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

Abstract

Using modern archival theory and semi-structured interviews, this article examines how the online communities of the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMO) Final Fantasy XI (FFXI) preserve their digital cultural heritage through unofficial private servers that reconstruct past eras of the game. Drawing on 15 interviews with players and developers across multiple private servers, the article argues that these private servers produce imagined records as developers piece together a virtual world from incomplete sources, collective memory, and creative reinterpretation. In doing so, they function analogously to community archives and serve as living archives, even as they lack the organizational structures and formal recordkeeping practices that define institutional archives. Player interviews highlight the affective resonances of reconnecting to past eras of the game, while developer interviews reveal the technical, social, legal, and archival challenges that complicate long-term sustainability.

Keywords

Community archives, virtual worlds, symbolic annihilation, imagined records, complex digital objects, Final Fantasy IX, living archives

Author Bio

Lucas McGill recently completed his MSIS at the University of Texas at Austin School of Information, where he worked as a Graduate Research Assistant at the Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America (AILLA) at LLILAS Benson Latin American Studies and Collections. His capstone audio de-duplication project received the School of Information's Dean's Choice Award Honorable Mention, and he developed the AILLA Language Atlas as a LLILAS Benson Digital Scholarship Research Fellow. He holds a B.A. in Writing & Rhetoric from St. Edward's University. His research interests include digital archives and video game preservation.

Introduction

As our lives have become increasingly digital, many people have created identities that inhabit online virtual worlds, including the immersive environments of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMOs). 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, leaving the communities who inhabited earlier versions without a record of the spaces and experiences they once shared.

Modern archival studies have explored how community archives and reconstructions of the past can address silences in the archival record, or the gaps and absences where certain communities, voices, and experiences go undocumented. Archival theorists Michelle Caswell and Anne Gilliland have developed the concepts of archival imaginaries and imagined records to address how communities respond to absences in the archival record, exploring “silences as potentially productive spaces in which communities can collectively imagine records that do not actually exist, but nonetheless have affective resonance.”¹ These concepts offer a useful framework for thinking about how online communities respond when the digital environments they once inhabited are altered or lost. Video game preservationists, meanwhile, have had to reconceptualize traditional notions of recordkeeping when it comes to preserving virtual worlds.² Despite this, there has been a lack of research into how virtual world communities are reliving past eras of their games, due in part to a “difficulty in accepting the academic study of leisure.”³

This article investigates how the online communities of the MMO *Final Fantasy XI* (FFXI) preserve their digital cultural heritage through unofficial private servers that reconstruct past eras of the game. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with players and developers, this article argues that private server developers produce imagined records by piecing together a virtual world from incomplete sources, collective memory, and creative reinterpretation. The resulting servers function analogously to community archives and serve as living archives, even as they lack the organizational structures and formal recordkeeping practices that define institutional archives. These efforts also face significant technical, social, legal, and archival challenges that complicate their long-term sustainability.

Background: *Final Fantasy XI*

Final Fantasy XI is [a] persistent-world MMORPG [MMO] produced in Japan, for a global market, by Square Enix in 2002.”⁴ Bonnie Nardi explains that MMOs are “a digital universe” that “couples

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.

“...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.

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.

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 Players pay Square Enix a monthly fee for access to the game’s virtual world, where they create a customizable character and choose a job or role to fill.⁷

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 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 alike 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 built using emulator software that replicates the original game’s functionality.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:

- 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

⁵ Bonnie A. Nardi, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft* (University of Michigan Press, 2010), 8.

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.

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.

¹² DAsoccer6, Twitch interview with author. See appendix.

¹³ Rabadaba, “FFXI, Horizon, Conflict, Renaissance, and You. - FFXIAH.Com.”

- 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), the open-source emulator that serves as the infrastructure for FFXI private servers, provides “the back-end software all servers [i.e. FFXI private servers] have their roots in.”¹⁷ LSB’s “primary goal is to have the retail game preserved as much as possible not any particular era of the game.”¹⁸ LSB developer Geodude explains that private server developers create their own copies (or “forks”) of the LSB code and modify those copies to suit their specific vision for the server.¹⁹ This allows them to essentially roll back the clock to a previous era of FFXI.²⁰ “The technical requirements for setting up a private server... are not complex,”²¹ but customizing the emulator to fit a specific vision becomes more technically demanding.²²

Literature Review

This section examines three frameworks that inform my analysis of FFXI private servers: community and living archives, archival imaginaries and imagined records, and current video game preservation praxis. Each framework offers a different lens for understanding how communities and institutions respond to absences in the archival record.

