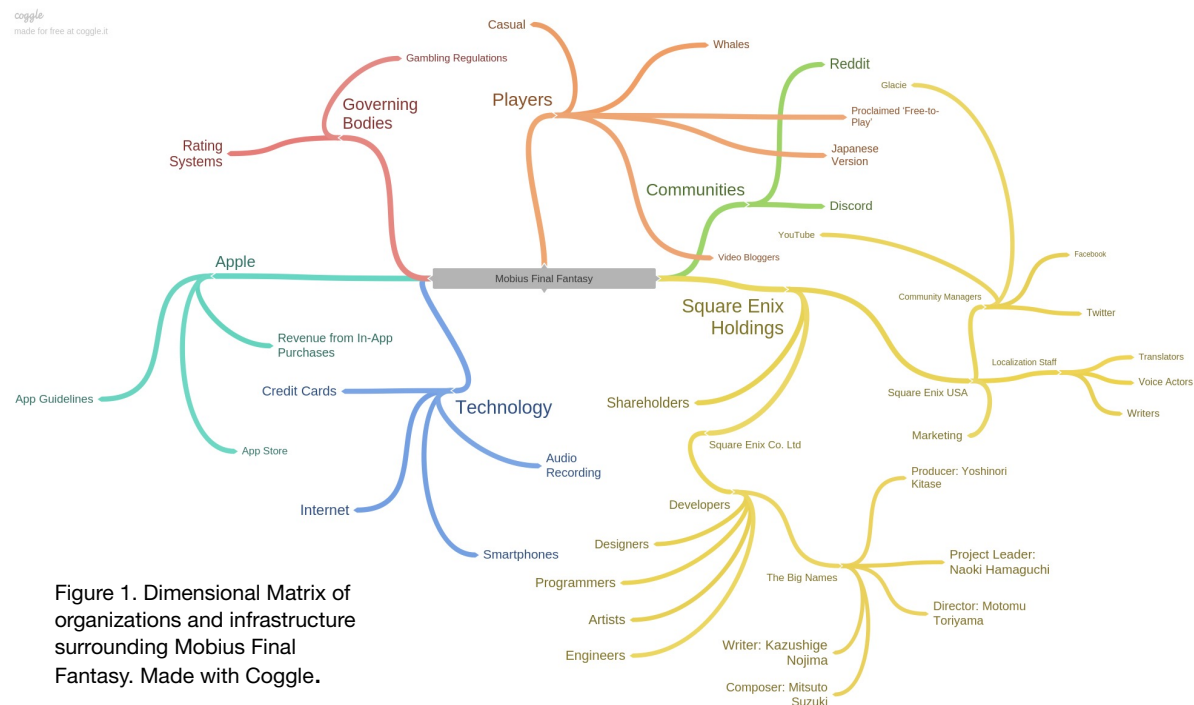


Culture and Technology I  
Implosion Assignment II

Mobius Final Fantasy

This report is a continuation of my previous Implosion Assignment examining the mobile game, *Mobius Final Fantasy*. In this report I employ multiple ways of apprehending this object in order to understand it within a larger context and to uncover aspects of the object that may not be readily noticed at first glance. In my previous report, I interrogated what Mobius Final Fantasy is, where it appears in the world, who interacts with it and how they do so. This time I'll be focusing on a broader context, examining who presides over the game. I will explore this through the lenses of how the game is made, how the game functions as an economic entity and what communities have formed around the game.



As mentioned previously, Mobius Final Fantasy is an article of game software released by Square Enix on Apple's Canadian App Store. This statement alone already begins to hint at the larger web of political bodies surrounding the game. Square Enix, Apple, and Canada are all mentioned, while various platforms like the App Store and technology to run the software are pointed to indirectly. Latour explains how it can be difficult to apprehend the tangled web that society, technology and science create because

we want to segment our objects of study into neat categories<sup>1</sup>. Mobius is exactly the kind of object that Latour identifies as difficult to neatly define because it reaches into many different realms of human activity. Mobius itself is a complex centre that combines art, technology, business, political bodies, and player communities. Throughout this report, I hope to contribute in disentangling this web by discussing the various workers, political bodies and social groups that surround Mobius, while keeping in mind that they are all co-existing in tandem with each other. To aid in this task, I have included a diagram for reference, shown above (see Figure 1).

