Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within
A Case Study

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Final Fantasy, the first CGI (computer generated image) film featuring synthetic human actors, opens with its protagonist, Dr. Aki Ross, surveying her barren, alien surroundings. Aki wakes from the recurring dream and looks out at earth from the window of her spaceship. As the music swells, our heroine wonders if she will be able to save the world from the "phantom" spirits that have invaded it. Two scenes later, we learn that the phantoms also have infected Aki, effectively linking the fate of the devastated planet with that of a beautiful, young – albeit wholly computer-generated -- female body.

This body was placed on provocative display for readers of the men's magazine, *Maxim,* two months before *Final Fantasy'*s American premiere in the summer of 2001. Looking oddly innocent in her string bikini, Aki addresses the viewer with the same quiet gaze she maintains throughout the film. A month before the premiere and after the cover spread, Ruth La Ferla identified Aki Ross as part of a growing "synthespian"[1] trend in a *New York Times* article entitled "Perfect Model: Gorgeous, No Complaints, Made of Pixels." Aki's digital companions included Webbie Tookay, who posed for *Details* in 1999 and was signed by Sony Music Latin America as part of a virtual girls' band; Ananova, a green-haired anchor who reads real news and weather reports on the web; and Princess Fiona, voiced by Cameron Diaz, whose performance recently helped *Shrek* grab the first Oscar for an animated film.

The article cites media scholar Marsha Kinder, writer-director Andrew Niccol and advertising expert James Twitchell who all connect the popularity of these young, virtual women to their "extreme malleability" – their capability to change, or rather, be changed physically at a moment's notice. As Twitchell cheekily points out, virtual women are more compliant than real women ever would be: "Any advertiser who is able to use a cartoon will. Cartoons are copyrightable, which is nice and you can control them in an interview, which is even more nifty" (par. 23). Suzanna Walters, the director of the Women's Studies program at Georgetown University, responds by denouncing the virtual females as "the postmodern equivalent of a mail-order bride … compliant creatures created for one's pleasure, another example of the female as object" (par. 24).

Walter's comment links synthespian female performers with mail-order brides – young, foreign, working-class women, many of whom hail from East and Southeast Asia. Her analogy between virtual women and real women who virtually sell their sexual and physical labor (via images, increasingly on the Internet) implicitly racializes the former. It does so by referring to the shared class status between the two groups of non-normative women, focusing specifically on the "compliant" work they perform as "objects" for the (assumed) male gaze. This connection between synthetic and nonwhite women as subaltern sex objects recalls two precursors of Aki Ross: the notorious "Face of the Nation" cover on *Time* magazine in November 1993 and the digitalized multiracial face that appeared a year later on the cover of the women's magazine *Mirabella* in September 1994.

In *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City,* Lauren Berlant describes the youthful woman on the *Time* cover thus:

> The … image looks like a photograph of an actually existing human being who could come from anywhere, but she is actually a Frankenstein monster composed from other "ethnic" human images, through a process of morphing. The new face of America involves a melding of different faces with the sutures erased and the proportions made perfect; she is a national fantasy from the present representing a posthistorical – that is, postwhite – future (201).

Likewise, Donna Haraway points out the racialized gender politics of morphing in *Mirabella*'s multiracial cover girl and the curious position of power occupied by the Japanese photographer-artist who created her. Particularly noteworthy is Haraway's displacement of Hiro's male (re)productive powers to the general, nebulous realm of "technology":

> In the September 1994 Great American Fashion issue of the feminism-lite magazine *Mirabella,* the prominent photographer Hiro produced the computer-generated cover image from many photos of exquisitely beautiful multiracial, multiethnic women. Asked by the editors to give them a photo to represent "the diversity of America," Hiro did a simulated (and very light-skinned) woman. A tiny microchip floats through space next to her gorgeous face. I read the chip as a sign of insemination, of the seminal creative power of Hiro, a modern Pygmalion/Henry Higgins creating his Galatea/Eliza Doolittle. But the seminal power is not just Hiro's; it is the generative power of technology (261).

