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FINAL FANTASY AND PHILOSOPHY

THE ULTIMATE WALKTHROUGH

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WALKTHROUGH

Edited by Jason P. Blahuta
and Michel S. Beaulieu



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GETTING STARTED

The Alternative Instruction Booklet

Unbeknownst to you, the moment you first played *Final Fantasy* a “You Must Read *Final Fantasy and Philosophy*” spell was cast on you (we went back in time and bribed the programmers to put the spell into the first *Final Fantasy* some twenty years ago—and we hope you appreciate how hard it is to program a spell that will work in only 8-bit graphics!).

The “You Must Read” spell is a status-changing spell spliced together from Sleep, Confuse, and Fire. Sleep, because after staying up all night playing *Final Fantasy* and reading this book—which is really necessary if you want to enjoy the full intellectual richness of the *Final Fantasy* universe—you will need to sleep all day.

Confuse, because after you’ve read this book, you will never look at *Final Fantasy* the same way again. Questions like “Does Cloud really exist (or should we really care)?” “Are our Heroes really heroes?” “Should we fear our own stopping?” and “How should we think of and treat the nonhuman world?” will no longer be passing thoughts but all-consuming desires that compel you to quest after your own final philosophy.

And Fire, because this book will enflame your soul with a greater desire for *Final Fantasy* and all things philosophical.

Everything you need to achieve a greater understanding of *Final Fantasy* and transform your status is here: the Basic Controls, Playing the Game, Abilities, Side Quests, and Other Ways to Enjoy the Game. Mages, Moogles, Fiends, and Kefka, however, have been mashed together with the likes of Machiavelli, Marx, Foucault, and Kafka. The result, we hope, will launch you into your own philosophical quests of *Final Fantasy* and beyond. And, of course, your intellectual status will be forever changed on reading this book.

Your Party Menu consists of people like you, longtime fans who have spent years exploring the many worlds of *Final Fantasy*. Some of them, like some of you, have put off their education and careers in order to save a *Final Fantasy* world. Other began as gamers but became so enthralled with the intellectual depths and challenges of *Final Fantasy* that they pursued degrees in philosophy—perhaps the only truly fulfilling human activity beyond playing *Final Fantasy* and drinking—in order to keep their brains stimulated while waiting for the next *Final Fantasy* game to be released. Yet all of them still inhabit these worlds as Summoners, Mages, Warriors, and Thieves, dreading the day when it will be literally and figuratively GAME OVER.

PART ONE

BASIC CONTROLS AND UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHARACTERS



THE SPIKY-HAIRED MERCENARY VS. THE FRENCH NARRATIVE THEORIST: *FINAL FANTASY VII* AND THE WRITERLY TEXT

Benjamin Chandler

“C’mon, Newcomer. Follow Me”: Interpreting Signs in the World of Gaia

Sephiroth hangs in the air before the imprisoned Holy. The time has come to save the world. The heroes are gathered: Red XIII, the giant talking red cat; Vincent Valentine, the demonic, shape-shifting former secret agent; Tifa Lockhart, the martial arts expert; Barret Wallace, the muscle man with the heart of gold, the mouth of a fisherman, and the arm of a, well, gun; Cid Highwind, the chain-smoking pilot; Cait Sith, the remote-controlled, fortune-telling robotic cat; Yuffie Kisaragi, the ninja; and you, the spiky-haired badass mercenary

with a monstrous sword. But who will fight the final battle? The choice is yours.

Multiple playable characters allow players more avenues into a text. Roland Barthes (1915–1980) would call Squaresoft's *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) a writerly text because players take an active role in producing the game's narrative through their personal gaming experiences. Barthes was interested in semiology, the study of signs—signifiers (things that signify) and signifieds (what they signify)—and he believed that writers should fill their texts with signifiers, allowing the readers, or *consumers*, to interpret these for themselves and so *produce* the text.¹ Characters, objects, and places contain bundles of signifiers. The more playable characters a game has, the more ways a player has to interpret those signifiers, and the more texts the player can produce from it. This process depends on the level to which a player identifies with those characters.

