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A Social Experience or Asocial Experience? The Fractured Togetherness of *Final Fantasy XIV*

By

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Abstract

In the face of anxieties regarding declining social connection, massively multiplayer online video games (or MMOs) have demonstrated their capacity to facilitate social interaction and feelings of community. In recent times, developments made both in how MMOs are designed and in online social platforms have elicited queries regarding whether these games still serve that social function. Through digital ethnographic study in the popular MMO *Final Fantasy XIV*, this study examines the game's ability to facilitate social connection among its players. I find that, though *Final Fantasy XIV* offers a unique social experience where players can cultivate a sense of togetherness with each other, it becomes fractured due to the game's systems deemphasizing social play as well as players fulfilling their social needs through external means. I argue that this experience of fractured togetherness does not invalidate MMOs from being valuable social spaces that can yield positive social outcomes for players. In effect, MMOs can therefore be instrumental in other, more individualized social platforms learning to support communality.

Keywords: massively multiplayer online game (MMO), social connection, togetherness, community, Final Fantasy XIV

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XIV

It is human nature to be social. Much of what motivates the actions people take in relation to others stems from a fundamental need to build relationships and cultivate community. The advancement of technology has expanded the realm of social life into a new modality: the digital. From instant messaging services to social media platforms, the virtual connection facilitated by digital media involves us in the lives of those around us, whether nearby or across the globe. Massively multiplayer online video games (or MMOs) present a compelling case for how technology can enable social connection. Games have always been a social activity, even before they were digital. With the advent of the Internet, games can bring people from around the world together into one virtual space. MMOs do this on a large scale, hosting thousands of players in shared, persistent worlds and possessing a multitude of gameplay systems that promote player sociability. In this way, MMOs can foster a sense of togetherness and community amongst their players. Nevertheless, there is a growing sentiment among players that MMOs have lost their capacity to be hubs for social activity as they once were given increasing incentives for solo play as well as the popularity of other online social platforms (e.g., Big Thanks, 2023; d0e1ow, 2013; Josh Strife Hayes, 2021).

Through digital ethnographic research in the MMO *Final Fantasy XIV*, this study explores the ability of such games to facilitate social connection among players. In what follows I will argue that although *Final Fantasy XIV* offers a social experience where players can cultivate a sense of togetherness and connection, this togetherness is fractured due to the game's systems deemphasizing social play and to players' fulfilling social needs through external means. I argue that this experience of fractured togetherness does not invalidate MMOs from being

valuable social spaces that can yield positive social outcomes for players. In effect, MMOs can therefore be instrumental for other, more individualized social platforms to learn to support communality.

Belonging, Technology, and Games

The need to belong is an innate human desire that motivates people to seek social connections wherever possible. Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary (1995) stated that fulfilling this desire means that people must be in positive relationships with others wherein they care for others' welfare and feel that their own welfare is being cared for by others (p. 497). Typically, this fulfillment is thought to happen through the formation of dyadic bonds such as friendship or romantic relationships. However, one's need to belong can also be satisfied through affiliation with large groups or through minor interactions with people across daily life (Hirsch & Clark, 2019; Paravati et al., 2021). Social belonging (or togetherness) is central to the foundation of community; that is, community exists as a means for fulfilling individuals' need to belong. The strength of a community to provide belonging is determined in part by its ability to facilitate frequent, meaningful social interactions between its members such that a dense web of social ties begins to develop (Dotson, 2017, pp. 33-34, 44). Digital communication technology has intervened in this process significantly by changing the scale at which people are able to encounter one another. As such, it is important to understand the effects this technology has had on social life.

In many ways, communication technology acts as a bridge between people who are otherwise physically distant. From the telegraph to the television, these technologies grant the ability for people to become more aware and involved in the lives of others around the world. As Marshal McLuhan (1964) succinctly stated, "As electrically contracted, the globe is no more

than a village.” In the years since his writing, the potential for rapid, diverse, and transnational connections has grown tremendously. Digitally mediated communication done through mobile phones and over the Internet has broken down the barriers of time and distance and enabled the creation and maintenance of community within digital space. Mary Chayko (2014) described the “techno-social lives” that people in the 21st century experience:

People use communication technologies to build, maintain, and experience social connections and a strong and authentic sense of community, both with those with whom they are geographically proximate and with those at a greater distance. Then, both figuratively and literally, they put these connections and communities in their pockets and keep them close at hand, wherever they go. (p. 985)

Digital technology therefore provides an effective means for people to fulfill their belongingness needs irrespective of their local social environments. McLuhan’s “global village” analogy is now even more a reality, as people are ever more involved in the lives of others through these technologies. Nevertheless, they are not without fault, and there has been much concern raised about whether digital technology is responsible for people becoming increasingly disconnected.

Widespread societal disconnection is not a recently established social problem. In the United States, for example, the turn of the 21st century brought with it canonical accounts of declining sociability written by Ray Oldenburg (1999) and Robert Putnam (2000). For Oldenburg (1999), one of the major problems facing the country in the late 20th century was the lack of public spaces dedicated to informal socialization (i.e., third places). Not only, Oldenburg argued, do such spaces give individuals the opportunity to familiarize themselves with their neighbors and local communities, but they also provide a public area for political discussion and burgeoning grassroots organization. To lose these third places is to lose a key aspect of what

makes community life possible. Oldenburg pointed to mass media like the radio and television as contributing factors to the disappearance of third places as they draw people's attention to matters outside of their local communities which have a greater impact on their lives. In his words, "Mass media do not and cannot extend to that small corner of the world in which most of us live...It is as though we don't live anywhere, or at least anywhere that matters" (pp. 70-71). Moreover, engaging with these media is primarily done in isolation, as people tune into television and radio broadcasts from their homes rather than in communal spaces (p. 77). Along similar lines, Putnam (2000) charted trends demonstrating the public's retreat from community organizations (e.g., political groups, sports clubs, etc.) and a shift in the US toward a form of social connectedness that is "one-shot, special purpose, and self-oriented" (p. 184). In his analysis, Putnam claimed that electronic entertainment, especially television, account for 25% of this shift as they take attention away from social or communal activities and focus them on private media consumption (pp. 245, 283). In all, both authors cite technology as a driving force in pushing people away from each other rather than bringing them together.

