent or unattainable archive” may “offer important affective counterbalances” to the corporate neglect of the preservation of their virtual worlds.⁴³ These interviews included players and developers from four different FFXI private servers along with developers from LSB, the

⁴⁰ Ayse Gursoy et al., “Understanding Change in a Dynamic Complex Digital Object: Reading Categories of Change Out of Patch Notes Documents,” in *Information in Contemporary Society*, ed. Natalie Greene Taylor et al. (Springer International Publishing, 2019), 1, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15742-5_38.

⁴¹ Baird, Scott. “Square Enix Is Safe From Final Fantasy Leaks (Because It Lost The Source Codes).” ScreenRant, accessed October 26, 2024.

⁴² Nicole Crenshaw and Bonnie Nardi, “‘It Was More Than Just the Game, It Was the Community’: Social Affordances in Online Games,” in *2016 49th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS)*, 2016, 3785. Crenshaw and Nardi refer to WoW, but the same applies to FFXI: “While social experience in WoW is central, it is also fragile and vulnerable to changes in the system.”

⁴³ Gilliland and Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries,” 55.

infrastructure in which all FFXI private servers are based. These interviews took place across Reddit and Discord messages along with one interview being conducted live on one player's Twitch Stream. I anonymized most interview participants except for the interview I conducted on Twitch because I had the interviewees consent.

I viewed and researched information about FFXI private servers through the subreddits r/FFXIPrivateServers, r/FFXIServers, and r/FFXIdrama.⁴⁴ I also visited individual private servers' Discord channels as well as their websites and wikis. The player who was interviewed on Twitch also hosts a HorizonXI podcast, LevelSync, so I viewed a few episodes of this podcast to get a sense of his role in the FFXI community.⁴⁵ Participants were found from posts I made in the subreddits as well as from posts I made in the individual servers' Discord channels.

Limitations

My sample size is only a sliver of the entire FFXI private server community. Except for one developer currently working on LSB and another who works on Eden, I did not have the opportunity to speak with many developers currently working on the private servers. I do not claim that my findings represent the entire FFXI private server community given the sample size. Although, I have experience with retail FFXI servers, I have not engaged with private servers personally; consequently, my approach to this study is somewhat detached. Given additional time, I would have sought experiential insight by participating in gameplay on private servers.

⁴⁴ "Final Fantasy XI Private Server Community," accessed November 9, 2024.; "FFXIServers," accessed November 9, 2024.; "Drama Torama," accessed November 9, 2024.

⁴⁵ "Level Sync," YouTube, accessed November 9, 2024.

Discussion

FFXI as Living Community Archives

FFXI private servers do not reflect the notions of traditional archives. They correspond much more with what modern archival researchers and theorists have come to understand as community archives because they are maintained by individuals with specialized insights into the communities they work to represent. In their article about queer community archives, Wakimoto et al. referencing Stevens et al. explain that “While in the past, professional archivists may have seen themselves as the “experts” graciously giving advice to the “amateur” community archivists, the community archivists are now seen as “sources of specialist knowledge.”⁴⁶ In my conversation with GeoDude, he explained his role in the maintenance of the software: “Just the janitor here... I've background assisted multiple servers. Spent more time teaching people [i.e. private server developers] how to do what they wanted without breaking their fork than I did coding.”⁴⁷ His role as the custodian of the emulation software along with his ability to teach others who are attempting to enact their own vision of FFXI demonstrate his specialist knowledge of a niche field and his service and dedication to his community.

Because of their unique knowledge and autonomy, these community archivists preserve these digital objects based on what they know their community needs rather than based on what someone learns obtaining an MLIS degree. GeoDude reinterprets provenance as defined by Tom Nesmith as “the social and technical processes of the

⁴⁶ Diana K. Wakimoto, Christine Bruce, and Helen Partridge, “Archivist as Activist: Lessons from Three Queer Community Archives in California,” *Archival Science* 13, no. 4 (2013): 310.

