

Memoria: A Rhetorical Analysis Of Sticking To And Spreading From JRPG's And Their Fandoms

by  
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**DEDICATION**

To Justin. My forever party member.

## ABSTRACT

In this project, I conduct rhetorical analyses of three franchises of Japanese Role-Playing Games (JRPG's): *Kingdom Hearts*, *Final Fantasy VII*, and *Code Vein*. I explore their relationships with players surrounding memory: how is it conveyed within and through the game, how do players receive and internalize it, how is it then dispensed through the fandom, and what do these movements say about video games as rhetorical texts. I ground my analysis in understandings of stickiness, spreadability, and accessibility, utilizing these theoretical underpinnings to explore the movement of sensation between video games and players, as well as players between each other and within themselves. In particular, I define these three paradigms using *Kingdom Hearts* as a fulcrum: connection and intimacy are explicit themes within the narrative, and fans latch to this intimacy and build off of it towards accessibility and spread of the text itself. The games act as texts and opportunities for future rhetorical engagement, and I carry this forward into *Final Fantasy VII* by taking an intimate look at how trauma and healing are handled via both the games and the fandom, especially around death and “remaking” narratives. The power of choice and narrative agency that I note in *FFVII* takes full shape in my final data chapter, where I explore how *Code Vein* engages with both character creation and a failure-centered composing process to draw players into the intimacy in more explicit ways. Finally, I posit how the relationship between rhetoric, memory, researcher positionality, and stickiness/spreadability/accessibility can be carried forward within the field and into other datasets.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### **Introduction and Overview**

Over the past several years, a trend of “year in review” has emerged: companies like Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo compile video game play-data for all users, and share with each player how many hours they spent playing various games, earning various trophies or achievements, etc. Players then share these results with their friends, fellow fans, and through social media channels. Anecdotally, people report being caught off-guard by just how many hours they spent in a particular game or franchise, or being compelled to look into a game they would not have otherwise because of the amount of time and effort a friend or fellow online fan put in. Video game developers and publishers are encouraged by the direct feedback “hours played” data gives them: bored, disinterested players do not commit hundreds of hours of their lives to playing a game. In and among the hundreds of hours I spent collecting data for this project, I also poured hundreds of hours into several other games recreationally. My 2021 “year in review”, for example, brought into sharp relief the types of gameplay and narratives I found compelling (Japanese role-playing games in which the story centered around criminal organizations, as well as a Greek-inspired, intentionally-difficult game centered on death and escaping the underworld).

I begin with this self-disclosure for two reasons. Firstly, “Year in review” posts offer a microcosm of the type of rhetorical phenomenon I spend time exploring in this project. Video games as a medium offer a unique praxis through which connection, joy, trauma, learning, and fandom are experienced and transferred. Games are impactful for various reasons: accessible characters and narrative, interesting and compelling gameplay mechanics and loops, affective sensations and unique rhetorical

and literary forms. This, then, causes players to impact others: fandom creativity and community building, writing thinkpieces, guides, and memes, drawing new and returning fans into the experience. “Year in review” compilations and their surrounding social output showcase video games as rhetorical vehicles that create memories to be experienced and shared in multifaceted ways. Secondly, I am intimately and intricately woven into this project by way of fandom and positionality; Francesca Coppa notes that fandom studies involves “engag[ing] from the inside”, and that is precisely what I do. My “year in review” showcases acutely that I am rhetorically compelled by video games, and that my lens through which I conduct this project is fundamentally informed by my passion for them.

In this project, I conduct rhetorical analyses of three franchises of Japanese Role-Playing Games (JRPG’s): *Kingdom Hearts*, *Final Fantasy VII*, and *Code Vein*. I explore their relationships with players surrounding memory: how is it conveyed within and through the game, how do players receive and internalize it, how is it then dispensed through the fandom, and what do these movements say about video games as rhetorical texts. I ground my analysis in understandings of stickiness, spreadability, and accessibility, utilizing these theoretical underpinnings to explore the movement of sensation between video games and players, as well as players between each other and within themselves. In particular, I define these three paradigms using *Kingdom Hearts* as a fulcrum: connection and intimacy are explicit themes within the narrative, and fans latch to this intimacy and build off of it towards accessibility and spread of the text itself. The games act as texts and opportunities for future rhetorical engagement, and I carry this forward into *Final Fantasy VII* by taking an intimate look at how trauma and healing are handled via both the games and the fandom, especially around



death and “remaking” narratives. The power of choice and narrative agency that I note in *FFVII* takes full shape in my final data chapter, where I explore how *Code Vein* engages with both character creation and a failure-centered composing process to draw players into the intimacy in more explicit ways. Finally, I posit how the relationship between rhetoric, memory, researcher positionality, and stickiness/spreadability/accessibility can be carried forward within the field and into other datasets.

First, however, I scaffold the arguments to be made with contextualizing and grounding the project. Here, I begin by defining my questions and my stakes, building out my methodological approach to this dataset and my argumentation. I then contextualize the project within the disciplinary fields I draw from, grounding it in foundational concepts that guide my epistemological framework. My game and fandom choices were influenced by both personal and academic factors, which I explore in a breakdown of my method and how this project manifested around my particular dataset. I conclude this introduction with overviews of each chapter to follow.

### **Defining Questions and Stakes**

This dissertation is fundamentally invested in exploration of the relationship between video games and collective memory. Specifically, I conduct a rhetorical analysis of several JRPG’s and their associated fandom spaces, and I argue that the building, maintenance, subversion, and overall experience of collective memory is unique to these spaces. I claim that these games are rhetorically significant due to their presentation of memory. My research questions are:

- How is memory defined and used in video games as a medium?

- How do video games interact with relationship-building, trauma-processing, and identity-formation?
- How is the fandom impacted by player experience, and vice versa?
- Why are video games a unique rhetorical vehicle, and what do they show us about meaning-making, persuasion, and passion?
- What is notable about playing a game that directly addresses memory formation and maintenance in the story, gameplay, character interactions, and/or worldbuilding? How does it affect the player experience? How does it affect conduct and output in fandom spaces via reviews, thinkpieces, and critiques?

In addition to these overarching questions, each chapter will answer specific questions relating to their datasets. The trajectory moves through and complicates the idea of player/character choice, JRPG's as rhetorical spaces for experiencing and creating memory, and fandom spaces as necessarily curated by game experiences. The *Kingdom Hearts* chapter primarily revolves around the concepts of in-game character memories enforcing particular access and emotional buy-in on players, and how this causes fandom spaces to manifest and evolve over time. The *Final Fantasy VII* chapter addresses questions of unreliable narration and trauma, experiences that invite players to come alongside in-game characters, adjust or even explode their own expectations of a game, and how these experiences impact the push and pull between fans and game-makers. The *Code Vein* chapter interacts with questions of identity play and failure, and how memory access and manipulation impacts choices of players, fandom spaces and experiences, and methods of composing narratives.

Why video games, then, and why now? I see both cultural and scholarly exigencies for this project. The build-up to—and subsequent 2020 release of—*FFVII*R was a watershed moment for discussions of remakes, canon, fandoms, sequels; it prompted critical—at times even fierce—discussions of how games create, maintain, and adjust memories, and what those memories mean to fans. *Kingdom Hearts* has long been considered an infamous franchise for its expectation of memory maintenance, both within the game lore (with the existence of characters who lose, regain, fight for, and fight against memories of themselves and others) and within the community (constant discussions of the expansive canon, whether the story is convoluted, complex, or just simply “a lot”). *Code Vein* bakes its experiences of memory into its lore and actual gameplay mechanics, requiring the player to “restore” memories of various occurrences, characters, and essential combat and exploration skills. These games are always already woven with discussions of memory and the implications those discussions have on players and communities.

Because of this inherent relationship between these games and memory, I see a rich opportunity to interact with questions of collective memory, video game studies, and fan studies. While rhetoric and composition scholars have engaged both with collective memory and video games as a rhetorical site, the intersection of the two fields is a rich space for further work to develop. I also engage with this data as both a researcher and a participant, a positionality that necessitates responsibility and reflexivity. I must discuss the coming-together of theory based on deeply personal data, allowing my data to craft arguments through my experience of research AND participation, simultaneously. As a participant in my own study, I additionally conduct my feminist and cultural rhetoric epistemologies by assigning rhetoricity—the

fundamental state of being a rhetorical object—to traditionally excluded “texts”, looking at both video games and fandom spaces. I am interested in what these spaces tell us about collective memory. These games and the fandom spaces surrounding them showcase interesting manifestations of significance between object and actor. I take the video game as a unique rhetorical space based on Phillips’ reading of memory curation: the game itself is a vehicle for rhetorical meaning, and there is a contest of rhetorical agency between the games’ presentations of memory, and the fans’ choices of maintenance of that memory.

My fundamental research question—what do JRPG’s and their fandom spaces tell us about collective memory—encourages a continued expansion of the possibilities of rhetorical analysis. Video games blur lines between rhetors and audience members, encouraging a slippage between roles that formulates interesting collisions for meaning-making and maintenance of definitions. There is a rich space here for a continued definitional evolution of what core rhetorical concepts mean and how they can be applied in future inquires: what is a text, what is an audience, how is meaning created and subverted? These are large, baggy questions, but important ones. I argue that my exploration of memory within JRPG’s and their associated fandoms encourages a continued reflective discussion within the field towards researcher positionality and analysis of rhetorical objects. Ultimately, I seek to create a constellative space of memory and intimacy through video games as a rhetorical praxis.

### **Contextualizing the Project**

I derive the epistemological framing for this project primarily from affect and emotion studies, rhetoric of memory studies, literary and rhetorical analysis of video

games and adaptation, and fandom studies. Additionally, I ground myself in feminist and cultural rhetorics; my researcher positionality is essential and inseparable from the work I do and the analysis I conduct. I am connected, intimately so, with these texts and the experiences they imprint upon me. This connection, and how video games interact with players overall, is fundamentally interwoven with affect and sensation.

### *Affect/Stickness, Emotional Movement, and Spreadability*

Video games provide unique and notable sensations to their audiences; affective and emotional information is imparted to players via an active sensory process. Sara Ahmed spends considerable time in her article “Sociable happiness” explaining the finer points of feeling states, such as anxiety or joy. They are “sticky: rather like Velcro, it tends to pick up on whatever comes near” (11). As a medium, video games disseminate feeling states in a particular sticky fashion: there is an investment required on the part of the player, to pick up the controller and participate actively in the rhetorical exchange, rather than be a passive consumer. The stickiness can further be expressed and experienced in happiness, a concept Ahmed prefers to relate more intimately with “happening” rather than the emotional state of joy or elation. Happiness is an active sensation that both happens to an actor, as well as happens through an actor. It “can thus be described as intentional in the phenomenological sense (directed towards objects) as well as being affective (contact with objects)” (11). Video games both cause happiness and have happiness directed to them.

The relationship between happenings and stickiness is dynamic, fluid, and requires movement to thrive. A sticky sensation cannot spread (a concept I return to

briefly) without movement and buy-in. An emotionally impactful experience can be temporally bound; however, to be manipulated in useful and rhetorically impactful ways as this project demands, there must be movement, defined through the affective and, at times, bodily shifts of various actors. I find Elizabeth Grosz's foundational work in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* about the Möbius strip of particular use here. She adapts the idea from theorist Jacques Lacan and defines the strip as "the ways in which, through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another...showing not their fundamental identity or reducibility but the torsion of the one into the other, the passage, vector, or uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside" (xii). Identity within the video game world and community cannot be solidified into a standing state; it is always already defined by its relationship and connection with its fans and its storytellers. The Möbius strip is a reflection of the necessary motion of sensations: a hap without movement becomes of no use. Video games encourage this motion by imprinting experiences of memory, both implicit and explicit, onto their audiences, and inviting audiences to consider those memories as affectively and rhetorically meaningful. The imprinting of these memories is the "slippage between roles" I mention as a fundamental stake of this project: video games torque sensations through players to both embed the player into the narrative, as well as deliver the narrative through the player.

Relatedly, Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green take a digital studies approach in their book *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. Rather than a mobius strip, Jenkins et al discuss the concept of spreadability as an evolving direction of media dissemination. Specifically, they discuss connections on a larger scale, noting that "this shift from distribution to

circulation signals a movement toward a more participatory model of culture, one which sees the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined” (2). They pull out from the “stickiness” model used in traditional marketing parlance—a model, it should be noted, that shares a name and superficial relation to Ahmed’s, but is bound by capitalistic desires in ways hers is not—and present “spreadability” as the model of current media engagement: while content is sticky, the way it moves is spreadable. Jenkins et al. relate this sensation to peanut butter, as the content is compelling so to does it move with, through, and between new and established fan channels. The spreadability of a particular media is dependent upon the buy-in from the audience, which is a pillar of the epistemological framing throughout every dataset I observe for this project. The buy-in from audiences that I engage with is intimately tied with memory, and how memories of a game and its mechanical and narrative impacts push audiences in rhetorical ways. Indeed, the timing of this project comes into sharp relief once again, as sales numbers of remakes and rereleases of games in these franchises break records due to the literal “buy-in” of new players and established fans alike, associated with their ability to see either potential affective impact and memory establishment, or their recollection of memories already retained and desire to (re)encounter those narratives.

### *Memory, Rhetoric, and Their Relations*

In rhetoric and composition, a significant discussion of memory dates back to original philosophers such as Aristotle, who considered memory to be one of the five canons of rhetoric. Jeff Pruchnic and Kim Lacey posit in “The Future of Forgetting”

that memory is both a rhetorical reality connected to externalization through information technology and to internalization via affective knowledge and response (3). They discuss rhetorical intentionality in advertising as a manifestation of this relationship; memories of consumers are driven both by the interaction with the technological output as well as the affective experience rhetorically presented. This relationship is easily grafted onto video games, and I posit that video games present this interplay between information technology and affect via a rhetorical space of memory unique to the gameplay experience. Jason Kalin and Jordan Frith discuss adjacent concepts of mobility in memory surrounding check-in apps. In “Here I Used To Be”, they note that memory is a dynamic experience that shifts between the individual and the collective, with affective interactions of place and persons making rhetorical decisions to “be present” (Kalin and Frith 20). Video games as a rhetorical and affective space provide similar methods of “check-in”: save points, chapter breaks, in-character notes of moments of no return, in addition to fandom spaces such as forums, Youtube videos, and spoiler/spoiler-free zones. Habitual returning to spaces forms bonds, networked feelings via shared experiences and object interactions, much like Michael Faris discusses in “Coffee Shop Writing” (2-3).

These networked feelings are most aptly described as “public memory”. Kendall Phillips discusses this phenomenon at length in his two edited collections, *Framing Public Memory* and *Global Memoryscapes* (edited with G. Mitchell Reyes). In the introduction to *Framing Public Memory*, Phillips provides an essential definition: “the ways memories attain meaning, compel others to accept them, and are themselves contested, subverted, and supplanted by other memories are essentially rhetorical” (2-3). This is the lynchpin to my definition of memory, and the one that



guides this project. If memories are essentially rhetorical, what then do video games have to teach us about experiences of memory? In the more recent book *Global Memoryscapes*, Phillips and Reyes expand upon this further by noting that memory necessarily slips between local/global and individual/collective as a rhetorical force; meaning-making is always partially determined by preconceived notions, knowledges, and contexts (18). This, again, presents in-roads to examine the relationship between memory and these JRPG's: what are the preconceived knowledges, how are they challenged, what do the manifestations of these memories push towards?

Douglas Eyman and Andrea Davis take up some of these questions in their edited collection *Play/Write*. These authors address the concepts of video games as rhetorical objects and players as actors. In particular, Jessica Masri Eberhard spends her chapter discussing the controversial ending of *Mass Effect 3*, contextualizing it as a fandom's complex relationship with games as stories<sup>1</sup> versus games as co-created event spaces, complicating the role of player as a rhetorical actor. The memories of the decisions players made in previous entries in the franchise crafted preconceived knowledges that were then subverted by the game's narrative (Eberhard). These are the types of spaces I seek to explore in this dissertation: what do game spaces and player spaces tell us about memory, with these games as rhetorical vehicles? Lee Sherlock takes up similar questions in their chapter on theorycrafting, a practice through which players create game optimization techniques and documentation via composing practices that affect in-game spaces. The exchange of experiences between the game-space and player-space is directly influenced by this composing (Lee);

1 I ground my understanding of the relationship between rhetoric and stories in cultural rhetorics; particularly, from the collective performance published in *enculturation* "Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics", which explains how narratives are the epistemological space from which understandings of rhetoric for a culture--"any place/space where groups organize under a set of shared beliefs and practices"--spring. Stories are told by video games, and are then told via stories through players.

players and games alike are in a constant state of creating and subverting collective memory.

### *Video Games as Rhetorical Texts*

Alongside this space of collective memory, theorists have been discussing the genre of the video game as a space of presence and engagement with unique features. Alf Seegert discusses interactive fiction experiences as presence via active engagement with narrative creation and maintenance. He presents a rich jumping-off point for discussions of shared experiences, even memories, of fans all playing “the same game”. He also notes that interactive fiction was a better alternative than video games at the time because present graphical fidelity was immersion-breaking (Seegert 25-26); an issue that deserves a fresh look with current technological capabilities and rhetorical assets. While Seegert focuses his studies on text-based games, I am interested in the expansion of his ideas within the unique compositional experiences of the games I plan to study. The participation in the worlds of these games is inherently associated with narrative creation and maintenance, as Seegert suggests, but is complicated by the push-and-pull dynamics of game-space and player-space via collective memory, as discussed above. Thessa Jensen addresses this notion indirectly in their article “On the Importance of Presence”. They discuss that fans must be able to feel as though they are in “the same room, the same space” (Jensen 144). While this article focused primarily on the study of online fandom spaces and how they curated the experience of togetherness, I am more interested in the relationship between players’ experiences of memory within games and how they are externalized in fan interactions and critic reports. I expand on Seegert and Jensen’s claims to ask: how do interactions with video games affect players’ memories, their presentations of those

memories, and what do these interactions say about JRPG's as a vehicle for collective memory?

In pursuit of understanding this complication, I turn to both Linda Hutcheon and Katherine Isbister. Hutcheon mentions video games in passing in their deep dive into adaptation as a literary genre and space, but primarily focuses on discussions of adaptations as “inherently palimpsestuous works” (6). They do state that video games cannot easily adapt “the space of the mind” like text-based works such as novels can, an argument I intervene in by positing video games as always already in the space of the mind via control of characters, narrative, and yes, memory (14). What is the rhetorical impact of an adaptation, Hutcheon seems to ask, and I seek to probe this question via discussion of adaptation in both addressing series that adapt themselves, like *FFVII*, and how fans utilize adaptation as a rhetorical space for memory creation and maintenance, like *Code Vein*. Isbister acts as the other side of the coin for Hutcheon. In her book *How Games Move Us*, she explains how video games actively create and maintain roles that people act through, presenting moments that powerfully impact players in ways that other literary spaces do not (Isbister 2). As an academic writing for a broader audience, her book asks readers to simply take video games as a space for important conversations surrounding choice, narrative, and memory. I expand upon her call to engage with video games as important meaning-making objects by exploring how players interact with memory: how is memory adapted to the video game space, and what affect does adaptation have on the experience for players?

### *Researcher Positionality and Investment*

Alongside this look at video games as rhetorical sites, the definition of a researcher and their positionality towards their data subjects offers a space for more intimate and engaged inquiry. As fan studies has bloomed around and beyond media studies, methods of identifying towards passion (or, as Ahmed would call it, happiness) in research have come forward. Previous requirements of emotional distance, of passion and emotional intimacy being a negative towards academic rigor, are appropriated for fresh perspectives of media studies. This idea of appropriating and accepting traditionally problematic and negative-leaning ideals is distinctly present in Francesca Coppas' "Fuck Yeah, Fandom is Beautiful", where she discusses that a pivot towards this appropriation is empowering, centering the communal aspect of studying fandoms and groups. Coppa self-identifies as a fan and a fandom researcher, a positionality I share and respect. The experience of engaging with emotion, even passion, as a cornerstone of rhetorical analysis is a fundamental continuation of work begun in feminist and cultural rhetoric disciplines, as is studying and analyzing non-traditional texts such as video games and their communities. I do this work because I am fundamentally invested in the success of the collective memory and emotional capital I study.

