

FINAL FANTASY

by THÉO CASCIANI

FR Théo Casciani est un auteur français né en 1995. Ses textes ont été présentés et exposés dans diverses publications et institutions telles que AOC (FR), la Cambre (BE), Possession Immédiate (FR), Actoral (FR), Nuit Blanche Kyoto (JP), la Fondation Ricard (FR), Cosa Mentale (FR) ou le Centre Pompidou (FR). Son premier roman, *Rétine*, est paru aux Éditions P.O.L en 2019.

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There's a moment that I like in Virgil's *Bucolics* where a shepherd sings the song of a peasant woman trying to win back her lover. The eclogue honors the prodigious power of words before becoming the theatre of a pathetic and nocturnal incantation. The woman demands that water, verbena and incense be brought to her, anything that will do for a hidden sacrifice in honor of her missing crush. Lost for loss, she relies on magic.

It was this mood that I dove into *Final Fantasy* a few weeks ago. Holed up in my apartment and lost on the Internet not knowing what to do to kill time, I stumbled upon an old version of this game that would soon occupy all of my nights. I didn't know anything about it, I was bored and surprised to learn that the Japanese saga had been created by the Square Co. a few blocks away from my home. I decided to click on the download link despite my aversion to fantastic aesthetics, dragons, flames and long nails.

The worldly success of *Final Fantasy VII*, of which more than ten million copies have been sold since its release in 1997, is due not only to its technical prowess in 3D modeling and its crucial role in the diffusion of role playing games, but also to its apocalyptic landscapes. The game depicts the struggle of an ecoterrorist group against ShinRa, a company that depletes the planet's resources to produce energy and weapons, looting and plundering with little regard for its abuses. It didn't take me long to realize that the game was also going to be about myths and spirits.

I was less disappointed than imagined by the game design. Small characters dressed in pixelated clothing rushed to the four corners of a large mockup world, winding their way through ships, tangled walkways and fragmented machines, while monochrome windows sometimes popped-up near their faces to initiate dialogue or propose an action. When I created my avatar, I didn't really think about what it would look like and just called him Theo.

Since then, not a single night has passed without me playing to the point of exhaustion. Equipped with a sword too big for me, I followed my crew passionately on the cyberpunk planet, remaining hypnotized by this medieval and industrial setting. The virtual enchantments comforted me more and more, I let myself be haunted by the militant claims I believed in more sincerely every night. But it's when Aeris appeared that I was definitively entrapped.

I met the florist about one week later, just after she managed to get away from an attempted kidnapping orchestrated by the ShinRa police. I was immediately fascinated by her esoteric powers and her impressive healing skills. However, I'm not really a mage. I don't joke about sacred things and the signs of the times, kami in temples, tarot cards, horoscopes or alchemy, all of which enlighten me in the face of chaos. It's usually rather through art that I dilute my vertigo.

I would get up every day in the late afternoon longing for nightfall so that I could find the one whose mere presence reassured me. As soon as darkness started to cover the tatami of my room, I rushed to the computer and let the credits of *Final Fantasy* scroll down to the name of the scriptwriter, Kazushige Nojima, embarrassed and excited at the same time, quickly checking the life cursors of Theo so that he could join Aeris as soon as possible.

Despite the fake impression of wisdom that her buttoned dress gave off, she reminded me of some kind of sweet-eyed witch, somewhere between Princess Nokia and Mary Wigman. Her imperfect silhouette climbed ladders and jumped up and down turbines in fluid movements, and when a battle broke out, Theo made sure he didn't miss any of the heroine's actions whose lineaments began to sparkle as soon as she cast a spell on one of her opponents. He tracked each move, playing worse and worse until it was time to go to bed when morning came.

I don't think there's any use, but since my childhood I have had the habit of praying before going to sleep. Without relying on any definite force, I indulge in this ritual in the form of an enumeration to lull my slumber by addressing a thought to seven of my loved ones, or rather eight if I dare admit that I count myself in this list that includes humans as well as animals, the dead and the living. Today, for the first time, I whispered the name Aeris.

Theo wanders on the large esplanade where the battles take place. The magician isn't there yet, no doubt en route with Cloud, a ridiculous blonde that she seems to like. A dragon passes in the sky. My character kills an anecdotal monster and then starts meandering randomly through the ramifications of the territory. Translucent cavities follow one another as he goes further into the depths of the city where rocky valleys line silver gas pipelines. It's still dark.

Spending several hours walking along a deserted railway, he sees Aeris praying in a small arena suspended above the waves. Hunched in the center of the platform, the mystical

presence stares at the ground awaiting an epiphany, motionless and radiant. A dark shawl adorns her dress that recalls Alexander McQueen's Fall 2007 collection. Theo immediately rushes in her direction but before he has even had time to cross the wooden logs that lead to the temple, a creature armed with a sword falls from the sky to plant its blade in Aeris' back.

With relaxed muscles and half-open eyelids, the magician's body stretches out in the arena. The music becomes more melodic. An aura emitted by her last breath flutters in the darkness and illuminates the matte topography of the surroundings. Theo and Cloud run but can do no better than to gather in front of Aeris, they grab the corpse and place it on the surface of a lake in which it will fall gracefully into the abyss, arms in cross and face glowing in the moonlight.

Theo abruptly closes his computer and notices that a tear has come to wet his cheek. The sun is already back in the room, everything around him spins, he struggles to get up and then decides to go out staggering on the tatami. With haggard eyes, he ventures into the Tokyo morning and walks a hundred meters without meeting anyone. The streets are empty, the silence severe. Huge heat exchangers snake between the buildings of the Shinjuku district. Theo enters the Square Co. building and asks the receptionist if he can see Kazushige Nojima.

A few TVs play clips promoting the main games created by the studios. A small bouquet of ikebana sits enthroned in the middle of the waiting room. The air has an artificial and fruity scents that almost smells too good. An elevator suddenly spits out a man whose long hair falls upon a pair of unframed glasses. Visibly perplexed, the old teenager quickly crosses the hall. He's wearing an Iron Maiden T-shirt.

Eight names come to Theo's mind as he stands up to greet the writer. He's thinking of eclogues, of incantations. The figures bow down. An intrigued gaze separates the two bodies for several seconds, the air is dry and the time long, then suddenly Theo grabs a knife from his pocket and stabs Aeris' murderer. He is surprised by the ease of the gesture, the tenderness of the flesh, the color of the blood. Screams begin to saturate the space. Theo sits down and looks up in the sky. The night is going to fall soon.