The concerns raised by these authors have grown over time as digital communication technology becomes more robust. For example, the U.S. Office of the Surgeon General lists the use of smartphones and excessive engagement with digital media as one source of rising loneliness and isolation in the United States, along with declining social infrastructure and other factors (OSG, 2023, pp. 19-20). Along with this, some scholars claim digital media has made social life take on the character of networked individualism rather than community (Kendall, 2011, pp. 311-312). This is seen best with social media platforms, the user experience is highly personalized to each individual user. The sort of content that one user sees can be vastly different from that which another user sees depending on how they engage with these platforms (Hermann

et al., 2023, p. 2495). These conditions fragment people's social activity such that "they experience social connection as individuals accessing and moving through technological networks rather than as an almost indelible feature of everyday life" (Dotson, 2017, p. 2). Amid this social landscape and concerns over declining connection, video games have emerged as the subject of budding research interest. Their role in supporting or discouraging sociability is important to understand as more people turn to games to seek out social interaction (Williams, 2006b).

In many respects, gaming is inherently a social activity. As Caillois (2001) states of games broadly, "Play is not merely an individual pastime" (p. 37). Contemporary online gaming makes this statement even more true, as people can meet in virtual spaces and foster connection through play (see Gonçalves et al., 2023). Massively multiplayer online games (or MMOs) accomplish this at a large scale by allowing thousands of people worldwide to inhabit a shared virtual world. Many MMO players use these worlds to not only deepen their connections with their offline relationships but also to expand their social networks to new people they encounter 'in game' (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Eklund, 2015; Nardi & Harris, 2006). In this way, MMOs have a social function akin to other online spaces such as social media. However, MMOs afford a unique form of social interaction not replicated by other forms of online interaction. For example, player interaction in MMOs is done not only through text or voice communication but also-necessarily through virtual avatars. As MMOs implement 3D environments and characters, social interaction within them more closely resembles face-to-face interaction than text-based online interaction. In this context, there is a present, mediated body for players to synchronously interact with for different purposes, from simple talk to more complex play activities like cooperative quests or competitive challenges (Osler, 2020). Though some expressivity (e.g.,

unconscious body language, facial cues, etc.) is limited by game design, virtual avatars allow players to convey various emotions to other players through their actions (Scriven, 2018). In all, this serves to make interaction highly visible within the social worlds of MMOs, aiding in the development of community life (Gotved, 2002, p. 408). Unlike the personalized networks of social media platforms or the isolated viewing spaces of previous mass media, MMOs house social activity within a shared space; in other words, play in these spaces is naturally a social experience.

As a result of their unique social experience, MMOs have often been likened to Oldenburg's (1999) third places, now in virtual form (Ducheneaut et al., 2007; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). However, such assessments were leveled when the genre was still in its infant stages, and their accuracy has become more uncertain as the genre develops over time. For years players and scholars alike have discussed MMOs shedding the social aspects of their game design to operate with greater focus on individual play (e.g., Crenshaw & Nardi, 2016; Pilley, 2009). For example, Andrea Braithwaite (2018) discussed this transformation within the acclaimed MMO *World of Warcraft*. Here, she detailed how changes to the game, like the reduction of collaborative in-game events or the introduction of automatic matchmaking systems, have led *World of Warcraft* to “[trend] away from multiplayer and toward multiple players, away from collaborative effort in favor of measures of individual achievement” (p. 131). Changes such as these diminish MMOs' social play experience and weaken the sense of community felt between their players (Crenshaw & Nardi, 2016; O'Connor et al., 2015). Instead of being virtual third places, MMOs seem to be closer to virtual non-places, where their shared spaces confer a lonelier experience (see Ratcliffe, 2023) after being deprived of the “challenge of ‘togetherness’” (Bauman, 2000, p. 105). Overall, the decline of MMOs' unique social appeal, along with the

predominance of social media as the primary sites for online interaction, raises existential questions about the necessity of MMOs as a specific form of online interaction (Koster, 2010). Namely, what is the purpose of MMOs existing as MMOs in the current social media landscape?

Motivation for Study

Going into this study, my primary interest was to understand how feelings of social connectedness form in online settings. I am a frequent user of the Internet and Internet-based platforms, and it is because of this use that I began to wonder whether the users of these platforms feel any sort of affiliation towards each other by virtue of sharing the same platform. For example, how close does a user of a social media platform like TikTok or Twitter/X feel towards other users of those platforms? This question extends to any online platform which puts people in contact with one another, including online games. Of these, the MMO genre presents an interesting case to examine how connectedness emerges in online spaces. As discussed previously, these games offer a unique form of online interaction unto themselves, one that can support positive social outcomes relating to fulfilling belongingness needs. At the same time, it is unclear if the current landscape of social media and MMO design can still bring those benefits to bear. Therefore, through this study, I seek to investigate how successful these virtual worlds are in facilitating closeness and community between players.

Method

To accomplish this, I conduct a digital ethnography on the MMO *Final Fantasy XIV* (or *FFXIV*). Digital ethnography is my methodology of choice for several reasons. First, it is an approach that allows close examination of how players encounter the virtual world they play in as well as the people they interact with inside. As Tom Boellstorff et al. (2024) write, virtual worlds are “valid venues for cultural practice” and just as ethnographic approaches are utilized to

understand cultures in the physical world, these same approaches can be applied to understand the forms of social life present within virtual worlds (pp. 1-2). Appreciating how players experience social connection requires centering the player perspective in my research, “getting close” to their everyday experiences of inhabiting and interfacing with the virtual world of *FFXIV* (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 2). As a result, I inhabit the role of both player and researcher for this study, directly participating in the culture of the game through play to analyze its patterns and draw broader conclusions about online sociality. In taking this ethnographic approach, I situate my study in the tradition of virtual world ethnographies performed by past researchers (e.g., Chen, 2011; Nardi, 2010; Taylor, 2006).

There are many MMOs whose worlds I could have chosen to study. I decided on *Final Fantasy XIV* due to a few key factors. First, a considerable amount of research on MMOs has focused on *World of Warcraft* (or *WoW*) due in large part to its significance to the MMO genre (see Gonçalves et al., 2023, p. 10). *World of Warcraft* is one of the most critically and commercially successful MMOs of all time; at its peak popularity in 2010, *WoW* had 12 million subscribers worldwide (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010). *World of Warcraft* was able to make MMOs mainstream in a way no other game had previously, and it has been a core influence on many games that have come after, including *FFXIV* (Gardner, 2021). While *World of Warcraft*'s longevity and remaining popularity provide an incentive to study it, there has been some concern that *WoW* may be a special or outlying case, as no other game has achieved its level of popularity and status (Golub, 2014).