Coppas' call to engage with spaces in which I am already intimate and integrated collaborates well with calls from feminist and cultural rhetoric scholars such as Jessica Enoch, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and Jessica Restaino, all of whom call for researcher reflexivity and explicit engagement with positionality in their work<sup>2</sup>. Enoch calls for returning always to oneself throughout the data collection and

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2 See, in particular, Enoch's *Refiguring Rhetorical Education: Women Teaching African American, Native American, and Chicano/a Students, 1865-1911*, Royster's *Traces Of A Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*, and Restaino's *Surrender: Feminist Rhetoric and Ethics in Love and Illness*.

analysis in the introduction to *Refiguring Rhetorical Education*, as a practice of reflexivity and scholarly awareness. Adjacently, Royster fixates on the concept of researcher responsibility in her sixth chapter of *Traces of a Stream*, noting that a feminist scholar must be intimately aware of their relationship to the data they collect and analyze, and how that relationship impacts the experience of the data in affective and rhetorical ways. The relationship between the scholar and their data is one that is inherently intimate, personal, and impactful to the work they produce. This is borne out especially in Restaino's work in *Surrender*, where she invites feminist and cultural rhetoric scholars to be more willing for their data to impact the matrix of engagement in potentially painful and liberating ways. I am particularly compelled by all their calls for responsibility, intimacy<sup>3</sup>, and self-reflection, explicitly naming various personal positionalities as I engage in this work, and acknowledging any biases and lenses I hold. My relationships with these games must, inherently, impact my understanding of them as rhetorical vehicles, and the memories they have disseminated to me and to others. This "passionate responsibility", to combine Coppa, Enoch, Royster, and Restaino's concepts, directly informs and guides my decision-making and analysis-crafting.

### **Manifesting the Project**

For this dissertation, there are three discrete data chapters: one centering around the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise, one centering around the *Final Fantasy VII* franchise, and one centering around the game *Code Vein*. The *Kingdom Hearts* chapter focuses primarily on the titles in the series with significant presences of key

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3 Jessica Restaino explains intimacy in *Surrender* as "my use of the term 'intimacy' is meant to be provocative, to invite us to think of blurred boundaries, of being even dangerously close to each other: collapsed walls between the personal, the academic, and the analytic" (9). I deeply identify with this use of intimacy as both a theoretical framing and a positionality framing. Throughout this work, as "intimacy" is invoked, this is the frame with which it is presented.

characters Xion, Axel, and Roxas, such as *Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories*, *Kingdom Hearts II*, *Kingdom Hearts: 358/2 Days*, *Kingdom Hearts: Dream Drop Distance*, and *Kingdom Hearts III*. The *Final Fantasy VII* chapter focuses on titles in the series centering on relationships constellated with Cloud, Sephiroth, and Zack, such as *Final Fantasy VII*, *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*, *Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII*, *Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII*, and *Final Fantasy VII Remake*. The *Code Vein* chapter focuses on the game of the same name, making most note of sequences within the game where the player-created protagonist character explicitly interacts with memories by literally walking into and through them, as well as key narrative moments throughout the game where players and characters must decide on story-impacting events. In addition to the games themselves, I examined the fandoms of each series, and collected data from various spaces associated with each game: gaming journalism, such as reviews and critiques, Reddit posts and discussions, and Youtube material from content creators covering memes, reactions, retrospectives, and guides.

To collect and analyze data, I rely on several forms of interaction with my materials. I played the majority of the games I analyzed, documenting my experiences and reflecting upon my observations. I journaled throughout every play and viewing session of the games, focusing intentionally on how the games and media positioned me to interact with memory, intimacy, and accessibility. I watched cutscenes and gathered grassroots information about games less-accessible (such as *Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII*, a game only available on the now-defunct console Playstation Portable), and non-game pieces of media (such as cutscene movies in the *Kingdom Hearts* series, manga published about *Code Vein*, and novels expanding the world of

*Final Fantasy VII*), documenting this unique accessibility as part of the research. I played these games on my personal consoles (a Playstation 4 and Playstation 5), on the easiest difficulties available to me, and I utilized fan-created walkthroughs and guides as I went along. I examine the interesting accessibility structures these types of gameplay decisions expose through the lens of “canon”, official story and world-space for pieces of media, how canon is impacted via accessibility, and how both of these in turn impact types of memory. I also explicitly address researcher positionality and experience throughout the chapters themselves, as I must fundamentally interact with these media franchises and fandom spaces as a rhetorician, and a fan, myself. I had played all of these games as a fan in the past prior to returning to them as a researcher. I pull on feminist and cultural rhetorics’ accountability and fan studies’ passion to not only journal about my experiences with the media, but reflexively consider my position as a unique type of engaged scholar.

Fan data itself is curated from spaces such as Reddit, journalism websites like Kotaku, and various content creator Youtube channels who interact with the media franchises I examine in this project. I curated this dataset with an explicit eye on longform pieces, reviews, memes, and other interactions that discussed memory and spreading fandom knowledge. I note how each piece of fan and critic data interacts with the building, maintaining, and/or subverting of collective memory established by the video game with which it is associated. I also engage the question of access: how prevalent are pieces of data discussing memory about these games, and how does that interact with the presentation of memory from the game itself? Fan data will be brought into conversation with gameplay data through the lens of memory maintenance: how do the two spaces talk to one another about memory? Is it

synchronous or cacophonous? Are memories maintained, subverted, adjusted?

Overall, each chapter will address the unique relationships formed between the JRPG's and fan output associated with them.

## Chapter Overviews

### *Chapter 2 – “We’ll go together.”: Sticking and Spreading Emotional Connection in Kingdom Hearts*

*Kingdom Hearts* is an action-adventure Japanese role-playing game franchise, the first of which released in 2002 on the Playstation 2 by Square Enix<sup>4</sup>. The games are famous for their unexpected genre mash-up: Disney-inspired environments and characters, with *Final Fantasy* characters and design. Players follow groups of teenagers and young adults as they explore worlds and fight enemies in search of the truth about the fundamental conflict between “light” and “darkness”, participating in real-time action-oriented combat, various minigames and challenges, and famously lengthy cutscenes, including those with gameplay requirements to unlock. The success of the franchise hinged upon the deeply emotional bond many players formed with the simultaneously larger-than-life and yet deeply-human connections between characters throughout the games. This bond prompted players to combat the complex issues around *Kingdom Hearts*' accessibility by spreading it themselves. As of this writing, the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise has over 10 canonical games<sup>5</sup>, the most recent being 2020's *Kingdom Hearts: Melody of Memory*, a rhythm game where players literally play through a character's memories of the narrative via revisiting famous songs from the games.

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4 At the time, Square Enix was two separate, competing video game companies: Square and Enix. They completed their merger in 2003 and have remained Square Enix ever since. The first game in the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise was technically developed and published under Square; however, for clarity's sake I maintain calling the company by their current name throughout this project.

5 There are also cutscene movies, manga/light novel adaptations, and a handful of other media presentations. Though these extraneous pieces of media are beyond the scope of this project, it nonetheless showcases how pervasive the narrative of the franchise has been and continues to be.



In chapter 2, I explore how *Kingdom Hearts*' presentation of emotional capital exchange engages the fandom in unique ways. This chapter sets the foundations of stickiness, accessibility, and spreadability that following chapters complicate and concur around. I engage with questions such as:

- What is compelling about *Kingdom Hearts*, and how is that affectively transferred to the audience? What “sticks”?
- How does accessibility impact the experience of *Kingdom Hearts*, and why is it a problem? What type of unique perspective do I have as a researcher and a fan with regards to accessing this content?
- Where does *Kingdom Hearts* spread, and through what means? What rhetorical jobs does this spreading accomplish?

*Chapter 3 – “I will never be a memory...”: Movement of Trauma and other Haps of the Final Fantasy VII Franchise*

Following an analysis of stickiness, accessibility, and spreadability in the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise, I turn to an older intellectual property to explore the impacts of trauma and unreliable narration on similar concepts. *Final Fantasy VII* is a Japanese role-playing franchise with a flexible game genre, toggling between Active Time Battle (ATB) turn-based, third-person shooter, and action-adventure. The first game debuted in 1997 on the Playstation console, developed and published by Square Enix. Players follow a team of various characters with unique abilities—the “party”—as they uncover the mysteries of the planet they live on, the late-capitalist corporation that runs it, and deeply personal histories and motivations for each of them. The franchise proved hugely successful due to its cutting-edge graphic fidelity and gameplay loop, as well as the traumatic and affectively-impactful bonds formed with the protagonist and one of his love interests. In addition to spawning many

controversial opinions about “spoilers”, *Final Fantasy VII* prompted fans to both seek healing for themselves in fandom, while also spreading the pain they had experienced themselves. As of this writing, the *Final Fantasy VII* franchise has over 5 canonical games<sup>6</sup>, the most recent being 2021’s *Final Fantasy VII Remake: Intergrade*, a remake-remix hybrid of the 1997 game, with upgraded graphics, new gameplay elements, and thought-provoking narrative and character adjustments.

In chapter 3, I discuss how the inclusion of trauma, unreliable narration, and constellations of remixing media and narrative impact the memory experiences of fans and how the memories of those fans are spread. This chapter engages with the push and pull of pain and healing in interactive media, and how memories are complicated by sharing those affects with the video game and with others. I engage with questions such as:

- What does *Final Fantasy VII* say about trauma, and where does that trauma move towards and through the audience? How do remixes and remakes partake in concepts such as “palimpsestuous works” and “cruel optimisms”?
- How does *Final Fantasy VII* actively engage with memory formation, revision, and subversion, and what types of fandom responses emerge from this practice?
- What spreads from *Final Fantasy VII*, and its remake? What rhetorical jobs do fans, the publisher, and the games themselves do, and how do they interact with one another?

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6 Again, there are other media elements. I engage with the movie *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children* at length in this project, but there are also several mobile games and light novels that are beyond the scope of my argument. However, elements of all the side projects have permeated into the *Remake*, an element I discuss in the chapter.

*Chapter 4 – “I wanted to forget my frailty”: Identity Play and Composing with Failure in Code Vein*

Both *Kingdom Hearts* and *Final Fantasy VII* provide deeply compelling, emotionally-relatable protagonists and characters for players to latch onto and connect with, prompting an affectively impactful experience. I carry this sensation to its natural conclusion in my final data chapter, wherein I explore the unique sensation of utilizing a character creation system to directly insert a player-created character into the game as the protagonist. *Code Vein* is an action-adventure game, colloquially known as a “Souls-like” modeled after the successful video game franchise *Dark Souls*. Published by Bandai Namco, it launched in 2019 on Playstation, Xbox, and home computer systems. Players create an avatar that becomes the main character, and spend the game experiencing the entire narrative through eyes that they have chosen as their own. They discover the corruption that caused an apocalypse alongside their small group of comrades, as well as decide what to ultimately do with that corruptive power. The game proved successful due to its combination of difficult but rewarding gameplay with a deeply customizable experience both mechanically and narratively. Fans were compelled to create guides, strategy walkthroughs, and spread awareness that the game had multiple endings and thus prompted multiple replays. As of this writing, the game has received some additional content in 2020, and a spiritual successor in Bandai Namco’s 2021 game *Scarlet Nexus*.

In chapter 4, I discuss how memory formation and spread from players is uniquely compelling when placed directly in the protagonist mindframe. I engage with Lauren Berlant’s “cruel optimism” and Jack Halberstam’s “failure” to explore how *Code Vein* utilizes affective buy-in to torque a superficially punishing gameplay loop into a deeply satisfying and empowering experience. I pull this into a composing

practice, and explore briefly what “composing with failure” could possibly look like in a gamified classroom. I engage with questions such as:

- What is unique about player-characters, and their experiences with memory transference and creation? How are players “stuck” to this game?
- How do processes of failure and learning interact with memory and composing practices? Where are players compelled by the game, and vice versa?
- Why is failure a compelling composing practice, and how could it be utilized in a classroom?

#### *Chapter 5 – Integrated Remix: Conclusions, Considerations, and Codas*

In chapter 5, I begin with a return to researcher positionality, explicitly giving space to my identity within this work. This acts as a retrospective on the experience of writing this project alongside data that was, and is, so intimately impactful to my life in various, messy ways. I offer a review of each data chapter and their main takeaways, including a listing of the key methodological questions I see as the most impactful from each. I ultimately conclude this project with a brief exploration of future notions and projects, where I could see these types of inquiries taking the field in projects on the horizon.

As a whole, this project centers around the movement of sensations via stories and memories, perpetuated through impacted people. This, fundamentally, is the definition of rhetoric that I ascribe to, both for this work and in my researcher ethos as a whole. I see rhetoric as, always, a dynamic, that both acts on and is acted upon by people and texts and kairotic expressions. Video games are, then, a rhetorical object. To begin, then, is to explore what connections are available and possible through

these video games, and how they stick and spread via accessible or inaccessible means, and expand from there towards the possibilities of healing, playing, and creating.

## CHAPTER 2: “WE’LL GO TOGETHER.”: SPREADING STICKINESS AND ACCESSIBILITY IN *KINGDOM HEARTS*

### **Introduction**

In late 2020, Square Enix released the latest title in the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise. Titled *Kingdom Hearts: Melody of Memory*, the game claimed to focus on protagonist Kairi and her memories of the story so far. Players were given over 150 music tracks from all the franchise titles in this rhythm game, many previously unreleased. The game released a day earlier in Japan than worldwide, and thus, the “new story content” cutscenes were posted online within a few hours. Fans immediately set about confirming theories from past games, speculating about the directions of the next several games in the franchise, and debating whether the new content was “enough” to justify a new game purchase. This series of events is a microcosm of the dynamic nature of the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise and its fanbase. All that matters in this franchise is connection; the narrative is glued together with memory. Ideas of accessible relationality permeate the game and, thus, the methods fans use to interact, remix, and (re)master the game.

*Kingdom Hearts*, at its core, is an action-role-playing video game franchise. Beginning in 2002 with the release of the appropriately titled *Kingdom Hearts*, the franchise has now spanned several console generations, with the most recent release being late 2020’s *Kingdom Hearts: Melody of Memory*. At its release, the game was met with equal parts skepticism and curiosity, mostly revolving around its attempts at a crossover game between the wildly successful *Final Fantasy* series, owned by Squaresoft (now known as Square Enix), and various franchises owned by Disney. However, the game was a hit, spawning a generation of predominantly children and preteen/teen fans who essentially grew up with the franchise, culminating in the

release of the highly anticipated *Kingdom Hearts III* in early 2019. Additionally, in the mid-2010's, Square Enix began to release bundles of the games, prompting a resurgence of fan interest and a new generation of fans to interact with the franchise due to increased accessibility from these bundles.

In this chapter, I argue that a collapsing of the rhetorical concepts “actor” and “audience” via emotional capital exchange in the *Kingdom Hearts* series provides for a curation of memory that is uniquely accessible, intimate, and relatable. This is showcased via the narrative manifestation of the franchise, the “problem” of accessing the games and their content, and content creators’ treatment of spreading the games extending into the fandom. In these games, the collective is always presented as more important and more powerful than the self or individual; the spreadability of that idea is baked into the gameplay experience and the fandom experience. The ideas of relationality, accessibility, and memory curation are familiar ground for this franchise. For the *Kingdom Hearts* series, bonds define the rhetorical impact of characters and narratives. I address these bonds by, first, grounding my previously established theoretical underpinnings in the context of the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise, including an address of researcher positionality. I then explore the stickiness of the franchise itself via its explicit use of memory in its narrative and character definitions, as well as its multifaceted relationship with accessibility to spread, before moving into how the franchise spreads via community-centric methods. I conclude with a discussion on accessibility, and how *Kingdom Hearts*’ relationship with its fans occupies a space of curious access defined both by the creators of the games, and yet also by its fans.

This chapter acts as a primer for the concepts of stickiness, spreadability, and accessibility via the unique rhetorical vehicle of video games. The exchange of

emotional capital, defined here as these affective sticking points that are disseminated via both fans and publishers, engage with movements of fandom that are then complicated in further research in subsequent chapters. Here, the unique compulsion that *Kingdom Hearts* provides, is defined and analyzed to provide a scaffolding upon which more complex interactions between fans, video game, and memory can hang and twist.

### **Destiny Islands: *Kingdom Hearts*' Exigency**

The *Kingdom Hearts* franchise is notorious for its expansive lore, secretive endings<sup>7</sup> and bonus content, and its passionate following. The attachment to the franchise is an intentional approach by the creators via the use of highly affective notions of friendship, connection, and identity definition via bonds with others. This is borne out in most critical thinkpieces surrounding the franchise, most notably in recent years due to the hype surrounding *Kingdom Hearts III*'s release. For example, in “How the Heroes of Kingdom Hearts Find Strength in Transformation”, Julie Muncy notes that Sora—the protagonist with the most screentime in the series—is important not because of his power alone, but because of his ability to craft connections with other people. There is inherent, and necessary, power in the idea and dissemination of connection. Tim Rogers notes that the entire franchise is built around this idea of connection and accessibility: “at times, Kingdom Hearts is more glue than material” (KHIII is Unreviewable). The “stickiness” of *Kingdom Hearts* is an inherent part of its success and longevity; the stickier it is, the more people will seek it, and the more people that seek it, the stickier it becomes.

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<sup>7</sup> Notably, the difficulty setting the player chooses to begin a playthrough of any *Kingdom Hearts* game directly impacts how difficult it is for the player to earn the secret ending to each of the games; the easier the gameplay difficulty, the more difficult it is to earn the secret ending.



Roger's description of the franchise as "more glue" is apt and adaptable to a theoretical framing. Sara Ahmed notes in her article "Sociable happiness" that feeling states, such as anxiety and happiness, are "sticky: rather like Velcro, it tends to pick up on whatever comes near" (11). As characters within the series share these feeling states, this glue, with fans, fans then transfer the glue between themselves and to new fans, cycling rhetorical meaning in ways unfamiliar to traditional methods. Rather, it is more akin to a linking between concepts presented by Elizabeth Grosz and Henry Jenkins et al in their respective works. Grosz spends much of her book *Volatile Bodies* reworking the concept of the Mobius strip, an idea she adapts from Jacques Lacan, for connection between the body and mind; "the ways in which, through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another...showing not their fundamental identity or reducibility but the torsion of the one into the other, the passage, vector, or uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside" (xii). I graft this reading of the Mobius strip onto memory, and showcase how the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise prompts this drift of memory between its games and its fans. As Kendall Phillips notes in his edited collection *Framing Public Memory*, "the ways memories attain meaning, compel others to accept them, and are themselves contested, subverted, and supplanted by other memories are essentially rhetorical" due to their meaning-making abilities (2-3). Again, rhetoric moves sensations between spaces: people, texts, locations, and times.

Alongside this growth of the franchise in accessibility via memory movement and, thus, spreadability, the definition of a researcher and their positionality towards their data subjects has expanded as well. As fan studies has bloomed around and beyond media studies, methods of identifying towards passion (or, as Ahmed would

call it, happiness) in research have come forward. Previous requirements of emotional distance, of passion and emotional intimacy being a negative towards academic rigor, are appropriated for fresh perspectives of media studies. This idea of appropriating and accepting traditionally problematic and negative-leaning ideals is distinctly present in Francesca Coppa's "Fuck Yeah, Fandom is Beautiful", where she discusses that a pivot towards this appropriation is empowering, centering the communal aspect of studying fandoms and groups. Coppa self-identifies as a fan and a fandom researcher, a positionality I share and respect. The experience of engaging with emotion, even passion, as a cornerstone of rhetorical analysis is a fundamental continuation of work begun in feminist and cultural rhetoric disciplines, as is studying and analyzing non-traditional texts such as video games and their communities. I do this work because I am fundamentally invested in the success of the collective memory and emotional capital I study. Relatedly, Henry Jenkins is considered by many to be a pioneer of "fandom studies" as a field. In the "How To Read This Book" section of *Spreadable Media*, Jenkins "call[s] himself an 'aca-fan' to reflect the ways his life has straddled the worlds of academia and fandom" (x).

I bring attention to both the storied history of accessibility around *Kingdom Hearts* as well as the history of researcher positionality in rhetorical studies because I am a participant in the very mobius strip I describe in this chapter. I torque and twist the experiences and memories the franchise has given me towards its dissemination, spreadability, and memory maintenance. I am the subject of study and the studier. I first encountered these games, these critics, these YouTube personalities, as a fan. I did not play a *Kingdom Hearts* game until around 2016, and was significantly older than a lot of long-time fans were when they played the first title in the franchise. I did

play the first game on a PlayStation 2; however, shortly thereafter I acquired a PlayStation 4. I was always able to access every game in the franchise on this console because I entered into the fandom after the releases of the bundles on modern hardware. Additionally, fan-curated cutscene compilations, reviews, gameplay run-throughs, and various other resources were overwhelmingly available via websites like *Youtube* and *Reddit*, so ensuring I experienced the entire franchise was significantly easier. For example, I was never in danger of not experiencing the secret endings to the games; I played on whatever difficulty setting felt most comfortable for me, then watched the scenes on the internet later. While this use of copyrighted content is dubiously legal at best, it nevertheless imprints a particular type of accessibility on the franchise that allows continual reproduction of fan engagement and allows more players to become “stuck” to the franchise in the end. The lack of corporate backlash towards this copyright infringement connotes an implicit acceptance and approval of the practice; if it means more spread, that means more fans, which is more helpful than harmful. However, the content of the franchise would not be so available if it were not for its dynamic ability to be compelling for initial fans.