Both Berlant and Haraway discuss the ways in which the faces of computer generated multiracial women function as cultural sites where fantasies of technology, virtuality and the future meet those of racial otherness as would-be national self. The figure of the digital character Aki Ross extends their ideas to the present, which according to the 2000

US census is quickly shaping into the future imagined by the *Time* article in 1993. In this character, the "face of the nation" becomes the face and body of a trans-nation – a so-called global community linked by electronic images and information – where difference is safely contained in American paradigms of liberal pluralism and consumer capitalism. Like the virtual women on *Time* and *Mirabella,* Aki provides a representation of racial and cultural difference that has been Anglicized, sanitized and commodified. For example, the name "Aki Ross," suggests an Amerasian and specifically Japanese American identity. In addition, the character is voiced by Chinese American actress Ming-Na, who starred in the first mainstream Asian American film, *The Joy Luck Club,* voiced the Disney animated character Mulan and currently plays Dr. Deborah Chen on the television show *ER*. However, these markers of racial and ethnic difference play no discernible role in the film's development of the story or the character. To put it another way, Aki Ross manages to *pass* successfully as Anglo American, not only in the movie but in its American reviews where critics compared her to white, brunette actresses, Jennifer Love Hewitt and Bridget Fonda.

In *Shopping for Ethnicity* Elizabeth Halter notes that ethnically and culturally hybrid images exhibit just enough difference to provide members of the dominant culture with a new and exotic but non-threatening experience. At the same time, racial and ethnic ambiguity appeals to members of the marginal culture by opening a space for pleasurable recognition and identification (7-10). Many cultural scholars have argued that the kind of cultural cross-pollination exemplified by Aki Ross and *Final Fantasy* ultimately serves to uphold the values, styles and goals of the dominant culture.[2] However, as Halter goes on to elaborate – and as I hope to demonstrate in the following case study – products of

cultural collaboration, while maintaining the major elements of the dominant culture, also contain the potential to challenge and change those elements.[3]

That said I introduce the film by way of Aki's ambiguously raced, female body for two reasons. First, Hironobu Sakaguchi, its creator, director and producer has made it clear in press releases and the supplemental documentary on the special edition DVD that the film functions as a showcase for the protagonist. According to Sakaguchi, Aki represents his mother (the two share the same name) and his coming to terms with her death (Pham par. 9-10). Second and more to the point of my essay, critical reception of the film places strong emphasis on the character, which often is treated as a metonym for the film itself. This relationship works for the most part. Both film and character are formal, national and cultural hybrids -- neither animation nor live action; neither videogame nor film; neither Japanese nor American. Both downplay their deviations from the dominant Hollywood paradigm in order to appeal to the widest, most "global" audience possible. Yet overall low box office and DVD sales clearly demonstrate the inability of the film and its star to find and grab that audience.[4]

My paper asks why and how *Final Fantasy* did not live up to the expectations of its producers and audiences. I examine the formal and cultural elements of the film that might have led to its commercial failure -- specifically, its transition from the videogame to the cinematic medium and its narrative and stylistic differences from American Hollywood films. How might the mistranslation or non-translation of these elements into the Hollywood model signify for the future of film and videogame convergence? Before approaching these questions, it is necessary to outline briefly the history of the film and the videogame series whose name it shares.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within, directed by Hironobu Sakaguchi and Moto Sakakibara, premiered in the United States on June 11, 2001. The film was co-produced by Chris Lee Productions, a subsidiary of Sony/Columbia Pictures, and Square Pictures, the film affiliate of Square Co., the Tokyo-based company that produced the popular *Final Fantasy* game series. Sakaguchi's original story idea was adapted into a screenplay by American screenwriters Al Reinert and Jeff Vintar; Reinert had produced and directed the space documentary *For All Mankind* and co-wrote *Apollo 13*. It touted an all-star voice cast, including Ming Na, Donald Sutherland, Alec Baldwin, Steve Buschemi and James Wood and a hefty production budget estimated between $114 and $150 million (Gray)**.** The following plot summary in the Final Fantasy official website immediately categorizes the story as a science fiction action film:

> The year is 2065 and Earth is under siege. A meteor has crashed onto the planet, unleashing millions of alien creatures which roam the Earth. Decimating field and city alike, these predators are threatening to extinguish all life on the planet. The survivors of the initial onslaught have retreated to barrier cities built to protect the inhabitants of Earth from the marauding invaders. But the few cities around the globe are in decline and time is running out. Yet, the spirit of humankind is resilient and embodied in the brilliant and beautiful Dr. Aki Ross. Determined and capable, Aki strives as Earth's last hope against extinction. With the guidance of her scientific mentor, Dr. Sid, and the aid of the Deep Eyes military squadron led by the courageous Captain Gray Edwards, Aki races to save both the Earth and herself.[5]

Much more interesting than the plot to audiences and reviewers, the selling point of *Final Fantasy* was its revolutionary role as the first CGI film to contain photorealistic or "hypeRealistic" actors and actresses (McCarthy par. 6).

