

A Game Analysis on Xenoblade Chronicles Definitive Edition

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Abstract

This paper serves to analyze how Xenoblade Chronicles Definitive Edition introduces the player to its unique mechanics and teaches them how to play. The game employs several of Gee's learning principles being *Fish Tank*, *Information on Demand*, *Well-ordered Problems*, and *Customize* principles and how well executed they were. These principles are primarily present in key battles being the first 2 tutorial battles and a later multi-enemy battle. These battles serve as introductory battles to familiarize the player with the mechanic and develop effective strategies. The game also uses the story as a tool to introduce some gameplay mechanics early game which this paper will also go over.

In 1999, several employees seeking more creative freedom working at *Square Soft*, now known as *Square Enix*, led by Tetsuya Takahashi and Soraya Saga decided to leave and form their own company *Monolith Soft*. Funded by *Namco*, *Monolith Soft* started working on a spiritual successor of *Xenogears*, a game the team worked on while at Square, named *Xenosaga* on the *PlayStation 2*. However, despite having good reviews and a relative popularity in Japan *Xenosaga* did not sell well globally. As a result *Monolith* started helping other studios with their games and stopped working on the *Xeno* games after *Xenosaga III*. Still, Takahashi did not give up on his *Xeno* series, and after some encouragement from Nintendo executive director Shinji Hotaru and Nintendo buying 80% of Monolith, he pitched a new game in 2007 to Nintendo named *Xenoblade*. The game released in Japan in 2010 titled *Xenoblade Chronicle* to critical acclaim from critics and beloved by fans. In 2011 the game was released in Europe and Australia and in 2012, after persistent fan demand, the game was released in North America to a massive success (Rairdin & Ronaghan, 2018). Fast forward to May of 2020, *Monolith Soft* remastered the game with updated graphics on the Nintendo Switch realized as *Xenoblade Chronicles Definitive Edition (XCDE)* (Nintendo, 2020). After constantly hearing about this game, learning its history, and it being the last major game I played I decided to analyze it to see what made it so special in the hearts of many gamers. I will be showing how *XCDE* teaches the player and goes over the Gee's principles *Fish Tank*, *Information on Demand*, *Well-ordered Problems*, and *Customize* implemented in the game (Gee, 2005). Gee's learning principles are broad design methods meant to teach the player how to play in an enjoyable and engaging way.

Xenoblade Chronicles Definitive Edition is an action Japanese role-playing game (JRPG) that has a unique setting and gameplay compared to many of it's peers. Unlike many action

JRPGs *XCDE* is not a turn based game, where the player does a move then waits for the opponent to make a move, which was very unique for 2010 when the game first released. Due to how uncommon this style of game was the tutorial needed to be much more effective in teaching the player the mechanics of the game, which many JRPGs usually struggle with. *XCDE* utilizes many different kinds of methods to teach the player how to play and I intended to delve deeper into these methods and evaluate how effective they were in teaching the player. I will also show how Gee's principles were incorporated and how effective their implementation of these methods were.

When *XCDE* is first launched the player is slowly introduced to the game universe. Two giant titans named the Bionis and the Mechonis are fighting each other until they both deal a finishing blow on the other resulting in each dying standing in place. These two giant titans have given life to different sentient beings that are biological, on the Bionis, and mechanical, on the Mechonis. The player is then taken to a war happening between the Homs, the equivalent of humans in this world, and the Mechons, machines made by the Machina, a humanoid sentient life from the Mechromis. Here the player takes control of the character Dunban who is wielding the Menado, a blade said to be made by the Bionis, and here the player's journey starts.

At this point the player encounters the first method the game has to teach the player how to play, text based tutorials. As the player takes control over Dunban they are faced with popups (figure 1) with minimal text informing the player how to target an enemy and start a battle. At the start Dunban can only use the Monado arts, one for attack and one for enhancing the other members of the party, and nothing else. The player would notice that the Monado arts can only be used after a few successful auto attacks have been carried out. The game also would only send

large enemies one at a time, while the small weak enemies are sent once as a group of three huddled together. When the player tries to attack these small Mechons with Monodo Buster they would notice that the attack also affected the two Mechons they were not targeting (figure 2).



Figure 1



Normal Arts Damaged Enemies Chain Attack gauge
Talent Arts Targeted Enemy

Figure 2

After that battle the player is taken a year to the future after the war has already ended, and now they are in control of Shulk our main protagonist. Shulk and his friend Reyn find themselves facing a monster and they engage it in battle. Now, the game introduces the player to normal Arts and the Talent Arts, and as Shulk has yet to receive the Monado he can only use these Arts. Shulk has access to two Arts only, an attacking Art and a healing Art (figure 2). Through this battle the player learns that normal Arts take real time seconds to recharge regardless if the player landed auto attacks, while the Talent Art only charges when auto attacks land. To ensure the player noticed these facts the game provides some popups with little texts explaining some of these concepts.