### **Stickiness: An Unbreakable Connection**

The “stickiness” of *Kingdom Hearts* is an inherent part of its success and longevity; the stickier it is, the more people will seek it, and the more people that seek it, the stickier it becomes. Muncy and Rogers’ concepts of connection and glue provide a critical game journalism take on this idea: the franchise is always already revolving around these strands of connection. As the game produces particular affects via its gameplay and narrative, its stickiness is also produced organically, resulting in

the Velcro-like experience Ahmed notes. For example, fans have spent a significant portion of their developmental periods with these original *Kingdom Hearts* characters; the characters themselves simultaneously remaining nearly un-aged while also growing and maturing with their audience. As such, these characters relate to their fans via sociability: they interact with people via the agreed-upon medium of video games to process meaning.

During the build-up to *Kingdom Hearts III*'s storied release, several pieces of critical gaming journalism took retrospectives of various fans about their relationship to the series. Gita Jackson and Patrick Klepek both note how fans of the series describe it as “formative” to their childhood and adolescence, especially towards their identity expression. Additionally, both journalists quote fans saying that the series assisted them in achieving a semblance of happiness or an escape from negativity. A fan Jackson quotes says that *Kingdom Hearts* “was just there, waiting for me to finally choose for my own happiness”, while Klepek’s fan confidant evocatively comments that “*Kingdom Hearts* is special to me because when I play it, I forget what depression is”. These quotes establish a multifaceted connection between sociability – the interactivity between the games and the fans – and a positive emotional response. Sara Ahmed takes up this relationship between socialability and what she calls “happiness” in her article “Sociable happiness.” She discusses that “happiness can thus be described as intentional in the phenomenological sense (directed towards objects) as well as being affective (contact with objects).” Paired with these quotes discussing the franchise and its impact on these fans and their identity formation via emotional output, Ahmed’s description of happiness indicates its sticky nature. The stickiness of particularly affective experiences begins in the games themselves, as

connection between characters is pushed as the most deeply defining concept within the franchise via narrative engagement.

The relationships between characters showcase how the power of stickiness and sociability overrides the boundaries of place, time, and memory, and how that stickiness is pushed outward onto the fan experience. The series has a trope of positing character trios as packets of emotional sticking points, and the fandom latches to them. This is seen most starkly in the relationships between three characters unofficially known as the “Sea Salt Trio”: Roxas, Axel, and Xion. As “Nobodies”, they are beings who have been separated from their hearts, and thus, they cannot remember their lives prior to this separation. According to the lore, they are also incapable of feeling true emotion. However, it is quickly noticeable throughout the series that this trio shares organic and emotive connection between them. In fact, the three literally fight for their friendships, with Axel’s entire character development being devoted to recovering Roxas and allowing him to co-exist with Sora. The only way he can ensure Roxas’ existence is by clinging to his memories, a concept which is constantly under attack in this franchise from the forces of “nothingness”, “darkness”, and “sleep”. Relatedly, Xion is crafted from memories Sora carries of his friend, Kairi, making her simultaneously identify as Sora, Kairi, and also as neither of them at all. Her physical appearance, how other characters perceive her, is wholly dependent on the perceiving character’s memories and experiences with Sora and characters adjacent to him. Her name is an anagram of “no. i”, the notation for an imaginary number, and the letter “x”, a marker of identity within Organization XIII, a group of humanoid Nobodies bent on retrieving hearts. She is only granted full

rhetorical agency and personhood when Axel and Roxas remember her as a wholly independent being; as Xion, their friend.

Evocatively, Xion's experience of being (not-being, and becoming) is discussed as the stickiest experience for a fan in Klepek's article. Identifying as a trans person, this unnamed fan explained that "Xion is a replica of Sora—she was made to look like him and have his abilities. Sora is male, but Xion, with her friends' help, realized that's not her—she is female and she is her own person. Now do the games bungle this? A bit. But I can still see past that and see the things that resonate with me." Xion's relationship to literally every other character in the franchise is one of identity enforcing, until her two best friends fight for her agency via their memories of her as a separate, female, unique person. This glue stuck to a fan who identified as trans because of their own struggles as a trans person becoming themselves. They also acknowledge its imperfections and shortcomings, saying that the games do "bungle" the presentation of Xion and her personhood becoming reality. However, the key to understanding stickiness in relation to affective impact is that the narrative can be imperfect and yet evocative. The goal is transference and connection.

The stickiness of connection—the formation of intimacy via shared experiences, the requirement that to receive power and overcome obstacles one must be intimate—defines this series and propels the narrative into relationship with the characters and, subsequently, the players. The players "stick to" the characters and the narrative via these evocative, affective presentations of connection, transforming these affects into memories they carry and propel into the world. Thus, then, the mobius strip continues to torque around these ideals: do you, the player, want to invest in these characters' success, growth, and goals? Then you must agree to these terms of

memory maintenance, how Square Enix made their games “sticky”. Each game in the franchise concludes with a black screen, a chime, and the text “RECONNECT – Kingdom Hearts”, explicitly inviting fans to agree, again and again, to the intimacies and memories the characters are crafting. As the franchise continues—the director, Tetsuya Nomura, has infamously gone on-record stating that fans should be excited for the franchise’s 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2022—this agreement becomes embedded in the fandom, itself. To be a fan of *Kingdom Hearts* is to be committed to this dissemination of deeply sticky affect in sociably happy ways. The stickiness of the franchise is thus pushed outward via the mechanism of memory and dissemination of fan interactions: the “spreadability” of the franchise. However, the ability to spread the connection to the franchise was not naturally available. Rather, it was created as a response to the seeming juxtaposition of the connections *Kingdom Hearts* asked players to make, and the conditions under which these connections were reached. In short, fans had to solve an accessibility problem.

### **The Accessibility Problem: Stuck in Darkness**

While the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise has always been sticky, it has not always been as widely accessible as it currently is. Rather, its relationship with accessibility presents another torque, another facet of the experience. Accessibility is a rhetorical signifier: who has the ability to “stick to” and “spread” these texts. *Kingdom Hearts* is a franchise famous for its relationship to accessibility: there are currently (arguably)<sup>8</sup> 11 titles in the series, all of which are required to understand the overarching plot. The series is ongoing, having begun in 2002 and showing no signs of being completed

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8 The HD collections contain multiple games each, several of which have additional cutscenes and content, so there is contention as to whether the HD collections count as separate games, whether the games within them count as separate games, and whether the original games still count towards the total if the HD collections are considered the “canonical games”. This tangent points explicitly back at this discussion about accessibility and related spread.

anytime soon. Tim Rogers succinctly and evocatively notes that curious outsiders should not be afraid, and yet it is also already too late for them to start preparing to become a *Kingdom Hearts* fan; that “swimming in the lore is an essential part of the experience, and that the series is not actually that complicated, but is **lush**” (KHIII Is Unreviewable; emphasis added). It is always already too late and yet the perfect time; immersion is a requirement of the experience—a sticky, affective image to invoke what it is like to become a fan of this franchise.

The facts of the franchise lay bare its storied relationship with accessibility. *Kingdom Hearts* has released on three generations of the PlayStation home console, the PlayStation Portable, the Game Boy Advance, two generations of the Nintendo DS, mobile phones, PC, Xbox, and the Nintendo Switch. Only the most recent two games, *Kingdom Hearts III* and *Kingdom Hearts: Melody of Memory*, were released simultaneously on multiple platforms. Every other previous game or bundle was an exclusive launch on one console. Physical access to the games themselves is compounded by internal access to the story. Every game in the franchise has a “secret ending” with various requirements to unlock, and the combat difficulty setting that a player chooses at the beginning of the game directly impacts the requirements to unlock the secret ending. The easier the combat difficulty, the more challenging or numerous the requirements are to unlock the secret ending. This directly gatekeeps the entire story unless a particular level of social agreement is reached between the player and the franchise: access to the story is dependent upon mastery of the games, implying commitment to the stickiness of the story itself. If a player cares deeply enough and is invested enough in the continuation of the series, they must agree to the access requirements set forth by Square Enix.



However, this decision by Square Enix to gatekeep their stories directly led to action by the fandom to increase accessibility. Enamored by the characters and the story built in the franchise, equipped by the burgeoning technology of social media and internet guides, fans of the series set about creating resources and spaces to spread the stickiness of the franchise beyond traditional marketing and company-controlled means. Fans such as those interviewed by Gita Jackson and Patrick Klepek experienced deeply affective responses towards the franchise and sought to share that affect with both interested outsiders, as well as other fans. The franchise did not lend itself well to traditional means of access: anecdotes abound of fans who could not afford multiple consoles as they grew up, who could not achieve the high standards of completion and difficulty to earn secret endings, and who simply did not have the time and energy resources to devote to almost a dozen 30-50 hour long games. Thus, this combination of inertia to share and spread with inaccessibility by corporate means resulted in organic, horizontal attempts at accessibility.

Fans engage in new methods of promoting accessibility to the series by crafting unofficial resources and spreading reviews, synopses, and guides on the internet. Content creators like SuperButterBuns, Clemps, and Bl00dyBizkitz—whose work I analyze at length—attribute their motivation towards increasing the likelihood that newcomers and fans alike will gain access to various aspects of the necessary tools to enjoy *Kingdom Hearts*. These actions—posting cutscenes on YouTube, writing synopses and guides that contain “spoilers”<sup>9</sup>, completing runs of the game and sharing the footage of locked content—present an alternative space devoted to

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9 A spoiler is traditionally understood as a piece of knowledge that significantly alters an audience member’s experience of a text. Definitions of what constitutes a spoiler, and how to treat potential spoilers, differ drastically between various fandoms. Video game publishers and developers have various relationships with spoilers as well, with some even banning discussion of spoilers on content creators’ streams and associated content for a certain amount of time after a game’s release.

accessibility, promoted and motivated by original stickiness. That space is also one with an inherent, complicated relationship to copyright, piracy, and capitalism. Jenkins et al. comment on the pirating behavior of some internet denizens in *Spreadable Media* in relation to accessibility, noting that “piracy is as much a consequence of the market failures of media companies to make content available in a timely and desirable manner as it is a consequence of the moral failure of audience members...the appropriation and recirculation of even entire works may sometimes work in the best interests of not only the culture at large but also of the rights holders” (16). The relationship torques again: access to content is controlled via capitalistic means and regulation, yet sociable happiness and spread occurs regardless. The accessibility of *Kingdom Hearts* is always already tied to the stickiness held by those exposed to it, and their willingness to spread the franchise via means that extend beyond the capitalistic paradigm presented by corporations. The commitment to accessibility wraps back around to being beneficial to the corporations, however, when the increase in accessibility via these liminally legal behaviors leads to more fans, more stickiness, and more spread.

Notably, accessibility in this vein matters deeply to me as an “aca-fan”<sup>10</sup>. I first encountered these games, these critics, these YouTube personalities, as a fan. I did not play a *Kingdom Hearts* game until around 2016, and was significantly older than many long-time fans were when they played the first title in the franchise. I did play *Kingdom Hearts* on a PlayStation 2, the original release console for the launch title of the franchise; however, shortly thereafter I acquired a PlayStation 4, on which the bundled, updated games and cutscene movies were housed. I was always able to

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10 Henry Jenkins describes himself as an “aca-fan” in the “How To Read This Book” section of *Spreadable Media*. He notes that it is a reference to how his life has straddled the worlds of academia and fandom. I employ this identifier for myself here.

access every game in the franchise on this console because I entered into the fandom after the releases of the bundles on modern hardware. Additionally, fan-curated cutscene compilations, reviews, gameplay run-throughs, and various other resources were overwhelmingly available via websites like *Youtube* and *Reddit*, so ensuring I experienced the entire franchise was significantly easier. For example, I was never in danger of not experiencing the secret endings to the games; I played on whatever difficulty setting felt most comfortable for me, then watched the scenes on the internet later. While this use of copyrighted content is dubiously legal at best, it nevertheless imprints a particular type of accessibility on the franchise that allows continual reproduction of fan engagement and allows more players to become “stuck” to the franchise in the end. The lack of corporate backlash towards this copyright infringement connotes an implicit acceptance and approval of the practice; if it means more spread, that means more fans, which is more helpful than harmful.

This, then, is the mobius strip coiling around this franchise and its relationship to its fans, its creators, and its own dissemination. When the stickiness of the franchise collides with the problem of accessibility, movement between the audience and the text fundamentally changes in response. If the sociable happiness was intended to spread, and fans could not contain the contagious affect, movement had to occur beyond the capitalistic boundary. Questions arise considering the constellation of memory and emotional capital here, inherently rhetorical given their push and pull of sensation: who owns video games? Who gets to act, and who is the receiver? I argue that the community engagement via creation of fandom output inherently complicates this question, and results in a relationship between games and fans that relies upon rhetorical ideas of memory and emotional capital. The experiences in

these video games are so “sticky”, so sociably happy, that fans are compelled to externalize their experiences. However, due to the fractured timeline and issue of accessibility via multiple consoles, fans are also compelled to craft new methods of accessibility for themselves and others, via products like Youtube videos. These videos engage in the liminally legal space allowed by corporations to spread their franchises, ultimately resulting in beneficial outcomes that far outweigh the potential copyright infringement and spoiler discussions. Indeed, the lack of response and implicit approval from the copyright holders indicates that the power of spreading the “hap” of the franchise belongs in the hands of the fans, and is the ultimate “solution” to the accessibility problem presented here. I showcase the videos of a small sampling of *Kingdom Hearts* Youtubers—ClemPs, SuperButterBuns, and bl00dybizkitz—and the unique ways the three of them interacted with the franchise and how their interactions showcased key ideas of accessibility, public memory, and emotional capital.

### **Spreadability Solutions: Lighting Opportunities for Access**

Material on YouTube is, by and large, made up of video clips that are uploaded, interacted with, and watched by users. Various fandoms utilize YouTube to perpetuate their materials, both to reach other fans, and to provide an accessible space for potential fans to encounter various texts. It is a common practice to see cutscenes and soundtracks from various video games posted partially or in-full to YouTube—a practice both assuredly breaking copyright law and yet essential to a fandom’s stickiness and spreadability. Additionally, content creators will craft reviews, guides, and discussion videos, to engage with fans of the same franchise as well as to market the franchise to newcomers. The goal is to pursue a maintenance of public memory;

the stickiness needs to spread, and fans utilize these methods to do so, increasing accessibility in the process.

The three content creators associated with *Kingdom Hearts* I showcase here each consider the *Kingdom Hearts* series to be one of their favorites, a series they have grown up with since childhood, and they are actively invested in disseminating it to others in a public fashion. They note how their initial impressions of the game were a mix of skepticism and excitement, as all three had been fans of *Final Fantasy* and Disney in the past, but that the “cross-over” potential of the two was intriguing, albeit odd. In particular, the franchise is widely held as a meme and a standard for “cross-over titles”, of the potential for great and lasting emotional imprints on fans of both franchises. The creators refer to themselves as Clemps, Buns, and bb, respectively, and I will utilize these shorthand monikers as well. Clemps focuses primarily on reviews and synopses of games in the series, splitting his time between discussing the story and the gameplay. Buns is most known for her “For Beginners” series, wherein she attempts to guide newcomers through the “how-to” of most games in the franchise, while also filling her videos with Easter eggs, memes, and jokes that are endearing to longtime fans of the franchise. Bb is a speedrunner and combat expert of the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise, and spends his time discussing combat/gameplay, as well as long-view retrospectives on various fandom issues.

The discussion of accessibility is rampant throughout all three of these creators’ videos. Clemps and Buns both consistently note that if someone wants to play the franchise, they should, at this point, only be interested in purchasing the “Final Mix” versions of the games. These compilations are remasters and extended editions of the original games, as well as ports from all handheld versions, with some

being made into cutscene movies rather than playable games. These updated versions with additional content are considered the “canonical” versions, so lack of access to them actively hinders the dissemination of appropriate memory and emotional capital to the audience. To assist with this problem, Square Enix created the bundles Buns and Clemps refer to in their videos, releasing all games in the franchise as part of two collections. As of this writing, there is a singular bundle that includes all games and content from the franchise excluding *Kingdom Hearts III: ReMIND* and *Kingdom Hearts: Melody of Memory*.

Clemps and Buns approach the franchise from a holistic point of view, addressing the gameplay and narrative in equal measure. Both are inherently invested in the presentation of the franchise to both current fans, to engage with the sticky, sociable happiness, and potential fans, to assist in the spreadability of public memory and emotional capital. Buns’ series is aptly named “For Beginners”, as she explicitly markets towards assisting new fans with understanding how to play and interact with the franchise, while simultaneously including content that “winks and nods” towards established fans who “get it”. Both Buns and Clemps include discussions of whether newcomers should buy and/or play the game in question in their videos, as well as mentions of any “institutional knowledge” that is required to play the game. This directly addresses the concept of stickiness and spreadability: the games are only as compelling as their accessibility allows them to be. Buns explicitly discusses this in her “For Beginners” video for *Kingdom Hearts III*, one of her most anticipated videos ever. She repeats multiple times that entry into the franchise is steep; *KHIII* is not a standalone title or an accessible starting point for involvement. She goes so far as to say that knowing all the lore is “not a suggestion; this is a WARNING”.

This use of “warning” begs the question of accessibility: if knowing all the lore is a gate to access, how spreadable is the text, really? Clemps takes up this question by crafting his videos into reviews and synopses. Rather than being teaching tools towards playing the games, Clemps utilizes his videos to discuss his experiences with the games, as well as provide an overview of the story, characters, and gameplay events in digestible formats. One significant difference between Buns’ “For Beginners” series and Clemps’ review series is the inclusion of “spoilers.” Spoilers are a contentious topic in any spreadable media; oftentimes, ignorance of a story is considered a key point to its stickiness, and if that ignorance is lifted—in other words, if the viewer is “spoiled”—the media is considered to have lost significant rhetorical compulsion towards this new viewer. However, when a franchise like *Kingdom Hearts* has such a bifurcated history with accessibility, fans must consider if the spread of public memory and emotional capital is worth the exposure of spoilers. Clemps considers it to be a worthwhile investment.

His videos provide synopses of the stories within the games in chronological format, with interjections that discuss his experiences with the story and gameplay elements. Buns gives a warning about the steep price of learning the lore of the series, while Clemps describes it in his own words and includes his own positionality as a rhetorical tool in the discussion about accessibility. He expresses his frustration as the series expanded endlessly onto new consoles, simultaneously expanding the world and story with new characters, timelines, and tropes. However, as the bundles of the games became more accessible, he began to discuss the improvements the remasters and ports had over the original versions of the games, while still maintaining a message of warning. Harkening back to the mobius strip, as the series torques around

concepts of accessibility and memory, so too do its fans. Clemps expresses his reviews and synopses with an eye towards always spreading the media, but only to those who agree to its sticky nature: if you can hear all these convulsions and still be interested, this series may continue to be perpetuated through you.

Buns and Clemps both position themselves as primarily advocates for and experts of the story and characters of the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise. Bb, meanwhile, is focused heavily on the gameplay and combat aspect of the franchise. Bb participates in “speedrunning” competitions, an activity wherein video game players attempt to complete a game in as short a period of time as possible. This typically involves skipping cutscenes and optional content, optimizing combat prowess and game routing, and occasionally using bugs and cheats in-game. Thus, he is intimately familiar with the mechanics of the game, and willingly participates in various methods to play the game that detract from the potential for narrative understanding, such as previously playing games in the series in Japanese rather than English, because the kanji loaded faster than Roman letters during runs. However, the focus on accessibility remains the same; bb runs the “final mix” versions of the games, as these are definitively more polished games.

Bb positions himself as an advocate for the games in a different way from Clemps and Buns; while he engages with the story and has even discussed it at length in his content, his primary method of enjoyment, engagement, and dissemination is via the combat of the game. Bb engages with the stickiness and spreadability of this game in a markedly different sphere than Clemps and Buns; his skill with the combat of the game draws in viewers who may not necessarily be interested in the narrative or characters of the franchise, which thus introduces new elements of stickiness.



Specifically, he markets the combat as approachable for beginners and satisfying for veterans to master, and links the inclusion of combat challenges like superbosses to the attractiveness of the franchise, as well as its lore. The combat of these games pushes him towards his continued investment in the story, and thus is what he externally capitalizes on towards his fans and potential fans of the series. The public memory is maintained via his mastery of the game and its dissemination to fans seeking an expert. Fans who want to experience the games themselves have more options than ever to access them, and bb is able to perform his role in the mobius strip of memory via discussion of the bundles and their impacts on accessible gameplay.

