

Cathartic Corridors: Queering Linearity in *Final Fantasy XIII*

Once a staple of game design, linear game spaces and play have slowly been pushed aside by open-world and sandbox mechanics in the AAA game industry. Most adventure games now have a duty to give visible agency to the player and ensure that their experience seem unique. Yet, this article argues that linearity in games should be reclaimed as a site of queer pleasure. Tackling how non-linear gameplays and temporalities have been associated with queerness, I first address the paradoxical nature of this argument. Through a brief examination of key *FF XIII* reviews, I then demonstrate that linearity has become *passé* in role-playing games and is frowned upon by the gaming community, which both play a key role in the shaping of our understanding of play. Running counter to the values hailed by the paratext, this article argues for a revival of linearity through a queer lens. Drawing upon two strains of queer theory – Ahmed’s queer orientation and Muñoz’s queer horizon, I show that *FF XIII*’s linearity aligns the player’s feeling with that of the characters and immerses them in a queer journey in which they face the present while walking towards queer ideality.

Keywords: queer; linearity; orientation; paratext; *Final Fantasy XIII*.

Subject classification codes: include these here if the journal requires them

Introduction

Boasting huge environments with almost no invisible barriers and loading screens between different areas, open worlds have rapidly become a staple of quality in most adventure games. *Zelda*, *God of War*, *Breath of the Wild* and even the next instalments of *Pokemon* are all franchises that have embraced open world game design to refresh their game mechanics, a choice that has been praised by many and enabled them to renew their gameplay. Indeed, allowing gamers to move freely in a gigantic virtual environment is often perceived as a non-linear and richer gaming experience; games feel less scripted and the player’s experience more personal, if not unique. As a result, even genres that initially did not seem to be suited to open world mechanics (racing

games such as *Forza Horizon* for instance) have gotten on board and contributed to its popularity.

After six years of waiting, *Final Fantasy XIII* was released and took fans by surprise. Despite displaying gorgeous visuals, the game was extremely linear and did not include many of the franchise's features, such as towns and non-playable characters. *FF XIII* still had many admirable qualities: breath-taking cut-scenes, a dynamic combat system, an excellent soundtrack and a cinematic narrative. And yet, linearity was the focus of most discussions debating the quality of the game. Reactions were mixed and a lot of players were disappointed. For the first time in the history of the franchise, Square Enix's decision seemed regressive. Taking into account criticisms, the studio changed its strategy and developed *FF* games that were much less linear. This change of direction reinforced the perception of linear gameplay as synonymous with weak game design in role-playing games.

Paying particular attention to unpopular gaming practices, pleasures and desires, queer game studies seeks to give a pluridimensional and political understanding of video games and gaming culture. Queer game studies has often focused on awkward, frustrating and bizarre games, which challenge gaming culture and its values, yet queer scholars have also made visible the queer aspects of mainstream franchises, attempting to demonstrate that there is no such thing as normal and that video games "have always been queer" (Ruberg 2019). In this way, *FF XIII* makes a relevant case study: it is a mainstream and conventional game, but its mixed reception and 'backwards' structure abounds with queer material.

Freedom of movements and diverse actions have often enabled queer theorists to identify and study queer play thanks to the multiple possibilities that they create.

However, we should not discard linearity on the grounds that it restricts queerness from

thriving. On the contrary, we should pay attention to its unpopularity in the gaming landscape and analyse its disruptive potential. In the light of the values of mainstream gaming capital, this article (re)claims linearity as a site of queer play. First elaborating on past interpretations of queer non-linear and non-chrononormative play, it demonstrates that *FF XIII* was considered a disappointment in the West because of its structure and tackles how focusing on unpopular trends could contribute to a queering of mainstream gaming capital. Finally, this article explores the queer pleasures that can be taken from *FF XIII*'s linear gameplay.

Material and Methods: Queering the Lines

Queer theory has evolved into a vast field constituted of various antinormative strategies (Watson 2005, 68) that revolve around the “disassembling of common beliefs about gender and sexuality, from their representation in film, literature, and music to their placement in the social and physical sciences” (Kirsh 2000, 33). Alongside this deconstructive process, being queer also signifies the practice of creating and nurturing queer spaces in which queer identities can thrive outside of the normative discourses of Western society (Halberstam 2005, 6).

