

CHAPTER 06 Playing Roles

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SQUARESOFT's *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) is a hugely successful Japanese Role Playing Game. It sold to virtually all Japan's Playstation owners within the first forty-eight hours of its release in 1997, and was no less popular in the USA on its release there later that year.¹ In this chapter, we use *FFVII* as a case study to explore one of the key dimensions of Role Playing Games: the avatar.

'Avatar' is the Sanskrit word for 'descent', and refers to the embodiment of a god on earth. It is by means of the avatar that the player becomes embodied in the game, and performs the role of protagonist. Cloud Strife, the protagonist-avatar of *FFVII*, is a mysterious mercenary. Dressed in leather and big boots, he wields a sword as big as himself; but he has an oddly childish face, whimsically delineated in the 'deformed aesthetic' of manga, with enormous, glowing blue eyes, framed in cyberpunk blond spikes (Illustration 6).

This is how Rachel, a seventeen-year-old English player of *FFVII*, described Cloud in one of our research interviews:

It's just basically you play this character who's in this like really cool like cityscape and you have to, er, and he finds out . . . and, er, he escapes because he finds out that, um, he's, because he starts having these flashbacks, and he escapes from this city because he's being pursued I think, and, um, he has to defeat this big corporation and try and – oh yeah, Sephiroth, he's this big military commander, and you have to go and try to stop him, 'cos he's trying to raise up all the beasts, and you do this by collecting materia, which you can use for magic and stuff, and you use your own weapons, and –

Rachel's phrase 'this character' evokes the conventional idea of the fictional character operating as a protagonist in a narrative. However, as well as being a protagonist in this conventional sense, Cloud is the player's embodiment in the game, the avatar. This chapter will explore how this dual function is constructed, how it is experienced by the player and why Rachel's words 'you play' indicate very precisely the relation between player and avatar.



Illustration 6 Cloud Strife – the avatar of *Final Fantasy VII*. Reproduced by kind permission of Square Enix UK.

In particular, we will consider how this dual function relates to the two fundamental elements of the game: what we have identified in earlier chapters as ludic and representational aspects of the game. We have proposed that games are systems that operate in terms of sets of rules, which in turn specify particular objectives, economies, obstacles and so on. In this chapter, we argue that representation is also a system; and we consider how it might mesh with the game system. The game system means the rule-based system of the game, which in computer games is produced by the procedural work of the

game engine, while the representational system refers to how the game represents the world, and includes the visible and audible game world, the narrative and the characters overlaid on the system. As we shall explain, the avatar-protagonist operates in both systems, and understanding the avatar enables us to see how the two systems work together to produce the player's experience of the game. In this chapter, we will focus on the narrative system, which is part of the representational system. Specifically, we will concentrate on one important part of that system: the fundamental relation between the narrative function of the protagonist (that of hero) and the actions she or he performs. This system will be seen to interrelate with the game system, in which the protagonist is realized as a playable character, with programmed functions enabling the player to navigate the game.

A social semiotic approach

This chapter draws on some of the narrative theories we have used in earlier chapters, but it also brings a new perspective to bear: that of social semiotics. Within media studies, the use of semiotics generally draws on the work of writers who have analysed visual media, such as Roland Barthes and Christian Metz. However, social semiotics also employs ideas from the sociolinguistic theory of M. A. K. Halliday (1985). From a Hallidian perspective, language is seen as a form of social behaviour, and the point of linguistic analysis is to reveal the *social functions* of elements such as lexis (vocabulary) and grammar. When social semiotics is applied to visual media (for instance by Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996), it proposes a 'grammar of images' which adapts Halliday's framework of three overarching functions of all language: *representational* (representing the world); *interactive* (allowing communication between the makers and readers of texts; but also between readers and imaginary characters in texts); and *organizational* (enabling elements of text to be cohesive and coherent – to stick together in ways which further realize the meanings they carry).

The first two of these have an obvious relation to the representational and ludic elements we have explored in earlier chapters. Thus, in terms of *representation*, we can look at the narrative of *Final Fantasy VII* (and, in this chapter, we look specifically at the central character as an element of that narrative). In terms of *interaction*, we can look at the game system and how it addresses and engages the player. We should expect that both these systems will operate very differently in game texts; and we will see whether social semiotic theory can help to conceptualize the relation between them.

A further development of social semiotics, *multimodality theory* (Kress

and van Leeuwen, 2001), considers how texts combine different semiotic modes – such as speech, writing, sound and images – and how these relate to each other. Games are obviously multimodal, so we can ask how the three overarching functions referred to above are realized by combinations of communicative modes: animation, visual design, music, written text and sound.

In the case of the *representational* function, social semiotics would lead us to focus on the system which in language is called *transitivity*: how *Actors* perform *Actions* upon *Goals* – or, simply put, who does what to whom. This is the basic idea on which the narratologist Gerard Genette (1980) builds his theory, proposing that narrative is an expansion of the grammatical category of the verb: it is about *action*. In the first part of this book we looked at other aspects of Genette's theory of narrative discourse. Here we are focusing on a different aspect of his theory: how action works at the centre of narrative, and how it produces a semiotic system which in language is transitivity.

The grammatical structure of Rachel's account above suggests that the element of 'Actor' in the transitivity system of the game is divided. In parts of her account the Actor is, conventionally, Cloud, rendered in the third person ('he escapes'). Elsewhere, the pronoun representing the Actor changes to indicate the player ('you have to go . . .'). The pronouns here can be seen as important signifiers, naming the central character. On the one hand, Cloud is 'he', the term by which Oliver Twist or Robin Hood are most often named in their respective narratives. On the other hand, he is 'you', a name by which a central character in literature could never be known.² Rachel's account reveals, in its oscillation between 'he' and 'you', the grammatical yoking together of the traditional protagonist and the player.

The next step would be to ask: if Cloud is the Actor in two senses (conventional character and avatar), what Actions does he perform, and are they different in his two states? The answer to this latter question is 'yes', but we will return to this aspect of the representational function of the avatar later.

The next obvious question follows Genette's theory a little further. Having considered the verb as a basic building-block of narrative, Genette moves on to look at the system of mood in language, which is traditionally organized under three headings: *indicative* (making statements); *interrogative* (asking questions); and *imperative* (giving orders). Essentially, we are going to suggest that, if conventional narratives make statements, game narratives also ask questions and give orders. We will see this as part of the *interactive* function of the text: how a game establishes a relation between itself and the player.

As we noted in chapter 3, Genette suggests that the natural mood of the narrative is the *indicative* – narratives make statements. Rachel's

account of Cloud, in its grammatical rendering of the avatar, makes it clear that, while in some parts of the narrative the hero is going about his business wrapped in the familiar indicative mood ('he escapes from this city because he's being pursued'), in other parts, the player has become the protagonist, and the game is manifestly in the imperative ('you have to go and try to stop [Sephiroth], 'cos he's trying to raise up all the beasts'). In terms of its interactive function, then, the game is not only offering a narrative statement but also telling the player to do something – in effect, telling the player to insert herself into the transitivity system of the game. Social semiotic theory would regard this as an aspect of the interactive function of the text because it is establishing a relation between text and audience, in this case a *demand* relation, where the text tells the player to do something. The difference between this and a conventional text is that the player will comply by taking an action which, in effect, poses a further command to the game, demanding that it respond in its turn. The other difference is that, in taking up this challenge, the interactive function and the representational function of the game become fused. This fusion points towards a social semiotic definition of *interactivity* – a definition that in our view is much more precise than is often the case.

