

FM5508 - CRITICAL APPROACHES

‘An analysis of the design transitions from *Final Fantasy VII* (Square, 1997) across to *Final Fantasy VIII* (Square, 1999)’

The medium of the videogame and the creative processes therein that gives rise to a publication could be analyzed as a grappling of the technological combined with the pouring of a crafted art into a diagesis; the popularity of the product being how well this mixture translates to the audience. Fantasy in particular lends itself to the realm of the game, as both require a certain suspension of disbelief for necessary engagement of the escapism from reality to work - the ‘fantastic’ being a very human clawing at of the notion of ‘mimesis¹’, and forms of media are ways of considering this intangible and unattainable nature of the mimetic by a filtering through a synthetic diagesis. Fairy-tale, legend and fable all extrapolate from the fantastic where the dominant ideologies of life-lessons are passed down generations in the form of myth. Deliberately setting out to explicate a fantastic game rather than a game predetermined by the gravity of realism is catharsis for freedom from the uncertainty of reality, for remediation of the foundation notions of existence, and more deeply abstract could be seen as searching for a closer proximity to the divine¹ – often in quest-based games through the overcoming of popular notions of the uncanny damned. Monsters of the mind, whether imagined to be frightening, cruel or repulsive, and moral issues of nobility, decency, happiness or goodness are issues that matter in the real world - yet when addressed in fiction potentially allow a purer addressing through magnification, especially in the genre of Fantasy where dream, illusion, distortion and exaggeration are intrinsically expected. An analysis of the two defining and significant classic Role-Playing Games (RPG’s) *Final Fantasy VII* and *Final Fantasy VIII* released for the *Sony PlayStation* hardware make a good comparison for studying the real transitional design and style sensibilities the Japanese videogame company Square arranged for the diageitic fiction of *VIII* following the distribution of *VII*, as well as consequential developments across audience participation with the series.

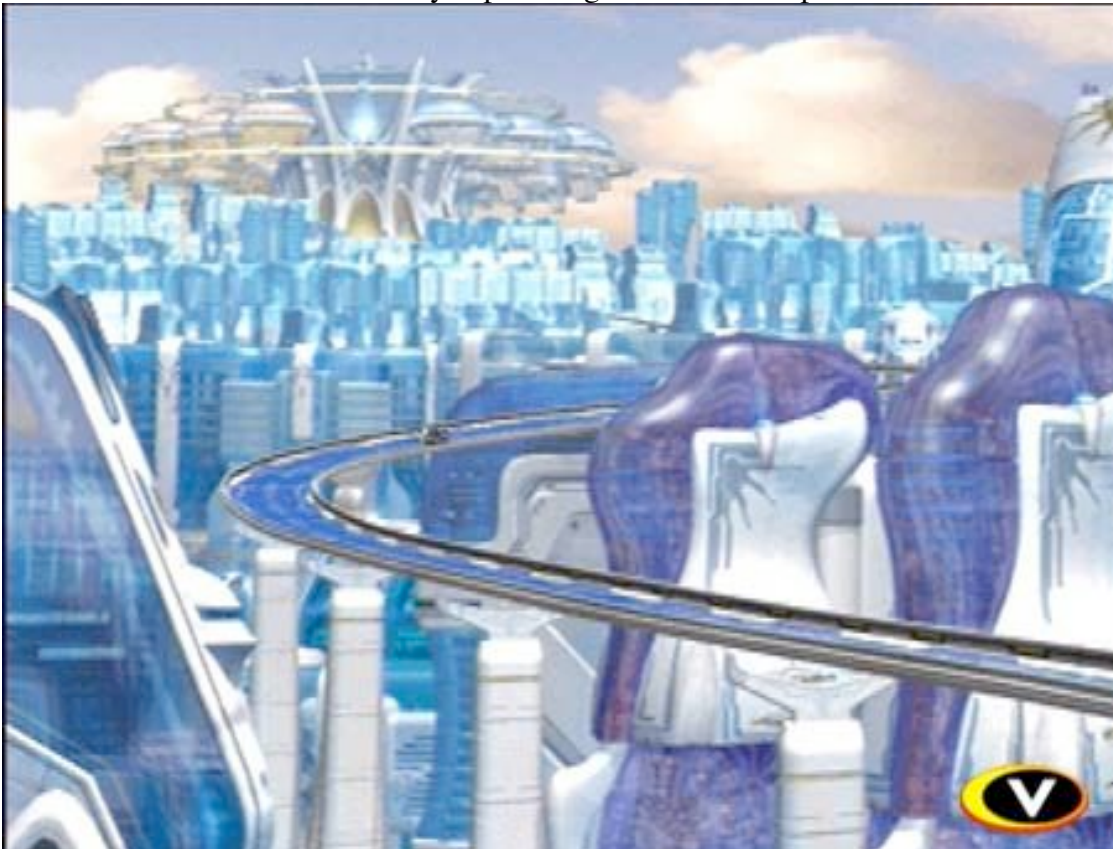
Fantasy as a genre generates within its audience limitations bounded solely by the imagination of the creators. The suspension of disbelief in the audience is the key

