Respawn
Milburn, Colin

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There is a common refrain among fans of the 1997 Japanese video game *Final Fantasy VII*: “This game pwns.”¹ Developed by Square (now Square Enix) for the Sony PlayStation and Windows, the game has attained legendary status: “This game pwns all.”² It beggars description, virtually sublime: “ffvii pwns . . . I don’t even think pwns describes it.”³ For many gamers, it represents not only the pinnacle of the long-running *Final Fantasy* series, but also the climax of video-game culture at large: “Final Fantasy VII frigin pwns anyone and anything!!!”⁴ By now, the widespread adoration of this game has even become a cliché, a stereotype of geek zealotry: “I dont care what you say, ff7 pwns all.”⁵

The gamer vocabulary of “pwning” signifies the domination of an opponent—owning, conquering. But it also represents a quality of excellence, brilliance, and delight. According to gamer lore, the verb “to pwn” originated in the gaming community itself, born from a typographic error. One popular theory points to a multiplayer map in the 1994 game *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*, allegedly the result of a developer’s hasty misspelling. Another common theory holds that the term arose during a deathmatch session of the 1996 game *Quake*, beginning with a player’s slip of the keyboard when proudly announcing that an adversary had been “owned.” Instead of being ignored or overlooked in the reckless pace of the game, the mistake was called out and then wildly embraced. Yet others have suggested that the term goes back deeper in gaming history, born from chess: a corruption
of the word *pawn* and the tactics of taking down an opponent by using the lowliest pieces on the board.⁶

Despite such origin stories, the notion of pwning as coeval with gaming remains dubious, unproven, an enigma of leetspeak. But in their desire to establish the mythic roots of pwning among games and gamers, these folk etymologies suggest the strong communal value of a term that can mean both a smackdown and a reckoning, a mark of virtuosity as well as virtue. For as much as it might indicate a glorious owning, it also suggests a condition of accountability: an owning that owns up to its mistakes, its failures.

In a ridiculously ironic way, after all, the recycling of the mistaken *p* signals a reclaiming of error, even if nothing more than a typographical error, yet expanded into a hallmark of gamer identity. It takes seriously the error as belonging to *us*—our group, our community—owning it and then finding ways to transform it, rendering it surprisingly productive of other ways of thinking, with pleasure, in common.

It is a term that recognizes, in its playfulness, that one cannot simply undo past wrongs, but instead discovers renovated potential precisely by playing through, learning from the blunder, and responding to such unexpected risks of goofing around with technology: a *mistaken owning* now troped into a way of taking charge of the game, taking responsibility.

In this regard, then, pwning might be understood as an ironic ethical concept, a ludic if not ludicrous ethics. Especially in the context of a game such as *Final Fantasy VII*, widely recognized as a richly layered allegory of environmental crisis and the planetary impacts of technological development, the ironies and paradoxes of pwning are front and center.

Like other games of environmental responsibility, *Final Fantasy VII* recursively implicates game technologies in environmental risk and ecological despoliation. It is a relentlessly self-reflexive game that provides players with conceptual and affective resources to address the consequences of their own recreational pleasures. While encouraging them to love their hardware, it simultaneously galvanizes some players to love responsibly and to take a stand for sustainable media—developing alternative practices of technogenic life.

**A Bird in the Hand**

There is a scene in *Final Fantasy VII* where our intrepid band of heroes, led by the ex-corporate soldier Cloud Strife, encounters a nest of monstrous baby birds. The game prompts the player: “What should we do?” If the player chooses that Cloud and his companions should leave the nest in
peace, Cloud’s childhood friend Tifa responds, “Right! That was admirable of you.” If, however, the player chooses to pilfer the nest, the mama bird immediately descends to defend her young. The player is then locked in mortal combat with the mama bird, with no other choice remaining but to destroy her or lose the game. As soon as the mama bird dies, the heroes receive the treasure in the nest: a bundle of magical Phoenix Downs for restoring life to fallen characters. The scene concludes with Cloud silently staring at the nest of newly orphaned birds, scratching his spiky head, as if recognizing that he and his friends have now doomed these young creatures as surely as they have destroyed the mother, all for the sake of gaming advantage (fig. 7.1).