Role Playing Games *do* offer narrative statements, then, as in Genette's classic model. We can ask some familiar questions about this. How is the protagonist constructed? What other texts or genres is she or he derived from? What kinds of narrative function will she or he perform? What ideas does she or he represent? On the other hand, RPGs, like all games, ask you questions and tell you to do things. If narrative requires a willing suspension of disbelief, games require a willing submission to rule-based systems. So we should go back to the question of *transitivity*, to ask how the player is involved in the actions the character performs, and back to the question of *mood*, to ask how the relations between the text and the player are invited and constructed. The next two sections will address the functions of the protagonist and the avatar respectively.

Cloud – heavy hero

Rachel's word 'character' points to Cloud's function as a protagonist, part of the representational system of the game. If the narrative is Genette's verb-writ-large, Cloud is the Actor who performs that verb. His narrative function (as a hero-mercenary who defies the ruthless Shinra Corporation and his nemesis, Sephiroth) is typical of hero roles in popular narrative, and, in many respects, of the formulaic character

types of folk tales, analysed by Vladimir Propp (1970). An important aspect of Cloud as protagonist is determined by the structure of Japanese console RPGs in general, and the *Final Fantasy* series in particular: the characters are fixed givens, rather than compositional palettes offered to the player as for the avatars of *Baldur's Gate*, who (as we have seen) are constructed by the player from a kit of visual attributes, abilities and orientations. In this respect, Cloud is much more like a conventional media character, and he can be engaged with as such in fan cultures, as we will see in the following chapter.

As the folk tale analogy suggests, a character like Cloud does not spring out of nowhere to fulfil the needs of commodified mass entertainment in the twentieth century, but draws deeply on traditional forms of folk culture, oral narrative and popular romance. At least since the medieval period, these forms have provided fantasies which offer consolation, moral polemic and psychic testing grounds, through elaborate allegories, for the rites of passage and tribulations of everyday life. Eri Izawa (2000) describes how the characters of manga and *anime*, and of *Final Fantasy III*, draw on epic themes in Japanese folklore, on hero legends based on historic warlords, and on supernatural narratives informed by Shinto and Buddhism. Though the historical origins of the character of Cloud may be obscure for players – at least, most non-Japanese players – a recognition of the legendary quality of the narrative and its characters is evident in fan writing, as in this fan reconstruction of Cloud's backstory:

Sephiroth had a power unseen and unrivalled by anyone at that time. To the people of Nibelheim, he was a living legend. All the children had dreams of becoming as powerful as the Great Sephiroth, but Cloud was the only one with the motivation to join SOLDIER. (Innocente, 2002)

Taking an even broader view, Janet Murray (2000) makes a suggestive link between computer-game characters and Homeric heroes, citing the early twentieth-century scholars who revealed the structures of the oral tradition. She points out that a game character might be formulaically constructed in similar ways to the Homeric poet's formulaic construction of Achilles – a comparison which radically shifts the ground on which conventional aesthetic objections to games are typically made.

In the protagonists of both oral narratives and games, there is a predictability about their appearance, the tools of their trade and their actions. The dynamic of the texts is to see how improvisatory flair on the part of the poet can stitch together and adapt the formulae; and, in the case of games, how the player can stitch together the given repertoires into the sequence that will gain the desired goal. This kind of improvisatory work can be seen in Rachel's account of how she

explores the world of *Final Fantasy*, how she looks after Cloud when he's sick and how she fights the battles with him. In both game and oral narrative, the text is woven on the spot by the poet/player. Indeed, it might be better to use the term *text event*, to suggest the particular nexus of representation, narrative and affect that is experienced in a particular moment or version. The word *text*, as Walter Ong (2002) reminds us, derives from the Latin word to weave (*texere*); and he also invokes the idea of 'rhapsody' as a possible description of oral performance, from the Greek *rhapsodein*, to stitch together.

A further useful point about the analogy with oral narrative is that it interposes another figure between the text and the reader: the performer. The poet who actually performs an oral text is not the author: the text already exists in the tradition. The poet-performer is on the one hand a real reader who actualizes the implied reader (as discussed in chapter 3). On the other hand, she or he is a mediator between text and audience, who is able in certain ways to adapt and rework the text. The implication for games is that players are both performer and audience: they have the ability to improvise upon the fixed elements of the text to some degree, whereas in other respects they also fulfil the function of audience, receiving and imaginatively interpreting the text.

Ong's (2002) analysis of the 'psychodynamics of oral narrative' points to several features which are arguably also characteristics of games; and some also apply more generally to modern popular narratives. These include, first, *heavy heroes*: oral narratives require larger-than-life, stereotypical heroes who can be formulaically constructed, easily recognized and remembered by audiences, and made to represent one or two key characteristics. Second, oral narrative is *agonistically toned*: it revolves around conflict externalized in the form of physical or verbal combat. Third, it is *aggregative* rather than *analytic* – narrative sequences are added and stacked up, rather than organized hierarchically. This is related to a fourth point; that oral narrative is high in *redundancy*, and in what in rhetoric is termed *copia*: it repeats the same thing many times, in different ways, to give the listener the best chance of purchase on it, as well as buying time for compositional effort for the performer. And, finally, oral narrative is *empathetic* and *participatory*: the performer and audience are both immersed in the narrative, to such an extent that, in an example Ong gives from African narrative, the narrator slips from third to first person, his identification with the hero, Mwindé, completed in the grammar of the telling.

If we take up Murray's (2000) suggestion, and compare Cloud Strife to the Greek hero Achilles from Homer's *Iliad*, the resemblances are striking, and the ways in which both figures fit Ong's categories are clear. Cloud is formulaic: like Achilles, he always fights in the same

way, always wears the same clothes and is partly controlled by gods (in the shape of players). Achilles is infused with strength by Apollo, nourished with nectar and honey by Athena, and given high-quality armour by the god Hephaistos. Cloud is infused with health points, and equipped with weapons, protective devices and magical properties by the player-as-god (and by the game system). He is a 'heavy hero': exaggeratedly attractive, good with his sword and equipped with a mysterious myth of origin, combining ordinary mortal and supernatural features, like Achilles. He operates agonistically: his problems are expressed in terms of physical combat or the overcoming of physical obstacles. He moves in a world replete with redundancy: the experience of playing him is to keep revisiting the same places again and again until familiarity shows us the next step; or fighting the same monsters over and over until we learn their weak points.

However, like Achilles, Cloud is not by any means a simple muscle-bound warrior. The appeal of Achilles is that he contains two powerful character traits, absolutely compatible in the culture of Ancient Greece: the powerful warrior and the beautiful lover (his lover, Patroklos, is with him at Troy). This combination of strength and beauty has plenty of modern counterparts; Cloud's androgynous good looks have often been commented on by players, and are developed in certain forms of fan art in explicitly homoerotic terms, as we shall see in chapter 7. One extremely perceptive review of *Final Fantasy VII* points out that Cloud is really role playing the action hero – that underneath he is actually an angst-ridden adolescent with a fantasy of himself as the warrior who saves the world (Moby, 2002). In a further twist, this editorial writer for the online magazine *RPG Dreamers* suggests that Cloud operates as a metaphor for the player, who is carried into the fantasy role play of the game through the mechanism of the role play that is modelled by the protagonist.

Of course, in certain important ways, games depart dramatically from traditions of oral narrative. The commodified, electronically mediated culture of games moves rapidly across and between global audiences, and is dependent on a wide range of particular skills and literate practices. Our argument is not that contemporary computer games are, in some simple way, a continuation of the oral tradition, but rather that they contain its residues, in terms both of narrative and character types, and of performative, improvisatory rhetorics. In this respect, they provide an instance of what Ong describes as the 'secondary orality' of high-technology societies – an evolution of the oral mindset in ways that are dependent on literate and technologically mediated culture.