In order to make *Final Fantasy* and to expand eventually into the realm of movie production, Square Co. established Square Pictures under American affiliate Square USA. Sony invested approximately $30 million to the project (Brodesser and Graser par. 17), and Columbia agreed to distribute the film internationally except to Japan and Asia, which were the province of Japanese distribution firm, Gaga-Humax.(Ryan par.4). Production began in October 1997 on two sound stages at the Hawaii Film Studio in Diamond Head and the company headquarters in downtown Honolulu. Square USA built a $45 million production facility where a 200 member crew labored for four years to realize Sakaguchi's original vision. The group consisted of well-known game and film animators, including lead animators from *Titanic, Toy Story* and *Jurassic Park,* as well as engineers and computer scientists. Honolulu was chosen as the production site because of its centralized location between East and West and its cultural familiarity for Japanese employees (Gray par.7). One reporter described the location "as close to halfway between Tokyo and Hollywood as you can get without treading water" (Lyman par. 12) while others noted the close proximity of Square USA headquarters to Pearl Harbor – the preeminent symbol in the United States of Japan as an invasive threat to its political, economic and social infrastructure.

In this culturally liminal place, the diverse production staff painstakingly constructed the movie using the following process. First, frame-by-frame storyboards were scanned into a slideshow Avid system while the voice actors recorded the script.

Using a program called Alias/Wavefront Maya, the scenes were blocked and shot with virtual cameras, which moved like real cameras to provide the necessary cinematic look. Storyboards and layouts then were sent to the animation and motion capture departments; the former held the subtext and character emotions for the story while the latter contained camera moves and character blocking synchronized with the voices of the actors. According to animation director Andy Jones, animators debated on what made a character more "human" – the way it moved or the way it looked – and finally decided to focus on its look, particularly the face and fingers. Also, due perhaps to Sakaguchi's penchant for elaborate storyboarding, the crew paid more attention to conveying the emotional state of the characters through appearance rather than through dialogue.

The concern with the visual extended to the use of motion capture, which accounted for 90% of the body movements that were used in the film. In motion capture, body actors physically act out a scene, and their movements are recorded through ping pong ball-like markers that are placed at specific points on their bodies. For *Final Fantasy* each performer wore approximately 35 markers, including five in the chest to capture his or her breathing. In addition to large movements, motion capture was used to get the bodily nuances of performers when they were still – nuances that were difficult to animate but easy to record through the 16-camera optical motion capture system and the tracking software from Motion Analysis.

This data was fed into an in-house system that converted the performances into a recognizable form for Maya. From there, animators worked on perfecting the appearance and movement of the characters' bodies and faces and later, of their skin and hair (Robertson). Often cited to demonstrate the meticulous craftsmanship of the computer

animation in *Final Fantasy* was the fact that the 60,000 strands of Aki's hair took twenty percent of the entire production time to create and render (Wilson par.14). Last but certainly not least, animators constructed visual and sonic environments – sets, props, phantom aliens, lighting and special effects -- for their new synthetic stars.

The result is a movie that looks and feels somewhere between animation and live film. Sakaguchi, Square Co. vice-president and chief architect of *Final Fantasy*, sums it up in the following way: "We've created characters that no longer feel blatantly computer generated. If we press on, we can achieve the reality level of a live-action film, but I kind of like where we are now. It's not anime; it's not live action. It's something people have never seen before" (*Time* 31 July 2000 par. 7). Sakaguchi was right in that CGI principles previously had not been applied to the creation of lead human-like actors. However, people *had* seen different elements of the Final Fantasy concept before -- in US animated features *Toy Story* (1995) and *Stuart Little* (1999); in digital backgrounds and special effects for *Jurassic Park* (1993), *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Titanic* (1997) and *Star Wars I: The Phantom Menace* (1999); in films based on videogames like *Super Mario Bros*. (1993), *Mortal Kombat* (1996) and *Pokemon: The Movie* (1999); and finally, in Japanese anime and videogames such as the series on which Final Fantasy was broadly based. It is to the last that I now turn.

FINAL FANTASY: THE VIDEO GAMES

Square began in 1987 as a game developer for Tokyo-based Famicon Disk System. Outside Japan, it became known primarily for its RPGs (role playing games) while it was partnered with Nintendo in the early to mid 1990s. After the success of Final

Fantasy III, Chrono Trigger and Secret of Mana, Nintendo commissioned Square to produce SuperMario RPG, the last game that Square developed for NES. Square cited inadequate storage capacity on Nintendo 64 when it left Nintendo for Sony in 1997. This became a landmark year for Square and Sony with the phenomenal popularity of Final Fantasy VII, which sold 8.6 million units worldwide and helped to establish the Sony Playstation as the dominant game console of the late 1990s (Miller par. 1-8). As of spring 2001, Final Fantasy I – IX had sold 35 million units and grossed more than $700 million, with two thirds of the games sold in Japan and the remainder in Europe and the United States (Herskovitz par. 7).