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. See appendix.

¹⁵ Ibid. See appendix.

¹⁶ “EdenXI,” accessed November 5, 2024.

“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,” GitHub, accessed November 7, 2024.

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

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. See appendix.

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. See appendix.

Community Archives & Living Archives

Community archives have emerged in archival science as recordkeeping efforts created and maintained by communities themselves, often in response to the absence or misrepresentation of those communities in mainstream archives. As Caswell et al. note, 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 isolation.”²³ This framework is grounded specifically in the experiences of identity-based marginalized communities. FFXI players do not face the structural marginalization Caswell et al. describe. However, FFXI private servers share certain structural features with community archives. Like community archives, they are created and maintained by the communities they serve, preserve practices and experiences absent from official records, and are valued by participants as spaces of connection to a shared past.

FFXI private servers also share characteristics with living archives. Living archives differ from traditional archives in that they emphasize the ongoing creation and social transmission of memory rather than the static preservation of fixed records. As Sabiescu describes them, living archives are “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 Sabiescu further explains that “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 FFXI private servers embody this “performative celebration of the past through contemporary acts of creation and transmission” as players perform their roles and as memories are transmitted between new and veteran players.²⁶

Caswell adapts the concept of “symbolic annihilation” to describe how members of marginalized communities experience “the absence or misrepresentation of their communities in archival collection policies, in descriptive tools, and/or in collections themselves.” She asserts that “community archives can serve as powerful forces against symbolic annihilation.”²⁷

FFXI players experience a similar kind of community erasure. The version of the game they once knew has been progressively erased through corporate development decisions. *World of Warcraft* (WoW) players faced a similar desire to revisit their game’s past and had enough market influence to compel Blizzard to release official “classic” servers. FFXI players lack the scale to influence Square Enix, whose development attention has shifted to newer titles like *Final Fantasy XIV*. Private servers fill this gap by providing FFXI players with versions of the game that no longer exist on official servers.

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, 497-98.

²⁶ Ibid, 497; greg404, Reddit message to author, October 19, 2024. See appendix.

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

Caswell et al. also introduce the related concept of “representational belonging,” which they frame as a counterweight to symbolic annihilation, to describe “the affective responses community members have to seeing their communities represented with complexity and nuance.”²⁸ FFXI private server participants describe similar affective responses, expressing how they recognize the same kinds of players they remember from earlier iterations of FFXI in private server communities.²⁹

Archival Imaginaries and Imagined Records

If FFXI private servers function analogously to community archives and serve as living archives, the imaginative work they perform can be understood through the concepts of archival imaginaries and imagined records. Michelle Caswell first introduced the concept of archival imaginaries and defines 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

Gilliland and Caswell extend this concept by proposing two related terms, “impossible archival imaginaries” and “imagined records.” Impossible archival imaginaries arise “in situations where the archive and its hoped-for contents are absent or forever unattainable” and “will never result in actualized records in any traditional sense.” 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 given the limited preservation practices of game companies and the constantly shifting nature of MMOs. 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. Private server developers can imagine the record and implement close to accurate recreations of the past of FFXI.³⁴

²⁸ Ibid, 75.

²⁹ Desert, Discord messages to author, October 18, 2024. See appendix.

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

³¹ Anne J. Gilliland and Michelle Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined,” *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 61, 65.

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

³³ reseh, “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.”

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 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. McDonough 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 allows private server developers to modify the current retail version of FFXI to preserve specific moments of the game's history with the tools they have. Raiford Guins pointed out that "emulation allows [players]... to experience game play through its reimplementations 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

It is hard to preserve a digital object that is in a constant state of flux. As Ayse Gursoy observes in her article 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 Video game companies themselves do not always have sufficient record keeping practices.⁴¹ Even if they did, the community of players who existed on these servers, a large part of what defined the game,⁴² would never have been captured in corporate records. Rigid traditional archival standards make it impossible to archive something that is so ephemeral. Theories of imaginary archives, imagined records, community archives, living archives, and contemporary game preservation provide frameworks for analyzing efforts like FFXI private servers that fall outside traditional archival practice.