⁴⁷ GeoDude, Discord messages to author, October 19, 2024.

records' inscription, transmission, contextualization, and interpretation, which account for its existence, characteristics, and continuing history."⁴⁸ Michelle Caswell explains that "archivists and users are active participants in the provenance of records, and are therefore important stakeholders in their custody, mediation and uses. Provenance is not only about the past, but the future of the records as well; this approach to provenance includes all possible potential activations in its scope."⁴⁹ LSB is the record of FFXI while the private servers that fork off of it are the future of the record and its possible activations are activated through gameplay and community participation. Preserving an online game that is defined by community participation requires modern techniques and reinterpretations of what we know and understand archives to be.

One important component of playing FFXI on private servers is the reliance a player must have on other members of the community.⁵⁰ This speaks to the performative nature of living archives as well. Players must perform their roles and be nice to each other in order to progress through and experience the game. One HorizonXI player, DAsoccer6 (DA) describes this:

Everything in this game, you can't do crap alone. There's NMs [Notorious Monsters], there's quests, there's missions, there's story progression that you cannot do by yourself, and because it's not multi-boxing [HorizonXI does not allow multi-boxing], because you don't have trusts, you've got to have that sense of community or a bond with other people, and it forces you... to be nice.⁵¹

Caswell describes this behavior as an act of strategic essentialism inherent to community

⁴⁸ M. L. Caswell, "'The Archive' Is Not an Archives: On Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies," August 4, 2016, 13.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 13.

⁵⁰ StunningNick, October 24, 2024, Discord messages to author. "I like knowing that every character running around is a person, and I like that we have to rely on each other."

⁵¹ DAsoccer6, Twitch interview with author. NM means "notorious monster" which are difficult enemies that players must cooperate to defeat.

archives: “strategic essentialism simultaneously acknowledges the social construction of identity categories and builds solidarity among individuals who identify with such categories.”⁵² Players engage in such strategic essentialism through the roles they fulfill and identify with in game and the solidarity they must build to progress through the game.

The FFXI private server community have experienced symbolic annihilation due to how Square-Enix has adjusted modern FFXI in ways that make the game less challenging and less social effectively rendering the game they once loved, unrecognizable.⁵³ Players have resisted symbolic annihilation and have come to experience more representational belonging by playing on private servers.⁵⁴ It is not only through revisiting the game’s mechanical structure that contribute to the private server community’s expression of representational belonging, players also experience reconnecting to other players that they used to play with in previous versions of FFXI and with veteran players who are new to them. This makes the players living artifacts who can share stories of the game, existing within the community archive of the private server they play on. DA goes into detail about his experience reconnecting to the past and sharing stories of FFXI:

LostTimeLord... we played retail together. Me and him were... the number one, two Final Fantasy XI streamers back in the day... Not only him, I've had a lot of people come out of the woods... I had somebody send me a screenshot from 2019 last week saying, DA, is that you and it shows me, a warrior in the Sky, back in the day... I think... one of the best things about it, it's not reconnecting with the same people you've already had experience with, you're reconnecting with people that actually remember those days... because of the stories you can tell.⁵⁵

⁵² Caswell, “Inventing New Archival Imaginaries,” 40.

⁵³ DAsoccer6, Twitch interview with author. “Old retail and Horizon, you've put in hours to be able to get your stuff accomplished, but original retail now the way it is is you log in, you immediately get some trusts, you have a party together. You don't have to socialize. You go out and kill your shit, and you can... fly through it incredibly quickly.”

⁵⁴ Ibid. “If you're looking for that original grind of the reason why most Final Fantasy 11 players still love Final Fantasy, then horizon is far more accurate to why we had cared about our characters, why we cared about the NMs, why we cared about that grind, because it took so much work to be able to accomplish those things... if you want that original [original FFXI experience], Horizon’s closer to it than what the retail currently is, by far.”

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Imagining and Activating FFXI's Past

In her article about archival imaginaries, Caswell explains that digital archives have the potential “for individuals to communicate memories” and “for communities to forge collective memories.”⁵⁶ Geodude communicates memories through his maintenance of LSB as the record of the game, and the private server developers use LSB to forge collective memories according to their vision, while players share these memories through their participation and performance on the server. One private server player elucidates this idea, stating, “private servers let me relive and create more memories like I had on retail. I would say private servers had more of an impact on me than retail. They open the door to something more.... the original game with additions made by people that also love the game.”⁵⁷

Gilliland and Caswell predicted the many forms impossible archival imaginaries and the limitless potential of creative manifestations that might be born out of informed reinterpretations of the record. “Impossible archival imaginaries have a “co-constitutive relationship with actualized records” but exist only as imaginary because they can never result in actualized records in any traditional sense. The authors add, “If instantiated, they may take various media forms, including fiction, film and performance.”⁵⁸ The ever-evolving nature of online video games make for a ripe medium to preserve through imaginary records.

