

2.1 Of Limit Breaks and Ghost Glitches: Losing Aeris in *Final Fantasy VII*

When you lose someone you loved very much you feel this big empty space and think, “If I had known this was coming I would have done things differently”. These are feelings I wanted to arouse in the players with Aeris’s death relatively early in the game.

Yoshinori Kitase, Edge (2003)

PROLOGUE

As a Japanese role-playing game, *Final Fantasy VII* (FFVII) is both rooted in an RPG tradition of turn-based combat mechanics dating back to a dice-throwing Dungeon & Dragons tradition (Poole 2000: 77), and the tightly authored experience of becoming a character (Burn/Schott 2004). Its core mechanics feature both the conventional RPG ingredients of “fighting and magic” (Poole 2000: 77), and “heavy characters” (Burn/Schott 2004), whose relationships emerge from the way they grow over the course of the game.

In the game, the player embodies Cloud Strife, a pensive, impulsive mercenary who joins the environmentalist movement Avalanche in an attempt to prevent the evil megacorporation Shinra from world domination. The convoluted story arc starts in Aeris's home city, Midgar, an industrial complex with a rigid class system, where the player learns how to control Cloud Strife's body and engages in the first Action Time Battles (ATB), *FFVII*'s interpretation of turn-based combat. ATBs occur frequently, interrupting the flow of exploration on the map, and in city areas. They establish combat as an ordinary element to be expected constantly. In conventional RPG manner, these battles facilitate the growth of characters by awarding Ability Points (AP) for each victory. These gradually level up the characters, which means that their stats, including strength (HP) and magic points (MP) increase.

The distribution of AP, rather than purely mathematical, have an impact on inter-character relationships. AP translate into different skills, characterising protagonists as aggressive, resilient, or talented at magic. Apart from these character metrics, the contribution of different party members during battle has a social meaning, suggesting different kinds of chemistry between the characters. This is where the relationship between main character Cloud and NPC Aeris is set in motion. Although she is just one among nine available optional characters who can be included in the active battle party, there are ways in which the game establishes her as an indispensable choice. This makes *FFVII* an early example of how videogames can express inter-character attachment through pawn metrics, algorithms and battle mechanics.

ATTACHMENT

British game scholars Andrew Burn and Gareth Schott (2004) have called Cloud Strife a "heavy hero" and compared his recognisable features to Homer's Achilles. This does not only refer to his signal look, but the way Cloud's personality traits as aggressive, melancholic hero are reflected in gameplay dynamics.

On a social level of inter-character dynamics this means that Cloud is the measure according to which the inclusion of other characters is decided. Are they a good match for Cloud? Since the battle party is restricted to three members, this is a strategic question asked to the player, who is in charge of identifying favourable constellations, and maximising synergies with Cloud. At his point, the game introduces several encouragements to pick Aeris as a compatible party member.

Limit Break

Since character metrics are hidden, players learn only slowly that Cloud's straight-forward aggression is mediated by an algorithm that makes him grow offensive skills faster than any of his allies. By contrast, no other party member, Cloud included, is as fast at developing magic skills as Aeris. This subtly suggests that Cloud and Aeris are a well-balanced duo, a fact which can be particularly well observed in regard to the so-called *limit break*.

Figure 3: Screenshot of Final Fantasy VII, Aeris's limit break 'Healing Wind'



Source: Square (1997)

In *FFVII*, limit breaks are individualised strikes performed by a character who has taken a serious amount of damage during battle. Inside the ATB window (fig. 3), limit breaks are represented through a progress bar next to each character's HP and MP count. This progress bar fills up whenever a character is hit; a process that may stretch out over several battles or happen multiple times throughout a single fight. When the bar is full, the character's personal limit has literally been reached, and they will perform a special attack without consuming any points.

The limit break mechanic taps into common imaginations of what it feels like to reach a point of mental or physical breakdown. The progress bar stands for the amount of insult and injury a character is willing to take before they will lash out or intervene more constructively. This moment is expressed by the sparkling, colourful appearance of a filled limit break bar, and the rushing 'fill bar' animation taking the character to their next turn more quickly than otherwise.

The discharge of limit break energy happens through a unique spectacular move predefined for each character. As the character develops, so do their limit breaks, making more choices available. This means that committing to a character means investing in their limit break as well. Here is where we find perhaps the most important synergies between Cloud and Aeris. In the *FFVII* universe, the common sense reaction to stress is retaliation, which is why most characters perform their limit breaks as a particularly strong attack. Aeris is an exception; instead of violence, she converts suffering into healing.