At the time of writing seven Final Fantasy games are available in the US and Europe: on NES the original Final Fantasy (1987), Final Fantasy II (1994) and Final Fantasy III (1994); on PSX Final Fantasy VII (1997), Final Fantasy VIII (1999) and Final Fantasy IX (2000); and on PS2 Final Fantasy X (2001) and Final Fantasy XI, which will have online playing capabilities (in development for fall 2002). The games have different scenarios that range from a band of medieval personalities searching for the requisite princess-in-distress to teenage cadets battling evil military forces in a futuristic space city. However, they all share the same quest plot wherein a band of underdog heroes uses magic and guardian spirits to fight evil villains and establish peace in the fantasy world of the game.

Gamers commonly hold that the Final Fantasy series set the standard for contemporary RPGs with their striking graphics, character development and increasingly difficult magic and fighting systems. In *Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames,* Steven Poole defines the RPG as “the synthesis of classic text-based games like

ADVENT and the 1970s teenage-male leisure phenomenon, Dungeons & Dragons fantasy boardgames" (53). Unlike sports, racing or war games, RPGs take a long time to play. They immerse the player in an epic fantasy world where she or he assumes the role of a character that must learn and grow from obstacles in order to reach the next plot point or level of play. In this sense, the RPG may hold the greatest potential for "interactive storytelling" (103-124) – a video version of "choose your own adventure" literature for a generation more apt to turn on a screen than open a book in its leisure time.

Beginning with Final Fantasy III, the games started taking on a more cinematic flavor by incorporating complex camera movements such as turn-based combat and behind-the-back perspective and by including FMV (full-motion video) sequences, short computer-generated movies that function as transitions from one phase to another. In addition the games for PSX and PS2 contain opening credits, rich musical scores and voiced dialogue (in FFX). However, the quest narrative remains the same in all of the games. As Poole makes a point to emphasize, stories in videogames are a completely different creature than those in novels or films. While novels and films always have been "interactive" in the sense that they stimulate us to create mental and emotional fantasy worlds, they usually do not engage us physically.[6] On the other hand, videogames consist of active interaction -- the gamer *plays* the story by responding viscerally and kinetically to stimuli thrown at him or her during various crucial moments in an ever-unfurling plot (108).

VIDEOGAME TO FILM OR FILM TO VIDEOGAME: CONVERGENCE?

How does this narrative structure translate from the screen of the private home console to that of the public movie theater? If the short history of movies based on videogames is any indicator -- not very well. From *Super Mario Bros*. (1993) to *Final Fantasy* (2001), this subgenre of game-based action movies has not exactly stunned the box office. Exceptions include *Mortal Kombat* (1996) and *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001), which grossed $70 million and $239 million, respectively, and most recently, *Resident Evil*, which bowed at theatres to an impressive $18 million (Graser par. 3). Generally however, the transition from film to videogame has been much smoother formally and more lucrative financially.

In 1994 film historian Janet Wasko wrote of the then $5.3 billion dollar US videogame industry as an important secondary market for blockbuster movies*:* "Video games have become an appealing and important product that corporations [such as Time Warner, TCI, AT&T and Matsushita] hope will attract specific market segments to the fiber-optic 500-channel systems of the future" (209). Since then, videogame revenues have grown by 111% in sharp contrast to those of film, which have grown only 36%. Indeed game revenues are now greater than global box office takings and video rental fees combined (*Accountancy* par. 5). Last year the videogame industry in the US generated $9.4 billion due primarily to the introduction of new consoles from Microsoft (Xbox) and Nintendo (GameCube) and the continued appeal of Sony PlayStation 2 (Graser par.2). It has become a commonplace in Hollywood for videogames to be developed alongside feature films, to the point where certain scenes in the film are added or deleted from the script for more effective marketing of the videogame. This strategy perfectly complements the modus operandi of the "high concept" film, which took root in

the late 1970s with *Jaws* and *Star Wars* and has since dominated the American film industry.