Final Fantasy XIV offers a compelling counterpoint to this claim. While it has not achieved the level of sales that *World of Warcraft* did at its peak, *FFXIV* has been among the most popular current MMOs and has received numerous awards since its 2013 reboot (SQUARE

ENIX, n.d.-b). In 2021, the game was so popular that developer Square Enix ran out of digital copies of the game and had to suspend sales as too many people were purchasing the game for its *Endwalker* expansion (Gilliam, 2021; Ruppert, 2021). Moreover, this surge in *FFXIV*'s popularity at the time partially stemmed from an influx of *World of Warcraft* players interested in trying out the game. This interest stemmed from a variety of factors, including players feeling dissatisfied with *WoW*'s storytelling experience and other design choices (Colp, 2021; Edwards, 2021). Despite offering a different (though *WoW*-inspired) play experience, *FFXIV* has attained a high level of success and remains a hub for thousands of players. Thus, I contend that *FFXIV* demonstrates that *World of Warcraft* is not as special a case as previously thought and is worth studying as a site for social interaction.

The unique play experience offered by *Final Fantasy XIV* also influenced my decision to focus on it as a fieldsite. Though a massively multiplayer game, *FFXIV* is a game that emphasizes its single-player experience. As a franchise, *Final Fantasy* is mostly made up of single player role-playing games, with *Final Fantasy XI* and *Final Fantasy XIV* being the two outliers as MMOs. Like the previous games in the franchise, *FFXIV* structures its gameplay around its narrative. Much of the game's progression, such as unlocking explorable areas or battle content, is tied to how far players have progressed through the main story. While completing main story quests does offer instances where one can play with other people, it is mostly a solo affair (Harris, 2022). Not only that, but *FFXIV* has also implemented a system where the parts of narrative progression that required multiplayer interaction can be completed individually with a party of computer-controlled characters (Kuhnke, 2023; Nightingale, 2022). As a result, *FFXIV* is an intriguing case study of a multiplayer game that places much importance on solo play over social play, one that exemplifies the existential concerns of MMOs

as a form of social interaction. Using *FFXIV* as my fieldsite therefore offers an opportunity to see whether these circumstances prove to be an obstacle for players' social interactions and feelings of togetherness.

The final reason I chose *Final Fantasy XIV* is because of my familiarity with the game. I have played *FFXIV* since 2020 with around 240 hours of playtime before beginning fieldwork. As a result, I had the benefit of experience with the game, making it easier for me to focus on participant observation since I was not learning how to play at the same time. Additionally, the time I have spent playing this game has given me anecdotes and other firsthand experiences that can serve as additional points of reference to supplement the data I collect. Nevertheless, this insider status is not unproblematic. I lack the perspective of a new player, making it a more challenging task to see how the game's design influences social behavior at those initial stages of play. In addition, my insider status does not grant me perfect knowledge of every aspect of the game given my (relatively) limited progress.¹

I focus my analysis more on the broader game space than smaller player-organized groups. This is because I am interested in the social practices and norms present broadly in the game, rather than any one limited space (Hutchinson, 2013, pp. 120-121). However, the game space of *FFXIV* is wide. To keep the game's technical performance smooth, players are spread across many different Data Centers in four different regions (Japan, North America, Europe, Oceania). Given my region of residence, I remain in the North American Data Centers for this ethnography. In this region, there are four Data Centers that, in total, host 32 servers (known as "Worlds") that players can choose to play from (SQUARE ENIX, n.d.-c). Though each World is

¹ For context, since its rerelease in 2013, *Final Fantasy XIV* has received five major updates (or "expansions") that each add new story quests, exploration areas, gameplay activities, and system changes. I have only recently reached the content from the first expansion, so there are many parts of the game inaccessible to me.

an exact copy of each other, the varied player populations within them may give rise to different social atmospheres. I perform my observations within the most populated Worlds of two NA data centers: Balmung, on the Crystal Data Center; and Seraph, on the Dynamis Data Center. I chose these Data Centers given their estimated² size as being the most and least actively populated Data Centers in NA (Lucky Bancho, n.d.). If there were any distinct cultures to come out of different Worlds, I felt they would be most apparent between Data Centers of vastly different sizes.

To observe player activity in game, I used my personal avatar Suki'e Nekaya.



Figure 1. My avatar Suki'e Nekaya

Using this avatar, I observed player activity in a variety of in-game locations. First, I focused on the three in-game cities in which players start the game, known as Ul'dah, Limsa Lominsa, and Gridania, as well as the game's mini-game center known as the Gold Saucer. These locations serve as *FFXIV*'s primary public spaces. As public spaces, they are the main places where people encounter and interact with one another, contributing to feelings of social cohesion and community (Cattell et al., 2008; Mehta, 2019; Qi et al., 2024). Their significance in shaping

² Estimations based on unofficial player census, as Square Enix does not officially report active player population.

social activity within *FFXIV* makes observing these locations essential for understanding the social life of the game.

Additionally, I observed player activity during instanced battle content wherein players are grouped together to complete combat challenges together. These are called “duties” and include Dungeons (which require 4 players), Trials (which require 4 or 8 players), and Alliance Raids (which require 24 players). I also observed instanced non-battle content wherein players participate in various activities together (e.g., Ocean Fishing, Gold Saucer mini games). These activities make up part of *FFXIV*’s social infrastructure; they act as the facilities through which social connection and togetherness emerge (Latham & Layton, 2019). These activities structure social interaction more as they present challenges that require collaboration to overcome or provide tasks that players complete alongside one another. As such, these activities are interesting places to observe to examine how sociability is influenced by specific acts of social play.

Overall, I was limited in my choice of places to observe in the game because of my current progress through the story and playing on the game’s free trial. As such, these locations are all limited to the areas available to players in the base game of *Final Fantasy XIV*. However, there is still value in concentrating on these locations as there is still a sizable number of players present in the base game areas. In addition, the base game area is where people will get their first bearings on what social life is like in *FFXIV*. Therefore, studying social activity here both provides a glimpse into how new players may become socialized into *FFXIV* as well as the potential social factors that keep players in this early-game region.

I began my participant observation by first mapping out where players tended to congregate in the main cities. As Setha Low et al. (2019) write, “Mapping is a way to record

people and objects as well as their relationships to one another in a particular space” (p. 7). I was also inspired by Vikas Mehta’s (2019) use of walk-by observations to study the sociability of streets. Using my avatar, I ‘walked’ around the three main cities, examining where players were most crowded and taking note of the designed features they gathered around (if any were present). In addition to these spatial observations, I observed the various social actions players performed. Social activity in the game primarily takes place within the game’s text chat. This chat has different modes of communication that vary depending on their publicity³ (SQUARE ENIX, n.d.-a). *FFXIV* also allows players’ avatars to perform special actions known as emotes. These actions range from dances to facial expressions and are often used during interaction. Where and when these different forms of communication took place between players as well as what the content of said communication was were all recorded when encountered. Along with these observations, I took screenshots at various places throughout the game to serve as visuals for the activities I recorded. Though the avatars of other players remain visible, usernames were hidden or blurred to protect their privacy.

