"But the planet's what matters, right?": The Entangled Environmentalism of Three *Final Fantasy VII* Remake Communities

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An evil corporation siphons energy from the planet, slowly converting natural resources into money as the world slowly suffers and dies. The corporation, intent only on generating profits, disregards any environmental concerns from the general public, leaving vocal citizens limited avenues in which to redress complaints against the corporation. Such is the world of late stage capitalism. This is Shinra, the megacorporation-turned-world-government featured in *Final Fantasy VII*. But it could also describe Square Enix, the publishers of the game, who recently announced their intention to sell NFTs as an additional revenue stream. Within the game, a team of disaffected youths join together to stop Shinra and save the bioenergy of their planet, often engaging in violence and ecoterrorism to advance their cause. Similarly, fans of the game have condemned Square's embrace of environmentally devastating technology and noted the company's hypocrisy in the endeavor, though they have yet to endorse violence in support of the environment. As such, the team within the game, the fans of the game, and the publisher create three communities with different outlooks on environmentalism. This entangled environmentalism of these three communities demonstrates how video games, despite largely being produced by huge multinational corporations, can metatextually provide opportunities for fans to engage in critiques of capitalist ventures, especially/in particular in *FF7* as they relate to the desolation, destruction, etc. of the natural world.

Cloud, the player character in *Final Fantasy VII*, is hired as a mercenary to help a group called AVALANCHE stop Shinra's abuse of nature. Slowly, Cloud (and the player) become embroiled in AVALANCHE's politics. Despite his aloofness, Cloud finds himself supporting his new teammates, and actively works to support their goals out of genuine interest, not merely for his paycheck. Barret, the leader of the local chapter of AVALANCHE, is more radicalized than the larger organization, and orchestrates an act of ecoterrorism: destroying a reactor to limit Shinra's ability to convert mako, an energy source connected to the planet's health, into electricity. Barret and the rest of the player's party members frequently engage in similar violent tactics, attacking Shinra soldiers and destroying its infrastructure.

Cloud and his party illustrate the strained relationship that often occurs in late capitalism between a concerned, politically active group and megacorporations. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Grieg de Peuter refer to this as a conflict between "activists" and a "multinational conglomerate" that operates as a "weapons developer" turned "world government" which "cause[s] massive ecological destruction" (236). Here, we should recognize AVALANCHE's status as activists rather than ecoterrorists. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter validate the party's stance with this

tacit approval. Activism downplays the violence of AVALANCHE's methods, and condones their actions as an appropriate response to the damage caused by Shinra. In contrast, Shinra's description emphasizes the facelessness and ultimately violent nature of the company. Shinra's recognition here focuses on its role in weapons manufacturing rather than their efforts at city-building, modernization, and the supply of electricity to a city of millions of people. Here, Shinra is cast as the violent one and the player's party is innocent, or at least absolved of any implication of instigating violence. Shinra is the guilty party, and with the megacorporation's monopoly on violence, the player is forced into violent actions as the only remaining resort. Thus, the player and their party are validated: destroying power reactors is an acceptable choice when faced with a potential biological collapse. The locus of violence is clearly situated with Shinra and not the AVALANCHE cell. Within this conflict, the small collection of individuals is heroic, and the corporation-governmental entity is antagonistic.

We should note that the ecopolitics of the player's party are made all the more appealing by their depiction as cool, attractive people who want to better the world in which they live. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter refer to the party as "fantastically good-looking ideal characters" and "disaffected youth" fighting against a "multinational conglomerate [. . .] whose attempt to drain the planet's vital energy sources makes it both a world government and the cause of massive ecological destruction" in "a saga that strangely connects the postnuclear legacy of the dissident *shin jinrui* to today's anticorporate movements" (17). *Shin jinrui*, which here translates to *new breed* or *new generation*, references a youth movement of dissident politics and engagement that roughly corresponds chronologically with the punk movement in the United States. Games critic Jessica Howard echoes this analysis, claiming *Final Fantasy VII* is "an *extremely* punk game, abundant with political sentiments," (Howard) and the party members certainly resemble that aesthetic, with their machine-gun hands, exposed hardware sticking out of their armor, and wild spiky haircuts. The party embraces punk; their angry, disaffected edge makes them relatable to young players of the game. Their status as righteous ecowarriors only enhances the cool: they care, and so should the player, because that is the only way things can change.

