

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Final Fantasy 15
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Developer: Square Enix
Publisher: Square Enix
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:
Kazushige Nojima (Lead Writer) / Hajime Tabata (Director)

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Overview

The world knows Final Fantasy as the franchise that revolutionized the role-playing video game genre. Through its 20-year lifespan, the series inspired generations of gamers with its innovative gameplay, immersive storytelling, stunning visuals, and breathtaking soundtracks. *Final Fantasy 15 (XV)*, the newest installment of the franchise, chose to delve into a narrative theme that none of its predecessors has yet to focus on: *Brotherhood*.

Final Fantasy 15 is an open world, action RPG game that takes place in the beautiful, magical, world of Eos – a “fantasy based on reality”. The scene is set with the brimming tension between the Kingdom of Lucis and the Niflheim Empire. For the sake of a peace treaty, the king of Lucis sends out his son, Noctis Lucis Caelum, on a journey to join his betrothed. However, soon after Noctis departs with his brothers-in-arms, they receive news of Niflheim’s betrayal and the subsequent fall of their nation. The player now follows Noctis and his three childhood companions through their quest of reclaiming their homeland, all the while attempting to reunite with his beloved fiancée. As the narrative unfolds, the party begins to realize that they are a part of something much greater and more ominous, and their bonds of brotherhood are put to the test.

"They are not just your body guards. They are your brothers. Trust in them."

On the surface, the story of *Final Fantasy 15* can seem generic and cliché to some. The majority of the plot is presented to the audience through cut scenes, and it is overall very linear in its storytelling with few plot twists or elements left up to the player’s interpretation. However, to say that *Final Fantasy 15* is a game without complex narrative is a disservice to the true, subtle humanity that’s hidden at the core of the experience. Whereas in all other aspects of the main plot the game tells more than it shows, it is in the relationships between the four boys and their growth where *Final Fantasy 15* truly shines. It is here where the gameplay elements begin to serve the narrative, and where the game goes above and beyond to make players *feel*. To anyone who has played past the initial hours of *Final Fantasy 15*, they will find that the focus isn’t on the grand fantasy plotline - but rather on its central theme of the comradery between the four friends.

Characters

At a glance, the characters in *Final Fantasy 15* can be easily identified and grouped into stereotypical tropes prevalent in current-day media. However, as the game progresses these pre-established expectations begin to crumble, with each of the main characters undergoing significant changes. *Final Fantasy 15* is not a game about individuals, but rather their growth and relationships with one another.

Main Characters

- **Noctis Lucis Caelum**

“Me and mornings don’t usually get along”

Noctis is the main protagonist and sole playable character of *Final Fantasy 15*. The story revolves around his coming of age journey into a worthy King of Lucis. Noctis starts off as a childish, rebellious teenager who relies heavily on guidance from his friends and elders. Outside the safety and comfort of the luxurious life he’s accustomed to is a merciless world that now hunts him and hungers for his death. Unable to deal with this sudden immense amount of pressure, Noctis succumbs to multiple breakdowns throughout the beginning of the game. It is then with the help of his friends whom share the burden of his fate, as well as various encounters with strangers from all walks of life, that Noctis begins to gather the courage to change himself.

Unlike western RPGs, Japanese RPGs prefers enacted narrative over embedded or emergent narrative. True to the nature of its predecessors, *Final Fantasy 15* is a JRPG where the central focus is a pre-established storyline. As a result, the player has very little influence on the progression of events. This in turn puts the player in a similar situation as the protagonist, where he feels little power or control over his destiny. Noctis as a character doesn’t fall into the category of the “silent protagonist”. However, he is the quietest one of the group, leaving room for the player to project themselves into the character. *Final Fantasy 15* is the story of Noctis Lucis Caelum, and the game firmly supports that narrative all the while finding ways to forge a deep connection with the audience.

“Off my chair, jester. The king sits there.”

- **Prompto Argentum**

"We're alive! Let's celebrate by eating something dead!"

In contrast to the rest of the crew, Prompto Argentum is a commoner amongst nobility. However, he's been a friend of Noctis since their teenage years. Prompto enjoys photographing their daily lives, and his happy-go-lucky personality serves to lighten the overall atmosphere of the party. During their journey Prompto is separated and captured by the Niflheim forces. When the others come to his rescue, he reveals that he was born in Niflheim and genetically designed to be an enemy soldier. To his surprise, the group happily accepts Prompto back into the team, disregarding his origins and quelling the fear he's kept to himself his whole life.

"Ever since then I've lived my life in fear: that, one day, they'd find out who I really was, and they wouldn't want me anymore."

- **Gladiolus Amicitia**

"Stop bitching, start killing."

