

This article contains hella spoilers for Final Fantasy 7, Final Fantasy 7 Remake, and a Thornton Wilder play. It happens. If you wish to experience FF7R untainted by foreknowledge, you have been warned. Now back to that play...

In 1938, Thornton Wilder released *Our Town*. For anyone that has not seen or read the play, it is a deliberately simple production that showcases three different stages in the lives of the residents of Grover's Corners. It begins with a focus on "daily life", like children going to school and milk being delivered, proceeds to "love & marriage" with a joyous and stressful wedding day, and finally ends with "death and eternity", a supernatural visit with the spirits literally haunting the local cemetery. The whole while, the play is hosted by the Stage Manager, a character that bleats his dialogue against the fourth wall. This "manager" separates their role between being a character in Grover's Corners, narrator, and a congenial guy (or lady) that addresses questions from the audience. The Stage Manager and the general tone of the whole production was a result of Wilder acknowledging that he didn't like the direction "the theater" was taking at the time, and *Our Town* was intended to drop intricate sets and impersonal narratives for a simple setup and direct interaction with the audience. Possibly because of this, *Our Town* has been popular since its premiere; however, Wilder often said the play was rarely performed correctly, as, in his own words, it "should be performed without sentimentality or ponderousness--simply, dryly, and sincerely." Good luck with that, Thorn, as the final act of *Our Town* contains one of the most beautiful and insightful exchanges ever directly lifted by Netflix's *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina the Teenage Witch*:

"Does anyone ever realize life while they live it...every, every minute?"

"No. Saints and poets maybe...they do some."

If you're curious about the context of such a statement: Emily, one of the stars of *Our Town* that has been showcased since her childhood days, has died during childbirth. She meets the other ghosts of the graveyard, and learns that, while she is unable to join the skeleton army, she can re-experience any moment from her past. She is warned not to try it, but she chooses to live out a mundane memory from her 12th birthday. Despite the fact that this is a typical, fairly boring day (children's birthday parties in the early 20th Century rarely included enough N64 games to make them worthwhile), Emily can barely bear the weight of experiencing a time when her family was content, happy, and, most importantly, alive. Emily knows what happens to the people close to her 12 year old self, and she knows the hardships and death that await herself and others. Items as humble as sizzling bacon or a kiss from her mother are things Emily will never experience ever again, so this living memory of happier times is agonizing. Do people realize how good they have it when they have it? How every little piece of life is precious, and even something as routine as seeing a family member for breakfast can be lost in an instant? No. Of course not. The Saints and poets sometimes think about such, but you're here reading a videogame essay, and gradually getting distracted by the fact that I mentioned bacon. Get a goddamn snack and then think about how good you have it, you frivolous living person.

So, after explaining one of the most important plays of the last century for 500 words, I'm going to go ahead and assume you've played Final Fantasy 7. You know the drill, right? Cloud presents himself as a highly decorated military veteran, joins his childhood friend and a dude with a gun for a hand to take down an evil corporation, and, yada yada yada, man has to punch a wannabe god square in the face to

save the planet from an extinction level event. Along the way, Aeris dies, Sephiroth loses his shirt, and someone sits his ass down in a chair and drinks his goddamn tea. Final Fantasy 7 wound up beloved beyond measure, and, likely because Square (+/- Enix) needed to recoup its drinking money after blowing it all on rendering internal spirits, FF7 also spawned **an entire theme week's** worth of sequels, prequels, and at least one cell phone commercial that lasted like two hours. As a result, even if you never played Final Fantasy 7, if you're the kind of nerd that reads an obscure videogame blog, you've probably absorbed the generalities of FF7 through sheer cultural osmosis. They might not know their exact names, but everybody can recognize the dog with a fire tail, the dude with the sword as big as he is, and that silly city that kind of looks like a pizza. And, thanks to those previously mentioned sequels/prequels, the world of Final Fantasy 7 has been well and truly fleshed out. You don't need to imagine what grainy, PSX Midgar is "supposed to" look like, you've got UMDs and Blu-rays that contain high definition upscales of anywhere Cloud ever touched. Final Fantasy 7, the seventh complete game in a franchise that has seen a million spin-offs and fifteen "real" entries, has itself been wrung out until every last drop of Mako and Materia could be repurposed for another adventure or five.