Final Fantasy VII (FFVII) has nine playable characters, not including the brief flashback where Sephiroth is semiplayable, each with his or her own unique bundle of signifiers. They each provide a separate point of entry into the world of FFVII through the interpretation of their individual signifiers. These multiple entry points are one of the indicators of a writerly text.² Aside from these entry points, the FFVII franchise comprises multiple texts that combine to form the overall narrative: *Final Fantasy VII* (1997, RPG); *Advent Children* (2005, CGI movie); *Dirge of Cerberus* (2006, action/shooter); and *Crisis Core* (2008, action/RPG). There is also a collection of novels, a short anime (*Last Order*, 2005), a mobile phone game (*Before Crisis*, 2004), and numerous collectibles, including costumes, figurines, and an energy drink. These provide the consumer with even more avenues for entering the FFVII universe, and they multiply the number of signifiers within the series.

The characters in FFVII possess two different *types* of signifiers. The first type is built into the characters by the game

developers, so we might call them *presets*; they are the fixed aspects of the characters: hair color, speech, age, and so on. Cloud Strife is a spiky-haired badass, Aeris is an ill-fated Cetra, and so on. These presets allow for only a limited set of signifiers, but the characters in *FFVII* contain psychological depth and therefore a significant number of presets.

The other types of signifiers contained within the *FFVII* characters are those that can be manipulated by the players. These we might call *customizations*, in that they are aspects of the characters that can be changed. Tifa might be a martial artist, but that doesn't mean players can't decide to make her a healer as well. Similarly, Red XIII can be a combination Magic-User and Summoner, whereas players might never use Cait Sith for anything at all. These variable customizations not only further increase the number of signifiers a character contains, they also allow players to alter those signifiers to suit their purposes. As Barthes would say, the game is a writerly text: players (consumers) can produce the text of the game for themselves, based on how they choose to interpret the signifiers they assign to each character.

There are limits, though. Customizations are themselves presets, in that the game developers decide what can be customized, what can't, and to what extent. I can't make my Cloud into a staff-wielding pastry chef; however, I can take the preset Cloud I start off with and make him into *my* Cloud, who will be different from anyone *else's* Cloud. James Paul Gee has already commented on this complicated relationship.³ In his terms, my Cloud would become Benjamin-Cloud, and if Gee played *FFVII*, he would have a James-Cloud. Customizations multiply the number of signifiers a character possesses, based on the way players interpret the preset signifiers of a character and how they assign the customizable signifiers to those characters. This process requires the players to produce the text for themselves, making *FFVII* a writerly text.

A Malboro by Any Other Name: The Role of Identification in Interpreting Signifiers

Allowing players to customize characters multiplies the number of signifiers the characters contain and ways the characters can be interpreted within the text. It also actively involves players in producing the text through their interpretation of what the characters ultimately are. When I played *FFVII*, I interpreted Red XIII as a combination Magic-User/Summoner. By interpreting him in my own way, I was able to lay some sort of claim to him; he became Benjamin-Red XIII. Customizing characters increases the likelihood of player/character identification as players start to see themselves *as* their characters. When we finally defeat Sephiroth, we don't congratulate Cloud and his friends for doing a great job, but we take all the credit for ourselves. This identification leads to a greater immersion in the game world. A writerly video game like *FFVII* is one in which players construct the fictional world within the game by interpreting the signifiers contained within it. How players identify with the playable characters will affect how they interpret the bundle of signifiers that make up those characters. Similarly, how players interpret the signifiers within the game environment will affect how they experience the world and the events in *FFVII*—in other words, how they produce the text for themselves.

By “produce,” I don't mean that players have to physically build the world of Gaia in *FFVII*; the game developers have already done that for them. As Henry Jenkins has noted, game designers become “narrative architects” who design and build game spaces in which players can experience narratives.⁴ “Produce” means that players experience the fictional world by investing preset aspects (limited sets of signifiers) with meanings of their own. These meanings are focused through the identification process. Signifiers are contained within places (Midgar, Wutai, the Northern Crater), objects (potions,

materia, weapons), or other characters or monsters (Marlene, Sephiroth, Chocobos), but how players interpret the signifiers within these game elements and the sort of text they will produce through them are dependent on how players identify with the game's playable characters.