### How is it Made?

First and foremost, Square Enix is the producer of the game. Square Enix actually refers to two main political bodies, Square Enix Holdings Co., Ltd and Square Enix Co., Ltd<sup>2</sup>. In this arrangement, Square Enix Holdings is the larger entity that manages all of Square Enix's operations, including developing, publishing, and distributing various commercial products. They have a hand in the production of video games, Japanese animation, books, magazines, Japanese comics and movies. Square Enix Co. is an entity that manages the internal creation of video games for their domestic market. This refers to video games first produced in Japan, which the Final Fantasy series is a prime example of. Throughout this report, when mentioning "Square Enix", it is generally Square Enix Co. Ltd that is being referred to.

Square Enix is divided into 11 business divisions that handle development of different games and intellectual properties. Mobius Final Fantasy is handled by Business Division 1, the team that generally works on mainline Final Fantasy titles, the first mobile game of its kind to be given this treatment. This prestige was used as a focal point when first marketing the game, leveraging well-known creators who worked on previous Final Fantasy games to catch people's attention<sup>3</sup>. In reality, there are a huge number of people working on the game, many of which are outside contractors. Perusing the end credits that appear when the player completes Act 1 of the story reveals that there are between 100-200 people

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<sup>1</sup>Bruno Latour, "Crisis," in *We Have Never Been Modern* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 3.

<sup>2</sup>"Square Enix", Wikipedia, last modified November 2, 2018, [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Square\\_Enix](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Square_Enix).

<sup>3</sup>"Mobius Final Fantasy," Square Enix, accessed November 10, 2018, <https://mobiusff.square-enix-games.com/mobiusff/>.

involved in the production of the game<sup>4</sup>. The core development team, which presumably resides within Business Division 1, consists of programmers, designers, animators, writers, artists, and engineers of various kinds. Outside of these core groups, the teams work with external voice acting companies, recording studios, motion capture agencies and various other third-party contractors.

How these roles are presented within and around the game portray what aspects Square Enix believe are most important to fans. In the marketing of the game, the producer, scenario writer and composer are given priorities, being 3 of the 4 names prominently presented on the game's main website (see Figure 2). For example, in the credits, voice actors are presented in full even before the core development team is shown. This focus is understandable since music, story and characters have always been a key focus for the Final Fantasy franchise and its fans. Outside of initial development, there is a separate team that handles the localization and production of the North American version of Mobius. Being primarily English-speaking, this teams presumably works within the North American division of Square Enix located in El Segundo, California. The localization team is the group that translates the game into English and ensures the resulting product is in working order, including directing the English voice acting and quality assurance.

When talking about the Macy Conferences on Cybernetics, Katherine Hayles discusses the illusive role of Janet Freed in transcribing the conferences<sup>5</sup>. Since Mobius Final Fantasy is an episodic game, with on-going service and maintenance, there are some similar ambiguities in worker representation within production that arise. The credits as presented within the game give the illusion of a static product, similar to the credits after a film. In reality, this is not the case because the game is constantly having new content produced, translated and patched into the game. It's likely that only a



Figure 2. The official site for Mobius Final Fantasy. Square Enix. Screenshot taken on iPhone X, November 2018.

<sup>4</sup>Mobius Final Fantasy, created by Square Enix (2016, Square Enix, Apple App Store), App.

<sup>5</sup>N. Katherine Hayles, "Contesting for the Body of Information: The Macy Conferences on Cybernetics," in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 82.

fraction of the people presented in the credits are actually working on the game in an on-going basis, but there are no records of who exactly is involved in these day-to-day operations. For example, part of these day-to-day operations involve push notifications or news announcements about upcoming abilities and events, which sometimes contain spelling or grammar errors. Members of the Reddit community have started explaining these infractions as affectionately being the handiwork of “intern-kun”, a fictional Square Enix employee who is overworked because players haven’t made enough in-app purchases recently to fund more help<sup>6</sup>. Ultimately, whoever does have a hand in creating the actual text that players directly encounter is hidden behind the bureaucracy of Square Enix and the notoriety of the big name creators. This is very similar to the hidden role that Janet Freed filled for the Macy Conferences, had Hayles not taken the time to identify her place in its production.

