

“What you Remember is the Illusion”

The Deluded Hero, New Mythology, and Nostalgia in *Final Fantasy VII*

David Stevenson

is a PhD film graduate from Queen’s University, Belfast. His research interests focus on theorizing Japanese digital cultures and the application of interdisciplinary methodology and close reading to video games. Recently, David has been examining the relationship between game narratives, their aesthetics, and the industrial efforts that produce them.

“No, not memories... a memory is something that is consciously recalled, right? That’s why sometimes it can be mistaken or wrong. It’s different from a memory locked deep in your heart.”

- Tifa Lockheart, *Final Fantasy VII*.

Abstract

Typically, critical writing on the topic has emphasised the hero / protagonist figure as the primary vector of player agency. However, the hero(es) of *Final Fantasy VII* (*Final Fantasy VII*, 1998) exhibit psychological depth in which party characters confront their self-delusion. This is particularly apt with Cloud who experiences an introspective reckoning while comatose that prefigures the game’s denouement. Beyond the narrative function of self-discovery, this essay argues that this process exists to reconcile the player with the JRPG ‘world’, a pan-mythological territory often reliant on signs, symbols and archetypes as exposition of an intricate and alien place. Through close reading of *FFVII*’s aesthetic and gameplay design, I aim to demonstrate that the protagonist is the nexus of player discovery, psychological characterisation and ‘lore’, and the significance of this model in the reframing and reinvention of the past common to the JRPG genre.

Keywords: video game, cultural studies, JRPG, narrative, genre

To say that *Final Fantasy VII* is an exceptional game is no exaggeration. It was produced in a period of significant transformation in the video game industry which saw the introduction of CD-ROM, Sony's first entry into the console market, and the formative steps towards 3D graphics on domestic gaming hardware. Squaresoft mortgaged their company in partnering with the unproven Sony following an (allegedly) fractious relationship with Nintendo¹. Tens of millions were invested in costly Silicon Graphics workstations in an effort towards producing a game of unparalleled graphical quality. Sony, too, had bet significantly on Square, agreeing to finance the marketing for *FFVII* on a global scale, where the game was anticipated to penetrate Western territories where interest in the 'Japanese Role-Playing Game' had prior been marginal². A vast stake on both parties had been placed on a new business partnership, a new console, and new technology. As lifetime sales of *FFVII* reportedly surpass 12.6M across multiple platforms, its continued availability on modern consoles, and the recent launch of the remake (*Final Fantasy VII: Remake*, 2020), makes it evident that the *FFVII*'s impact has outlived the boundaries of its origin on the PSX, now presented as an epochal game³.

The ubiquity of *FFVII*'s production appears embedded in the game itself; as it begins in the techno-dystopia of Midgar where the protagonist, Cloud Strife, participates as part of an eco-terrorist cell that successfully destroys a major power plant to prevent Shinra's exploitative harvesting of the planet's spiritual energy; the Lifestream⁴. The opening hours of the game surpasses the neo-medieval 'lost continents' of previous *Final Fantasy* titles towards a 'modernized' fable where it would appear that corporate greed is the true enemy of humanity. The scale of *FFVII*'s opening, which sees the player control Cloud through an act of extreme industrial terrorism, establishes the tone of high drama and moral ambiguity that persists throughout the narrative. As the game progresses, the personal history and intimate recollections of Cloud are consistently interrogated and often delusional.

The task of summarizing what a 'Japanese Role-Playing Game' (JRPG) is remains something considered nebulous even in recent discourse on the topic, but some explanation is warranted. The

JRPG is a loosely-defined genre, reasoned through a taxonomy of scale, gameplay system, and place of origin (Japan). Attempts have been made to quantify the taxonomy of the ‘JRPG’ based on gaming websites and imageboards (Pelletier-Gagnon, 2018; Mallindine 2016) but this research has yet to produce a definitive term. Schules (2015) presents a distinctive reading of the ‘JRPG’ as construed more through media interrelation than ludology, stating that:

...One way to understand the Japanese qualifier of JRPGs is through its position in a larger framework of creative media brought together under the aegis of soft power. Despite soft political discourse to the contrary, JRPGs are Japanese not because of any intrinsic quality they possess; rather, they are Japanese by virtue of their relation to other creative media. (<https://www.kinephanos.ca/2015/kawaii-japan/>)

