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Culture and Technology I

Implosion Assignment 1

<u>Mobius Final Fantasy</u>

Joseph Dumit describes how any object is a nexus of unending interrelationships and histories to discover[1]. By asking question after question, interrogating the object from a number of different perspectives, we can draw out the hidden realities that an object may naturally cover over. Dumit names this process this an implosion assignment. I will undertake this kind of investigation by examining the mobile game, *Mobius Final Fantasy*, as it appears on the Canadian App Store on iOS. I will examine this piece of software from a number of different perspectives, paying close attention to its material, cultural and social dimensions, noting any tensions I find as I explicate different aspects of the object. In this first report will ask questions about what Mobius Final Fantasy is as an object, exploring where it appears in the world, who interacts with it and how they do so. I'll be drawing the majority of my factual information from the Wikipedia page for the individual game[2], the franchise[3] and the fan-run subreddit community[4].

Mobius Final Fantasy is an episodic, mobile-based, role-playing game released on the Canadian iTunes App Store by Square Enix in 2016. It is a major entry in the long running video

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[1]Joseph, Dumit, "Writing the Implosion: Teaching the World One Thing at a Time," *Cultural Anthropology* 29, no. 2 (2014), 349

[2] "Mobius Final Fantasy", Wikipedia, last modified October 1st, 2018, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mobius_Final_Fantasy.

[3] "Final Fantasy", Wikipedia, last modified October 9th, 2018, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Final_Fantasy.

[4] "Everything Mobius Final Fantasy!", Reddit, accessed October 15th, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/MobiusFF/.

game franchise *Final Fantasy*, an anthology series generally known for its fantastical storylines, emotional music and high-quality graphics. The main branch of the franchise consists of a set of titles numbered Roman numerically I through XV, which generally have the highest production values and attempt to push the boundaries of storytelling with their technology at the time of their release. These are the games that the series as a whole revolves around, creating the foundation of themes, characters and motifs that the series continually returns to. Mobius was designed to compare to these mainline titles, bringing a game of higher-then-usual production values to the mobile game space. Being a mobile game, there are specific differences in how Mobius is thought of and engaged with when compared to other entires in the series. Noteworthy features are that the game is 'free-to-play' and always online. This means that the game has very particular conditions for its usage while simultaneously being particularly blurry around its edges.

<u>What is it?</u>

      Mobius Final Fantasy is a piece of software that you can download from the Apple App Store on an iOS equipped device (See Figure 1). To access Mobius you must have an internet-enabled iOS device such as an iPhone or iPad running iOS 7.0 or later. The game itself requires an internet connection to play at all times, so the ability to play it is confined to places where Wi-Fi or other kinds of cellular activity such as 3G or LTE is accessible. Conceiving of Mobius as an App on a phone paints the picture of a particular object with defined boundaries.
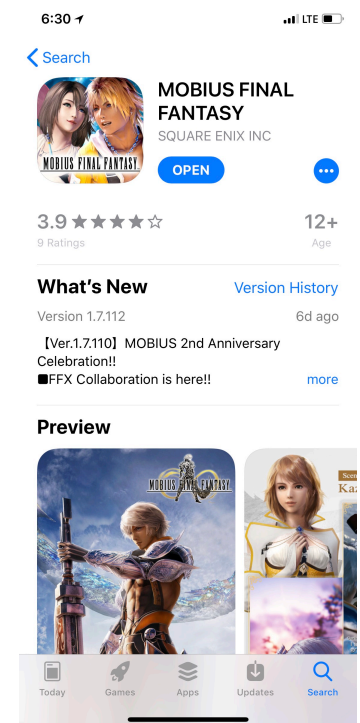

Figure 1: Mobius Final Fantasy in the Canadian App Store. Screenshot from iPhone X, October 2018

However, some resistance to this idea appears when discovering that equivalent software is also

available on the Google Play store for Android devices or on Steam for PC.

Though one's method of accessing the game may be different, the content

of the game is consistent across platforms. Players will interact with each

other in various ways, with no way of knowing how the other players are

engaging with the game (See Figure 2). There is a tension between the

specificity of one's engagement with the game and it's perceived

interchangeability.

At a more fundamental level, this points towards an ambiguity

inherent in the game as a digital artifact in general. As an individual user,

someone is able to play the game continuously by switching between

playing it on a phone or a tablet, each of which has its own separate App.

The obvious account that delineates the game as the App on the App Store

actually fails to denote a particular object. In many ways, the game as a

particular object is better defined by the user account one might be accessing,

that has a unique array of abilities, resources and a self-named character that

other players may encounter. This data is stored on Square Enix's own online

Figure 2: An example of multiplayer gameplay. There's no way of knowing what device others are playing on. Square Enix. Screenshot from iPhone X, October 2018.

servers, which is constantly being updated while you play. This fact is a major

reason why internet access is required to play. This means that the decisions you make in the

game, such as how to spend your resources, are binding. There is a sense of permanence and

specificity to Mobius as an object, but it's located in those servers you access rather then the app

itself.

