

Final Fantasy Through the Ages:
A Comparison of Final Fantasy's Characters in I, VII, and XII

The Final Fantasy series contains what are perhaps the most popular single-player role-playing games of all time. An essential element to any RPG is, of course, the characters. Players come to an RPG in order to become immersed in the story-line and attached to characters they have come to identify with. The Final Fantasy series has developed through the ages, from simple characters with very little personality, to a set of characters the player comes to love and relate to. In this paper, I will discuss the development of the Final Fantasy characters through the evolution of the series—specifically Final Fantasys I, VII, and XII—with special attention to the progress of character back-stories and the use of naming and personalization.

The original Final Fantasy had a basic story; the player was four very basically personalize-able Warriors of Light who are fighting to save the world by restoring light to four elemental orbs (which one's characters conveniently carry). This game brought new life to the world of RPGs after Dragonquest commenced the genre, and quickly became a fan favorite; this led to the production of another Final Fantasy, then another, until we come to FF7: Final Fantasy VII is among the favorite RPGs of all time for many RPG players.¹ FF7 is about, in short, saving the world of “Gaia,” the planet on which FF7 occurs, from the evil, greedy control of the Shinra Company, a company that produces power (maka energy) by stealing people's spirit energy, and that creates incredibly powerful soldiers (part of an elite crew called SOLDIER) by creating people infused with materia (magical essence). The player controls a large group of characters (which can be changed out at the beginning of

¹Although many contend that FF8 is superior for the engaging love story, I find that FF7 has an overall better plot and character development.

each sequence, with the exclusion of the main character, Cloud) who oppose Shinra's evil rule. This game was wildly popular, as were the successive Final Fantasys, the most recent of which is Final Fantasy XII. FF12 is—again in brief—about a group of player characters (interchangeable like those of FF7, only now at any point, even in battle) fighting against the evil Archadean Empire and its invasion of their home of Dalmasca. Each of these Final Fantasys was a new step towards a greater attachment of the player to the characters and a small video game revolution in itself.

In the first Final Fantasy, the four characters that one played were chosen by the player himself.² The player selects the type of characters played based on what he wished their abilities to be, from the three melee types (Fighter, Monk, and Thief) and three magic (Red, Black, and White Mages). After he selects four he is then allowed to name them any name up to four characters long. This is an interesting move by the creators, which allows the player to personalize his characters to a degree never before available in an RPG. Choosing both class and name is a way for the player to make the character his own, and take pride in their accomplishments. And the characters do accomplish; they gain experience through battle and can level up, eventually even becoming a more powerful version of their own class with a different title—Fighter becomes Knight, White Mage becomes White Wizard, Thief becomes Ninja, and so forth). Along the way, the characters are further able to be personalized by the changing of weapons, although this is somewhat linear in that the player is given a weapon that is clearly better than the last and so the choice is simplified. The characters in this game are limited to just this much personalization and so ends their development; because the player can select some of the classes and not others or even all one class, there is no coherent backstory and the characters do not develop beyond leveling and switching weapons. Their simple 2D animation leaves them a bit lacking in personality,

² I use here the masculine "himself" simply for ease, although it is interesting that video games have been primarily male-dominated since their inception.

although that is simply the best animation at the time.

Final Fantasy VII was another leap for animation and for character development. The characters were now 3D and their clothing is relevant to their stories and not just their abilities. Aeris wears a long pink dress to show her innocence, whereas Sephiroth, the “bad guy,” wears an ominous all-black outfit. In this Final Fantasy, the player can again name his characters, but because they are a set of specific characters, the degree of personalization does not rob them of their backstories. As the player progresses through the game, he becomes more and more aware of the world that his characters inhabit through the stories they tell and as their past becomes clearer and clearer. As their past emerges, the player begins to feel an attachment to the character and sympathy for their plight. He is also allowed dialog choices which will have some effect on the game, such as deciding who Cloud takes on a date towards the end of the game—Aeris the beguiling flower girl, Tifa the tough but lovable girl from his past, or even the very large and very male Barrett. In having some degree of effect over the development of the game (minimal though it may be in order to retain the character's stories) along with the slow unveiling of the character's past and the progressive story-line, the player begins to feel emotionally invested in the outcome of the game; this makes it a difficult game to set down and sets the bar for all RPGs that follow, making an engaging character interaction a top priority.

Final Fantasy XII, besides stunning all-3D graphics, has that character interaction. The characters in this game are all somewhat invested in the outcome of their plight, although in this Final Fantasy, it is to different degrees and for different reasons. While Vaan, the main character (in a sense), looks to avenge his brother's death at the hands of the Empire, Princess Ashe wants to reclaim her kingdom, and Fran simply has nowhere else to go, with her home among the Viera no longer welcoming her. This makes for a more real emotional interplay, and the player can become more immersed in the game simply because

the flatness of character in the other Final Fantasys (such as FF1 and FF7's simple fights against evil, with all the characters hating the evil equally) is expunged and replaced with a depth that rivals a decent novel. Each character has a backstory and motives are not always what they seem. Basch, for instance, another player character, is thought to be a traitor to Dalmasca, and is hated by Vaan and Ashe for a portion of the story, although later he becomes their good friend. The fluidity of the story, punctuated by voice acting for each of the characters and beautiful cinematics, comes to a life of its own. The player is swept away by the intensity of the world and the character's loves and hates. One thing that a player cannot do is name their characters, a choice that, while decreasing the personalization of the game, keeps each individual character *an individual*; just as one cannot choose the name of their spouse or their best friend (unless, for some reason, a certain name was one of their qualifications) the name belongs to the character just as it does to a person. Personalization emerges in FF12 by way of licenses, which allow you to make a certain character more melee or magic oriented, and to use certain gear. The characters in Final Fantasy XII have a life of their own, and there is very little one can do to change that.

Throughout the Final Fantasy series, characters have gone from simple 2D animations carrying out simple commands and having no identity, to characters with stories and personality, to an intense interplay of characters with intentions and emotions. While personalization has been outmoded in favor of greater character development, for Final Fantasy this works to create a rich gameplay world and the most popular single-player RPGs of all time.