To supplement these in-game observations, I examined *FFXIV*’s official English forums⁴ as well as the largest game-dedicated subreddit *r/ffxiv*⁵. These platforms represent an extension of players’ engagement with *FFXIV*, as they are a space for them to encounter one another for the purpose of discussing various aspects of the game (Boellstorff et al., 2024, p. 118; Hutchinson, 2013, p. 140). Topics range from opinions about the game’s content and systems and conversations about experiences dealing with other player to advertisements of in-game social

³ These modes include “Tell,” or private messages; “Say,” or nearby messages; “Yell,” or long-rang messages; and “Shout,” or zone-wide messages. There are also group chat modes such as “Party” and “Alliance” which are used when partied with other players or when in a player alliance during a raid.

⁴ <https://forum.square-enix.com/ffxiv/forums/619-English-Forums>

⁵ <https://www.reddit.com/r/ffxiv/>

groups and showcases of player avatars. Given the number of threads and posts created each day, I felt it best to focus on those that related most to my research topic (i.e., player sociality). After sorting by the top daily threads and posts⁶, I looked for the ones I felt were most relevant and took notes on the conversations that occurred therein. At first, I did this when the game was undergoing maintenance and was unavailable to play. However, I eventually changed my process to bookmarking relevant threads/posts every day over the span of about a week before finally recording the discussion. I made this change so that conversation could build up on the forum threads and subreddit posts, as newer threads and posts did not always have many initial replies.

Lastly, I attempted to conduct interviews with players. I utilized two recruitment methods: posting flyers across the University of Chicago campus and posting a recruitment request on the r/ffxiv Discord server (with mod approval; see Appendix A for recruitment flyer, Appendix B for recruitment scripts). Participants had to be over the age of 18 and currently play (or have played) *FFXIV*. Unfortunately, I was only able to conduct one interview. This took place remotely and asynchronously over Discord based on the preference of the interviewee.⁷

I started my data collection midway through March and ended in early May, spending approximately 40 hours observing player activity in total (~2.35 hours a session). More than half of that time (~57.5%) was spent in the game itself, while the rest (~42.5%) was spent on online forums. I made most of my observations in the evening to late-night hours, though a few sessions for the forums/subreddit were done in the afternoon. This was in line with the limited available

⁶ The official forums have a page where one can view every thread posted over the last day (including replies to older threads). Reddit has a similar feature, allowing users to sort by the top posts made over the last day.

⁷ After receiving consent, the interviewee was sent a list of questions regarding demographics and player sociality. Example questions include “How often do you talk with other players in game?” and “Do you feel a sense of connection or community with other players?” (see Appendix C for full list).

data on daily players provided by SteamDB⁸, which showed that *FFXIV* reached its daily peaks in concurrent players around 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. (“FINAL FANTASY XIV Online Steam Charts”, n.d.). All fieldnotes were recorded by hand in a physical notebook and consisted of general descriptions of public player activities. Any player-specific information in these fieldnotes was anonymized through generic labels (e.g., “player”) to protect privacy. Interview data was anonymized through use of a pseudonym chosen by the interviewee, following recommendations of Maria Lahman et al. (2015). Finally, screenshots of gameplay had identifiable information (i.e., usernames) hidden or blurred to protect player privacy. Data analysis was done in two steps. First, as noted by Boellstorff et al. (2024), preliminary analysis can take place before data collection is complete (p. 161). In my case, I was annotating my fieldnotes as I wrote them, taking note of certain questions I had and highlighting points I thought may be important. Upon completing data collection, my data analysis consisted of going back through my fieldnotes, sorting them between observations from the game and those from the forums/subreddit. From there, I analyzed my findings for themes I could pull out, following the suggestions Boellstorff et al. (2024) give regarding participant observation data analysis (pp. 168-169). At the end of the study, all data was deleted or destroyed.

Results

In observing social life within *Final Fantasy XIV*, I hoped to uncover how successful the game was in facilitating closeness and community between players. Its ability to do so would indicate that MMOs can function as virtual third spaces that support sociability, standing out from the wider landscape of online interaction that atomizes people into personalized networks.

⁸ SteamDB only shows concurrent player data for those who play *Final Fantasy XIV* through the Steam storefront; no data is available for the other platforms where the game is sold (Square Enix PC client, MacOS, PlayStation 4/5, Xbox Series X/S).

If *FFXIV* failed to support social connection, then that would be further evidence that MMOs as a specific social form are unnecessary and can instead be replaced by other online platforms like social media. My findings do not support either conclusion on their own. Instead, I find that *FFXIV* confers onto players a more complex social experience, one where togetherness and separation are simultaneous outcomes. I structure my discussion around the varied factors that produce this social experience.

Stimulating Sociability

FFXIV's nature as an MMO informs the social experience it confers onto its players. This is a sentiment felt by players like my interviewee, Fade. In their words, "*FFXIV* being an MMO means it's built on players. It's a pretty social game by nature. It needs to be." MMOs need to be social because that is what differentiates them from single-player games; it is their defining feature (Christou et al., 2013; Ducheneaut et al., 2006; Yee, 2006). *FFXIV* fulfills on this promise of socialization through enabling spontaneous and structured social interaction between players. These actions lay the foundation for community ties to develop and endure, instilling *FFXIV* players with a sense of togetherness.

Spontaneous Interaction

For social interaction to occur, players must first encounter one another. In *FFXIV*, the main cities—known as Ul'dah, Limsa Lominsa, and Gridania—serve as the main gathering sites for players. During my play on both the Balmung and Seraph servers, these locations were where I saw the most amount of people gathered in one spot. This was especially the case in Ul'dah on Balmung which has a large player population. While walking around this city, I would see players' avatars load in and out of my field of view because there were too many players for the game to handle all at once. Figures 2 and 3 showcase concentrations of players in different cities.



Figure 2. Players gathered around Aetheryte Plaza in Gridania (Seraph)



Figure 3. Players inside Ul'dah's Adventurer's Guild (Balmung)

Players frequent these cities because of the utility they have for the player. For example, they house important non-player characters (NPCs) who give quests for players to complete for rewards, allow players to buy in-game items from other players as well as NPCs, and are where players can unlock new combat, crafting, and gathering classes (i.e., in-game vocations) for their avatars. As a result, the everyday experience of playing *FFXIV* typically involves entering at

least one of these cities, meaning that players will regularly encounter and interact with each other.