According to Justin Wyatt, the high concept film emphasizes visual and stylistic elements of a story over textual and narrative ones, syncopating music and visual spectacle to elicit a visceral response from the audience. Consequently, it usually involves minimal plot and little character development (1-20). Steven Spielberg laid the official dictum for this kind of cinema when he said, "If a person can tell me the idea in 25 words or less, it's going to make a pretty good movie" (13). Spielberg's formula continues to rule the conception, development and dissemination of most Hollywood movies. And the New Hollywood that churns out these films operates as one part of a vast web of distribution outlets and delivery systems (Wasko, 1-2). Richard Maltby gives the following description of how this global entertainment matrix operates:

> Contemporary Hollywood is a fully integrated part of a much larger and more diversified entertainment software industry, the second largest net export industry in the US economy, dominating its global market to an extent comparable only with the position of Hollywood at the height of the late silent era … the major companies, acting primarily as financiers and distributors, have gradually come to terms with a fragmentation of the audience, a concern with ideas of demographics and target audiences derived from market research, globalized markets and new delivery systems (23).

To recoup their exorbitant production costs, studios distribute their major films to international audiences and ancillary markets -- videos and DVDs, soundtracks, television shows, comics, toys and videogames. Transition from film to videogame works especially well because the consumer can take an active role in re-experiencing or "replaying" spectacular moments from the film like chase and racing scenes. In addition,

games already have a built-in audience and fan-base from the film, which ensures an economic safety net. Examples of successful videogames based on movies include The Star Wars Trilogy, The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Jurassic Park.

Finding an audience for game-based movies proves more difficult since these movies need to appeal simultaneously to gamers who want a plot and/or style that resembles the game and non-gamers who simply want to see a good action flick. The process of translation is tricky formally as well. As a student of mine put it, "It's hard to make something engaging when it's already been engaged with."[7] He is supported by writer, Danny Bilson, who scripted The Sims, Harry Potter, Medal of Honor and Agent Under Fire for Electronic Arts*:* "Good games do not make great movies … The game space isn't famous for its great fiction. People who play games really know which ones are worthy of being a film or not, and there aren't too many of them. I haven't found one" (Graser par. 10).

Poole likewise counters predictions of imminent convergence between films and videogames in a chapter devoted specially to comparing the formal qualities of each medium. Of the several interesting observations he makes, I reiterate three here. First, spectacular sequences in films and videogames do not necessarily offer the viewer/player the same experience: for example, the pod-racing scene in *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* differs from the same scene in its game version because the *viewer* in the former is not in control of the action whereas the *player* in the latter definitely is.

Second, camera movement in videogames is "player controlled" – a feature that allows the player to choose from a variety of potential visual perspectives – from follow cam and aerial cam to first person viewpoint and shoulder cam. Poole points out that the

game camera helps the player to see as much of his or her surroundings as possible in contrast to the film camera, which does precisely the opposite. Instead of revealing the protagonist's environment, the film camera keeps certain parts of it hidden in order to pace the action toward the anticipated revelation of climax. The dramatic irony so crucial to the logic and pleasure of film-viewing is neither possible nor desirable in the game playing experience where the protagonist and the spectator are the same person.

Finally, most films are based on the measured disclosure of information via editing or montage (the organization of time). Videogames, on the other hand, are based on continuous action; the principle of "replay" underlying game play elides time with space. To put it another way, time itself transforms into a kind of space once the ending of the story opens and proliferates. Contrary to conventional films, then, videogames might be said to operate more under the principle of *mise-en-scene* (organization of space) (Poole 78-102).

If we follow Poole's argument, convergence, were it to happen at all, would not take an easily predictable or recognizable path. The box office failure of *Final Fantasy* provides a case in point. What the film's producers and investors initially saw as the perfect blending of two different media amounted in the end to a tremendous loss of time and resources. This may have been due not only to the videogame origins of the film and the fact that it was computer animated (all other game-based films have been live action), but the controversial way that the film *used* digital animation -- to attempt mimetic representations of human beings.

VIRTUAL YELLOW PERIL?

With the exception of *Final Fantasy,* digital animation in the United States has been limited to non-human representations: toys, mice, dinosaurs, insects, aliens and monsters, faceless extras and crowds in the background (e.g. *Titanic* and *Gladiator)*, settings and props, and of course special effects. The first major studio vehicle to feature computer animation was the Disney release *Tron* (1982) about a team of engineers trapped inside a computer. The film flopped, and it was not until 1993 with the release of *Jurassic Park* (Universal) that computer-generated animation made a significant mark in Hollywood. Two years later, the first fully computer-generated film appeared with *Toy Story* (Pixar Animation/Disney), and shortly thereafter, the first CGI lead character – one very charming and realistic-looking mouse – in *Stuart Little* (Sony Pictures Entertainment, 1999) and a less charismatic secondary digital character, Jar Jar Binks, in *The Phantom Menace* (Hiltzik and Pham par. 15-17).

