

Game Narrative Review

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Submitted: Jan 2013

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Game Title: Final Fantasy XIII

Platform: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360

Genre: RPG

Release Date: March 9, 2010

Developer: Square Enix

Publisher: Square Enix

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Momotu Toriyama (scenario designer), Daisuke Watanabe (main scenario writer), Kazushige Nojima (scenario concept), Sachie Hirano (scenario writer), Harunori Sakemi (scenario writer), Yoshinori Kitase (scenario supervisor)

Overview

Final Fantasy XIII takes place on the planet of Gran Pulse and a manufactured sphere that floats above its surface called Cocoon. All of the people of Cocoon live on the inside of this sphere, hence the name Cocoon. The powers of godlike beings known as the fal'Cie are responsible for maintaining Cocoon. The powers of the fal'Cie keep it afloat and provide light and water to its residents, among other tasks. The fal'Cie also have the power to mark humans as their servants, called l'Cie, who are then given a task to complete known as a "focus." Once a l'Cie has completed their focus, they turn to crystal. However, they have a limited amount of time to do so. Their l'Cie brand will continue to develop after the initial marking. If the focus is not completed in time, the l'Cie turns into a Cie'th, a mindless monster that attacks any living being.

Due to a war seven hundred years before the events of the game, known as the War of Transgression, Cocoon's residents have lived in constant fear of Gran Pulse. This has allowed the government of Cocoon, known as the Sanctum, to stay in control. So when a Pulse fal'Cie is discovered at the peaceful town of Bodhum, all of the town's residents are ordered to be purged. However, not all of the citizens of Bodhum will go down without a fight.

Claire "Lightning" Farron, Sazh Katzroy, Snow Villiers, Hope Estheim, Oerba Dia Vanille and Oerba Yun Fang find themselves in an unlikely group. As newly-branded l'Cie, they must complete their focus, but not everyone sees eye to eye on what their focus is. Along the way, they learn the hidden truth about the Sanctum and the history of Cocoon and Pulse - a truth that could tear Cocoon out of the sky.

Characters

Claire “Lightning” Farron – Lightning is the main protagonist of *Final Fantasy XIII*. She is the older sister and guardian of Serah Farron and an ex-sergeant in the Guardian Corps, the military department of Sanctum. She is initially cold and arrogant, but over time learns to trust her companions and show compassion for them. Her goal is to save her sister, who was turned into a Pulse l'Cie by the fal'Cie Anima. She meets Sazh Katzroy on the Purge train, and together they derail it in an attempt to escape from the Purge.

Snow Villiers – A citizen of Bodhum, Snow is Serah's fiancée. He leads NORA - “No Obligations, Rules or Authority” - which began as a group to fight off the wildlife of Bodhum. NORA evolved into a resistance group for fighting against Sanctum during the purge. His goal is to save Serah, like Lightning, but they do not see eye to eye on what it means to save her. Snow's hot-headed and impulsive attitude often causes him to argue with Lightning, making her unable to approve of Snow and Serah's relationship.

Sazh Katzroy – Sazh is a middle-aged man and the father and only parent of Dajh Katzroy since his mother's death 3 years before the events of the game. Dajh was branded as a Sanctum l'Cie at the Euride Gorge Power Plant. He was then taken into custody for testing by PSICOM, the “Public Security and Intelligence Command,” who discovered that he gained the power to sense beings from Pulse. Sazh soon realizes that PSICOM has no intentions of discovering Dajh's focus, and is just using him until his time is up. Sazh optimistically thinks that Dajh's focus is to detect invaders from Pulse. With this in mind, Sazh boards a Purge train to find the Pulse l'Cie Anima and save his son. Sazh is a kind, optimistic and forgiving man. He serves as the voice of reason in the party, who he refers to as “the kids.”

Hope Estheim – Hope is a young boy who was on vacation in Bodhum with his mother, Nora. Since they were in Bodhum when the fal'Cie Anima is discovered by PSICOM, they are put onto Purge trains. On the way to the Hanging Edge, the location of Anima and the destination of the Purge trains, the train is derailed by Lightning and Sazh. Nora joins Snow's resistance group, but subsequently dies after saving Snow's life. Thus, Hope blames Snow for his mother's death. This becomes his main motivation for continuing on his journey. Hope's insecurity causes him to easily become angry, and he is easily affected by the harsh words that others say to him.

