You and I at the End: Playing Final Fantasy VII at the End of the World

I've always wondered if the developers of *Final Fantasy VII* knew they were speaking to the future. They had to know the future is what they were building. What did developing that "future" mean to them? What did they want to use their platform to say, and to whom were they speaking? Why does *Final Fantasy VII* make more sense to me now, at the beginning of the end of the world, than it ever has before?

For 1997's Americans, setting a game in a dystopian future probably seemed like a strange choice, but it wouldn't have been such a stretch for its developers. Development on *Final Fantasy VII* began in 1995, halfway through Japan's "Lost Decade." An economic boom in the 80s gave way to one of the worst economic recessions in the country's history. Meanwhile, the world came to Japan to adopt the climate change emergency Kyoto Protocol in 1997, the same year *Final Fantasy VII* would be released.

Japan was reconciling with the darkside of the rise of global neoliberal capitalism a decade earlier than America would. Corporations were getting larger, people were getting smaller. The planet was dying, and somehow, it felt like there was nothing anybody could do about it *and* that it was everyone's fault, all at the same time.

Shinra was born. The fossil fuel metaphor at the heart of Mako energy was obvious even in 1997, but the fact that Shinra becomes rich by literally sucking the planet's blood is only one aspect of the face of true evil *Final Fantasy VII* uses the company to portray.

"Shinra Electric Company" is a conspicuously incomplete descriptor. The company is a monolith. They don't just enjoy a monopoly on power; they produce *everything*. As Cloud and Aerith make their way through the ruins beneath sector 5, they clamber over the piles of discarded Shinra war machines that created the ruins around them … and the discarded Shinra construction equipment used to clean up.

There's no question in the minds of the citizens of Midgar who is in control. Midgar native Aerith has never known a life beyond the metal plate Shinra built over her home. When Avalanche appears to oppose them, they have such a calculated, perfect plot in place to use the eco-terrorists as an excuse to further consolidate control that we're left wondering if they had been waiting for the opportunity.

And of course, this is the end game, beyond the profit or the power. Shinra is attempting to consolidate economic and cultural control so total that they become synonymous with reality itself; not just "too big to fail," but too big to IMAGINE failing. Shinra isn't trying to destroy the world, but to *inscribe themselves upon it indelibly*, even if that means ending it in the process. Just like their Frankenstein's monster, Sephiroth.

This isn't just a metaphor for oil companies. Shinra is capitalism itself, rendered antagonist just a few years after Frances Fukuyama wrote "The End of History and the Last Man." *Final Fantasy*

VII gives us the most pessimistic alternative vision of Fukuyama's "End of History" imaginable. A world where every competing theory, idea, and person is sublimated into capital until everything's just more fuel for its world-destroying engine, until that engine that churns faster and hotter until there's nothing left to fuel it. They couldn't have known how right they were.

Final Fantasy VII isn't just a game about Shinra, however. It's a game about the people who grew up under its boot. How does it feel to grow up a cog in the machine of eternal, inevitable capital? What does it do to you? These are the people *Final Fantasy VII* speaks to, and why it resonates with me so much now.

The characters of *Final Fantasy VII* are living in a doomed world. They've known it since they were children, discussing their bleak futures from a tiny hometown on the outskirts of Shinra's city. What happens to kids who know the world is ending? Each of *Final Fantasy VII*'s characters reconciles with different manifestations of the same inciting trauma: it is impossible to separate yourself from the horrors you were created in. How do you self-determine in a world determined to make you a weapon?

There couldn't be a better posterboy for the *ahem* strife at the heart of *Final Fantasy VII* than Cloud himself. Naive Cloud, who assures his childhood crush he's not going to be "like the other boys." He's going to be a SOLDIER, one of the corporate-sponsored superhumans manufactured to fight Shinra's endless wars. Not just any soldier either, he insists, but the best: SOLDIER first class. Like Coca-Cola's Captain America. It's hard to blame him. He's just a kid with a dream and a girl to impress.

That's the great irony of Cloud: the *real* reason he's the perfect protagonist for *Final Fantasy VII* is that he's essentially millennial imposter syndrome made manifest. On the surface, he's the single most iconic (read: cliched) JRPG protagonist to this day, from the giant hair to the giant sword to the giant brooding. But that isn't who Cloud is. It's who he wanted to be, just like it's who we wanted to be.

After Sephiroth's attack on Nibelheim and Hojo's experimentation, Cloud fashioned a false persona for himself out of his childhood perception of his idols. This version of Cloud didn't "fail" to become a SOLDIER, let his friends and family down, or suffer terrible victimization at the hands of Sephiroth and Shinra. This version of Cloud was tough and stoic enough to survive in the world he found awaiting him.

