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# How Linearity Affects Narrative: The Incomplete Story of *Final Fantasy XIII*

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Months before March 2010 the gaming community had been hyped about the release of the latest installment of the *Final Fantasy* series – *Final Fantasy XIII* (Square Enix 2010). The game's superb visuals and excellent animation would excite even the most skeptic of players. The colorful settings and lush environments shown in videogame publications seem to invite the player into what promises to be an immersive adventure. Although the lack of Uematsu's epic melodies are painfully obvious to the experienced *Final Fantasy* player, the music composed by Masashi Hamauzu is certainly adequate for the environment, as it seems to seamlessly meld into the overall experience. With all the visual and aural elements in place, *Final Fantasy XIII* indeed promised to be one of the most impressive Japanese Role Playing Game (JRPG) experiences in the current generation of game systems. However, any experienced gamer knows that a videogame's worth cannot be measured by visual and aural considerations alone, and while much of the surface-level content of the game is well polished, the game's narrative itself suffers because of the approach taken by the designers. Because of the approach the designers used to tell the story of *Final Fantasy XIII*, the game falls short on one of the most important Role Playing Game (RPG) elements – an immersive narrative.

One of the major flaws of *Final Fantasy XIII* is the extremely linear nature of the game. While other titles of the *Final Fantasy* series also lead the player from point to point in order to advance the overall narrative of the game, as does *Final Fantasy XIII*, these other titles have allowed players a certain degree of freedom and exploration. Certainly, being story-driven narratives, the level of freedom allowed in *Final Fantasy* titles, with the exception of the MMORPG *Final Fantasy XI* (Square Enix 2003), is notably less than that afforded in open-world quest-driven narratives like *Grand Theft Auto 4* (Rockstar North 2008) and *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks 2008). However, even within the story-driven, dialogue-intensive narratives of previous *Final Fantasy* titles the player has been allowed to explore vast areas and learn more of the mythology of the world through NPC interaction, side-quests, and additional exploration. *Final Fantasy XIII* discards these elements of exploration in favor of a purely linear sequence of events presented in a manner similar to film where the player is required only to move forward from cut scene to cut scene. This style of narrative progression has been both praised and attacked by fans of the franchise. Although some players and reviewers have argued that the linearity of the game is what sets it apart from other Fantasy titles, others have commented that the lack of towns, interaction with NPCs, and exploration elements take away from the overall enjoyment of the narrative. The game's director, Motomu Toriyama, defended the extremely linear nature of the game by stating that when the player is given too much freedom "it becomes very difficult to tell a compelling story" (Ingram 2010); however, anyone who has played through the narratives offered by *Fallout 3*, *Fable 2* (Microsoft Game Studios 2008), or *Oblivion* (Bethesda Softworks 2006) will

quickly disagree with Toriyama's statement. It would not be hard to argue, in fact, that the narrative of *Final Fantasy XIII* seems to have been originally plotted for a non-interactive medium, such as print or film.

Many gamers have stated on several discussion groups that previous *Final Fantasy* titles have only given the illusion of freedom, yet this illusion of freedom is integral to the Role Playing Game experience. A game where the player is simply forced to go from point A to point B and is then treated to a film that puts the player in another linear hallway where there is no element of exploration, and where there is no element of owning the story and experiencing it at the player's own pace, is not particularly good game design, as it is leaving out an integral part of the game experience – the game experience itself. This is what the first half of *Final Fantasy XIII's* does: deprive the gamer from experiencing what would otherwise be an interesting world.

During the first chapters of *Final Fantasy XIII* the player simply moves through hallways with no deviations while fighting a limited amount of battles. Each section of the game has a predetermined level cap that does not allow the player to develop the characters' skills and techniques. Once the player reaches the end of a hallway section, a CG sequence plays and the player is taken to another hallway. This design approach to gaming, called "story driven gameplay", when taken to the extreme that is *Final Fantasy XIII*, provides for what is at best a forgettable experience and at worst a 60 hour torture session. Some naysayers may argue that the "real" game starts in Gran Pulse, an expansive semi-open world full of quests; but even then due to the disproportionate difficulty levels between areas and the lack of any real value to the overall narrative of the game, it can be argued that the quests that players undertake in Gran Pulse were an afterthought to allow players to "grind" and prepare for the final levels of the game. Furthermore, the lack of cities and NPCs in Gran Pulse, and the way in which the player engages in these quests – more closely resembling an Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) rather than a traditional JRPG – offer what is at best a mediocre exploration experience.

