

# Compressed Time —

## FFVIII as a Model of Our World

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Figure 1: Floating castle in a Lovecraftian future — locus of power for the game's antagonist.

Introduction

*A member of an elite military team, Squall is forced into a conflict beyond imagination. To survive, he must contend with a desperate rival, a powerful sorceress and his own mysterious dreams. — (Square 1999)*

Though iconic, Final Fantasy VIII (FFVIII) has often been regarded as one of the lesser accomplished main titles in the Final Fantasy (FF) franchise, at times ‘one of the weakest entries’ (Fahey 2009). Critiques seem to mostly focus on the story being a ‘nonsensical mess’, as a reddit user points out, with its main plot device ‘time compression’ being ‘dumb’ (odaiba\_memorial 2018). Far from interested in defending the game’s story, I will explore how specific aspects of FFVIII’s narrative relate to political and cultural conditions of our current times — and to what extent FFVIII, as a model of our world, naturalises the logic of capital and, consequently, the organisation of the speculative temporality we name as present.

First I am going to identify the game’s capitalist ideology and how characters are made to remain static, unable to fundamentally change the course of action. The next section will reconcile the game’s concept of time compression with contemporary theory on speculative realism, more specifically, the speculative time complex. In the final section, I will discuss the implications of Ultimecia, the game’s antagonist, a sorceress from the future, who seeks to accelerate present world paranoia and future anxiety into the inception of a compressed timeline.

Our Neoliberal Garden

In order to discuss the governing structures and political currents in the world of FFVIII and their implications in relation to our contemporary realities, we need to apprehend the game's economical system, which I understand to be capitalist and neoliberal. Suffering under the effects of *capitalist realism*, emotionally detached and unimaginative, the game's protagonist and his surrounding factors may serve to deliver evidence to this claim.

Squall, is an angsty emo. Rejecting any kind of company — romantic and otherwise — and indifferent to the world, he's the game's edgy lone wolf, set up to experience his cathartic moment: in the end, he learns to depend on others, finds love and acceptance. Besides that, he also willingly accepts the end of the world as collateral in order to be together with his girlfriend. Back to the beginning: graduating from military high-school, the so-called Garden, he becomes part of its elite corps SeeD (note the phallic symbolism). SeeD members are paid in regular instalments and based on merit: the better one's overall performance in battle, the more Gil (the game's currency). In regards to the understanding of their external positioning, however, to Squall and his fellow SeeDs, it remains unclear what their business ethos actually entails: no one really knows what they fight for, they just take orders and get paid.

An example of the Garden's business ontology is given in the party's first post-grad mission, in which the group is tasked to aid a resistance group, led by Squall's later love interest Rinoa. When Squall asks her to pass him the contract, the group is baffled, unable to comprehend the document's bureaucratic vernacular. Rinoa replies: 'Oh yeah, that one's pretty confusing' and hands out another, simplified one. Written by the Garden's director Cid, whose character design looks awfully similar to the actor Robin Williams, the personal note states that the contract lasts until the resistance group's goals are met (spoiler: it never happens, hence the contracted time of service is indefinite). In other words: the SeeD corps is forced into contracts, and they generally have no idea what's going on.

In FFVIII's Garden, we can observe a postmodern decentralisation of power: the institution is run by a director without any executive right, being a subordinate of a — until mid-game never before heard of — CEO dwelling in the Garden's off-limit basement. Here it is revealed that Cid, seeking financial aid, made a deal with the neoliberal devil. With capital accumulating in the basement and

the director of the institution — the symbolic bastion of higher purpose — being reduced to a managerial mid-layer, the school's ethos behind raising SeeDs (i.e. as an anti-sorceress task force) began to fade into oblivion. It comes to no surprise that purpose is usurped and worker dissent ignored in favour of capital accumulation: with a shift from a Fordist to a post-Fordist economy, as cultural theorist Mark Fisher explains 'the concerted attacks on unions by neoliberal interest groups' have 'eroded the power base of unions [and thus the labour force]' (Fisher 2010). As 'Capitalism is what is left when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration' (Fisher 2009, 4), the once purposeful destiny of the SeeD troupe — chosen to avert the end of the world in a fated battle — is diminished into being mercenaries, i.e. service providers.

Squall is then, unexpectedly, given the responsibility of leading Garden mid-game. He, however, retains his position in SeeD and doesn't become the new director, no pay-rise, nothing. Although he very visibly wants to decline, he somehow ends up being gaslit into a position that he cannot possibly fill. Just like Squall is suddenly confronted with elastically phrased responsibilities that exceed his resources, Fisher explains that capitalist realism 'entails subordinating oneself to a reality that is infinitely plastic, capable of reconfiguring itself at any moment' (Fisher 2009, 32). This breakaway of stable modernist working conditions further negatively impacts Squall's ability to continue living his life as he does it.