Oerba Dia Vanille – Literally “Vanille of the clan Dia from the village of Oerba.” Vanille is a l'Cie from Gran Pulse who took part in the War of Transgression centuries ago with her friend, Fang. Their focus was to become the being Ragnarok and destroy Cocoon. After the war, they were placed in crystal stasis and brought up to Cocoon to fill the hole created by Ragnarok. Vanille and Fang caused the fal'Cie's activation at Euride Gorge, which resulted in Dajh being branded as a l'Cie. Vanille acts like a happy-go-lucky and innocent girl, but her bubbly personality hides an emotionally fragile interior. She feels guilty for affecting the lives of so many people and pretends to forget what her and Fang's focus was in an attempt to run away from her past. Since

she never became Ragnarok, she never fulfilled her focus, and thus her brand continues to advance. Vanille acts as the narrator and is often considered the deuteragonist of the game.

Oerba Yun Fang – Literally “Fang of the clan Yun from the village of Oerba.” Fang is a l'Cie from Gran Pulse who took part in the War of Transgression with Vanille. Vanille was too frightened to become Ragnarok, and thus Fang became Ragnarok alone. Her diminished form only allowed her to make a hole in Cocoon's shell before being turned to crystal. After they were crystallized, the Cocoon fal'Cie used parts of Pulse to fill in the hole created by Ragnarok, which is how she and Vanille ended up on Cocoon. She has no recollection of her previous focus or of becoming Ragnarok, but vows to assist Vanille in fulfilling her focus once she sees her unscorched brand. Fang is stubborn and fearless, but has a compassionate side, especially when it comes to Vanille.

Galenth Dysley – Galenth Dysley is the main antagonist and the Primarch of Sanctum. He is actually the fal'Cie Barthandelus in disguise, and his goal is to cause the destruction of Cocoon. The sacrifice of its citizens would summon the Maker, the godlike being responsible for the creation of Gran Pulse, and cause the world to be born anew. As a Sanctum fal'Cie, he cannot harm Cocoon directly, and thus uses the l'Cie and the Pulse fal'Cie to fulfill his goals.

Serah Farron – Snow's fiancée and Lightning's younger sister. The Pulse fal'Cie called Anima brands Serah as a Pulse l'Cie, causing the events of the game to go into motion. After everyone comes to save her from Anima, she is turned into crystal, having fulfilled her focus.

Breakdown

The story of Final Fantasy XIII is separated into two sections. There is the main storyline that the player experiences, and then there are the thirteen days that lead up to the opening scene. The events that occur during the Thirteen Days are presented during the main storyline in the form of flashbacks. This structure prevents information overload. The events in the Thirteen Days reveal much of the story to the player while leaving little room for interaction. Thus, revealing the information later makes it much easier to digest. Each flashback cut scene is prefaced by a screen that says which of the days is being presented. This gives the player the ability to put the pieces of the story together, despite the asynchronous and anachronous presentation of the timeline.

Prejudice is a major theme of Final Fantasy XIII. The l'Cie brand that the party members receive change nothing about them; they've gained a focus to fulfill, but they're otherwise fundamentally the same people. Regardless, the citizens of Cocoon fear and despise them because they now happen to have powers originating from Gran Pulse. The party acts in the best interest of Cocoon despite being labeled as servants of Pulse, but the citizens are unable to see through the Sanctum's anti-Pulse propaganda. Thus, PSICOM can take any measures needed to stop the l'Cie without fear of the populace of Cocoon questioning their methods.

The game provides basically zero opportunity for interaction with the world. There is little

exploration to be done and no significant interaction with non-player characters. In lieu of this, the narrative focuses on development between the playable characters.

The game is broken up into thirteen chapters, each of which is divided primarily by a change in controlled characters. Until about halfway through the game, the full party of six is never in one group. Instead, they are split into several smaller groups that are pursuing their own goals. This allows for conversations between characters that have complex relationships without the interference of the others.

Such interactions take place often, even if their importance is not readily apparent. Early on, Lightning and Hope are traveling together while fighting Sanctum, and Lightning learns of Hope's hatred for Snow. She advises him to quell his emotions and form a plan upon which he can focus his energy. Hope then creates his plan to enact revenge, naming it "Operation Nora." Over time, Lightning realizes that she was using Sanctum as a means to run away from her fate, and that she had done the same thing to Hope. Unfortunately, no other characters are present to point out her mistake, and she doesn't realize what she has done until it's too late.