So did we ever really need Final Fantasy 7 Remake? Could such a thing be remotely necessary when you could reconstruct the whole of Final Fantasy 7 from unused Ehrgeiz assets? We've been up and down Midgar already, so do we need to do this whole... **thing** all over again? We know the story, guys. At least **that Genesis doof** was trying to do something new with his Sephiroth impression. What would a "remake" have to offer?

And it turns out the answer was obvious: Final Fantasy 7 Remake offers exactly what we need. It offers an opportunity to live a life.

Final Fantasy 7 Remake ends after a generally modified vision of Final Fantasy 7's "original" Midgar content, so, one way or another, we know there is more to Final Fantasy 7 Remake's story than currently exists. So, obviously, we don't know the full details on everything happening yet. That said, one thing is clear: Aerith knows **something**. While other characters in FF7R may be simple "upgraded for 2020" versions of their OG appearances, this new Aerith is not the same flower girl that met her end in 1997. Or maybe she's exactly that Aerith, and her companions are all "new" recreations. We don't know! But it is clear that this Aerith has some level of knowledge of events she shouldn't know (she has at least two conversations with Cloud where she already "knows" information about this complete stranger), and possibly has some kind of ability to confer visions to others (Cloud's brain is already swiss cheese, but check out Aerith's rescue of Marlene, or that time Aerith dropped a datalog into Red XIII's noggin). This may be an Aerith that already experienced "Final Fantasy 7" in full, or she may simply be a sorceress with the ability to see the future through more traditional divination avenues. Magic bracelets? Holy Materia? Whatever the case, one thing is clear: Aerith has at least some knowledge about her companions before they ever meet, and she has a general idea how this story is going to turn out (or at least the "original" story).

Acknowledging the fact that Aerith has foreknowledge of the people around her and their general trajectory in the world, we can make a few assumptions:

1. Aerith knows her ultimate, Masamune-based fate
2. Aerith knows that, despite her death, the rest of her friends are going to save the world
3. Aerith knows that, as part of saving the world, all of the villains involved are going to fail and be punished for their crimes

And when you couple that with the knowledge that Aerith actually likes the rest of the party, you come to one inescapable truth: it must be goddamn amazing to be FF7R Aerith.

Think about it. **Really** think about it. Aerith is, for much of her existence in the FF7R world, consistently thrust into literally deadly situations. Walk three feet away from your house? Here are some spiny, malevolent hedgehogs to greet you. Hanging out at the church? An entire cadre of soldiers has arrived. Chilling at Wall Market? Welcome to an underground fighting tournament, and that can't end well. But guess what? Someone actually does know it's going to end well. Aerith, and her friends, are practically invincible. If Aerith is going to die, it's at the hands of a silver-haired dork with mommy issues, and, since he doesn't spend much time in Midgar, this flower girl is safe. Everybody else makes it out of this adventure alive, so Barret, Tifa, and (of course) Cloud are going to be just fine. And the bad guys are all going to get their due comeuppance, so, while Hojo might have you in a tube at the moment, you know he's not going to successfully run for president down the line or some similarly absurd situation wherein he ultimately "wins". Yes, there is pain. Yes, people do die. But you know who is going to die. You know the tragedies in store, and you've made peace with what will be lost. If nothing else, it means you get to value the time you do get to spend with these familiar faces, even if it is fleeting. In the end, for Aerith, knowing how everything is going to happen is a blessing, because, with full knowledge of how her friends and loved ones are going to be okay, Aerith can experience her world as if it were... a fun game.

And Final Fantasy 7 Remake is, if nothing else, a fun game.

Because, let's be real here, **we** are all this all-knowing Aerith. When Tifa asks Cloud what he remembers about his past, we all wryly wink and recall exactly why Cloud has brain problems. When Jesse wonders why blowing up the reactor was much more of a bang than expected, we are presented with the additional cutscene that shows wily ol' Shinra is up to no good. And when Sephiroth makes the scene, and half the party can't identify this Soldier on sight, we know some hardcore slashin' is about to go down. We all know how Final Fantasy 7 goes, and, what's more, FF7R expands much of the world of FF7 to fill in gaps in the story for the player. We are granted windows into the machinations of Shinra executives and grunts alike, and there is never any doubt when Avalanche is heading into an ambush. It might not be a result of Aerith's precognition, but the player does, by and large, have a good idea of what's going to happen next.