Queer game studies has tended to focus, and rightly so, on playing games differently, which generally consists in running counter to the game's rules and structure. Scholars have focused on queer transgression (Sihvonen, Stenros 2018), queer failure (Ruberg 2015), queer becoming through body transformations (Wood 2017), queer controls (Marcotte 2018) and many other manifestations of queerness. In these studies, both visible and invisible aspects of gaming are highlighted, and new possibilities of gaming are studied, discovered and rediscovered. The relationship between queer play and linearity has been repeatedly touched upon and certain practices can be identified as particularly non-linear. This article defines linearity in terms of

game design: it can refer to a restricted game space, repetitive in-game actions, a series of scripted actions and a rigid narrative or all of the above (such as in *FF XIII*). Keeping this definition in mind, two types of play that particularly challenge the ‘normality’ or linearity have received scholarly attention – game *flânerie*, which includes walking simulators, and speedrunning.

Most games reward players for the time they invest: they must gain experience, loot collectibles, pick up new weapons and learn new skills. More time spent in a game often means better in-game abilities. For instance, delaying the completion of a main objective and undertaking a side quest instead could unlock an artefact that will prove useful in the future. Other gamers will simply want to repeat some tasks in order to ‘get better’ at the game. However, delaying a main narrative for no particularly reason seems nonsensical, which has drawn scholars to argue that *flânerie* (in other words, aimless wandering) in games could be perceived as a queer form of play (Kagen 2017, Pelurson 2018). Drawing upon Freeman’s (2010) concept of chrononormativity – i.e. ensuring maximum productivity through the organisation of human labour – they have argued that non-linear temporalities and non-productive play demanded queer attention. As previously mentioned, open and semi-open world mechanics are more likely to allow for queer meandering. The queer essence of meandering lies in its twisting of mainstream game practice, and, more particularly, linearity. Players wander in game’s environments without taking into account the game’s instructions. They take their time and slow down the succession of game events. Game progression is not necessarily discarded, but it is extended, or even put on hold. As such, game *flânerie* can be assimilated with queer counter gaming: the game is not played as it is “supposed” to be played, and the aims are not automatically tied with conventional success (Chang 2017).

At the opposite of game *flânerie* stands speedrunning, which is arguably one of the most visible form of non-linear gameplay and has also been reclaimed as potential queer play (Ruberg 2019). Speedruns generally consist in exploiting bugs and skipping entire sections of a game in order to finish in a record time (sometimes assisted by tools that enable in-game actions that would be impossible otherwise). Speedrunners avoid puzzles and enemies, and create new ways of playing that often revolves around the enjoyment of twisting game design. However, there are several obstacles to the claim of speedrunning as a queer game practice. First of all, speedrunning often occludes representational and non-representational queer game elements (Ruberg 2019). Speedrunning is also chrononormative and focuses on playing efficiently, which runs counter to the non-competitive and exploratory queer styles of gameplay previously mentioned. More importantly, the speedrunning community remains distinctively heteronormative (Boluk and Lemieux 2017) and puts the emphasis on competitiveness and gaming skills, thereby reproducing the tenets of mainstream gaming culture.

Both game *flâneurs* and speedrunners rely on breaking gaming norms and bending the “lines” that gamers are supposed to follow. In this way, they essentially opposed the initial gameplay designed by game developers and reject a certain “line” of conduct. In this context, linearity and the lack of agency to twist gameplay seems directive, if not authoritarian. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that a restricted game space does not necessarily prevent game *flâneurs* from taking their time, no matter how pointless their activity might seem to the eye of the average gamer. It could also be said in the case of speedrunning that breaking a game’s structure leads only to the reinstatement of another type of linearity, as speedrunners still must go from point A to B. In short, linearity should be considered neither at odds nor aligned with queerness. Although many games now offer various possibilities and game experiences tailored for

the players, we should not assume that a more restrictive gameplay prevents queer play. More importantly, we must first understand the tenets of the unpopularity of linearity before approaching it through a queer lens.