Thus, we can also locate Cloud in a tradition of comic-strip heroes, specifically Japanese in this case, but belonging to a wider global tradition of popular media with its roots in the American comic strips of the

early twentieth century. Here we find superheroes with dual identities that enable them to step outside the banality and anomie of urban life, in costumes which are the polar opposites of the suits worn by Clark Kent and Bruce Wayne, and in bodies with Renaissance musculatures offering aspirational ideals to those who in real life may sport only the skinny frame of Peter Parker. The post-war manga comic-strip superheroes, and their moving-image descendants in *anime* and live-action television and film, were directly influenced by the US tradition, borrowing the structures of aggrandized heroic powers and bodies, as well as dual identities, but adding specifically Japanese motifs such as martial arts skills and weapons, enemies composed of monsters and atomic power plants and eventually superhero teams (Allison, 2000). It is from this tradition that the *Final Fantasy* designers descend; and in fact *Final Fantasy VII* saw the arrival of a new designer from a popular mainstream manga tradition, Testuyo Nomura.

An important difference between the visual semiotic of comic strip and film and the oral narrative tradition is that the heroes become to some extent fixed in visual form. Nevertheless, they remain extremely visually versatile and adaptable. Variations on Batman and Superman over the years, for instance, retain key iconic attributes, but adapt to suit variations in aesthetic preferences, social concerns and audience demands in successive decades. The semiotic hybridity of games produces a more concentrated kind of variety. Cloud's appearance varies across a range of artistic and technical design contexts in *Final Fantasy VII* – for instance between cutscenes, game sequences and packaging. Furthermore, his design spills out into the fan cultures that adopt and develop the game, so that fan art produces further variations, which we explore in chapter 7.

As we have suggested, then, the game employs some of the immersive, agonistic, episodic, aggrandized structures of both traditional oral narratives and modern popular superhero narratives. Nevertheless, *Final Fantasy* is not only a narrative, but also a game. Although Cloud operates as a superhero protagonist within the representational system of the game, in the game system he embodies, like any RPG avatar, the symbolic and technical mechanisms through which the player performs actions within transitive sequences of the text. So how are these narrative elements fused with the rule-based system of the game?

Cloud – digital dummy?

The substance of Cloud, as a larger-than-life, highly specific protagonist within the representational system of the game, is overlaid on the

character as an entity module in the game engine – a skeletal set of programmed repertoires within the game system. In this respect, as well as in all the ambiguities of his design, he is, like all RPG avatars, what Steven Poole has called ‘a comparatively blank canvas’ (Poole, 2002), on which the player can project imaginary structures of his or her own. He is a kind of puppet, and we pull his strings. When we press the Playstation buttons or PC keys, it is this programmed entity we engage with and control.

Cloud is thus a bundle of semiotic resources that facilitate the player’s engagement with the game’s system, equipping us to move through its links and nodes, landscapes and events. He is a set of economies: health points, hit points, experience points, weapons and magic with quantified capacity – the so-called *materia* system of the *Final Fantasy* series. He is a kinaesthetic grammar, with a limited set of actions for us to deploy – talk, walk, run, jump, get, fight. Our engagement with these actions is more direct in this, as in other console games: unlike the point-and-click procedure of *Baldur’s Gate*, we control Cloud by pressing directional buttons on the Playstation (or on the PC keyboard, in the PC version). Cloud is a digital dummy, whom we manipulate at will – albeit within limits that are defined by the possibilities of the game engine.

Thus, Cloud is both heavy hero and digital dummy. Furthermore, the two roles, though presented here for the sake of contrast in a polarized way, are interdependent, and leak into each other, just as the representational system and the game system affect each other. The heavy hero, for instance, is the kind of protagonist ideally suited to being constructed by rules and formulae, being already predictable in his behaviour and formulaic in his nature. However, though it is tempting to regard a textual construct like Cloud as a fixed object, this would miss the point of the player-avatar relation, and perhaps of texts in general. The game is not so much an object as a series of processes. It begins, obviously, with the design and production of the text: this is itself a complex combination of different communicative modes, and it draws on images, sounds and narrative patterns from both recent and distant cultural histories, and on a constantly developing game engine common to the *Final Fantasy* series. Yet it is also the product of the meeting of text and reader, or, in this case, player. One reason for comparing the playing of a computer game with a performance of oral narrative is that it allows us to see the text as an event, rather than as a fixed object. Furthermore, the playing of games is iterative – it is many text events, all different, with a dynamic relation between the computer game as a textual resource or text *in potentia*. The player is a dynamic textual element, whose fingers and skills become no less part of the game system than the avatar’s strings of

machine code. And, as we shall see in more detail in chapter 7, the player is also a cultural resource, an interpreter, and an adapter of the game's resources in the production of fan art and writing.

Playing the avatar

Cloud as heavy hero and Cloud as digital dummy offer different sets of semiotic resources from which the player can experience the game. The heavy hero, in many respects derived from conventional narratives, and constructed through non-interactive modes (visual design, music, animation), is largely *read* by the player (along with the representational system in general). The digital dummy, mostly made up of interactive textual forms, is largely *played* by the player (along with the game system in general).

The sense in which the player both is, and is not, the avatar, is central to the experience of the game; and the pronoun slippage in Rachel's account of her experience of the game directly represents this ambiguous relation. This ambiguity extends to the symbolic and social meanings that might be attributed to gameplay. Cultural studies typically emphasizes *agency*, as a positive quality of 'active readership', and so we could argue that the degree of control we possess over the avatar's actions can be equated with a degree of more general cultural power. However, as Perry Anderson (1980) observes, agency has two opposed meanings: one in which we are autonomous, powerful social actors; and one in which we are merely the representative of another (as in FBI agent). Both meanings can be read into the player-avatar relation. On the one hand, we might choose to celebrate the unprecedented degree of participative agency allowed for the reader within the text, as for instance in Brenda Laurel's positive image of the audience moving on to the stage to become actors in the digital play (Laurel, 1991). Yet, on the other hand, there is a sense in which players merely accept and play out the roles determined for them by game texts devised by global corporations, dominated by patriarchal narratives and what Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) calls the male-dominated power rhetorics of combative play. The question of player agency in *Final Fantasy VII* is therefore quite ambiguous and debatable. (We return to the question of agency in more detail in chapter 10.)

As mentioned above, Walter Ong (2002) demonstrates the participatory nature of oral narrative by the pronoun slippage of the Mwindé narrator, suggesting a slide from objective oversight of the narrative to empathetic, performative identification with the protagonist. Similarly, Rachel's account of Cloud, as we have seen, is characterized by

pronoun-switching. Cloud is 'he' when the representational system is most emphasized, and 'you' when the game system is most emphasized. The former is characterized by structures of offer (the indicative mood); the latter by structures of demand (the imperative mood).

The player's dual engagements with offer and demand structures inform each other, producing a sense of dynamic play and of identification with a fictional character. As different moments in the game move more in the direction of offer or demand, however, it seems likely that the kind of engagement will change. The battle scenes, perhaps, are the most demand-dominated scenes, where the game system would seem to be all that matters, the economies of health, hits and magic become critical, and the temporal elasticity of the game shrinks to real time conflict.

Rachel's account of the battles gives some clues about how player agency is constituted here:

R: Well you kind of get a choice of what to do in battles, and you have to learn how to defeat some monsters some ways and you have to learn how to defeat them this way and you have to learn what order to put the stuff in, and it just – it's really quite good when you've built up your character because for every battle you get – experience points – and so, um, after a while you've built up your character, and so you know how to use everything more efficiently – and it's – the camera angles are cool too –

AB: In the battle scenes?