The game channels the party's cool energy and desire for change into the conflict with Shinra, and we must recognize that this conflict originates from a capitalistic desire to extract profits from natural resources. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter connect mako to Foucault's concept of biopower: by harnessing a substance that sustains all life on the planet, Shinra asserts control over all the people—or all the living creatures—in its domain (236). In this way, access to mako enables Shinra to reach otherwise unattainable levels of power to regulate and control any biological entities within their influence. Mako provides Shinra with significant riches, granting a capitalistic power to the corporation, and also allows the company to tap into the metaphysical life force of the planet, so that Shinra's reach extends beyond economic power and into a mystical control of not just humanity but indeed all forms of life. Shinra dictates who lives, who dies, what occupations are available to individuals, and even conducts experiments on citizens. Possession of mako energy is thus significantly valuable along multiple avenues of control, and ties to its position as a natural

resource. Shinra's control of mako is a severe environmental concern. This is why the player's first mission in the game is to destroy the mako reactor: AVALANCHE intends to cause significant loss of capital to Shinra, and simultaneously deny the corporation the ability to consume as much mako, thus protecting the planet's life force. In retaliation, Shinra flexes its biopower by destroying a section of the city, killing thousands of people, and blames the attack on AVALANCHE, calling it a second terrorist attack. Shinra is able to use this as a pretense to assume tighter political control over the populace, enhancing their biopower. All these exertions of influence, control, and even the conflict between Shinra and the player's party are expressions of how the exploitation of natural resources can be used to create biopower.

The heroic representation of the party in *Final Fantasy VII* as plucky underdog ecowarriors in a noble fight to save the natural world has had a profound effect on the fanbase of the series. In his focused discussion on how fans react to game narratives, Mattias van Ommen suggests that an affective component plays a crucial role in connecting the players with the characters and world of *Final Fantasy VII*, asserting "[t]his narrative approach towards emotions can help clarify why certain games, featuring narratives in which the player guides forth the growth of characters over the course of many hours and play sessions, may be more successful in producing a longer-lasting affective relationship between player and game world than games in which each play session concludes a mini-narrative" (24). Jessica Howard reinforces van Ommen's analysis when she calls a member of the player's party a "childhood friend of mine," and demonstrates how this game "abundant with political sentiments and messages regarding the distribution of power, our treatment of the environment, and the evil found in complicity" ultimately speaks to her. Hence, game narratives, especially longer ones, hold a special ability to elicit affective reactions in their players, and, as van Ommen recognizes, Japanese Role-Playing Games often take a distinctly narrative-forward approach, which indicates that *Final Fantasy VII* engenders a stronger affective relationship with its players than many other games in different genres that feature shorter narrative elements. In this way, players may respond affirmatively toward narrative decisions made by party characters that are nonetheless out of the player's control; the affective relationship between player and party encourages the player to view characters just as they would friends, supporting their actions and adopting their ideological outlook.

Moreover, we should note that such connections are not limited by the narrative components of the game, but rather that the ludic mechanics also contribute to strong affective responses with players. Gameplay structures within *Final Fantasy VII* induce a deep emotional association within players, who are allowed to customize the various party members and experience a steady growth of character statistics, which rewards the player for significant investment of time and engenders a sense of ownership over the characters. Such customization may, for example, take the form of equipped weapons, magical augmentations called materia, how the player chooses to respond to in-game questions, or even whether or not to indulge in side quests. As van Ommen observes, "statistical progression and creative customization are often at the core of creating a personalized experience, which has the potential to generate affective relationships with character worlds that