As previously mentioned, linearity has become increasingly less visible in the gaming landscape. The majority of games now enable gamers to evolve in 3d environments, create sandbox mechanics and open-worlds that get bigger every year, making linear gameplay rarer. While there are still successful AAA franchises that rely on linearity to deliver compelling narratives (*Uncharted*, *The Last of Us*), it now seems to appear as an outdated artefact in the mainstream gaming landscape, including historically linear genres such as beat-them-all (*God of War IV*) or First Person Shooters (*Far Cry V*). Unsurprisingly, linearity is even more shunned in RPGs, which are now expected to offer the widest range of possibilities to the players. Games such as *Skyrim*, *The Witcher III* and *Fallout: New Vegas* immerse players in vast and lively open worlds, which have now become standards of quality. J-RPGs tended to offer more of a linear experience, but the global success of Western RPGs in the late 2000s and early 2010s such as *Mass Effect*, *Dragon Age*, or *Skyrim*, pushed them to diversify their structure and franchises such as *Tales of* or *Xenoblade* have adopted open-world mechanics while still attempting to deliver a cinematic narrative. In this context, Square Enix's choice to make *FF XIII* one of the most linear instalments of the franchise was a surprise and a disappointment to many. Linearity had become *passé* and a source of annoyance to players and reviewers.

This article deploys Ahmed's (2006) notion of queer orientation and Muñoz's (2009) concept of queer horizon to uncover how linearity can be reclaimed as a generator of queer experiences. Wondering about how phenomenology can be approached through a queer lens, Ahmed (2006) questions what it means "for sexuality

to be lived as oriented” (543) and the difference it makes when it comes to the direction of our desire. She argues that becoming queer involves changing directions and “risking departure from the straight and narrow” (554) in order to make new futures possible, and suggests that queer individuals tend toward a “space and time that is almost, but not quite available in the present” (554), and try to escape from social normativity, embodied by the following of “lines” (555). These lines can be equated to heteronormativity, defined by Ahmed as a “straightening device” (562), which cannot comprehend moments, objects, or people that are situated in-between the lines meant to be followed. Queer desire is therein erased and straightened by these same lines, and queer bodies run the risk of feeling empty and melancholic, while seeking “fleeting” (565) queer moments. As such, Ahmed argues that queer phenomenology could be oriented toward the “loss of grip” (566) of an object within reach, a slipping away of a moment that is already within the reach of our horizon. We can, therefore, generate a queer landscape by deviating from straight lines and creating new and “unofficial” paths (570). Yet, Ahmed suggests that deviation should not be the essence of queer politics, particularly because it cannot unite nor support queer paths. While deviation is bound to happen, Ahmed suggests that we must ask “what our orientation toward queer moments of deviation will be” (570) and how we will find and provide support for those whose lives deviate from the rigidity of heteronormativity. Her compelling argument offers such a framework for approaching linearity through a queer lens.

In his provocative study of the everyday life confrontation between queerness and heteronormativity, and in response to the antirelational works developed by Bersani (1989) and Edelman (2004), Muñoz argues that queerness is an “ideality” which can be felt as “the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (2009, 1). He argues that we should strive for queerness, even if it is an ideality that “is not yet there”

(1). According to him, we may never be queer, but moving towards queerness enables us to resist the “here and now” – the heteronormative present, and concentrate on what is missing in order to perceive and understand the “blueprints” (1) of queer futurity. Challenging the mainstream perception of *FF XIII*'s structure, this article turns to examine queer gaming capital according to strains of queer theory that involve embodiment, orientation and purpose. Under this critical scope, it aims to consider *FF XIII* in a different light than its paratext.

Anatomy of a Disappointment

The story of *Final Fantasy XIII* mainly takes place in the floating world of Cocoon, an artificial planet built by the fal'Cie – god-machines whom mankind view as their protectors. Cocoon floats in the atmosphere of the world of Pulse, an “outside world” that remains unknown, feared and despised by the inhabitants of Cocoon because of their past conflicts. Fal'Cies can give humans missions, which are often unclear and difficult to understand. The outcome of such a quest is not without consequences: humans are transformed into crystallized status if they succeed, granting them eternal peace, or zombified monsters if they fail. The game's story follows characters from both Cocoon and Pulse, who are given a mission by a Pulse fal'Cie, and become entangled in a plot to destroy Cocoon.

