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CREATING CLIMATE CONSCIOUS PLAYERS: *FINAL FANTASY VII*'S ECOACTIVIST FAN COMMUNITIES

Abstract: This paper examines the ecocritical message espoused by characters in *Final Fantasy VII* and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* and uses affect theory to better understand fan response to these beliefs. From there, I note the publishing company, Square-Enix, recently declared interest in pursuing NFT technology as a potential revenue stream despite the environmental concerns this technology brings, which resembles the villainous organization Shinra in these games. Fan response Square-Enix's NFT projects indicates how fans may identify with and absorb the ideologies of characters in video games, even when that ideology sets the fans in opposition with the companies behind the original game(s).

Keywords: *Final Fantasy VII*, *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, NFT, affect theory, game studies, video games, Square-Enix, ecocriticism, fan response, fan theory

An evil corporation siphons energy from the planet, 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 through which to make 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 have recently released multiple

NFT video games, including an entry in its *Million Arthur* franchise and *Symbiogenesis*, an NFT experience that partially pulls from the *Final Fantasy* series. Within the game, a team of disaffected youths joins 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. *Final Fantasy VII*'s

fan community demonstrates that games can lead to political engagement and activism. While video games are often maligned as frivolous vices or otherwise corruptive influences, *Final Fantasy VII* and its *Remake* illustrate the fact that games can be a positive force in times of crisis.

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.

Two early sequences in *Final Fantasy VII* and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* help to establish the importance of environmentalism to the games and their audiences: Barret, Jessie, and Cloud riding an elevator, and AVALANCHE's train escape after the destruction of the mako reactor. Each of these scenes occurs in both the original *Final Fantasy VII*, released in 1997, and in *Remake*, which came out 23 years later in 2020, demonstrating the importance not just of the ecological awareness exhibited in the

scenes, but of these scenes themselves. The first scene, which takes place in an elevator inside the mako reactor, occurs in the first five minutes of the original game and partway through Chapter 1 in *Remake*. This scene helps establish Barret's motivations in what Shinra would consider to be an act of violence, as well as Cloud's feigned coolness at AVALANCHE's concerns, which juxtaposes Barret's hotheadedness. The second scene, in which AVALANCHE rides a train away from the now-destroyed reactor, takes place in the opening half hour of the original game and in Chapter 2 of *Remake*. This scene further clarifies the group politics of the party members, as expressed through the outspoken Barret, who often functions as the mouthpiece and moral compass for the party. It is within these two scenes that both games establish their environmental politics and encourage the player-character Cloud to embrace these ideas.

In the original game, the party frequently advocates for Cloud – and thus the player – to support their actions not just because he is a paid mercenary, but out of a sincere belief in their cause. Regularly, members of the party (and particularly Barret) will plead for Cloud to understand their position. Early in the game, while AVALANCHE rides an elevator inside the mako reactor, Barret describes the function of the building, saying “Little by little, the reactors'll drain out all the life [of the planet]. And that'll be that.” Cloud responds, “It's not my problem,” and Barret shouts back “The planet's dyin', Cloud!” Barret's incredulity at Cloud's indifference functions as a warning for the player: these

environmental concerns are too big to ignore. Cloud's blocky, polygonal body shrugs, demonstrating the blasé nature of his character—and likely the nature of the game's late-90s audience. This game, after all, was released before public awareness of climate change and environmental justice became the divisive issue it would be in the coming millennium, a full nine years before Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* came out in 2006. While awareness of environmental concerns had increased since the incredibly hot summer of 1988 and was growing into a political issue in the 1990s, *Final Fantasy VII* was an early part of a growing climate consciousness movement that included popular culture entries like the US animated TV show *Captain Planet* and nightly news stories on environmental disasters like the Exxon Valdez oil spill. As a part of this growing movement, the game helped introduce the concepts of environmentalism and ecojustice to a younger audience. Thus, Cloud's shrug of dismissal aligns him with the disaffection of the larger population at the time: the weirdly passionate like Barret may care about such issues, but the rest of the world feels less of a sense of urgency.