Between gameplay and narrative, the series is spread affectively and effectively via these content creators. Spreadability is, as Jenkins notes, a “placeholder, perhaps like a stub in Wikipedia”, a concept that should maintain a dynamic and mobile definition. Thus, as the Kingdom Hearts franchise grows in stickiness and accessibility, so too does the concept of spreadability contort with it. While methodologically and definitively mercurial, the aim of spreadability remains consistent: it is always already invested in the movement and maintenance of public memory. The experiences that create stickiness that must spread, the franchise’s focus on narrative and gameplay, players’ reactions to it (including my own), all revolve around an affective core. This affect moves by vehicle of public memory, the rhetorical lynchpin of stickiness, accessibility, and spreadability.

### **Movement of Memories: Rhetorical Considerations**

The initial appeal of the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise lies in its stickiness, the methods through which it acts upon its audience with persuasive, affective force. As this affect permeates and becomes memorable, fans seek space to perpetuate the affect

they are now “stuck with”, and encounter the problem of accessibility firsthand as various aspects of the narrative and world are siloed on particular consoles, in particular difficulties, and requiring particular time sinks. They then transform their affect into spreadable media via their understanding and subversion of given accessibility, further spreading the memories that are essential to the *Kingdom Hearts* experience via guides, walkthroughs, cutscene movies, reviews, and synopses. The cycle continues, contorting around spreadability’s investment in working beyond capitalistic and legalistic boundaries to maintain current memories and fans, and create them anew. At its core, the cycle revolves around meaning-making, the most fundamental definition of rhetoric. Specifically, the dynamic nature of public memory as defined by Phillips and Reyes is showcased here as rhetorical: meaning is achieved through movement via access.

Kendall Phillips defines the concept of public memory at length in his two edited collections, *Framing Public Memory* and *Global Memoryscapes* (edited with G. Mitchell Reyes). I return to his definition from the introduction here: “the ways memories attain meaning, compel others to accept them, and are themselves contested, subverted, and supplanted by other memories are essentially rhetorical” (2-3). In the more recent book *Global Memoryscapes*, Phillips and Reyes expand upon this further by noting that memory necessarily slips between local/global and individual/collective as a rhetorical force; meaning-making is always partially determined by preconceived notions, knowledges, and contexts, and by its necessary force of travel (18). These definitions taken in tandem showcase that the movement of memories between contexts and individuals is always already a rhetorical space and practice.

The dynamic nature of public memory requires that affect maintain velocity towards new targets; sociable happiness is treated as a contagion. I link these ideas of sociable happiness and public memory here as the rhetorical lynchpin: the affect has happened, and due to its velcro-like ability, is transmuted into a memorable encounter and spread to other contexts. *Kingdom Hearts* showcases that the movement of affect through stickiness, accessibility, and spreadability is a rhetorical mobius strip via the vehicle of public memory. As fans encounter the emotionally and narratively arresting characters, story, and gameplay of the series, they are driven to continue to access it, as well as perpetuate it to others. They then operate beyond capitalistic boundaries to encourage maintenance and growth of the public memory. As new fans seek access, they expand the access of the franchise via their participation in the memory maintenance. The mobius strip continues to torque and turn. Of course, this memory is only accessible via emotional capital being fundamentally given by either the fandom itself or the video game publisher; the solution of spread makes the movement of meaning actually happen. As discussed in Jessica Eberhard's chapter, "What Do You Mean None of My Choices Mattered?" Collaborative Composition and the Ethics of Ownership in Games—A Case Study of *Mass Effect 3*", accessibility is a shifting responsibility with the movement towards a digital, communal economy, as fans both solve the problem via their own spreadable methods, as well as vocally and financially indicate their desires to the companies creating the games. Story-telling and maintenance is shifting towards becoming a more collaborative and "digital" affair, and thus, the video game publishers are held more and more responsible for addressing the problem of accessibility in terms of the stories they tell.

Outing myself as an “aca-fan”, my access to the franchise is only possible via these in-roads of spreadability combating the problem of access, and enabling me to experience the rhetorical power of these sticky memories. As Square Enix is held responsible for making the franchise more accessible (and thus more spreadable, and sticky, etc.) I gain easier and more inclusive access to the material for the narrative. I spent over 90 hours ingesting content in various modes: playing games, watching cutscene movies, both made by Square Enix and compiled by fans on Youtube, reading critical journalist pieces, analyzing fan reviews, guides, and memes. I was able to access all games on one modern console, excepting the two mobile-exclusive games, for which cutscene compilations are widely distributed. Writing this argument looks very different in 2021-2022 than it would have in 2005, or even in 2010. The accessibility decisions Square Enix has made perpetuate ideas of spreadability and affect: fans will access it anyway due to the rhetorical compulsion of its stickiness, so why not be in relation with that cycle. One could even argue by writing this argument, I participate in the perpetuation of memory I discuss. My relationship to this franchise showcases the commitments of researcher positionality: I am dynamically participating in the affective movement of memory as I rhetorically analyze this franchise. I am responsible for both a compelling argument and a respectful, even loving argument.<sup>11</sup> As an actor, an analyst, and an audience member, I argue that *Kingdom Hearts* showcases a unique cycle of rhetorical meaning-making: affective investment, encountering accessability, and dynamically cycling through internal and external modes of spread. This key cycle is primed to repeat itself: a sticky medium,

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11 Again, this relationship between compelling academic argument and loving argument are heavily influenced by Coppa, Enoch, and Royster’s work in researcher love, reflexivity, and responsibility. My participation in this work is not only academic, but passionate, and I seek reflexivity in my relationship to the texts I analyze and the rhetorics I espouse.

an accessibility conundrum, a spreadability movement, all through memory, all for affect.

### **Conclusions: Priming the Datascape**

*Kingdom Hearts* as a franchise continues to mutate and grow beyond the scope of this bounded project, a dynamic site of research. The most recent game, November 2020's *Kingdom Hearts: Melody of Memory*, was the first title to release simultaneously on every major console. Square Enix released the entire franchise excepting *Melody of Memory* onto PC in early 2021, prompting a voracious surge in the modding<sup>12</sup> scene. Fans and studio executives alike spread whispers every few months of what the franchise will do during 2022, the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first game. This continuation of the spread, reification of stickiness, proves again the importance of affect moving via memory between the medium of game and fan. *Kingdom Hearts* as a franchise is necessarily invested in the curation of public memory via direct gameplay and the way fans interact with one another. The game pushes affect outwards to the player, and players have disseminated that affect among themselves and in an attempt to include more participants via engagement with fan-made materials to preclude the capitalistic barrier of accessibility.

In addition, the relationship between *Kingdom Hearts* and its fans is invested in meaning-making by challenging the notion that a rhetorical exchange involves an actor, an audience, and a text. Instead, the definitions of actor, audience, and text are all fluid here, i.e. a mobius strip effect. The game posits a particular narrative,

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12 Game modification, or “modding”, is a practice in which fans access source code for games and modify it to allow for various features otherwise inaccessible to players. This ranges from small visual and graphical tweaks to creating entirely new playable characters and maps. *Kingdom Hearts* mods tend to focus strongly on new playable characters and mechanics, and the fandom has been clamoring for PC ports of the franchise for years. Mods create new inroads for discussions about canon and spreadability via fan-made content, a discussion beyond the scope of this project as it stands. Nevertheless, it is important to note here.

especially one associated with ideas of memory, presence, and identity, and players interpret, embellish, and remix that narrative to engage with the game, each other, and attract newcomers. The rhetorical persuasion of the franchise is directly impacted by the sociable happiness, the “stickiness”, of the fandom associated with it. The movement of affect is spreadable because of the rhetorical moves of fans and the games themselves.

Lastly, my identity as a researcher is complicated and mutated via my ongoing relationship with this franchise. I am incapable of separating my fandom of the series from my rhetorical analysis of the series. I am beholden not just to academic rigor and vitality, but also to an ethical, perhaps even loving, presentation of these texts that I hold so dear. I utilize my own sociable happiness, my own memory that has been maintained, my own emotional capital, to practice this analysis. As Coppa so eloquently states, fandom is beautiful; so much so that as a methodological move, I am interacting with these games as an “aca-fan”. The sticky affect I describe is impactful in the very analysis I perform and the ways in which I move throughout the series. This holds true for all the franchises I analyze in this project.

This chapter provides the primer for how video games as a rhetorical space interact with stickiness, accessibility, and spread. Specifically, *Kingdom Hearts* establishes the notion that fandom is both the nexus and praxis for driving memory conservation and spread, and that the methods through which this is accomplished are rhetorically profound. By linking the movement of what are, fundamentally, narratives, to the overcoming of accessibility constraints via spreading affectively impactful content, this chapter sets the stage for exploring how the following games interact with that matrix. *Final Fantasy VII* utilizes its unique, extremely potent

stickiness as an avenue to explore trauma and unreliable narration via the text and fan dissemination. *Code Vein* centers the experience of stickiness squarely in the protagonist's mind, who is always already the player themselves, to provoke a new torquing of accessible narrative and spreadable affect. All these franchises, then, participate in movement of affect via the vehicle of memory, a rhetorical avenue that utilizes stickiness, accessibility, and spreadability as praxis for a constellative space unbound by capitalistic rules.

### CHAPTER 3: “I WILL NEVER BE A MEMORY...”: MOVEMENT OF TRAUMA AND OTHER HAPS OF THE *FINAL FANTASY VII* FRANCHISE

#### **Introduction**

On April 10, 2020, Square Enix released the latest game in the *Final Fantasy* franchise, the highly anticipated *Final Fantasy VII Remake (FFVII R)*. Directed by Tetsuya Nomura, the game was a reimagining of the critically-acclaimed 1997 game *Final Fantasy VII*; Square Enix had the unenviable task of wrestling with the expectations and experiences of fans of the original, newcomers to the series, and every type of gamer in-between. They decided to tackle these expectations by weaving a clear, and polarizing, meta-narrative into the very fabric of the game itself. Throughout the game, players and characters alike encounter Whispers, manifestations of fate that violently correct the course of the story when events threaten to deviate from the 1997 telling. At the conclusion of the game, this conflict comes to a head, with the player leading the cast of characters to defeat the largest manifestation of Whispers—Arbiters of Fate—and thus un-suture themselves from the narrative players know and expect.

*FFVII R* places players and characters in an equivalent position in this final battle sequence: defeat your expectations, desires, and assumptions about this narrative. The game space is flattened; players are pushed into a space alongside characters to confront memory and intimacy formations in a literal way. Features of the original game, such as music, set pieces, and character abilities, are juxtaposed with the *Remake's* new story outcomes. This then spills out into the space surrounding the game; countless reviews, critiques, and think-pieces are published surrounding this novel use of player memory and character motivation to unhinge past from future.



Thus, the game space and the fandom space become linked by this experience of creation, transference, maintenance, and manipulation of memory.<sup>13</sup>

In this chapter, I walk through the compendium of media that comprises the universe of *Final Fantasy VII*. I begin with a conversation about *FFVII*, move to the *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII* by focusing on a movie and two games, then conclude with a discussion on *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, its Playstation 5 update *Intergrade*, and its 2021 downloadable content (DLC), *InterMISSION*. *FFVII* asks its fans to consistently confront trauma and unreliable narration, two expansions and complications of stickiness and spreadability<sup>14</sup>. The various narrative and character devices that disseminate a traumatic affect with questionable reliability “stick” to audience members, creating the need for spreadability to share, process, and heal certain elements of pain. As the spread continues, the franchise reaches for more accessible methods of interacting with established and potential fans: releasing ports of the original game on every possible console and system, expanding the universe by focusing on “fan favorite” characters like Vincent Valentine and Zack Fair, and most recently, “re-making<sup>15</sup>” the original game in episodic fashion.

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13 I ground these terms in definitional texts such as Linda Hutcheon’s “Beginning to Theorize Adaptation: What? Who? Why? How? Where? When?”, Kendall Phillips’ *Framing Public Memory*, as well as his collaboration with G. Mitchell Reyes in *Global Memoryscapes: Contesting Remembrance in a Transnational Age*, Nathan Johnson’s *Architects of Memory: Information and Rhetoric in a Networked Archival Age*, Henry Jenkins et al’s *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, and Jessica Restaino’s *Surrender: Feminist Rhetoric and Ethics in Love and Illness*.

14 As noted in chapters 1 and 2, I derive “stickiness” from Sara Ahmed’s work, most notably her article “Sociable happiness”, and “spreadability” from Henry Jenkin et al’s *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. Briefly, stickiness refers to the power of an affect, or a text, to impact an audience member, and spreadability refers to the ability of an affect/text to be disseminated via audience members to either other audience members, or new “fans”.

15 I style this word intentionally to reflect the nebulous nature of its use to describe *Final Fantasy VII Remake*. Co-director Tetsuya Nomura and producer Yoshinori Kitase have discussed how they intend it to be seen both as a “remake” and as a “re-make”; an update graphically and mechanically, and yet also an opportunity to craft new sensations and stories. This is a contentious position among fans of the franchise.

The re-use of narrative assets reads as powerfully palimpsestuous<sup>16</sup>: the characters are always already new and yet familiar, established in the minds of fans and canon, and yet possessing a dynamic potential. The nostalgia of palimpsestuous works and characters collides with new futurity via the promise of certain-and-yet-uncertain outcomes, especially in *Final Fantasy VII Remake*. Tim Rogers sagely notes that “it’s pronounced The Final Fantasy VII Re-MAKE...it’s a verb, not a noun” (ACTION BUTTON). As Square Enix pulls on the definition of adaptation in this work, they simultaneously are crafting an affect of familiarity and intimacy, as defined in chapter 2, to then torque a new experience onto all audiences. The trauma of knowing previous traumas—character deaths, villain motivations, loss and gain—is a vehicle towards healing, and yet is also the draw to experience the trauma, potentially, again. The spreadability of *FFVII* is reliant upon the recognition of predictability and the shock of unexpected change.

### ***Final Fantasy VII: Establishing Haps, Spreading Trauma***

#### *The Stickiness of Trauma: Being Cloud*

*Final Fantasy VII (FFVII)* is a Japanese Role-Playing Game (JRPG) that released for the first Playstation console in 1997. Considered Square Enix’s (then known as Square or Squaresoft) breakout mainstream hit, the game utilized an Active Time Battle (ATB) mechanic, expecting players to use characters in a turn-based, dynamically-timed combat system. *FFVII* follows the story of Cloud Strife, an ex-military mercenary, as he pursues the truth about himself, his friends, and the planet.

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16 I take Linda Hutcheon’s description of “palimpsest” from her chapter “Beginning to Theorize Adaptation: What? Who? Why? How? Where? When?”. Drawn from the practice of scrubbing physical manuscripts clean for reuse and still seeing remnants of the original text, I use palimpsest as a theoretical frame to showcase how *FFVII* has both scrubbed clean the experience of *Final Fantasy VII*, while leaving behind very clear remnants of the original text that do work in memorable ways. This relationship between original and remixed text is inherently concerned with meaning-making; how the meaning is mutated, impacted, by the presence of both texts, and memories associated with both, is rhetorically compelling.

The game was praised for its inclusion of pre-rendered cinematic cutscenes, as well as its three-dimensional rendered characters, a significant jump forward in the media fidelity of video games. More poignantly, the game became the subject of much discussion once it was discovered via play that one of the main characters, Aerith<sup>17</sup> Gainsborough, is killed relatively early in the game by the main antagonist, Sephiroth. Gamers anecdotally report it as the first cutscene that ever made them cry in a video game.

This death event deeply impacts the narrative and the characters within the game, most directly Cloud, with whom Aerith had seemed to share a spiritual, almost ethereal connection. As the protagonist of the game, Cloud is both meant to be one of the “tellers” of the story, as well as the lens through which the player experiences and interacts with the story. Thus, this trauma that Cloud endures and integrates into his experience is transferred to the audience. Cloud’s pain is an affective evocation in the medium of the game, causing a “sticky point” for the audience. I continue to draw on Sara Ahmed’s use of stickiness and happiness in her article “Sociable happiness”, pulling forward from the stickiness established in chapter 2 to focus more explicitly on the encounter of the “hap”. Ahmed explains that “the etymology of ‘happiness’ relates precisely to the question of contingency: it is from the Middle English ‘hap’, suggesting chance” (10). This invocation of happiness is a useful kairotic endeavor, and provides a space to examine the stickiness of pain, loss, and even trauma as sociable affect. As a literal “hap”, Cloud’s pain provides a dynamic connection with the audience and ensures a transfer of stickiness due to his protagonist status.

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17 In the original 1997 Japanese release, her default name is stylized as “Aeris” with Romanji. Subsequent titles in the franchise with English text have always referred to her as “Aerith”, so I will be doing the same.

Cloud, and thus the player, are literally guided by Aerith throughout the rest of the game, with her voice coming to him in dreams and visions, her advice and knowledge of the planet and of Sephiroth's intentions granting the party—and, again, the player—insight, and her prayer to the heavens granting the planet itself healing powers. The trauma of her sacrifice and death is an affective sticking point through which Cloud experiences loss, hope, and resolve. The player, too, is drawn into this sticky “hap”, literally fighting their way to Aerith on the altar, watching her die, receiving her equipment back into their inventory after she permanently leaves the party. The “hap” of experiencing Aerith's connections to the other characters and the planet itself, watching her die and experiencing her absence, and feeling the aftermath alongside the party became one of the most attractive draws *FFVII* had. As time passed, the game's success became mainstream, and media and social coverage around it was widespread. This, inevitably, led to a question: how do we discuss one of the most important story beats in the game in public spaces? The potential impact of knowing about Aerith's death before encountering it firsthand in the game narrative prompted a long-lasting discussion of the rhetorical power of “spoilers”<sup>18</sup>.

### *The “Problem” of Spoilers: Aerith's Legacy*

A “spoiler” is generally considered to be a piece of information that, once known, significantly alters the experience of a piece of media for the consumer. For video games, this can range widely; who the final antagonist is, if any characters die or are seriously injured, even the location of the game's plot or indications of battle mechanics can be considered spoilers depending on the audience member. Aerith's death reached an infamous status among fans and gamers alike for its ability to

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18 This is the same concept as discussed in chapter 2, covering how different content creators interact with the narrative of *Kingdom Hearts* and explicitly state their intentions of covering story beats in their content.

drastically alter the player experience based on prior knowledge of its occurrence. As the game continued to age, various media outlets became more loose-lipped and less intentional about the maintenance of ignorance about Aerith's death, assuming that those who cared had already played the game and, thus, knew about her tragedy and its impact on the game experience. Of course, this ignored the reality that any potential fans who were too young or not born in 1997 would not have yet experienced the game at all, as well as the reality that to play the game, a consumer must first own a Playstation, a luxury not every household could afford. In addition, Square Enix continued to release material relating to *Final Fantasy VII*, including the *Compilation*, as well as appearances of various characters from the franchise in *Kingdom Hearts*<sup>19</sup>. This prompted newfound interest in these characters and their origins, prompting interactions with a minefield of spoiler-rich media and resources in the modern age. Elizabeth Grosz's concept of the "mobius strip" from her book *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* comes into play again here, most explicitly with an idea of torque; fans and company alike form and re-form new and yet-familiar ways of experiencing and knowing these characters in constant relation and reaction to one another.

As a kairotic flashpoint, Aerith's death impacted fans by pulling them into the tragedy and trauma of Cloud through both his eyes and the shared lens of the observer. This "sticky hap" turned outward with sharing of that trauma to corroborate experiences, share pain, and honor the memory of Aerith and the journey she prompted. However, spoilers became commonplace due to this outward turning of affect, resulting in an inherently adjusted experience for future fans and consumers.

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19 Notably, Cloud and Aerith interact in several *Kingdom Hearts* games, and there are heavy-handed hints at the two of them being "reunited" in this narrative after being "separated" in the past.

My first encounter with Aerith's death was, in fact, reading a character profile for her in Bradygames' *Kingdom Hearts II* limited edition strategy guide. It notes that "her fate in [*Final Fantasy VII*] tugged at many a heart string" (63). This signified to me that Aerith died at some point in *Final Fantasy VII*, even though I had not yet played the game myself. However, discovering this tragic truth about her character intrigued me rather than repelled me: I knew this game as one of the most famous and important JRPG's of all time, and that specifically Aerith's role in the game had a significant impact on everyone who had played it. Thus, knowing she died at some point prompted me to experience the trauma myself, to seek out the kairotic hap of her death, to have my heartstrings tugged.