#### How Does it Function as an Economic Product?

As the product of a multi-million dollar, publicly-traded company, Mobius Final Fantasy is expected to make a profit. From Square Enix Holding’s website, it seem that the company’s shareholders are split mostly between individuals, financial institutions and other companies<sup>7</sup>. Beyond just what the fans want, Square Enix Holdings must also answer to these shareholders, which has trickled into how Mobius was designed. Being free-to-play, with on-going production costs and server maintenance, Mobius’ only method of generating incoming revenue for Square Enix is through the in-game purchase of Magicite (see Figure 3). As mentioned in the previous report, Magicite is used for a number of activities in the game. The most impactful usage is in obtaining new jobs and abilities through a randomized draw (see Figure 4), but it can also be exchanged for a variety of items that let you revive in battle, refill your stamina or to speed up certain processes such as



Figure 3. The menu where you purchase from within the game. Screenshot taken on iPhone X, November 2018.

<sup>6</sup>“I’m sorry.... but, um, what?”, Reddit, accessed November 10, 2018, [https://www.reddit.com/r/MobiusFF/comments/9f574v/im\\_sorrybut\\_um\\_what\\_does\\_anyone\\_know\\_why\\_the\\_news/?st=JOAMPKRJ&sh=9839176d](https://www.reddit.com/r/MobiusFF/comments/9f574v/im_sorrybut_um_what_does_anyone_know_why_the_news/?st=JOAMPKRJ&sh=9839176d).

<sup>7</sup>“Shareholder Information”, Square Enix Holdings, accessed November 10, 2018, <http://www.hd.square-enix.com/eng/ir/stock/shareholder.html>.

boosting your weapons. As a player continues through the game they must pull for new abilities and jobs, otherwise they won't be able to complete the newest content in the game or competently participate in multiplayer battles.

Langdon Winner presents the idea that it's easy to accept technology uncritically<sup>8</sup> and that because such technology has both good and bad uses that it is thought to be inherently neutral<sup>9</sup>. Mobius Final Fantasy is a good example of what Winner is trying to explain, how technology is not inherently neutral. Mobius is designed in such a way as to incentivize people to want to spend their resources, hoping that they will eventually spend money to be able to obtain everything they want. Square Enix has a number of methods to incentivize people to spend their resources. One method is to continually release new jobs and abilities that vastly outperform old ones. Another is to offer abilities that are only available for a limited time. This is something Square Enix must do to keep Mobius afloat as an economically viable product, if it wishes to maintain its free-to-play status. However, people do not take this practice uncritically either. People are constantly discussing online about these business practices, supporting each other and assessing whether they're enjoying the game or not<sup>10</sup>.

In my own experience, *Mobius Final Fantasy* is a potent example of how a game like this can subtly change one's flow of life, as Winner mentions<sup>11</sup>. After the game's first year anniversary, the developers made it possible for Magicite to be obtained from any battle through a random drop, up to a maximum of 20,000 Magicite a month. The amount of time this takes to accomplish is significant, potentially needing the game to run for 2-3 hours a day for the entire month. When a player first starts



Figure 4. An instance where someone has gotten incredibly lucky with an ability pull (a term players have created to describe this drawing mechanic) but have yet to check what they obtained. Posted by user Somna on Mobius Final Fantasy Discord channel, November 2018.

<sup>8</sup>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), 5.

<sup>9</sup>Winner, *Technologies*, 6.

<sup>10</sup>"A year later I love Mobius but it's making me greedy as hell.," Reddit, accessed November 10, 2018, [https://www.reddit.com/r/MobiusFF/comments/8efx2g/a\\_year\\_later\\_i\\_love\\_mobius\\_but\\_its\\_making\\_me/?st=JOARJ1MO&sh=b72bc8ce](https://www.reddit.com/r/MobiusFF/comments/8efx2g/a_year_later_i_love_mobius_but_its_making_me/?st=JOARJ1MO&sh=b72bc8ce).

