



## ‘s01e03’ Review: Unfinal Fantasy



Eddie Vargas, OCTOBER 20, 2020

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s01e03 is the latest film from Vancouver-born filmmaker Kurt Walker. Starring a large group of the director's close friends – many of whom "play" themselves and are credited as such – the enigmatically-titled movie plays out as a hybrid of live-action drama, cinema verite, experimental collage, and *Final Fantasy XI* machinima.

The film's particular brand of machinima hybrid takes place on the last day of summer in 2016, 24 hours before the massively multiplayer game *FFXI*'s servers are shut down. (In reality, *FFXI* is — surprisingly — still online after launching way back in 2002.) Essentially starting the film on a countdown, s01e03 is a movie that frequently and intentionally blurs the lines between history and fiction, reality and online, dialogue and text. Atmosphere is given greater importance than adhering to a conventional, historically accurate, or linear narrative.

## **Dawn of the Final Day**

While s01e03 takes place in a variety of locales across both New York City and Vancouver, there are two main settings: Earth and Vana'diel. The suburban malaise of the cities is expressed through shots of empty rooms, quiet streets, and sprawls of rolling green hills and mountains, while the

long-shots in the online world of *FFXI*'s Vana'diel are far more desolate and lyrical in nature.

Washed out and color-corrected in-game footage is framed so as to not appear as gameplay at all but rather as well-executed 3D animation. This is achieved through the removal of game UI elements combined with some creative, third-person camerawork. The end result flows so seamlessly with the movie's live-action scenes that you forget you are — essentially — watching footage of a game. The audience is thus able to focus its attention on *FFXI*'s digital avatars as they play the stoic conduits for their real-world players' feelings.

Our *FFXI* party is made up of two Elvaans, a male named Gavilan and a female named Shuqiii, as well as a Tarutaru player named mypretzel. The film starts off with a fullscreen chatlog between our two Elvaans set against a dim, blue screen. It is here that the film's looming countdown is first referred to as "the last day," recalling the impending doom of another fantasy game, *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*. The game's text chat appears in various sizes, superimposed over screen captures and live-action footage, serving as just one of the film's many examples of how the real world and our online lives are so intrinsically connected.

Soon after the *FFXI* introduction, we cut to early morning hours in Vancouver, British Columbia. We watch as two women hug and say goodbye to one another as one of the them, Marissa, heads off to an airport taxi, luggage in tow. It is immediately after this that we're introduced to the ominous intertitle that expresses the passage of time throughout the movie: "[server shutdown: 24 hours remain]".

With very little in terms of spoken dialogue, the movie relies on its clever mixture of digital video, screen capture, and 16mm film to drive the narrative. Washed out 16mm segments are overdubbed with raucous electronic remixes of the *Kingdom Hearts* soundtrack. At other points,

footage of Vana'diel landscapes or vehicles are overlaid onto Vancouver's rolling mountains, sky trains, or airplanes. Without giving too much away about the film's story and its arsenal of filmmaking tricks, the movie's mastery of these formal techniques is what results in such an accurate representation of the complex feelings of loneliness, joy, and ennui that inform many long-distance, digitally focussed relationships.

s01e03

## Outsiders

That being said, s01e03's elliptical narrative is by no means unimportant to the overarching theme of the movie. The various chat logs, emails, and text threads that make up the bulk of the film's narrative spell out in very clear language their characters' thoughts and motivations. What isn't important, however, is trying to keep track of who exactly is speaking to who. As soon as it seems the stories of Gavilan, Shuqiii, and mypretzel begin to dip into the personal lives of their players, the movie flips perspectives so as to leave the viewer slightly in the dark in terms of who is actually speaking. There could be one love triangle story being told here, or multiple, simultaneous explorations of long-distance friendships.

"The movie is called S01E03 because it is loosely inspired by the televised

tradition of exploring relationships over an expansive duration of time,” according to the film’s Indiegogo page. “...it’s only an excerpt: the sole episode plucked from the middle of a television series which otherwise does not exist.”

This is a film about building and maintaining strong bonds with others via digital avenues, and it includes all the awkward and stressful aspects of those connections too, not just the beautiful ones. I’ve yet to see another piece of media that so effectively expresses the inner turmoil and emotional poignancy of instant text communication the way s01e03 does – though some honorable mentions come strikingly close. If you’ve ever become pen-pals with a stranger from an online forum, made friends with like-minded mutuals on Tumblr, or been part of a clan of players in a MMORPG, s01e03 will likely recall those experiences for you.

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# Images that Bring People Together

Distributed for free by avant-garde film distribution studio [Kinet Media](#), s01e03's credit roll disclaimer states that "This is a non-commercial, uncopyrighted movie made for and amongst friends and new friends."

In 2020, as weeks of isolation have turned to months, most of the world has come to accept the reality of our situation. In this time of alternating extreme boredom and paranoia, s01e03 felt like a hug from a close friend. As one of the film's chat logs so eloquently states: "the only images worth anything now are the ones that bring people together." This is a film not only for Walker's friends, but yours and mine as well.

Humanity has often found itself teetering on the brink of despair — this tumultuous year is just the most recent instance. But that is why it is so important for art like s01e03 to exist. Art like this doesn't just entertain, it instills hope. It reminds us that we'll always be connected, no matter how far apart.

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**Skram**

10.22.2020

Great piece! Loved this movie

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