Yuffie's hometown of Wutai contains a bundle of preset signifiers, such as "Wutai is the hometown of Yuffie," "Wutai lost a war against Shinra," "Wutai is home to ninja," and so on. For players, it may also contain signifiers such as "Wutai is the location of the Leviathan Materia" and "Wutai is where the All Creation item is that unlocks Yuffie's Limit Break attack." These signifiers are dependent on how players have come to identify with Yuffie and whether they have a character who is at least in part a Summoner. If they haven't been using Yuffie as a playable character, they may not complete the optional mini-quest necessary for acquiring All Creation. Similarly, if they aren't all that interested in summoning, they may see no reason to acquire the Leviathan Materia. Either way, the players' construction of Wutai will be different—if they spend much time there at all, it will be for different reasons. In other words, Wutai will signify different things to different players, depending on their interpretation of its signifiers and their identification with the playable characters—in this instance, Yuffie.

According to Barthes, however, signifiers are not solely dependent on character identification. Players can interpret the game world directly. Toward the end of *FFVII*, four monsters known as WEAPONS are released from the Northern Crater. The player fights two of these during the plot, but only one (Sapphire WEAPON) is destroyed in the course of the narrative. Whether the player destroys the other three (Ultima, Ruby, and Emerald WEAPONS) is a matter of choice. They are extraordinarily difficult to defeat; Ruby and Emerald are each stronger than the final boss in the game. The only things that you get for defeating them are items.

Some of the best items in the game, I'll grant you, but you can beat the game without them. More important, there aren't any consequences for the game world if you *don't* destroy them. The desire to destroy them comes from the player. Cloud or Tifa may wish to destroy them, but they don't force the issue. Identification with a playable character is not necessary. These mini-quests are only a small part of the overall game, however. They are a handful of battles among many, and they come toward the end of the game, when the players' construction of the game text should be almost, if not entirely, complete. Although players can produce the game text through a direct interpretation of signifiers, a true writerly text is dependent on character/player identification to guide the interpretation of those signifiers.

"Didn't Catch Your Name": The Player as Cloud

If identification comes from a combination of preset character traits and customizable aspects, most players will identify most strongly with Cloud because he is the one they spend the most time with. This means that players interpret the world of *FFVII* mostly through his set of signifiers, so the text they produce will be heavily influenced by Cloud's relationship to them. When Cloud and AVALANCHE blow up Mako Reactor No. 1, Cloud remains aloof, distancing players from the initial action and from AVALANCHE's ideologies. This does not mean that Cloud and the players have no opinions on the destruction of Mako Reactor No. 1 or of Shinra. Two of Cloud's preset signifiers, gleaned from the instruction booklet, are that "Cloud is an ex-SOLDIER" and "Shinra is bad." Players are influenced to produce a text in which what AVALANCHE is doing is "the right thing."

Players may find themselves on the horns of a moral dilemma when, as a result of Cloud and AVALANCHE's action, Shinra

drops the plate onto Sector 7, killing everyone in the sector's slums and three nonplayable AVALANCHE members. Gamers and players might interpret this event differently. I use the term *gamer* to refer to someone whose only interest is beating the game, while *players* refers to those people who immerse themselves in the game world during the gameplay experience. The distinction between the two terms is completely arbitrary and is used only to distinguish between two approaches to playing video games. Gamers might not care that these people died—they are, after all, only interested in beating the game, and this is simply one part of that. Gamers interpret the signifiers contained within the game only in terms of how they contribute to the completion of the game. For them, the destruction of Mako Reactor No. 1 is the first feat in a series that needs to be accomplished to beat the game. The text they produce is not concerned with signifiers such as “innocent victims,” or “senseless slaughter,” but with more basic ones like “level one compete.”

Players, on the other hand, do care about the destruction of the Sector 7 slums. They care because they are interested in such signifiers as “Cloud is a mercenary,” “Cloud has a good heart,” “Cloud’s intentions are good,” “Cloud is working with AVALANCHE,” “Cloud’s actions for the good result in the death of innocents,” and so on. The text that players produce of *FFVII* is dependent on the process of interpreting these signifiers through their identification with Cloud: “I have a good heart,” “I am working with AVALANCHE,” “My actions for the good result in the death of innocents.” The players’ moral responsibility may be mitigated by further signifiers: “Shinra are the bad guys,” “Cloud/I didn’t decide to drop the plate,” “Shinra should not have been using the Mako reactors in the first place,” and so forth, but because players identify with Cloud, they bear the weight of the consequences of his actions—they produce the text most strongly through *his* collection of signifiers. RPGs rely on this sort of

investment in the game world to provide the impetus for their completion.