As the mission concludes, AVA-LANCHE and Cloud are reunited on a train. After Jessie describes the city of Midgar to Cloud, Barret cannot resist adding his own commentary, stating: "Look... you can see the surface now. This city don't have no day or night. If that plate weren't there... we could see the sky." Barret regrets the mechanization of the city, which destroys nature down to such a fundamental level that

even the day-night cycle is lost. Here, *Final Fantasy VII* connects the abuse of nature to capitalism; if the price that capitalists must pay for wealth is the exploitation and death of nature, then so be it. This industrialization unsettles Cloud, who responds, "A floating city... Pretty unsettling scenery." Barret, thrilled to be winning Cloud over, continues, "The upper world... a city on a plate... It's 'cuz of that &^#\$# 'pizza', that people underneath are sufferin'! And the city below is full of polluted air. On topa that, the Reactor keeps drainin' up all the energy." Cloud, seeking to understand, asks why the people don't leave, and Barret makes the connections to capitalism even more explicit: "Probably 'cuz they ain't got no money. Or, maybe... 'Cuz they love their land, no matter how polluted it gets." Barret draws the line between the poverty of the Slums and the pollution poisoning their land and air at the hands of their capitalist overlords. While Barret focuses primarily on the destruction of the natural world, he does recognize that this occurs because of late capitalist forces, which will continue to industrialize and exploit as a way to gain wealth. Ultimately, Barret seems to suggest, capitalism is the source of their environmental woes, and ecological justice is social justice.

While similar to the original game, these scenes receive deeper development in *Remake*. During the same elevator ride depicted in the original game, Barret's lecture is expanded: "This pump's sole purpose is to drain the planet dry. While you sleep, while you eat, while you shit – it's here, sucking up mako. It doesn't rest and it doesn't care!" he shouts into

the small room while Jessie and Cloud watch. “You do realize what mako is, don’t you? Mako is the lifeblood of our world. The planet bleeds green like you and me bleed red [...] You gonna stand there and pretend you can’t hear the planet crying out in pain?” By expanding Barret’s monologue here, *Remake* signals its intent to foreground the environmental message of the original game. But the lecture Barret gives here is not just longer; the language is more explicitly violent, invoking blood, crying, pain, all relentlessly soldiering on at all times of the day. By ramping up the violent imagery, Barret creates a more dire picture of the world’s trajectory, which mirrors the real world after twenty years of inaction on the part of global leaders. Thus, Barret’s rhetoric reflects the evolution of climate understanding among activists as they grow increasingly desperate for meaningful progress.

After the destruction of the mako reactor, AVALANCHE escapes via train just as in the original game, but the scene is expanded when they encounter a group of Shinra employees discussing the explosion. When the Shinra employees denigrate AVALANCHE, Barret interjects to reassert the group’s environmental goal of saving the planet. Barret uses his physically-imposing body to intimidate the business suit-wearing employees; he leans over their trembling forms as he continues: “In my humble opinion, that explosion was a message – a message to the bastards bleeding our planet dry. Think they got it? Heard it loud and clear? Y’all’s masters?” He paces in front of them, leaning over, and his machine gun-arm looms prominent in

the shot. Barret’s demeanor clearly sets himself against the Shinra employees, and the classist opposition here is apparent. Barret’s cargo pants, bare chest, and open vest, along with his bulging muscles, signal a life of physical labor, whereas the Shinra employees wear smart black suits, with white dress shirts and power ties. Their smaller physical bodies signal not physical labor, but the comfort of an office. A clear capitalist tension is drawn, and Barret embraces his identity as impoverished, even as the Shinra employees react in fear and disgust at his proximity. One of the group, named Shinra Middle Manager (a character name that emphasizes the facelessness and interchangeability of corporate life), declares the company and its employees will “work together for peace and prosperity” instead of succumbing to Barret’s implied violence, since “that is how civilized people change the world,” to the applause of his compatriots. The dialogue here mimics the tone-policing frequently seen opposed to real world activism, which the Oxford Dictionary defines as “criticizing the angry or emotional manner in which a person has expressed a point of view.”¹ This practice is often used by moderates (or opponents masquerading as moderates) to condemn the rhetoric used by activists as too revolutionary. This attempt to neuter the language of others has been used to limit or marginalize political groups growing in influence. Barret recognizes this tone-policing for what it is, as well as the implication that he, as well as AVALANCHE

¹ Oxford Dictionary of English, s.v. “tone policing.”