R: Yeah.

AB: How are the camera angles different?

R: 'Cos they zoom – it zooms right into your character, and they have different angles – one sometimes looking up at the beast, or across, or down – it's – really spectacular.

AB: How does it feel then, to be in that?

R: Exciting! 'Cos it kind of, right – what the game does is, it has a little sequence where it actually spirals into the battle scenes, and the music changes and the tempo changes and it really kind of, actually kind of gets you a bit more excited.

In the relations between player and game, the agency is clear here, reflecting Rachel's engagement with the demand of the game. In the first part of her account, the Actor – literally, the subject of the clauses she speaks – is the player ('you'), and the actions you are performing are represented as imperatives, as in the triple repetition of 'have to learn'. These transparently reflect her engagement with the game system. Yet, in the second part of her account, the subject becomes the text ('it'), and its actions are textual ones: it 'zooms', 'has different angles', 'has a little sequence', 'spirals'. The player becomes the Goal of these actions: 'it gets you a bit more excited'. This would seem to be more to do with offer – the actions of the text here are conventional

cinematic ones, designed to position the spectator and to work for particular kinds of affective response.

Multimodal offers and demands

Although Rachel's account precisely represents the two-way interactive function of the game text – you do something to it, it does something to you – the demand/offer structures cannot be so simply separated. How do they work together; and how are they realized multimodally?

The demand exercised by the text is realized in different ways by the different modes combined within it. For instance, the music described by Rachel is specific to the battle scenes; and she describes it accurately – the tempo does change (it speeds up); and the rhythm changes to a regular 4/4 time, with the mix of midi voices including a martial snare drum (the music of the *Final Fantasy* series, all by Nobuo Uematsu, is a celebrated example of the composer's art in game design). The orientation of the music to the player, then, operates as a kind of musical imperative – a call-to-arms, as it were. At the same time, the swirling graphics which introduce the battle scene produce a giddy, disorientating sense, a feeling of risk, of danger, in combination with the music. As the battle scene appears on the screen (Illustration 7), the player sees the characters lined up against the enemy, with the battle statistics represented graphically at the bottom of the screen. The readiness of each character to attack is shown by a thermometer-style bar, which fills up. This specific graphic operates, again, as a form of visual demand, effectively instructing the player to wait, but get ready. When the bar fills up, a yellow triangle appears above the head of the character, indicating that it can attack – a visual imperative equivalent to 'Attack now!'.

In the representational system of the text, the method of attack is very like the composition of a clause, in strict sequential form. When the yellow arrow appears, clicking OK selects the character – the Actor. The next choice is the means of attack, a specifying of the process, which determines what the character will actually do – whether he will slash with a sword, fire a lightning bolt, or throw a grenade, for instance. Finally, a white hand appears, which can be moved by the player to select the enemy at whom the attack is aimed – the Goal. This particular sequence, then, is a transitive structure made up from a restricted set of elements, forming a classic 'restricted language' of a kind typical of many games (see Halliday, 1989).³

In terms of the player-avatar relation, the player here has a dual function. In one sense, the player fuses with the avatar: both of them are the Actor, both do the attacking. Yet, in another sense, the player is like a puppeteer, pulling the character's strings, or even a kind of



Illustration 7 The battle screen of *Final Fantasy VII*. Reproduced by kind permission of Square Enix UK.

author, composing a sequence within a restricted language as part of a rule-based structure of causality. As we argued earlier in this chapter, the availability of these textual elements to the player means that, while they are part of the representational system, they are also part of the game system: the two functions combine, and the player writes a sentence of the narrative, so to speak. It should be observed, however, that this piece of narrative is bounded: the battle scenes are structurally separated from the larger narrative of the game, and make no impact upon it.

The cinematic element also contributes to the interactive work of the text, positioning the player in particular ways in relation to the action and the characters (Burn and Parker, 2001). Whereas in the rest of the game we are usually positioned above the characters in a fixed position, here we are positioned much lower down, alongside the characters, as if fighting with them. At times, the swooping camera angles place us even lower than the characters. This feels as if you're fighting with them, helping them stock up health points, or recharge their weapons. Though this is an offer – it is distinct from the function of those parts of the text that demand specific actions – it fuses with our response to those demands, changing our sense of how we act. In effect, it mutes the sensation of being a puppeteer that the demand-response

structures create. If we were given these powers and simultaneously placed high above the characters, the feeling of pulling strings from a distance would intensify. The low angles and close-ups bring the player closer to the avatar at exactly the moment when the demand structures are at their most urgent.

Beyond the battle scenes, where we follow Cloud through the dark urban spaces of the city of Midgard and its pastel-coloured rural hinterland, the feeling of offer rather than demand is reinforced multimodally. The music of these sequences is much less stark rhythmically, either using unmeasured rhythms or regular duple times muted beneath flowing melodies, which either chime with cheerful characters and locations, or evoke the kind of mysterious sorrow which Izawa notices in *Final Fantasy III* (Izawa, 2000). In any case, the music suggests that you're being offered an event and a mood; if there is any trace of demand, it is more of an enticement than an urgent command. This musical enticement, though part of the representational system of the game, operates in tandem with the game system, which invites you to make a move.

Similarly, you explore and progress through the game world in a fixed camera environment. Here, you are positioned isometrically above the action, with the avatar and other characters rendered as chunky, polygonal figures. This design distances them from the player; or, perhaps, during these parts of the game, makes them more puppet- or doll-like, developing a tamagotchi-like relationship in which the player trains and nurtures the avatar like a pet. The fixed-camera, high-angle position, by contrast, is a spatial and visual reinforcement of the offer mode. It detaches the player a little, and offers stability.

However, the sense that the exploration of the game world is characterized by a weaker form of demand – enticement rather than command – depends on player perception as much as on semiotic design. In terms of the distinction introduced in chapter 3, *Final Fantasy VII* seems to offer the potential for both maze-like and rhizomic navigation. Ben, one of our interviewees, points out that 'One of the problems with *Final Fantasy* is . . . it is really linear, but they make it seem like it's not.' In fact, he says, there is 'only one place you can go to' – so the appearance of a world where all experiences are causally related to the narrative is an illusion. This echoes a similar perception in a review of *FFVII*: 'As is typical of the Japanese RPG form, the game is extremely linear. You may not see the train tracks, but the feeling that you've been railroaded is unmistakable' (van Cleef, 1997). Rachel's experience of the game, by contrast, emphasizes the rhizomic qualities: 'it's fantastic 'cos you can just explore everywhere, and you just never get bored 'cos there's just so much stuff to look around and find out, basically'.

The modality of the game in this respect – and hence the degree of agency that it affords to the player – seems to be quite ambiguous. The requirement to explore the game could be seen as a form of demand – in effect, ‘explore!’ However, as noted above, it is a weakened demand, more of an enticement or plea, and may well be experienced by the player as accentuating, rather than diminishing, their sense of agency. Thus, Ben appears to read the game as an urgent demand, as puzzles demanding to be solved, while Rachel interprets it as a weak demand – a rhizomic world to be explored, the strong demand being kept for key moments of progression or battle.

The most direct responses to the demand structures of the game, then – to the battle scenes, or the nodes of the puzzle maze – are those when the player is most likely to report their experience in the second person. And these are the aspects of the game driven by the game system, where the avatar is most empty, most like a vehicle for the dynamic action of gameplay, most simple in their characterization, reduced to a sword or to the sliding economies of health and experience points.