measure as to how far the fantasy can be pushed before the spell breaks, and this relies on many design elements not least enthralling character arcs, engrossing plot developments and a comprehensible logical world. The games are famous for their intense cinematic quality visuals and soundtrack that express expeditions through precision design. A clear aesthetic tapestry for the player to engage with is certainly an element that runs strong through both games, with considerations having taken place to invert many of the features of *VII* for *VIII*.

Physically the world² of *VII* is cyberpunk in style, the dystopian megalomaniacal conglomerate oppression of the Shin-Ra Electric Power Company and its raping of the planet's Lifestream energy source in the name of an intangible 'promised land', coalesce with the previous Jenova alien incursion to generate a heavy, oppressive atmosphere. It also deals with psychosis and identity in the face of eugenics, and the evils of unethically meddling with science and the unknown. Thematically the narrative presents the personal struggle of the protagonists who are a ragtag thrown together group, and the environmental struggle through the abusing of the limitations of the game world from the antagonists - thus grounding the player in a grinding uncertain reality. The main city of Midgar (see image 1 below), which is the source of the whole of the first disc, is even in a perpetual state of darkness from pollution suggesting the claustrophobic repercussions from relying too much upon technology. Playing as members of the renegade group AVALANCHE creates a feeling of hazard and risk to the corrupt governing establishment, of excitement and danger generated from political disturbance and revolution. No personal ethical battle exists for the player, as more details emerge about Shin-Ra's selfish corporate attitude it allows an easier gliding for immersion – the game relies on the natural moral compass regarding preservation of their environment most are instilled with to justify narrative developments. It is a gestalt of drought, where achievement is generated through feelings of liberation and overcoming obstruction, the player as aggressive resistance with/as the avatars. The game is the best-selling in the *Final Fantasy* series and ongoing popularity has led to a series of sequels and prequels.



1 and 2 – VII's Dystopia Midgar vs VIII's Utopian Esthar





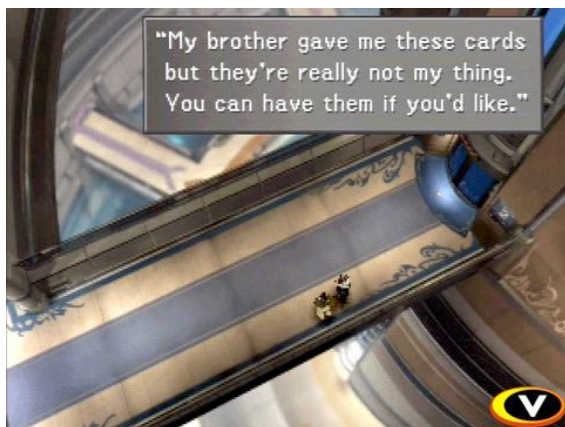
3 – Examples of group character art in *VIII* highlighting the games premise of tactile affection, compared with