*Knowing, Spreading, Healing: Hearing Tifa*

Desiring intimacy with a known painful hap prompts a particular kind of dynamic movement; an affective knowing that is inherently sticky. I wanted to feel the pain that Cloud feels, that generations of gamers had felt before me, that Square Enix would replicate again and again with expansions and re-mixes. Yet, it was scary and intimidating; I wanted the promise of connection, but to know the hurt was required was a difficult premise. Jessica Restaino evocatively performs and defines this work in her book *Surrender: Feminist Rhetoric and Ethics in Love and Illness*. She sagely notes that "we all want to be known and yet not to hurt" (Restaino 8). *FFVII* pulls on this desire in blunt ways, and pulls the player into the position of knowing through intimacy with both Cloud as the player-lens and Aerith as the source of desire and affection: Aerith is one of the characters with whom you can share a "date scene", and interactions with her prior to the scene can impact her "affection meter". Cloud's interactions with her are guided by the player, and thus, Cloud's

desire to know Aerith becomes the player's desire. In turn, the player engages in intimacy with both Aerith and Cloud: they are known to the player via the gameplay and the narrative, and the events are painful. The push towards the hap of her death is shared across the medium of the game; both Cloud and the player must experience the draw to Aerith, and her painful absence once she is killed.

The intimacy of sharing Cloud's trauma, then, is hurtful knowing. The player is compelled by Aerith, and her absence. However, this hurt cannot remain static; hurt without movement is isolating, the opposite of a hap, as stickiness inherently prompts spread. Later on in the game, Cloud and his childhood friend Tifa fall into the Lifestream, a spiritual "river of the dead" that provides the energy of the planet. Tifa immediately notices that Cloud's memories are strewn around them, physical locations of Cloud's defining moments, and the player takes control of Tifa (a notable exception to the player controlling Cloud, as is the case for the majority of the game) as she literally walks through Cloud's traumatic memories, reminding him of his true identity, his position with the party, and his promises to Aerith to save the planet. In this, Tifa showcases a poignant pillar of Restaino's framing: that of using language to convey a journey through trauma and healing. Restaino argues that "to follow language through the process of coming to terms with death and through the hope that someone else...could understand something about what that coming to terms feels like is a *shared, intimate rhetoric*" (5, emphasis added). As Tifa walks with Cloud through his traumatic memories and fractured self-narrative, she also shares this intimate practice with the player. Coming to terms with who Cloud is, why Aerith meant so much to him, and where his motivations lie, require an intimacy that has been built

throughout the game via Cloud as player-lens. We now know Cloud, we were already hurting, and we share his intimacy through Tifa.

Tifa guides Cloud through experiencing the trauma of his unreliable narration—his personality was grafted from one of his best friends, Zack Fair, whom he watched die—as well as his attachment to being a hero, especially for Aerith. She, thus, guides the player through these “shared, intimate rhetorics”, prompting a type of healing for both Cloud and the player. An understanding, a knowing through hurt rather than in the absence of hurt. Even if a player had known about Aerith’s death before playing the game due to spoilers, this sequence still rings true as a walking-through of hurt, because whether the death of Aerith was experienced first-hand through the game, or second-hand through a spoiler, the hap still sticks. The rhetorical impact of the trauma *FFVII* brought was its ability to draw affective connections to the continuation of this journey, this hurtful knowing. The intimacy fans curated with *FFVII*’s world and characters prompted a continuation of the series, and thus a complication of that known intimacy.

### ***Compilation of Final Fantasy VII: Spreading Trauma and Healing***

*Final Fantasy VII* was an overwhelming success for Square. In particular, the game reached non-Japanese audiences in ways that JRPG’s had not yet achieved. The attachment to these characters, their trauma, and their triumphs prompted Square to expand the universe, drawing in established fans as well as potential newcomers. In the early 2000’s, they announced the formation of the *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII*, a genre-inclusive set of media that would expand upon the universe from the original game in various ways. The most commercially successful offerings from the



compilation included a movie, *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*, and two games, *Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII*, and *Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII*<sup>20</sup>.

#### Advent Children: Final Fantasy VII – *Healing with Familiar Trauma*

*Advent Children* was originally released in 2005. The movie has since been re-released twice; once in 2011, with updated HD graphics and additional content, and again in 2021, with 4K HD graphics. The movie follows Cloud and several other returning characters as they address the threat of Geostigma, an illness borne from Sephiroth's remaining influence on the planet, two years after the conclusion of the original game. Rather than a rehash of Cloud's journey through traumatic discovery, the movie focuses on a journey through guilt and healing. Cloud spends much of the movie reflecting the player-viewer's emotions and experiences back at them: he scoffs at the notion that he was an elite SOLDIER, reminding the characters and viewers that this identity was "only in my head", a reference to the reality that his personality and memories were directly stolen from another character, Zack; he is haunted by memories of Sephiroth's connection to him via the mutated cells in his body, cells injected into him with Sephiroth's genetic data; he laments his role in Aerith's death and holds himself personally responsible for it (*Advent Children*).

During one of the most pivotal scenes in the movie, Tifa, a longtime friend and romantic interest for Cloud, rebukes him for continuing to allow this guilt to hold his mind hostage. She bluntly states that he needs to choose "between a memory and us"; between his guilt at events past, and the life she and others who care for him have built in the present (*Advent Children*). Directly following this scene, Cloud is seen talking with Aerith. It is clear this is Aerith's memory, her spiritual awareness

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20 There are several other pieces of media that comprise the compilation, including mobile games and books. For the purposes of this project, only the movie and the two console games are addressed in an extensive capacity.

communicating with Cloud through an ethereally white space. They discuss the concept of forgiveness, and she reminds him that she does not hold him guilty, and therefore he should not either. This decoupling of the trauma and guilt from Cloud's present character pushes the affective kairos forward in the franchise and in the fandom mind. Cloud was always both a lens through which to experience the game and an intimate link to the players themselves. Fans were "guilty" for Aerith's death as well: via experiencing the game, they propelled her fate ever-forward, and by spreading the affective stickiness of the game to others, they perpetuated that fate as nearly-static. This new dynamic shift, this new "hap", allows for more, multifaceted propellants to spread, as the curation of "hope" and "healing" join with the guilt and trauma from the original game.

*Advent Children* began Square Enix's experimentation with the affective expectations and payouts that they had built in the original game. In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant theorizes that a sense of "animated suspension" propels affective experiences forward, especially on a communal scale (5). That is, there is a tension of occurrence and movement inside of known, bounded, static objects and events. Memory, then, is both experienced in real-time and built up in real-time, especially when the texts in question are intimately related to already-established memories and affects. As discussed in chapter 2, memories are moved via connection between themselves. Haps are stickier when they already bear the glue of other haps. *Advent Children* showcases this as Cloud confronts Sephiroth, once again, at the conclusion of the movie. Cloud literally fights a physical manifestation of his trauma and guilt, and the audience experiences nostalgia and reconciliation in tandem. As Cloud defeats him and commands him to "stay in my memories, where you belong" Sephiroth

disintegrates into black feathers with a foreboding warning: “I will never be a memory” (*Advent Children*). A promise from Square Enix, too: this animated suspension, this tension of healing and trauma, will continue to be a pillar of experiencing this narrative.

The movie was a minor success. It is considered one of the more positive examples of “fan service” in the series: an extension of an intellectual property that interacts with particularly successful aspects of that property, explicitly fan-facing in its intent. That is, people wanted to see Cloud fight Sephiroth again, so the movie built a story where that could occur in a timeline that made sense with the original game. The movie was successful enough to warrant updating the material for continually modern audiences; in 2011, a significant extension was added to the final confrontation between Cloud and Sephiroth, and in 2021, the graphics were updated to 4K. The natural conclusion of Cloud’s guilt arc, with Aerith’s forgiveness and Sephiroth’s defeat, resulted in fans propelling the series forward via a conclusively close-ended affect: this story will hurt, but it will end well now.

#### Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII – *Future and Affective Dissonance*

As Cloud’s trauma and Aerith’s memory mutate into healing, this reprieve of guilt allowed the franchise to experiment with other protagonists as the compilation went on. The following game, 2006’s *Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII*, focuses on the experiences of Vincent Valentine, and occurs one year after the conclusion of *Advent Children*. Vincent appeared in *Final Fantasy VII* as an optional party member; adding him to the roster of characters required the player to fulfill a sidequest that involved returning to a previously completed location, fighting a difficult boss, and answering multiple-choice questions correctly to recruit Vincent. Many players did

not acquire him at all, or only did so on replays of the game. Due to his optional nature, the story of his character and his motivations were largely implicit and hidden throughout the game; a player required either a guide or a knack for completionism and trial and error to experience all that Vincent had to offer. *Dirge of Cerberus* took advantage of both Vincent's vague backstory and his wildly different playstyle to create a unique sequel.

The narrative revolves around a dual structure: it addresses the current threat of Deepground, a secret group of elite warriors that Shinra—an electric power company and late-capitalist corporation with significant political power; as well as the employer of SOLDIER, the group Zack and Cloud reference—has hidden away, and the tragic backstory of Vincent, the mad scientist Hojo, and Sephiroth's human mother, Lucrecia Crescent. As these stories interweave and interact, it becomes clear that Hojo transplanted his consciousness into the leader of Deepground, Weiss the Immaculate, and Vincent must contend with defeating both Weiss' plan to destroy the planet with human sacrifice, and Hojo's vendetta against him. Vincent's connection to the antagonists is both larger than life (saving the planet from Weiss who seeks all-consuming power) and deeply intimate (Vincent secretly loved Lucrecia, and Hojo impregnated her, causing her death). Vincent morphs his trauma into literal bodily mutation, becoming another monstrous being known as Chaos to both protect the planet and address his personal vengeance. His final fight with Weiss is also a mutation: as Cloud confronted Sephiroth, the manifestation of his trauma and identity issues, so too does Vincent confront Weiss, the manifestation of his attempts to flee from Shinra's influence, the physical embodiment of new-and-familiar traumas for the *Final Fantasy VII* universe for players.

As Vincent provides a connection to the human aspects of Sephiroth—the woman who birthed him, the man who experimented on him and destroyed his sanity—so too does he provide a connection to returning and-yet-new trauma and healing for the audience. However, the departure from connections to Cloud caused the audience to experience an affective dissonance: while Vincent still had ties to Sephiroth and the overarching plot from *FFVII*, he was too different from Cloud in mechanical and narrative ways. The third-person shooter gameplay was described as “boring” and the new story elements, especially the introduction of Deepground and the tenuous relationship they hold with Hojo, were too strung out from the lore and intentions of the original game and *Advent Children*. While the game is appreciated for its attempts at new genres and avenues by Square Enix, and its focus on a fan-favorite party member, the “fling into futurity” with the narrative did not stick with fans as effectively (or affectively) as the original game and the movie.

Unlike *Advent Children*, the game was widely panned at release. The game is beholden to accessibility issues: it was only released on the Playstation 2. Finding a PS2 in contemporary times is a difficult task, so most fans like myself can only access cutscenes and playthroughs on Youtube (capitalistic boundaries again being crossed). It is a third-person shooter rather than a dynamically-timed turn-based battle loop, and the story is considered to be the weakest in the franchise both in execution and payoff. The “service to fans” went too far into the future and tried too hard to extend the appeal and “hap” of the original, into increasingly tenuously-connected objects, i.e. Vincent, Deepground, and Weiss. Contemporarily, however, the game is presented as a “guilty pleasure”; related to “fan service”, this concept is used in fan circles to denote objects in the canon that are not as defensibly “good”, but that rather provide

enjoyment in more pleasurable ways. Clemps and SuperButterBuns, two content creators on Youtube who provide retrospectives, reviews, and guides for various JRPG's, both joke about their "primal urges" to play *Dirge of Cerberus* at times. They note that they find Vincent Valentine sexually attractive, and that while the game may have "jank"<sup>21</sup>, they both hold deeply affectionate feelings towards it and still replay it occasionally. While the game may not have been as commercially or affectively successful as *FFVII*, or even *Advent Children*, the successful stickiness and spread of previous traumas and healing resulted in even this attempt at futurity being enjoyed, albeit in a "guilty" way.

#### Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII – *Sticking to Nostalgic Trauma*

With the knowledge that fans were lukewarm towards advancing the storyline, Square Enix completed the trifecta of major media in the *Compilation* with a prequel title, drawing back to familiar narratives and familiar traumas instead. *Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII* encapsulates the 7 years prior to the opening of *FFVII*, and focuses on the story of Zack, Cloud's mentor, best friend, and previous wielder of the iconic Buster Sword<sup>22</sup>. The combat is a closer approximation to that of the 2020 *Remake*, with weak attacks and real-time combat leading into use of magic and special abilities. The return of ATB-like elements encouraged a connection with Cloud, the original game, and the affective stickiness associated with them. Additionally, establishing the game as a prequel allowed Square Enix to draw upon literal nostalgia and tease it out with new information, fleshing out the "haps" associated with both Cloud and Aerith into stickier and more spreadable occurrences.

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21 A catch-all term for mechanics, narrative, characters, and/or other aspects of a video game that are clunky, off-putting, unpleasant to experience/interact with, or subpar in quality.

22 This is the weapon Cloud starts *FFVII* with, and is considered a symbol of the franchise as a whole. Part of *Crisis Core*'s appeal is the origin story for the sword itself.

*Crisis Core* specifically establishes the relationships between Zack and Aerith, Zack and Cloud, and Zack and Sephiroth. The player is shown Zack's burgeoning romance with Aerith, his brotherly affection and eventual sacrifice for Cloud, and his respect mutating into pity and rage towards Sephiroth. Zack is presented as a parallel foil for Cloud: he falls through the roof of Aerith's church just like Cloud, he wields the Buster Sword and is a SOLDIER like Cloud, and he is sarcastic like Cloud. However, as a prequel, it is assumed that the audience understands the motivation behind these parallels: Zack is not a pure foil for Cloud, but rather, these aspects of Cloud were grafted from Zack due to the trauma Cloud experienced in watching Zack sacrifice himself. The audience is pulled back into the sticky, bittersweet experience of these narrative touchstones, a feat that *Dirge of Cerberus* was unable to accomplish.

Aerith is not only alive in this game, but is thriving as Zack's love interest. Cloud is a shy, skilled infantryman for Shinra, looking up to Zack as his mentor, both of whom idolize Sephiroth, the best SOLDIER Shinra has ever known. We are drafted, again and again, into the already-and-not-yet of the trauma of *FFVII*. We know that Zack will die at the conclusion of the game, brutally murdered by Shinra to prevent the knowledge of genetic experimentation from spreading. We know that Cloud will be so traumatized by this experience that he will become the iconic unreliable narrator, and have to rediscover his holistic self beyond the trauma, literally walking through the scientific and memorialized pieces of himself that bind him to Zack, Sephiroth, and Aerith, with Tifa as his guide. We know that Aerith will never see Zack again, and that when she joins Cloud on his journey, she too will die, slaughtered by Sephiroth while offering her plea to the planet to save humanity. And

yet we soldier on, curating enough gil<sup>23</sup> as Zack to buy Aerith's iconic pink bow for her, driving a comatose Cloud to Zack's hometown of Gongaga, fighting off wave after wave of Shinra troops in Zack's last stand as the literal HUD of the game seizes and prevents controller inputs from the player<sup>24</sup>.

*Crisis Core* is restricted to a now-defunct handheld console, the Playstation Portable, and is still largely inaccessible to play, though a promise of a chapter-driven mobile game starting in 2022 has been given by Square Enix. But fans know this game, experience this game, stick to this game. They watch the cutscenes on Youtube, they draw fanart and write fan-fiction, they buy used consoles on eBay and opened copies of the game on internet forums. They go beyond the problem of accessibility to spread the meaning. The trauma of *FFVII* is both re-experienced and made anew in the hands of players through Zack and his story. The memories of *FFVII*, and *Advent Children*, haunt this game, always lurking just beyond the periphery. Fans are acutely aware of the characters that are no longer active, even as they walk in their shoes and swing their swords. This, then, is the sticky "hap": that of the "already-and-not-yet" trauma, the prequel causing the loss to hurt more, and yet fans crave it all the same.

The story of Cloud, Zack, Aerith, and Sephiroth grew deeply sticky, and fans spread it far and wide. When *Advent Children* released an HD extended cut in 2011, there were murmurings of a potential high-definition remake of the original game around the same time. Fans were clearly attached to Cloud and his trauma, and were willing to re-experience it again and again via new angles and avenues. The panning of *Dirge of Cerberus* and success of *Crisis Core* provided more evidence to this fact:

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23 The in-game currency of the *Final Fantasy* franchise, used to buy various items.

24 The "heads-up display", or HUD, contains information like health, attacks/inputs available, current objective, and more. During this sequence, the HUD begins to freeze and glitch, putting Zack's declining health in direct, affective experience for the player controlling him.



fans received, and thus spread, trauma and healing from Cloud as a source, and his story was ultimately the one that was “hap” to them. As time went on, it became clear that the scaffolding of the franchise is architected by these memories and desires from fans. Nathan Johnson notes that “questions about rhetoric’s role in information literacy can be fruitfully reframed as questions having to do with public memory”, and I agree here (9). To be literate in the *Final Fantasy VII* information is to participate in the public memory, the rhetorical reality, of trauma and healing. The success of various titles in the franchise hinged upon the extent to which public memory was linked to the information contained within the object. As such, fans were expectant of a remake. From years of speculation, rumors, stops and starts and teases, in late 2018, a formal announcement came, followed by a full-blown showcase in summer of 2019. The *Final Fantasy VII Remake* really existed, it would release on Playstation 4, and it would retell the story of *FFVII*. The method of that “retelling” quickly became the nexus of “sticking” for the trauma, memories, and fan spread of the franchise.

### ***Final Fantasy VII Remake: The Palimpsest of Haps***

#### *The Game, and Trauma, Again*

*Final Fantasy VII Remake* is a game that fundamentally resists a static definition and synopsis. At a surface, simplistic level, it is a retelling of the first segment of *Final Fantasy VII*, with its conclusion occurring right before the player would have unlocked access to a larger “world map” in the original. It includes drastically updated graphics, expanded story and character elements, and more action-oriented gameplay. However, it is also a cunning meta-narrative, a dynamic look at

what a “re-make” can be in a media space, and a palimpsestuous<sup>25</sup> space where hyperaware characters actively break through audience walls. The player still controls Cloud<sup>26</sup>, who is still an ex-SOLDIER mercenary, and his growing group of comrades and friends, as they slowly unveil their relationships and responsibilities attached to one another and the planet. There are many story and character beats that remain the exact same, and the resolution of the “Midgar section” of the game is still the waypoint towards an open world (though, of course, this game concludes at the promise of that open world). The lynchpin of the *Remake*’s experience, however, lies in its presentation of its characters as palimpsests of their previous appearances.

Linda Hutcheon offers a deeply useful definition of reproduction in her book *A Theory of Adaptation*. She notes that to see a work as an adaptation, the lens with which the work is analyzed must shift towards a definitional recognition of what an adaptation is. Taking Michael Alexander’s work and expanding upon it, Hutcheon offers that “to deal with adaptations *as adaptations* is to think of them as...inherently ‘palimpsestuous’ works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts” (6, emphasis original). That is, the adaptation must always already be associated with its origin, whether it chooses to acknowledge that association explicitly or not. Furthermore, the palimpsestuous nature of adaptation results in the cleaning and/or scraping off of an original text to then layer on new text, all the while knowing on some level that the

25 See footnote 16; both the players and the characters within the game are aware the manuscript upon which the game is written has been “scrubbed” and many bits remain. The intentional decision to put the word “remake” in the title, the characters, setting, and music being updated to modern quality standards while strongly resembling the original; all of it is “cleaner” and yet also always strongly associated with the manuscript upon which it rests. The meaning of the remake cannot be disassociated from the original; its rhetorical message is always intertwined.

26 In the original *Final Fantasy VII*, players had the ability to change a character’s name if they desired, though the characters always came with default names attached. In every media appearance since the original, the names are defined and cannot be changed. This is also reflected in *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, as all party members come with their default names that are not adjustable. This reflects a small, but powerful, change in the way these characters are received: they have defined ways of being known, of being named. Interacting with them as a player is now always linked to those definitions established throughout the canon of *Final Fantasy VII*.

original text remains. The “cleaning” of a text and subsequent re-use of the “body” sees rhetorical and affective payoff in that audiences interact with the text that reveals memories of the original, “scrubbed” text.

*Palimpsestuous Memories and Defying “Fate”*

That is, the *Final Fantasy VII Remake* is not discernible as a discrete object outside of *Final Fantasy VII*, nor was it ever intended to be. Just as *Crisis Core* pulled on previous knowledge of the characters and the world to prompt an “already-and-not-yet” gameplay experience, *FFVII* relies upon the palimpsest of *FFVII* to draw an audience in and to make the affective “hap” both familiar and yet new once again. Players are once again invited into connection. Hutcheon goes on to say that “adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication” (7). Thus, players are drawn into a repetitive world, yet one that is wholly new. The idea of “scrubbing” and cleanliness draws attention within the remake: the extreme technological and graphical enhancements that were possible in 2020 far outpace what was considered “cutting-edge” in 1997. In 1997, Squaresoft had to rely on up to four different character models of varying dimensions and sizes; 2020’s *FFVII* had deeply human, deeply detailed character models, consistent across the entire game experience. We see tears fall out of Cloud’s eyes in real-time when he has traumatic flash-forwards to Aerith’s death. We see each character in our party perform their “victory poses” as human-proportioned characters, rather than as rough polygonal sprites. We see Sephiroth’s eerie cat-eye pupils narrow in malice as he quietly taunts Cloud; his face has more pores than 1997’s game had polygons, it seems.