And, in some cases, that is absolutely horrible. The pacing of Final Fantasy 7 Remake's main plot really suffers from the foreknowledge of a Final Fantasy fan. Chapter 6 is another "bombing run" featuring Barret, Tifa, and Cloud as they turn the lights off to battle a mech helicopter, and an obvious issue is that it takes **forever**. This is the exact same task as was completed in Chapter 1, and you know the whole scenario is going to turn out inconsequential (oddly, blowing up power reactors in the FF7 universe never seems to make an impact on anybody), but it still requires hours of "dungeon" exploring, learning two different "minigames", and battling attack dogs, anonymous soldiers, and unusually large bugs. For all of that, the only plot "revelations" that are expressed across those hours is that Shinra is bad, and they'll manipulate literal terrorists for their own ends if they can see a profit in doing so. And we already knew that! And it's done better a few chapters later during the plate incident! Thanks for wasting our time, Final Fantasy 7 Remake! We could have just thrown Cloud off some scaffolding at the start and saved all that time we had to waste on washing bug juices off of Barret!

But if the "main plot" of Final Fantasy 7 Remake isn't the pursuit of Shinra and the disasters it has unleashed on the planet (yeah, that's right, I'm talking about you, Sephy), then is Chapter 6 such a waste

of time? What if the point isn't to defeat Shinra, but simply to enjoy your time with the companions that are close to you? When Chapter 6 begins, Cloud is on the outs with Avalanche, as he has been voted off the island by everyone but his trusty lady friends. Cloud is along on this mission only as a substitute because Jesse sprang her ankle fighting unspeakable cosmic horrors. But by the time Chapter 6 is concluded, Cloud has grown closer to Tifa and Barret, and, without it being outright stated, appears to have become a full-fledged member of the team, complete with Barret accepting this spikey-haired merc as a valuable contribution to the cause. Avalanche doesn't accomplish anything during Chapter 6, but Cloud grows closer to his friends. And, considering we all know Cloud winds up living with one of those friends, and becoming a quasi-uncle to the child of the other, we know this is a worthwhile relationship. Cloud is growing as a person, and the player is getting closer to these familiar, genial characters. Did you know Barret had a whole speech prepared for the moment he would appear on camera? I didn't before "worthless" Chapter 6.

And that's the crux of Final Fantasy 7 Remake. This isn't a game about fighting some sword-wielding doofus, his malevolent parent company, or whoever is currently in charge of "clean coal". This game is an excuse to hang out with old friends, and rediscover why you liked these weirdos in the first place. This isn't a game that lengthened every town just to throw in a few extra mini quests, this is an experience that expanded its world so you could have more time and more ways to enjoy it with beloved characters. It may have taken five minutes in FF7 to get through a town that will now eat up hours, but that's because FF7R wants you to cherish the world of FF7 and everything in it. Final Fantasy 7 sequels did not perform as well as the original. Final Fantasy 7 prequels did not perform as well as the original. The audience apparently wanted the original, so here is the original. Here is the whole, original gang just as you remember them (give or take a polygon or two) in their original, iconic scenario and setting. These are your old friends. Appreciate that this world was made for you as much as it was for them.

Enjoy spending time with Cloud like you're a 20-something woman who knows she isn't long for this world, and gets to spend a scant few more days with the people she loves.

And it's clear this isn't an accident. The new eldritch horrors of FF7R, the Whispers (so christened by a dog that doesn't even reveal his own name), are the ultimate foes of this adventure. They are present practically from the start, they continually, enigmatically hurt and heal the party, and, when the chips are down and we need a dramatic final fight that doesn't involve a motorcycle, they swarm together to form a big bad boss or two. Much of the "new" plot of FF7R is given over to the question of what exactly these shadowy jerks are up to, and the ultimate answer seems to be that they want to make Final Fantasy 7 Remake turn out like Final Fantasy 7. Now, as someone who once won a surfing competition entirely by riding a metaphor wave for hours on end (the judges were so excited and confused), I can appreciate that the Whispers can be interpreted in a number of ways. Are they meant to represent fans that demand all new experiences be the same as the old? Are they a shadowy monument to how the creators of Final Fantasy 7 feel constrained and restricted by the expectations of their own creation? Or is it something even more "inside": a trio of color-coded Whispers is clearly meant to evoke the antagonists of **Advent Children**, so maybe they're supposed to represent the mistakes the FF7 franchise has made in pursuit of milking its own past. A shadowy simulacrum of a clone of a clone of the genetic freak that still holds the record for most homosexually charged three-way swordfight (God, I miss the PSP) is battling for a future where he's allowed to exist, and the mere fact that that concept makes any sense at all perhaps proves that the Final Fantasy 7 franchise has, like this entire paragraph, gotten a little out of control. At the time of this writing, the Whispers could be literally anything: we only have the context revealed within in Final Fantasy 7 Remake, and there isn't so

much as a mysterious trailer for FF7R2 yet to offer some conjecture as to their ultimate purpose or how a world where they have once been defeated will turn out. If the Whispers are revealed to be a version of Sephiroth that stole his name and then became a floating spaceship monster, well, **it wouldn't be the first time**.