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), 12.

³⁷ *You Can't Install Final Fantasy XI on the PlayStation 2 in (2024) | PS2 - Every Day Retro Gaming*, 2021; Bad4Bill, Discord messages to author, October 21, 2024. See appendix.

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.

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.

⁴¹ Baird, "Square Enix Is Safe From Final Fantasy Leaks."

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."

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 infrastructure in which all FFXI private servers are based. Most took place across Reddit and Discord messages, 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 interviewee’s 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, and I do not claim that my findings represent the community as a whole. Of the five developers I interviewed, only two are currently active (one at LSB and one at Eden); the others are former developers.

Discussion

FFXI as Living Community Archives

FFXI private servers function analogously to community archives and serve as living archives. Like community archives, they are maintained by individuals with specialized insights into the communities they 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 FFXI private server developers hold a comparable kind of specialist knowledge. 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

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

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.

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.

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 developers preserve these digital objects based on what they know their community needs rather than through formal training. GeoDude reinterprets provenance as defined by Tom Nesmith as "the social and technical processes of the 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 instantiated 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 participatory 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

DA's account shows how the game's mechanics enforce community engagement. The social bonds players form are not optional features but conditions for progressing through the game.

The FFXI private server community has experienced a form of community erasure 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.⁵² Players have resisted this erasure and have come to experience a form of representational belonging by playing on private servers.⁵³ Revisiting the game's mechanical structure is not the only contributor to this experience. Players also reconnect with others 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 what functions as the living 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:

⁴⁸ Tom Nesmith, "Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate: Some Thoughts on the 'Ghosts' of Archival Theory," *Archivaria*, no. 47 (February 1999): 146.

⁴⁹ M. L. Caswell, "'The Archive' Is Not an Archives: On Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies", August 4, 2016, 6.

⁵⁰ StunningNicole, October 24, 2024, Discord messages to author. See appendix.

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

⁵² Ibid. See appendix.

⁵³ Ibid. See appendix.

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.⁵⁴

DA's reconnection with people who "remember those days" illustrates the role private servers play in gathering the dispersed FFXI community. Shared memory circulates through stories told between players, and that circulation is part of what makes these spaces function as living community archives.

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."⁵⁵ 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."⁵⁶

Gilliland and Caswell describe how impossible archival imaginaries can manifest in various forms. They write that "such imaginaries are archivally impossible in the sense that they will never result in actualized records in any traditional sense, although they may exist in some kind of co-constitutive relationship with actualized records." When instantiated, these imaginaries "may take various media forms, including fiction, film and performance."⁵⁷ The ever-evolving nature of online video games makes for a ripe medium to preserve through imagined records born out of informed reinterpretations of the record.

Because past eras of FFXI and the communities of people who enjoyed them have not been preserved by Square Enix and records of their existence are scant (for example source code, but also because a lack of 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.⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ In his article about imagined records in

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Caswell, "Inventing New Archival Imaginaries: Theoretical Foundations for Identity-Based Community Archives," 45.

⁵⁶ Bcrazy79, October 22, 2024, Reddit message to author.

⁵⁷ Gilliland and Caswell, "Records and Their Imaginaries," 61.

⁵⁸ GeoDude, Discord messages to author. See appendix.

⁵⁹ Bcrazy79, Reddit message to author. See appendix.

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.”⁶⁰ 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.”⁶¹ Caswell and Gilliland explain:

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.⁶²

Some players want to relive the glory days without what GeoDude calls the “painful” aspects of the former game mechanics by incorporating changes that make the game more accessible while keeping the spirit of classic eras.⁶³ 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.”⁶⁴ 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, as 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.”⁶⁵

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.”⁶⁶ The benefits of imagined archival records are that the record creators can devise a record grounded in the past, but augmented with certain quality of life enhancements. DA describes 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.⁶⁷

DA captures what's at stake. Developers can use hindsight to fix the game, but if they make it too easy, they lose the work that defined FFXI in the first place.

⁶⁰ Richard M. Cho, “Becoming an Imagined Record: Archival Intervention in Autofiction,” *The American Archivist* 83, no. 2 (2020): 283.