4 – Group montage of individual character portraits



VIII by comparison³ is much more feminine in discourse (see image 3 above). The ‘school days’ aesthetic was deliberately reversed to immerse the player in a brighter and more positive world with exotic and foreign (at least to the Japanese) overtones; nurturing a mutual, shared communal environment. Fundamentally the game is a love story - the relationship of the two main protagonists Squall Leonheart and Rinoa Heartilly⁴, and about the friendships of the students of the SeeD military Academies. This theme is further founded through unraveling flashbacks about how a potential relationship (Laguna, a soldier, and Julia, a Hotel pianist and singer) was ruined with the advent of war. Consequently Laguna went on to marry and have two children (Squall and Ellone), and Julia married General Carroway to have Rinoa. The game’s main musical theme ‘*Eyes On Me*’ is a romantic lyrical (which is rare considering almost all music is orchestrated in both games except for the final boss theme ‘One Winged Angel’ in *VII* and the recurring anagram ‘Fithos Lusec Wecos Vinosec’ in *VIII*) song written by Julia for Laguna after his departure, and is used in a key romantic scene⁵ which gives it a deeper poignancy considering Julia’s death. Physically Square were able to explore this affection thematic through field character models that were more ‘Western’ in proportion whereas *VII* exhibited more Eastern ‘chibi’ models as a result of their first foray into three dimensions, hence further motion and expressive body language could be generated. By extension other positive recurring themes present are of acquisition and refinement, whether that is the main combat system of ‘drawing’ magic from abundant sources and enemies or transforming items into others. Possession is explored through literal bodily possession with regards to the Sorceress powers of the storyline - giving an unknowable sublime trepidation to the limitless of the supernatural. These Sorceress powers are the key to many of the plot events, with players often chasing, exorcising or bearing witness to the overwhelming and sensuous. Players are compelled to marvel at the abundance of the spectacular, and are left to enjoy immersing themselves in the designed beauty of the environments for a reflectively and reflexively flowing narrative experience. The diagnosis of *VIII* is more concentrated on people and relationships and much more understated in its overall narrative method – it is rife with symbolism throughout, with promotional material and loading screens referring to Squall as the ‘Sleeping Lion Heart’, Rinoa as the ‘Angel Wing’ and Seifer (a brash secondary

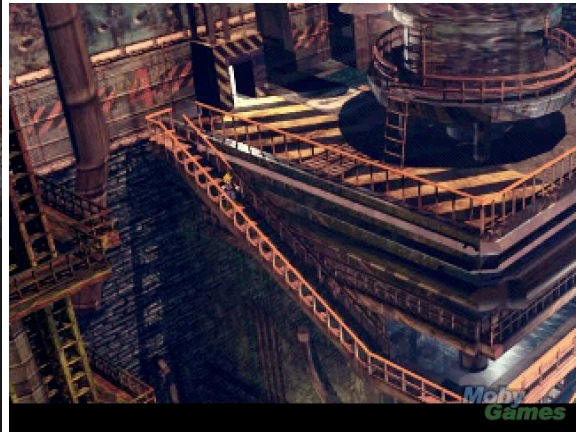
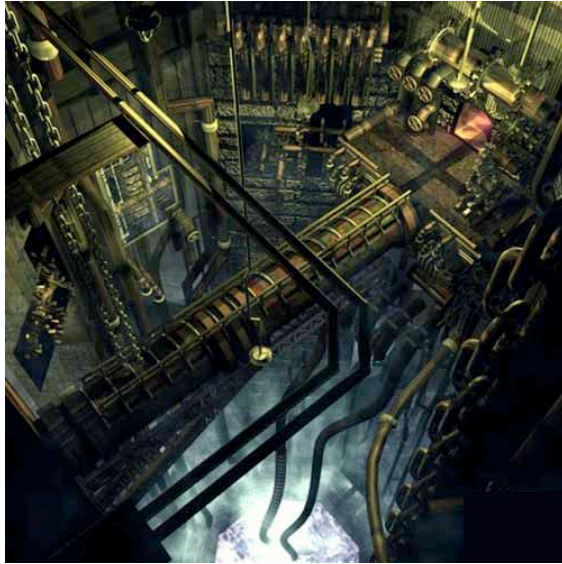
recurring Knight antagonist who is the dualistic binary opposite to the composed Squall as the 'Cross Sword'. These semiotically further flesh out the characters as respectively honorable and truthful, holistic and feminine, and full of allegiance and loyalty.