<sup>11</sup>Winner, *Technologies*, 7.

playing the game the idea of doing this seems ludicrous. However, if the player crosses the psychological barrier of spending money on the game, suddenly the Magicite they can obtain 'for free' has a value attached to it, which would be about \$175CAD worth when purchased directly. This makes the idea spending that time to obtain Magicite in this way much more enticing and has the potential to drastically change the amount of time a player spends on the game. The way the game is designed has the potential to cause someone's day-to-day habits to change in order to accommodate it.

Something important to mention is that this process of using Magicite for the chance of obtaining rare jobs or abilities can be conceived of as gambling. This is one instance of a broader trend in games where a premium currency can be spent for the chance of obtaining digital items. Many contexts use the term 'loot box' to explain this phenomena. In Japanese mobile games it's commonly referred to as 'gacha', based on the term Gashapon which are capsules containing a random toy that can be bought through a vending machine<sup>12</sup>. Recently, there have been laws passed in certain countries stating that games containing loot box-like mechanics violate gambling laws - especially since children can access them - and have made them illegal<sup>13</sup>. Mobius Final Fantasy was recently obstructed by this law and will disallow Belgium players from accessing the game after November 2018<sup>14</sup>, as people speculate that the gacha mechanics are too integral to the design of the game to consider removing. This shows how there are a number of political bodies that bear on Mobius as an object, one of which being regulating bodies that determine what kind of mechanics are allowed to be used in the game.

Another major political body involved in the game, especially from an economic standpoint, is Apple itself. Since the game is played on Apple devices and hosted on the Apple App Store, Apple is entitled to take a 30% cut of every in-app purchase that's made on the platform. To give an idea of the scale here, in 2017 Square Enix reported making \$373.8 million from mobile and browser-based games,

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<sup>12</sup>"Gashapon", Wikipeda, last modified November 6, 2018, <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gashapon>.

<sup>13</sup>"Now Belgium declares loot boxes gambling and therefore illegal", Eurogamer, accessed November 10, 2018, <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-04-25-now-belgium-declares-loot-boxes-gambling-and-therefore-illegal>.

<sup>14</sup>"[Nov 1018]An important notice for all players residing in Belgium", Square Enix, accessed on November 12, 2018, <http://information.mobiusfinalfantasy.com/ne/sp/2018/10/30/15073f5ed560503b1d12ca39a1f7eb19cdf0e490.html>.

including Mobius Final Fantasy<sup>15</sup>. By contrast, Apple made \$48.3 billion through mobile gaming on their App Store, which includes in-app purchases like the ones made in Mobius<sup>16</sup>. Square Enix must work to find a profit within the boundaries afforded to them by the companies that produce the technology their games run on and the governing bodies that regulate their contents.

### What Communities Form Around it?

There are a number of communities that form around Mobius Final Fantasy. These communities include a subreddit<sup>17</sup>, a discord channel, YouTube videos and the de facto communities that form in the comment sections of official posts on social media such as Facebook<sup>18</sup> or Twitter<sup>19</sup>. They generally function as places players can go to discuss the story of the game, share strategies for how to beat difficult enemies or plan for how they spend their resources. Within these communities, you find people identifying themselves in different ways. Sometimes it's based on whether or not they spend money on the game, with people identifying as 'F2P' (free to play) or as 'whales'. The term whale is used to describe the situation that generally occurs in free-to-play games where a small fraction of the player base spends huge sums of money within the game, which keeps it afloat when the majority don't pay anything at all<sup>20</sup>. Sometimes it's based on how invested they are in the game, with people identifying as 'casual' or 'hardcore'.

The Reddit community in particular is where people go for in-depth analysis of game mechanics and gameplay advice. It's not uncommon to find posts where people have done huge amounts of data gathering and analysis to determine how certain stats affect drop rates of items, how much health certain

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<sup>15</sup>"Square Enix sales hit \$1 billion off the back of mobile successes Mobius Final Fantasy and Brave Exvius", Pocket Gamer, accessed November 10, 2018, <https://www.pocketgamer.biz/asia/news/64371/square-enix-financials-q2-fy17/>.