and those who live in the Slums, are uncivilized, and responds, “Them’s fighting words.” The Shinra employees leave before the violence can escalate, and the scenes follows the beats established in the original game, with Jessie explaining some of the elements of Midgar to Cloud. Again, Barret inserts himself into the conversation, just as he did in the first game, and again, the scene is expanded. Barret implores, “Take a good look. It’s because of that great big pizza in the sky that people down there gotta struggle to survive. Shinra sucks up mako while the soil turns to dust, the air fills with smog, and the flowers die.” Cloud takes a stronger stance than he does in the original, telling Barret the people should just leave, rather than asking why they can’t. Barret calls Cloud out, perhaps more gently than he did the Shinra employees, stating, “Well that’s all well and good if you’re only out for yourself. But the folks down there don’t have the luxury of choice, you know?” Barret’s statement forces Cloud to confront his privilege, and simultaneously acknowledges the necessity of community: the people of the Slums must work together, because they will not survive on their own. Their poverty within the capitalist system in which they live means they require the support of others. With this established, Cloud begins to understand the seriousness of Barret’s mission.

Ultimately, Cloud and his party illustrate the strained relationship that often occurs in late capitalism between a concerned, politically active group and megacorporations. Nick Dyer-Witthford and Greig 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.”² Here, we should recognize AVALANCHE’s status as activists rather than ecoterrorists. Dyer-Witthford 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

² N. Dyer-Witthford, G. de Peuter, *Games of Empire*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2009, p. 236.

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.”³ *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,”⁴ 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.⁵ 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 at-

³ Ibidem, p. 17.

⁴ J. Howard, *Final Fantasy VII Is a Timeless Tale of Hope, Growth, and Love*, Gamespot, 3.02.2022, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/final-fantasy-7-is-a-timeless-tale-of-hope-growth-and-love/1100-6500280/> (accessed: 5.11.2022).

⁵ N. Dyer-Witheford, G. de Peuter, *Games...*, op. cit., p. 236.

tack 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.”⁶ 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”⁷ 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, even as this ownership contradicts and conflicts with the independence of the characters dictated by narrative necessities. Such customization may, for example, take the form of equipped weapons, magical aug-

⁶ M. van Ommen, *Emergent Affect in Final Fantasy VII and Japanese Role-playing Games*, “Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds” 2018, vol. 10 (1), p. 24.

⁷ J. Howard, *Final Fantasy VII Is a Timeless Tale...*, op. cit.

mentations 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.”⁸ 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.⁹ 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.

As the fan community develops an environmental mindset, they can potentially become mobilized to fight for causes the community adopts. Henry Jenkins recognizes this, claiming that as fan communities grow larger and embrace technological methods of communication, “fandom becomes much more effective as a platform for consumer activism. Fans can quickly mobilize grassroots efforts to save programs or protest unpopular developments.”¹⁰ The *Final Fantasy VII* fanbase was passionate and engaged, but they lacked a central issue that was straightforward and easy to understand. Perhaps some would break out beyond the confines of game fandom, like Kruse, and fight for the ideology beyond the realm in which it was initial-

⁸ M. van Ommen, *Emergent Affect...*, op. cit., p. 23.

⁹ S.K. Hirst, *How Final Fantasy VII Radicalized a Generation of Climate Warriors*, Ars Technica, 29.07.2021, <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2021/07/how-final-fantasy-vii-radicalized-a-generation-of-climate-warriors/> (accessed: 5.11.2022).

¹⁰ H. Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, New York University Press, New York 2006, pp. 141–142.

ly introduced to them, but many others would feel discomfort at leaving behind the comfort of the video game medium. Fans needed an environmental issue that was central to video games to galvanize them into action.

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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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”¹³; Take-Two, whose president Strauss Zelnick is a self-described “big believer” in NFT technology¹⁴; 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 Enix is just one more company searching for an additional revenue stream – one they can exploit to generate significant profits with comparatively little labor. Square Enix’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 Enix 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

¹¹ D. Das, A. Dutta, *Bitcoin’s Energy Consumption: Is It the Achilles Heel to Miner’s Revenue?*, “Economics Letters” 2020, vol. 186 (1).

¹² D. Ahmad (@ZhugeEX), “Square Enix is also looking into entering the blockchain and NFT games segment. – Shi-San-Sei Million Arthur mobile was proof of concept. – Believes games are expanding from centralised to decentralised formats – Expect to benefit as NFTs and token economies take hold.” (Tweet), Twitter, 2021, November 5, [https://twitter.com/Zhuge-](https://twitter.com/Zhuge-EX/status/1456551027168137216)

[EX/status/1456551027168137216](https://twitter.com/Zhuge-EX/status/1456551027168137216) (accessed: 5.11.2022).