In figure 3, Aeris has just performed 'Healing Wind', her first limit break, which restores the HP (health points) and MP (magic points) of all party members by 25 percent. The green numbers indicate the amount of HP received by each party member. Interventions like these make her indispensable for the team, since limit breaks tend to occur in situations where at least one party member is sufficiently weakened. Apart from a strategic advantage of combining physical prowess (Cloud) with potent healing (Aeris), Aeris's limit breaks have economic advantages. The player uses fewer health potions if Aeris is around, saving 'Gil' –

FFVII's currency – as well as the effort to stressfully browse the inventory for curative items while the team is about to die. On a symbolic level, Aeris's 'healing reflex' characterises her as resilient, solution-oriented, and spiritually balanced.

Character Appearance

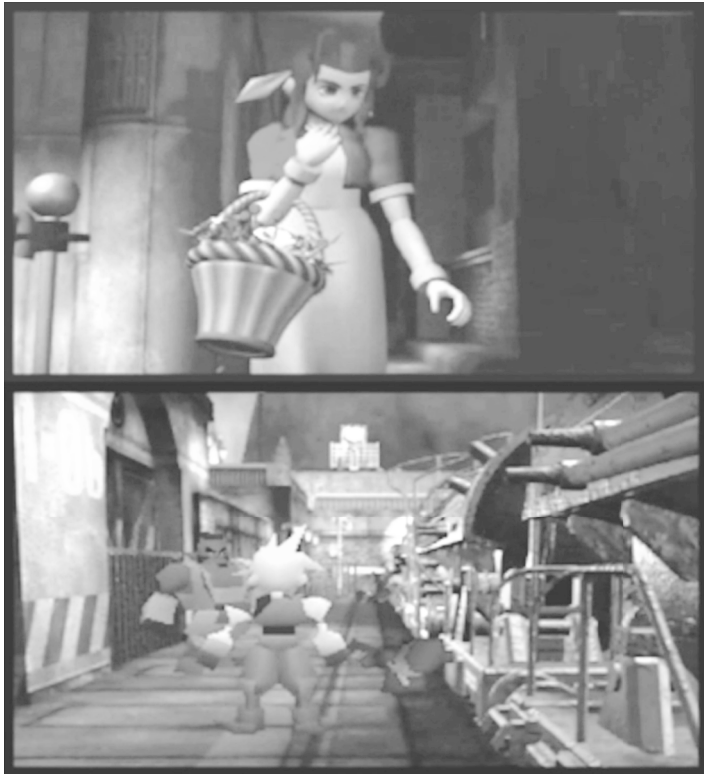
On the level of character design, the oppositional roles of Cloud and Aeris are reinforced both through the presentation of bodies, fashion items, weapons, and other symbolic attributes. This visual strategy is used throughout the game in many different ways, but as a point in case, I would like to describe the staging of Aeris and Cloud in the initial cut sequence.

This sequence starts as a non-ergodic cinematic clip right after the player has pressed play in the start menu. It begins with a meditative pan shot through a star-spangled night sky, which transforms into green energy particles that slowly materialise into Aeris's face, looking the player straight in the eye. There is the cosmos, there is peace, and there is Aeris. We hear high-pitched synth strings and a sequence of chime sounds vaguely reminiscent of the beginning of Mahler's *Titan Symphony* (1898), before the soundscape turns more intimidating. Aeris turns around, distracted, revealing a long, buttoned pink dress, a pair of

functional brown boots and a giant flower basket lightly dangling from one arm (fig. 4). As the camera zooms out, Aeris's location is exposed: She is standing amidst an urban, industrial landscape surrounded by skyscrapers, and next to a sign saying 'Loveless & Sons'.

This is the first glimpse into the dichotomy we have seen before on the level of battle mechanics: 'Loveless', aggressive masculinity, sacred femininity. Now, in juxtaposition with the floral theme, Aeris is established as the 'other' in a dark, smog-infested stronghold, dominated by the male-led Shinra corporation. As the camera zooms out from Aeris's whereabouts, we oversee their work: A network of reactors linked through giant steam engines.