*Capitalist Realism* is characterised by the subject's inability to imagine a coherent alternative to capitalism. The game goes further to emphasise the protagonists' impotence to imagine an alternative organisation of politics by revealing that through the use of a Garden-enforced form of magic — and by extension technology — SeeD cadets and candidates suffer from amnesia. This imposition of forgetting has been described by Jack Halberstam in his book 'The Queer Art of Failure'. He argues that, as a colonial tactic, forgetting produces hierarchical relationships, as it can 'easily be used as a tool of dominant culture to push the past aside in order to maintain the fantasy and fiction of a just and tolerant present' (Halberstam 2011, 82-83). Amnesia is used here as a colonial logic to suppress class consciousness: without memories of and access to the history of worker struggles, the urge to revolt might not even begin to flare up. Not knowing who they are, where they come from and without any historical knowledge, Garden students instead become pliable tools for rituals of corporate accumulation, humans as grist for the mill to ensure the full realisation of capital.

The use of amnesia may, however, paradoxically act as a tool for rebellion against the oppressor ‘when directed at a dominant narrative rather than at subaltern knowledges’, Halberstam suggests. Forgetting ‘could become a tactic for resisting the imposition of colonial rule’ (Ibid., 77). Such a form of forgetting could imagine the reorganisation of understandings of ‘gender, sexuality, community and politics and the disruption of the regularity of Oedipal transmission’. Halberstam notes that ‘As a kind of false narrative of continuity, as a construction that makes connection and succession seem organic and natural, family also gets in the way of all sorts of other alliances and coalitions’ (Ibid). Wishful thinking: the positive aspects of amnesia are never tapped into by the game. Instead, what follows is a turn to tradition by proxy.

Exactly that which Squall could benefit from unlearning is instead replaced by a return to what Fisher describes as a logical consequence of neoliberal governance: ‘the family becomes an increasingly important place of respite from the pressures of a world in which instability is a constant. [...] capitalism requires the family [...] even as it undermines it’ (Fisher 2009, 33). Until this point, the romance between Rinoa and Squall was characterised by perpetual emotional labour and cold unavailability, respectively. Squall was comically mean to Rinoa throughout, constantly facepalming himself following her advances, even as she ‘Manic Pixie Dream Girl’ed her way into his life’ (Uszerowicz 2018). When Squall regains his memory and Rinoa falls into a coma (one way of ghosting someone), there seems to be only one way out of FFVIII’s form of control capitalism for him: because ‘Post-Fordist social angst creates the desire to return to a non-globalised world’ (Teixeira Pinto, 2019) there is no alternative for Squall; seeking stability, he must return to the heterosexual matrix.

Invasion From the Future

Throughout FFVIII Squall and the others repeatedly pass out only to find themselves experiencing past events through the bodies of another group, that is — as it later turns out — led by his father. This relationship to the past is induced by Squall's second forbidden object of Oedipal desire, his sister Ellone, whose special power is able to send people's consciousness back in time. History, within FFVIII, is therefore exclusively constructed by an external Oedipal force, purely subjective and episodic. Squall's present time can consequently only be described as *post-that*, because no other but his father's subjective past exists for him. Political theorist and philosopher Suhail Malik observes that 'Everything now seems to be "post-" something else, which indexes that our understanding of what is happening now has some relation to but is also disconnected to historically given conditions' (Avanessian & Malik, 2016). I would argue that the definition of the present via the past is even less meaningful in FFVIII because of its fragmentary nature of historic events. Armen Avanessian, himself a political theorist and philosopher, continues that 'what the "post-" marks is how what's happening now is in relationship to what has happened but is no longer. We are the future of something else' (Ibid). Here, we are also the future of *someone* else — the glimpses into the past are of little consequence to Squall and the group, when they realise that the present can't be changed by altering past events. As the present itself is a speculative relationship to the past that has already been exceeded, the 'post' herein acts as a marker of the 'deprioritization of the present' (Ibid).

Another marker of the 'deprioritization of the present' becomes evident through the end-game's main objective: preventing time from being compressed by the evil sorceress Ultimecia.

*A witch from the distant future with hatred for SeeD. She intends to create a world where only she can exist by casting Time Compression and causing the past and future to melt together. In pursuit of the ability harnessed by Ellone to send someone's consciousness into someone in the past, she possesses the bodies of the witches Edea, Rinoa and Adel one after the other. — (Square Enix, 2018)*