5 through 10 - Examples of VIII's paideic spacious movement allowing ease of immersion in the aesthetically bright world.

VIII has an emphasis resting on initially creating an environment the player wishes to immerse themselves in, so freedom for exploration is required – or rather a paideic design strategy (see image 5-10 above). *VII* begins as true to its aesthetic, in a very restricted and confined ludic manner in the bowels of Midgar with the main World Map only opening after completion of the first disc (see images 11-16 below). The player is initiated by sabotaging one of the city’s reactors and along the way learns the rituals of the game through a linear path. *VIII* has a reverse design where straight away there is the freedom of the Garden to explore and subsequent examination where the World Map opens up straight away. Interestingly *VIII* is the only game in the series to have enemies ‘level up’ with the player, a strategy that deploys a rewarding for the player who emphasizes playing around and clever use of the key customizing ‘Junction System’ instead of laborious slaying of endless legions to progress with boosted stats. The series has always been aware of conventions of spectacle⁶ with its battle system, especially with limit breaks and summons⁷, and *VIII* introduced a further paideic element by allowing the ‘boosting’ of arduous summon animations with a pressing of the *select* button and timed tapping of the *square* button, hence making long repeatedly viewed sequences interactive, which was one of the main criticisms of *VII*.





11 through 16 - Examples of predetermined ludic movement in *VII*.

Evidently *Final Fantasy VII* and *VIII* explore two different mimetic tones of the natural and manmade; where players of *VII* fight a conflict, and players of *VIII* share a binding. Each of the games antagonistic climatic methods of absolution contrast accordingly. Sephiroth's summoning of the Meteor invasion⁸ where the goal is to extract the planet's Lifestream energy represents the dominant and masculine threatening of the very life of the planet itself, and is akin to the natural law of the 'survival of the fittest', where anything goes in order to further ones own existence. Ultimecia's Time Compression⁹ is a feminine abstract psychological pursuit of the intangible, a meltingly

surreal metaphor for the ecstatic pursuit of capturing *jouissance*, only possible through a collapsing in of reality to reveal a sensual concept of ‘truth’. There are similarities though, where both games feature deep resonances that are derived from female allies being taken from the storyline (in *VII* Aerith, a simple flower girl from the Midgar slums and last of a crucial ancient race is murdered, and in *VIII* Rinoa falls into a coma upon possession by Ultimecia, the main antagonist). These work because of a dual process; within the inevitable developments of plot in the ludic narrative diagesis, and because the game has effectively stolen the hard paideic work the player channels into developing these characters, who are also your primary healers. Mercifully *VIII* returns Rinoa, but whether the result of this is an absence of a famous ‘Aerith Death Scene¹⁰’ is a possibility, due to the controversy always caused by the very real inherent sudden emptiness of death itself. In reference to film Gaut suggested ‘consider the idea of empathy... it is different from the notion of affective identification... That required the viewer to imagine feeling what a person (or a character fictionally) feels; empathy requires the viewer actually to feel what a person (or a character fictionally) feels’ (Gaut, 1999, 206)¹¹. Often media causes sympathy within the context of the resonant characters and storyline but losing a player/avatar from the diagesis masked by the computer’s ludic theft of an important asset generates a far more potent, and rarer, empathetic bond.