⁶¹ Desert, Discord messages to author.

⁶² Gilliland and Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries,” 61.

⁶³ GeoDude, Discord messages to author. See appendix.

⁶⁴ HotRichard, October 19, 2024, Reddit message to author.

⁶⁵ Cho, “Becoming an Imagined Record,” 273.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 271.

⁶⁷ DAsoccer6, Twitch interview with author.

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

Technical, Social, Legal, and Archival Challenges

The existence of FFXI private servers functioning as imagined living community archives does not come without the challenges that occur whenever a group of people work together to try and accomplish something great. Servers can be run autocratically, stagnate without updates, or pursue versions of FFXI that diverge from the game's past or present. As Alex Poole observes in his systematic review of community archives scholarship, "internal fractiousness is likely, representational claims are ever-contested, and silences and marginalizations persist."⁶⁸ Disputes over what gets preserved, by whom, and toward what vision are constitutive of community archives work. 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 the point: "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 challenges with servers that have not made updates in a long time, essentially breaking the game.⁷²

Private servers infringe Square Enix's copyright regardless of whether developers charge for access. In practice, however, Square Enix tends to take action when private servers begin generating revenue. GeoDude warns: "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."⁷³ This is a calculation about commercial harm rather than a legal threshold. The infringement exists in either case; the corporate response is shaped by what Square Enix sees as a commercial threat.

This commercial calculation also shapes why Square Enix has not built legacy servers itself, despite established market demand for past versions of online games. When WoW players advocated for classic versions of their game, Blizzard eventually launched WoW Classic, and the resulting subscription growth confirmed demand.⁷⁴ FFXI's player base is smaller than WoW's, and Square Enix has concentrated its development on newer titles. From a corporate perspective, the cost of

⁶⁸ Alex H. Poole, "The Information Work of Community Archives: A Systematic Literature Review," *Journal of Documentation* 76, no. 3 (2020): 673.

⁶⁹ HotRichard, Reddit message to author.

⁷⁰ Ibid. See appendix.

⁷¹ GeoDude, interview. See appendix.

⁷² Ibid. See appendix.

⁷³ Ibid. See appendix.

⁷⁴ Ali Jones, "Thanks to WoW Classic, World of Warcraft Subscriptions Are up 223%," PCGamesN, September 23, 2019; 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*, August 12, 2024.

developing and maintaining classic FFXI servers may not justify the projected revenue. Private servers fill the gap left by that calculation, but they do so on legally precarious ground.

Beyond the legal exposure, developers also face informal threats and financial strain. GeoDude describes the difficulty of devoting time to an unmonetizable project: “Financially its [sic] tough to devote so much time to something you know you can't take money for without causing problems.”⁷⁵ LSB developer Bad4Bill describes the threat of bad actors “doxxing all the developers and sending our details to Square Enix” to elicit cease and desist letters.⁷⁶ 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 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 and splits off to a new server taking part of the player base with them. It's like watching amoeba divide!”⁷⁷ HotRichard provided an example 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.⁷⁸

HotRichard's experience illustrates the internal contestation Poole describes. The absence of formal governance structures can fracture a private server team, regardless of how skilled or committed its members are.

Private servers function analogously to community archives and serve as living archives, but they lack the formal recordkeeping practices that distinguish institutional archives. Documentation of private server development is informal: GitHub commits (records of code changes) track development history, Discord channels hold organizational discussions, and wikis describe in-game systems, but no standardized practices guide what should be preserved or how. These same wikis often serve as research sources when developers attempt to recreate past eras, where the absence of authoritative documentation becomes acute. GeoDude puts the problem plainly: “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.”⁷⁹ Without formal appraisal criteria to guide them, individual developers decide which elements of past FFXI eras to recreate, often informed by community feedback and player demand. The community interactions that define an MMO

⁷⁵ GeoDude, interview. See appendix.

⁷⁶ Bad4Bill, interview. See appendix.

⁷⁷ GeoDude, Discord messages to author.

⁷⁸ HotRichard, Reddit message to author.

⁷⁹ GeoDude, Discord messages to author. See appendix.

experience (in-game text chat, conversations on platforms like Discord) are rarely captured in any persistent form. However, players describe these interactions as central to the worlds developers are working to recreate.

