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Essay 3

Too Much Freedom? The Cost of Customization in *Final Fantasy XII*

There are very few game series I care about as much as *Final Fantasy*. *Final Fantasy VI* through *X* made up some of the best, most fun moments of my college years. They were perfect for whiling away the hours and hours of time on my hands, and for fun and bonding with friends. I consider myself a huge fan, but the latest installment of the series has been sitting on my shelf, halfway played for months. I've spent hundreds of hours playing the other installments in the series, and yet I've dropped this one already and moved on to other games. The question of why I've given up on this game is an important one, because I believe that Square Enix has unintentionally broken the core of what makes *Final Fantasy* so engrossing. I believe the series, especially if it continues in the vein of *FF XII*, may have jumped the shark.

In order to understand what is different about the latest *Final Fantasy*, it's important to understand what *Final Fantasy* has historically done well. The game is known for its innovative art styles, its impeccable balance, its pacing and its battle systems, but also, perhaps uniquely so, for its rich storylines and characters.

Historically in a *Final Fantasy* game, a character is never just a tool in a system. Each character has a personal journey to embark on, and while the group is united in their foes, the characters have their own reasons and motivations behind everything they do. But perhaps an even stronger *Final Fantasy* tradition is that of character classes. In each game there is at least one stock character that is analogous to that same character type in

every other *Final Fantasy* game. These include the black mage: Lulu, early Rydia, Palom, and Vivi, the white mage/summoner: Yuna, Garnet and Eiko, the warrior: Cyan, Auron, Squall, and Cloud, and the thief: Locke, Rikku and Zidane.

The series has other classes, but these four types crop up the most consistently. Every character has his/her strengths and weaknesses, and more importantly, each has a personality that matches their skills. In the storyline a black mage will inevitably be mysterious. A white mage will be pure of heart. You can count on a thief to be a witty smart aleck, and on a warrior character to be stoic and strong. The leveling system in the games is usually designed so that the battle strengths of one character complement the battle strengths of the others. That is, a black mage will never attack for much, but they can deal substantial damage to enemies resistant to physical attack and vulnerable to magic.

The only game that deviates from this pattern is the latest game, *Final Fantasy XII*. In playing this new installment in the series, I found an amazing battle system and the same beautifully rendered worlds that Final Fantasy is known for. But the characters in the game felt very weak, and as a result of that, the plot felt aimless and flat. I believe that the meandering, flat plot and the uninteresting characters are a direct result of the design decision to get rid of the pre-determined specialization of characters.

Much is made of customization in games. And in most cases, there is nothing lost when a measure of freedom is given to a player. Nintendo Miis are highly customizable, but the power to customize is strictly cosmetic. This sort of customization only adds to a personalized experience of playing a game with your avatar, and does not affect the design of the game in any way. In Final Fantasy the player is given the power to control

and define the actual abilities of the characters. When this power is handed over in a game series that is known for its engrossing narratives, it is at the cost of freedoms that the designers and writers of the game should have kept for themselves.

In *Final Fantasy XII*, the characters all start out in the center of the license board, and can go in any direction. They have very similar starting skill points, and there is no significant advantage that any character has over another in a specific skill set. Essentially they are all the same. Tiny, femme Penelo starts at approximately the same strength as statuesque, leather-clad Fran. The player has complete freedom to move around the board wherever they want, and to define their characters as they wish. If I want Penelo to be an ubertank, then I can move her along that path as easily as I could Fran.

The reason this seemingly small change has such large repercussions is subtle, but important: a game that is well-designed is far more engrossing than a game that is structured to allow for more freedom. In *Final Fantasy XII*, the writers could not know what each character would be like in terms of skills. These variables were left for the player to define. And so in writing the stories of the characters, there are no stock characters to draw on, and no assumptions can be made about what battle style each character has, or even how leveled up the character is. Essentially, every character in the game is a blank slate for the players to define.