Despite all the shortcomings of the game's narrative structure, and regardless of one's opinion on the nature of the game experience, one must remember to look at the game designer's intentions when determining the title's aesthetic and narrative worth – and in *Final Fantasy XIII* it is evident both by the agonizingly linear nature of the game as well as from Toriyama's comments, that the intention was not to make a game that told a story, but to tell a story through a game. It is in this light, then, that one should look at, and evaluate, the quality of the game's narrative. Instead of focusing thoroughly on the simplistic – yet engaging – battle system, the linear nature of the game's narrative, or any other aspect related to the game's design, when dealing with games like *Final Fantasy XIII* it might be useful to consider the characters and the way they are developed as well as the story being told in order to discover if the author's original purpose – to tell a compelling story through a game – was successfully achieved.

The story of *Final Fantasy XIII* begins with Lightning, a sword-wielding female ex-soldier with a look that will remind long-time *Final Fantasy* players of Celes and an attitude reminiscent of Squall Leonheart, being dumped into some sort of battlefield. Her companion, an exaggerated caricature of what seems to be an African American

with an afro that doubles as a baby chocobo's nest, claims to be following her because "he had no choice". As one progresses through the game it becomes evident that one of the many flaws that the narrative in *Final Fantasy XIII* suffers is character design and interaction. Drawing "inspiration" to a point that would be considered plagerism had the publisher not been the same, the characters from *Final Fantasy XIII* could be considered as forgettable and shallow HD versions of Terra, Locke, and Celes from *Final Fantasy VI* (Squaresoft 1994), Rinoa from *Final Fantasy VIII* (Squaresoft 1999), and Paladin Cecil from *Final Fantasy IV* (Squaresoft 1991). Many of the older players, perhaps, would have appreciated the character design had it not been for their overall lack of personality. With very few exceptions, the characters in *Final Fantasy XIII* only offer one or two emotions, often resolve to accomplish a task or regret at having done something, and their dialogues often go hand in hand with their monochromatic personalities. It is worth mentioning that one of the exceptions to the case is the main character, Lightning. The way she interacts with the other characters make her seem like a strong-willed female protagonist who, nonetheless, needs support and is, at times, unsure of herself. Most of the times she manages to provide substance to Snow's repetitive rants on rescuing Serah and saving the world, Hope's idiotic comments on revenge, or Vanille's cowardly remarks. Still, this does not make Lightning a deep character – it simply makes her the much-needed realistic strong female lead character that is missing from most videogames.

The rest of the characters are at best shallow embodiments of generic JRPGs. The only exception to this is Sazh, whose inner conflicts with other characters of the party make him a mildly deep character. However, all of Sazh's potential for being a truly interesting character are lost because of the stereotypic character design and dialogue used in his conversations. In fact, the shallow personas of the *Final Fantasy XIII* characters seem to be most of the time an extension of one of Lightning's inner conflicts. Despite this, the casting of a strong female character as the narrative's main protagonist, something that had not been done in a *Final Fantasy* title since the 1994 release of *Final Fantasy VI*, is certainly refreshing.

Lightning's purpose, the player learns quickly, is to rescue her sister Serah. To accomplish this task the player must guide Lightning and Sazh, her curiously-named temporary sidekick, through a corridor of the Public Safety and Intelligence Command (PSICOM) soldiers in order to infiltrate a Pulse Fal'Cie located in the remains of a war with nearby planet. At the same time, Snow, the leader of a rebel group called No Obligations, Rules, or Authority (NORA), is fighting against PSICOM authorities who have ordered the inhabitants of the area where the Pulse Fal'Cie was found to be Purged – exiled from Cocoon to Pulse. Snow's quest, however, is a far more individualistic one than that of a revolutionary hero of the people. His true goal in inciting insurrection against authorities is to create a diversion for the PSICOM forces in order to sneak into the Pulse Fal'Cie to rescue his true love, Serah, who has been turned into a L'Cie. This event effectively turns Snow into a single-minded delusional individual whose only purpose is to "save Serah by saving the world". His dialogue rarely goes beyond commenting on one of these two goals. In his quest to successfully create a diversion by engaging in the liberation of a people being exiled to Pulse, Snow recruits the help of a young civilian mother, Nora. Predictably, Nora dies in battle. This event is witnessed by her son, Hope, who accompanied by an amnesic Vanille also ventures into the Fal'Cie to face Snow, whom Hope sees as his

mother's murderer. Hope's dialogue from here on never goes beyond showing fear at the prospect of killing Snow.