However, this kind of involvement, most similar to the agonistic patterns Ong (2002) reports of the oral tradition, is set against the offer structures of the game’s representational system, marked by the third person in the player’s account. It is through the representational system that the character is filled out – when the declarative mood of the cutscene or interpolated dialogue fills out part of Cloud’s history, his murky past, the uncertainty about his mercenary motives, his obscure love affairs and his ambivalent relationship with Sephiroth.

The experience of play would therefore seem to entail an oscillation between two contrasting ways of relating to the protagonist-avatar. At one moment, we are playing Cloud, while at another we are watching his story unfold. Yet, as Ben and Rachel’s comments suggest, these different positions may be differently valued – or even differently ‘occupied’ – by different players. This is apparent, not only in how players engage with the game, or interpret its images and narratives, but also in how they imaginatively appropriate and remake them. In order to explore these issues further, it is now time to turn our attention more directly to the players themselves.

CHAPTER

07 Reworking the Text: Online Fandom

Andrew Burn

LIKE many RPGs, *Final Fantasy VII* has an enormous global base of devoted players and fans. In the last chapter, we considered the experience of the player as he or she engages with the avatar during play, and how to analyse this process. But engagement with the game does not finish when the game session ends and the computer or console is switched off. Players continue to think about, imagine, even dream about, the events, landscapes and characters of the game; and particularly committed fans go further, joining online communities of fans, and contributing to message boards, art galleries, writing groups and other forms of expansive embroidery of the game and its components.

The variety of work by fans of *Final Fantasy VII* alone is hard to overestimate. Written forms come in all shapes and sizes; there are discussion groups that focus knowledgeably on specific aspects of the game such as Nobuo Uematsu's music, or Tetsuya Nomura's artwork; fans adopt names derived from those of the characters in the game, and design visual representations of these; and they make small animated movies built around images and stories in the game.

In many ways, this is a kind of expressive and social activity typical of fans of any popular medium, and it can be researched and analysed in this way. Perhaps the most well-known recent model of this kind of analysis is Henry Jenkins's account of *textual poachers*. In his book of that name (1992) he demonstrates how fans of canonical media texts such as *Star Trek* seek to extend the pleasure they derive from them by appropriating and reworking them in various ways, through writing, song, artwork and so on. This kind of fan activity (or 'fan work') in some ways reveres the original text, seeking to remain as true to it as possible, replicating fine details of the appearance or behaviour of a character. In other ways, however, fan work can dramatically alter the original text, adapting it to express the particular interest of the fan or fan group. Perhaps the most dramatic form of adaptation is *slash fiction* (named after the slash between the sexes represented in the story, such as male/male). This form is traditionally produced by women, and

focuses on homosexual relationships not explicitly present in the original text, but imagined and inserted by the fan. The classic example of this is slash fiction which elaborates a gay relationship between Spock and Kirk in the first *Star Trek* series – a relationship which, Jenkins suggests, is arguably implicit in the strong male friendships and largely male environment of the *Enterprise*, though the value systems of this kind of media text prevent any explicit development of such a theme.

The multimodal textual theory used in the last chapter raises a number of questions about this kind of fan work in relation to games, and specifically to *Final Fantasy*. First, how does the nature of the game make a difference? Fan work surrounding a TV series like *Star Trek* is largely constructed as written text and image. Although the original text is a TV series, texts and drawings are the only semiotic modes available to most fans. We might therefore consider how the transformation from moving image to written text or drawings works – what it allows the fan to say, what it prevents them from saying, and so on. Games are multimodal texts in the sense that they use visual design, animation, music, speech, writing and so on. Again, this combination of modes is unavailable to fans, so we should expect to find that they will carry out their work of remaking and appropriation as a series of transformations into the modes available to them – again, largely writing and drawing. Where this is the case, we can, again, ask how this semiotic transformation happens and how it represents the social interests of the fans.

However, games are not only made up of representational systems but of game systems based on rules, quantified challenges and economies. There is a kind of dialectic, as we have seen in the last chapter, between the *demand* structures of the game system – agitating the causal chain, pressing you over the puzzle hurdles of wrecked trains or labyrinthine laboratories, catching you in the affective tensions and anxieties of obscure routes and monstrous enemies – and the *offer* structures which lay out the context, landscape, backstory, motivation and psychology, engaging the reader-spectator in the empathetic networks and imaginative extensions of the text which also operate in conventional narratives. Although it is the combination of these which provides the kinds of pleasures Rachel describes, in the fan work that surrounds the game the combination might operate in quite different ways.

So a question this chapter will ask is: what will fans make of the game system? Will they simply ignore it, and concentrate on narrative and character? Or will they find some way to express their love of the game by reworking its game system? Or will they find ways to combine the two, as they do in the playing of the game? At the same time,

we will look at what motivates fans in this kind of work – what their social interest is and what they get out of it all.

We will look at three kinds of text: a ‘walkthrough’ for *Final Fantasy VII* written by a fan; two pieces of creative writing about Cloud; and an amateur Japanese manga comic strip representing Cloud and Sephiroth.

The walkthrough author

The walkthrough was written by Kao Megura (2000), whose fan status has become exalted by his detailed expertise in the game to the point where he is widely regarded as something of an independent online authority. Because walkthroughs are generically not interested in the representational aspects of the game, this text omits all reference to the backstory of Cloud’s former adulation of Sephiroth, his love life, his heroic appearance, the music which creates the motifs for Cloud and the other characters, and so on. The interest of the walkthrough is purely in relaying the procedural demands of the game system. Accordingly, it is structured almost entirely as a demand act itself, written in the second person, dominated by the imperative mood:

Once you leave the train, check the body of the closest guard twice to get two Potions. Then head north. You’ll be attacked by some guards. Take them out with your sword (you may win a Potion for killing them) and then move left to go outside. Now, talk to your teammates (Biggs, Wedge, and Jessie), then name yourself and Barret. Make your way to the northwestern door, and head up in the next room to enter the heart of the power plant. (Megura, 2000)

There is no oscillation here between second and third person, as in Rachel’s account in chapter 6. The consistent use of the second person marks the concentrated focus on the game system, in which player and avatar are most closely linked. The ‘you’ in Megura’s walkthrough is both player and Cloud.

For this fan, the thrill of the game seems very much bound up in his exhaustive expertise in the properties of the puzzle maze, and in the game as system. Anything incidental to this is omitted or reduced to minimal expression. The social motivation for this particular development of player preference is clearly bound up in the very public status that such a position wins in return for his hard work. His attitude to this status is quite ambivalent, however. On the one hand, there is obvious pleasure in the recognition such status brings: ‘I recall that some other people were translating this FAQ into Spanish, Portuguese, and other languages. If they could mail me the URLs of their translated FAQs, I’ll add them here.’ On the other hand, there is exasperation

with online relations with people who don't measure up to his notion of minimal competence: 'I WILL NOT answer any gameplay related questions about this game. It's not because I'm a prick (haha, I know), but because you wouldn't believe the types of questions I get.'

Although the walkthrough itself appears as a technical, dispassionate text, in fact the motivations that lie behind it are full of passion. Megura's online messages delineate a history of his walkthrough, which begins as a quasi-professional service, and ends in boredom and disillusionment. This appears to be partly because of magazines that have reprinted his material without acknowledgement or permission:

I cannot express my disgust towards these people for using my FAQ simply to increase their sales. I did this because I wanted to help others, and I didn't plan this FAQ back in February just so it could be used shamelessly by people who should be responsible adults.

His disillusionment seems to proceed partly from aspirations to professional status, in which intellectual property rights become more of an issue (fan authors in general are very aware of IP and copyright issues, though this is more usually because they themselves are in danger of infringing copyright in their adaptation of original texts). Yet, it also seems to proceed from an idealistic desire to serve the fan community.