Cute virtual mice riding motorcycles and fumbling aliens talking to Liam Nielson were technologically fascinating, but their projection on the screen did not question age-old ideas of what it means to be "human" – or rather, what it means for an animated character potentially to elicit "human" emotions. An entire cast of human-looking digital actors, however, did. News of the impending premiere of "synthespians" in *Final Fantasy* caused a mild wave of panic in the Hollywood community, especially as it came during the SAG (Screen Actors Guild) strikes in summer 2001. Representing his colleagues, Tom Hanks often was cited in the press worrying about the future of

professional actors: “I am very troubled by it [computer actors]. But it’s coming down, man. It’s going to happen. And I’m not sure what actors can do about it.” (Lyman par. 7)

The major fear was that the new synthetic competition would edge out real actors. After all, artificial actors do not have the means to represent themselves and so cannot strike for pay raises or argue with directors and writers about how to interpret their scripts. The anxiety expressed by Hanks and others recalls the popular Anti-Chinese sentiments in the mid 19th century when California laborers agitated for immigration laws to keep low-paid Asian competition out of the country (Lee 51-82). Indeed, the controversy that surrounded Aki’s creation and that of digital actors in general brings into relief the uneasiness underlying notions of what counts as legitimately “human” in the new millennium – an uneasiness that has everything to do with race, gender, sexuality and class.

It is interesting, for example, that articles on *Final Fantasy* define “human” on the level of performance – i.e. to what extent artificial actors can, through their speech, movements and interactions with each other and their environment, draw a particular affective response from the real, human audience. This is noteworthy because the West historically has considered East Asians (and especially the Japanese) to be *emotionally* inaccessible and culturally “alien.”[8] Known for their ability to imitate and in some cases surpass certain forms of Western technology, the Japanese (and by extension other East Asian groups) have been elided in popular American culture with that very same technology. Hence the prevailing stereotypes of Asian and Asian American computer and math “nerds,” emotionally cold but sexually proficient “dragon ladies” and superhuman martial arts wizards. During various periods in history, extreme xenophobia against

Asians has manifested as the "Yellow Peril," defined thus by Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary:

> Date: 1898: 1: a danger to Western civilization held to arise from expansion of the power and influence of eastern Asian peoples 2: a threat to Western living standards from the influx of eastern Asian laborers willing to work for very low wages

The idea of a "Yellow Peril" almost always invokes images of uncontrollable, dehumanized and indistinguishable Asian bodies swarming together to attack all that is Western, human and good. In the US, the "Yellow Peril" reared its head perhaps most dramatically in anti-Japanese propaganda and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II – and again, in less overt form, against the same mechanized "enemy" during the 1980s.

This time Japanese weaponry came in the guise of consumer electronic products, including entertainment software and distribution systems, which rivaled the Hollywood film for the attention of the (mostly youthful) masses: the videocassette recorder (VCR) by Sony (Betamax, 1975) and Matsushita (VHS, 1977) and videogames by Sony, Nintendo and Sega from the late 1970s to the present (Schatz 21-22). The level of anxiety increased in the corporate entertainment world when Sony purchased Columbia Pictures for $3.4 billion in November 1989 and Matsushita, MCA/Universal for $6.9 billion a few months later, in January 1990 (Wasko 61-64). Corporate America feared that the Japanese were "taking over." For the Japanese to provide *hardware* was one thing, but to imitate and through imitation change the *software* that contained and reproduced American national identity threatened the view of the US as cultural and economic center

in the neocolonial world order. One can sense a trace of this technological "Yellow Peril" in many of the *Final Fantasy* reviews that appeared right before and after its premiere.

A "LAME" STORY

The plot of *Final Fantasy* centers on Aki's race to save the planet not only from the phantom aliens – who have no particular form or identity upon which the audience can project any concrete emotions – but from the "Zeus cannon," an industrial strength laser beam that General Hein (voiced by James Wood) plans to fire at the earth in order to destroy said phantoms. He is opposed by Aki and her mentor, Dr. Sid (voiced by Donald Sutherland) who believe that the weapon will only destroy the earth and strengthen the phantoms. Instead, they posit an alternative, more ecologically friendly plan to construct an "energy wave" from eight "spirits" culled from once-living organisms on earth. Their plan derives from Dr. Sid's philosophy-religion of Gaia (based on James Lovelock's controversial Gaia Theory), which asserts that the Earth itself is a living thing, and that each organism on earth has a particular "spirit" that contributes to the overall "spirit" of the earth.