Normally in a *Final Fantasy* game, Penelo would be a white mage, and Fran would be a warrior. In the structure of the game, their roles in the battles and their roles in the cut scenes would feed off of each other and add to the richness and depth of the narrative. In the traditional *Final Fantasy* structure, the battle characteristics of the

characters are not just strategic elements, but they are also narrative elements. Their strengths and weaknesses reverberate through the rest of the game. But without these assumptions to work with, the characters in *FF XII* end up feeling less defined. It's not that the individual stories of the characters are less nuanced or believable in *FF XII*, it's that their motives and personalities are only reinforced during cut scenes. In giving the player freedom over the battle characteristics of the characters, the developers of the game let a powerful narrative tool simply fall by the wayside.

And what was gained by this change towards customization? In every other *Final Fantasy* game, the player is still positively challenged with issues of party balance and leveling up. They can level up every character equally, or they can choose to leave characters out of the party and forego their specific talents, strategizing to find the best combination of abilities to meet the challenges ahead. In earlier games, though, it is never really advantageous to leave characters un leveled. The delicate balance of the *FF* games is seen in this, because each character's skills are needed, and each has the capability of being the most important in the battle. In *FF IX*, the player has more control over this process. They can give any character any sort of battle skills, and therefore the player has far more control over their strategy in the game. But is this much of a gain? It doesn't seem to be much of a gameplay advantage to have some more choices in deciding what each character will be, as opposed to strategizing which characters to use. In this sense, the question is one of player style and preference.

As a result of these changes towards giving the player more freedom, the gameplay changes, perhaps for the better, depending on the player. But the narrative suffers. The plot of *Final Fantasy XII* ends up feeling far more like a Shakespearean

history than one of his comedies. Shakespearean comedies, much like the more traditional *Final Fantasy* games, rely heavily on stock characters. These characters rely heavily on stereotypes and archetypes that Shakespeare knew his audience was already familiar with. This technique is essentially narrative shorthand that is used to add color, humor and flavor to the rest of the play. Stock characters communicate simply and easily, and yet they add to the richness and depth of a play because they serve as foils for the more realistic, more nuanced characters.

Because *FF XII* is divorced from this device, the characters feel disconnected from the richly developed archetypes the rest of the series draws on. Much as Shakespeare had to minimize his use of stock characters in writing *Henry V*, a history play, the writers and designers of *Final Fantasy XII* had to strip their characters of class characteristics. They needed their characters to be readable as any sort of fighter—white mage, black mage, whichever. The upshot is the same: both Shakespeare's histories and *Final Fantasy XII* are as well-written and witty as the rest of the canon, but the individual characters in each are less colorful, less cartoony and more realistic. While this style of writing suited Shakespeare's purposes very well—realism in a history play is desirable and even necessary—it feels very out of place in a series whose very name has the word “fantasy” in it.

Personally, I found the game's lack of color to be its death knell. At one point in the game, I faced the arduous task of climbing up hundreds of floors in a temple because of some plot point that I've since forgotten. And that's where I gave up. Normally in a *Final Fantasy* game the narrative is enough to sustain me through the leveling up, the multiple restarts back to an earlier save point, and the too-difficult side quests. But in this

case, the game failed me. I don't even *remember* what the plot point was. It's no wonder it didn't sustain me through the dungeon. A fantasy game populated with uninspired characters can only feel listless and dull.

If given the option, I would like to see some sort of middle ground. *Final Fantasy X* explored this a bit by spacing its characters out on the skill grid, and allowing for points on the path when the player could take the character along another character's path. If the designers used this system of spatial location of the characters but allowed for even more flexibility in jumping from one track to the next, they would create a system where the players can choose to either have characters develop in accordance with their strengths and weaknesses, or become defined by the path the player has chosen for them. I hope in the next *Final Fantasy* the designers realize that every part of a game can become part of the game's narrative. When one whole part of a design stops serving the narrative, even with some gain in terms of gameplay, the game will suffer for it.