The scene has provoked considerable debate. Some players see it purely as a tactical moment, another opportunity to maximize utility: “I always took [the Phoenix Downs]. . . . I say if it only helps to take them then take them. Don’t give in to cute little 10001001, come on its just a computer animated bird.” For these players, the game is simply a game, an algorithmic system. To think otherwise is to be duped by fiction: “always take them [the Phoenix Downs]. There’s no reason not to except for role-playing purposes.” Others take the representation more seriously while still advocating a hard-nosed financial
calculus: “I always take the phoenix downs because they are useful and the items are expensive. So it is money saved. Yeah it is sad that momma bird dies, but hey in real life it happens also.” Yet even for these pragmatic players, the scene often induces a role-playing effect, an affective response, precisely because it shows the collateral impacts of the most profitable course of action: “I always take them. It saves money and all that, exp [experience points] and such. Do I feel guilty? Sort of.”

While many are perfectly content to live with this choice and its instrumental rewards, others find it intolerable: “I only ever took them the first time I ever played it, then promptly felt guilty for ages after when I killed the parents :gasp: So I’ve never taken them since xD I just can’t bring myself to do it, even though I know they would come in handy. . . . I look at the little chicks and I’m like awwwwww. I think about it for a few minutes then come to the conclusion that I just can’t do it.” It is a common experience: “I took it once, then guilt ate away at me and I ended up restarting the game. Guess I just felt bad for the little birdies.” Some even translate the moment into a moral imperative: “I have never taken the phoenix downs from the nest. If I did I could not live with my self literally the birds are so cute . . . Please don’t take them.”

It is a strangely poignant moment in a game that, up to this point, has consistently rewarded the player for ransacking every hidden treasure and slaying all manner of other creatures. Following the model of earlier games in the Final Fantasy series—and like most role-playing games (RPGs) in general—Final Fantasy VII structures its gameplay around “level grinding,” the process of gaining power, money, and equipment by fighting monsters and wildlife, becoming stronger and more experienced with each victory. The baby bird scene merely highlights the fact that the entire game, characteristic of RPGs as a genre, encourages us to carve a path of carnage across the planet in order to level up. More than one player has noted the irony: “RPG characters are always trying to fix the world (while killing as much flora and fauna as it takes to reach level 99).”

It is a particular irony in the context of Final Fantasy VII, which focuses on the efforts of Cloud and his scrappy companions to save the planet from the exploitations of Shinra, Inc. Shinra is a ruthless technology corporation that controls the global energy infrastructure. Running its own private army called Soldier, Shinra dominates the political economy of the world. The Shinra business plan is based on constructing powerful reactors to extract Mako energy from the geological depths of the planet. Mako is a natural resource, converted into fuel by the reactors. In concentrated form, it is also the source of numerous strange phenomena that are commonly considered
“magic” (though some characters point out that any mysterious power is just unexplained science: “It shouldn’t even be called ‘magic’

Eager for profit, Shinra supplies more and more Mako to feed the energy demands of the human population, especially in the high-tech city of Midgar. At the outset of the game, Shinra’s extraction of Mako has reached a crisis point, threatening the integrity of the planet, the vitality of its ecosystems past and present (the “Lifestream”). The Mako economy has also created enormous social disparities. In Midgar, the poor live in the bottom tier of the city, below the surface, no other choice but to inhabit an urban stratum filled with pollution from the Mako reactors: “The upper world . . . a city on a plate . . . people underneath are sufferin’! And the city below is full of polluted air. On topa that, the Reactor keeps drainin’ up all the energy.”

Riding the train that connects the different sectors of the city, Cloud suddenly observes the path dependencies of existing technological infrastructures and socioeconomic orders, the extent to which choices made in the past lock in certain futures that often seem impossible to change: “I know . . . no one lives in the slums because they want to. It’s like this train. It can’t run anywhere except where its rails take it.” A train on a track: a metaphor for what the philosopher Martin Heidegger called the technical ordering of destining, that is to say, technological enframing. It indicates a dominant mode of existence in the modern world, the manner in which all things are challenged forth as standing-reserve, component resources in the relentless drive of technologization. This theme is reinforced throughout Final Fantasy VII. Indeed, the head of the Shinra Public Safety division—that is, the Shinra military—is even named Heidegger.