Aki was infected by a phantom while conducting experiments as a graduate student; consequently, she is plagued by dreams in which she learns that the phantoms themselves are wandering spirits who have not been able to find a home. Sandwiched between the abstract environmental and spiritual themes are the requisite love story (between Aki and former lover Grey Edwards); the "ticking clock" as General Hein prepares to unleash his weapon; and the camaraderie among Grey's crew, which consists of the masculinized woman *a la* GI Jane, the wisecracking male engineer and the

sacrificing African American man. The film ends with the crew dead, Grey dead, and Aki alone (again – as in the opening sequence) facing a new morning of planetary hope and rebirth.

Most reviewers based their critique of the movie primarily on its narrative strategies and the performances of its characters. Both aspects generally seemed to fall short of the viewers' expectations. For example, consider the following evaluation of the plot in a review in *Film Journal International***:**

> The story continually has to make itself up as it goes along and thus feels terribly arbitrary, constantly doling out exposition-ridden speeches that attempt to justify whatever the heck is going on. And so there is little compelling *cause-and-effect*, the gold currency of any action extravaganza (Luty par. 5)

And a more culturally contextualized version of similar sentiments in the *New York Times*:

> C.G.I. presents one clear and present danger: that films will soon be driven, not by story and character and sense of place but by the technology and the effects it can produce. Classical film style is based on a sense of integrity, an integrity that is at once psychological, dramatic and spatial. When that integrity is ruptured – as it is routinely in music videos and in the films that imitate them (like "The Matrix," "swordfish" and "The Fast and the Furious") – there is a loss of weight and wholeness. *The medium becomes little more than a comic book that happens to move and speak (like the anime the Japanese have been turning out for years*). (Kehr par. 26).

Both reviewers find the movie inadequate structurally because it does not follow the Classical Hollywood mode of storytelling: an Aristotelian plot with a distinct beginning,

middle and end; characters whose motivations and desires the audience can easily comprehend and identify with; well-timed plot points that lead to inevitable climax through causal, linear logic; and a satisfying sense of closure at the end when the central questions and problems that were posed at the beginning of the film are answered and resolved. As David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger discuss in detail in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, the classical model became the dominant film language in the world as the Hollywood studio system gained economic and cultural currency at the beginning of the twentieth century (3-41, 85-142). Even as it attempted to court a "global" audience familiar with and anticipating an action film based on the Hollywood model, *Final Fantasy* deviated from the classical formula in several ways.

Thematically the film bears no relation to any of the stories in the videogame series; the link, if any, between the film and the games is more stylistic than narrative in nature. Reviewers like the one above noted similarities in this style to that of anime, a distinctive form of Japanese animation that became internationally popular after the introduction of *Akira* (Katsuhiro Ôtomo) to western audiences in 1988. Todd McCarthy compared the tone of the film to that of *Princess Mononoke* in an advance review for *Variety* and stressed its leanings toward the contemplative: "the Eastern p.o.v is pronounced, and even the presence of Yank-speaking-and-looking characters isn't enough to prevent this from feeling more like a Japanese film than an American one" (par. 9).

In *Anime: From Akira to Princess Mononoke*, Susan Napier contrasts the themes and narrative structure of anime to that of Hollywood cinema; she sees the former as resistant to ideological containment, a cinema of "de-assurance" as opposed to the

"reassurance" of the latter with its happy endings and affirmation of hegemonic norms (33). Anime often tackles complex, philosophical themes within the context of fantasy, including the vexed relationship of human beings to technology and fears of ecological and social apocalypse. The sense of closure one gets from most mecha anime films (which is the genre most familiar to western audiences) differs from that in Hollywood films: endings tend to be open-ending and often tragic, with protagonists unable to fulfill their goals. Napier attributes the increasing international popularity of anime to its resonance with shifts in how we relate to others and ourselves in a transnational, post-capitalist global system:

> Anime may be the perfect medium to capture what is perhaps the overriding issue of our day, the shifting nature of identity in a constantly changing society … Moving at rapid – sometimes breakneck – pace and predicated upon the instability of form, animation is both a symptom and a metaphor for a society obsessed with change and spectacle (12).

The ambivalent anticipation and ultimate dismissal of Aki Ross and other virtual characters in *Final Fantasy* reflects mixed feelings about the "postmodern" sensibility that anime has always had and that newer forms of "high concept" cinema quickly are beginning to adopt.