Figure 4: Two screenshots of Final Fantasy VII: Aeris as a character to be looked at (above), Cloud as a playable character (below)



Source: Square (1997)

As the music picks up an erratic pace mimicking engine sounds, the camera pans in on another location. We are at a train station, where we see Cloud Strife for the first time (fig 4). Unlike Aeris's serene first impression in high resolution, we see him somersault from the train in his lowest polygon count. Most notable is his spiky ash-blond hair and the purple onesie, as the game transitions from cut scene to playable. As we take control of Cloud, the screen freezes and blurs, accompanied by

the threateningly hissing Action Time Battle sound. After a black-out we see our first battle screen, featuring a different visual representation of Cloud. Instead of the low-polygon Cloud, we see a well-armoured leather-clad mercenary in oversized boots and an androgynous face, inviting multiple gender interpretations (Burn/Schott 2004). Most outstanding, however, is the massively oversized sword, with which he smoothly defeats his first enemies.

This introductory scene sets the tone in terms of character presentation: Aeris and Cloud are oppositional characters, who belong together due to their differences. This is a theme that will be repeated until Aeris's death, and in the initial sequence it is foreshadowed on three different levels. First, there is the level of symbolism and visual attributes. Aeris's simple, gendered outfit, the flower basket, and her connection to the cosmos characterise her as sacred feminine, detached from the urban environment. The floral theme signifies innocence, wholesomeness and organicity. As we later find out, she is able to grow these flowers in the midst of the city's slums, indicating both resilience and mystical powers. In contrast to Cloud, we first see Aeris unarmed, marking her as vulnerable in her violent surroundings. In stark opposition to that, the first we see of Cloud is as a somersaulting, sword-swinging mercenary who seems well attuned to handling danger. His leather-clad appearance and the over-dimensional weapon characterise him as aggressor, and seamlessly blend him into the dark environment.

Secondly, there is a difference between who looks and who is being looked at. The initial close-up of Aeris's face, and the way the camera pans over her body to reveal her attributes in detail, positions her as object of first the player's, and later Cloud's gaze. In contrast to this, Cloud's first visual representation is a low polygon body that can be immediately inhabited. As opposed to the invitation to look at Aeris, Cloud comes with the invitation to act. In gameplay terms, Aeris's and Cloud's first impression are structured around non-ergodicity (Aeris) versus ergodicity (Cloud). Although this awakens interest in who the flower vendor might be, it also defines whose view we are going to take, and whose world we are going to inhabit.

This first division into agent and object of gaze is later challenged, even before Aeris's inclusion in the party. Minutes after the first cut scene, Cloud and Aeris need to escape an unforeseen attack in Aeris's church, and we get to experience Aeris's battle proficiency while Cloud tries to distract the perpetrators. By switching back and forth between Cloud and Aeris's point of view, the game provides a glimpse into how it would be to include her in the team. There is some variability in how the game moves back and forth between establishing Aeris as object of Cloud's gaze, and equal by his side. As a reprise to the beginning, the event of her death again constructs her as spectacle to be looked at and objectified in high definition, while the mourner, Cloud, expresses his sorrow as the same low-count polygon we have seen in the beginning. He is the agent of attachment and later loss.

Thirdly, the pacing of the starting scene says something about the characters' personalities, starting out with a meditative, timeless pan shot across the sky and Aeris's contemplative posture, and transitioning to a hurried staccato rhythm leading up to Cloud's somersault from the arriving train. The extremes of meditative versus impulsive, passive versus aggressive are not merely facets of the game to be played in a moment, but anchored as qualities of the two characters. The beginning thus foreshadows that part of the game will revolve around negotiating Cloud's and Aeris's relationship; balancing the tension between their traits.

Musical Theming

Videogames have a long tradition of using music to anchor the meaning of spaces and characters, particularly in the RPG genre, where elaborate musical scores accompany the epic journeys of player characters (the *Ultima* trilogy (1989) comes to mind).

One game-specific demand is that scores respond to the interactivity of games, and the fact that players explore environments in different paces and orders. This is why games often use short repetitive loops which can accommodate a sudden change of scenes, or a triggered event (i.e. a random Action Time Battle in *FFVII*). When it comes to attachment strategies, music has a specific function in *FFVII*. It uses the Aeris leitmotif to firmly anchor the character as part of the game world, suggesting belonging. The element of repetition here is important. Playing the theme again and again in signal locations, the game marks those locations as legitimately owned by Aeris.