Cloud's identity crisis partway through the game forces players to reinterpret the game text; his preset signifiers and the players' understanding of them are altered. Cloud learns that he was involved in one of Professor Hojo's experiments, that he was injected with Jenova cells and infused with Mako energy (like all SOLDIERS). He also learns that he was never a SOLDIER himself, and that he has taken on the identity of one of his friends, Zack, the sole playable character of *Crisis Core*. Players are forced to reorder their impressions of Cloud and the way Cloud shaped their experiences in the game world. The extent to which this is necessary will depend on the extent of their identification with Cloud. Gamers will most likely accept it as it comes: "Cloud has an identity crisis that spurs on the next part of the action." Players will need to reassess their interpretation of Cloud's signifiers and alter the way they have produced the text of the game up to this point. The result is a stronger level of identification with Cloud and a shift in perceptions of the game world based on an alteration of signifiers.

"Cloud . . . You Just Want Friends. Isn't That Right?" The Player as Party

The process of identification is more complex when there are multiple playable characters. This leads to a greater number of signifiers and a larger number of ways to interpret those signifiers. A distinction needs to be made here between party-based RPGs and strategy-based RPGs that may involve whole armies of characters. The games in the main *Final Fantasy* franchise usually have small parties of playable characters who work together to achieve a common goal. There is also a distinction between party-based games, where players take on the roles of those characters, and strategy-based games,

where players become generals within the game controlling those characters.⁵ Often players identify less with one specific character the more characters they have to control. Games that attempt to blend the party-based and the strategy-based include the *Suikoden* and the *Final Fantasy Tactics Advance* series, but in these games the majority of playable characters tend to have extremely limited preset characteristics, whereas a smaller group of playable characters are more fully fleshed out.

Final Fantasy VII is a party-based RPG. Cloud may be the main character, but the eight other playable characters provide further opportunities for player identification and signifier interpretation. Those who identify with Tifa from the outset may find themselves caring more about her relationship with Cloud, AVALANCHE, the Seventh Heaven bar, and Sector 7 than players who identify more strongly with Cid or Red XIII. This is because Tifa's love of these things forms a part of her character—they are some of her signifiers. Just as alternating perspectives in a novel can provide the reader with new vantage points from which to interpret a text, having multiple playable characters allows multiple ways of interpreting the game text. This is because part of what makes each character unique is the varied signifiers he or she contains.

Some players may, as I did, opt for maintaining a strong central party to the exclusion of the other characters. I became invested in Vincent and Lucrecia's story and in the happenings at Cosmo Canyon because I kept Vincent and Red XIII in my active party for most of the game. As such, I spent a great deal of time customizing their (and Cloud's) equipment and materia, while doing nothing with the other characters. This meant that I spent more time interpreting the preset signifiers contained within these characters and assigning them customizable signifiers of my own (Red XIII was a Magic-User and Summoner, Vincent a Healer and Command User, while Cloud was a Melee Attacker) to the exclusion of the others. This limited my experience of the characters I didn't

play with to their preset actions within the plot, and as such my investment in and subsequent identification with them were lessened. The level of interaction and identification with a character will affect how, and the extent to which, players interpret that character's signifiers, which will have a significant effect on how players produce the game's text.

Aerith's death has a dramatic impact on both the preset Aerith and the customized player Aerith. Unlike Cloud's identity crisis, it doesn't force a reevaluation of the game text, but it removes one of the lenses through which players interpret it by eliminating one of the signifier bundles through which players produce the text. Gamers not invested in the game world or its characters may turn off the game at this point. The payoff in an RPG results largely from the players' ability to turn a weak starting character into a juggernaut. For gamers, this can be expressed as a simple formula: time (playtime) + effort (customization) = payoff (a more powerful character). This formula informs the gamer's interpretation of signifiers. When that payoff is taken away from the gamer, it results in a lot of wasted time and effort. Such is the case with Aerith's death, where the player's customization is nullified.

The extent to which Aerith's death upset players is evident in the numerous rumors that circulated over the Internet about the possibility of resurrecting her, as well as instructions for finding the glitch to see her ghost in Midgar. *FFVII*'s game developers were relying on players to be so invested in the game world that Aerith's death would not stop them from completing the game. This required the players to identify with characters other than Aerith, allowing them to continue interacting and interpreting the game text through alternate bundles of signifiers. It was therefore essential for the game developers to allow multiple points of entry into their game environment. These multiple entry points make *FFVII* a writerly text.