As the genre title of the RPG suggests it is the written *role* the player is given that determines the consequent cohesive immersion of the player/avatar that the game conjures in the virtual space, which leads to effortless enchantment and is therefore well designed. The initial moments of gameplay are crucial for establishing a firm connection with the player, and especially with RPG’s need to captivate enough they will continue playing for the remaining time of the story (with *VII* and *VIII*, famously above forty hours). *Final Fantasy VII* revolves around Cloud Strife as the main protagonist. As with the many of the other characters in the game it is possible to tell disposition through name alone, and with Cloud his plot thread unravels to be very cloudy and strife ridden indeed. Regarding his damaged design, as Yoshinori Kitase states in *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, October 2005 -

... he is definitely a mysterious character. That's one of the game's main themes, the fact that the protagonist has all these secrets to unravel. He isn't a straightforward hero like Superman; rather, he has lots of mysteries, self-doubts, and a real dark side. Mr. Nomura was also very good at designing a character like that¹².

Squall by contrast is a quiet mercenary student with an idyllic lifestyle, whose only narrative curiosities are being haunted by flashbacks to another life, and why he is so quiet. Being one of the greatest pupils at the Balamb Garden creates a reliance on the player wishing to pursue SeeD duties to further the story, including initial examinations and expeditions for the incentive of regular payment.

Designing connective characters for gaming is different from all other forms of media because of considerations required for player interactivity. Player identification is a core aspect of designing games played from the third-person, whereas first-person games often have anonymous protagonists that are 'empty vessels' which never respond to conversation and often have their facial features obscured - to allow ease of player/avatar immersion. Designers can use the 'sliding' nature of third person identification to interesting effects, as it facilitates an oscillation between stepping in and out of the role. Cloud and Squall's temperament allows player locomotive agency as the narrative unfolds for sleuthing out precisely whom they are controlling, but designing a designation is a delicate balance. Unraveling the character's secrecy and vagueness provides a sublimely exciting potent charge, yet too much and the player/avatar can seem needlessly convoluted, yet without enough then the player can lose interest in identifying the unknown. Suturing the player into RPG's is often allowed with the personal bridge of being allowed to name ones characters - avatars need to be empty yet relatable and interesting to allow a cohesive transition. Target demographics¹³ are an important consideration for striking these balances - both Cloud and Squall exhibit traits of effeminate androgyny so players have a higher chance of identifying with them, they both possess a certain 'power amplification' by being able to master weapons and magic that seem otherwise unwieldy, and upon unraveling of their plot threads both undergo psyche developments to their original temperaments of anxious angst-ridden adolescents.

Lacan (1949, 1)¹⁴ uses the concept of the *Mirror* to suggest a personally constructed identity is a process of identification with the external environment, or *Other*, in which we see or do not see ourselves in. With regards to *Final Fantasy VII* and *VIII*,

Cloud and Squall deal with overcoming anxieties and social impairment that are lessons arguably their audience seek to learn. A Guest Critic on GameCritic.com suggests – “The male protagonists are designed to more accurately reflect (those) that make up their fan-base, and the result is often a gentle reconciliation between fantasy and reality, a post-modern reinvention of storybook romance that addresses more directly the anxieties of modern social life... the reconciliation of subject and object, of fan and fantasy, into a redefined post-modern whole where the media serves as both mirror and window¹⁵”

By allowing typically angst-ridden teenage player to role-play as angst-ridden teenage characters who are unaware of their true identity (or in Cloud’s case are in fact role-playing to be someone else) it is a merging of the subjective and objective into an memorable thought-provoking whole, where the conscious goal is a saving of the fictional game world and an unconscious discovering of aspects of ones own identity.