The stickiness of *FFVII* relies upon the concept of palimpsest, and how familiarity with an original text can compel an audience to interact with the

adaptation. *FFVII*'s spreadability had ensured the desire for the remake was alive and well. "Maybe in the remake" was a key refrain in the fan community. Many fans wanted the narrative and gameplay elements to largely remain static while the graphics received the most attention. However, there were also fans who saw the remake as an opportunity for more invasive adaptation potential: indeed, there was even a wishful undercurrent to the affective "hap". Fans had spent over 20 years with one of the most traumatic narrative deaths in video game history, and the very universe in which it had happened was being adapted, torqued into a palimpsestuous new media. Maybe in the remake, Aerith wouldn't have to die. Maybe the rhetoric of healing would be carried forward, instead of only the trauma the original had.

*Final Fantasy VII Remake* quickly became a source of much fan discourse, debate, and discussion. Critics and fans praised the faithfulness of the presentation of characters, setpieces, and various game mechanics. The combat redux was discussed as a new incarnation of the ATB system for a modern audience, and players relished in the unique experience of nostalgia for a new experience. However, as more fans completed the game, the discussion turned towards the conclusion of the game, and the implications for the remake timeline going forward. Throughout the game, creatures identified as Whispers interacted with the protagonists, preventing them from engaging in certain activities, and shuffling them forward towards others. An evocative example is during the beginning of chapter 8, when Cloud has a boss fight against a man known as Reno, a Shinra operative who is attempting to capture Aerith. After defeating him, Cloud seems ready to execute Reno, but as Aerith cries out in protest, a Whisper violently shoves Cloud back, and subsequently shoves him and Aerith towards escaping from the Shinra operatives, leaving Reno alive.

These Whispers work in conjunction with Cloud's flash-forwards and visceral visions to cast a sense of foreboding over the temporality of the game: when is this game happening, truly? It is clear that the Whispers know how the narrative arc of *Final Fantasy VII* was shaped, and are committed to maintaining that continuity here. The conclusion of the game sees the party defeating the Whispers, manifesting as spectral versions of their future selves, as well as the lead "Arbiter of Fate", after Aerith tells the party that doing this will result in "freedom...boundless, terrifying freedom" (*FFVIIR*). The characters decide that unsuturing themselves from destiny is their ultimate desire, and the player is offered the opportunity to join them. Notably, there are no "alternative endings" as is a common practice in some JRPG's. Either the player defeats the expectations of the *FFVII* narrative, or the game remains fundamentally incomplete, with Cloud and the party lingering on the Midgar Expressway<sup>27</sup>, the save file permanently unfinished. Additionally, the finale of the game includes a high-fidelity remake of "Zack's Last Stand", the concluding scene from *Crisis Core*, wherein he fights Shinra until he dies. However, Zack lives through his fight, witnesses the explosive defeat of the Whispers in Midgar, and carries a mako-poisoned, comatose Cloud on his shoulder into the city, passing by the party as he does so. The party does not acknowledge his presence, but Zack and Aerith seem to "feel" each other as indicated by subtle body language shifts; his face softens as he seems to see her, she blinks in surprise and seems almost nervous.

#### *Spreading Defiance with Use of Future and Past*

Fans have now spent the last few years living in this familiar-and-yet-new experience, and are notably vocal about the experience of the finale. Some first-time

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<sup>27</sup> This is the "point of no return" in the game; crossing the threshold to the next area prompts the final sequence of boss encounters.

players, including Ian Walker from *Kotaku*, admitted that they felt like they were attending a church service of a religion they were not a follower of, in an almost voyeuristic and awkward way. Walker reported in this game diary that “without the context of the original, I’m just an interloper on someone else’s nostalgia...a reverence is attached to this game that I can only comprehend at a basic level, and it felt sacrilegious being in its presence without having already made a spiritual connection with the original” (Finale). Attaching transient and spiritual imagery to the experience of the *Remake* feels apt: the text has moved, been re-written over itself, the gospel retranslated. Meanwhile, long-time fans of the series had a range of reactions from dismay, to excitement, to concern, to jubilation. Everyone put these reactions, thinkpieces, memes, all over the internet, and the conversation continues to this moment. DrCullenPhD notes in his video addressing *FFVIIR*’s ending that it’s one of the best pieces of “meta-fiction” he’s ever experienced, and that the game simultaneously connected itself to the nostalgia of the original while also freeing the characters and the narrative from the expectations past (LET’S TALK). The *Final Fantasy VII Remake* succeeded at its attempt to transfer the stickiness of the past to ensure stickiness of the present, utilizing palimpsestuous-presenting characters and narrative, to craft an affective hap that required spread via already-and-not-yet invested fans.

*FFVIIR* met resounding critical and economical success, and exploded the fandom conversation web with its defiant fate-twisting finale and inclusions. A 2021 update brought with it further graphical enhancements for the Playstation 5 system, as well as a downloadable content (DLC) episode titled “InterMISSION”. This DLC focused on the other optional party member from the original game, Yuffie Kisaragi,

and was an entirely original story. By crafting a new narrative that occurs adjacently to *FFVIIR*, Square Enix continued to pull on the palimpsestuous threads established in 2020. As they used Zack in the conclusion of *FFVIIR* to link to the traumatic hap of his death, they included Weiss and Deepground as antagonists in “InterMISSION”, firmly rooting them in the universe with Cloud as the protagonist, rather than their attempt with Vincent in *Dirge of Cerberus*. The update to the narrative, utilizing previously-panned elements from the least-successful game in the franchise, showcases the knowledge of successful stickiness on the part of Square Enix. That is, they are actively, dynamically shifting the “hap”, again and again, based on the successful trauma and healings of the past. Fans enjoying, consuming, and responding to the content continues this trend and reinforces the use of these palimpsestuous tendencies. As the series continues, the torquing of the familiar-and-yet-unknown will too.

### **Rhetorical Implications and Conclusions: Guilt of Affect, Intimacy of Healing**

As discussed in previous chapters, the movement of sensations between bodies via text is a core tenet of rhetoric for this project pulled from studies of affect and memory. Thus, *Final Fantasy VII* and its franchise do the work of encouraging the transference of trauma, guilt, healing, and (re)encountering memories in a fundamentally rhetorical way. The persuasive power of the franchise lies within its ability to cause people to stick to it and assist in its spread, motivated by a desire to both foster familiarity and also breed unique sensations associated with remaking the experiences of various facets. Indeed, the promise of “unknown knows” throughout the franchise, most notably the *Remake* and subsequent expansions, invites the audience into a space of particular ethos with the text. By placing them in intimate

relationship with the characters and narrative and offering new sticking points via the palimpsestuous presence discussed here, the game “persuades” spreadable connections to occur.

*Final Fantasy VII* and its universe expand significantly upon the sticky-accessible-spread model presented by games like *Kingdom Hearts*, which focus more simply on connection and buy-in. Utilizing trauma and unreliable narration as its vehicle, *FFVII* transfers affective haps to its audience with persuasive intensity: to be compelled by this universe is to have “nostalgia hooks in your brain”, as Tim Rogers says in his three-hour-long review of *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (ACTION BUTTON). The game crafted an expectation of trauma and guilt, and provided means to explore those sensations via the *Compilation* even further, granting healing as a new and more-spreadable affective hap. The *Remake* explodes these expectations and blurs all lines between rhetor, audience, and text via its use of palimpsest, adapting the memorable experience into a newly accessible experience, and yet also crafting one anew, built upon the scrubbed remains of the original text.

So then is it not a betrayal of ignorance and fandom to openly discuss various plot elements of the game without an explicit spoiler warning, even here? As I analyze the rhetorical moves this franchise makes, am I also too spreading it, or am I preventing its spread by robbing the game of its vehicle? This is the odd and remarkable space *FFVII* invites me to occupy: that of lore-holder and trauma-spreader, but also that of analyst and rhetorician. As I engage in spreading *Kingdom Hearts* via loving discussion earlier in this project, so too do I engage in spreading *FFVII* by embarking on a painful journey through the trauma of Cloud, Zack, Aerith, and the planet itself. The betrayal of spoilers is a necessary sacrifice to the furtherance



of spreadable affect. Maybe by writing about the trauma, Aerith's inevitable death will hurt less, will spread through more people and dilute the pain.

Palimpsestuous presences are a powerful rhetorical tool for adapting sticky works into newly accessible and uniquely spreadable artifacts. *FFVII* and its continually-evolving franchise prove that the affective hap of trauma can be torqued into new-and-yet-known vehicles, and that the rhetorical power of palimpsest is showcased most in the intimacy fans built with the narrative, characters, and gameplay structure of the franchise. If spread is seen as the analogue for persuasion in this scenario, the franchise has succeeded. Using a painful sensation to open futures of hope via Aerith's death and subsequent "resurrection" in later titles provides a ground of constant potential: the rhetoric of *FFVII* is reliant upon dynamics, on the persuasiveness of Cloud as narrator, lens, and player-stand-in. Buy-in from the player, a sharing of trauma and healing, is accomplished via a compelling protagonist. The movement towards hap occurring directly onto a player further complicates the blurring and torquing of audience, actor, and text. *Final Fantasy VII* does not involve character creation or plot-altering character-player choice, but its movement towards this removal of filters provides a stepping-off place for games like *Code Vein* to explore more direct rhetorical action and connection via player and game synergy.

## CHAPTER 4: “I WANTED TO FORGET MY FRAILITY”: IDENTITY PLAY AND COMPOSING WITH FAILURE IN *CODE VEIN*

### Introduction

*Code Vein* is a game about dying. Specifically, it is a game where dying is an expected and necessary mode of narrative and technical advancement, and rebirth prompts questions about identity, memory formation, and building expertise through the practice of failure. Published by Bandai Namco in 2019, *Code Vein* is a “Souls-like”<sup>28</sup> action role-playing game. Players create their own “playable character”—a PC, also sometimes known as a “main character” or MC<sup>29</sup>—and experience the first-hand perspective of this PC as they unravel the mysterious past of this destroyed world, how its inhabitants are coping, and where their place is in the larger narrative. Beyond crafting a compelling story or a relatable protagonist, such as *Kingdom Hearts* and *Final Fantasy VII* do respectively, *Code Vein* invites players to integrate themselves into the narrative itself: become the main character, whatever that means to the player, and step into this formative role. In addition to becoming the MC, players must also engage in the gameplay loop of *Code Vein*: difficult encounters with limited healing ability, where a few misplaced actions could result in death. However, these deaths place characters back at unlocked checkpoints throughout a level, with the ability to return to home base, exchange out equipment or stat boosts, and even initiate an online multiplayer experience for help. The gameplay loop is fundamentally invested

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28 Derived from the popular *Dark Souls* series of games developed and published by FromSoftware. A “Souls-like” game shares particular genre markers with *Dark Souls*, including, but not limited to: action gameplay that is marked by its difficulty and dependence on pattern recognition and player response, a game environment that encapsulates many smaller maps that all connect to a central safe “hub”, corridors of enemies and hazards that lead to a boss encounter, an in-game currency that is typically either temporarily or permanently lost upon a character death, and a “character build” system that allows for customization via stat manipulation, equipment tradeouts, and/or skill trees. For the sake of this project, I focus on *Code Vein*’s applications of these genre markers and their rhetorical uses, but many games within the genre are notable for their interactions with memory and player response.

29 I use they/them pronouns to refer to a general playable character in the game, and she/her or he/him for the characters I have created and played, respectively.

in death and failure as an opportunity, an iterative practice that creates even as it seems to fall apart.

In this chapter, I will walk through *Code Vein* as a game about forming identity and memory through character creation, narrative and gameplay choice, and unique community-building perspectives. Ultimately, *Code Vein* offers a model of composing through failure, a particular type of memory formation and maintenance that I find both rhetorical and affective in nature. I build upon the established definitions of Sara Ahmed’s “stickiness” and Henry Jenkins et al’s “spread” from previous chapters to manifest as a newly autonomous experience for players: the character creation, a position that places players directly into the liminal space between audience and actor in ways *Kingdom Hearts* and *Final Fantasy VII* do not approach. In addition, I draw on Lauren Berlant’s “cruel optimism”, from a concurring perspective as the *Final Fantasy VII* discussion, as well as introduce Jack Halberstam’s<sup>30</sup> theories of “failure”, to consider *Code Vein*’s practice of death and rebirth as a unique and rhetorical composing process. This uniquely accessible space prompts a consideration of identity, community formation, and practice: what does it mean to form a narrative around a player-created and maintained character? How do those experiences stick and spread in unique ways? And, how is the iterative failure learning process affective and rhetorical?

### **Character Creation: Sticking to Oneself**

As the player begins the game, they “awaken” to an ethereal space, with the voice of a character named Cruz gently calling them into consciousness. She asks them whether they would like to remember their name or their appearance first, and

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30 When *The Queer Art of Failure* was published in 2011, the author was listed as “Judith Halberstam.” I choose to refer to the author as “Jack” to reflect his contemporary preferences.

thus character creation begins. Rather than attaching the player perspective to a particular character who is already present and fleshed out, this system places the player directly in charge of creating the protagonist themselves. The player becomes the character, in the most literal sense possible. Their name, appearance, and voice are all chosen by the player prior to any further gameplay<sup>31</sup>. Notably, while the game does have traditional binary gender choice with outfits, hair, and voice types locked behind each, names are not policed in any way. Furthermore, once the player gains access to the “home base” of the game, they can access the mirror, which allows them to adjust their appearance if they so choose. This includes creating a character skin in either gender and grafting it onto their character; that is, a player can create a character coded as “female”, create a separate character coded as “male”, and when granted access to the home base, can choose to present their appearance as male while coded as female, or vice versa, by selecting to load the saved appearance onto their character model. Via this method, a player can access any combination of gender presentation and coding offered in the game, with a name uniquely chosen by them.

Players are invited directly into the composing process from the start: they are asked to answer the question, who do *you* want to be, as the main character of this game? There are no rules or regulations on whether the character looks like the player, has the same name, gender, body type, skin color, or clothing aesthetic. Prompting the player to become so intimately invested in the main character of the game before it even begins offers a potent opportunity for connection. The stickiness here, a familiar concept from previous discussions of Sara Ahmed’s work, is derived from the

31 This ability to control player/character identity presentation is notable beyond important representation/diversity politics. Explored further later in this chapter, this is an early indication of the concept of “authoring”, discussed most explicitly in Andrea Lunsford et al’s *Everyone’s An Author* composition textbook. The fundamental belief that everyone has the ability to both receive and present rhetorically impactful texts, authoring prompts “buy-in” from the player from moment one: establish the memories created here as your own.

potential for a “hap” upon the player via the character they create and control, rather than through a proxy like a narratively-defined character. The happening is the direct connection between player and Playable Character, rather than emotional draws towards the narrative, as explored in *Kingdom Hearts*, or shared trauma with the protagonist, as explored in *Final Fantasy VII*. The player is the main character, via literal self-insertion, starting with the character creation process. As a player, myself, I share an intimacy with this game and this project that is akin to the “sticky hap” expressed here: I created a character, myself, made my own decisions about their presentation and motives, and walked through the game as a PC. Additionally, this was not my first time playing through the game, so my experiences with the character creator were more varied in scope than a first-time player. The first time I played the game, I made my character an “ideal self” type insert, indulging in aesthetic fantasies like clothes I do not currently own or hairstyles I am too impatient to keep up with, as a coded female character. My second time, I designed a male character, again indulging in aesthetic fantasies of clothes unavailable on female-coded characters, and with the intent that his character would be my “bad ending”/selfishly-motivated playthrough<sup>32</sup>, thus influencing his darker/”edgier” style.

This act of composing draws me, and players, into an authoring position within the first few seconds of the game: a reality is being crafted by the player that is unique to themselves, with a character through whose eyes the story will continue to be composed. This positionality is a unique offering compared to other games

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32 A staple of *Souls*-likes, multiple endings is a feature that is typically associated with making value decisions about some sort of artifact or power within the universe, especially with regards to how the PC chooses to wield it. This concept will be explored in more depth throughout the chapter; the important piece here is that my male-coded PC “Klaus” was the character with whom I planned to earn the ending coded as “bad”, the one that involved choosing the most self-serving outcomes during the crucial story beats.

associated with this project: players are asked to directly participate in authoring<sup>33</sup> the game, weaving the narrative around a protagonist that they define, manipulate, and control. The experiences of the protagonist are the experiences of the player, themselves, and by walking through the game as the protagonist, the player is actively creating knowledge by absorbing the narrative and gameplay of the game, producing knowledge by implementing that information into their playstyle and progressing the story and experience, and sharing that knowledge with others both internally within the game-world as the protagonist and playing the game multiple times, and externally with other fans via the production of guides, memes, reactions, and walkthroughs. This journey of authoring is kickstarted via the narrative tool of amnesia<sup>34</sup>: the protagonist of the game is established as amnesiac immediately, only remembering their name and appearance as defined by the character creation system. The game sets the player off on a journey to (re)discover who they are, what got them here, and where their power is drawn from, as well as to learn skills and establish relationships with others, whether through power or actual kinship. While this is another fairly standard feature of most Souls-like games, *Code Vein* extends this amnesiac-protagonist trope towards a rhetorical goal by foregrounding the practice of memories in both the narrative and the gameplay loop.

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33 Authoring exhibits an inherent connection between the self and the text. Andrea Lunsford et al's *Everyone's An Author* notes: "students are capable of creating and producing knowledge and of sharing that knowledge with others, of being *authors*" (v, emphasis original).

34 Pulling back the definition of memory from Philips as "movement", the use of amnesia is striking as opportunistic: how will memories be propelled forward from loss and regain, rather than established associations?

### **Memory-building as Advancement: Spreading Gifts**

Amnesia introduces the opportunity for meaning-making via a blank-slate for the player: the player chooses what to fill in, historically, presently, and for the future, to establish an understanding of their own narrative as well as the story of the world and characters around them. Becoming the “protagonist seeking answers” is a powerful rhetorical space: the player is drawn into the ethos that the character they control is espousing, and the character projects that same amnesiac ethos onto other characters to impact the social landscape. Jason Kalin and Jordan Frith discuss how impactful the experience of memory is when moved between actors. In “Here I Used To Be”, they note that memory is a dynamic experience that shifts between the individual and the collective, with affective interactions of place and persons making rhetorical decisions to “be present” (Kalin and Frith 20). This ethos of present-ness and connection to the world and other actors is established by Cruz during the tutorial: she explains to the PC that their combat skills are acquired by practicing with various types of abilities, but that the PC’s base character type (their “blood code”, the classification that determines what stats and skills they have access to) has been “lost”, and that their ability to hold multiple blood codes is a unique experience to them. The PC is established as having literally lost their identity marker, as the player is set on a mission to find out the circumstances surrounding it, as well as discover why the PC can wield multiple identities and skills.

This acts as an invitation to composing, to sit in the author’s seat alongside the developers and publishers of the game itself. The player creates a self-insert (whether based on some version of themselves, someone else, or even another character), and contributes directly to the building of the rhetorical memories the game crafts in real-time. The “sticky hap” is this constant invitation to craft rhetorical memory, to author

the experience of the game as a player via the character. By beginning the game with a character creation self-insert, *Code Vein* creates a sticking point via the affective intimacy of authoring the protagonist and inserting the player's experiences into the game directly.

As the player progresses through the game, they are introduced to “vestiges”, physical manifestations of memories left behind when a revenant disperses<sup>35</sup>. The PC is the only creature known to the other characters who can successfully touch a vestige and resist the negative impacts of doing so. Appropriately, the consequences for most revenants for interacting with a vestige include losing one's own memories and control over sense of self. However, when the PC interacts with the potent memories of others, rather than being consumed by them, the PC integrates these vestiges into their own experience, drawing once again on Kalin and Frith's presentness and shift between individual and collective. The vestiges transport the player, and occasionally other characters, into a similar ethereal space to the one the PC awakens in at the beginning of the game. In this ethereal space, the PC literally walks through the memories that created the vestige, experiencing the events and thoughts of the revenant to whom it belonged. Notably, the game has significant restrictions on mechanics available during these sections: the player can walk the PC throughout the memory space, but cannot run; they also cannot interact with or attack any creatures or pieces of the environment. The dialogue cannot be skipped or rushed, even when rewatching the scenes in the in-game cutscene theater; the scene can only be skipped entirely. Simultaneously, the PC is coded as “safe” in these spaces: there

35 “Revenants” make up the majority of characters in the game. They are vampire-like creatures: they do not age, they must feed on blood to survive, and the only way to permanently kill them is to destroy their heart, where the parasite that causes their revenant status resides. “Dispersal” refers to the temporary death revenants suffer when they have taken significant damage, and in-game, is the “death” mechanic. When the PC is killed in combat, the character “disperses” and reappears at the most recent checkpoint (designated by a plant in-game known as “mistle”).



are no enemies, and the player's character cannot be harmed or die during these sections. By removing distractions like combat, fear of hostility, and running, the game prompts the player to be as present with the memory as the character they are controlling.