Eventually, however, Megura terminates his FAQ service. It seems that an unexpected side-effect of becoming an expert is that the naive questions of less competent players become tiresome; and, eventually, he becomes exhausted with the game itself, apparently suffering a kind of fan burnout:

I'm not trying to be rude, but it gets a little tiring at times. I realize that there are some mistakes still in the FAQ that I never got around to correcting (the Emerald Weapon does damage equal to the materia that you wear, there is no use for the miniature soldiers, you cannot have chocobos that can fly, and any character who isn't in Disc 2 or 3 cannot be used without a GameShark code, and Bahamut Zero can be gotten from Cosmo Canyon, this is in the FAQ but no one notices . . . but I've done this thing for more than a year now and I'm tired of FF7, geez!

A contradiction in the text is that the double declaration of weariness brackets a spilling over of the kind of obsessive detail about the game which made him the walkthrough master: the ebullience of this succession of five clauses listing what can and can't be done at various points of the game system gives the lie to the profession of exhaustion.

This kind of social role is comparable to the role of 'expert' in the group of boy players whom we will meet in chapter 8. In their collaborative playing of *Soul Reaver: The Legacy of Kain*, a particular expert emerged within the group, whose social function was to tutor the

others; but his fixation on getting through the game system was at the expense of other aspects of the game, or a holistic view of it, including (most importantly) its narrative. As we shall indicate, the boys' talk was characterized by Halliday's *regulatory mode* (1970), in which they sought to control each other's gameplay through imperatives – a mode which is also characteristic of the walkthrough. In other words, at the point of play, the overriding concern is to respond to the demand function of the game, which becomes realized in the grammatical structures of the boys' talk. We can see the social motivation of walkthrough authors like Megura as a kind of advanced version of the 'expert' in the *Soul Reaver* players: he wins social standing among the player community by specializing in the stripped-down, efficient sequence of commands that gets the player through the game system. He goes on to build a kind of career for himself as expert, however – a career which is characterized by the excessive, excited language of the obsessive amateur on the one hand, and by the cool, detached tones of the professional on the other.

The fiction writer

By contrast, most authors of fan fiction largely ignore the game system and concentrate on the narrative. A particular form of fan fiction is the spoiler, which effectively tells the story for those who have not yet experienced the text itself. Here is an extract from a fan spoiler from the *Final Fantasy Shrine* website, in which Cloud's story is rendered as a kind of literary narrative:

The Secrets of Cloud's Past

One of the greatest mysteries in Final Fantasy is the secret of Cloud's past. Is he a clone of Sephiroth? Is he even human? It's very hard to tell. Here, for your benefit, I will lay out the evidence and dispell all the mystery about who Cloud really is. Be advised that this is a definite spoiler, and if you want to save the mystery for yourself, leave now.

Originally, Cloud did leave Neibhliem to join SOLDIER. However, he was found to be unfit, and so he became nothing more than a common grunt. During this period, he became friends with a SOLDIER member named Zack. As luck would have it, these two were assigned to accompany Sephiroth to the Neibhliem reactor. Cloud, too ashamed of his failure to admit it to his friends and neighbors, kept his mask on when they arrive. He does, however, stop and talk with his mother a little bit. When they reach the reactor, it is Cloud who stays outside and guards Tifa. Inside, Sephiroth finds Jenova, and his mind slowly starts unraveling. He isolates himself in the mansion library, eventually burning the town to the ground in a rage. Zack and Cloud follow him to the reactor. Just as they arrive, Sephiroth slashes Tifa. Zack chases after him, while Cloud carries Tifa off to the side, fulfilling his childhood promise. Zack

and Sephiroth battle, and Sephiroth sends him flying out of the room, mortally wounded. He leaves, carrying his sword in one hand, Jenova's severed head in the other. Zack pleads with Cloud to kill Sephiroth, so Cloud takes Zack's sword, then gives chase. When Cloud reaches Sephiroth, he stabs Cloud in the chest and hefts him into the air. Thinking Cloud dead, Sephiroth lowers him back down. Suddenly, Cloud grabs the blade of the sword, lifts Sephiroth, and flings him into the liquid Mako. (This means that the Sephiroth you've been chasing around is nothing but a clone created by Hojo.) Cloud then collapses. Some scientists find them, and place them in glass tubes so they can heal them, as well as inject them with Jenova cells. Cloud has a reaction to them, while Zack does not. During this period, Cloud and Zack were linked, which is why Cloud has some of Zack's memories, and yet sees himself in Zack's role. It also explains why he has Mako eyes. They showered him with it to speed his recovery. Eventually the two escape during feeding time. They leave Neiblehiem, and begin hitchhiking to Midgar. There, they intend to become swords-for-hire, and earn a living. However, as they approach the city, they are found by a group of Shinra soldiers, who were searching for them. Zack is promptly shot to death, while Cloud, badly injured, is left to die. However, he manages to get to Midgar, where he slowly recovers. Finally, 5 years later, he finds Tifa at the train station. She at first mistakes him for Zack, because they look and act so similar. (The result of their link during their recovery.) Finally, she convinces Cloud to take the job with AVALANCHE, and you undoubtably know the story from this point on, having played it already. There are those who believe that a sephiroth clone living in a pipe in the slums is really Zack. I don't share that view, simply because I havn't seen any conclusive evidence to prove it.

There. That's the whole truth behind Cloud's past. Be this point you should know that he is a normal human being, that he never was in SOLDIER, and that he did kill Sephiroth.

(<<http://www.angelfire.com/mn/midgarff7/cloudpast.html>>)

Because this is no longer a game, the demand function is eliminated, unlike in the walkthrough, whose function was to deliver the wisdom of the expert in order to steer novices through the game. This account has nothing to do with game system, everything to do with narrative system: it is about filling in the gaps, developing the replete, heavy hero of popular narrative, and is a communicative act of the offer variety, entirely dominated by the declarative mood. We can also see this text as a work of reconstruction, based around moments in the game of particular importance to this player. Though he claims it is the 'whole truth' behind Cloud's past, it is in fact highly selective. It chooses moments from the complex series of cutscene flashbacks in the game in order to present a narrative with Cloud firmly at the centre – it largely omits, for instance, his relationship with Aeris.

In their social semiotic study of children's viewing of television, Hodge and Tripp (1986) note a similar phenomenon – that in their

retelling of a TV cartoon, some of the children ignore the whole structure of the narrative, and make their own version by stringing together particularly powerful moments in a sequence that suits their own interests and preoccupations. Hodge and Tripp define this kind of reading as *paratactic*, a term borrowed from linguistic theory. Parataxis is a grammatical structure in which clauses are strung together in chain-like sequences, typically using connectives like 'and' and 'then'. It is opposed to *hypotaxis*, which consists of structures of subordination, such as complexes of clauses in which one clause may be the main clause of the sentence, and others are ranked in importance below it. Hodge and Tripp argue that most television and film narratives are effectively hypotactic, consisting of complex hierarchical narrative structures, but that readers may elect to read them paratactically. This kind of reading would be subversive and unpredictable, producing meanings which might be quite at odds with the apparent meaning, structure and ideology of the text.