This early tutorial is a fantastic implementation of Gee's principle *Fish Tank*. In games, Fish Tank is the idea of providing a simplified version of the game to the player in order for them to learn and slowly get into the game (Gee, 2005, p. 12). This helps the player not get overwhelmed with the amount of things they have to learn and helps keep them engaged. The early tutorial broke down two of the biggest, and most important, aspects of the combat in this game and they are Arts and Talents Arts and the difference between them. It also shows the player that moving around is mostly to get in an appropriate spot to launch an attack as they can't dodge the attacks of the enemy targeting them.

Later on, Shulk and his friends go to a location to get some items for the story and on the way they encounter some monsters in a cave. There the game provides some more popups (figure 1), some are more text heavy, about different kinds of information the player needs to know such as how to perform a *Chain Attack* and how *Aggro*, the basis on which enemies target

a party member for attack, works. *XCDE* then goes to provide more information and tutorials to the player as they play when needed. For example, it provides a popup on how to use the map, a popup on NPCs, non-playable characters, and side quests after they talk to their first NPC.

The popups presented to the player is an example of another one of Gee's principles being the *Information On Demand* principle, which is about giving the player access to the information they need when they need it (Gee, 2005, p.11). The game not only provides these popups to the player but also saves in a sub menu so they can be revisited at any time. This submenu also contains more detailed information that the player can check if they needed at any point on their journey. These popups are sometimes very helpful with small bits of information that can be immediately applied afterwards. However, some popups are very text heavy and when the player is not applying the information immediately afterwards they could forget that information.

Later on a group of Mechons attack the Shulk's home, Colony 9, and so the party engages them in battle. As Shulk has yet to receive the Monado the party cannot damage the Mechon. This is when the game teaches the player that in order to inflict damage on Mechons without the use of the Monado then the player has to inflict a *Break*, and then a *Topple* on the Mechon which are side effects from some of the Arts the player has at their disposal. This teaches the player, after they have gotten used to what they have learned so far, that they can inflict status effects that can immobilize an enemy.

XCDE does such a great job at implementing the *Fish Tank* principle and in making this experience be seamless making the start of a JRPG much less daunting of a task. Also, by ensuring that the player is actually engaged and applying what they just learned immediately is

one of the strongest ways to start a game. I believe this is one of the big reasons why *Xenoblade Chronicles* was beloved by so many people. It is not very common for an action JRPG with so many nontraditional mechanics to be this accessible for new players. However, this is not the only method XCDE uses to teach the player how to play.



Figure 3

Another method XCDE used to teach the player some of the game's mechanics is by integrating some parts of the gameplay with the story. Early on in the story Reyn, one of Shulk's friends and party members, takes hold of the Monado and loses control of it striking in the process Fiora, another friend of Shulk and party member, but it bounces back doing her no harm. Shulk then goes into explaining that the Monado cannot hurt the people of *Bionis* which is why Fiora was unharmed. This comes to effect later in the game when Shulk and his friends go up against some people of the High Entia, another human race that lives on the *Bionis*. The player

should quickly realize that Shulk does no damage to the High Entians in the battle and thus switch him out of the party. Another time this technique was used was when the Shulk first got the Monado and started seeing visions of the future and used that knowledge to avoid attacks and land hits in a cutscene. Afterwards when the player is in a battle occasionally the player would get visions (figure 3) of what an enemy is about to do in the next 8-12 seconds in which they have to decide what to do about this outcome.

This is a genius way to tie gameplay and narrative together which results in a much more engaging game and world. It also demonstrates how a game doesn't necessarily need to bombard the player with pages of text to teach them everything. The few things the game taught me through the story gameplay wise were the things I learned best as they felt like apart of the game world and not just game mechanics. Now that we went through how the game went about introducing the player to the combat, let us now move on to how it helped them to learn how to strategize.

XCDE through battles subtly teaches the player some skills that will be more necessary in future battles. This is done by introducing some of the challenges the player will face in the harder battles earlier in the game so the player can figure out what is the best approach to these challenges before they encounter them. In chapter 7, for example, the player has two mandatory mini-battles against groups of four or five enemies. The first one is in an open space and the other is in a closed space. These battles are tough not because the enemies themselves are strong but rather due to their numbers they gain up on one party member at a time and take them down that way. This presents a new kind of challenge for the player that they have to overcome. The player could try to switch up the party to focus on more defensive members to better deal with

the damage, or they can try and take down each one of the enemies one at a time which will lower the difficulty of the fight. With the open space battle the player can battle until they are about to die then run away and come back after they are healed. In the closed space battle the player could go in large circles which will distract some of the enemies and lessen the frequency of their attacks. These battles force the player to better learn the behaviors of the enemies in the game and how to take advantage of their environment. And from that point forward most of the major bosses are going to occasionally summon weaker monsters to come to their aid and the game expects the player to be able to deal with them.