"MORE HUMAN THAN HUMAN?'

Along with an unwieldy and uninteresting story, the movie was charged with having bad digital actors. Compared to their nonhuman counterparts in US animated films, these characters generally were found to be lacking in their ability to draw an emotional response and identification from the audience. Hiltzik and Pham attribute this

to a phenomenon that robotics researchers call "the uncanny valley" – "the point where a robot is so close to lifelike yet still so short of ideal that people become focused on its imperfections" (par. 39). Whereas traditional animation exaggerates certain features of a character to emphasize its personality, the animation in *Final Fantasy* did the opposite – striving for near perfect visual replications of real human beings. Instead of bringing out the warm, "human" qualities of these characters, their hyper-real look, coupled with the serious tone of the action story in which they were placed, exposed the characters' *limits* as artificial actors and images.

Reviewers noted the discrepancy in the way the characters looked and the way they behaved. While they looked impressively real, their behavior was flat, cold and emotionless – with eerie voices that were always a bit off, mouths that moved strangely, and an absence of chemistry between characters.

> The lip movements of the animated figures are slightly slow, so you feel as if you're watching a badly dubbed Japanese creature feature from the 1960s. The dialogue is almost as stilted, and after a while you drift into that half-dream state that inert movies can create. As hard as the off-screen actors work, you'll find that it was easier to suspend disbelief for the animated playthings in "Toy Story 2" than for the computer-created human figures in "Final Fantasy." You miss the unchoreographed wayward tilt of the head or an improvised double take: the unpredictable physical chemistry of actors that computer science hasn't mastered -- yet (Mitchell par. 6-7.)

This lack of human emotion was evident especially in the love scene between Aki and Grey. According to John Wilson in *Books and Culture*, "Aki is at once seductively sexual and strangely unphysical. Her kiss with her love interest, the jut-jawed Captain Gray Edwards (Alec Baldwin) is almost antiseptic" (par. 15). Wilson's comment takes us back

to the image with which I began my paper: the enigmatic figure of the protagonist and what she might represent for the future of videogame and film convergence as well as the cultural intersection of these media forms.

Clearly Aki and the film "passed" on the surface. Negative critical reception and the official end of Square Pictures in October 2001 aside, the production crew hit a watershed in the history of computer generated animation with *Final Fantasy.* However, fears of artificial actors taking over the big screen proved to be unwarranted when the film failed to "pass" on the non-visual levels of story and performance. This brings up several questions with which I would like to end. What different formal or cultural approaches, if any, might have made this movie successful? Should CGI remain reserved for nonhuman characters, special effects and background touch-ups? If not, what kind of future might there be in Hollywood for gorgeous synthespians?

Supposing digital actors do land jobs someday, to what extent will they compel us to reconsider our ideas of what *real* actors do – and by extension, what *real* people do: how we interact with each other, how we emote, how we manage to navigate through an increasingly simulated "real" world. Supposing otherwise, how does the existence of this film ask us to redefine what is "real" and "human" in the 21st century – particularly along the lines of race, gender and class? The advent of image clones indicates that postmodern hybridity, as epitomized in the possibilities of media convergence, has become a part of our daily media fare. At the same time, the critical and box office failure of this film suggests that convergence has certain limits. What these limits are and how they will reconfigure current maps of power in the "global village" remain to be seen.

[1] This term was coined in 1989 by digital filmmaker Jeff Kleiser. Hiltzik, Michael and Alex Pham. "Synthetic Actors Guild." *Los Angeles Times.* 8 May 2001, home ed.: A1+.
[2] See Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (1994); Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1994); Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture* (1995); George Lipsitz, *Time Passages* (1990).
[3] Since I am not looking at the reception of *Final Fantasy* in Europe, Latin America, Africa or Australia, dominant culture here will register as (Anglo) American, and marginal culture as Japanese, East Asian and/or Asian American.

[4] The film (released July 11, 2001) grossed $32 million worldwide and the DVD (released October 24, 2001) $5.43 million. Videobusiness.com.
[5] www.finalfantasy.com
[6] An obvious exception to this rule is pornography – in cinematic or textual form. See Linda William's *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the "Frenzy of the Visible."* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.
[7] Conversation with Vanat Sermpol, Austin, TX, March 23, 2002.
[8] See Said, Edward. *Orientalism* (1978); Dower, John. *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (1986); Thompson, Richard. *The Yellow Peril: 1890-1924* (1978); Yamamoto, Traise. *Masking Selves, Making Subjects: Japanese America Women, Identity, and the Body* (1998).

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