In order to obtain an overview of the critical reception of *FF XIII* by journalists and gamers, this article selected eleven¹ of the fifteen most visited video game websites in the United States, according to the ebusiness platform eBizMBA in September 2019.

¹ IGN, gamespot, kotaku, the Escapist, PCGamer, GiantBomb, Joystiq, Gametrailers, Gamesradar, Cheatcc and gamasutra.

It also included Metacritic, which quantifies the perception of high numbers of gamers through online surveys and reviews. Although Metacritic has been widely criticized for gathering a large list of publications that are not always “recognizable”, the scores given by the websites remain highly influential in the video game industries and mean a lot to publishers who often decide to offer bonuses to developers when a game reach a certain score (Schreier 2015). Evidently this article delivers a Western and anglocentric reading of *FF XIII* and does not claim to represent the views of non-Western or non-English speaking audiences. As such, the views expressed in the selected websites should be approached as indicative rather than fully representative of the overall reception of the game.

Eight of the most popular selected websites gave relatively high scores to *FF XIII*, which were equal or superior to 8 out of ten (Clements 2010; VanOrd 2010; Fahey 2010; Funk 2010; McElroy 2010; olGamingL 2010; Gudmunson 2010; Kondolojy 2010). Yet, a closer look reveals a much more ambiguous picture. First, most scores reveal that *FF XIII* obtained lower marks than its predecessors in most cases (see Appendix 1). More importantly, some of the websites that originally gave strong reviews of *FF XIII* have made contradictory statements in the following years, thereby partly discrediting their original score. This is the case for *IGN*, which labelled *FF XIII* as the biggest disappointment of the year 2010 (Kolan 2010) despite giving it the score of 8.9. While this contradiction reveals the potential lack of transparent relationships between video game websites and editors (Plunkett 2012), it also consolidates the vision of *FF XIII* as a disappointing game. This feeling was reinforced as Samuel Roberts (2014) from *PCgamer* labelled the game “the most hated Final Fantasy” instalment of the franchise and the websites *IGN* (2016) and *Kotaku* (Schreier, 2013) respectively ranked it 10th and 12th out of the 12 *FF* offline games at the time.

The reviews all identified similar flaws such as the game's repetitive gameplay and its laborious narrative, but agree on one particular aspect: the game's blatant linearity. Considered a bold choice made by Square Enix, *FF XIII* ran against the trend in a year where a leading group of successful AAA games such as *Assassin Creed 2 Brotherhood* (Ubisoft Montreal 2010), *Fable 3* (Lionhead Studios 2010), *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios 2010) or *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar Games 2010) all followed open-world mechanics, which set the bar for the following years. By creating the most linear instalment of its franchise, Square Enix's decision was perceived by many gamers as backwards at a time where video game culture was all about (the illusion of) freedom and exploration (amesthemighty 2010).

Of course, most of the franchise's previous instalments were fairly linear, but they presented lively game worlds with many non-playable characters. Instead, *FF XIII* was the first game to entirely skip the inclusion of towns and interactions with NPC (Fahey 2010) in order to "allow the player to become absorbed in the drama of the storytelling and exciting world" of the game (Reilly 2010). Despite this approach, reviewers often felt that they could not connect with the characters and did not often feel empathetic to their fate (Croshaw 2010; VanOrd 2010; Roberts 2014).

Yet, *FF XIII* is not entirely linear as it is divided in two distinct parts: the first one being a long succession of 'corridors' where the player can only go from one point to another without any alternative, and a second where the characters are suddenly thrown in a vast plain (the world of Pulse) that more or less follow semi-open world mechanics.

