

Review of Final Fantasy VII

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From left: Cid, Yuffie, Red XIII, Barrett, Cloud, Tifa, Aeris, Cait Sith, Vincent

Introduction

There are few video gamers today who have not yet played Final Fantasy VII. The Final Fantasy series first became popular on the Nintendo Entertainment System. Final Fantasy VII marked the move of the series from the 16-bit Super NES to the 32-bit Sony Playstation. Not only that, it set a first in everything from production to marketing to game design. This paper reviews the game 4 years later after its release, and concludes with a discussion of its impact on the industry and the gamers, and its place in the history of console games.

FFVII Fact Box



Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: Squaresoft
Platform: Sony Playstation
Genre: RPG
Number of Players: 1
Number of Disks: 3
Released: September 3, 1997
ESRB Rating: Teen (comic mischief, mild animated violence, mild language)

Part of the development team:

Producer: Hironobu Sakaguchi
Director: Yoshinori Kitase
Music Composer: Nobuo Uematsu
Main Programmer: Ken Narita
Character Design & Battle Visual Director: Tetsuya Nomura
Art Director: Yusuke Naora
Image Illustrator: Yoshitaka Amano



The Story

The story begins with Cloud Strife, a mercenary and ex-member of Soldier (Shinra's army), joining a rebel group Avalanche in an assault on Shinra's Mako Reactor No. 1 in the city of Midgar. Shinra is a huge corporation that has taken over the world by building power plants to mine the "mako" (in Japanese, "magic light") energy from the ground, but in doing so it is slowly depleting the planet's life force and eventually every living thing will die. After the

successful mission, Cloud agrees to join Avalanche again for another bombing mission on another reactor but they were ambushed and he was separated from the group. He meets the flower-girl Aeris and finds out that Shinra is extremely interested in her for some unknown reason. After saving Aeris from the clutches of Shinra, Cloud and the gang find out that something more sinister than Shinra is coming, and the end of the world may come much sooner than they expect. This new discovery leads them on a hunt across the world for the mysterious ex-Soldier Sephiroth, a man with legendary abilities, and with a hidden agenda for the fate of the planet. But Shinra is searching for Sephiroth too, for reasons unknown, and they are out to stop the party from reaching Sephiroth first. Along the way, questions arise about the past, and about Cloud's real identity. Who exactly is Sephiroth? The Ancients? Why does everything seem to hinge on one seemingly unimportant photograph? What is the mysterious voice that plagues Cloud's mind? Their search for the truth eventually leads to the Northern Crater, into which they descend for the final showdown with Sephiroth.



The complex story gradually unfurls primarily in the form of character flashbacks. The game is unique in that these flashbacks are not simply telling the events as they happened, but what the character remembers, either accurately or inaccurately, from his or her own perspective. Many of the characters' accounts of the past are conflicting. The truth is revealed a bit at a time, to be finally resolved only much later. The player thus desires to know the real truth, and is effectively drawn deeply into the game.

The sacrifice for such a complex and compelling story is the number of possible outcomes. Final Fantasy VII has only one ending, and is a commonly heard complaint among the hard-core RPG players. However, I believe the sacrifice is respectable and worth it, because a simpler story or inconsistent endings would have destroyed the game, although I too would have preferred more non-linearity in the story. The only major complaint I have is that the back-stories of some characters, in particular Tifa, are not developed as fully as I would have liked. However, each character's personality is conveyed very well in the way they speak, and this is a very refreshing difference from other RPG games.



Although the story is extremely linear and sometimes predictable (although some people have complained it was too complex and confusing), it was nevertheless a great story masterfully told by some of the best people in the business.

(Warning: Spoilers below! Do not read if you have not played the game!)

Final Fantasy VII has several major firsts as stories in RPG games go. For example, it contains perhaps one of the most pitiable villain ever found in RPG games. We understand the need to destroy Sephiroth

in order to save the planet, but we feel sorry for him too, as it is not his fault. He is a victim of Shinra's hideous experiments, misled into believing he is one of the chosen "Cetra". Shinra's lies, and his obsession with his "mother" Jenova led him down the path of self-destruction. Villains have always been extremely stereotypical in Japanese-styled RPG games (as in the "Haha! I'm going to destroy the world! Nyah nyah!" type). No other RPG villain has even come close to Sephiroth's depth and complexity, and his ability to evoke such strong feelings of sympathy in the player.