Private servers also lack the organizational structures that support long-term archival preservation. They operate on volunteer labor without succession planning, formal backup procedures, or long-term preservation plans. When developers burn out or face legal threats like the doxing Bad4Bill describes, the server's survival hinges on whoever else can step in. Keeping past eras of FFXI playable depends entirely on volunteer effort, with no guarantee that any given server will exist in five or ten years. Despite these gaps, private servers preserve past eras of FFXI through emulation and community engagement. The experience of those eras lives in these spaces as community memory and imagined records.

Conclusion

FFXI classic era private servers are grounds for powerful positive affective resonances based on the passionate responses received by players interviewed. These private servers function analogously to community archives and serve as living archives, positioning the players and developers as custodians of past FFXI eras. Through the archival imaginary, they produce imagined records that let players inhabit a Vana'diel that no longer officially exists. However, the challenges developers expressed indicate problems with long-term sustainability. Beyond sustainability, what these servers preserve does not extend to the formal recordkeeping practices that define institutional 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 players the representational belonging they seek through the preservation of past eras of the game. Square Enix could draw on the expertise of private server developers by hiring them to build official classic era servers. This would address player demand for classic eras, compensate those who have been preserving FFXI on a volunteer basis, and avoid the technical, social, and legal challenges of DIY development. The archival gap is a separate concern, one that points toward broader questions about how institutional archives might engage the preservation of online virtual worlds.

Future Research

One observation made while writing this article 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 knowledge passed down between generations of players is necessary to the preservation of a game or to the 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 similar kinds of erasure. Social media platform migrations, where users leave one service for another in response to large-scale changes, present another setting where digital representational belonging is being negotiated. It would be interesting to study how successor platforms support belonging for displaced users from established ones.

⁸⁰ Greg Tito, "Valve's Gabe Newell Says Piracy Is a Service Problem - The Escapist," *The Escapist*, November 28, 2011.

Appendix: Interview Excerpts

DAsoccer6 (Player, HorizonXI – Twitch, October 21, 2024)

On gear obsolescence (Footnote 12):

“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.”

On multi-boxing (Footnote 14):

“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.”

On “the grind” (Footnote 15):

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

On retail vs Horizon (Footnote 52):

“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.”

On Horizon's authenticity (Footnote 53):

“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.”

GeoDude (LSB Developer – Discord, October 19, 2024)

On LSB's mission (Footnote 20):

“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.”

On personal motivations and enabling customization (Footnote 22):

“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.”

On recreating experiences through imagined records (Footnote 58):

“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.”

On nostalgia vs reality (Footnote 63):

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

The “Dr. House” problem of data and memory (See Footnotes 71 and 79):

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

On technical debt and legacy software (Footnote 72):

“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.”

On legal risks of monetization (Footnote 73):

“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 [sic] bank account and your careers both goodbye... Also in FFXI in partiocular [sic], the player bas eis [sic] is severly [sic] averse to this due to past events, so everyone will hate you fast.”

On financial challenges (Footnote 75):

“Financially its [sic] 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.”

greg404 (Player, HorizonXI – Reddit, October 19, 2024)

On transmission of memory (Footnote 26):

“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”

Desert (Player, HorizonXI – Discord, October 18, 2024)

On community and representational belonging (Footnote 29):

“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 [sic] would have seen back in the day. You get the whole spectrum from egoistical players to seemingly highly altruistic people.”

Bad4Bill (LSB Developer – Discord, October 21, 2024)

On preparation for shutdown (Footnote 37):

“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.”

On social risks and doxing (Footnote 76):

“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.

StunningNicole (Player, HorizonXI – Discord, October 24, 2024)

On community reliance (Footnote 50):

“I like knowing that every character running around is a person, and I like that we have to rely on each other.”

Bcrazy79 (Player – Reddit, October 22, 2024)

On QoL enhancements (Footnote 59):

“Tweaks are generally Quality of Life. They make leveling easier and parties more flexible to accommodate the lower population.”

HotRichard (Developer, CatsEyeXI – Reddit, October 19, 2024)

On long-term sustainability of CatsEyeXI (Footnote 70):

“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 I see them driving the car until the wheels fall off.”

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