In particular, this applies to two places: The church, and Aeris's family home, both located in Sector 5 of the Midgar slums. In both places, the track *Flowers Blooming in the Church*¹ is played. This is an adaptation of the Aeris leitmotif interpreted by a synth flute and marimba. Rather than concluding the leitmotif, it repeats the initial part of the melody in soft, contemplative triplets. The soothing quality of *Flowers Blooming* suggesting safety and warmth is also emphasised through the way we enter Aeris's spaces. In both cases, Cloud goes through some kind of danger to arrive at Aeris's locations. To enter the church, Cloud loses a battle against a Shinra robot, falls, and breaks through the church roof, where his fall is cushioned by Aeris's mysterious indoors flower bed. There is a transition from industrial to organic, profane to spiritual, hard to soft, which is further mediated through the meditative loops of *Flowers Blooming*. As the name

1 Sound available at: <https://www.discogs.com/Nobuo-Uematsu-Final-Fantasy-VII-Original-Soundtrack/release/329627>

suggests, it is supposed to indicate Cloud's return to an organic, sacred space uncorrupted by industrialisation.

Like Aeris's church, her house of birth is located in the most devastated, dangerous region of Midgar. To visit this location, players have to navigate the party through the slums, which is characterised through a dissonant musical theme dominated by agitated hi-hats (*Underneath the Rotting Pizza*). Navigation is also frequently interrupted by random ATBs featuring the aggressive battle theme.

Finally, reaching Aeris's locations, the soundscape marks the player's arrival at a safe space. Rather than in the centre, the theme provides the background to a narrative scene in which they learn more about Aeris's past, are free to roam her house, and discover helpful items in the garden. By composing a musical transition from a slum environment to Aeris's oasis, the description of Aeris a peaceful, non-aggressive character becomes stronger. The repetition of parts of her leitmotif has three important functions: First, it provides context for what Aeris stands for in a world dominated by fight and violence: While the visual symbolism of flowers and churches is more aggressively defining Aeris as virtuous, sound is a subtle means to turn her places into 'safe havens'. Secondly, repetition produces familiarity and therefore legitimacy. The more time players spend in Aeris's signal locations, the more often they will get to listen to her loop, and the more likely they will memorise the melody. This creates a nostalgia effect which is used later when Aeris is assaulted and killed by Cloud's arch-enemy.

TRAUMATIC IMPALEMENT, SECONDARY LOSS

At the end of the first of the three *FFVII* discs, Aeris has disappeared. She has retreated to the Temple of Ancients, a giant mysterious seashell hidden in the Secret Forest, where she is at work summoning protective spirits in a last attempt to save planet Gaia. After catching up with her by navigating Cloud towards the sacred site, the party leaves Cloud's body, and the game switches to a cut scene. The camera displays Aeris's

face in deep meditation, while arch enemy Sephiroth dashes down through the roof and impales Aeris.

The details of this impalement are disclosed in a cross-cut; a rapidly descending Sephiroth with erect sabre; a closeup of Aeris's relaxed face; the penetration by sabre, the separation of body and mind, as represented through the disembarking White Materia bouncing down the stone pillars. In a sense, this is the reversal of Cloud's earlier fall through the church roof, where Aeris's flowerbed had saved his life. In the parallel scene now, Cloud's alter ego takes Aeris's life, similarly by entering her sacred chambers through the roof. Kotaku games journalist Jason Schreier (2012) reminds us of the careful composition of this death moment, in which "no shot is wasted". For the first time, we now hear the full Aeris Theme, which starts with a soft but confident harp triad, and builds up to become a full-fledged string carpet elaborating on the theme. Schreier notes that the bouncing movements of the life materia is slightly off the rhythm of this theme, emphasising the randomness of her death. When the cut sequence ends, the music continues. It is stuck in a loop, accommodating the ensuing scripted dialogue between Sephiroth and Cloud. For the incredulous player, Cloud makes explicit what just happened, holding the collapsed Aeris in his arms:

Cloud: Aeris is gone
 Aeris will no longer talk, no longer laugh, cry...or get angry...
 What about us...what are WE supposed to do? What is this pain?
 My fingers are tingling.
 My mouth is dry.
 My eyes are burning!