The game's present time is entirely concerned with a speculative future that needs to be averted at all cost — the *preemptive*. Malik states that 'the "pre-" indexes a kind of anticipatory deduction of the future that is acting in the present — so that future is already working within the now, again

indicating how the present isn't the primary category but is understood to be organized by the future' (Ibid). In anticipation of a future event, the *pre-time-compression* present loses its primacy. Instead, what happens in the present is governed by a preemption of the future. Avanesian concludes that 'we no longer have a linear time, in the sense of the past being followed by the present and then the future. It's rather the other way around: the future happens before the present, time arrives from the future' (Ibid). In FFVIII time literally arrives from the future, personified through sorceress Ultimecia, who, living in a future timeline, possesses other sorceresses to influence world events and politics to her will. Because Ultimecia understood that neither the past nor the present are the primary organising factors of time, she advertises her agenda into existence via hyperstition, a term coined by Nick Land, British philosopher turned neoreaction (NRx) ideologue. Time compression is hyperstitionally evoked through the catalysation of 'dispersed sentiment into a historical force that brings the future into existence' (Williams & Srnicek, 2015), a relation of cause and effect. To put in simple terms: an announcement of a future time compression will implement its own inception; 'In the beginning was the Word' (Haider 2017). Its hyperstitional appeal is further amplified by future paranoia vis-à-vis the unfathomable horror of a compressed timeline: past, present and future compressed into one, a Lovecraftian world in which only the sorceress herself can survive.

Ultimecia's attention management agenda shows success: Squall and the others don't want time to compress. As the game itself only sparsely discusses the nature of time compression, it may come to a surprise that the party is so hellbent on trying to avert the end of all days. To reiterate: an actual threat is not given for the party at their time. Time compression can only be initiated when Ultimecia possesses the bodies of sorceresses from the future, past and present (in exactly that order). However, without Ellone's power, being able to send people's consciousnesses back in time, Ultimecia cannot reach back far enough in order to possess a sorceress from the past. In short: if Squall were to accept the fact that his girlfriend, as a present time sorceress, prone to being taken over, need be sealed in cling-film at the so-called Sorceress Memorial, the world wouldn't be in immediate danger. What instead ensues can only be described as a death drive: as Squall's last resort against FFVIII's control capitalism — the prospect of a family — is bound to break away for him, he decides to settle the score with the evil sorceress in her own time. The group then travels to the future via a partly compressed temporality.

Time compression isn't just a self-fulfilling prophecy. As the movement is advertised into existence, Squall's desire to hinder it — set in motion by capital-induced anxiety — may be apprehended as an accelerationist impulse that undergirds the inception of time compression: the end of the world is conjured to avert it. For Squall, the apocalypse is preferable to losing his girlfriend, an affirmational strategy and accelerationist mantra: 'there is no outside to capitalism, hence the only way out is the way through' (Teixeira Pinto 2017).

If Ultimecia were to reign supreme, having absorbed all magical powers from every sorceress throughout history, all SeeD members, past and future ones, would be punished eternally. Given the allegiance of the world of FFVIII with neoliberal ideology, what initially appears to be a clichéd world-domination-desire may in fact be recognised as capitalist eschaton — hence, Ultimecia as a symbol for capital itself and time compression as the evolutionary promise of singularity theory, ushering in the apotheosis of history — along with all consequences of anti-democratic NRx ideology: vastly amplified class disparity, plutocracy, transhumanism. In Land's essay 'Machinic Desire' he theorises that 'What appears to humanity as the history of capitalism is an invasion from the future by an artificial intelligent space that must assemble itself entirely from its enemy's resources', which is exactly the hyperstitional momentum that Ultimecia instigates. Clues for the accumulation of technology as a proxy for capital are given in the latter half of the game, when the group enters Esthar, a technologically advanced continent and Silicon Valley stand-in, where problems (i.e. girlfriend's coma) are solved by launching them into space.

After defeating Ultimecia, the group returns to their own timeline. Squall however, lost in time and space, is tormented with visions of his past, and of forgetting Rinoa and his loved ones. He somehow ends up in his own past, where he sets in motion the game's events by coincidentally telling his foster mother about the purpose of SeeD, fighters destined to avert time compression. Shortly after, the dying sorceress arrives and, unable to fade away without passing on her legacy, transfers her power to her, which awakens her latent sorceress powers. Propagating the urgency of SeeD, Squall's prophetic warning, ultimately, is what gave Ultimecia an incentive to rise to power and exterminate the SeeD group via her own survival instinct. This moment can be seen in relation to Roko's Basilisk, a thought-experiment that emerged via the tech-forum LessWrong. It assumes that once AI comes into being it would wish to accelerate its own inception, retroactively punishing those who don't actively partake in its coming into being (i.e. enforcers of socially progressive

ends, ‘decelerating’ the realisation of capital; ‘The Cathedral’ in Landianspeak, the aggregation of political power). In the end, it was Squall who — just like Roko — accidentally created the Basilisk.

Presumably victorious, in the end everyone finds their way back to the present. Together they celebrate a high school party. Trapped in a time-loop (Ultimecia traveling back in time, passing on her powers, Squall’s warning leading to the establishment of SeeD, Ultimecia’s defeat, rinse & repeat), however, their current temporality, may arguably be the eternal punishment via simulated resurrection the Basilisk inflicts upon all those who can’t make a worthy contribution to its realisation. For once, a tragic end to a FF title.



Figure 2: The group travelling to the future through a partly compressed time.

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