The Gee principle employed here is the *Well-ordered Principle* which is what the game does to help the player make guess in the future based on the challenges they have already overcome (Gee, 2005, p. 9-10). When implemented right, the *Well-ordered Principle* is what provides the player with the tools to figure out the solution to the hard problems they will face naturally. This also helps the designers design more challenging obstacles without the player feeling like the difficulty spiked all of a sudden. One of the key reasons why *XCDE* is so enjoyable is because the game does a great job at teaching the player skills they will need without the player even realizing they learned anything new. All of this though builds up to the final point I will cover in this paper and it is customization.

Many RPGs customization is usually approached by giving the player a character creation screen at the start of the game for them to create what type of character they want to play as. However, the player does not always know what type of character they will enjoy playing as the most before they start playing and experimenting in the game. In *XCDE* this problem is avoided by providing the player with set characters that they can make a party from to

however they like. The game gives the player seven unique characters that are introduced slowly to them to not overwhelm them. The player is also faced with a variety of challenges that can force them to rethink their strategy and approach and use other characters if the need arises. In the battle mentioned earlier where the player is against a group of five enemies in a closed space, for example, I was faced with High Entia soldiers which forced me to switch out Shulk, due to the Monado not effecting people, who was my main for another tank Riki. I also played as Sharla, the healer, for the first time as she kept dying from as a CPU. This was one of the more fun fights as I got kind of used to the party set up I had and this had me mix things up.

This is the Gee's Customize principle, allowing the player to dictate how they play the game to fit their style, employed and implemented at its best (Gee, 2005, p. 7). The game achieves this by providing different kinds of characters and challenges that have no one right answer and depends on how the player decides to face said challenges. Furthermore, to encourage switching party members the game keeps all characters at the same level regardless of how often they are used so the player can switch to them whenever they feel like it. I played this game alongside a friend of mine and we had distinct experiences from one another as we for the most part did not use the same party members. As a result we were able to have fun discussions on how we overcame the bosses in the game and what we would do in a second playthrough. However, *XCDE* is not a perfect game with no flaws or shortcomings.

Now we reached where the game fell short in some regards starting with the tutorial. While the game does provide an excellent early tutorial that teaches the player how to play on a basic level and are very engaging, some of the other tutorials that delve deeper into the game mechanics for even a higher mastery were not executed as well. One example comes to mind is

when the player first learns Chain Attacks, the game just presents the player with a popup filled with text and does not mandate the player to use that newly learned knowledge immediately afterwards. The best way to teach a player something is by having them do it (Schank, Berman, & Macpherson, 1999, p. 164). This resulted in me not initially using it as the battle I was presented with the Chain Attack tutorial ended before I had the chance to. And I never did use it properly for the first half of the game as I did not know how it fully worked.

The player is also presented with optional tutorials that can help them better understand the mechanics, however, these tutorials are all just walls of text and I found them very boring and did not bother using them. This is one area where the Gee principle the game would have benefited from greatly, the Information ‘On Demand’ and ‘Just in time’ principle. It simply put is the idea of how the game presents its information and how the player needs certain info as a reference and not as the sole source of said info (Gee, 2005, p. 11-12). These optional tutorials would have been a lot better if they had their own little battles the employ the skills taught from them. As I was playing the remastered version and not the original it would have been nice if this was implemented.

Another slight issue I have encountered was that the game did not try to make me switch up my party as much as I would have liked. Players need to be continually challenged and make errors to encourage improvement (Eichenbaum, Bavelier, & Green, 2014, p. 53). There were instances where battles were hard for my main party and I had to switch things up, but it felt like there were not as many of those types of battles as I had hoped. This resulted in me not experiencing the full potential of some characters until I started a new play through. Alas though, these small gripes did not hinder my enjoyment of the game much.

In conclusion, I can see why *Xenoblade Chronicles* is held up at such high regards in so many peoples hearts. It has a fantastic narrative with deep unique mechanics that are easy to learn but hard to fully master. It does a fantastic job at introducing the player to its mechanics utilizing the Sandbox principle and even integrating some go the gameplay to the story. It uses the Well-ordered principle to help the player master the new mechanics of the game. And finally provides the player with a great veracity of customization for them to face the challenges how they want to. I always find it hard to recommend JRPGs to friends who are not fans of the genre due to how hard it is to learn and get into them. But with *Xenoblade Chronicles Definitive Edition* with its near perfect tutorial that has few flaws, the well paced and timed challenges, and the flexibility it gives the player party wise I can easily recommend it to anyone whether they are fans of the genre or not.

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