17 through 22 - Examples of Final Bosses from *Final Fantasy I, II, III, IV* and *V*.

23 and 24 - Final bosses from *Final Fantasy VI* and *VII* displaying Fallen Angel themes.





The notion of Lacan's Other is also a useful tool for designing dualistically 'beyond' antagonists; for defining what the players *cannot* identify with and therefore crafts a classically opposing villain. The history of the Final Fantasy series has used classic armour clad demonic knights, the twistingly abstract ethereal and the straightforward Lucifer/ Fallen Angel visual metaphor (see 17-24 above) to illustrate evil the player must strive to defeat. Interestingly both *VII* and *VIII* use women (only seen before as an antagonist in *Final Fantasy II*) as a means of generating Other, where the audience cannot relate to and has fear instilled in them by the powerful female; a possible method of overcoming atavistic anxiety. *VII* has the deeply Oedipal and misunderstood Sephiroth mistake the evil parasitic alien Jenova for his Mother and many of the games tragic events are set in motion by the developments of the his distorted love complex. *VIII* has primarily the Sorceresses Edea (see 25 and 26 below) and Ultimecia for their players to defeat who both embody a theatrically exaggerated and threatening feminine flair. Another tactic to instill the notion of a dark dual opposite is via asymmetrical design (society values the symmetrical as an indication of healthy gene pool) especially with women, as the disfigured are potentially not seen by men as healthily prime for mating with, which both Edea and Jenova show examples of.



25 and 26 - Edea and Jenova displaying asymmetrical design.

The *Final Fantasy* series is unusual in that each subsequent game (except for *X-2* and other recent spin offs) are set in completely different Universes with individual stories, and yet all share the same *Final Fantasy* brand. It could be argued that the darker design of *VII* was a marketing strategy, a consequence similar to the film theorist Noel Carroll's theory (...past performances of actors contribute to their star persona, which can be utilized by the viewer to help flesh out other aspects of future character roles¹⁶) that a game spotlighting hard hitting dominion was required not necessarily as a subsequent step from *Final Fantasy VI* (which is similarly steampunk in aesthetic but more akin to the late 19th Century) but as a plan for heralding the intended domination of the game with the new PlayStation technology, and for the added worldwide impact only a game based on the mysterious could force. *VIII* by contrast potentially was only possible after the cementing of the success and establishment of the franchise within the next generation arena from *VII*; the real life technological environment at the uncertain beginning of the PlayStation lifecycle required a physical masculine aesthetic and approach before the more feminine *VIII* could have been produced. To the West the RPG genre had never popular or mainstream, and so the 'first RPG' for the PlayStation generation had to be designed to be significantly absorbing; a world of deep immersive angst was arranged whereas perhaps the bright happiness of *VIII* could have been viewed as too sickly sweet and typically 'Eastern'. Western avatar ideals celebrate exaggerated

physical presence whereas avatars from the East are generally a lot more psychological in nature, hence the design decisions behind the more emotionally stimulating and colourful *VIII* may have lacked the intended impact upon the industry landscape. To the ‘PlayStation Generation’ of the West, *VII* will always be remembered as more groundbreaking as to many it was their primary opening to the possibilities of the Japanese RPG. Benjamin (1968, 217-251)¹⁷ argued that progressive mechanical reproduction leads to a loss of ‘aura’ and this could also be applied to genre – why more advanced games in the series will not offer the same impact. Freshness in concept is valued over new successive technically impressive installments, and is why *VII* will always be remembered and loved the most.

Both games are an exploration of complex relationships between forms of redefinition and self-discovery, for both player and avatar. *VII* embodies an epic quest of grand heroism and redemptive navigation of solid structure - a sleek blacked-out chassis of dueling violin and subwoofer boom. *VIII* by extension is an exploration of the ethereal, an emotional meditation of affection and warmth perhaps only available to the West through the calculated success of *VII*. While *VIII* was technically more adept, to many *VII* was available first and therefore always going to be remembered as the most successful, as much of the success story of videogames as a whole is riding waves of fresh technological achievement. Fantasy in particular will always be a near infinite resource for enthralling audiences, but a success will always be influenced by market innovation and audience demographic, which in the West was administered more towards by the sprawling *VII* than the romantic *VIII*.