Frequent encounter and social interaction pave the way for community bonds to form between players. Such was the case for players in Ul'dah on the Balmung server. Here, owing to its large population, players often make use of the game's Shout chat mode, which allows them to send messages to all players in a given zone. No matter when I logged into *FFXIV* and went to this city, there would almost always be a conversation going on in the chat. Topics ranged from discussions of *FFXIV*'s lore to players talking about their out-of-game lives and everything in between. Usually, there would be a handful of players who were talking in Shout chat, with others coming in and out of the conversation at a moment's notice. Occasionally, players would even recognize each other in the chat and engage in small talk with each other afterwards. As I continued to play and make observations, I too began to recognize familiar usernames in the chat. Though other cities did not have as active a chat as Ul'dah, some players' repeated presence within these cities led me to also begin recognizing them over time. This would happen most with players who remained in these locations performing the exact same actions day after day. For example, there was a player in Limsa Lominsa on the Balmung server that I would always see dancing in the same spot whenever I was in the city. In other words, to use Oldenburg's (1999) terms, these players are the regulars of these spaces, and their presence "set[s] the tone of conviviality" in *FFXIV*'s world (p. 34).

Player-organized public performances are another example of emergent player activity that bolsters feelings of togetherness. In *FFXIV*, one of the playable classes, Bard, gives players the ability to play music using their choice of instrument between 24 options (e.g., electric guitar, trombone, etc.). As such, players, either individually or in groups, will use this class to put on

concerts in the main cities. I witnessed this during one of *FFXIV*'s seasonal events when I was playing on the Balmung server. Because of the event, several decorations and installations were set up in Ul'dah, including a stage where a few players were playing music and dancing. In front of the stage, other players were using different emotes to cheer (see Figure 4). While performances like these were more impromptu, others were more structured. After their performances in a particular city, some bands⁹ would post a link to their website in the chat box containing more information about their group, their schedule, and other platforms on which they were present. Since I was never aware when a concert was going to happen, every time one did was a pleasant surprise. Concerts brought with them a crowd of other players who would use different emotes or type in the Say chat mode to cheer for the performance, making for an enjoyable experience. Figure 5 shows what these kinds of concerts can look like and the crowds they can draw in.



Figure 4. Small performance in Ul'dah (Balmung)

⁹ While some bands do consist of a group of individual players, many are formed by an individual player using multiple accounts at the same time (a process known as multi-boxing)



Figure 5. Post-concert crowd in Limsa Lominsa (Seraph)

The importance of these performances comes from this ability to bring people together. Public performances serve as “playful acts of de-alienation” that enable “intensive interaction and joy” between passing strangers (Lavrinec, 2011, p. 72). Therefore, participating in these in-game performances, whether as a performer or a viewer, draws players closer to one another and deepens their experienced sense of togetherness.

Overall, these observations illustrate the ways that spontaneous interaction within *FFXIV*'s public space promote social connectedness. Players' routine encounters with each other are important for building community because they reinforce the notion of the game being a shared space and is the first step in developing stronger social bonds. In addition, sharing public space also gives rise to other spontaneous forms of play, such as the concerts put on by various groups of players. These performances enhance the sociability of *FFXIV* by making cities feel more alive and playful while also creating opportunities for players to strengthen collective bonds (Gabriel et al., 2020; Lavrinec, 2011; Simpson, 2011). In this way, the public spaces of *FFXIV* have a similar social function to those found offline. For example, Mehta (2019) detailed how neighborhood public streets allow diverse groups of people to commune with each other,

whether through enabling momentary interactions or bolstering enduring relationships. Even those with whom people do not directly interact can amplify feelings of belonging given that sharing public space enables invisible ties between strangers to form as they become familiar (Felder, 2020; Zahnnow & Corcoran, 2024). While social play here takes on the form of incidental interactions between players, *FFXIV* also offers specific activities that structure social interaction and influence player sociability.

Structured Interaction

To promote social connection, it is important for public spaces to have specific places that create opportunities for social interaction to occur. These places make up the space's social infrastructure and include places like public institutions and recreational activities (Latham & Layton, 2019). Recreational activity is important in the context of *FFXIV* because it is through participating in those activities that the most social play happens. From minigames to battle-focused challenges, there are a range of activities for players to participate in alongside other people that help bolster sociability within *FFXIV*.

One area that houses such activities is known as the Gold Saucer. Within this location, players have access to a variety of minigames that net them special currency used to buy different rewards. Within the Gold Saucer are area-wide events known as GATEs (or Gold Saucer Active Time Events). Every 20 minutes, a new GATE begins and most allow large groups of players to simultaneously participate in unique minigame challenges. These events are an opportunity for players to strengthen their social bonds with each other. For example, when I participated in the "Leap of Faith" GATE¹⁰ on the Balmung server, I often witnessed players conversing in Shout chat. There, people jokingly complained about their struggles with the event

¹⁰ A GATE where players must jump across platforms to reach the goal while collecting statues to earn points.

or offered tips to others for how best to complete it. On both the Balmung and Seraph servers, some players would congregate at the goal point, cheering on those who were nearing the end (see Figure 6). Social interaction in this form helps create a sociable atmosphere akin to that found in Oldenburg's (1999) third places, providing players with a sense of "joy, vivacity, and relief" through play (p. 55).



Figure 6. Players cheering at the goal during Leap of Faith (Balmung)

Another activity players can participate in is known as Ocean Fishing. Every two hours, players using the Fisher class can join with up to 23 other players to sail around the game's oceans to catch fish. When I participated on the Balmung server, one customary practice I observed was that one player would, unprompted, call out specific bait to use to catch certain fish and accrue the most points. Sometimes, this player would also answer questions other players asked regarding the activity. In a sense, they became the informal leader of the party. Though they held no real authority and other players could act how they wished to, this player acted for the benefit of the larger group of their own volition without any expectation for a return. Though minor, this sort of prosocial behavior highlights the reciprocity norms present within *FFXIV* that indicate strong community bonds (Dotson, 2017, p. 37).

Though players regularly participate Gold Saucer events and Ocean Fishing, the activities that players do most often are *FFXIV*'s battle-focused challenges known as "duties." These challenges require groups of 4 to 24 players to complete, meaning that collaboration between players is paramount to success. These instances of collaborative play can lead to positive social outcomes for players, including expanding their social networks and promoting online and offline civic engagement (Zhong, 2011). This form of social play grants players the opportunity to interact with others in "meaningful and satisfying ways" owing to these activities being a shared experience around which social interaction is focused (Dotson, 2017, p. 44; Eklund, 2015). Furthermore, this content can also function as the place where new players are welcomed into the *FFXIV* community. I observed on both Balmung and Seraph that players would always wait for everyone in the group to be ready before engaging with major enemies (i.e., bosses). In duties that required less players, this norm was unspoken (i.e., people waited without any communication needed). Conversely, large group duties usually had one player who would ask if everyone was ready before starting boss fights. Overall, this norm of waiting ensures that players, particularly new ones, are not left behind for experiencing the game at their own pace. At some level, this norm arises out of necessity more than anything else, as trying to fight boss enemies without all group members poses a much greater challenge. Nevertheless, the effect remains the same in that no one in the group is left behind, an act that would hurt the community feel of the game. In this way, new players can build a sense of belonging to these individual player groups as well as the *FFXIV* community at large.