Because past eras of FFXI and the communities of people who enjoyed them have

⁵⁶ Caswell, “Inventing New Archival Imaginaries: Theoretical Foundations for Identity-Based Community Archives,” 45.

⁵⁷ Bcrazy79, October 22, 2024, Reddit message to author.

⁵⁸ Gilliland and Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries,” 61.

not been preserved by Square-Enix and records of their existence is scant (for example source code, but also because a lack player created videos and ephemera you often find surrounding more modern video games) private server communities have been forced to imagine records of the game and implement recreations and reinterpretations of these eras through emulation.⁵⁹ One of the reasons private servers are never 1:1 recreations of past eras of FFXI is due to the dearth of existing records about past eras. Instead, private servers make necessary tweaks to increase accessibility for modern gaming sensibilities and lower server populations.⁶⁰ In his article about imagined records in autofiction, Richard M. Cho speaks to the necessity of imagining records. He says that “Imagined records... can be indispensable and even necessary for addressing inevitable gaps in records.”⁶¹ One player, Desert, mentioned the difficulty in resurrecting a classic server with 100% accuracy. They write, “you basically have to go through ancient forum posts and try to get an idea of how things worked, or go by your own, often fallible, memory.”⁶² Caswell and Gilliland explain that:

impossible archival imaginaries... can provide a trajectory to the future out of a particular perspective on the past... at the same time, they can be complex and dynamic, shifting along what Gilliland has identified as a “continuum of recordkeeping affect” as internal emotions and external circumstances change and interact.⁶³

Some players want to relive the glory days without the pain that some of the former game

⁵⁹ GeoDude, Discord messages to author, October 19, 2024. “We don't have to do things exactly the same way the retail game does them, we just have to create the same player experiences. The journey the server logic goes through can be different as long as the destination is the same, invisibly to the players.”

⁶⁰ Bcrazy79, Reddit message to author, October 22, 2024. “Tweaks are generally Quality of Life. They make leveling easier and parties more flexible to accommodate the lower population.”

⁶¹ Richard M. Cho, “Becoming an Imagined Record: Archival Intervention in Autofiction,” *The American Archivist* 83, no. 2 (2020): 283.

⁶² Desert, Discord messages to author, October 18, 2024.

⁶³ Gilliland and Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries,” 61.

mechanics have caused them by incorporating changes that make the game more accessible while keeping the spirit of classic eras.⁶⁴ One developer, HotRichard, commented on the fact that he considered his work “to be game preservation, even if it was not authentic preservation. It was pioneering the future and keeping... interest in the game itself alive.”⁶⁵ The hesitancy with which he wants to describe his work as game preservation, and his fears of inauthenticity can be assuaged by a perspective held by Alexandrina Buchanan referenced by Cho:

Archives cry out for human interpretations, she speculates, which can represent creative starting points rather than the closed records of completed actions. She concludes, “We might, however, consider the potential of using these and other techniques to add other layers, other voices, other possibilities to traditional archives, thus providing opportunities for different meanings to be communicated or created.”⁶⁶

Like the imagined records of autofiction described by Cho, private servers are “uniquely suited to serve as an imagined archival record because” of their “smooth amalgamation of actual events and imaginary supplements.”⁶⁷ The benefits of imagined archival records is that the record creators can devise a record grounded in the past, but augmented with certain quality of life enhancements. DA describes the how developers hybridize the imagined and authentic while keeping the spirit of classic FFXI alive.

It's the hindsight to be able to find what should have been done originally but wasn't, and being able to make those changes, you can make things too easy and too accessible, but then that takes the fun out of the game, because again, Final Fantasy XI is about the work you put in to be able to get an accomplishment, not getting the accomplishment itself.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ GeoDude, interview. “It turns out the old classic era was more painful than they remembered.”

