

PART ONE

**BASIC CONTROLS AND
UNDERSTANDING YOUR
CHARACTERS**

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

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“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.

“Zack . . . SOLDIER First Class. Same as Cloud”: The Player as Zack

Grand adventures usually start with the disruption of the natural order.⁶ Prequels allow us to go back and experience what the world was like before the hero is called to arms. They are often tragic because they usually involve characters we know are dead in the contemporary setting of the original story, and we also know while consuming a prequel that something bad is about to happen that will spur the action in subsequent narratives. This tragic overshadowing influences the way players interpret the signifiers within a text and influences the type of text they will produce through those signifiers.

More experienced gamers may be able to correct me on this point, but to my knowledge *Crisis Core* is the first game where players know that the playable character has to die in order for them to complete the narrative. This means the game cannot be beaten. By drawing the narrative to a close, it can be completed, but no matter how well you customize Zack or how much time and effort you put in, you cannot defeat the final continuously spawning army of Shinra infantrymen that will be the cause of his death. Believe me, I tried. Knowing that it was futile, I still tried to fight for Benjamin-Zack's life.

So, why play the game? Although there are parts of the game that can be beaten, and monsters that can be vanquished, the ultimate payoff for playing *Crisis Core* is not in beating the game but in experiencing the world of Gaia through Zack's eyes and interpreting the text through *his* collection of signifiers (as opposed to Cloud's). Players already know what happened during the Nibelheim incident because they have seen it in flashbacks in *FFVII*, but in *Crisis Core* they get an insight into who Zack was and what caused Sephiroth's madness. This forces yet another reevaluation of the game text onto the player. Signs like SOLDIER or Sephiroth or the Turks take on new meanings, based on a

player's interpretation of signifiers within *Crisis Core*. Even Cloud can be reinterpreted through our identification with Zack as we learn just how much Zack invested in him and how he shaped Cloud's bundle of signifiers. This makes mastering the original *FFVII* all the more satisfying because we now know that *we* have lived up to Zack's expectations. It is the ultimate expression of Barthes's writerly text—one that the consumer wants to expand by reevaluating the core narrative via another entry point.

**“A New Life . . . Children Are Blessed
with Spirit Energy and Are Brought into
the World”: *Advent Children* as Cathartic
Dénouement**

Advent Children is the first instance in the *FFVII* universe where players become entirely passive in a gameplay sense. I do not wish to enter the debate as to whether film audiences are passive or active, but viewers of *Advent Children* are passive in a gameplay sense—they cannot customize anything within the film. *Advent Children* provides yet another access point into the *FFVII* game world, but, unlike others, it makes no demands on the player's interpretation of the game text. It relies on viewers with preformed opinions about the world from their time as players. As a film, it doesn't have to construct its own imaginary world. Unlike the financially disastrous *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001), which sought and never found a mainstream filmgoing audience, *Advent Children* is clearly targeted at fans of *FFVII* who have already come to identify with its main characters and who have already interpreted the signifiers within the text.

These interpretations may be proved false in the film, however, making it the least writerly text of the *FFVII* franchise. *Advent Children* moves away from Barthes's ideal, with

its multiple signifiers open for interpretation, back to a more traditional text where the writer limits the signifiers and the consumer does not produce the text. The preset characters in *Advent Children* will probably be nothing like the characters a player has customized. Benjamin-Cloud loved his materia and never would have left them behind in the church to be stolen by the bad guys; Benjamin-Red XIII loved using the Knights of the Round summon, which the *Advent Children* Red XIII never does. This doesn't mean that a less writerly text cannot contribute to the larger writerly text of *FFVII*. Although *Advent Children's* Cloud was different from Benjamin-Cloud, he still acted and spoke in the same way as the preset *FFVII* Cloud, so I was able to identify with him in the film. Cloud's set signifiers remained unaltered. It was only his customizable signifiers that were missing. Lacking these customizable signifiers meant that my interpretation of Cloud was more restricted, but *Advent Children* still provides another entry point into the *FFVII* universe.

“I Couldn't Stop Her. That Was My Sin”: Exploring Vincent in *Dirge of Cerberus*

While acting as yet another access point into the world of *FFVII*, the mechanics of *Dirge of Cerberus* and the demands it placed on the players are as different from those of the original game as are the mechanics of the film and the demands it placed on its viewers. This game relies more heavily on reflex and gaming skill (the ability to push buttons in the correct order and with the right timing) than it does on developing a party and using it strategically. The first requires immediate responses, whereas the second requires more strategic thought, particularly if players adjust *FFVII's* Active Time Battle system to give themselves more time to think and respond. These demands on the players' skill in *Dirge of Cerberus* influence

the way players will interpret the signifiers within the game and allow players to produce a different kind of text from that produced through the original *FFVII*.

Not only does *Dirge of Cerberus* provide an opportunity for players to identify to a greater degree with a supporting playable character from the original game (Vincent), it also allows them to learn more about him and *his* view of the game world. We learn, for example, what Yuffie and Vincent were doing while the rest of the *FFVII* crew were watching Meteor fall on Midgar (as optional playable characters, they were left out of the ending cinematic of *FFVII*). *Dirge of Cerberus* aids in the pluralizing of the *FFVII* text by offering another access point and by moving beyond the scope of the original narrative. It multiplies the number of signifiers contained within the Vincent character, while providing new ways of interpreting those signifiers to produce the text.

“This Is the End?”

All texts contain signifiers, but in a writerly text those signifiers are multiplied to such an extent that the consumer of the text is forced to produce his or her own text through an interpretation of those signifiers. *Final Fantasy VII* is a prime example of a writerly text where the playable characters’ preset signifiers are multiplied by the psychological depth of the characters and the players’ identification with them. The ability to customize the characters in *FFVII* not only multiplies the number of signifiers they contain exponentially, but also requires players to interpret them based on how they are producing the text. Different texts will be produced by each person who plays the game, based on how the player identifies with the *FFVII* characters, and also how he or she interprets the signifiers within the various titles in the series. Thus, *FFVII* fulfills the ideal of Barthes’s writerly text in a way that printed literature cannot.

NOTES

1. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, translated by Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), pp. 4–6.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
3. See James Paul Gee, *Why Video Games Are Good for Your Soul* (Australia: Common Ground, 2005).
4. Henry Jenkins, “Game Design as Narrative Architecture,” in Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, eds., *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2004), pp. 121–123.
5. Gee, *Why Video Games Are Good for Your Soul*, pp. 71–72.
6. See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (London: Fontana, 1993).