In the case of this spoiler, we could argue that it is paratactic, in Hodge and Tripp's sense. It takes a selection of cutscene narratives in the game, and strings them together to make a story that is centrally concerned to affirm Cloud's heroic status, and to make the point that Cloud is a human protagonist, a matter of some debate within *FFVII* fan communities. However, this motivation of the player is hardly the kind of oppositional reading that Hodge and Tripp propose as a possibility of paratactic strategies – indeed, in terms of the representation of gender, it produces a conventional rendering of Cloud as warrior-hero, a feature frequently complained about by girl-fans regarding the entire *Final Fantasy* series. We might modify Hodge and Tripp's rather idealistic view of paratactic readings, then, to suggest that such readings produce interpretations of the text to fit the reader's singular preoccupations, but that these may or may not be closely aligned with the representational strategies of the text.

If we think about the game as a multimodal construct, and the game system as one of the constituent modes, this piece of writing undoes the link between game and narrative modes. However, this is not simply a function of the fan work itself – something similar happens in the game too, on which the spoiler builds. As we have seen in earlier chapters, part of the method by which games develop narratives is to insert cutscenes, short animations or FMVs (Full Motion Videos), which develop a section of the narrative. In *Final Fantasy VII*, the cutscenes are most conspicuously used to develop the backstory, a labyrinthine tale of Cloud's birth, his recruitment by an elite fighting force, his friendship with Sephiroth (later his enemy) and his love affairs. In Genette's terms, then, these cutscenes are a form of *analepsis* – an element of narrative which disrupts the chronological

sequence of the story to insert previous events as flashbacks (Genette, 1980).

Two points are important to note for our purposes in this chapter. First, the cutscenes are entirely characterized by the offer mode we looked at in chapter 6 – they are simply narrative statements. They involve no interactivity, and are simply there for the player's satisfaction and pleasure. In effect, at these points, the narrative and game pull apart, to such an extent that Stephen Poole argues that cutscenes are evidence that games are not a narrative form at all, and any narrative in them is effectively decorative, structurally separate from the game (Poole, 2000). We take a different view, as we have explained in earlier chapters; but, nevertheless, in *Final Fantasy VII* it is fair to say that the backstory cutscenes do show a certain separation between the yolk of game and the white of narrative. In this respect, the fan's spoiler writing is simply taking the separation a stage further, and leaving the game system behind. It is a move for which the text provides the raw materials very clearly. Choices are available to the player – so that, where some players simply skip the cutscenes, seeing them as a distraction to the gameplay, others regard them as important and valuable (and the spoiler is a creative expression of this kind of valuation).

Second, the cutscenes, as we have observed, are effectively animated films. The spoiler writer, then, has the same set of resources and restrictions as Jenkins's *Star Trek* fans: she or he cannot develop the text in the same mode, the moving image, and is obliged to employ the mode most available, that of writing. The differences made by this are important, but we will emphasize only one. A picture paints a thousand words, as is well known; so the moving image is able to convey a brief summation of an event while retaining a wealth of descriptive detail. The cutscenes on which this spoiler builds, for instance, show us Sephiroth's flowing grey hair in close-up, the elaborate staircases of the mansion and Tifa's falling body after Sephiroth's attack. However, the scenes still construct what Genette calls *summary duration* – they rapidly summarize a series of events. In writing, this is just not possible, so this spoiler, in constructing summary duration in language, has to dispense with most of the descriptive detail. The text suggests that this is felt as a loss, and the writer struggles to provide some hints of detail about movement, especially in the verbs: *slashes, flying, flings, hefts*.

The poet

A different kind of creative writing typical of fan cultures is that of poetry. This genre is used extensively by fans of other canonical media

texts such as *Harry Potter*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The X-Files*. The poem analysed here focuses on Cloud:

The Mirror: Cloud Strife
I'm coming for you.

You stand behind the guise of a SOLDIER, a hero, and smirk down at the whole Planet.

Your unreasoned hatred
Has tortured your soul.
Descent into evil
Must levy its toll.

Planning your moves as if it were a chess game and not a matter of life and death . . .

But I'm coming for you. We're coming for you.

Your crimes will not go unpunished.

You'll pay the price for
What you choose to be.
Undaunted, unwanted
And nothing is free.

A thief of memories, of lives, of will . . . And yet you go unrepentant, actually reveling in the chaos you cause.

Enjoy it while you can, my former friend.

. . . for we seek to topple who has the farthest to fall: you.

Not even your precious Jenova can withstand the power of teamwork.

The shadows that haunt you
Will spell your defeat.
The victors that taunt you
Will take revenge sweet.

The death of our comrade will not dissuade us from our cause.

And in the end, you will fall before my blade –

– and suffer as she did before.

Beware.

Yes, a rather freakish one. I was near the end of the game when I wrote this, so I focused a bit more on Cloud's feelings towards the cute (for us girls, anyway)-but-demonic silver-haired guy we all know and love/hate as Sephiroth. =^.^= we all know and love/hate as Sephiroth. =^.^= [<http://www.geocities.com/chocofeathers/themirror/cloud.html>](http://www.geocities.com/chocofeathers/themirror/cloud.html)

The use of a lyrical (rather than narrative) poetic form here produces a very different engagement with and transformation of the game text. To begin with, lyrical poems in the Western Romantic tradition are conventionally subjective, first-person texts which concentrate on power-

ful emotions. This produces, most obviously, a kind of linguistic role play in which this female fan speaks as Cloud. While this is a common strategy in media fan work (there are similar poems from the point of view of Harry Potter, Buffy or Angel on fansites, for instance), the difference here is that the first-person engagement replicates, or parallels, the role play engagement with the avatar required by the game system, and expressed, as we have seen, by a move from third-person to first- or second-person accounts of play in players' discourse.

Second, however, the poem elaborates an emotional aspect of the protagonist in direct ways that the game text cannot do – it cannot, for instance, show emotion by facial expression, which would be the filmic equivalent of the feelings this fan attributes to the avatar, and in particular to the love-hate relationship between Cloud and Sephiroth. In this respect, the poem supplements the game narrative in the same way as the spoiler, which similarly refers to Cloud's shame in the direct and explicit way that language affords.

Finally, both game system (here only as the experience of role play) and narrative are generically subsumed within this emotional structure, which builds a sequence of Sephiroth's feelings rather than actions – smugness, hatred, conceit – and Cloud's counter-emotions – revenge and sorrow for the teammate who dies near the end of the game, Aeris. However, along with the role play of Cloud, this fan, like many others, finds obvious pleasure in imagining Sephiroth as a very desirable kind of enemy; and the love-hate relationship between Cloud and Sephiroth becomes a springboard for a fan admiration of both characters, enhanced by the murky moral tangles in which they are caught up.

Like all fan work, then, this can be seen as a semiotic transformation. It takes one aspect of the semiotic link between player and avatar we have explored in chapter 6 – the adoption of protagonist point-of-view by the player, constructed in the game as the character facing away from the player so that we are looking in the same direction – and transforms it into language by way of the first person. However, the offer-demand structure is quite differently dealt with. Whereas in the game, and in Rachel's talk in chapter 6, the demand mode of the game is directed outwards from the game text towards the player, demanding action in the game system, here the demand is redirected back inwards to the text, at Sephiroth, who becomes the 'you' on the receiving end of Cloud/the fan's imperatives, both grammatical and implied: *you'll pay the price; enjoy it while you can; you'll fall before my sword; beware.*

In the final section, we will see how an appropriation of elements of the text through a visual medium offers different possibilities, engages with different cultural traditions and semiotic practices, but in some ways realizes similar social motivations.

The YAOI manga artist

The visual image of Cloud is a popular subject for appropriation in the tradition of amateur (*doujinshi*) manga comics (though ‘amateur’ here means highly skilled independent artist). This is a tradition begun by women, both to find room for expression within male-dominated production practices, and to explore erotic images and narratives in the idealized form of manga. Though this manga subgenre develops in some ways from an earlier tradition of comics depicting love between beautiful boys (*bishoonen*), one particular subgenre, the YAOI tradition, focuses more explicitly on erotic imagery, deliberately subordinating narrative to the sexual act – YAOI is an acronym from the Japanese words for ‘no climax, no point, no meaning’. McLelland (2000) also points out an obvious parallel between this provocative renunciation of narrative in American female slash fiction of the PWP (Plot, What Plot?) subgenre.