The game puts the player in charge of a group of characters actively resisting Shinra and the environmental crisis it has created. Cloud and the other protagonists are members of the militant ecological group AVALANCHE, whose tactical ops focus on blowing up the Mako reactors. AVALANCHE’s activities—lauded by some, vilified by others—foment an eschatological discourse on environmental justice, as suggested by scattered graffiti in Midgar:

Don’t be taken in by the Shinra.
Mako energy will not last forever.
Mako is the life of the Planet and that life is finite.
The end is coming.
Saviors of the Planet: AVALANCHE
To the extent that the game presents its core conflict as an epic struggle for the fate of the planet, with Cloud and avalanche fighting a guerrilla war against the militarized corporate power of Shinra, the fact that the heroes must procedurally depopulate the wildlife of every region they visit would perhaps seem an instance of ludonarrative dissonance—a radical disjunction between gameplay mechanics and narrative content. Yet this is exactly the point. The game draws attention to the ways in which its own conventional gameplay design, its random encounters and accumulative leveling structure, allegorize a general predicament: to play a video game, any video game, is to contribute however indirectly to the environmental hazards represented by electronic media.

*Final Fantasy VII* encourages us to remember, precisely in the conflict between its narrative of environmental heroism and its ludic insistence on random acts of animal slaughter, how video games and other technologies of entertainment exacerbate global ecological problems. Pointedly, repeatedly, it emphasizes the links between digital media and the world’s unsustainable energy economy. For example, a citizen of Midgar advises Cloud about their media dependency on Mako: “If you knock out Midgar’s power, then all of its computers and signals are going to be knocked out too.” When playing the game, whether on a personal computer or a PlayStation console, we are reminded that, as gamers, we are contributing to the environmental crisis—even as the narrative of the game charges us, at least fictively, to do something about it.

**Runaway Train**

Barret, the leader of avalanche, addresses the technological condition of the world with a recurring metaphor—his personal motto: “There ain’t no gettin’ offa this train we on! The train we on don’t make no stops!” The figure of the runaway train suggests the deterministic force of industrialization and the path dependency of the energy economy, the acceleration of petroculture. The game depicts energy consumption speeding up as the result of new technologies, especially in the transition from coal-powered systems to the Shinra-controlled Mako reactors. However gradually at first, the fate of the planet was set once humans began to extract machine fuel from the remains of living things (symbolized as a fluid “Spirit energy” that flows into the underground Lifestream). As the scientist-mystic Bugenhagen says, “Every day Mako reactors suck up Spirit energy, diminishing it. Spirit energy gets compressed in the reactors and processed into Mako energy. All living things are being used up and thrown away. In other words, Mako energy will only destroy the planet.”
Recognizing that technological decisions of the past have become self-reinforcing, Barret repeatedly admonishes his companions that they must fight to change the system in its entirety: “But you gotta understand that there ain’t no gettin’ offa this train we on, till we get to the end of the line.” His metaphor points to the material infrastructures underpinning the social order, while also emphasizing that we are all in it together, for better or worse. Barret’s insistence that we are all passengers on the same train distributes responsibility to everyone, in pointed contrast to the polarized structure of the game’s playable narrative, which identifies the corporate greed and unethical scientific experiments of Shinra as the primary threats to environmental sustainability.

Certainly, Shinra represents the worst excesses of high-tech global capitalism. Even as the existing Mako sources threaten to run dry, destabilizing the integrity of the entire world, Shinra strives to locate the so-called Promised Land, a hidden region of vast Mako reserves, and drain it completely. Irritated by the Avalanche insurgents and their strikes against the Mako reactors in Midgar, Shinra responds by detonating the supporting structures of the Sector 7 plate, which divides the gentrified upper level of the city from the slums below. The slum area is crushed by the collapse of the massive plate: a shocking display of corporate force that callously destroys the lives of thousands of people simply to stifle a handful of rebels.

Moreover, it is Shinra’s work on the military applications of Mako and the company’s unethical biotechnology research that shifts the “slow violence” of the energy economy into a climax crisis: the existential threat represented by Sephiroth and his summoning of the Meteor, a potential extinction event. Sephiroth, the most powerful member of Soldier, is the product of Shinra’s experimental research, engineered from human and alien materials, as well as heavy doses of Mako. He is both the pinnacle of Shinra’s military science program and its foreclosure, for upon discovering his synthetic origins, Sephiroth turns against Shinra and the entire biosphere. Another figure of the runaway train, Sephiroth is an uncontainable force produced by technoscientific choices of the past—and now driving the entire planet headlong toward catastrophe.

