

Boundless, terrifying freedom's: ecocriticism and ludographic metafiction in Final Fantasy VII: Remake (2020)

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“Boundless, terrifying freedom”: Ludographical Metafiction, the Anthropocene, and *Final Fantasy VII Remake*’s Whispers

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“Careful - that which lies ahead does not yet exist”

- Sephiroth, *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (2020).

Final Fantasy VII occupies a storied place in the Fantasy Games canon. Released in 1997, the game made use of the Sony Playstation’s CD format for an experience that was both highly extended (comprising three discs) and audio-visually impressive. The storyline follows eco-terrorist group Avalanche as they recruit laconic mercenary Cloud Strife to fight against energy corporation Shinra. The company creates power and profit by unsustainably exploiting the ‘Lifestream’ which circulates through the planet. Cloud and Avalanche discover a greater threat than Shinra - the super soldier Sephiroth, created by Shinra by combining human cells with those of an alien being called Jenova, “the Calamity From the Skies”.

Final Fantasy VII Remake (2020) reprises the first disc of the original game, taking place in the city of Midgar, Shinra’s capital. From a gaming perspective, *Remake* answered commercial and design imperatives. The original was subject to decades of hermeneutic discussion on gaming forums, not least due to the popularity of subsequent spin-off games such as *Dirge of Cerberus* (2006) and 2005’s CGI film *Advent Children*. However, it is now difficult to play given the vintage platform and outmoded gameplay

structures (including random encounters). 2020's outing could have simply been the *Remake* its title suggests - improving graphics, gameplay, social media options - appealing to a new generation of players. However, the game also remakes its eco-fictional cyberpunk storyline through the introduction of the Whispers, in a move we term *Ludographical Metafiction* (LM).

LM draws on Linda Hutcheon's classic work (1988) on *Historiographic Metafiction*, a "self-reflective exposition of the discursive nature of historiography" (Fu 2018) in postmodernist literary texts. In later remarks, Hutcheon argues that digital media have "transformed the language we use and the social world in which we live" (Hutcheon [1989] 2002, 181), calling for new metafictional heuristics. LM refers to the increasing use of fantastic tropes to bring digital and playful worlds into proximity. As game sequels and transmedia worlds have become more saturated, and consolidation and conglomeration have brought new clashes between rights holders, digital games have increasingly borrowed techniques from genre. Reboots and alternate versions of characters are explained by alternate timelines, dimensions and so on: key recent examples include *Mortal Kombat 11* (2019) and *Fortnite* (2017).

In Fantasy games, these techniques have added metafictional potential. Scholars including Kathryn Hume ([1984] 2014), Ursula Le Guin (1971, 1993) and C.S. Lewis (1984, [1947] 2004) note that ostensibly less realistic Fantastic symbols allow creators to convey complex psychological ideas, reflecting reality through culturally-bound representations. Fantasy fans are often well-versed on the intertextuality of these 'condensed images', participating in a genre-wide dialogue that crosses forms to uncover the complex themes of a work.

In other words, fantastic tropes like alternative dimensions can go beyond merely answering “who would win in a fight – Johnny Cage or the Terminator”. They allow games to pose complex questions that would be difficult to explore in realistic games. Take, for example, the rewind time mechanic in *Braid* (2008), which players may use to correct mistakes when navigating levels. In the final level, the game rewinds the action to show that, far from rescuing your ex-girlfriend, you were in fact the enemy she was running from. This reframing provides a metafictional commentary on the “save the world, get the girl” heroic narrative of traditional 2D platformers like the *Super Mario* series, and the societal ethics of masculinity this embodies.

Bernardo Bueno attempts to explore this process in describing ‘Geek metafiction’ (2018), “the love of intertextuality... where the reader who identifies the most wins.” LM answers Hutcheon’s call for digital metafictional heuristics in a different way, working to both enable intertextuality, and to highlight and make use of the ludic potentials of source texts. The task of LM is therefore to create a frame for metafictional crossings, using both fantastic tropes and the medium-specificity of video games: gamer argot, hardware standards, gamer cultural debates, and so on. Mapping ludo-fictional self-reflexive entanglements becomes part of the game: a sop for experienced players and an invitation to media-historical work for novitiates.

While LM has broader manifestations, in this paper, we explore a focused example with relevance to the conference theme: how the metafictional ‘Whispers’ rework the formerly anthropocentric ecocritical themes *and* the ludography of the original *Final Fantasy VII*, through identification with not only the player characters and their stakes in the planet’s survival, but also with the planet itself.

In *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, the planet acts through the Whispers, spectral hooded figures who selectively appear to characters at significant plot points. Sentient feline Red XIII later reveals the Whispers are “arbiters of fate”, with fate specified as “the will of the planet itself”.

This is a departure from the original *Final Fantasy VII*, where the planet had no voice of its own, though many stakeholders claimed to speak for it: eco-terrorists Avalanche, player character Aerith, the last descendant of ancient race the Cetra, and main antagonist Sephiroth, who claimed inheritance of the planet. In *Remake*, nature is no longer a passive entity to be saved, but an active participant in the narrative, ‘speaking’ for itself through the actions of the Whispers.

