

The Evolution of Final Fantasy's Narratives

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FINAL FANTASY.

Hironobu Sakaguchi was ready to give up. The president of Square Co. at the time, Sakaguchi had lost confidence in his most recent creation, an RPG for the NES made in the wake of the first *Dragon Quest*. While, [contrary to popular belief](#), Square wasn't on the verge of bankruptcy, the beleaguered Sakaguchi decided that this project would decide his future. If it failed, he'd leave the video game business and return to university. It was this sense of finality that led to the game's now-ironic name: *Final Fantasy*.

In the ensuing years, there have been 14 numbered entries in the series and even more spinoff titles. In the numbered series, each game had nothing to do with the previous one in terms of story, characters or setting. There were common motifs and creatures, but for the most part, every *Final Fantasy* game was its own self-contained adventure. Ever since the launch of the first title all the way back in 1987, gamers have been captivated by amazing worlds and epic quests time and time again.

At a certain point, though, something in the series changed. The focus shifted. Once-common staples took a backseat to new tropes. The fantasy that Sakaguchi had staked his career on had never truly been "final," but today it isn't even familiar. Dialogue, story and character development have now become the emphasis of a series that began with four mute, faceless protagonists at the center. While a push for advanced storytelling is laudable in the video game art form, the execution of narrative technique in *Final Fantasy* has altered the framework that made the first entry a hit back when



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To understand what has fundamentally changed the series, a primer of what the *Final Fantasy* franchise used to be is necessary. For

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the most part, the plot of the first *Final Fantasy* is pretty simple. The four controllable characters, known as the Light Warriors, arrive in the kingdom of Cornelia carrying mystic orbs. They are subsequently

told that they must defeat four elemental-based fiends to restore light to the orbs, thus bringing balance to the world. As far as plots go, it's a pretty simple good-versus-evil tale without many frills. The ending, which involves the final boss utilizing a time loop in order to achieve immortality, is more “out there” than the rest of the game, but it doesn't strain the mind.

Really, none of the *Final Fantasy* sequels that followed added much in the way of complexity. While *Final Fantasy II* added a human face to the enemy, it was very clear that our named-but-bland protagonists were fighting a figure of pure evil. *Final Fantasy III* followed a plot trajectory similar to *Final Fantasy I*, with four nameless heroes striving to stop the embodiment of darkness.

A shift towards character development arrived with *Final Fantasy IV*. Cut-scenes and character arcs were weaved into the narrative, adding a greater sense of purpose. The plot still centered on fighting elemental fiends and stopping a garishly evil final boss, but the player got to know the characters like Cecil and Kain and Rydia along the way. The high-fantasy questing aspect of *Final Fantasy* remained intact even with this added dimension.

After a brief regression in narrative and character depth in *Final Fantasy V*, *Final Fantasy VI* took several steps forward. Prior to the franchise's sixth installment, any character development present tended to occur within the confines of a quest, as exemplified by Cecil's conversion from dark to light in *Final Fantasy IV*; his redemption is a good character moment, but it also serves the utilitarian purpose of allowing him to defeat the villainous Golbez. In *Final Fantasy VI*, the role of character begins to eclipse the role of the overarching plot. Scenes, not levels, like Celes' suicide attempt or the coin toss between Edgar and Sabin add little to the plot, but they flesh out

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These changes can be attributed to Yoshinori Kitase, whose first project as director was *Final Fantasy VI*. Starting with his first game, characters began to take a clear emphasis. What's more, Kitase would come to alter the look and feel of the franchise. As he later revealed in a bonus DVD for *Final Fantasy X*, Kitase strove to push the limits of what a "fantasy world" was in the minds of fans.



Final Fantasies VII and *VIII* continued the trend of increased character focus. Indeed, characters in themselves became the focus of the arcs, not a battle between good and evil. The latter conflict was present in these games, but it didn't possess the urgency that it did in the earlier titles. *Final Fantasy VIII*,

in particular, didn't seem to be bothered with a main plot. The main villain had the barest of motivations and the time-travel laden plot was riddled with holes. Almost entirely eschewing the setup, the ending cut-scenes were content with wrapping up character arcs and ending with a kiss on a balcony – a far cry from the triumphant fanfare of the original *Final Fantasy*. This isn't bad, simply different – changed.

An emphasis on pageantry accompanied this change. Prior to *Final Fantasy VII*, many of the fantastical elements were standard tropes in the overall fantasy genre: Dwarfs, magic and western mythology all populated these earlier games. These elements continued to be a presence, but under Kitase they shifted into the background in favor of levels like amusement parks, impromptu band performances and extreme sports. The evolving technology aided in the shift from traditional fantasy norms to a more unique outlook. Artist Tetsuya Nomura, who worked for *Final Fantasies VII* through *X*, was hired for his ability to integrate his designs into the 3-D realm, and his input shaped the way the series would look henceforth. Visually and structurally, the franchise began to devise its own fantasy tropes.