Source: Square (1997)

In this little monologue, Cloud uses the collective pronoun 'WE', which can be taken to refer both to himself, the party, and the player. Translated to the gameplay level, the fact that "Aeris will no longer talk" means

that Aeris may no longer be a party member. This, indeed, raises the question ‘what we are supposed to do’ on a very pragmatic level.

As much as it illustrates Cloud’s emotional world, it points to the uncertain status of the player grappling with the loss of ludic opportunities. In a world where Aeris’s limit breaks are no longer available, where one has relied on her healing abilities, and invested in her growth, what are we supposed to do? Cloud’s lines are visually supported by a shaking and trembling low-polygon character sprite. Arch-enemy Sephiroth towers right behind him, unimpressed, as he summons the Jenova Life monster boss.

As the scene blackens out and the battle screen appears, we notice a difference to regular boss battles. Instead of the default boss battle theme, the player still hears the Aeris’s melody. This creates a ‘lag’ effect, as if Aeris’s friends are still in shock, while the world has moved on. It is possible to read Jenova Life as the cynical representation of Aeris’ death and its impact on the player-characters.

Jenova frequently launches a powerful magic attack named *Aqualung*, whose impact often kills a single character immediately. Since Aeris’s limit break is not available, this puts the player into a vulnerable position. To resuscitate a character, they are forced to scroll through the inventory, find an expensive healing item, and thus lose time and money. This is a stressful loop which previously had not been necessary. It forces the player to learn new survival tactics on the fly.

This is a powerful analogy for post-loss depression created entirely through ergodic means. The death of a friend can ‘kill’ others as well, and in order to move on with the loss, one has to fight for new survival tactics. In this sense, Jenova *Life* stands for the characters’ life after death. At least one character must stay alive in order to beat the boss.

Aeris’s demise leaves a permanent mark on the gameplay structure, which the player needs to make up for. From the perspective of grief theory, this is a phenomenon known as “secondary loss” (Stroebe and Schut 1999). The idea is that the death of a loved one does not only cause emotional distress, but often comes with “additional sources of stress” which “add considerably to the burden of loss” (Stroebe/Schut 1999:

214). Particularly in intimate relationships with distinct roles, a loss may require the learning of a new role or ability.

In *FFVII* the player has to relearn being a healer, yet might find this stressful, given that no character in the game can match Aeris's abilities. For some players, this has been a reason to cultivate an ongoing relationship with Aeris after her death.

GRIEVING OVER AERIS: TWO FAN PRACTICES

There is not much the game leaves of Aeris after her loss. The boss battle concludes the first of three disks, so when Cloud and his party leave the Ancient Forest, *FFVII* has only just started and progresses without structural changes. The ATB and levelling up system is still in place; life goes on, so to speak, and next we hear of Aeris is right before the end, dozens of hours later.

Since the game ignores the player's struggles to come to terms with the loss, there is room to come up with creative practices of staying in touch with Aeris. I have found two fan practices particularly interesting; the *Aeris ghost glitch*, which expresses yearning and searching for the character, and the *resurrection hack*, which denies her passing.

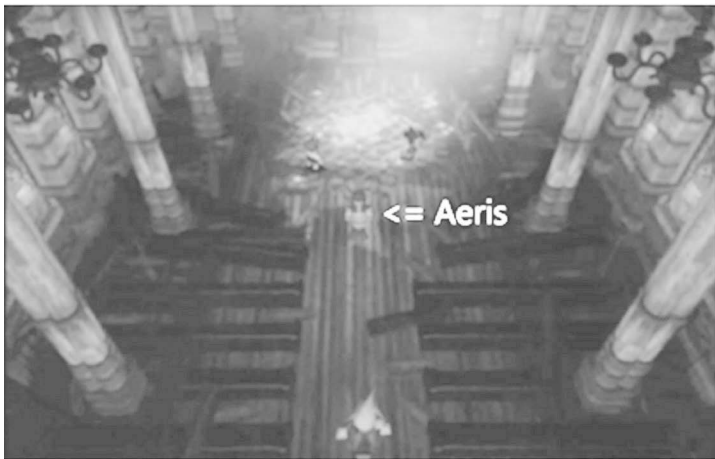
I find it useful to look at these fan practices through the lens of *continuing bonds*, a grief studies concept which Silverman and Klass (1993) describe as the need to "remain involved and connected to the deceased, and that the bereaved actively construct an inner representation of the deceased that is part of the normal grieving process" (1996: 16). I argue that the two fan practices indicate players' continuing bonds with Aeris, and therefore demonstrate how *FFVII*'s attachment devices have evoked a 'normal grieving process'.