Disorientating, this clear-cut transition did not meet the expectations of several reviewers either, who felt that the length of the first part would discourage most gamers to play until they reach Pulse (Shoemaker 2010; Funk 2010). In Roberts' words (2014),

FF XIII removed “the sense of exploration that’s been intrinsic to the series” and its “noisy but sometimes enjoyably melodramatic narratives” does not justify the first 20 hours of gameplay. Others felt confused by the change of pace during the second part of the game – cut-scenes were sporadic and objectives less obvious. In addition, Pulse is not big in comparison to open-world environments and is solely inhabited by monsters and speaking stones, which does not make it particularly attractive. Finally, the last segment of the game forces the player to go through corridors once again for a few hours. Overall, Square Enix’s prime objective – to convey a compelling story – was met with mixed success and the dualistic nature of the game’s structure was considered clunky and laborious (Funk 2010; McElroy 2010; olGamingl 2010; Shoemaker 2010; VanOrd 2010; Roberts 2014).

To repeat, linearity is not automatically synonymous with bad game design and a significant amount of forum threads illustrates a more nuanced reaction from players who enjoyed their experience (egervari 2011; amesthemighty 2010). Still, the significance it holds in online debates and the negativity it is associated with in online reviews present linearity as controversial in the case of *FF XIII*.

Queering Game Capital

Journeying through queerness in games will inevitably make players venture out of their comfort zone and explore realms ruled by the unexpected and the bizarre. Enjoying queer games often means clashing with mainstream views online as contemporary gaming culture remains a site “where discourses around technology, technological innovation and technological competence converge with dominant conceptions of gender and race” (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, 131) and has firmly established its place in the landscape of popular culture as such. This dynamic is nurtured and relayed by a plurality of factors, one of them being what Consalvo (2007) calls the “paratext”, a term

which encompasses a system of media products – game journalism, fan and internet culture – playing a key role in the construction of our understanding of how to think and judge video games both as products and media texts. According to Consalvo, this system is not perfectly balanced and some actors – such as video game journalists and YouTube channels – play a more important part in the shaping of the paratext. The previous sections shows that many game websites (who are, therefore, significant influencers) construed linearity as an outdated and even backwards mechanics in the context of this franchise.

Consequently, gamers who like *FF XIII* run the risk of being mocked, shunned and even accused of not being a ‘true gamer’ by a visible fragment of the online gaming community. This policing of good tastes is not a new feature of gaming culture and has sometimes taken a darker turn. #Gamergate², for instance, and recent accusations against three game developers (Webster 2019) demonstrate that there is still a long way to go before considering the gaming community as a safe space for minorities. Online vigilantes have hunted ‘traitors’ of geek culture with the aim of preserving a capital that would be supposedly threatened by outsiders.

One way to make online gaming culture safer is positioning ourselves against the current defining features of mainstream gaming capital. Based upon Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, gaming capital is “a fluid and always changing currency held by those who have gained knowledge and information about games and game culture and are able to voice their opinions or relate their experiences to others” (Nieborg and Sihvnonen, 2009, n.p.). Gaming capital encapsulates economic, social and symbolic

² An online controversy which stemmed from an online harassment campaign towards female journalists, developers and actors of the gaming industry.

forms of capitals that are inherent to the skills, knowledge and habitus of a “local” gaming environment. Gamers use online reviews, forums and comment sections to build and compete over a “culture of history” (Nieborg and Sihvnonen 2009, n.p.) and identify titles as ‘classic’ or ‘cult’ games. A hierarchy of gaming capital is established and is prior to change through the circulation of information “that takes place in the media ecology of videogames” (Walsh and Apperley 2009, 5). However, since most of the social influencers part of this system tend to privilege normative identities (Nakamura 2012), mainstream gaming capital that leaves a little room for queerness to thrive. Dominant meanings and ideological positions are produced and dictate how good games should be designed and played, which in turn influences gamers who navigate narratives and game worlds (Bogost 2007, 258).

Thus, running counter to the paratext might not always be queer, but having a queer approach will always consist in resisting the paratext. Bonnie Ruberg (2015) argues that queer essence lies in games that annoy, alarm, disappoint and bore players. Emphasizing the importance of turning our attention to alternative types of gaming pleasure, Ruberg challenges the hegemony of fun and questions the defining features of video game entertainment. In this respect, *FF XIII* could be read as a queer game despite its AAA features and onerous development. Indeed, its linearity was no longer accepted by its contemporary capital, which might explain why some of its predecessors, such as *FF X*, got away with being linear at the time of their release. Inadvertently, Square Enix positioned itself against the current game capital and created a potential site of queer pleasure.