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This arrangement can be a point of anxiety or power for the players. Though the game itself gives the player some tools to facilitate the process of migrating their save data to a new operating system if needed (such as when you're moving from an iOS to Android device), the general user may not ever have to deal with this process until something goes wrong. If, for example, the player encounters a game-breaking bug or their mobile device breaks and they are unable to access these tools, they will be at the mercy of Square Enix to grant them access to their account again. This involves contacting Customer Support and going through their bureaucratic processes. On the other hand, this lack of specificity in relation to the app itself affords particular kinds of opportunities to 'game the system'. On the Reddit community where players discuss gameplay and answer each other's questions, new or returning players are commonly encouraged to 'reroll' their accounts[5]. This means going through a continual process of starting the game, accumulating enough resources to 'pull' for new abilities, resetting their save data and starting again until they are able to obtain an extremely rare Supreme ability, something which normally has only a 0.8% chance of appearing in regular gameplay. Though it's against the terms and conditions to do so, in some cases people will even sell their accounts to other potential players for money outside of the game if they have been able to accumulate enough such rare abilities. Ultimately, it is the account you play that denotes a specific object of concern, though there is no unique point to access that object from. These practices show that people readily interact with the blurry nature of Mobius as an object.

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[5] "Returning Player Looking Into Getting Back In", Reddit, accessed October 15, https://www.reddit.com/r/MobiusFF/comments/93cbwe/returning_player_looking_into_getting_back_in/.

Where Does It Appear In the World?

Being a digital-only product, *Mobius Final Fantasy* is found mostly through its marketing. Mobius is promoted most often via official social media pages on Facebook[6] and Twitter[7]. The episodic nature of Mobius' storytelling, with new chapters and events coming out month to month, nicely fits the ongoing flow that digital mediums like social media create. The game makes appearances in larger Square Enix-related

Figure 3: Advertisement for Mobius Final Fantasy included with Final Fantasy XII: The Zodiac Age. Taken on iPhone X, October 2018

channels such as their Community-focused YouTube channel or large-scale game industry events such as Tokyo Game Show or E3 where trailers are shown and the producers discuss the game. Sometimes there are insert advertisements for Mobius when you purchase a boxed version of other games in the franchise (See Figure 3). *Final Fantasy* is a series that has 30 years of history which Square Enix continually keeps alive through porting the older games to new systems and spinoffs featuring old character, so this kind of marketing is common.

Mobius Final Fantasy is an object steeped in its own cultural heritage. Much of how Mobius is presented relies on its connections to the franchise as a whole. In some ways its

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[6] "Mobius Final Fantasy -NE", Facebook, accessed October 15th, https://m.facebook.com/MobiusFinalFantasy/.

[7] "Mobius FF -NE", Twitter, accessed October 15th, https://twitter.com/mobiusff_ne.

cultural 'hinterland', as Law describes[8], is built right in to its DNA and

prominently advertised. The game implicitly draws it's thematic

content from the first *Final Fantasy*. Prominent major characters such

as the knight Garland or the princess Sarah and concepts such as the

Warrior of Light or Chaos are all direct homages to elements that

originate in *Final Fantasy I*. The game explicitly connects to its roots

by having direct crossovers with other major titles in the franchise,

such as *Final Fantasy VII* or *Final Fantasy X* (See Figure 4). These

major events adapt variations of noteworthy gameplay mechanics from

their original games to fit within Mobius' own gameplay systems. A

substantial portion of Mobius as an object relies on its association and
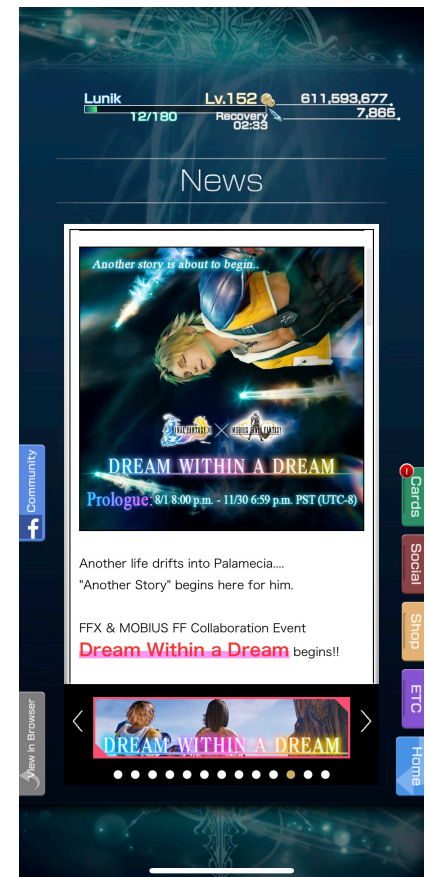
linkages with the series as a whole.

Figure 4: Example of an ongoing collaboration between Mobius Final Fantasy and Final Fantasy X. Square Enix. Screenshot from iPhone X, October 2018

      Mobius Final Fantasy seems to function as a sort of archival

process for the series. It invites in concepts, characters and mechanics

from older games in the franchise, freeing them from their original

situated modalities and re-presents them in a discrete, episodic format.

For Square Enix, Mobius functions as an effective new way of keeping the series' origins alive.