Schules’ reading posits the difficulty of a JRPG being interpreted in isolation. Further, *FFVII* comports well with Schules’ model of interrelation, given that the game is mechanically consistent as a product



Fig. 1: FFVII’s ‘Battle View’. Cloud, Barret and Tifa shown fighting a dragon.

of the *Final Fantasy* series of games, and shares thematic parallels with other anime of the time. Of particular note is *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995-1996) in which humanity is similarly pitched against a dominant extraterrestrial force, and *The Vision of Escaflowne* (1996) which similarly reimagines the mythological realm of Gaia/Gaea and questions both the personal history and intent of its protagonists⁵. In addition, the overpopulated and inorganic dystopia of Midgar is resonant with Otomo's Neo-Tokyo in *Akira* (1988), to the extent that Cloud, like Kaneda, battles his opponents on a technochic motorbike in his attempt to escape the city.

The general principles of a JRPG is that they are epic, long-form games that demand a significant time investment. In the case of *FFVII*, first-time players could expect the game to require roughly 60 hours from beginning to end, with many more hours necessary to discover the vast optional content hidden in the game. The figure provided above demonstrates how the game's battle system is presented. In the image, the 'party' of Cloud, Barret and Tifa square off against a dragon, placed in opposition at the margins of the frame. A common feature of the JRPG is turn-based combat, in which the heroes exchange strikes with the enemy in sequential order. In the figure, a sub-menu is highlighted that presents abilities for the player to select in combat. The player will pick an appropriate command that the character will execute without further input. The metrics of combat (e.g. damage given, damage received), are determined by each character's statistics (stats), where numerical values are given to reflect their proficiency in certain combat tasks. The design of a JRPG typically eschews 'skill-based' input for a more tactical approach to gameplay. With *FFVII*, ease of progress will be determined by making prudent choices during combat, and tailoring the characters beforehand through allocated equipment and 'materia', mako-infused gemstones that enhance the characters with a suite of additional combat abilities. In a broader case, the appeal of a JRPG is that it presents a grand narrative that incorporates story events, exploration of the game-world, and a significant amount of combat. Progress for the player is rewarded both by the continuation of the narrative and new places to see, as well as observing the increasing proficiency of characters in combat. *FFVII* fulfills the ludic expectations of the JRPG in this regard. It should be stressed that, as a text-heavy game, that the player's continuing

interest in the game is contingent on identifying with both the sprawling storyline and the characters therein.

In terms of scholarship, much has been done in terms of covering *FFVII*'s specific relevance to its Japanese audience, with Hutchinson (2017) presenting an intricate reading of the game's anti-nuclear discourse. This is seen most clearly in the definition of 'Mako energy' as a power source harnessed from the planet's spiritual energy; highly efficient, but with a disastrous ecological toll. *Mako* is similarly catastrophic to humans exposed directly to it, prompting instances of physical mutation, loss of motor skills, amnesia, and death. The protagonist, Cloud, is himself a victim of exposure, which is reckoned with throughout the story. Central to Hutchinson's argument is that

Player agency and character identification are manipulated and disrupted by the designers, creating a self-reflexive environment where players are forced to draw connections between the gameworld and the real world.
(2017: 72)

Where *FFVII* is most consistent is in the theme of delusion, and the extent to which the party character's beliefs and motives are founded on falsehoods. The 'Cloud' presented to the player at the game's opening - initially named 'EX-SOLDIER' [sic] is in fact neither a distinguished hero or indeed a member of SOLDIER in the first place⁶. Cloud's delusion comes as a result from Mako poisoning after his confrontation with Sephiroth in events set prior to the game's beginning. After plunging Sephiroth into the core of Nibelheim's reactor, Cloud falls unconscious, only to be abducted by Shinra under the malign experiments of Professor Hojo.. Cloud's identity has been refactored by the implantation of Jenova cells by Professor Hojo as part of a project to produce obedient clones of the legendary Sephiroth. Cloud's personality at the outset of the game is an amalgam of Zack (an actual member of SOLDIER whose sword Cloud now wields) and the retention of childhood memories that support this fragile identity as an elite mercenary.