⁶⁵ HotRichard, October 19, 2024, Reddit message to author.

⁶⁶ Cho, “Becoming an Imagined Record,” 273.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 271.

⁶⁸ DAsoccer6, Twitch interview with author.

The power of resurrecting past eras of FFXI through imagined records cannot be understated. The players' excitement about reconnecting to the past of a beloved game exhibit these private servers' function as a tool to promote representational belonging.

Technical, Social, and Legal Challenges of Private Server Community

Archives

While the existence of FFXI private servers functioning as powerful imagined living community archives have positive and idealistic affective implications, it does not come without the challenges that occur whenever a group of people work together to try and accomplish something great. Players I spoke with held mostly positive views about their experience playing on private servers, but developers and former developers had a different story to tell behind the scenes.

HotRichard observes the technical challenges that come with fresh developers working on private servers. He illustrates, "technically... there are always challenges with... dealing with amateurs coding the game and verifying the... overly complex aspects of XI for authenticity."⁶⁹ When speaking about the server he worked on specifically, HotRichard mentioned that a lack of oversight has led this server to a version of FFXI that is "not based on the XI of now or the past."⁷⁰ Another developer mentioned problems of memory that come with trying to create a server that is authentic to past eras of FFXI.⁷¹ There are also

⁶⁹ HotRichard, Reddit message to author, October 19, 2024.

⁷⁰ Ibid. "The future of CatsEyeXI is not bright in my opinion. They have increasingly customized their game without any comprehensive quality control or focus on balancing for far too long. Their economy is in tatters which is a core aspect of the game regardless of their inventing brand new custom economic actions. Their balance is out the window and increasingly not based in the XI of now or the past. Ultimately [sic] I see them driving the car until the wheels fall off."

⁷¹ GeoDude, interview. "Data. the problem is data. You can't always trust what the wiki's [sic] and fan sites say. Sometimes you can't even trust someones very plausible looking spreadsheet. In the word of Dr. House, everybody lies. Especially to themselves. I don't even trust MY OWN memories of how this game did things that I cannot log

challenges with servers that have not made updates in a long time, essentially breaking the game.⁷²

Private servers exist in a legal grey area. A private server is likely to fly under the radar unless the developers of the private server start charging players for access because Square-Enix will see this as theft of their intellectual property and take legal action.⁷³ This can create burn out on the developer side of things because it is hard to dedicate your life to something that you cannot be compensated for.⁷⁴ There are also bad actors who will snitch on developers by sending their personal details to Square-Enix hoping to elicit cease and desist letters.⁷⁵ This leads to another layer of sustainability issues for the survival of these private servers.

Social challenges account for some tough circumstances. Since there is no financial incentive in the development of a private server, some developers are motivated by the power inherent to running a populated server. Geodude asserted, “if you are the operator of a large server [sic] you can treat people like utter crap without consequence for an absurd time, before your "staff" (I hate that word, you aren't getting paid) gets disgruntled

in and test right now on the spot. I sure as heck won't trust someone else's. And we've found some thing to have changed without even being mentioned in SEs official patch notes. So we just aim for what we can prove beyond all reasonable doubt RIGHT NOW.”

⁷² Ibid. GeoDude explains problems with not making updates describing servers that still run off Darkstar, which was the predecessor of LSB: “Some servers, sadly are still running off old darkstar and manually locking down the client version and providing custom installers to maintain that old version. These servers tend to break a lot of stuff, then fail to realize that they can't get our updates that fixed issues they are having.”

⁷³ Ibid. “As soon as you start taking money... the more likely BigCorp™ is likely to think "hey that should be MY money" and start considering taking action... Kiss you bank account and your careers both goodbye... Also in FFXI in particular, the player base is severely averse to this due to past events, so everyone will hate you fast.”

⁷⁴ Ibid. Financially its tough to devote so much time to something you know you can't take money for without causing problems. And then dealing with people who can't understand why you won't take their money for it. It is not legally safe and morally questionable to take money for this type of project.”