For long-standing players, who have memories and nostalgia for those past experiences, these

linkages and connections become a reason to play the game. For newer, younger players, these

linkages and associations give a hint at greater depths that they can trace out for themselves by

playing the original games. This fits Square Enix's ongoing strategy for *Final Fantasy* as a series

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[8] John Law, "Scientific Practices," in *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 27.

that constantly reiterates on its own history and entices people to continue buying the older

games. Mobius acts as a sort of inscription process for the series, distilling ideas and carrying

them forward in a new way, similar to the scientific practices Law describes[9].

Who Interacts With it and How?

First and foremost, *Mobius Final Fantasy* is a video game. This means that the people

most likely to encounter and use it are people who are familiar with games and interested in

playing them. In this case specifically, fans of Final Fantasy, Japanese-style Role Playing games

and mobile games are the target audience. Players aren't the only users however. The game may

be acted upon by a number of different agents such as developers, marketers and quality

assurance testers. Apple themselves are notorious for having strict guidelines for Apps that are

put up on their App Store, so they always have people review App before they are posted[10]. For

the purposes of this section though, I am going to focus on how players interact with Mobius and

various community practices that appear around them.

Mobius Final Fantasy has an entirely different structure then most other games in the

franchise. Many titles in the series are lengthy single players affairs that you can progress in at

your own pace. These titles are played off line and are self-contained experiences that have a

beginning, middle and end. Mobius on the other hand is always online and episodic in nature.

The events that are released can be played in any order and disappear after a certain amount of

time. There is a linear narrative to follow, with new chapters released every couple of months,

but there is no set end as of the time of writing. The game is designed to be played in short play

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[9] Law, "Scientific Practices", 29.

[10] "App Review", Developer Support, Apple, last modified 2018, https://developer.apple.com/support/app-review/.

sessions, over the course of months and years. The game actually enforces this style of play

through the use a 'Stamina' system. This mechanic dictates that

participating in battles require a certain amount of available stamina, a

resource that is a function of a player's level which refills over time.

Once a player has emptied their stamina, they will be limited in how

much they can progress without spending other resources to refill their

stamina or waiting for it to refill automatically. A key difference in

Mobius' structure compared to its traditional brethren is the game's link

to the progression of real time (See Figure 5).

Figure 5: Examples of various real life timers in Mobius Final Fantasy. Square Enix. Screenshot from iPhone X, October 2018

     Playing a game like Mobius involves moulding your schedule to

its needs. There are various incentives offered for playing regularly, such

as daily login bonuses, daily missions to complete and various benefits to

using up your stamina. Players who get invested in the game will likely

play it everyday, because that is the most beneficial to do as a player.

Sometimes the perceived need to spend time on the game becomes too

burdensome, which leads people to 'quitting' the game. Posts show up

about this every once in a while on the Reddit community[11]. Another key difference is its 'free-

to-play' nature. This means that the game can be downloaded from the App Store and played for

free. Within the game, there is a special kind of currency known as Magicite that has multiple

functions in the game, the most important one being that it lets you obtain abilities and roles

through a randomized draw. Magicite can be obtained normally through completing in-game

[11] "Reached the End of Mobius", Reddit, accessed October 15th, https://www.reddit.com/r/MobiusFF/comments/832n5t/reached_the_end_of_mobius/.

activities but it can also be purchased directly within the game with Canadian dollars. This is

how the game is economically supported to maintain its servers and continue releasing content.

All content in the game can theoretically be accessed without spending anything, but one is

unlikely to be able to obtain everything they might want with the limited resources they obtain

from playing normally. As a product that has to potential to continually siphon one's attention

and money with its practices, it's rightly worthwhile to question "what kind of *world* are we

making" as Winner says[12], when players participate in this kind of game design.

Some interesting community activities spring up to combat these practices. One is a

communal effort of analyzing the Japanese version of the game, which is 8-10 months ahead of

the Canadian version, to know what abilities are worthwhile to spend resources on and obtain in

the long run[13]. Another is to 'datamine' patches that are released, so that players can gleam

information about what is coming in advance of it being officially announced[14]. Players will give

each other all sorts of advice from how to play, where to spend their resources, to raising

awareness of times where they may be being 'baited' by the company to spend their resources

inefficiently. These communal practices seem to arise in response to a situation where individual

players are at a disadvantage when pitted against marketing and systems seemingly intended to

take advantage of them. The community keeps each other informed to counterbalance the

system's design.

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[12]Langdon Winner, "Technologies as forms of Life," in The Whale and the Reactor: a Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology (University of Chicago Press, 2010). 17.

[13] "Ability Cards of October 2018 and some opinions", Reddit, accessed October 15th, https://www.reddit.com/r/MobiusFF/comments/9k5bzu/ability_cards_of_october_2018_and_some_opinions/?st=JN9Q0V9Z&sh=ac355f68.

[14] "Datamining of the 20mb update", Reddit, accessed October 15th, https://www.reddit.com/r/MobiusFF/comments/9mxbcw/datamining_of_the_20mb_update/?st=JN9Q8YLJ&sh=fde5884e.

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