Same Lines, New Paths

From a queer point of view, *FF XIII* belongs somewhat to a grey zone. Having not made it into the pantheon of cult games, it remains too good to be considered

scandalous and too mainstream to compete with the politics and edge of independent games that fully embrace queer game design. Yet, the paratext's framing of *FF XIII* as a disappointing game implicitly condemns the enjoyment of its linearity. Almost blasphemous, this enjoyment makes waves, raises eyebrows and even creates discomfort in the gaming community (LaTerry 2018). In many ways, it can be equated to queer play, which is all about resisting the lines dictated by mainstream gaming culture, and finding a new path, a new way of existing, in other words, a new orientation.

In the light of Ahmed's argument, we should first keep in mind that lines do not have to be 'straight' and that linearity should not necessarily be equated with 'straightening'. More importantly, the following of lines can only be normative if the process is recognized as such. Indeed, I have shown that the corridors of *FF XIII* have not been particularly praised by the paratext. On the contrary, a 'normal' gamer should be pestering against the game's linearity, bored by and annoyed at its repeatability. In this, to relish walking the straight path of *FF XIII* can paradoxically make us go astray.

The corridors of *FF XIII* offer material for queer introspection. Teasing the gamer, they make players evanescent promises of a world that demands to be discovered. Indeed, the game's decor depicts a virtual universe that is full of potential – a crystallised lake, a bionic forest, a never-ending and lush coastline – in which characters escape from their pursuers. Escaping from their pursuers throughout the first twenty-something hours of the game, players are unfortunately asked to 'rush' through these lush and imaginary environments. They can, of course, stop at any moment and observe the surrounding landscape, but the narrative demands they run through and leave each environment as soon as possible, in order to reinforce the feeling that time is running out for both the characters and the player. Until the steppes of Gran Pulse, the

game is a colourful and fantastical ride that showers the player with myths, history and other facts about Cocoon, without enabling them to fully experience them. In this respect, it can be argued that *FF XIII* encourages players to seek beyond the present moment of gaming and makes them hope for something better. In the light of Ahmed's argument, queer players orient themselves towards queerness with a purpose, which echoes Muñoz's (2009) work about the ideality of queerness.

Hope is omnipresent in *FF XIII*. Distressed and fleeing from a certain death, characters face countless enemies on their path, wishing that crossing each new region will help them fulfill their mission. On the player's level, this journey toward a better future can be aligned with the wish to see more interactive environments, just like in the previous *FF* games. And yet, while Gran Pulse temporarily changes the game and puts an end to the strict linearity of *FF XIII*, it does not deliver all of its promises. Its monsters and ancient stones do not make up for the fact that there are no towns or non-playable characters in sight. Missions are repetitive and the player is, once again, pushed to wish for more. Ironically, after leaving Gran Pulse, they have to walk through gorgeous but linear environments, once again.

In many ways, this lengthy progression can be read through Muñoz's queer utopianism. The gorgeous corridors of *FF XIII* are the "here and now", the present that is not queer enough. Still, this present gives players spectacular viewpoints overlooking waterscapes, starlit skies and seas of clouds. Albeit temporary (players cannot return to these spaces once they have been explored), these spaces provide an unattainable but present horizon into which players are free to look, slowing down the pace of the game should they wish to (see Figures 1 and 2). Refusing to take pleasure from these fleeting moments will probably frustrate the mainstream gamer, who will go increasingly frustrated throughout this mandatory journey.

Encouraging the contemplation of a present that is both temporary and eternal, *FF XIII* gives players the opportunity to take solace and enjoy the view of an imperfect present, from the characters' perspective – they are left with no other choice but to move forward and go through repetitive fights to summon glimpses of a better future – and a gameplay's point of view – the linear corridors leading to Gran Pulse. In this way, *FF XIII* provides glimpses of the “slant” (Ahmed 2006, 562) of queer desire towards which one can be oriented. Allowing gamers to self-reflect on queer orientation and existence, *FF XIII* offers a platform of contemplation that can help them to build new phenomenological paths.