But, while the exact motivations and purpose of the Whispers have not yet been fully revealed, we are told what will happen if they win the final battle. If they win, Final Fantasy 7 happens. And, to at least one member of your party, that means death. Aerith will, if the Whispers get their way, meet the same fate as Jesse, Wedge, and Zack: she will die so the survivors can be sad and/or righteous. Yes, her friends will go on to save the world, but they will go on without **her**, and a shopping trip with Tifa will never happen. Before the final Whisper battle, Aerith resolves that she will fight for this uncertain future, because, whereas it will mean she will no longer have the cheat codes of the universe that previously made her more rash decisions comfortable ("Let's go ahead and infiltrate Captain Rapist's mansion in frilly dresses. I know it will turn out fine!"), Aerith decides she will fight for a new fate. The ostensible protagonist of the franchise stands there gargling up spit bubbles (this is what Cloud is doing whenever the camera isn't distinctly focused on him), and Aerith resolves to make the biggest decision in the game. Hell, considering everything else was seemingly preordained by the events of Final Fantasy 7 and the Whispers demanding to see that all again, it is possible Aerith makes the **only** decision that exists in this world. And why does she do it? Why does she fight? Because she wants a world she can be in. She wants a world where she can enjoy new stories. She has experienced FF7 again, and it makes her want to **live**, and live with the people she loves.

Aerith wants the opportunity to realize life while she lives it. Every glorious and horrifying moment of it.

Our Town was created by Thornton Wilder, who rejected the (then) current direction of modern theater. It seems Final Fantasy 7 Remake, which was directed and written by a number of the people that worked on the original Final Fantasy 7 (and countless other JRPGs), aims to similarly reject the modern direction of its parent genre. After years of AAA games that have focused on a core party and left NPCs to be little more than side-quest distributors, Final Fantasy 7 Remake fashioned a world. It eschewed simple maps for towns that could literally leave the player to get lost, and made every last "side quest" an important part of the character's lives. When Final Fantasy 7 Remake ends with the party leaving Midgar, you **know** Midgar more than was ever possible in Final Fantasy 7 (or any other Final Fantasy town before FF7R). The lives of these "NPCs" are expertly woven into the fabric of characters that are already treasured, and now the likes of Marle the Landlady or Ms. Folia the teacher can stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Cloud and Aerith. Modern, huge JRPGs barely have time to establish a supporting cast after spending all their resources on rendering 70 different swords, but FF7R takes the time to give its every last resident... life. And you, player, are asked to experience this life with them. Not necessarily a life that is all firagas and gun-hands, but a life where someone's existence is genuinely better because you decided to go round up some lost kids. A life that is more mundane, more sizzling bacon on the stove, but a life all the same. A life that you should realize while you live it, whether it involves roving behemoths or not.

Final Fantasy 7 Remake is not a story about fighting silver-haired swordsmen, shadow monsters, or a particularly homicidal electric company. Final Fantasy 7 Remake is a story about people living their lives, trying to get through the challenges of equally mundane and extraordinary days, and ultimately making the choice to fight for a future where that can continue. Final Fantasy 7 Remake, for being a "remake" of a very established title, is one of the most subtly subversive videogames to come around in a long time, and its subversion stems from its kindness and thoughtfulness.

In 1938, we had Our Town.

Now, in 2020, we have Final Fantasy: R Town.

Realize life while you live it, even if it's just in an effort to enjoy terrible wordplay.

FGC #526 Final Fantasy 7 Remake

System: Playstation 4 exclusive for right now! You're going to have to wait to mod Cloud into a dress for the entire adventure.

Number of players: Wouldn't this game just be the shiznite if it had online play, and another player could control another party member? Or would that be really annoying? I can't tell. We're stuck with one player until that day, though.