Despite that Shinra is a war-mongering, criminal corporation, most people of the world are willingly duped by its propaganda (“Shinra’s Future Is The World’s Future!! Mako Energy For A Brighter World!!”). In the complacent town of Kalm, for example, an old man says, “Thanks to Shinra, Inc. developing Mako energy for us, everything’s more convenient now.” A woman says, “I’d hate to think of what life’d be like without Mako energy. . . . Yeah, Mako
energy’s made our lives much easier. And it’s all thanks to Shinra, Inc.” Even awareness of the looming crisis cannot shake this attitude. “I hear that the natural resources near the reactors are being sucked dry,” says one villager. But he nevertheless concludes, “We’re better off with them bringing in the Mako energy.” This widespread feeling, according to the president of Shinra, cannot even be threatened by the rising prices of Mako: “It’ll be all right. The ignorant citizens won’t lose confidence, they’ll trust Shinra, Inc. even more.” The citizens of the world are happy to accept exploitation as long as they can avoid changing their way of life.

But no one is innocent. Even Cloud bears the evidence of complicity in his own flesh. His glowing blue eyes indicate that he was literally showered in Mako to enhance his capabilities as a corporate warfighter: “That’s the sign of those who have been infused with Mako. . . . A mark of soldier.” Barret, likewise, sports a prosthetic gun-arm, a constant remembrance of the catastrophic destruction of his hometown of Corel. Barret had urged the people of Corel to give up coal and allow Shinra to build a Mako reactor near the town (“No one uses coal nowadays. It’s the sign of the times.”) But disaster falls: “There was an explosion at [the] reactor. Shinra blamed the accident on the people. Said it was done by a rebel faction.” The Shinra army burned the town, killing Barret’s wife and shooting off his arm while he tried to save a friend. Replacing his ruined arm with a gun, Barret became the leader of Avalanche to alleviate his own culpability: “But more than Shinra, I couldn’t forgive myself. Never should’ve gone along with the building of the reactor.” But as Tifa says, “We were all fooled by the promises Shinra made back then.” The mistakes are ours, we must own them. We are all passengers. We are all playing the game.

Whenever his companions start to lose track of the technopolitical objective—that is, the goal of this game—Barret rallies them with the familiar refrain: “C’mon, let’s think about this! No way we can get offa this train we’re on.” The insistence on the technically determined pathway also self-reflexively points to the narrative of Final Fantasy VII itself, to the software of the game and its predetermined range of possible choices. For the player of Final Fantasy VII, just as for the characters in the story, the only apparent option is to play through to the end or to quit entirely. It is a reminder that our own participation in the game is coterminous with the journey of Cloud and friends to defeat Shinra, a journey that shows how they have always been as responsible as everyone else in maintaining the status quo, the Mako economy and the corporate systems accelerating its expansion.
The central drama of *Final Fantasy VII*, after all, is about discovering the extent to which even those who resist the prevailing systems of control are likewise products of those same systems, mystified by the conditions of high-tech living to overlook everyday failures of responsibility, including their own failures. It is drama about accepting the fact that we are all puppets of the technopolitical regimes we inhabit, for only by owning up to this can we begin to find ways of turning our puppet condition to advantage, to game the game.

**No Strings Attached**

The big twist in *Final Fantasy VII* is that Cloud is not who he thinks he is—and in more ways than one. He has played out an elaborate fantasy in his own mind, creating a fictive backstory to avoid grappling with his inability to achieve his ambitions. It blinds him to the fact that he is also being controlled by an external agency: “There’s something inside of me. A person who is not really me.” He discovers that he is a pawn, a doll, a marionette: “I’m . . . a puppet?”

This puppet condition is the result of a series of failures: “I never was in *soldier*. I made up the stories about what happened to me five years ago, about being in *soldier*. I left my village looking for glory, but never made it in to *soldier* . . . . I was so ashamed of being so weak; then I heard this story from my friend Zack. . . . And I created an illusion of myself made up of what I had seen in my life. . . . And I continued to play the charade as if it were true.” Haunted by anxieties of weakness, Cloud’s personality is further destabilized when Professor Hojo of the Shinra science division tries to turn him into a copy of Sephiroth: “You are just a puppet . . . . An incomplete Sephiroth-clone. Not even given a number. That is your reality.” Cloud is rescued by his friend Zack, an accomplished member of *soldier*, but the nefarious experiment nearly destroys him: “I was a failed experiment.” Cloud’s mental stability crumbles completely when Zack dies in combat. Cloud then constructs a fake history for himself. His persona as an ex-*soldier* resistance fighter is merely an avatar, a puppet identity without substance. He is a shell, a fictive version of himself secretly manipulated by Sephiroth (“I wasn’t pursuing Sephiroth. I was being summoned by Sephiroth.”).