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Final Fantasy II (Square, 1988)

Final Fantasy III (Square, 1990)

Final Fantasy IV (Square, 1991)

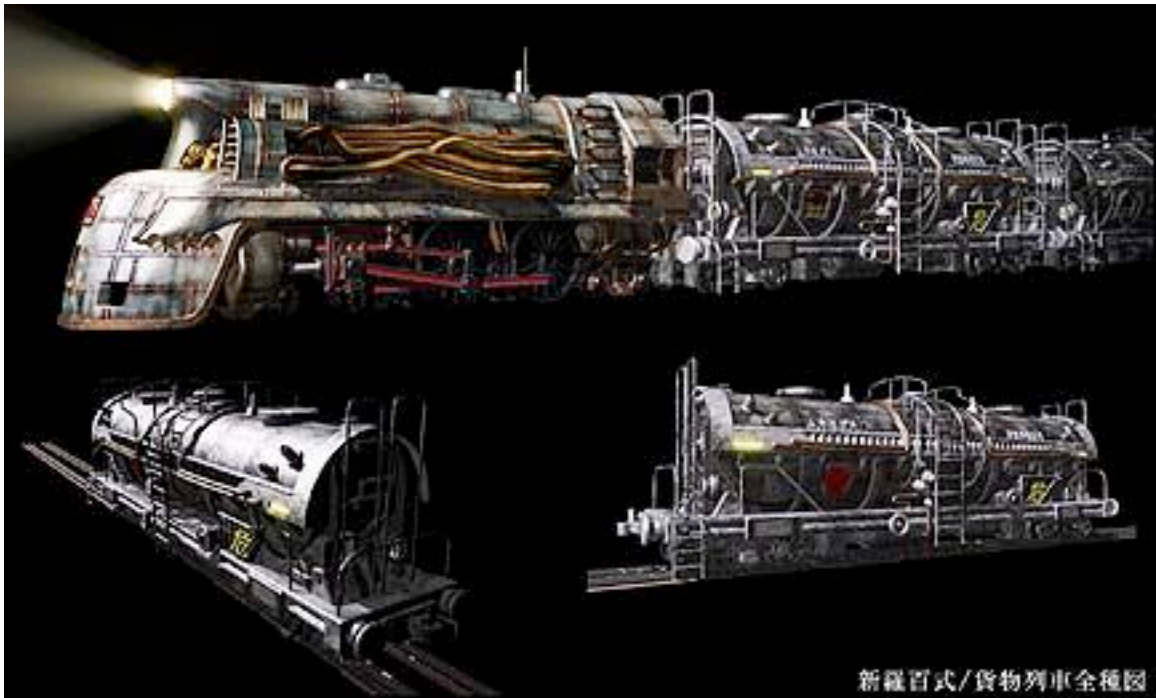
Final Fantasy V (Square, 1992)

Final Fantasy VI (Square, 1994)

Final Fantasy VII (Square, 1997)

Final Fantasy VIII (Square, 1999)

Final Fantasy X-2 (Square, 2003)



27 and 28 – comparing the games train vehicle designs *VII* above, *VIII* below. *VII* was about bare mechanics, exposed and barely functional. *VIII* had a much more effortless with elegant, beautiful high technology





29 and 30 – A comparison of the logo's, where one is an apocalypse and the other is a sweet embrace.





31 and 32 – A comparison between the Shiva summons in *VII* above and *VIII* below.





33 and 34 - Ultimecia in her original form and her final form. Note how the real Ultimecia hangs down as a mummified host for the Sorceress powers, as if the ineffable power is the real enemy.