The stickiness of the memory, then, is integrated into the mechanics of the game as well as the narrative experience of the PC. As the player finds vestiges and walks through their memories, they participate in a composing practice, one that ties the player to the experience of the narrative and the PC to the memories unlocked. This is, as Lunsford et al. would say, "producing knowledge", an authoring-focused activity, one that is invested in not only cognitive information, but emotional information, as well as disseminating that information via the character's actions into the world. The meaning being made here is affective, suturing the protagonist's memories and abilities together with the other characters and with the game mechanics themselves, implicating the player in the design of their character's relationships with others and their knowledge of these characters. This memory restoration space is also the first opportunity to showcase hints of Lauren Berlant's "cruel optimism" as well as Jack Halberstam's "failure". As the vestiges are restored, the PC and the vestige's owner gain the memory by walking through it. However, this also guarantees that the authentic memory itself is forever lost. The vestige experience is a progression that necessarily inhibits restoration; a "cruel optimism" in that the memory is experienced, but the authentic memory itself is forever lost, absorbed into the PC. This space of experience through loss is liminal and dynamic: there must be movement for advancement in the plot and in gaining power as the PC, but it also requires the release of a potential for authentic memory recovery for the characters

and the PC themselves. The vestige is also only available to be absorbed due to a “failure” of the original revenant: the creation of a vestige requires a death-experience, a dispersal, to occur. The failure is a creative and creation opportunity, especially towards strengthening stickiness about the PC and the characters within Vein; rather than losing resources by dying, resources are created for the benefit of the player. Cruel optimism and failure will be explored further in discussions of game endings and replays, but their first appearances occur early on in the game experience.

As vestiges are completed, various abilities and skills, known as “Gifts”, are unlocked. The PC can learn, equip, and master these Gifts. The skills are always associated with the character from whom the vestige dropped, and give a mechanical tie-in to the narrative the character espouses, including the character class (or “Blood Code”) the character possesses. The player is invited to become more intimate with the characters in the game, to literally share their memories and pieces of themselves, through the PC, to compose the narrative of the game and to strengthen their PC towards future threats. They are also invited to emulate the characters themselves by accepting their Blood Codes and utilizing them in combat. For example, one of the first revenants the PC encounters in the game is Louis, a man who claims to be researching blood beads, the primary source of sustenance for revenants other than humans. He offers to join you as your partner, a key mechanic throughout the game where certain characters can assist you in combat by fighting, casting useful support Gifts, and healing. Once again, rhetorical connections are drawn: Philips notes that communal memory must be associated with connection between actors as well as place, and Louis’ presence in dangerous areas offering his literal body to the player for assistance provide potent exigence for memory formation.

His blood code, Prometheus, claims that it is “well-rounded for combat, but fragile” in its description, and features abilities that prioritize evasive maneuvers, feinting attacks, and dodging damage. Throughout Louis’ vestiges, the PC (and the player) discover that he was in an intimate relationship with Cruz, who through side effects from scientific experimentation, lost control of herself and caused the outbreak of revenants seen in the present timeline. Louis could not bring himself to stop her when he could, refusing her request that he kill her. When the player has completed all of Louis’ vestiges, he muses that he dropped these vestiges and embarked on his journeys because he wanted to “forget his frailty.” His use of the same word to describe himself as the mechanical game description uses to describe his Blood Code is noteworthy; there is a direct link between knowledge of him as a character and knowledge of the game mechanics as they relate to the PC. These “networked feelings”, as Michael Faris discusses adjacently in “Coffee Shop Writing”, ensure a link persists between the narrative of the story, the experiences of the player as the character, and the mechanical output of the game itself: knowledge of Louis’ story is knowledge of gameplay mechanics, and vice versa. Louis states that the PC is assisting him in bolstering resolve and knowing he can pursue justice if and when the time comes again.

Louis’ blood code, gifts, and vestige arc are a microcosm of *Code Vein*’s approach to affective stickiness: the PC is drawn to Louis by his offer for assistance during combat, especially due to the combination of high difficulty, danger, and solo combat the player experiences prior to meeting him. His vestiges unlock useful and interesting abilities that the PC can equip, but only by walking through them, assisting Louis in his remembrance, and learning about self-actualization by shedding authentic

memories. By walking through his memories, the PC is drafted into intimacy with him, with the abilities they unlock, and with the motivation to pursue his story further into the game. Thus, the player is drafted also, as well as participating in the drafting itself: by composing memories via finding vestiges, unlocking abilities, and pursuing the knowledge of self and others, the player authors the game as it is being played. The crux of memories as decision-markers create space for both fandom community building as well as significant player individualization: a PC and player's narrative can stand on their own while also contributing to the communal memoryscape<sup>36</sup>. In addition to unlocking Gifts and fleshing out character arcs, memories and vestiges are intimately connected to the branching of the narrative, providing separate conclusions to the game that can be sought and shared internally and externally, within the game and within the fandom.

### **Endings, Replays, and Loops: Optimizing Failure**

*Code Vein*'s conclusion is directly determined by the decisions a player makes with their PC in the second half of the game. These decisions revolve around the player and PC making judgments about the importance of identity and memory restoration and access. There are three distinct endings—Heirs, To Eternity, and Dweller in the Dark—with Dweller in the Dark containing a slight variation based on the player's choices about restoring a particular character's vestiges prior to beating the final boss(es)<sup>37</sup>. The player is not explicitly instructed on the methods through

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36 Drawn from discussions with Philips, Faris, Kalin and Frith, as well as Ekaterina Haskins, "communal memoryscape" is the expanse upon which memories are interacted with by multiple actors. It can be seen as a tapestry, where each players' experiences stand as their own while also adding to a larger picture and experience that the entire fandom simultaneously experiences.

37 The variation is one line of dialogue, delivered by the PC, saying the name "Io", the character whose vestiges determine this ending. It is notably one of only two dialogue lines delivered directly by the PC, as well as counting as a separate ending towards completing the game, but beyond that, the ending follows the Dweller in the Dark ending narratively. As for the "boss(es)", there is a true final boss that is only available to fight in the To Eternity and Dweller in the Dark endings due to narrative reasons. Heirs has one final boss, while the other two endings have two

which the endings are unlocked; rather, the game follows Souls-like genre practice and simply offers the player several similar choices throughout the game that align the PC with particular narrative goals. Here, the PC must choose to either restore or absorb the vestiges of powerful beings, known as Successors, after walking through their memories. Either choice unlocks a new blood code and various Gifts; however, the ending earned is based directly on the number of Successors who are restored (none, some, or all, respectively). The player is invited to not only make a decision in the game, but to choose how the game ends for their PC and their particular iteration of the game. Each ending showcases how the power of memories impacts the PC directly: whether they become overwhelmed by power, saddled with responsibility, or free with community is determined by how the player chooses to interact with the Successors' memories.

The three endings have colloquial names attached to them that heavily imply the narrative outcome of the PC: “good”, “neutral”, and “bad.” These names are commonly used for *Souls*-like games with multiple endings, as it is normally made clear via the narrative arc which ending corresponds to which moral/ethical marker. In *Code Vein*, the “Heirs” ending is known as the “bad” ending; it is also a showcase of the interaction between memories as narrative and mechanical devices within the game, and how perceived failure prompts further composing. In “Heirs”, the PC must have chosen to not restore any of the Successors, instead absorbing the Successors' relics (more powerful forms of vestiges) into themselves. As they approach the final area and defeat the “final boss”, the PC absorbs all relics from the final boss, as well as the PC's party members, into themselves. Rather than the Queen Reborn being the final boss that the PC fights, “Heirs” sees the PC turn into the new iteration of the

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final bosses.

Queen Reborn, themselves. Louis takes down the PC and takes up the mantle of guarding the planet, while the party members you have gained become the new Successors, replacing the Successor for whom they shared an emotional connection. In this ending, the PC, the character through whose eyes the player sees and experiences the narrative, dies permanently. As a decision-making moment, this ending exemplifies the power memories hold in-universe: “Heirs” implies that the PC, and thus the player, valued the powers bestowed upon them by memories more than the power of affect the memory gives, especially within character relationships. That is, memories are mechanical tools, rather than intimacy-prompting sensations. This ending can be seen as a failure: colloquially termed as the “bad ending”, the player character dying, and the characters with whom the player has sown friendship scattered to isolated, indeterminate suffering. Through this failure, however, is opportunity.

*Code Vein*’s multiple endings prompts, even expects, multiple playthroughs of the game. Players are invited to compose the story of Vein, and walk a PC through the experience of memories, loss, and repair, at least four times to see all four iterations of the ending. Notably, if a player chooses to replay the game with the same PC (a “New Game Plus”), they can maintain the same character, or design a new character and load that appearance on top of their completed save file, to visually craft a new narrative, or simply engage in a “what-if” scenario with one particular PC. Additionally, all skills, equipment, and blood codes are retained in a NG+ file, and the player can choose whether to maintain the same difficulty level, or increase the difficulty up to 10 times in subsequent runs. The “Heirs” ending, even with its character death, becomes an opportunity for advancement through its perceived

failure: by not restoring the Successors, the PC gains access to four unique blood codes, which are maintained even when beginning a new playthrough via NG+. Memories can maintain their mechanical use while also prompting new affective “haps” in subsequent runs. Players are “stuck” to this composing practice via the promise of familiarity with game mechanics, map layout, and story progression, as well as the opportunity for revising their experiences with the game via new skills, narrative choices, and PC presentations. This iteration also allows the game to “spread”, prompting walkthrough guides, character creation and skill tree layouts, and decision markers to achieve each ending.

### **Accessibility and Community: Spreading Memories through Failure**

*Code Vein*'s conclusions seem to invite action in contradictory ways. In Berlant's “cruel optimism”, where “the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially”, *Code Vein*'s multiple endings promise an end, but actually invite iterative beginnings (1). Berlant discusses the reality of the simultaneous potential and yet also near-disappointment of attaching to a desire that leads towards a “conclusion” that is not a satisfaction of said desire; indeed, this is the “cruel optimism” itself. This dynamic movement of desire and execution of desire towards unknown and open-ended means strikes rhetorically: the appeal of more sensation beyond the initial desire that created sensation originally. In *Code Vein*, the player is drawn into the experience of seeing the multifaceted narrative potential, of seeking and mastering all skills, blood codes, and endings, of attempting different configurations of builds and use of partners within the game. Rather than acting as a narrative stop, like the “aim” of a game ending would behave, *Code Vein* invites an open relationship with its narrative, of infinite potential compositions,

dependent upon the player's choices directly through their PC. The game encourages attachment to compositional iteration by its unique approach to accessibility.

As a *Souls*-like game, *Code Vein* fulfills requirements about its genre via its gameplay mechanics. There are enemies, traps, hazards, and boss fights, all of which deal significant damage, and the PC has a finite pool of health and healing. As a player fights enemies successfully, they earn “haze”, the in-game currency to purchase gear, upgrade equipment, level up, and unlock/master various skills. When a PC “disperses”—takes significant enough damage to deplete their health total to zero—they are transported back to the most recent checkpoint<sup>38</sup> they encountered, and the enemies within the area reset. The haze the PC was carrying at dispersal is also dropped where they dispersed, and the player has the opportunity to pick it up. If they disperse again prior to picking it up, the haze is permanently lost.

Superficially, the system of combat and death seems punishing, and in some ways, it is. The player is expected to die, to fail, to lose resources, time, and energy. However, the player is also expected to learn, to experiment, to grow, and ultimately, to advance, using the skills—both the PC's and theirs as a player—they acquire to progress through the game. This, then, is the promise of accessibility: through failure and death, new knowledge is gained, new skills are acquired, and new methods are attempted. The promise of accessibility is, holistically, a cruel optimism. To succeed at the game, you must fail. Desire for forward movement prompts constant revision and “restart”, thus earning the object of attachment (gameplay) by being impeded (dying). Successful iteration of the narrative and the combat requires learning via trial and “error”—though I hesitate to associate an idea of wrong-ness with the fundamental

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38 Kalin and Frith discuss check-in apps in their article “Here I Used To Be” and this seems significant to mention here: the idea of checkpointing progress in a narrative as an explicit composing practice and opportunity to return, revise, and re-experience.



gameplay loop *Code Vein* expects, encourages, and desires. The game encourages experimentation, which thus turns outward with guides, walkthroughs, playthroughs for all endings, and explanations of equipment and blood code build-outs. As players are stuck to the composing of failure, they seek to spread the unique experience of this iterating via external resources.

*Code Vein* actively encourages experimentation, combining various blood codes and gifts to create unique combinations of skills and abilities that suit different purposes. This is the fundamental act of composing via the gameplay loop: players create who they want to see themselves as in the combat and mechanical abilities of their PC. Adjacently, the practice of memeification crops up in fandom spaces that allow for creativity: Jenkins et al. remark in *Spreadable Media* that “as material spreads, it gets remade: either literally, through various forms of sampling and remixing, or figuratively, via its insertion into ongoing conversations and across various platforms. This continuous process of repurposing and recirculating is eroding the perceived divides between production and consumption” (27). As players contribute their builds to various databases, they are producing content that actively circulates and recirculates the game for various types of players or runs they would wish to see. For example, players have discovered a unique combination of stats, blood code, and gifts that produces a “one hit boss kill” loadout, where due to the types of buffs the PC gives themselves, they can hit a boss once and finish the fight. This, obviously, trivializes the challenge of the boss fight, a key aspect of experiencing *Code Vein*, when viewed superficially. However, this “meme build” acts as a bridge between players and the game, granting them the opportunity to torque<sup>39</sup>

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39 As mentioned in previous chapters, the idea of “torquing” is drawn primarily from Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, where she states “the Möbius strip...also provides a way of problematizing and rethinking the relations between the inside and the outside of

the narrative in spreadable ways. The meme builds provide entertainment both to the players and to potential fans, leading to the opportunity for interest in the game itself, and the potential for new players to stick, fail, and compose.

While meme builds and guides are accessible content for new or curious fans and players, one of the most accessible means of spread is watching someone else play the game. Content creators engage in both stickiness and spread with *Code Vein* by showcasing their unique narrative, reactions, and builds, prompting their own revisions in real-time while also granting viewers the opportunity to stick to the game themselves and purchase it for their own composing practices. Alongside my time spent with *Code Vein* as a player, I watched a Youtube content creator, QuinBoBin (known as “Quin” to his audience), play through the game multiple times. Quin’s initial success as a content creator, where his subscription numbers grew from a few thousand to several tens of thousands in a few months, came as a result of his *Code Vein* playthroughs. He played through the game several times, achieving each ending possible with the same character, though the appearance of his PC was altered throughout his experience<sup>40</sup>. Additionally, Quin did a “no partners” playthrough of the game during one of his runs, where he did not use an AI or online partner for any combat whatsoever, choosing instead to only fight alone.

Quin’s composing practices relied upon seeing his failures as opportunities, rather than as deterrents or negative, wasteful uses of his time. His multiple attempts at various difficult boss fights, gauntlets, and his “no partner” run all prompted a buy-

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the subject...the torsion of one into the other, the passage, vector, or uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside” (xii).

40 It is worth noting here that Quin identifies himself using he/him, and created a PC within the game who he identifies as she/her. I, myself, identify as she/her, and have played with two different PCs, one of whom I identified as she/her, and the other of which I identified as he/him. A discussion of gender identity, play, and expression is beyond the scope of this project, but is nevertheless an aspect of character creation and composing that deserves recognition.

in from his audience from an entertainment perspective: it is fun to watch someone fail, but it is more fun to watch someone fail, learn, and succeed. *Code Vein* expects and encourages failure and death, so Quin's experiences with the game were inherently appealing to audiences wanting to witness both a narrative of failure as success, as well as the narrative of the game itself. Quin's motivation to seek all possible endings, especially due to his attachment to the character Io and her inevitable disappearance regardless of the ending achieved, pushed the narrative of *Code Vein* both into his composing practices, as well as outward into his audience and their experiences. As people watched Quin experiment, disperse, triumph, and emote, they were joining in his composing of a narrative, spreading the game and its rhetorical intentions beyond an initial player-game connection. Because of Quin's sticking to the game, the game spread to more people. His creation of media, via documenting his experiences and uploading them onto Youtube, responding to comments and incorporating viewer feedback, all leaned on an understanding of memories as the source of stickiness and spread for *Code Vein* and its narrative. That is, Quin's composing with the game publicly aligned with creating memories and learning from failure, and pulled his viewers into the composing practice alongside him. This, again, is crafting the communal memoryscape in real time: Quin's thread not only added his own experience to the tapestry, but prompted many others to adjacently access the memories by watching him, or even play the game themselves.

Spreading *Code Vein* through meme builds, guides, and multi-ending/multi-build playthroughs relies upon a framework built upon the narrative as a sticky location of affect. The game's narrative, its rhetorical bedrock, arise from a presentation of memories as both a deterrent to power and the very source of it, of

failure as the means and method of success, rather than an impediment. Player's narratives can stand on their own as testaments to individual decision-making and composing, as well as contribute to a communal memoryscape of information-collecting, build-sharing, and masterful failing. By building accessibility via shared death and rebirth, *Code Vein* prompts a reorientation towards traditional definitions of failure and fulfillment, offering success via iteration and exploration, rather than punitive work towards a static goal.

### **Composing with Failure: Pulling *Code Vein* into Praxis**

*Code Vein*'s association with failure is one of growth and opportunity, rather than a result of wrong turns and bad decisions. Death always has a rebirth, and is not a terminus, but is instead a feedback loop granting valuable information to the character and the player in real-time. Implementing and integrating experiences of death and failure into the skillset of the character is expected, and the player learns alongside the character that this loop is the opportunity for revision and iteration. *Code Vein* rewrites an association with failure and dying: rather than a loss of opportunity, it becomes the nexus of opportunity. In addition to granting particular affective sticking power and spreadability, this notable adjustment to the experience of failure also prompts players to see compositional engagement alongside their PC's. Rather than just punitive pushes to succeed with a narrow-minded definition of success, *Code Vein* offers players the opportunity to create narratives. As mentioned throughout the chapter, Halberstam's idea of "failure" from *The Queer Art of Failure* is strongly relevant here: failure is a freeing opportunistic space for subversion and reinvention, rather than a defeat and "end" of narrative and rhetorical capabilities.

Throughout the game, players are encouraged and invited to draft, revise, submit, receive feedback, and repeat, building skills, determining their voice, and placing themselves into a larger narrative. Obviously, this draws comparisons to the composition classroom, wherein iteration is a fundamental piece of the composing process, and yet is often shrouded in language of negativity and failure: “rough” drafts, turned in with the desperate hope that all that will be required will be surface-level proofreading and copyedits, and an assumption that a final “draft” is a period at the end of a sentence, a conclusion of an argument or discussion. *Code Vein* showcases that the stages of iteration—drafting, composing, unintended or unexpected results, feedback from peers and instructors, and returning once again—can be experienced and presented as both inherently failure-centered and also as opportunistic and exploratory. Composing as a practice is a fluid experience, informed by memories grafted through “loading out” particular argumentation skills and attempts, and one that is always dynamically shifting and moving, and never done in a vacuum. I propose three distinct methods towards utilizing a “composing with failure” metric drawn from *Code Vein* in the composition classroom: active peer and supervisor feedback that is future-focused, drafting types and opportunities with “loadout” options, and a focus on rhetorically positioning students as authors.

By implementing a video game’s scaffolding, the experience of the composition classroom can be reoriented towards a relationship with iteration and collaboration towards shared goals. Gamifying the classroom and implementing play have been discussed in various scholarship<sup>41</sup>, and I see an opportunity with *Code Vein*

41 Michael Faris’ discussions of using Littlebits in the classroom in “ Building Rhetoric One Bit at a Time: A Case of Maker Rhetoric with Littlebits”, as well as Part IV of Eyman and Davis’ *Play/Write*, including “Programming, Pedagogy, Play” by Bran Ladd and “Procedural Rhetoric, *Proairesis*, Game Design, and the Revlauing of Invention” by James J. Brown Jr and Eric Alexander, are of significant note. All discuss the use of gaming concepts, like play, checkpoints, open-ended invention, and reiteration, as useful and relevant to the compositional space.

to experiment with a particular framework that encourages a relationship between students and their work, as well as with their instructor. For example, the syllabus is introduced as a series of levels and encounters, always drafting towards each major project, which are considered the “bosses” of the “game”. The peer and instructor review periods are presented from a “we’re all in this together” ethos: the course itself, the assignments and the projects, they are the obstacles to overcome, the objectives to complete, and this class comprises your partners and companions. I draw particular attention to the ethos of the instructor in this scenario, because they are not intended to be a “final boss”, as a gamified classroom may seem to imply. Rather, the instructor is the helpful and available expert, similar to Cruz or Louis in *Code Vein*, with particular skills that provide context, information, and assistance to the “players” throughout their compositional journey. Peer review and instructor review of drafts and assignments focus on implementing iterative composing and showcasing the writing of the course as drafting, always, rather than completed and final products. Every assignment is always inherently an opportunity.