By owning up to being a failed hero and a failed experiment, conceding his puppet condition and working to move beyond it, Cloud gains the upper hand: “I never lived up to being ‘Cloud,’” he tells Tifa. “Maybe one day
you’ll meet the real ‘Cloud.’” He does not accomplish this alone, of course, but with the help of friends. Tifa guides him to reconstruct an identity from the stream of his memories tinged with fantasies of Zack’s exploits: a composite fiction that ultimately becomes real life. “I’m . . . Cloud . . . the master of my own illusionary world. But I can’t remain trapped in an illusion any more. . . . I’m going to live my life without pretending.”

This process represents the pawning of error, taking responsibility for the failed experiment. Cloud was a victim of Shinra’s military research program, certainly—but only because he had already volunteered for the Shinra ranks in a misguided effort to join soldier. He was a puppet of the military-petroleum complex, from the beginning. Only by recognizing his personal contribution to the onrushing environmental calamity (under Sephiroth’s influence, he even hands over the Black Materia for summoning Meteor) can he change the course: “I’m the reason why Meteor is falling towards us. That’s why I have to do everything in my power to fight this thing. . . . There ain’t no gettin’ offa this train we on!” Taking charge of his own mystification, he actually becomes the virtuous warrior he was not supposed to be. Cloud’s pawning of the environmental crisis, even in going forward “without pretending,” thus depends on an elaborate role-playing game, adopting the role of the “real Cloud” who emerges from the other side of his own puppet condition, the “real Cloud” who turns out to have been a hero in sufferance, all along.

These narrative twists allegorize the gameplay situation itself. The player, having puppeted Cloud throughout the game, occupies two roles simultaneously: both the puppet, identifying with Cloud, controlled by Sephiroth’s will—which is to say, controlled by the game software and its narrative that inexorably drives us through the action—and the puppeteer, the controlling agency behind the console in whose hands the action lies. It is a recursive allegory that valorizes the capacity of RPGs to create an ecologically responsive subject, an eco-warrior fighting for the planet by taking responsibility for past mistakes. Playing the role of “Cloud” is literally the means by which Cloud works though failure to become better than himself. We, as players of Cloud, are invited to take the same initiative.13

In this way, Final Fantasy VII fashions itself as an instrument of ecologically responsible technopolitics, an instrument of change. Over and again, its narrative recursively emphasizes the transformative power of games, the subversive potential of role-playing and other forms of ludic recreation. The secret avalanche hideout in Midgar, for example, is actually hidden beneath a pinball machine (fig. 7.2). Or consider the Gold Saucer: a vast
pleasure dome, an amusement park offering a wealth of playable minigames, including video arcades, chocobo races, basketball, VR battles, and more. The Gold Saucer bodies forth the culture of fun and games as such. On the one hand, it represents gaming as a distraction from real environmental crisis, a temporary escape from the problems of modern life. When the AVALANCHE crew enters the Gold Saucer, hot on the trail of Sephiroth, Aeris says, “Wow! Let’s have fun! I know this isn’t the right time to do this. I wish we could just forget everything and have fun!” The Gold Saucer is an alluring diversion, beguiling the AVALANCHE team to waste time while the fate of the world remains at stake. But on the other hand, the Gold Saucer episode shows how games also provide clues, tools, and skills for addressing the material conditions of the present.

After all, when exploring the entry hub to the Gold Saucer, Cloud finds the following poster: “Many attractions await you here at Gold Saucer. You will be moved and excited, thrilled and terrified! Led from one zone to another . . . unlike anything you’ve ever experienced!” And at the bottom of the poster: “Shinra.” In other words, the Gold Saucer and its ludic pleasures have
been developed by the very same company controlling the energy economy and driving the planet to disaster.