As the series began to enter 21st century, the games grew even further from

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to Shakespeare and Lewis Carroll gave the game a whimsical European vibe which made it feel both similar and distant to previous games. As mentioned before, western influence had made appearances in the franchise before, but it was generally Tolkien-flavored – elves and spells and castles. In *Final Fantasy IX*, the feeling is less high fantasy and more theatre-in-the-round. It was a sly reworking of traditional fantasy influences that set the game apart from the established feel of the franchise even further.

The next installment went even further in developing its own fantasy lore. *Final Fantasy X* tackled themes of religion and humanity while at the same time delivering some of the more esoteric artistic visions of the franchise. The distinctive, colorful look of the game complemented the characters as well, for every party character in the game is larger than life. From Tidus the illusory sports superstar to Kimahri the furry blue tribesman, *Final Fantasy X*'s wild cast pushed the plot forward, epitomized by Tidus' repeated proclamation that "This is my story."

The plots of these games, by the way, began to explore more abstract directions; from the time warps of *Final Fantasy VIII* to the dream worlds of *Final Fantasy X*, the stories began to abandon the narrative form that was standard to the series. Even *Final Fantasy IX*'s plot, superficially similar to the good-versus-evil romps seen in *Final Fantasies II* and *V*, manages to shift things up by reflecting on the nature of life and death in a manner that was unheard of in the series. While these were still essentially linear stories of defeating a final boss, by this point the atmosphere and characters had come to influence not just the stories, but the messages that the audience were supposed to glean from the stories. *Final Fantasies VIII* through *X* in particular really focused on using the stories to convey themes rather than telling a straightforward story.

Sidestepping the MMORPG *Final Fantasy XI*, which didn't have a large plot to speak of, *Final Fantasy XII* had a more digestible plot than its immediate predecessors, arguably since it borrowed heavily from *Star Wars*. It added more artistic flair and ambiguous plot devices, but it was still a decipherable plot. Elements of philosophical debate bubbled around the surface of the game's main story, but the individual character arcs never really crossed

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Solo/Princess Leia type romance between the characters Balthier and Ashe but it felt forced and spontaneous and the finale hadn't earned the emotional payoff that it so wanted.

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Final Fantasy XIII, on the other hand, went full-stop on character development and visual splendor while neglecting to have a sensible plot. Indeed, most of the exposition or vital information isn't delivered in dialogue, but via text-only journal entries, treating the story as subordinate. Rather, the characters

took center stage and the nonsensical plot went to great pains to tie the myriad character threads together.

After another attempt at an MMORPG with *Final Fantasy XIV*, the main franchise and its fans await a fifteenth installment. What should the latter group expect from the former? If *Final Fantasy XV* follows the recent trajectory, there will be lots of dialogue, beautiful designs and a plot that defies reason. Gone are the days of fetch-quests and dark dungeons, replaced with brightly colored plazas and pop concerts.


It would take a book to go into every nuance involved in how the series has changed over time, but for the sake of brevity, *Final Fantasies I* and *XIII* make for a good cross-section. While *Final Fantasy I* put nearly no emphasis into characterization or dialogue and only the most basic of stories, it allowed the player to embark on a vast world to explore. Most of the locations fit the profile of generic dungeons or caves, but every level challenged the players not with personal dilemmas or inner turmoil, but with dragons and fiends. It was classic high adventure and the prototypical RPG experience. On the other hand, *Final Fantasy XIII* offered only a few opportunities of exploration or dungeon-crawling. The level design was linear, but linear never looked so good. Beautiful set design bookended by dialogue-heavy scenes were the crux of the game. Crucially, the player's role in the game was far different between the two games; in *Final Fantasy I*, the goal was to finish an adventure while in *Final Fantasy XIII* the goal is to guide the narrative to its climax. It's as if the player was asked to become

This drastic but gradual transition that the franchise has gone through has not always pleased everyone. Critics have called the franchise's recent efforts "a punchline" and have referred to the plots as "jigsaw puzzles." Indeed, not every choice that Square Enix (Square Co. and *Dragon Quest* creators Enix Corp. merged in 2003) decided on has worked. While the emphasis has clearly shifted towards characters and story, the dialogue can be of questionable quality at times. The stories themselves have bordered on incomprehensible. Even worse, the characters haven't always been worth rooting for. In games with such dependence on narrative, these are costly failures.

After 14 entries, though, Square Enix cannot be faulted for a lack of trying. After delivering six of the best classic RPGs out there, it would be strange if they didn't start experimenting with new ideas. Is every design choice or line of dialogue a winner? No, but in a gaming market saturated with murky first person shooters and "gritty" action-adventures, bizarre bursts of innovation should be cherished, not ridiculed. The games may no longer resemble the eight-bit fantasy that Sakaguchi put his faith in long ago, but every new *Final Fantasy* game comes imbued with his spirit of risk, and that's what keeps drawing fans back to the games. As long as the franchise continues to be inventive and offbeat, the next fantasy will by no means be final.

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POSTED ON APR 19, 2014 BY

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