Both fascinating and frustrating, Cocoon can therein be read as a synthetic prison where characters and players do not belong. Indeed, *FF XIII* aligns the player's feeling of frustration and entrapment with that of the characters through restrictive game exploration and rigid narrative structure: living in Cocoon or Pulse is unthinkable for the game's protagonists and none of these worlds can be fully explored by the player. The latter therefore undergo what is, from Muñoz's perspective, a queer journey: they have to endure a present that is not satisfying enough while being given an opportunity to reflect upon the obstacles they must face.

Focusing on non-normative pleasures enables us to articulate the richness and diversity of game experiences but also encapsulate gaming culture in a given time. This article showed that publicly enjoying *FF XIII* means carving out a route that strays carving straying from the paratext. Still, reclaiming linearity as a site of queer pleasure needs to be contextualized. Indeed, there is a possibility that linearity might enjoy a 'come back' in AAA role-playing games. Typing 'open world fatigue' on any internet browser shows that gamers are yearning for games with new structures as well as meaningful and narrated game tasks. When put in perspective, queer theory is a tool that

helps us develop an awareness of the dynamics between normative and transgressive values, observe the shifting politics of gaming culture, and, most importantly, be able to enjoy the unenjoyable.

Conclusion

Branded as a disappointing game, *FF XIII* gives us the opportunity to discuss the perception of unpopular game features. This article has attempted to show that linearity, when too restrictive, could become a site of queer pleasures. Shunned by the paratext and perceived negatively in role-playing games, a genre that is now expected to allow players to roam around in fantasy environments, linearity has been blamed for restraining players and echoing regressive game mechanics. Yet, this article has shown that *FF XIII*'s linear spaces reproduce the stages of a queer journey, making players embrace the present and recognize its limitations while hoping for a queerer future.

Using a queer rationale to defend the qualities of a criticized game design might seem trivial, but it ultimately legitimizes alternative appreciations of gaming that thwart dominant meanings produced by the paratext. Having sold more than 7 million copies, *FF XIII* has been played by a significant amount of people and gathered, despite its critics, an online community. Echoing what Miller (2008) argues about *GTA IV*, no one is ever 'truly alone' in the beautiful corridors of Cocoon. Players engage online, debate about and recreate video game material, which, in turn, contribute to the consolidation of a significant "imagined community" (Anderson 1983). Still, in order to avoid the normalization of the oppression of non-normative pleasures, we must share diverse readings of gaming experiences legitimize and reinforce gaming practices, pleasures and experiences that are articulated both consciously and unconsciously in the light of mainstream game capital.

Reclaiming linearity as a potentially queer gameplay structure is one endeavor among many that examine the cusp when a game mechanics stops being acceptable, which ultimately sheds light on the fragile nature of normality. *FF XIII*'s queer lines reminds us that queerness, despite its deconstructive nature and marginalized status, is ubiquitous. Norms might pervade most game design and structure, but queer pleasures can always be found lurking in parallel planes. We must bridge new paths and blur borders to nurture novel relationships with gaming and strive to enrich our gaming landscape.

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Appendix

	<i>Final Fantasy X</i>	<i>Final Fantasy XII</i>	<i>Final Fantasy XIII</i>
IGN (/10)	9.5	9.5	8.9
Gamespot (/10)	9.5	9	8.5

PCGamer ³ (/100)	85	85	48
Gamesradar ⁴ (/5)	4	4	5
Metacritic (/100)	92 (based on 53 reviews) 8.8 users score (based on 1178 ratings)	92 (based on 64 critics) 7.5 users scores (based on 1093 ratings)	83 (based on 83 reviews) 7.1 users scores (based on 2653 ratings)

Table 1. A comparison of reviews of *FF X*, *FF XII* and *FF XIII*.



Figure 1. Vanille (in-game) looking into the horizon of the Sunleth Waterscape, Kajgana, Public Domain.

³ The reviews on this website focused on HD remastered version of *FF X* and *FF XII* as it was impossible to find reviews of the original games.

⁴ The reviews on this website focused on HD remastered version of *FF X* and *FF XII* as it was impossible to find reviews of the original games.



Figure 2. Lightning (in-game) running on the waves of a crystallized lake, Final Fantasy Wikia, Public Domain.