It also becomes clear that the entire Gold Saucer structure has been built upon the ruins of Old Corel, Barret’s hometown, which had been decimated by the Mako reactor explosion, razed by Shinra’s army, and then repurposed as a prison. The pleasure dome has risen from the ashes of this calamity. The lucrative chocobo races inside the Gold Saucer even rely on convicts from the Corel prison below, who are lured into the races in hopes of winning their freedom. If Cloud therefore learns that games contribute to petroculture and environmental despoliation, corporate power and securitization, we as players must also reckon with the idea that the gaming console in our hands is a node in a much larger system of technopolitical forces and material flows. Certainly, some Final Fantasy VII players become acutely attentive to such connections: “You are aware how god-awful video games are for the environment right?” Or as another player explains, “Why are we still so dependent on

Figure 7.3. Final Fantasy VII: Avatars upon avatars—respawned. Square, 1997. Cait Sith (a robotic cat piloting a synthetic moogle, puppeted by Reeve, playable as a game character) sacrifices himself in the Temple of the Ancients to help Avalanche secure the Black Materia. He asks to be remembered after death, even while anticipating his return, already looking ahead to respawning in another toy body. Cait Sith renders visible the conditions of technogenic life, the transfiguration of what it means to live through computational machines.
oil? Because we need the electricity to play Final Fantasy VII, of course. Speaking of which, am I the only one who thinks that it’s a bit hypocritical . . . it’s kind of annoying to get an environmental message from a video game that essentially wastes electricity for the sake of entertainment.”

But this shocking revelation of the impurity of gaming is, of course, afforded by gaming itself—a type of double agency. It is for this reason that our first exploration of the Gold Saucer also introduces the playable character of Cait Sith. Like Cloud, Cait Sith is a self-reflexive figure of the puppet. Cait Sith has a robot moogle body, apparently piloted by the intelligent cat riding on the robot’s head (fig. 7.3). Cait Sith joins the avalanche team to fight Shinra and Sephiroth. But it turns out that Cait Sith is a double agent. The intelligent cat is actually a cybernetic avatar teleoperated by Reeve, a Shinra employee who runs the urban development department back in Midgar: “This [Cait Sith] body’s just a toy anyway. My real body’s at Shinra Headquarters in Midgar. I’m controllin’ this toy cat from there.” A remote-controlled toy, Cait Sith was set up in the Gold Saucer to infiltrate Cloud’s group and undermine the resistance from inside.

Yet as an effect of role-playing as an eco-warrior, Reeve starts to identify with the insurgency. Speaking through the Cait Sith puppet body, he confesses to the avalanche group: “Alright, yes, I am a Shinra employee. But we’re not entirely enemies. . . . Something bothers me. I think it’s your way of life. You don’t get paid. You don’t get praised. Yet, you still risk your lives and continue on your journey. Seeing that makes me . . . It just makes me think about my life. I don’t think I’d feel too good if things ended the way they are now.” Reeve switches sides, turning against his employer and embracing the Cait Sith role. He emerges as the virtuous defender of the planet he had not planned to be. In playing along, even from the compromised position of Shinra middle management, Reeve discovers hope—and becomes otherwise.

If at First You Don’t Succeed . . .

Hope—even faced with the scope of the problem, recognizing the difficulty of solving a crisis while contributing to it, the double agency of pwning says to play through, try again. Bugenhagen reflects on this conundrum: “Cloud says they are trying to save the planet. Honestly, I don’t think it can be done. For even if they stop every reactor on the planet, it’s only going to postpone the inevitable. Even if they stop Sephiroth, everything will perish. But . . . I’ve been thinking lately. I’ve been thinking if there was anything we could do, as a part of the planet, something to help a planet already in misery. . . .
No matter what happens, isn’t it important to try?” For Bugenhagen, this entails responsible innovation: not a relinquishment of modern science and technology, but an obligation to find other ways, different technopolitics.