are simultaneously intimately personal as well as shared with other fans" (23). This personalized experience invokes an even deeper affective connection to the in-game characters and world than may be otherwise possible. By tailoring the various characters to their personal whims and desires, the player forms an affective bond with the party. Personal stylings through equipment and upgrades, as well as minor choices in gameplay, such as how Cloud answers questions, do not affect the narrative at all, and yet gives the player a sense of ownership over their gaming experience, inextricably drawing the player in closer to the characters and the world. In this way, the affective response here is made all the stronger through the gameplay mechanics. Players thus feel invested in the party's success within the narrative, and this affective association may help the players adopt some of the party's ideology, such as with friendships and relationships, mental health, or, most aptly, environmentalism. As Stephen K. Hirst recognizes, "the game's radical environmental themes and Shinto-tinged philosophies wound up influencing a generation of environmentalists," specifically pointing out multiple high-ranking officers of environmental organizations such as Tyler Kruse, the senior communications director at Greenpeace (Hirst). These examples point to the depth of resonance that players feel with the game's narrative; investment of time and energy into the characters and narrative fosters a strong affective relationship with the game and its outcomes. The *Final Fantasy VII* fan community has embraced a position of environmental concern and activism, largely influenced by the affective response from the game.

It is with this fanbase that, toward the end of 2021, Square Enix announced it would incorporate NFT technology into its games. NFTs, or non-fungible tokens, are units of cryptographic data stored on a blockchain, which acts as a deregulated ledger of ownership, and allows for the sale of data stored on the blockchain. However, because of the computational energy required to process transactions on the blockchain, it has been condemned as an environmentally devastating waste of energy consumption, which some scholars have estimated to be equivalent to that of a small nation in order to process only a few transactions (Das and Dutta). Despite these concerns on the ecological impact of blockchains and NFTs, Square Enix already incorporated the technology into several smaller games, and in November of 2021, suggested an interest in pursuing blockchain gaming with a more "robust entry," according to games industry analyst Daniel Ahmad (@ZhugeEx). This mirrors other large corporations within the gaming industry, such as Ubisoft, who incorporated NFTs into their popular *Ghost Recon* series in late 2021; EA, whose president Andrew Wilson called NFTs "an important part [. . .] of the future of our industry" (qtd. in Makuch); Take-Two, whose president Strauss Zelnick is a self-described "big believer" in NFT technology (qtd. in Makuch); or smaller publisher Team-17, who famously announced support of NFTs and then backtracked less than 24 hours later after backlash from fans. In short, Square is just one more company searching for an additional revenue stream—one they can exploit to generate significant profits with comparatively little labor. Square's interest in NFTs and blockchain gaming indicates a capitalistic desire to extract wealth rather than some sort of artistic pursuit.
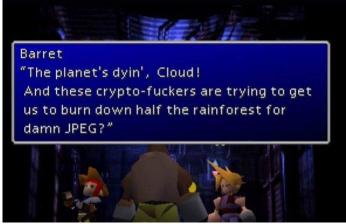
In its declarations of interest in NFT and blockchain technology, Square has yet to acknowledge the environmental impact this technology may have. In his "A New Year's Letter from the President," Square Enix's President Yosuke Matsuda redoubles the company's desire to incorporate NFTs and blockchain gaming, specifically noting different incentives to engage new kinds of players, differentiating between the so-called "play to earn," "play to have fun," and a new "play to contribute" (Matsuda). Matsuda equates the first with the third, suggesting "explicit incentives" could be used to encourage players to develop user-generated content, with the understanding that we may see "advances in token economies [result] not only in greater consistency in [players] motivation [to contribute], but also creating a tangible upside to their creative efforts." In essence, Matsuda sees these players as a potential expansion of the workforce, who may be rewarded with a percentage ownership of any NFT generated as a result of the content they create. Matsuda's view here is explicitly capitalistic. He doesn't speak on any artistic value or merit in the technology, he neglects to point toward any user-generated content he finds to be particularly compelling, and he never mentions any creative innovation in game mechanics, art design, or narrative structures that could arise from incorporating NFTs or blockchain. Matsuda dismisses "play for fun" immediately after mentioning that as an option; their objection to these new technologies are "reservations," and Matsuda never elaborates on how these trends will enhance the experience for "play to have fun" players. Any interest expressed by Matsuda in NFT and blockchain technology is couched solely in the financial. Square is in this to make money.