For the first time in RPG history, Final Fantasy VII includes the death of a main playable character as an essential and critical element of the plot. Many of us still mourn Aerith's death, and many players have undoubtedly used devices such as GameShark to "resurrect" her and put her back into the party. Even more interesting is the existence of a hoax that Aerith can indeed be resurrected legally, complete with instructions on how to achieve it, seemingly valid reasons such as the new "hidden" cinematics in the US release of the game, and recounts of other players who claimed they did it.

However, this is nothing but a hoax, and interested readers can probably find information regarding this on the web (I recommend the GameFAQs web site).

Gameplay

The key to a successful RPG, in addition to its story, is its battle and character development system.

Materia

Materia is the result of condensing "mako" energy into a crystal. Ironically, the key to success is in using up the very same energy that Shinra is depleting. Understanding and using materia effectively is essential to doing well in the game.



The materia system is what replaces the job- or class- based character development systems found in previous games in the series. Final Fantasy VII utilizes a classless character development system, and although it makes the characters much more interchangeable, they are now more balanced, unlike older RPG games, where a healer is ultimately useless and is a liability until someone needs healing.



You use materia by equipping them on your weapons and armor. Every weapon or armor has a number of slots in which materia can be attached. Each materia also contains its own series of spells and summons. Materia gain levels the more you use them, and allows you to use stronger spells. When a materia is "mastered", it spawns a new duplicate for you to repeat the whole training process all over again.

In addition to just level-building, materia can also be linked in pairs, if the weapon or armor provides for that. They can have different side-effects depending on the combination, so there is a lot of room for experimentation and self-expression. Furthermore, any materia can be used by any character, and can be swapped between characters, so you can reconfigure the party to deal with different situations.



While not necessary to beat the game, some players have created really amazing materia combinations. There are FAQs all over the Internet, written by players, describing the “perfect” materia combination to, for example, to kill almost all enemies on the first strike, or even to beat Sephiroth in the first couple of rounds without doing anything at all in the final battle. Of course, it takes a lot of time and patience to master enough materia to get the required setup. That the players are willing to do this proof of Square’s ingenuity and farsightedness in creating such a flexible system

Battle system

The Active-Time Battle system is not a new concept, as it was used in some of the earlier games in the series. What is new is the introduction of “Limit Breaks”, fantastic desperation moves that a character can use if they are attacked enough times, indicated by a bar that shows the character’s amount of anger. Performing enough Limit Breaks allows the character to learn new Limit Breaks, but the player must set the Limit Break level manually, otherwise the character will not attain the next level.



Mini-games, Secret Characters and Side-Quests

Mini-games abound everywhere in Final Fantasy VII as part of the story-line, which includes an exhilarating bike chase on the highway, and an underwater submarine seek-and-destroy mission. There is even a complete video game arcade in the Gold Saucer, where you can replay the mini-games or play other games (and waste a tremendous amount of money, just as in real-life arcades).

There are two optional secret characters which you can get in the game - Yuffie (an annoying female ninja) and Vincent (a really cool undead human), each with their own set of Limit Breaks, weapons, side-quests and back-story. The most often heard complaint is that they are woefully underdeveloped. No special FMVs were made for them, their side-quests and back-story lacks substance, and they have absolutely no effect on the story. The only reason to get them is if you like their fighting prowess, or if you simply want to get every little secret in the game.

Chocobos

Yes, they are back, and this time you can breed and race them for additional cash at the Gold Saucer, or even breed your very own super-duper ocean-going gold chocobo to get at that all-powerful Knights-of-the-Round materia, or the extremely useful Mime materia. Chocobo breeding (and racing) is a time-consuming and expensive commitment, but very recommended if you want to beat Sephiroth. The other alternative is to level up to ridiculously high levels. Either way, the choice is yours to make.



Graphics

Freed from the size constraints of a cartridge based system, and with a budget of over \$30 million and 120 artists, the most amazing CG graphics ever to be produced at that time were achieved. FMV sequences are scattered throughout the entire game, providing a visual feast never seen before in any RPG. These are not just cut-scenes that function as rewards for the player's achievements. The movie sequences are woven directly into the game itself, and drive the story forward. Most players first bought the game for its beautiful

graphics, and then were wowed by the gameplay and story. Final Fantasy VII feels more like a movie than a game, and that is probably where most of its mass-appeal lies. This use of integrated movies was controversial within the RPG community. Even today, there are still debates by gamers regarding the merits of such "eye candy", and what elements make a "true" RPG.

In addition to the pre-rendered FMVs, many scenes are acted out in real time 3D by the super-deformed "Popeye-like" characters themselves within the 3D game environment, complete with suitable animations, such as Barrett shaking his fist in anger. The game is played entirely in a third-person perspective, on lush pre-rendered 3D backgrounds.