The example analysed here (Illustration 8) depicts eroticized relations between Cloud and Sephiroth in which the hero and villain of the game are represented as, respectively, submissive (*uke*) and dominant (*seme*) sexual partners.

Three important questions might be posed here. First, what does the visual medium offer that is different from the medium of writing in the spoiler and the poem; and what kinds of social interest are accommodated as a result? Second, because this kind of fantext employs the same manga aesthetic as the game, what kind of semiotic transformation is going on; and what differences does this make?

First, then, the visual mode. The adoption of the protagonist’s point of view inherent in the game and easily available in language through the first-person pronoun is not available in the visual image. This then becomes an objectified view of both Cloud and Sephiroth – no vestige of the game system is possible or present. In this respect, this text is furthest from the game text than any of the four we have considered. However, the visual mode allows for elaborate specificity about the appearance of the characters: indeed, the same semiotic specificity as that of the game, which is also realized visually. However, the game realizes Cloud as several different kinds of visual design – as a finely crafted digital image in the cutscenes; and as a short, blocky polygonal doll-like creature in the gameplay sequences (a discontinuity that caused some dismay in American reviews on the game’s release). The latter realization, the doll of the gameplay, is not referred to in any of the many examples of manga images of Cloud we have found. In every case, it is the more finely crafted image of the cutscene animations that is drawn upon. In this respect, too, we can say that the semiotic raw material adapted for these manga texts is appropriated from the least game-related components of the game.



Illustration 8 An example of YAOI manga depicting an erotic relationship between Cloud and Sephiroth (artist unknown).

The second question is to do with the use of manga to engage with a text which itself is designed as a kind of manga or *anime*. Clearly, there is a sense here of semiotic material – visual signs, forms, meanings, even textures – being borrowed, reworked and adapted from text to text. Furthermore, it is not simply a question of the fan manga borrowing from the original game. The game designs of Testuyo Nomura themselves grow from a tradition of images of beautiful boys whose ambiguous sexuality, combined with ferocious warrior strength, has specific roots in the *bishoonen* of earlier manga, who are arguably ‘not really “men” but fantastic, androgynous creatures created by Japanese women as an expression of dissatisfaction with current gender stereotypes and the “narrow life paths” which restrict women in the real world’ (McLlland, 2000).

This borrowing and adaptation of semiotic material from text to text can be theorized in different ways. It can be seen as an example of intertextuality, in which the fixed boundaries of traditionally conceived texts are seen to dissolve as signs slide between texts. It can also be seen from the point of view of Barthes’s notion of connotation (Barthes, 1973), in which signs in a text carry an associative freight by virtue of their use in other contexts. In Barthes’s theory, the signs developed in one context become signifier material when imported into a new context, so that they are used to make a new meaning, but bring with them a network of other meanings from a wider cultural and ideological context.

The multimodal theory we have used in this and the last chapter proposes a similar idea, but with some specific differences, in its theory of *provenance* (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001). This theory agrees with Barthes that to make any kind of meaning, semiotic resources, or signifier material, is needed. This may come with relatively little semiotic baggage, as when a sculptor chooses a lump of rock as the basic medium for a statue (though the difference between, say, soapstone and Carrara marble is, of course, culturally significant). However, the difference between this theory and Barthes’s connotation is twofold. First, Kress and van Leeuwen distinguish between mode and medium – that is, between the communicative mode at work (in the case of manga, this would be visual design), and the physical medium (paper, pencil, computer pixel). Second, they emphasize the agency of the sign-maker and their social motivation. So, in the case of manga, we could say that the visual signs of manga design which produce images of idealized and exaggerated beauty are aspects of the mode, whereas a set of craft skills built around uses of pencil, pen and ink are part of the medium, with their own signifying properties. In fact, this use of the material medium is highly prized by manga fans, who devote numerous websites to tutorial programmes in how to draw manga.

The idea of provenance, then, allows for the ways in which semiotic resources, both of mode and medium, can be successively deployed, shaped and transformed as a future resource by sign-makers. This image is arguably closer to the work of manga artists than traditional semiotics, which proposes an impersonal, fixed, abstract system, even in the case of Barthes, who is more attentive than most to the nuances of social usage.

In the case of this single image, then, we can trace a kind of history. The conventions of sculptured hair and enormous eyes are specific motifs of manga, and particularly of the *shojo* manga aimed at young female audiences. They are among the formulaic attributes which signify the abiding figures of the beautiful boys who provide an alternative, idealized image of masculinity for the female artists and readers of closed-circulation amateur manga. We can also argue that the figure of the beautiful youth with ambiguous sexuality has a longer tradition, quite differently constituted in the history of Japanese culture than in any roughly corresponding Western history.

The development of Cloud and Sephiroth by Nomura, out of this history, then, would seem to produce a pair of characters whose visual connotations are rich and intriguing for a number of possible audiences. For boys and young men who play the game, their good looks, metal-ornamented clothes and sizeable weapons are an obvious focus of interest. Furthermore, Cloud in particular is invested with visual details suggestive of appealing modern urban style – fatigues, boots, punky spikes in his hair. At the same time, his androgynous appearance is calculated to appeal to the fans of *shojo* manga in Japan, as well as to secondary-cult manga fan bases in America and Europe. Yet, as these images are appropriated in turn as raw material by YAOI artists, further transformations appear. In the image in Illustration 8, Cloud's raised T-shirt, his erect penis enclosed by Sephiroth's gloved hand, and his expression of sexual ecstasy are all visually explicit additions to a visual image which is impossible in the actual game, although the game contains all the elements for such a development to be plausible, both in narrative and cultural terms.

This history is also one of cultural globalization. The traditional craft of pen and ink replaces the computer graphics of the game, reaching beyond them to the concept drawings of Nomura and the manga traditions behind it. But *doujinshi* manga of this kind is enthusiastically imported into the USA, scanned on to countless websites, and offered as material for imitation and further adaptation by amateur manga and *Final Fantasy* fans in America. In spite of the cultural differences between the Japanese YAOI tradition and the American and European slash tradition, the two cultures meet up in

the ceaseless global interchange and semiotic negotiation, not merging, but adopting, adapting and imagining each other.

Conclusion

On the whole, then, we have found that, in fan art and writing surrounding *Final Fantasy VII*, the representational system and game system pull apart. Fans whose interest is in the procedural intricacies of gameplay devote themselves to walkthroughs and cheats, transforming the demand structures of the game system into the characteristic imperative structures of these texts, producing themselves as experts, semi-professional guides and instructors, although precariously poised in the lawless world of online intellectual property, not always supported by their fan community, and not recognized by the industrial producers of the game.

In contrast, fans whose interest lies in the rich and complex imagery and narrative of the game build on these structures. Though it is possible, as we saw in the case of the poem, to use these to replicate the first-person identification of player and avatar, more commonly these texts produce third-person views, narrative and iconic offers which pick up the possibilities offered by the representational system of the game and select, magnify and transform these for their own pleasure. These pleasures are at least as wide-ranging as those charted by Jenkins in *Textual Poachers*; and we have indicated a particular set of cultural and sexual interests associated with Japanese women's comics here, as an example of how such fan work is both culturally local and specific and at the same time capable of global export and adaptation, just like the original game on which it builds.