Together in Play, Together in Place

FFXIV players have a strong desire to be social with others during play. This is evident by the many posts I saw on r/ffxiv of parents playing with their children, players asking

questions about the best ways to play with their friends, and people wondering how they might convince their partners to play with them. Some players even commemorate their relationships by getting married in game, whether to their offline partners or to people they met through playing *FFXIV*. The official forums even have a long-running thread for users to find a marriage partner. For many on that thread, they want to get married for the rewards associated with it. However, there are quite a few people I saw who were looking for a social connection, whether platonic or romantic. Overall, this desire for social play leads players to look for opportunities to not only strengthen ties with those close to them but also create new ones with people they have never met before. Being present in the public spaces of the main cities as well as participating in social activities can fulfill that desire for social interaction and facilitate player sociability within *FFXIV*. In their interview response, Fade made that point clear by stating that they “continue to play *FFXIV* because it feels like a second home. The lore, the community, even outside the game. I feel like I can be myself in Eorzea.¹¹ We share a common love.” Their feeling of community demonstrates how *FFXIV* exemplifies the unique social appeal of MMOs, where social activity within shared virtual space promotes togetherness and fulfills belongingness needs. As much as it performs that social function, however, this description does not paint the full picture of what it means to play *FFXIV*.

Stifling Sociability

For a game in a genre defined by sociality, *FFXIV* does not always encourage social experiences for its players. In some cases, systems present within the game work to discourage social interaction. Because of this, *FFXIV* takes on the character of a non-place instead of a third place. Non-places are those where togetherness with others is tolerated rather than appreciated;

¹¹ Eorzea is the main setting of *FFXIV*.

moreover, they are places for people to pass through and not remain in (Bauman, 2000, pp. 102, 105). In *FFXIV*, this non-place character arises due to the lack of player socialization and changes to the game's social affordances that reduce options for social interaction. These factors make social interaction less a provision of the game and more a resource players pursue individually. As a result, they may turn to platforms outside of *FFXIV* to fulfill their social needs, leaving the in-game community fractured.

Lacking Socialization

In MMOs like *FFXIV*, collaborative play does not always lead to socialization between players. These games encourage players to be efficient and progression-focused; therefore, without support from the game itself, player sociality is sacrificed (Crenshaw & Nardi, 2016; Eklund, 2015). The result is that players tend to avoid talking to each other unless otherwise necessary (e.g., Eklund & Johansson, 2013). I observed this most in *FFXIV* when completing duties with other players. Save for brief greetings (“hi”) and farewells (“gg”), very little talk transpired during these challenges, even when there was ample time to do so. Once the duty finished, players left the area quickly, leaving little space for any socializing to occur. Despite these duties requiring collaboration to complete, the actual experience of completing them rarely led to social interaction. Furthermore, the times in which I observed the most talk were when something went wrong during the duty, like multiple players dying to a boss. When this happened, there would usually be chat conversation about how we should change our strategy to avoid further failure. Overall, the general lack of social interaction can influence the perception that players have of one another. In MMOs, social interaction can serve as an indication someone is a human player rather than an NPC (Hutchinson, 2013, p. 160). Therefore, without interaction, players seem less like humans and more like bots that help with completing duties (Crenshaw &

Nardi, 2016). *FFXIV* even has a system dedicated to that very task,¹² further inviting these comparisons. One forum user lamented this reality of lacking socialization, stating that “the magic of spontaneous social interaction [has] completely evaporated in modern *FFXIV*.” Without this “magic,” *FFXIV* becomes a place where people share space but avoid togetherness: a non-place (Bauman, 2000).

Changing Social Affordances

Shifts in the social affordances offered by *FFXIV* have played a notable role in making the game less sociable. Since its release, *FFXIV* has implemented several features to streamline play, including the Party Finder system. This system allows players to form or join groups to complete duties or other activities (see Figure 7).

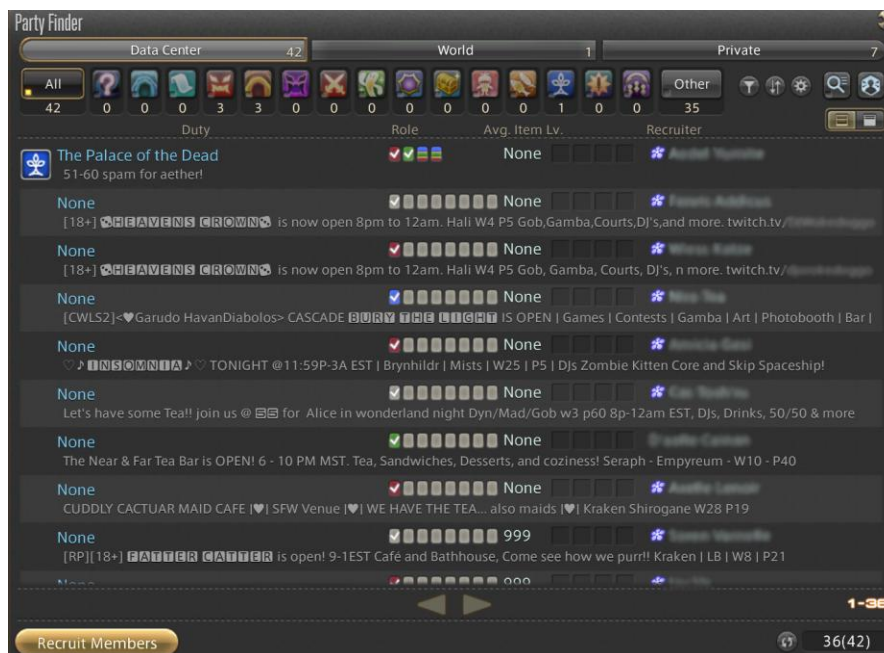


Figure 7. Party Finder Menu (Seraph; © SQUARE ENIX)

Though this system hastens the process of finding people to play with, it has downstream effects on the kind of social interaction available to players. On r/ffxiv, one user posted a screenshot