As the player explores the Fal'Cie area all three groups come closer together, eventually finding Serah, who tells them to protect cocoon before turning into a crystal and, according to Cocoon lore, earning immortality. Serah's crystallization leads to the party fighting the Pulse Fal'Cie, Anima, and being branded as L'Cie, Fal'Cie servants who only live to complete a task given to them. The party members, whom do not like each other, are now forced to work together to achieve their focus, a mission bestowed by the Fal'Cie, or must suffer being turned into Cie'th, mindless zombie-like creatures.

During this short series of events the player learns of "the purge" – an eviction that the Cocoon government forced onto some of the inhabitants. In theory, the PSICOM forces were going to relocate the people from their town because "a Pulse fal'Cie was found nearby" and this might "taint" the inhabitants. Instead of risking this Pulse Fal'Cie giving everyone in that sector a Focus of destroying Cocoon, the Cocoon government decided to relocate them all. However, as Lightning mentions, the true intention is not relocation, but annihilation. This chapter ends with the Fal'Cie Anima being blown up and everyone being thrown to the icy lake below the city. From here on the player is led through an almost infinite number of linear hallways with no deviations following a narrative that rarely goes beyond the characters commenting on how they are being followed and must get away to safety. Throughout the course of the next nine chapters a few mildly interesting events take place that would have allowed for the exploration of serious topics in a game medium, but these events are quickly abandoned in favor of generic action chase scenes.

One of the more interesting topics that is brought up during the *Final Fantasy XIII* narrative is that of mainstream media. In the world of Cocoon people rely on the official news networks to receive their information. Shortly after the party manages to steal a PSICOM airship, the government authorities broadcast a news report stating that "the purge has been completed successfully" and that "the successful relocation of the migrants has finished without incident". This, had it been developed, could have served to spark a conversation on the reliability of traditional forms of media, notions of propaganda as news, and issues of the power structure using media to brainwash the masses for their own agenda. However, instead of having the characters make a comment on how broken the system is, the game's designers decided to avoid any potential for critical discourse by instead having a ship attacks them. This is followed by the party's airship crashing unto another linear hallway. Likewise, events where there seem to be hints of sexual tension between Sazh, a middle-aged man, and Vanille, a young woman, or between Snow, a young adult, and Serah, an eighteen year old with the appearance of an even younger woman, and which could have been used to explore sensuality and sexuality in videogames in the same manner that many authors explored these topics in text, and which *Mass Effect* attempted to explore in videogame form, are quickly defused into generic and superficial paternal or young-adult romantic relationships respectively. Once again, the narrative of the game walks away from exploring powerful topics that could have possibly made a great contribution to storytelling in videogames in favor of a superficial action narrative of persecution.

Following the same trend of shying away from mildly controversial topics, the statement made on abuse of authority and power in Lightning's flashback when a PSICOM officer tells Lightning that only civilians were to be purged after shooting a civilian in cold blood and stating that it was for his own good is quickly wasted when the narrative returns to the linearity of the chased outlaw narrative. Once again, an event that could have been used as a catalyst for a larger conversation, both in-game and in real life, one that focused on media manipulation, abuse of power, and fear of a righteous rebellion from the people, is simply lost as just another CG film in between straightforward hallways. Even the pivotal event for the main topic of predisposition versus free will of the overall narrative, when Lightning then decides to take the fight to Eden, is wasted thanks to the overall design and the pacing of the narrative. Granted, Lightning states that "our Focus doesn't matter. How I live is up to me", which is an example of free will versus destiny, but the player is then forced by design to walk through another series of hallways to the end of the game. There is no open narrative to allow the player to explore issues of free will, as titles like *Fallout III* do. Instead, the player is treated to an experience drastically lacking in free-will. In the same manner events that could have led to a larger conversation on topics like self-loathing, self versus the greater good, preconceived notions versus facts, and ideology are constantly brushed over with generic action scenes of being chased.

In the end, *Final Fantasy XIII* proves to be nothing more than eye-candy with a generic story that takes away the game elements from the game. The amazing visuals and lush world are only the fancy packaging for a simplistic system of rules, an extremely linear narrative, and bland characters. Still, despite the simplistic design, the superficial narrative, and the wasted prompts at larger discussions, some gamers have spoken favorably of the game, and it has received some positive reviews by gaming magazines. Indeed, if one is the kind of gamer who likes simple games with superficial plots and largely unremarkable characters, then perhaps it might be worthwhile to give *Final Fantasy XIII* a try, but otherwise it would be prudent to stay away from this title and invest on better-designed games with excellent narratives like *Mass Effect 2* (BioWare 2010). As a final comment, it is worth advising to the kind of player who favors straightforward narratives to give better-written narratives like *Heavy Rain* (Sony Computer Entertainment 2010) a chance.

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