Despite (or perhaps because of) Square's gleeful interest in the capitalistic side of NFTs, fan response has been less enthusiastic. *Final Fantasy VII* primes its audience to be receptive toward environmental politics, and when ecological concerns entered a realm the players felt secure in—that is, the gaming industry—they were ready to act. Stephen Duncombe claims gamers get "intense pleasure" from a game because it "offers power, excitement, and room to explore" in ways that political involvement often doesn't (72). Thus, if politics can offer similar avenues of pleasure, gamers may become more politically active. Duncombe continues to suggest several methods through which play can be used to recruit gamers, but sometimes, players have the propensity to mobilize themselves. Square's announcement of its decision to invest in NFTs triggered a perfect storm for players: a political issue that the players had been taught to care about was entering an arena they were passionate for, all because of the hypocrisy of a corporation betraying the themes of a beloved game. Now, they could bring play to politics.

And play they did. Across social media, players have denounced Square Enix's enthusiasm for NFTs, trolled official company accounts, mocked the decision, threatened piracy in response, and even gone so far as to weaponize Square's own games against them. Twitter user @TheIshikawaRin declares the company is "sinking lower and lower" because of "the NFT scam" before ending with the very declarative "Fuck you Square-Enix [sic]" (@TheIshikawaRin). @Nicodemus82 says "if you start putting NFT's [sic] in your games, I'm gonna pirate every single game you put out going forward. Sincerely, A fan" (@Nicodemus82). Other responses attached screenshots from the game featuring the characters, turning these examples of Square's capitalism into tools that point out

the company's hypocrisy. Such images often feature Barret, perhaps the most outspoken critic of Square's—I mean, Shinra's—exploitation of the natural world. One such screenshot features the dialogue subtitled at the bottom of the screen, "You gonna stand there and pretend you can't hear the planet crying out in pain?," drawing the viewer's eye toward Barret's machine gun-arm. Crying out in pain indeed. Another features an altered screenshot of the original game, featuring an early moment in which Barret addresses Cloud, and therefore the player. The original dialogue reads "The planet's dyin', Cloud!" to which has been appended "And these crypto-fuckers are trying to get us to burn down half the rainforest for [a] damn JPEG?" These examples, and countless others, speak to the passion of the fan response. Players have enthusiastically rejected NFTs in gaming more broadly, but Square's interest seems to be an especially brutal betrayal because of the environmental themes of Final Fantasy VII, which holds a special place in many players' hearts. And yet, despite this, and despite the retractions made by many other game companies, Square has yet to change course.

Screenshots of Final Fantasy VII: Remake *featuring Barret. The screenshot is often reposted in fan communities as support of environmental activism, with undertones of violence. The second image has Barret's dialog altered to incorporate what fans believe the character would have thought of cryptocurrency and NFTs.*

This is where we stand as of this writing. Square remains committed to incorporating NFTs into games, and fans remain committed to making fun of them for doing so. But I think the important takeaway for now is rather the mobilization of game fans. Often, video game fans have experienced negative portrayals in popular media, are castigated by public officials, and have become a go-to example of the lazy and aimless. However, the situation around *Final Fantasy VII* demonstrates exactly how that negative image is incomplete—how games can be a positive force on players. Because of the experiences, both narrative and ludic, in *Final Fantasy VII*, many players find themselves politically aware and engaged. They learn that it's okay to be passionate about issues that may be minimized by other people. And, by incorporating a sense of play in political action, we may see a growing involvement of game players. Their new passion can even be directed at the company behind this original lesson, showing the depth of their commitment to the cause. After all, as AVALANCHE member Biggs asks Barret after the party successfully blows up the mako reactor, "But the planet's what matters, right?"

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