¹² *FFXIV*'s Duty Support system allows players to complete story-related dungeons and trials with a group of NPCs instead of players.

from before Party Finder was implemented into *FFXIV* in 2013, leading to discussion about the impact of the feature. At that time, players would have to type in Shout chat or directly message other players to find people to group with to do high-level content. In this way, social interaction was a required part of group play and functioned as a way for players to build relationships with each other. It also acted as a way for players to learn social skills in a relatively safe environment, an affordance not as prevalent in modern *FFXIV* (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005). Furthermore, a few replies to the post also mentioned how players previously had to be physically present at the location of the duty to queue for it. In effect, these locations were a kind of “fourth place,” or a public area that supports unplanned social interaction (Aelbrecht, 2016). Now, access to these locations is handled through a menu, discouraging this form of socialization. As a result, there is sentiment among some players that despite systems like Party Finder being preferable for their convenience, an important aspect of MMO sociality is lost in the process their implementation. Such sentiments are common among players of other MMOs that have gone through similar changes (e.g., Crenshaw & Nardi, 2016; Eklund & Johansson, 2013). For example, one study found that players reported a diminished sense of community because of changes like this in *World of Warcraft* (O’Connor et al., 2015). Overall, *FFXIV*’s social affordances work against players cultivating close ties with one another, making the game feel more like a single-player game rather than an MMO.

Fractured In Play, Fractured in Place

With little incentive for or access to social interaction, *FFXIV* can be an isolating experience despite being an MMO. Under these conditions, “belonging is more of an individual responsibility than a public good” (Dotson, 2017, p. 19). When people ask whether *FFXIV* is a social game, a common response is that sociality is present if you are proactive in finding it. As

one Reddit user stated, “you get what you put into it.” As such, the onus is on individual players to seek out community for themselves, splitting up into different Linkshells (chat groups), Free Companies (player organizations/guilds), or even transferring to different servers in the process. This constant search can be a tiresome act, and, ultimately, players become fractured into independent social groups rather than situated in a shared space that facilitates communal relationships (Dotson, 2017).

Players’ search for community may also draw them to online platforms outside of the game, fracturing community even further. These online platforms have features that make them very appealing for fulfilling social needs. For example, platforms like the messaging app Discord allow players to communicate over voice chat, enabling a form of interaction absent from *FFXIV*. Additionally, these platforms are more accessible, as people can take their social connections with them wherever they go with their phones rather than being limited to the game (Chayko, 2014). As a result, players may feel more inclined to use these social platforms instead of *FFXIV* itself to socialize with others and find community. To quote a comment on r/ffxiv, “The days of an MMO serving as the communication channel of choice [for players are] gone.” Under these circumstances, players become fractured across distant social spheres rather than together in a shared environment. In the end, if everyone is in their own social bubbles, does *FFXIV* even need to exist as an MMO?

Discussion and Conclusion

A Social Experience or Asocial Experience?

The findings of the present study suggest two realities about *Final Fantasy XIV*. On one hand, *FFXIV* bears resemblance to Oldenburg’s (1999) third places: its virtual environment enables informal socialization and lays the groundwork for community formation. At the same

time, the lack of player socialization as well as the reduced availability of social affordances within *FFXIV* give it the character of a non-place, where togetherness is stripped of any meaningful interaction (Bauman, 2000). Though paradoxical, my observations point to these realities of *FFXIV* existing simultaneously. Thus, I find that *FFXIV* confers an experience of ‘fractured togetherness’ onto its players. To me, this is emblematic of the role shift that MMOs have undergone since their emergence. Early MMOs released at a time when online interaction was not as robust as it is now. Not only was it a novel concept to inhabit a shared virtual environment with people around the world, but these games were also designed to promote social interaction (e.g., Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005; Nardi & Harris, 2006). As a result, MMOs became a unique form of online interaction support the formation and maintenance of community. Over time, MMOs began designing away from this type of social play, instead enabling greater solo play and rewarding individual achievement (e.g., Braithwaite, 2018). At the same time, other forms of online interaction (e.g., social media) were becoming increasingly popular, meaning that MMOs were not as unique a social space. Now, with social media being the predominant space for online interaction, there is room to believe that MMOs are on their way out (Koster, 2010). *FFXIV* illustrates how there is still room for a shared social environment like an MMO to facilitate feelings of community, as difficult as that process might be.

Study Limitations and Future Directions

The present study has several limitations that future studies could redress. First, for this ethnography into *FFXIV*, I spent a total of 40 hours conducting participant observation both in game and on online forums. Though I was able to collect a workable amount of data, this length of time is not enough to get a fuller understanding of the social norms, practices, and attitudes of *FFXIV* players. Boellstorff et al. (2024), for example, recommend spending at least twenty hours

a week conducting digital ethnographic fieldwork (p. 90). As such, the present study represents a glimpse into what the social world of *FFXIV* is, something that future research could expand on further. For example, a future ethnographer could visit more than the two servers I did, examining differences in player activity across the North American Data Centers. They also compare the behaviors of NA players to those of other regions (e.g., Japan, Europe, Oceania) to observe regional differences in social activity. Furthermore, observing in-game sociability at the endgame stage would open up more activities for investigating player behavior. This would also help with generalizability, as my research is limited in how far the findings can apply given the fieldsite.

Additionally, the present study is limited by the non-game platforms I consulted to supplement my in-game observations: the official English forums and r/ffxiv. These sites were chosen because of their close affiliation with the game as well as their popularity. While these offer some insight into players' discussions about *FFXIV*, these platforms do not encompass all player activity outside of the game. Other social media platforms are also home to their own communities of *FFXIV* players and their thoughts on the sociality of *FFXIV* may inform different conclusions than those I drew from the sources I utilized. Examining these other platforms could also assist in interviewee recruitment, as the present study only had one interview respondent. More player voices being included would be beneficial for obtaining granular knowledge about what daily play is like for *FFXIV* players.

Finally, my identity as a Black male researcher as well as a long-time *FFXIV* player may have the sort of data I was able to collect. For instance, throughout my play time I was not the recipient of any negative unsolicited messages or other sorts of harassment. While this may speak to the low levels of toxicity present within the player community, I would also argue that

playing with a male avatar offered a level of protection against that treatment. My avatar's skin color also did not negatively impact my play experience, though it is possible that I may have been treated differently without my awareness. There is also the possibility that if I had played as a different in-game race, other players may have received me differently. Aside from these aspects, being familiar with *FFXIV* meant that I was not worried about playing with others given that I had done the content previously. Were I more unfamiliar with the game, there could have been more friction between myself and other players, giving room for different social experiences than those I encountered. One reason why there was as little friction in my play experience is because I was observing the game world rather than player behavior in specific groups. If I had joined Free Companies or gotten more involved in *FFXIV* communities on Discord, I would have interacted with players more directly and potentially faced different reception as a result.