On a metafictional level, this reflects changes in ecocritical discourse since the original game. Many scientists now believe that climate change cannot be reversed. We have entered the Anthropocene, irrevocably changing the environment, and we can only avoid impacting it further.

Since the Whispers’ goals align with those of the eco-warrior player characters, we expect them to be allies. Yet the Whispers interfere in gameplay, such that their motivations are initially inscrutable to players. While they assist in the escape of player characters Cloud and Aerith from antagonist Reno, they also hamper players, fighting them outside of the bar Seventh Heaven and injuring nonplayer character Jesse.

This metafictional discourse creates tension for players, as those familiar with the aforementioned “save the world...” narrative are encouraged to question the price of their eco-friendly goals. The power of the players to resist the Whispers is limited – they can fight them, or find alternative routes through Midgar, but they cannot prevent the

Whispers from mandating the deaths of fan favourite characters Jesse and Wedge.

Much as with the planet's response to global warming in the current discourse, players can mitigate, but not prevent climate change. Often, the Whispers actively work against the player, according to the planet's will.

Or do they? Here we come to *Remake's* other metafictional resonance – the will of gamers. As the story progresses, we learn the planet's will is to preserve the events of the original game. When Sephiroth murders Barrett in the Shinra corporation offices, the Whispers revive Barrett because “this death was not the one ordained for you by fate” – he did not die here in the original game. The Whispers serve as metafictional commentary on games culture and the influence gamers expect to have on studio output. Their actions anticipate the reactions of long-term fans of the series, many of whom were disappointed or confused that the so-called Remake did not follow the original story.¹

This creates conflict in these players, who simultaneously identify with the wishes of the Whispers and those of the player characters – especially with the knowledge that the original narrative leads to the death of beloved player character Aerith. This also develops the ecocritical message of the game. While the original game created player empathy with the planet's fate through player character Barrett, who could hear the planet's pain, in *Remake*, designating the players as planet forces players to take a direct, non-anthropocentric viewpoint on climate change issues.

¹ For examples, see the following videos: Final Fantasy Union, ‘Final Fantasy 7 Remake: The Ending Explained (Spoilers... For When You've Finished!)’, *YouTube*, 13 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfOFQr5C61E>; [last accessed 23 February 2021]; SaneTBD, ‘Streamers React to Final Fantasy VII Remake Ending (FFVII)’, *YouTube*, 22 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VzjJunPoZA> [last accessed 23 February 2021].

At the end of the original *Final Fantasy VII*, 200 years on from the climax, the human race is strongly implied to be extinct. In *Remake*, the glimpse of this future in Red XIII's vision suggests this is indeed the planet's desired ending. This increases the conflict within players, pitting 'getting the girl' against 'saving the world'. Players are forced to re-examine their attitudes towards climate change and the original narrative simultaneously. The sacrifices of beloved characters – the end of humanity – the original outcome of the game – are best for the planet. But are these sacrifices that we should make?

This conflict reaches its climax in the final battle with Sephiroth, another new addition in *Remake*. Notably, Sephiroth can defy the Whispers, slicing a gap in their mass to access another dimension out of time, symbolizing his disregard for and immunity to the planet's will. So do the player characters, Aerith making her own doorway into this dimension. The parallel is clear – the characters do not have to save the planet and die, they can also, like Sephiroth, defy the planet and destroy it – much as players could carry on as usual and ignore climate change.

The player characters' fight for survival is framed as both against the planet's will and Sephiroth's apocalyptic goals. Ultimately, they choose neither path, defeating both the Whispers and Sephiroth, still determined not only to save the planet, but its people too. This encourages players to regard unstoppable climate change as not simply a choice between people and the planet, but that a middle way is worth fighting for.

However, the game's close offers no clear answers regarding the righteousness of this path, while indicating the existence of alternative timelines through the return of player

character Zack. The falling rain symbolizes the potential for healing in this new timeline, but Aerith remarks that she misses the “steel sky” of Midgar and the security it represents. For now, the ultimate ecocritical message of *Final Fantasy VII Remake* is that for us and the planet to survive the Anthropocene, we must step away from the comfort of old narratives around possible futures and write our own. As Aerith puts it, in opposition to Sephiroth, this is a “boundless, terrifying freedom”.

Notably, this game is only a partial adaptation of the original, and “the unknown journey continues” in a promised future installment, offering the opportunity to examine the developing ludographic metafiction of this series as it unfolds. As *Final Fantasy VII Remake* demonstrates, digital games and virtual worlds are becoming more entangled with culture and society, leading to new ludographies and metafiction. Answering Hutcheon’s call for metafictional heuristics for the digital age, Ludographical Metafiction provides tools with which to explore these developments. Fantastic ‘condensed images’, like the Whispers in *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, allow games to explore multiple metafictional resonances, creating nuanced thematic explorations. Meanwhile, the ludographic elements allow players to immerse themselves within complex issues from climate change to fan culture, simultaneously embedding games within these debates. By using Ludographical Metafiction to re-orient its ecocritical themes, *Remake* presages ever-expanding connections between the ludic, the fictional and the real.

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