Each of the characters in *Final Fantasy VII* are undergoing their own identity crises. They break or bind or hide the parts of themselves they believe make them weak. Barrett galvanizes himself into an eco-terrorist zealot because he believes saving the world single-handedly (er, no pun intended) is the only way he can become a worthy father. Tifa aggressively pursues independence and responsibility to hide her deep-seated anxieties. Only Aerith seems comfortable in her own skin, and even she winds up convinced she has to be a chosen one to save the world.

Final Fantasy VII is a game about people responding to guilt, failure, and disillusionment. The world is not the place we thought it would be, and we are not the people we thought we would be. It's so tempting to make the final leap of logic, that terrible conflating association: the reason the world isn't the way it should be is *because* we aren't the people we should be. The planet is dying because *we* failed.

I believe *Final Fantasy VII* exists to counter that line of thought, which is what makes it so valuable today. Guilt and repression nearly doom Cloud and his friends. Cloud, in all his affected cynicism and self-denial, plays right into Sephiroth's hands. He doesn't even realize exactly *why* he's pursuing Sephiroth until the terrible truth is revealed: because Sephiroth summoned him.

As long as Cloud denies the parts of himself he considers weak, Sephiroth can manipulate Cloud into doing his bidding. In his efforts to kill the part of himself that he was ashamed of, Cloud rendered himself a puppet. Worst of all, the reason he tried to kill that part of himself in the first place is *because* that same machine taught him to hate it. All the affectations we adopt to keep ourselves from being hurt are exactly what the system leverages against us to keep us inside it. We are special, we are exceptional, we are chosen. We are not like the rest of them. We are not victims. In our desperation to escape vulnerability, we let the things that are killing us choose how we should see ourselves.

To what end? After Sephiroth has Cloud hand over the Black Materia and nearly makes him kill Aerith, he and Hojo attempt to finalize their command over Cloud. They exploit his fractured psyche to make him believe he was *never* a real person in the first place; that he was just another failed clone of Sephiroth himself.

Sephiroth is the offspring and conclusion of Shinra's philosophy. He believes his status as chosen one makes him the <u>only</u> inheritor of the Earth. He's literally the only being "special" and "chosen" enough to continue to exist; everything else on Earth exists to be sublimated into his perfect finality. This is the endgame of the system-perpetuating self-denial the children of capitalism subject themselves to.

As we try to kill weakness in ourselves we kill empathy for each other. When we see vulnerability in others it reminds us of our own, and we resent it. Instead of acknowledging the recognition, we place ourselves on an ever-changing, zero-sum hierarchy to protect ourselves from it: us vs. them. Who is "strong" or "smart" or "cool" enough for what the world needs? In order to convince ourselves that we make the cut, we desperately punish those who don't. We need to become Sephiroth: the chosen one, destroying the world to prove they're better. Sephiroth kills the actual final ancient in his nihilistic zeal to be special. And now Cloud believes he *is* Sephiroth.

Of course the clone theory makes sense to Cloud. When we deny our identities, it's easy to lose sight of them entirely. Cloud nearly forgets he was ever anything other than what Shinra told him he was. That doesn't happen, thanks to Tifa and Cloud himself. Together, the childhood friends confront the root of Cloud's trauma and - even more importantly - the root of Cloud's

unwillingness to face that trauma. When Cloud can admit his own vulnerability and understand that he's not the rugged, stoic, singular badass he always wanted to be, he can reclaim his life and his identity.

What happens next is the most important thing to take away from *Final Fantasy VII*, then or now. When Cloud and his friends reassert their own identities, they find, in Cloud's words "their own reasons to fight." Their struggle to self-determine is no longer bound up in the stakes and rules the system set down for them. It doesn't matter that they're not "worthy" or "chosen." Even their worst failures don't somehow "disqualify" them. Their "chosen one" is dead, but she is still with them, because she is still a part of the world they share together.

When Cloud and his friends free themselves from the hierarchy of the system, something crucial happens: Shinra and even Sephiroth himself cease to seem insurmountable. Shinra is just a company; Sephiroth is not a God. History did not have to happen this way, and the world does *not* have to end this way. At the end of *Final Fantasy VII*, the party doesn't just destroy Safer Sephiroth; Cloud defeats the Sephiroth that exists in his mind.

Surprisingly, the apocalyptic warnings of *Final Fantasy VII* aren't what make it feel so resonant now, at the actual end of the world. Though I can't speak for them, I don't think they were the "message for the future" the developers intended, either. Instead, that message is in the arc of Cloud and his ragtag group of flawed, ridiculous saviors: the people who learn they can save the world themselves.

We can't let capitalism tell us we're doomed. We can't let a narcissistic death cult indoctrinate us. There will never be an 11th hour answer in the form of a chosen one, and there doesn't need to be. No matter how powerful the world-ending forces we face now may seem, they're not insurmountable. They are people and systems and flaws, just like us. We are already everything we need to be to save the world. We just need to stop waiting to be something else. Now, who's helping me start AVALANCHE?