Let the Battles Begin: This article wholly focused on the plot changes to Remake, but the whole new battle system is... something. Look, on one hand, I kind of want my low impact JRPG combat back, and I'm not 100% certain I want to be block-timing in a game that involves more than a few tentacle monsters. That said, I like the battle system, it feels like an improvement over **Kingdom Hearts** mechanics, and this whole setup does allow for dramatic 1-on-1 battles that would be impossible in the old way of doing things. It feels like a few kinks need to be ironed out (why does Aerith feel boring to use but is somehow the most powerful/useful member of my party?), but I look forward to where this iteration of Square action-JRPG gameplay is going.

Crazy Motorcycle Chase: That said, I hate every moment of motorcycle combat. The fact that beating the game unlocks the ability to skip these sections is the greatest reward a game has ever granted a player.

Barret? He has gone from an important but inessential piece of FF7 (that makes sense, right?) to the true heart of the adventure. He obviously takes a backseat to the main trio of Cloud-Aerith-Tifa, but he really does feel like a trailblazer that is incidentally letting the mercenary pave the way for now, and not just the dude that makes decisions when "real" leaders aren't around. And he genuinely cares for Marlene! She seemed like a bit of an afterthought when he was globetrotting in the original. One way or another, this Barret feels like a fully realized character, and not the poor dude that got ignored in so many FF7 spin-offs.

Naked Pandering: The new plot really lays it on thick with the Avalanche supporting cast. Biggs is a former schoolteacher? Wedge collects stray cats? Jesse is hornier than a hedgehog pie? I feel like I would have respected FF7R a scotch more if they decided to reveal some of the team's vices before their (maybe) inevitable ends. Don't make these dudes into saints, tell me about that time Biggs became obsessed with drinking tiger blood! It's more humanizing!

Let's take a break: I love the benches everywhere, and it's great that a HP/MP refill is so seamlessly immediate in dangerous areas. That said, the way the benches are placed and utilized kind of gives the impression that Cloud is a narcoleptic. Or maybe an old man? "You kids want to go to that next boss fight? That's great, but Uncle Cloud needs to have a little sit. Play with your materia or something, I need to rest my eyes."

Unanswered Questions: I still would like to know how Aerith knows her Holy Materia isn't working. Like, I get that it doesn't work like a Fire Materia granting pyrokinetic powers, but does Barret just feel his fortune increasing every time he slots in a Luck Up Materia? Or how about Enemy Skill Materia? That one doesn't "function" at all until a monster self-destructs in your face, and that's not the kind of thing you just want to assume is working when you approach a sparking robot. Maybe your Holy Materia is the reason you can shoot little balls out of your stick, Aerith. You ever think about that?

Just play the gig man: Fun fact? Apparently the song I associate most with Final Fantasy 7 is (Ahead) On Our Way. Unfortunately, that doesn't get as many remixes as the Main Theme, Tifa's Theme, Aerith's Theme, or the infinitely remixed Battle Theme. But it's in there! I think! Sorry, it's hard to remember where I heard it, as Barret just whistled the victory theme again, and now that's stuck in my head.

Requests for the Sequel: I want to see this iteration of Final Fantasy 7 actually end, but with a finale that includes Aerith lamenting, "Oh hell. We forgot to pick up Vincent!" The rest of the party just stares at her blankly while they save the world. "Who was Vincent?"

Did you know? Final Fantasy 7 was the original. Then there were a number of spin-offs that were alphabetized: Advent Children, Before Crisis, Crisis Core, and Dirge of Cerberus. That is four spin-off items, even if they can't all strictly be called "games". Now we have Final Fantasy 7 Remake. That means the next Final Fantasy 7 game will be the seventh Final Fantasy 7 experience. Final Fantasy 7-7. Final Fantasy Seven Seconds?

Would I play again: Probably sometime before the inevitable sequel. I'd like to see some of the other scenarios in Wall Market, but, by and large, I am content with my playthrough of Final Fantasy 7 Remake. I'm fond of the time I spent with these characters, and I'll let that simmer for a little while longer. One day I'll go back and conquer the coliseum...

What's next? Random ROB has chosen... Megaman & Bass for the Gameboy Advance! Or maybe it's Rockman & Forte? Whatever! What's important is that we will have a special guest that is only marginally related to the game at hand. Megaman is great, but maybe you wanna be a Mega... guy? Please look forward to it!