One arc in particular stands out from the rest. Sazh and Vanille travel together for most of the first half of the game. They decided to run away from Sanctum rather than get caught up in the fighting. Vanille eventually learns from Sazh that Dajh was the boy who was branded at Euride Gorge, and silently suffers the guilt of knowing it that she caused the fal'Cie there to awaken. Sazh decides that he is going to turn himself in, confident that PSICOM would grant his request to talk to his son once more before they execute him. Vanille tries to stop him, but as she is about to admit her guilt, PSICOM catches up to them.

While they're on the run, Sazh unexpectedly runs into Dajh, who then turns to crystal right before his eyes. Jihl Nabaat, a leader in PSICOM, then appears, thanking Sazh for raising a capable servant of Cocoon; she had used Dajh's power to track them down and claimed that that was his focus. She also reveals to a distraught Sazh that Vanille caused the accident at Euride Gorge. Vanille runs away, and Nabaat allows Sazh to pursue her.

When Sazh catches up to Vanille, he points his gun at her. She responds by telling the truth about her – that she is a l'Cie from Gran Pulse, and therefore evil in the eyes of Cocoon. She then prompts Sazh to shoot her and take revenge for his son. Sazh refuses to let his emotions get the better of him, knowing full well that the guilt of killing Vanille would only compound with the pain he feels about losing his son. He responds with one of the most powerful lines of the dialogue: "You think you die and that's that? You think you die and everything will be sugar and rainbows?"

Sazh feels helpless and devoid of any reason to keep living, causing his eidolon to be summoned. Eidolons are powerful beings that appear when a l'Cie is deep in despair, giving them a final chance to restore their faith by besting the eidolon in battle.

Once the eidolon is defeated, Sazh once again points his gun at Vanille, who is ready to accept judgment. Sazh then decides that "a lot of things can be excused. Shooting kids ain't one." He then aims at his own head, declaring that "Enough... is enough," as a gunshot is heard and the

screen goes black. It is later revealed that Sazh didn't shoot himself, and the two of them were taken into custody by PSICOM.

Character interactions like these become the most powerful element of the narrative. The characters grow in compelling ways and compose a party that was meant to be together, rather than a ragtag group of random people who were just bored enough to stick together long enough to defeat the final boss. Since the overarching story of the game is mediocre at best, it's the smaller things in the big story that the player appreciates. That's not to say that the dull plot is a positive element, but rather that where the story falls flat, the engaging cast of characters excels and creates an overall enjoyable experience.

When it comes to RPGs in general, it often seems that the characters are simply there to fill the tropes around which the story is engineered. Final Fantasy XIII instead goes in the opposite direction. It's as if the characters were designed before the story, and the story was then designed as a way for the characters to come together in a way that is genuinely interesting. Thus, the characters feel authentic, and while they have their own motivations, they make sense as a cohesive unit.

Strongest Element

The game's chapter structure allows for important interactions between characters to take place that otherwise wouldn't occur. While a party of characters would normally act as a package deal for the entire story, the isolation of specific sets of characters creates opportunities for strong character development. For example, when Hope and Snow finally meet for the first time after Nora's death, Snow gets to be the hero and save Hope amidst explosions and falling buildings. Right up until that point, Hope had every intention of killing Snow in the name of his mother. That one moment gave them the opportunity to settle their differences in their own way.

Weakest Element

Unfortunately, the chapter structure also makes the game feel very linear in gameplay as well as narrative. For the first half of the game, the navigable areas are essentially narrow hallways with an objective marker at the end. There are no decisions to make, no towns or cities to explore, only towers to climb and doors to open. The player is rarely given a situation where they can stop, relax and analyze the information they've been given.

This removes any sense of agency that the player would have over the story, feeling more like they are along for the ride rather than fully engaged in the narrative. This may have been intentional. The idea of the l'Cie being servants of the fal'Cie could imply that the l'Cie are carrying out their focus without consciously recognizing that their actions aren't their own (in other words, BioShock syndrome). However, given the way that the story develops, this seems unlikely. The l'Cie don't actually fulfill their focus as Barthandelus intended, so it's quite clear that the fal'Cie had no direct control over their servants. The linearity of the narrative feels

more like an incorrect design decision rather than a failed experiment.