Tifa is similarly deluded; she reminds him of a childhood event where Cloud vows to become a member of SOLDIER. Tifa recalls that Cloud was her closest friend in childhood, but the memories

shown later in Cloud’s subconscious proves that this impression is far from the truth. Beyond the entwined delusion of Cloud and Tifa, Barrett blames himself for the destruction of Corel and the loss of his best friend Dyne, yet he is found alive in the course of the story. Red XIII believes his father died a coward, Cait Sith is a Shinra spy, Yuffie presents herself as a legendary ninja and is in fact the runaway princess of the kingdom of Wutai. Where this dissonance between the projected self and reality is a consistent motif, they present each character a salient motive for joining Cloud on his quest.

Within the bounds of *FFVII*, the idea of heroism remains inaccessible and largely abstract. The two major heroes of Gaia are Zack and Sephiroth. The character of Zack is only directly addressed in the optional ‘secret cinema’ event towards the close of the game, and Sephiroth is dead by the events of *FFVII*, having been plunged into Nibelheim’s mako reactor through Cloud’s reckless assault; what remains is a deranged puppet acting in Jenova’s best interests. Zack is an ideal mirrored unknowingly by Cloud, where Zack - the displaced and disappeared hero of SOLDIER, remains elusive. Given that the events of Cloud and the party in *FFVII* are largely obeying a narrative engineered by Jenova, i.e. for Cloud to uncover the Black Materia on Sephiroth’s behalf, the path of heroism is only accessible to the characters once they have reconciled with the falsehoods that motivated their beginning.



Fig 2.1 Cloud’s recollection of the photograph taken at Nibelheim.

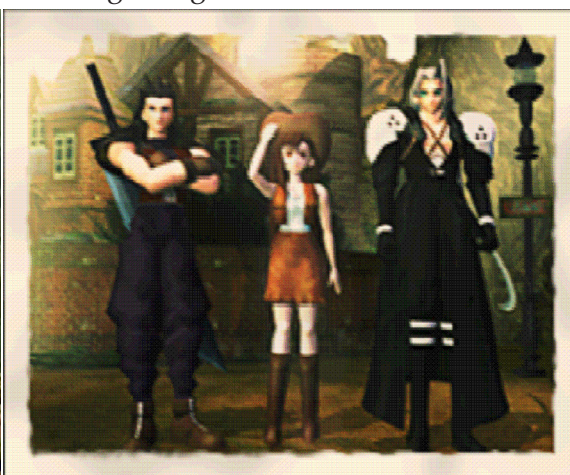


Fig 2.2. The photograph presented to Cloud in his vision of Sephiroth.

Cloud recalls the events that led him to leave SOLDIER. Fig 2.1 shows a flashback of Cloud’s triumphant return to his hometown, Nibelheim, as a proud member of SOLDIER and Sephiroth’s trusted underling. In the image, Cloud is preparing to venture to the Mount Nibel reactor to exterminate monsters terrorizing the townsfolk. A photograph is taken to inaugurate the event, with Cloud, Tifa and Sephiroth placed side by side. Cloud proceeds to detail the events at the reactor, including the ensuing destruction of Nibelheim by Sephiroth and their dramatic confrontation. The detail of these events appear to be a satisfactory recollection to both player and party, leaving only Tifa to make a stoic inquiry into Cloud’s story⁷. This memory unravels later in the game when Cloud experiences a vision of Sephiroth. The photograph taken in Nibelheim is presented to Cloud, but he is nowhere to be seen. In the second image, Zack appears to be Cloud’s imposter, individuated only by hair colour. Following these events, Tifa and Cloud are both engulfed in the lifestream, swallowed by a fracture to the planet’s core. Tifa exists as a spectator in Cloud’s consciousness, and begins to revisit Cloud’s accounts of the past. Significantly, Tifa now mediates these memories and confronts the inconsistencies present in Cloud’s account of his memories. The first revelation is that Tifa never saw Cloud at the fall of Nibelheim; Zack now occupies Cloud’s place in his recollection. Cloud’s second memory is the promise Cloud made to Tifa in childhood - the defining memory that made him stay in AVALANCHE. Cloud and Zack’s likeness to one another reveal the extent to which Cloud has emulated a hero past, now absent from the narrative.