For example, during the companions’ adventure in the wild northern snowfields, Barret observes that some human modification of the environment might be desirable: “Seein’ a place like this, makes you realize how awesome nature is. But, if anyone ever told me to live here, I’d tell them to . . . you know . . . I’ll tell you one thing though, If I did have to live here I’d change things around ‘n’ make it better. I guess the total opposite of this would be . . . Midgar. When you think of it that way, Shinra don’t seem so bad. . . . Uuuuuurrrrgh!! What the hell am I sayin’!? The Shinra, not bad!?" Barret begins to consider Shinra’s industrial expansion less as a symbol of evil than as a failure of responsible innovation, a symptom of capitalist profiteering. Indeed, the game implies that other options for the flourishing of high-tech human civilization and the planetary ecosystem are possible. Bugenhagen, for instance, imagines an alignment of natural processes and human ingenuity: “Smells like machinery. I love this smell. Of course, I also love the smell of nature, too. . . . I can feel the workings of the planet in the smell of the wind. I also feel the greatness of man's wisdom and the knowledge in the smell of machinery.” It turns out that Bugenhagen had also formerly been a Shinra employee, and his deep understanding of the planet, his holistic notions, and his ethics were not shaped in isolation from Shinra technologies but in relation to them. Living in the ecotopian village of Cosmo Canyon, Bugenhagen has put Shinra’s machines to more sustainable purposes: “Wrapped up in the planet’s strange notions surrounded by Shinra-made machines . . . Science and the planet lived side by side in that old man’s heart.”

It is a vision of sustainable media, conjured forth through the mechanisms of unsustainable media. The provocation that a source of danger could itself become a saving power, that the conditions of modern technologization might be the means of their own transformation—a Heideggerian paradox, to be sure—is everywhere affirmed in the game.16 Debating the merits of high-tech solutions versus the power of nature (e.g., magic) for averting global catastrophe, Cid Highwind, the ace pilot who joins Cloud and his companions, says, “I don’t give a rat’s ass whether it’s science or magical power. No, I guess if I had to choose, I’d rather put my money on the power of science. . . . Science is a ‘Power’ created and developed by humans. And science just might be what saves this planet.” Certainly, the future is filled with risk. Every choice is a gamble (“put my money”), a maneuver in a game. But winning this game—that is, arriving at the conclusion of Final
Fantasy VII—means using a high-tech system (the console, for example) to work through the crises of high-tech globalization and achieve a different outcome. This is the point of the game’s coda. Several centuries after the collision of Meteor and the Lifestream, Nanaki—once known as the experimental test subject Red XIII—and his cubs gaze on the ruins of Midgar that have grown verdant with new life. The coda suggests that human civilization successfully let go its reliance on Mako, allowing the planet to restore itself. It is the result of the playable events in the game—a consequence of playing through, committing to the challenges. In this manner, Final Fantasy VII discloses its own final fantasy of recuperation and rehabilitation. The failed experiment of the digital media industry, with all its contributions to environmental problems, here represents itself as affording something better in the long run . . . by putting the future in the hands of players.

Responding to these recursive thematizations of responsibility, fans of the game endlessly discuss its potential to elicit critical thought about the conditions of our technological society. Of course, some prefer to overlook the environmentalist motifs and simply enjoy the fun of slaying monsters. Others are overtly skeptical about the green politics of the game, much to the dismay of those more committed to its ethical twists. But for many players around the world, Final Fantasy VII has encouraged them to consider, for example, “how deeply the fights for economic democracy and environmental sustainability are intertwined.” It has helped them to conceptualize the stakes: “We’re all aware of the idea that Mako energy and all that is a metaphor for the way we mistreat our planet but parts of Final Fantasy VII seem to hint in an even stronger way towards the effects of climate change/global warming.” The parallels between fiction and real life become abundantly clear: “Shinra, like so many real corporations, are ruthlessly upsetting that balance with no thought of the future. . . . This is exactly the same problem that we face today. We have wreaked havoc on the environment and are causing many species to become extinct. How are Mako reactors any different than nuclear or other real-life power plants?” For some, engaging with the game on this level can lead to exasperation: “The ideological strife here [in the game] mirrors an obvious—and also often ignored—issue in the real world. Fossil fuel consumption, global warming, and ongoing pollution are problems that have gone on relatively unchecked since the Industrial Revolution and have continued to increase in severity as technology and a growing population demand more use of coal and gasoline. . . . Gaia is dying, the people are loosely aware of it, and pretty much no one is doing anything about it. In many ways, the same thing is happening on Earth.” Yet for
others, the figural aspects of the game entice them to imagine differently, turning erstwhile fantasy into proactivity.