¹³ Andrew Wilson, quoted in Eddie Makuch. E. Makuch, *GTA and EA Executives Are Big Believers in NFTs*, Gamespot, 6.01.2022, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/gta-and-ea-executives-are-big-believers-in-nfts/1100-6497712/> (accessed: 5.11.2022).

¹⁴ Strauss Zelnick, quoted in Eddie Makuch. Ibidem.

a new “play to contribute.”¹⁵ 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 Enix 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 – and in a way that did not threaten the players’ existing lifestyles or modes of recreation (we may note here that gaming inherently requires a significant consumption of electrical power, and therefore a sizable environmental impact to merely play, let alone create¹⁶), 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.¹⁷ 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 Enix’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 about, 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 of-

¹⁵ Y. Matsuda, *A New Year’s Letter From the President*, Square Enix, 31.12.2022, https://www.hd.square-enix.com/eng/news/2022/html/a_new_years_letter_from_the_president_2.html (accessed: 5.01.2023).

¹⁶ B.J. Abrahamson, *Digital Games After Climate Change*, Palgrave MacMillan Press, New York 2022, pp. 149–177.

¹⁷ S. Duncombe, *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*, The New Press, New York 2007, p. 72.

ficial company accounts, mocked the decision, threatened piracy in response, and even gone so far as to weaponize Square Enix'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]."¹⁸ @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."¹⁹ Other responses attached screenshots from the game featuring the characters, turning these examples of Square Enix's capitalism into tools that point out the company's hypocrisy. Such images often feature Barret, perhaps the most outspoken critic of Square Enix'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. Cry-

ing out in pain indeed. Another features an altered screenshot of the original game, featuring the early moment discussed previously in this paper, 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 Enix'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 Enix has yet to change course.

As the players share memes and mock Square's environmentally-destructive business decisions, they may demonstrate the real value of games as a medium. Alenda Y. Chang recognizes the value that games bring to ecological awareness, and suggests they "have curative potential" despite their contributions to environmental exploitation through "energy, resources, [and] waste,"²⁰ and other practices, but Chang believes media remediation is possible. Despite the destructivity associated with game development and their subsequent playing, the audience of games benefits from "games [making] certain aspects of our

¹⁸ Rin (@TheIshikawaRin), "Wow, Square-Enix really do keep sinking lower and lower. First it was the Epic Games exclusivity stuff, then it was the ridiculous pricing of said exclusive games. Now it's getting it on the NFT scam? Fuck you Square-Enix." (Tweet), Twitter, 1.01.2022, <https://twitter.com/TheIshikawaRin/status/1477276328265199622> (accessed: 5.11.2022).

¹⁹ Y Blaidl Llwyd (@Nicodemus82), "@quare-Enix I love you, and have been buying your games for the past 25_ years, but if you start putting NFT's in your games, I'm gonna pirate every single game you put out going forward. Sincerely, A fan. #keepthatshitoutofgames" (Tweet), Twitter, 31.12.2021, <https://twitter.com/Nicodemus82/status/1477129452832317443> (accessed: 5.11.2022).

²⁰ A. Chang, *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2019, p. 234.

environments knowable while also creating avenues for action.”²¹ I suggest that this is indeed what the *Final Fantasy VII* community is doing. The fans are raising awareness of environmental issues surrounding NFTs and other blockchain technologies and simultaneously attempting to limit the energy waste and ensuing environmental destruction resulting from Square’s pursuit of NFTs. While Square seems to be working at cross-purposes with its own game, fans can remediate the game and the medium. By weaponizing *Final Fantasy VII* and *Remake* against Square, fans are living up to the ideals of Cloud and the party members to resist the capitalistic exploitation of the environment and their desire to make the world a better place.

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. Frequently the influence of games is presented as a destructive and ultimately malignant force (see, for example, the career of Jack Thompson, a lawyer and anti-video game activist who denounced the influence of digital games on children and adolescents), and certainly games have been used with negative effect, such as the GamerGate movement. However, *Final Fantasy VII* and its *Remake* show

how these influences can also be benevolent and inherently good. 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 is 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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²¹ Ibidem, p. 235.

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