Tifa encourages him to mentally revisit the memory of Nibelheim. Here, Tifa questions the approach of conscious memories as something that can be replicated, and so the probing turns to far more foundational concepts, such as his reasoning for joining SOLDIER. To define himself, Cloud reveals a ‘secret’ memory never divulged - that Tifa was part of a clique that excluded him. His memory of following Tifa, until the two fell off a perilous mountain bridge, formed a defining moment where he identified his weakness and forged a desire for strength; as a means to be noticed and included. The final memory of the ‘Nibelheim incident’ reveals Cloud as a spectator to the events he’s recalled, but in the role of an anonymous Shinra guard. Cloud is at Nibelheim as seen in fig 2.1,

but is one of the two generic Shinra guards cloaked in deep blue fatigues to the right of the image. Once Cloud is able to accept his incidental role at Nibelheim, he admits that his identity is a creation of “Jenova cells, Sephiroth’s will, and my own weaknesses”.

What differentiates Cloud’s story from other Final Fantasy protagonists is the inversion of the hero’s journey. Rather than ascend to the role of a legendary hero, the game begins with Cloud as an exceptional mercenary until the inconsistencies in his story, and accusations of being a failed replica of Sephiroth, causes a psychic fracture. What liberates Cloud is not the recovery of a hidden inner strength, but instead the acceptance of his own weakness. Cloud’s weakness refers both to his literal lack of physical strength in childhood, but more aptly refers to his urge to be ‘noticed’ by others, providing an explanation to how easily he succumbs to the illusory narrative that Sephiroth provides him. The events revealed in Cloud’s coma scene radically alter the perception of the narrative; the original duality between Cloud and Sephiroth is now one between Zack and Sephiroth, where Cloud has been displaced of the motives that have guided him thus far.

Cloud’s gesture of self-acceptance sets an optimistic tone as the game moves towards its concluding hours; that having no destined place within *FFVII*’s grand narrative is reason to persevere. In this sense, the narrative forgoes the typical moral dualism of heroic conflict, opting instead to place the awakened Cloud as an outsider, clearing up the residue of events which occurred seven years before the game’s beginning. This awakening marks a significant shift in *FFVII* as the narrative escalates to a mythic level as the party travels through to the centre of the planet to confront Jenova; a fight that culminates in a confrontation with the final, angelic incarnation of Sephiroth.

This restructuring of the classic heroic narrative is indebted to the implementation of dialogue in-game. Greg Smith’s (2002) formalist analysis of *FFVII*’s ‘cinematic dialogue’ explores how text within the game first appropriates cinematic form, then diverts from it. Much like a filmic narrative, *FFVII* sets up the motivations and goals of its key character (Cloud), at the outset, but the interactive nature of the game’s combat serves the narrative function often left to film dialogue. Thus, *FFVII*’s dialogue performs another task, as Smith notes that ‘many of the key lines of *FFVII* are there to fill us

in on the past, not to point us toward the future’. Smith’s study demonstrates that *FFVII*’s preoccupation with the past is a definitive example of game dialogue serving a function beyond the emulation of film dialogue; however, this interrogation of the past also suggests a desire to reconcile modernity to myth.

FFVII, at the very least, appropriates thematic elements from *Evangelion*, an anime in which teenage *mecha* pilots spar with ‘Angels’ intent on eradicating humanity⁸. The visual motif of a battle against an angelic figure is most distinctly seen in the confrontation with Sephiroth at the end of the game. Sephiroth’s form taken in *FFVII*’s final battle is deliberately angelic; beyond this, he is also capable of attacking the party using the entire cosmos⁹. Tellingly, the game *Xenogears* (1998), released after *FFVII*, culminates with the protagonist and his accomplices destroying a cruel and unfair god. *Xenogears* was created from a story initially proposed by Tetsuya Takahashi and Kaori Tanaka as the basis for *FFVII*, but turned into a new and separate IP, allegedly deemed “too dark and complicated” for one of Square’s mainline titles (Yip, 2010). Soraya Saga, a freelance writer, illustrator, and partner to Takahashi, concedes that the works of Nietzsche, Freud and Jung in particular were influential in the writing of *Xenogears*, motivated by the question of identity: “where do we come from, what are we, where are we going?”. The motif of recollecting the self plainly reappears in *Xenogears*; the protagonist, Fei Fong Wong, is a construct of a ‘monster’, a ‘coward’, and the false persona of ‘Fei’. Fei’s bifurcated identity neatly overlays with Freud’s model of the psyche (his monstrous self is literally named ‘Id’), while the imagined persona of ‘Fei’ shields him from the truth - that he is, in fact, the reincarnation of a deity known as ‘Abel’. This particular synthesis between character interiority and cosmic horror, mediated through psychology and spiritual intertext is a congruent element through *FFVII*, *Xenogears* and *Evangelion*.