Aeris's Ghost Glitch

The appearance of an Aeris sprite after her death is documented in the game's fan wiki finalfantasy.wikia.com. In order to see it, one has to make a detour to Midgar and enter Aeris's church. In this case,

“Aeris comes into view on the flower bed. She flickers and disappears when the player moves across a certain spot on the ground or attempts to leave the church. Moving across the spot on the ground when approaching the scene cancels the event permanently, as Aeris’s appearance is a one-time-only event. It is possible to move next to her if the player moves past the spot next to the broken pew before the location fully loads. In this case Aeris will not disappear, but she cannot be interacted with².”

Figure 5: Screenshot of JBedGames’ YouTube tutorial detailing how to find the Aeris ghost glitch in Final Fantasy VII



Source: JBedGames (2012): www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9UEXLMarB0

In order to take a fleeting glimpse at Aeris, the player not only has to visit a certain place but requires knowledge about how to move and where to position Cloud. They either have to time their navigation across a particular spot (“next to the broken pew”) correctly or, alternatively wait and look at Aeris with some distance. This indicates how fragile a

2 This description can be found on FFVII’s fan wiki: http://final-fantasy.wikia.com/wiki/Aeris's_ghost

ghost encounter is; one wrongly timed step “cancels the event permanently” (fig. 5).

However, if done ‘correctly’, as YouTuber JBedGames demonstrates³, players can experience different versions of the ghost glitch, variously interacting with and looking at Aeris. This scenario expresses a desire to continue bonds with Aeris in three ways. First, there is some effort in deliberately ignoring the direction of the main plot for the sake of being with Aeris. Going back to the church is a detour; both in terms of acquiring knowledge to find the glitch, and the act of virtually travelling there. This demonstrates the lengths to which players choose to go to revisit the flickering image of the love object.

Secondly, the activation of the glitch itself requires particular skills, such as being in the right spot at the right time and pacing one’s walking speed correctly. The back and forth between the broken church pew is not unlike the liminal space griever navigates when cultivating contact with the deceased. Like bonding rituals to the dead are flexible rather than stable over time (Klass et al 1996: 16), so are the different glitch versions.

Thirdly, by navigating Cloud in and out of the church, the continuation of bonds is characterised as his project, his commitment to Aeris. The commemorative stance he takes in the church, the distance between their bodies, and the imperative to stand still or the glitch will disappear, evoke a sense of awe and respect. Although initiated through him, it is the player who decides to continue this bond, and the game provides a (conscious or incidental) platform.

Coded Denial: The Resurrection Hack

The second commemoration strategy has been more proactive and driven by an insistence that Aeris’s loss is unacceptable. Players have

3 A collection of Aeris’s ghost glitches can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9UEXLMarB0>

conceived a piece of code which promises to “get Aeris back in your party⁴”.

Hacker Niai Mitch elaborates that not only will this enable Aeris to use “her best limit breaks”, but there will be “moments when you can catch a glimpse of her on screen in the field with your party even when she is dead”. On a more cautious note, there are also “times when you should avoid using her so as to avoid your game crashing. I very much hope that you find this guide useful, and enjoy!”. This already indicates that using the provided cheat code to continue the game with Aeris comes with a compromise. Like in the ghost glitch, players must know about the correct rituals to sustain a connection to the dead.

Unlike the glitch, the resurrection code is invasive, and introduces situations in which Aeris is ‘safe to use’, and others which will make the game crash. In the context of grief discourse, this reflects the concern that continuing bonds may both be a healthy and a dangerous grief response (Stroebe/Schut 1999).

‘Bringing Aeris back’ means bringing her old sprites, dialogue options, battle skills and animations back. Aeris does not actually contribute anything new, and in moments in which this is asked of her, the game crashes. Although the hack constructs her as alive, this illusion breaks as soon as we realise that there is nothing new, nothing creative about the ‘returned’ Aeris.

Her presence merely consists of traces of a past that through player effort have been woven into a compelling memory of her. This activity of yearning, seeking and coding fabricates a small fantasy bubble in which Aeris continues to matter.

4 A description of the resurrection hack can be found here: <http://www.gamefaqs.com/pc/130791-final-fantasy-vii/faqs/38201?print=1>