In this *Code Vein* class, the drafting process is also gamified. I offer different “loadout” options to students via various low-stakes assignments and drafting processes. As they experiment with different drafting techniques, they discover which methods make them feel most comfortable and confident with their writing process, and are encouraged via feedback from the instructor and peers to continue to use that drafting technique in future projects. These drafting techniques, such as reverse outlining<sup>42</sup>, or bullet-listing<sup>43</sup>, offer students opportunities to “fail” at the assignment,

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42 A method in which an author “braindumps”, or writes very informally, about a topic or towards a prompt, then reads the draft and pulls out topic sentences and important points to build a scaffolding for their project.

43 A method in which an author creates a list of points, topics, quotes, and other building blocks of an argument, from which to draw inspiration and information towards a project.

building memory of the composing practice, earning feedback from peers and the expert, and adjusting their technique towards conquering the next goal. Note that “fail” does not imply a literal failing grade; rather, drawing again on the concept of failure as an opportunity and a beginning for iterative composing. Assignments that allow students to experiment with composing and build authorship carry no punitive weight.

This, of course, is the ultimate goal of the *Code Vein* classroom: to impart authorship ethos onto students. The old, cemented adage of Kenneth Burke’s parlor room<sup>44</sup>, with revenants and vestiges: we are all always dying, forgetting, remembering, and fighting. Therefore, we are all always authors. Students are always already composing and iterating, and these methods with which composition is taught explicitly names and empowers those traits in them, rather than treating them as blank slates upon which to impart wisdom. *Code Vein* assumes the player and the character have innate talent and skills that simply must be brought to the surface through the trial of the game. The composition classroom can be similar: students are authors, they simply must be given the opportunity to participate in the authoring process. Rhetoric and composition instructors cannot fundamentally remove the ability for students to think of their class as just another line-item on their transcript, or a finite problem to solve. However, the passionate, and compassionate, presentation of the composition classroom as an iterative, failure-as-opportunity space, in which students and instructors are authoring and experimenting together, can bring about memory formation and compositional spread that is empowering.

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44 Quoted in *Everyone’s An Author*, Burke’s parlor room parable explains rhetorical engagement as fundamentally always a conversation that involves equal parts listening and conversating, and that discourse is an always-dynamic space (7).

## Conclusions

Stickiness and spread have been constant markers within the dataset of this project, and *Code Vein* is no exception. However, rather than sticking to the player via emotional investment in the narrative, or shared trauma with the actors in the story, *Code Vein* takes a more direct approach by placing the player directly into the role of the main character. The game is only ever experienced through the player's own eyes, and whatever perspective they have chosen to operate in as their PC. The "hap" here is the amnesiac protagonist inviting the player along for exploration, experimentation, connection, and growth, and the sticking affect is a result of the player "buying in" to that experience. As memories are restored—again, fundamentally destroying the original memory in the process—and skills are gained, opportunities arise for players to craft narrative and mechanical choices that customize their experience, including the ability to gain multiple types of narrative endings based on those choices. As players interact with the community to learn more builds, how to access areas and endings, and share character creation ideas, the game spreads, via its unique approach to accessibility as difficulty and failure.

This failure, of course, is not defined by punishment and error, but rather by literal trial, experimentation, and opportunity. Players are expected, required, and encouraged to die and fail to learn, craft, and advance in the narrative and in their mechanical ability trees, hearing words of encouragement spoken by their in-game companions and always having a safe hub to return to for testing and recalibrating. Player characters are always in control of the narrative, whether it be driven by power, friendship, or something in-between, and the composing practice is always conducted via this failure feedback loop. Again, players are authors, first, and this composing alongside the game is what ultimately drives the stickiness and spread of the game:



players have perspective of the game that is unparalleled in either *Kingdom Hearts* or *Final Fantasy VII*, because they are literally in the main character's head: it is always them.

Compositionally, crafting memories, narrative, and rhetorical experience via a method of failure as opportunity and experimentation that hinges on individual and communal compassion guides the experience of *Code Vein*. This compositional practice provides potent opportunities for the rhetoric and composition classroom as a gamified space, with students as fellow players and the instructor as an expert rather than a boss-like figure. The class can implement *Code Vein*'s inventive praxis by giving students space and opportunity for experimentation via drafting "loadouts" and reorienting the relationship with iterative composing towards generative rather than punitive affect. Ultimately, students are empowered by the truth that they are always already authors, and by crafting a course around this fundamental idea, composition can be explored as a space to create memories and expertise, rather than mold copies of already-established voices. Failure and opportunity are spaces for connection and growth, rather than oppressive sites of punishment and rote memorization.

*Code Vein* is a game about learning. It is a game about dying, yes, but ultimately, it is a game about the choices and opportunity that dying grants the player, and the character they share identity with. It is a game that pushes haps and compositional opportunities towards the player in as blunt and explicit methods as possible, with rhetorically interesting results. And it is a game that passionately defends experimentation, creating new memories from vestiges of old, and seeing opportunities in difficult circumstances. Using this praxis in the rhetoric and

composition classroom grants us powerful opportunities to empower students in ways

*Code Vein* empowers its players.

## CHAPTER 5: INTEGRATED REMIX: CONCLUSIONS, CONSIDERATIONS, AND CODAS

### **In the Lifestream: Musings on Positionality**

In this conclusion, I review the work each chapter has done in this project, and note the gaps and avenues for future conversations, projects, and opportunities. I complete this project with a coda, pointing towards the fandoms of these franchises as they dynamically shift in real-time, and gesturing towards a future project that jumps off from the integrated fandom work I do here. To begin, however, I wax poetic about positionality, passion, and memory. As I draw this project to a close, I am struck by the deeply entrenched relationship between my personal and professional selves that is required to participate in this work. I note in the introduction that I take up Henry Jenkin's identifier of "aca-fan", and that rings true. It reverberates through the epistemology, methodology, argumentation and analysis of this project, moving and shifting the alignment of my researcher positionality. I never claimed objectivity in this work; however, the experience of rhetorical analysis of games and fandoms I consider deeply important and impactful to my life exposed several facts about both myself and the work I desire to pursue.

*Kingdom Hearts* was the second video game I ever played as an adult. My now-spouse and I took turns reading the walkthrough to each other while the other used the well-loved, fantastic-condition PlayStation 2 controller he had owned for many years. *Final Fantasy VII* and its remake bolstered my confidence in my self-image, and my relationships to traumatic events in my life. *Code Vein* rewrote my relationship to failure, a feat that I, a former GT kid, could never have imagined. These games shape me into who I am, and I am humbled to have given them the space to shape this project. There was never any intent to perform this analysis from an

objective, distant point-of-view; in fact, that was never an option. Jessica Restaino talks vulnerably about how we, as scholars, should be more willing to allow our data to overwhelm us, to “confront [our] own humanity and [our] capacity for pain and for love as rhetorical work” (7). She notes shortly thereafter, as I footnoted previously, that “my use of the term ‘intimacy’ is meant to be provocative, to invite us to think of blurred boundaries, of being even dangerously close to each other: collapsed walls between the personal, the academic, and the analytic” (9). The analyses I present here in this project are all intimate. My data overwhelmed me often; I was confronted by my skill ceiling as a gamer, my affective and passionate attachment to these characters and these worlds, by how work is love at times, and love is, at times, work.

In my previous chapter, I discuss how *Code Vein* builds the experience of death and failure into its gameplay loop to encourage experimentation, learning, success, and ultimately, memory formation and growth. This work, overall, has been an experience of dying and rebirth, of revisiting and experimentation. I had to “die” to previous experiences of these games and narratives. I also had to adjust my playstyle and experiment with new methods of intimacy: practically speaking, I had to adjust the difficulty I played on, or utilize walkthroughs and gameplay summaries, due to time constraints. I grafted over previous experiences of these games, though these new experiences were always, as I discuss in chapter 3, palimpsestuously related to my previous collisions with them. As I built new memories and new intimacies with *Kingdom Hearts*, *Final Fantasy VII*, and *Code Vein*, the work propelled forward, always creating opportunities for new haps, and new spread through this project.

I review these chapters here, and conclude this project, looking towards future collisions with my own fandom self. These rhetorical analyses push understandings of

the discipline, of various methodologies and questions around memory, fandom, and attachment, towards a rhetoric that is less bound by textual form and is more interested in the movement of sensation across bodies and mediums. And also, these chapters unspooled, rethreaded, and bound-up tapestries of memories and fandom sensations for myself and many others. I, as an aca-fan, am constantly undone and redone by my work, and I review those undoings here, now.

### **Loot Drops: Chapter Reviews and Takeaways**

#### *Kingdom Hearts*

Laying the groundwork in stickiness, spreadability, and accessibility, chapter 2 walks through the fundamental collision of memory in fandom via the video game medium. Characters in these games are defined by memory and connection moreso than any other marker of identity, and this type of identification spreads into the fandom, hooking people into the canon and creating co-conspirators out of them.

*Kingdom Hearts* leaves us with questions about how fandom is, ultimately, the nexus and praxis for driving memory conservation and intimate rhetorical impacts with video games as text. The franchise's growth in popularity and sustained fandom has been largely due to behaviors associated with piracy and horizontal spread of information and content. As fans expand beyond the constraints of capitalism, publishers release bundles, on-sale deals, multiple-platform games, to encourage this spread of attachment to their games.

*Kingdom Hearts* is impactful due to its sticking power of connection and intimacy above all else, which prompts fan behavior that reaches beyond accessibility restraints to further expand the memory spread of the franchise; a self-replicating cycle of "unbreakable connection", as Aqua from *Kingdom Hearts: Birth By Sleep*

would say. The games pull players into the space of curative adventurers, people for whom memory and relationship are of dire importance to the world's very existence, both in-game and in-fandom, pulling audience and text together to craft actors. I, myself, in doing this work, continue to perform the spread of the franchise. I pull forward these takeaways as future methodological considerations:

- How can a collapsing of actor, audience, and text promote connection, accessibility, and spread?
- How are stickiness and spread fundamentally rhetorical concepts? How do they collide with accessibility, and what kinds of movements spring forward?
- Where do researcher positionalities form, mutate, and fracture? How does being lovingly invested in one's data impact and enrich the analysis?

### *Final Fantasy VII*

Picking up on the threads of stickiness and spreadability, *Final Fantasy VII* complicates these epistemological throughlines by introducing trauma and unreliable narration into the player/character experience. Rather than simply being compelled by connection and an overt relationship with memory like the characters in *Kingdom Hearts*, *FFVII* and its franchise invite players to walk through trauma, guilt, and healing alongside and through the protagonists and antagonists of the world. This experience is reiterated through the fandom by sparking conversations about spoilers, canonical and extracanonial narratives, and the relationship the fanbase and the franchise have with sequels, prequels, remixes, and remakes. 2020's *Final Fantasy VII Remake* and its subsequent expansions and promises for sequels maintain a dynamic air to the power of this fandom space by pulling the story and characters of

*FFVII* into an inherently palimpsestuous form and asking fans to address, and defeat, their own expectations.

*FFVII* provides an intimate look at what trauma and unreliable narration can provide with regards to rhetorical movement and affective sensation towards fans. It draws upon a deeply fundamental disciplinary dynamic, one that passionately expands both the kinds of texts and the kinds of inquiries that are possible by looking at rhetorical impact via the lens of memory, forgetting, guilt, and healing. Nostalgia is also posited as a praxis for rhetorical analysis, both by my researcher positionality as well as by the expansion of the *FFVII* universe throughout the years with new and remixed content becoming available. The games provide a delivery method for player-character connection that prompt a reckoning with painful human experiences, even in a fantastical world, and encourage connection with other fans to share and integrate those experiences, as well as encourage other fans to join in the journey. I pull forward these takeaways as future methodological considerations:

- What does trauma move in us? What vehicles prompt healing and integration, and what makes certain types of trauma rhetorically appealing?
- How are memory and forgetting utilized in sharing a story? What impact do narrator and audience positionalities have on the rhetorical power of a text?
- How can data be fluid, ongoing, and dynamic, and yet also solid enough to engage with? What types of analysis are possible on narratives that are multifaceted, fractured, and alive?

### *Code Vein*

The level of integration, the collapse of separation between text and audience, is enhanced furthest by *Code Vein*, wherein players create a character that becomes

their avatar and protagonist that the narrative revolves around. Beyond connection and intimacy with a protagonist, the connection becomes most personal with the introduction of identity presentation within the game itself: *Code Vein* asks players to directly align themselves as the protagonist, themselves. The implications of identity presentation and “play” are rich rhetorical spaces to explore. *Code Vein* also presents players with the fundamental gameplay loop that death is inevitable, inviting an understanding of reiteration as opportunity. There is an expectation of growth via buy-in from the player putting in effort to a superficially punishing gameplay experience, one that revolves around the recovery and reanimation of memories, as well as crafting new ones.

The crafting of memories, narrative, relationships, and even gameplay skills posits *Code Vein* as a space wherein creation occurs through vehicles of failure. I present this creation as a form of composing, as authoring that is a dynamic drafting process. When composing is failure-oriented and opportunistic, rather than only goal-oriented and punitive, pedagogical potentials become clear. *Code Vein* spends time empowering characters and players rhetorically, which is then disseminated via the fandom by crafting guides to bosses, earning different endings, and creating “meme builds” that trivialize combat, as well as other forms of communal composing such as fan-fiction. This empowerment via failure and composing with memories can be carried into the composition classroom and beyond, as the success of superficially punishing video games provides a praxis through which players, and students, can be encouraged. I pull forward these takeaways as future methodological considerations:



- How do we build opportunity from failure? What about failure is rhetorically compelling, and how can it be retooled towards experimentation, memory- and skill-formation, and empowerment?
- What is compositionally unique and interesting about narrative-building via loss, recovery, and (re)building? What is provided to an actor, audience, and/or text?
- How can player, character, researcher, and fan identities be pushed, analyzed, and experienced? What modes are available for engagement, connection, sticking, and spreading?

### **New Game Plus: Conclusions and Fandom Horizons**

As all projects must be, this analysis was bound by time, and data was practically chosen with cutoff dates in mind. *Kingdom Hearts*' most recent game, 2020's *Melody of Memory*, was announced within a week of beginning data collection for this project. *Final Fantasy VII Remake: Intergrade* released in early 2021, and I included its discussion here due to my ability to access it promptly upon release. The texts and sensations curated and analyzed here are necessarily frozen in time, a snapshot of what these fandoms looked like between late 2020 and early 2022. As an active, dynamic industry, the video game world has not taken a hiatus, however. *Kingdom Hearts* is celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, with promises of new announcements and projects cropping up every so often. Fans are actively theorycrafting about what the next game will include narratively and mechanically. The entire franchise also released on PC recently, prompting the community to begin "modding"<sup>45</sup> the games in earnest to allow for more unique playstyles, gain playable

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45 "Modding" is an activity wherein players gain access to the sourcecode of a video game and are able to modify it. This can range from small adjustments such as font size or color swaps, to massive undertakings such as encoding a newly playable character or creating entirely new world

access to characters that were previously never player-controlled, and address narrative and setting-related headcanons in various ways, such as being able to roam around previously-locked sections of maps. *Final Fantasy VII* continues actively beta-testing for the chapter-driven retelling of the narrative, fashioned as a mobile game, as well as rolling out its battle-royale-genre prequel that places players in the direct control of a personally-designed SOLDIER under Shinra's employ. *Final Fantasy* as a larger franchise has just released its most recent game, *Strangers in Paradise: Final Fantasy Origins*, a departure in both form and genre in telling mythological origin stories about many creatures and lore within the *Final Fantasy* universe while also being more action-oriented than any previous title. And, lastly, Fromsoft—the developers of *Dark Souls*, the game from which *Code Vein* takes direct, loving inspiration as a *Souls*-like—have released their latest game, *Elden Ring*, to overwhelming critical success, selling 12 million copies within 17 days of launch.

As I have utilized throughout this project, video games tell stories. They also empower players to tell stories. As stories, these video games invoke sensations and considerations of intimacy, identity, play, and movement of emotional capital and memory. They invite us to stick to memories, to hold them, consider them, manipulate them, and ultimately, to share them and increase access to them. The rhetorical power of these fandoms is in the constant dynamic movement of content and sensation between and across people, technology, and media. As I draw this project to a close, I am struck most by the relationship between the sticky stories these games brought and the power of the fandom to promote access well beyond what the creators of the games themselves intended or achieved. I see this grassroots, horizontal-facing,

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maps based on available assets within the game code. This is a considerably easier task when a game is available on PC, as the source files are findable in a few clicks on a computer, whereas on a home console gaining access to filesystems is a more tedious process.

questionably-legal accessibility movement as a deeply-embedded part of the fandom experience that extends beyond the video game sphere.

In the future, I can see the forward momentum of this relationship between sticky stories, accessibility, and fandom spread take shape in other potent spaces of emotional intimacy and memory maintenance. To bring this project to a close, I offer a recent, deeply personal example. During the completion of this project, I spent much of my personal gaming time completing the *Yakuza* series, a cultishly popular Japanese crime video game series. The franchise's 2018 spinoff title, *Judgment*, as well as its sequel, 2021's *Lost Judgment*, stars Takuya Kimura as both the voice actor and "faceclaim"<sup>46</sup> for the protagonist, Takayuki Yagami. Kimura is a former member of a Japanese pop (also known as "J-pop") group, SMAP<sup>47</sup>, and is a current Japanese idol and musical artist. Through looking into Kimura and his work, I have become a voracious fan of several J-pop acts, including Tomohisa Yamashita and the group KAT-TUN<sup>48</sup>. These fandom spaces share many facets with the JRPG fandoms I have discussed in this project: affective connections with "characters" that promise intimacy, the desire to spread fandom due to its relationship with experiencing the intimacy itself, and the encounter with accessibility and its complications due to factors such as difficulty or finances.

I see rich potential in pulling methodological lessons from this project into datasets such as fandoms of various Japanese pop idol stars and groups. In particular, these fandoms offer a more explicit bent towards the accessibility granted by worldwide internet access, fandom efforts and data-storage, and the collisions these

46 A "faceclaim" is a character in fiction (typically animated, though text-based faceclaims also exist) who shares a likeness with a real person. The likeness can be purely physical, or can also extend to mannerisms, identity markers, etc.

47 An anagram of "Sports Music Assemble People."

48 Using last-name initials of each member: Kazuya Kamenashi, Jin Akanishi, Junnosuke Taguchi, Koki Tanaka, Tatsuya Ueda, and Yuichi Nakamaru.

fandoms have with capitalism, legality/piracy, and emotional pain and recovery. Being a J-pop fan, much like being a JRPG fan, is always already accepting a relationship to texts and actors that can bring pain, but also healing, as well as entering into a composing practice that complicates the relationship spreadability has with accessibility practices. The stories being told in these fandoms are familiar: ones of connection<sup>49</sup>, of trauma and healing<sup>50</sup>, and of learning, failure, and revisiting<sup>51</sup>. My experiences in these fandoms are familiar, too. Pushing the work of this project forward into more data that overwhelms me—as I sit, late at night, watching concerts in a language I don’t yet speak, taking copious screenshots—means pushing more “texts” into the rhetorical conversation, more “cultures” into the story circle. Ultimately, the exploration of fandom and its rhetorical power when interacting with memorably sticky content is the quest I continue to set upon, as an academic, a rhetorician, and a passionate fan.

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49 For example, the following practices of fellow fans on sites such as Twitter, creations of direct messaging groups and servers for fans with similar interests, and the reposting of/interacting with of memes and reactions about specific acts.

50 Such as the lore and story of the group KAT-TUN, who began as 6 active members and is now 3. Fans both share the triumphs and failures of the group themselves, as well as craft theories and narratives surrounding the relationships of the members and how it is showcased in the rhetorical choices of the group (song lyrics, setpieces, clothing, etc.)

51 Skillsets such as attempting to learn the Japanese language, how to rip, encode, and store various types of media data, and how to purchase and acquire the goods of a fan’s preferred acts all require resource gathering, experimentation, and returning over and over to “sources”, opportunistic experiences to become a more educated fan to spread the love and to experience the fandom more holistically, whatever that means to them.

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