In this sense, *FFVII* exists in a gulf where it mirrors the religious anxieties of *Evangelion*, develops the continuity of the *Final Fantasy* series, and establishes the major theme of identity then explored with the release of *Xenogears*. All of these texts engage in the miniaturisation of humanity through an ever-increasing scale. This structural shift reorients the hero narrative from the horizontal conflict of hero and villain towards a ‘vertical’ narrative in which humanity

lingers at the bottom rung of a totalizing mythic order. As stated prior, Cloud’s psychological growth is significant on a narrative level, and arguably gratifying to the player, but it remains that the outcome of the hero’s success (in destroying Sephiroth / Jenova) is ambiguous with regards to humanity’s long-term survival. The motifs of apocalypse and destruction is a common and long-running motif of Japanese media, but *FFVII* builds these elements into a narrative in which the hero must first remember himself before passing through the crucible.

Finally, the heroism that Cloud projects to the player in *FFVII* is just like Cloud himself. Shaped by preconceptions of what heroes are, how they start, and what they go through to become legend incarnate. The revelation is that Cloud has merely been trying his best to meet the caricature of his own hero, Zack. is not the role as one expects in the archetype of the hero’s journey; led astray by the valor of his implanted past, and in shedding that past begins to fulfill the protagonist’s role in earnest. The heroism that he is believed to hold at the outset is found to be false; true heroism is the acknowledgement that he is not the exceptional nor the chosen, but who will fight due to his newfound belief in the truth. Now, authenticity replaces deed in what makes a hero.

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Notes

- 1 Hinrobu Sakaguchi, producer of *FFVII*, recalls the meeting with Hiroshi Yamauchi (then-President of Nintendo Japan) to officiate Square’s dissolution with Nintendo, and the ‘very warm welcome’ extended by Nintendo. Hiroshi Kawai, lead character designer on *FFVII*, curtly responds to Sakaguchi’s version of events: “What I heard was Nintendo said, ‘if you’re leaving us, never come back.’” (Leone, 2018: 70).
- 2 ‘Japanese Role-Playing Game’ is commonly expressed in the shorthand of ‘JRPG’.
- 3 <https://www.famitsu.com/news/202004/21197153.html> [Accessed 05/05/2020]
- 4 The ‘Lifestream’ is known as ‘Mako’, when converted by industrial process to an energy source. Shinra is the villainous corporation that Cloud battles throughout *FFVII* as their reckless search for *Mako* now threatens the life of the planet.
- 5 In *Escaflowne’s* Gaea, destiny itself is a physical property that can be observed with scientific apparatus, much like a photon or magnetic field. The protagonist, Hitomi, believes she is capable of using her grandmother’s necklace to predict the future - in reality, the necklace is an apparatus that allows her to alter fate. The villain, Emperor Dornkirk, similarly uses a ‘fate alteration machine’ to transform his enemies, who remain unaware of this cosmic transformation.
- 6 The terms ‘SOLDIER’ (Shinra corporations’ elite task force), ‘EX-SOLDIER’ and ‘AVALANCHE’ are represented in all-capitals in the English translation. This convention is likely due to the original terms having been distinguished in *katakana* script and given additional emphasis when transcribed.
- 7 After Cloud has recounted the events at Nibelheim, Tifa asks “Cloud? How badly was I injured when Sephiroth cut me?”. This is because, to Tifa’s knowledge, he never returned to Nibelheim.
- 8 The Angels in *Evangelion* arrive according to the written prophecy of a classified, in-universe version of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The design of the Angels closely mirror the historical depictions of Ophanim and Seraphim.
- 9 This attack in particular was altered to look much more spectacular for the Western release of *FFVII*. This version was eventually relaunched in Japan as ‘*Final Fantasy VII: International*’, in October 1997.