The world of Gran Pulse seemed like a perfect reprieve from the monotony of the first half of the game. The Archlyte Steppe is a beautiful landscape with hostile wildlife that contains many side quests to complete. Aesthetically, it is a very sharp turn from the stale environments on Cocoon. Unfortunately, despite a fantastic first impression, the area doesn't have much to offer. The side quests rarely involve more than killing a monster or retrieving an item and returning to the quest giver. Even the quest text lacks flavor. Once you take one loop around the central area of the Archlyte Steppe, you've experienced most of what the zone has to offer. The areas branching off from the central hub are merely smaller portions of the same recipe. This seemed like a great opportunity to reveal the mysteries of the world of Gran Pulse to the player. After all, it is the first time stepping foot on the planet for both the player and the characters. Sadly, that opportunity was squandered.

Highlight

By far, the scene involving Sazh and Vanille is the highlight of the game's narrative. What makes this scene so powerful is how Sazh's personality is revealed to the player. It was clear that he was a level-headed and caring man, but this scene portrays the depth of his character. The fact that he was able to forgive Vanille for essentially destroying the last thing he loved in the world shows what kind of a person he is. As Vanille says, "Kindness like his, you don't forget." His ability to persevere also shows that he is optimistic and will not completely give up hope, even in such immeasurable despair.

From a narrative design perspective, the scene shows what can occur when the characters of the party are separated. Sazh himself had to decide that neither he nor Vanille needed to die. It wasn't a decision that he made with second opinions, but a decision he made by himself.

Critical Reception

Critical reception to Final Fantasy XIII in general was favorable. The combat system was incredibly unique and the graphics and sound production were nothing short of fantastic. The story for the game, however, received mixed reviews.

Chris Kohler of Wired gave the game a 6/10, noting that the story was good, but was "still over-the-top and cartoony, more like an anime box set than a feature film." He also says that the game lacks the sense of rising and falling action. It boils down to a series of battles that offers no breaks or opportunities to slow down, relax and absorb the information you've been given. This element is important for RPGs, since they tend to sport a much higher time requirement for completion than games of other genres. Kohler says that the cycle of tension and release is what makes RPGs "feel like epic journeys and not just really long videogames."

However, Carolyn Gudmundson of GamesRadar, had nothing but good things to say about the linear nature of the game. She gave Final Fantasy XIII a 5/5, stating that Final Fantasy has never given freedom to the player, that every game in the series has a completely fixed plot. "FFXIII

simply takes it a step further, streamlining the formula into a more controlled, more focused experience.” She goes on to say that the lack of a lengthy opening cut scene sweeps the player up in the story right from the start in a way that no games of this genre have done before. She also justifies the linear design of the story and the game play, stating that since “our protagonists are outlaws fighting for their lives against an all-powerful corrupt government, it makes perfect sense that they'd make a beeline for safety rather than leisurely exploring.”

Jeremy Parish of 1UP, who scored the game at A-, also praised the character development. While the story is “nothing to write home about”, and “hardly world-class writing”, the cast of Final Fantasy XIII is “by far the best-defined group of protagonists the series has ever seen.” The focus on character development results in “something truly rare: An RPG party that actually makes sense.” Even while the characters try to go their own ways and pursue their own goals, “by the time the story pulls them inevitably together, they've worked through their differences and demons and feel like comrades.”

Lessons

- Powerful emotional attachments to characters arise when the characters are developed well. Designing a story around characters, rather than the converse, makes for a much more compelling narrative.
- However, the story itself should still be compelling as well. Don't let the complex plot distract the player from the character development, but don't dilute it so much that it might as well not exist.
- Giving freedom to the player is the key to engrossing the player in the world of the game. When all of the levels can be described as hallways with different textures, the environment loses its identity. Exploration is an element of RPGs that rarely can be compromised for the sake of its other parts.
- Obeying the rules of rising and falling action is paramount to keeping the player engaged. Gamers are humans, and thus they need time to grasp what the screen and sounds are trying to tell them. Otherwise, you risk the player losing track of what is happening and consequently losing their interest in the game.

Summation

In more ways than one, Final Fantasy XIII was not a traditional RPG, but an experiment on the genre. It reinvented the series in almost all aspects. The combat system was unique and the story's structure had its share of quirks. Some of their experiments were a glaring success while others did not fare as well. The lackluster story and linear design left a sour taste in the mouths of many, but the character design was impeccable and represented everything that Square Enix did right when making Final Fantasy XIII. They've shown that creating a story that fits the cast of characters is a formula that works fantastically and is a practice that should be used in games of all genres moving forward.

References

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