<sup>16</sup>"App revenue climbed 35 percent to \$60 billion in 2017", Tech Crunch, accessed November 10, 2018, <https://techcrunch.com/2018/01/05/app-revenue-climbed-35-percent-to-60-billion-in-2017/>.

<sup>17</sup>"Everything Mobius Final Fantasy!", Reddit, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://www.reddit.com/r/MobiusFF/>.

<sup>18</sup>"Mobius Final Fantasy -NE", Facebook, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://m.facebook.com/MobiusFinalFantasy/>.

<sup>19</sup>"Mobius FF -NE", Twitter, accessed October 15, 2018, [https://twitter.com/mobiusff\\_ne](https://twitter.com/mobiusff_ne).

<sup>20</sup>"What it means to be a 'whale' - and why social gamers are just gamers", Venture Beat, accessed November 10, 2018, <https://venturebeat.com/2013/03/14/whales-and-why-social-gamers-are-just-gamers/>.



enemies have or how much damage certain abilities do under different conditions<sup>21</sup>. Since these values are hidden in the game itself, people work together to discover them through trial and error. The Reddit is also where people go to learn about what has already been released in the Japanese version of the game and discuss what that means for the North American version to make more informed choices for how they spend their resources. There are certain users here that have privileged knowledge, either because they actively play the Japanese version of the game or have proven their mastery of the game mechanics by scoring a top rank in the monthly ranking events.

Using Shannon's communication model<sup>22</sup> as a lens to understand how players communicate within the game can be illuminating. In game, there are exactly three places for direct player messaging; 1) a player's personal profile, 2) a text box when searching for players to do a multiplayer battle with and 3) using preset stamps that can be activated in real time while in lobbies or a multiplayer battle (see Figure 5). The first is generally used to convey some of the player's personality, while others use it as a space to identify themselves as F2P or goers of the Mobius subreddit (implying their mastery of game mechanics from utilizing the information available there). The second is used mostly to convey intentions in starting the multiplayer battle, giving tips for how to complete the specific battle or to declare intentions about who is allowed to join (based on player level or ability load-out). The third place is the most interesting, since it's the only method that happens in real time and allows for a back and forth exchange between players. At first glance, one might think that the usage of many varied preset messages would create the opportunity for straightforward communication with minimal amounts of noise. In practice, this is anything but the case. Because the stamps are preset, there's rarely any



Figure 5. A sample of the different kinds of stamps that can be used in multiplayer modes. Screenshot taken on iPhone X, November 2018

<sup>21</sup>"General Multihit Damage Distribution Analysis", Reddit, accessed November 10, 2018, [https://www.reddit.com/r/MobiusFF/comments/9f9ijy/general\\_multihit\\_damage\\_distribution\\_analysis/?st=JOAUMFXE&sh=fb2c551c](https://www.reddit.com/r/MobiusFF/comments/9f9ijy/general_multihit_damage_distribution_analysis/?st=JOAUMFXE&sh=fb2c551c).

<sup>22</sup>Warren Weaver, "The Mathematics of Communication", Scientific American 181, no. 1 (July 1949): 11-15.



message with enough subtlety to properly convey the user's intention. One of my favourite examples is the 'Fear Karma...' stamp (shown in Figure 5), which could equally be jokingly directed at the soon to be destroyed monster or toward a player that's performing badly. An extra layer of complication here is that sometimes the players whom join multiplayer battles aren't actually real people but instead computer programs, or bots, that are being employed solely to gather materials through the efforts of the active players. In these cases, no matter how much you try to communicate your intentions through stamps, they'll fall on deaf ears since there is no person actually there to receive the message and adjust their behaviour. Ironically, one of the tell-tale signs you're playing with a bot is their methodical use of stamps themselves, alongside their nonsensical abilities or lack of action during battle. In order to combat the potential for noise in the chain of communication, or the lack of a proper receiver on the other end of the chain, players sometimes use external infrastructure to facilitate finding players and communicating more efficiently. The Discord channel, which is a real-time chat client, is used primarily for this purpose. This opens up the channels of communication between real players, allowing real-time text input or voice chat, greatly reducing the amount of noise in communication during the heat of battle.

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