One finding that worth delving deeper into relates to the Data Center Travel system contributing to a loss of server identity in *FFXIV*. In discussion of this point on r/ffxiv, one reply noted how some players' contempt for those who use this system to travel between servers (noted in game as "Travelers" or "Voyagers") almost sounded like xenophobia. Though not a perfect analogy, it would be interesting to explore this comparison further, investigating whether the effects of virtual tourism and/or immigration can inform how we understand its non-virtual form and vice versa.

The Future of MMOs and Online Interaction

In the end, what is the purpose of MMOs being MMOs? Despite being massively multiplayer, *Final Fantasy XIV* is demonstrative of how these games work more to deter social interaction than drive it, encouraging more individual or isolated play. Coupled with other online

social platforms' ability to fulfill players' social needs where the game cannot, there seems to be little reason for it to be an MMO. Yet, *Final Fantasy XIV* is also a testament to how much rich sociality would be lost if that were to transpire. Unlike the personalized networks of social media, MMOs like *FFXIV* are shared virtual worlds where unplanned interactions with other people turn into meaningful encounters that lay the foundation for community bonds to grow. Additionally, these spaces merge conversation with collaboration such that players both talk to and rely on each other as a natural part of play, separating MMOs from other forms of social gaming (Kowert et al., 2014). Furthermore, research suggests that playing MMOs and engaging with the communities found therein may even improve players' social and mental well-being and encourage civic participation both online and offline (Molyneux et al., 2015; Raith et al., 2021; Tushya et al., 2023). Though current anxieties surrounding loneliness and isolation are high, these games contribute to keeping people close and connected. They would be even more effective if developers expanded their affordances for social connection. Overall, *Final Fantasy XIV* shows that MMOs still have a place in the online social landscape, delivering togetherness in a realm where individualism governs interaction. Other social platforms can therefore learn from MMOs to deliver similar experiences to their own users. In this way, the fractured togetherness felt by people separated into fragmented social networks across the Internet might one day be made whole.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer



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Looking for Final Fantasy XIV Players to Interview

Study Purpose: Exploring the social activity of FFXIV players

To participate you must:

1. Be at least 18 years old
2. Either currently play FFXIV or have played in the past.

Note: No direct benefits or compensation are rewarded for participating in this study

Participants will be asked questions about:

- a. In-game social interactions
- b. The impact of game design on social interaction
- c. Feelings towards other players

Interviews will be conducted remotely via Zoom or Discord

Study No. IRB25-0375

Contact Kiragu Waititu for more info!
Email: kwaititu@uchicago.edu

Thank you!

Appendix B

Recruitment Scripts

To Discord Moderators:

Hello! I have a bit of an odd question that I am hoping you could help me with. I am a graduate student looking for a few FFXIV players to interview for my thesis research project. My research is interested in players' social interactions with other players and how the design of FFXIV influences those interactions. The interviews would be done through text or voice chat over Discord, depending on what is more comfortable for participants. Would it be possible for me to post a request on this server for people to contact me if interested? If you need further information about my project, please let me know. Thank you!

General Script:

(To be posted after receiving approval from the mods)

Hello! I am a graduate student looking for a few players (ages 18 and over) to interview as part of my master's thesis project. My research is interested in players' social interactions with other players and how FFXIV's design influences those interactions. Interviews would be done over Discord (voice or text chat, based on preference), should take around 30-45 minutes and will ask questions related to this topic. If interested and/or you have any questions, please DM! Thank you!

Appendix C

Interview Questions

Demographics

1. What name would you like to be called (can be your username or any other name you want for privacy/anonymity purposes)?
2. What is your age?
3. What data center/server do you play on?
4. When did you start playing FFXIV?
5. If you wish to share, what is your preferred gender identity?
 - o What are your preferred pronouns?

Player Sociality Questions

1. How often do you talk with other players in game?
 - a. Is there a specific place or instance in which you do so?
 - b. What prompts you to talk or not talk with other players?
2. Do you typically play with friends or by yourself?
 - a. Do you enjoy one way more than the other?
3. Are you a part of any Free Companies or Linkshells?
 - a. If so, what made you want to join?
 - i. How has that affected your experience of playing FFXIV?
 - b. If not, what made you not want to join?
4. How often do you talk with players outside of the game?
 - a. Where (e.g., in-person, online)?
5. How social do you think FFXIV is?

- a. How social do you think it should be?
 - b. What aspects of Final Fantasy XIV do you think affects how social players are with each other? Would you want to change those aspects?
6. Do you feel similarly to other FFXIV players as you do to strangers you may encounter in real life?
 - a. If not, what marks that difference?
7. Do you feel a sense of connection or community with other players?
 - a. If so, what makes you feel connected?
 - b. If not, what sort of feelings do you have towards other players?

Appendix D

Consent Form



Version: 2/22/2025

University of Chicago Consent for Research Participation

Study Number: IRB25-0375
Study Title: FFXIV Sociality
Researcher(s): Kiragu Waititu

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to understand the social activity of Final Fantasy XIV players and the factors that influence it.

Procedures and Time Required: You will be asked to participate in one 30-minute remote interview. With your permission, the interviews will be audio-recorded. You will not be required to answer questions you do not wish to, and you can withdraw from the interview whenever you would like.

Financial Information: Participation in this study will involve no cost to you. You will not be paid for participating in this study.

Risks and Benefits: Your participation in this study does not involve any risk to you beyond that of everyday life. There are no direct benefits to you for participation in this study; however, your contribution will aid in providing a better understanding of how social activity occurs in virtual space.

Confidentiality:

To protect personal information, you will have the option to choose a pseudonym for yourself to be used in the study. If you do not wish to choose, one will be given on your behalf. If recording consent is granted, audio records of this interview will be stored on a secure cloud server provided by the University (i.e., UChicago Box). This data will be destroyed at the end of the study or if you decide to withdraw. Information collected as part of this interview will not be shared with anyone outside the research team or used for future study.

Contacts & Questions:

If you have questions or concerns about the study, you can contact Kiragu Waititu at kwaititu@uchicago.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, feel you have been harmed, or wish to discuss other study-related concerns with someone who is not part of the research team, you can contact the University of Chicago Social & Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board (IRB): phone (773) 702-2915, email sbs-irb@uchicago.edu.

Consent:

Participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate or withdrawing from the research will involve no penalty to you. If desired, you will be provided a copy of this form. *Would you like to participate? Is it okay for me to record this meeting and take notes?*