⁷⁵ Bad4Bill, interview. “Every few years there tends to be a person who will try and destroy the project through "legal action", but [by] doxxing all the developers and sending our details to Square Enix to try and illicit [sic] the sending of Cease and Desist letters. This has happened to me twice now...” Doxing is slang for making personal details about someone publicly available.

and splits off to a new server taking part of the player base with them. Its like watching amoeba divide.”⁷⁶ HotRichard provided an example of this issue of what happens when private servers are run in less than democratic ways:

There is always a lot of infighting, headbutting, corruption, and sophomoric politics involved in this. Within CatsEye there was one individual with very strong opinions who wants very much to shape the entire server their way over the rest of the team. They were the most active and had a good deal of talent on the team. Which eventually put them into a position where they would get their way. This drove a wedge between the team...While others internalized this struggle and distanced themselves from the server. I was generally the one pushing back against this member, and long story short it caused a break in the server after half the staff walked out with me.⁷⁷

There is still more work to be done on addressing the challenges of these unique born digital community archives. One suggestion that I have come up with would be for game companies, such as Square-Enix, to hire private server developers for the preservation of their games. By hiring those who already have the skillset and know what player wants are when revisiting classic eras, a company like Square-Enix could finally address player demand while preserving their history, compensate those who are already doing this work, and provide a budget for quality control that private servers do not have, all while profiting off the nostalgia. It has been proven that classic era servers can reinvigorate the modern version of the game by getting people excited about the past of the game and revisiting what gets people so excited about the past and reimplementing those concepts into the current version of the game.⁷⁸ When Blizzard, the creators of World of Warcraft(WoW) released their own official classic servers, WoW players were

⁷⁶ GeoDude, Discord messages to author, October 19, 2024.

⁷⁷ HotRichard, Reddit message to author, October 19, 2024.

⁷⁸ Oli Welsh, “World of Warcraft’s 20th Anniversary Sees the Game in a Better State than Years Past — and It’s Thanks to WoW Classic,” *Polygon* (blog), August 12, 2024. This article demonstrates that the popularity of WoW classic allowed Blizzard to revisit the concepts of what made classic WoW so popular and reimplement those ideas into the modern version of WoW.

monumentally excited about revisiting the past of the game leading to a rise in subscriptions to the game by 223%.⁷⁹

Conclusion

FFXI classic era private servers are grounds for powerful positive affective resonances based on the passionate responses received by players interviewed. Viewing these private servers as imagined, living, community archives validate the players and developers as stewards of the preservation of FFXI. However, many of the challenges that the developers expressed experiencing indicate problems with long term sustainability of these imagined living community archives. Gabe Newell, co-founder of Steam, the largest video game digital distribution platform, once said that “piracy is almost always a service problem.”⁸⁰ Square-Enix has a service problem when it comes to delivering FFXI to players who want to experience past eras of the game the representational belonging they seek. By hiring private server developers to help create official classic era servers and giving them the freedom to enact their vision, Square-Enix could address player demand for classic eras, compensate those who have already been voluntarily preserving FFXI, and profit from the nostalgia all while avoiding the challenges inherent to DIY game development.

Future Research

One observation made while writing this paper was how veteran players pass knowledge down to newcomers. This behavior mimics traditions of oral history. It was also an observation expressed by newer players many times in my interviews. It seems that this

⁷⁹ Ali Jones, “Thanks to WoW Classic, World of Warcraft Subscriptions Are up 223%,” PCGamesN, September 23, 2019.

⁸⁰ Greg Tito, “Valve’s Gabe Newell Says Piracy Is a Service Problem - The Escapist,” The Escapist, November 28, 2011.

knowledge passed down between generations of players is necessary to the preservation of a game or preservation of a game's culture. Especially one that has many intricacies such as FFXI. I think this would be ripe for a topic of study in the future. Also, another area of future research would be that of digital representational belonging in general. I used MMO private servers as a vehicle to explore this concept, but MMORPGs are not the only digital platforms whose communities experience symbolic annihilation. For example, X, formerly known as Twitter, has experienced large scale change which has caused an exodus of former community members to seek out other digital platforms such as Bluesky. It would be interesting to study how platforms like Bluesky are promoting digital representational belonging for former Twitter users.

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