The characters may look very blocky by today's standards, but at that time it was so revolutionary that the game sparked the beginning of a new genre of "cinematic RPGs" (a term coined by Square a year later when they produced Parasite Eve).



Sound

The musical score is simply beautiful. Over 100 tunes composed by the ever-popular Nobuo Uematsu, who composed the music for all the games in the Final Fantasy series, is used in the game. Many audio CDs have been released, including orchestral arrangements, and sold well.



Probably the most common complaint is that the music is synthesized instead of being digitally recorded, despite the huge budget. The same goes for the sound effects. Interestingly, later games in the series still used the same synthesized approach to the music and sound effects.

The only exception to the synthesized formula is the final battle with Sephiroth, where chanting voices are used. The theme works effectively to heighten the player's anxiety when facing down Sephiroth, especially as it is totally unexpected because all other music in the game are synthesized.

Control

The controls are simple to understand and use. However, sometimes it is hard to control Cloud in some of the more complex interior environments because it is not clear where he can and cannot go.

Translation

Japanese RPGs often suffer from a very bad translation treatment when they cross the Atlantic. There is frequently a tendency to Americanize the story and characters to better suit American tastes, due to a fear that Americans will be put off by foreign elements in the story. Often this results in an incomprehensible story. Final Fantasy VII is lucky in that Sony promised not to alter the work. Even the dialog remained uncensored, and the vulgar words kept intact. Still, after taking more than year in translation and repackaging, there are several translation inconsistencies.



Perhaps the most obvious mistake is the “Off-course” (of course) at the Gold Saucer Battle Arena. Sometimes the dialog makes no sense, such as when Cloud says, “...Hmm. That’s how you’ll fool them” and Aeris echoes “That’s how you fooled them” outside the Honeybee Inn. Despite the mistakes, the translation is one of the best ever in a Japanese RPG.



Besides translating the text, the American version also contains a myriad of new additions. The optional Ruby and Emerald Weapons monsters were added, and new FMVs were created for them. The Underwater materia was added as the way to eliminate the time limit in fighting the Emerald Weapon. Some spells were altered, and some monsters were made easier to defeat. Perhaps the craziest addition in the American release was Sephiroth's Supernova summon, drastically modified from the Japanese version, which is now at least a minute and a half longer. One beneficial modification was that you can now exchange materia easily between party members. That was a real pain in the original

Japanese release. Another modification was that exit points are now marked clearly with red arrows, which makes navigation in confusing scenery much easier.

Game Design

There is very little replay value, except for maybe the Gold Saucer mini-games. The story is extremely linear, and there is only one ending. Of course, many players will play the game again at least once to get all the secrets, raise the perfect chocobos, beat the Ruby and Emerald Weapons and so on, but there is little reason play the game again and again. This is very common problem with RPGs. Still, this is a really wonderful game to play.



The battles are well-balanced. Most monsters at each stage of the game are at a beatable level, and there is a lot of variety in battling them. Many monsters have specific weaknesses, and require different strategies.

The frequency of Limit Breaks has been criticized to be too high by some, making the game too easy. While this might be true, Limits Breaks are a godsend when you are fighting a difficult boss battle, and it does require some strategy in deciding when to use a Limit Break.

Navigation-wise, there is not much control over where you can go. New places are “unlocked” as the story progresses, but it is done “naturally”, such as you must acquire the buggy so that you can cross the river to the other side of the continent, and the biplane before you can cross the ocean.



Impact on Industry

Final Fantasy VII marked Squaresoft’s breakaway from Nintendo, and many players followed in the switch over to the Sony Playstation. This was undoubtedly an important factor in the Playstation’s success as the next-generation video game console. Enix’s Dragonquest series followed soon after Square’s decision to “defect” to the Playstation. Even now, Nintendo still have not quite recovered from this double-blow.

Final Fantasy VII helped lifted the status of Japanese-styled console-based RPGs from being a niche market into the mainstream. In the past, RPGs are far and few between. Now players are spoilt for choice every year.

The game proved that big budget games are possible and heralded the end of the garage-based RPG game development. Final Fantasy VII also started a new genre of “cinematic RPGs” as opposed to “old-school” RPGs.

Finally, the game was so successful that an “International” version (basically the American version with Japanese text) was produced which sold very well in Japan, a first for any Japanese RPG. Subsequently a PC version was produced which brought the game to millions of non-Playstation gamers.



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The End