In online discussions about the lessons of Final Fantasy VII, ranging from the tongue-in-cheek to the sincere, numerous players have attested to the impact of gaming on their own ecological sensitivities. As one player has put it, “I’d also like to thank Final Fantasy VII, EcoQuest I and II, and Chrono Cross for turning me into a raging environmentalist.” According to another player, “FFVII changed the way I think about the planet, I can tell you that much lol. Hurry! Let’s all rebel against giant companies and industries because they’re polluting the planet!” Another has said, “It made me newly aware about matters like ecology, the need to fight for your rights without hurting anyone else, and most of all it made me think a lot about bioethics.” And another: “it made me realize a lot of things, including the way we live.” And another: “It made me realize that the whole world needs improving . . . and I’ve gotta help.”

It is certainly the case that these insights, these ethical urges and emergent dispositions, are shaped by experiences with a game, or rather, an entire media ecology that is not remotely sustainable in its current form. Ironic, yes. But such irony often cultivates perspicacity. Consider the Spanish console modder MakoMod, who made headlines in 2015 by transforming an old PlayStation console into a physical replica of Midgar (fig. 7.4). This Midgar PS1 mod is a fully functional gaming machine that also features small details of narrative significance: the Mako reactors, the poisoned terrain beneath the city, the train system, and Aeris’s reclaimed church where she grows flowers in the midst of industrial ruin. It reaffirms the game’s allegory of environmental crisis and responsibility, identifying the unsustainable city of Midgar with the PlayStation itself: the city is the console, the Mako reactors draw power from a real electrical outlet. The mod does not obscure the material and geopolitical histories that converge at the site of the console, but instead brings them to light and recycles them. In this regard, it also represents a small gesture of resistance, pushing back against the game industry’s calculus of planned obsolescence by refurbishing the vintage hardware, giving it new life.

This modding experiment and others like it, modest though they are, can be considered affirmative exercises of remediation, homebrew efforts to reclaim the toxic infrastructures of the present. Some players have likewise suggested that the massive fan re-creations of Midgar in Minecraft are comparable to Aeris’s flower garden in Final Fantasy VII, insofar as they represent DIY attempts to revamp the contaminated city of Midgar and all
Figure 7.4. PlayStation as Midgar: A console mod created by MakoMod. Video demonstration uploaded to YouTube by MakoMod, “Midgar PS1—Working,” February 7, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPrpFdgjEvE.

Figure 7.5. “Midgar Restoration Project”: Steve from Minecraft visits Aeris’s flower garden in the ruined church of Midgar’s Sector 5 slums. Created by Killerx20, Volagar-enthor, Ksun, Anniixo, Flock, and collaborators, Minecraft, 2012–17. Midgar Explorer v. 2.2 modpack, created on Minecraft v. 1.7.10, played with Technic Launcher. Modpack uploaded to Technic Platform by Killerx20, August 18, 2016, https://www.technicpack.net/modpack/midgar-explorer.504534.
it signifies from the bottom up (fig. 7.5). As one player puts it, “If everyone grew flowers in Midgar, it’d be a better place. She [Aeris] tried to change that place for the better.”25 Expressing a shared desire for change, such practices of media appropriation confront the givenness and intractability of our high-tech modes of existence, indicating in minuscule ways that other futures are yet possible: alternate tracks for this train we are on.

Problem and solution, poison and remedy, video games propagate pharmacologically in the ecosystems of our world. They represent the danger and the saving power of technology, the threat and the promise. As the philosopher Bernard Stiegler writes, “This is the case because technological knowledge is pharmacological, that is, it has the ambivalent structure of a pharmakon: it is always at once potentially beneficial and potentially harmful. The following question therefore arises: under what conditions can therapeutic knowledge be elaborated and transmitted, that is, knowledge that cultivates curative capacities and that fights against the toxicity of technical knowledge insofar as it is essentially pharmacological.”26 This is the core question pertaining to video games today, after all, the question at the heart of the technopolitics surrounding video games, the sociogenesis of gamer culture. For even while contributing to high-tech problems and environmental hazards, games tend to animate a playful and experimental attitude toward technology as such, a sense that innovation pathways and technopolitical trajectories can always be hacked, transmogrified. As mechanisms for working through error, overcoming failure, they afford visions of a future reloaded, played with renewed virtuosity, thanks to skills learned from past experience. In a word, pwned.

It is the task at hand, the game in hand. It is not at all impossible, this final fantasy. So can we get from here to there, from this world of corporate control, securitization, and environmental devastation to a world of free play, openness, and responsibility—from a world full of own, to a world full of pwn?