As the eldest son of the noble Amicitia family, Gladiolus is pledged to become the "King's Shield" and is the brawns of the team. In their youth, Gladiolus trained Noctis in combat and disliked him due to his cold attitude. After Noctis saved Gladiolus's sister from danger, the two grew close. Gladiolus continues to act as Noctis' guardian and most loyal companion throughout the game. His outspoken personality makes him brash and impulsive at times, often resulting in confrontations with Noctis. Gladiolus became demoralized after being easily defeated by an enemy commander and embarks on a side journey to defeat Gilgamesh – the first King's Shield to restore his own faith in himself.

"No point in going on without you."

- **Ignis Scientia**

"I've come up with a new recipe!"

Raised alongside Noctis as his confidant, Ignis Scientia is the tactician and brains of the team. In battles, Ignis's composed and logical personality makes him the voice of reason. Sometimes acting more like a motherly figure than an advisor, he is also tasked with cooking and taking care of the crew's wellbeing throughout the journey. Tragically, a major battle mid-game severely wounds Ignis and leaves him permanently blinded. Due to this drastic handicap, the dynamic of the party become strenuous until he steps up and forces a reconciliation. Even so, the impact of losing his eyesight is detrimental to himself and his comrades, especially in a world torn by war. Ignis is subsequently forced to reevaluate what's truly important to him.

"Yet in spite of this, I will remain with you all. 'Til the very end."

Supporting Characters

- **Lunafreya Nox Fleuret**

*"When the world falls down around you, and hope is lost, look to the distance.
Know that I am there, and that I watch over you always."*

A princess from the land of Tenebrae, Lunafreya is the main heroine and the chosen Oracle who can communicate with the Gods of Eos. She shares a close relationship with Noctis ever since their childhood, but due to Niflheim's invasion of Tenebrae they have not met in person for the past 12 years. Even so, she continues to use her powers throughout the game and guides him to the Astrals. Ultimately, she lost her life while awakening the Astral Leviathan in the hands of Ardyn.

- **Ardyn Izunia**

"Only once the Crystal and King are gone, can I know redemption."

As the main antagonist of the story, Ardyn Izunia is cunning, sarcastic, and clever. He is initially introduced as the Imperial Chancellor of Niflheim, but his real identity is later revealed as Ardyn Lucis Caelum, a man rejected by the Crystal due to his corruption and denied his destiny to become the first King of Lucis. Now thousands of years later, driven by hatred and revenge, Ardyn is hell bent on ending the Lucian line of blood. Ardyn is an antagonist unlike any other within the Final Fantasy series. He chooses to help the protagonists at times, and torment them at others. Ardyn is the final boss of the series, and his immortality comes to an end by the hands of Noctis.

Breakdown

Brotherhood. At the heart of it all - *Final Fantasy 15* is about brotherhood. It is the central theme that is kept consistently throughout its narrative, and what makes the game so emotionally impactful to the players. To make an audience invested in its narrative, a game must first ensure that they care about and empathize with the characters who experience it in the first place. *Final Fantasy 15* does so by carefully crafting an experience that charms and attaches the audience to each of the protagonists through the subtle notions and nuances found in the interactions between them. With gameplay elements and minute details to support it, the characters feel alive and real, which in turn enriches the narrative into an emotional, immersive experience that grips the players long after the credits roll.

The game begins in media res, and shows the four brothers-in-arms in a fierce, fiery battle against the Astral, Ifrit. As the player walks through the battlefield dazed, they are introduced to the older versions of Prompto Argentum, Ignis Scientia, and Gladiolus Amicitia in order – all coming to their rescue. The screen flashes white and takes the player back 10 years, where the story of Noctis Lucis Caelum truly begins. The use of in media res as a literary device can be jarring and out of place if done incorrectly, but it is executed with a clear intention in *Final Fantasy 15*. This beginning scene is meant to foreshadow the time skip that occurs near the last quarter of the game, and plants the idea in the audience’s minds that no matter what – these three will remain ever by their side.

The core of the gameplay revolves around the open-world exploration, where the four friends travel and discovers Eos. The main story follows the structure of “A Hero’s Journey”, and is present in the form of chapters and quests. However, nothing streamlines or stops the player from exploring each area to their heart’s content before moving on. According to the polling website How-long-to-beat¹, the minimum playtime of *Final Fantasy 15* is 20 hours, whereas the average playtime is more than doubled at 50 hours. This shows that while the main plot of the game is significant, the open world segment is the essence of the experience, and in turn, the core of the narrative as well. It is here where the attention to details the writers put in shines through, and where the game effectively develops each of the characters and their relationship with one another.

One of the best narrative tools utilized in *Final Fantasy 15* is its subtle “show” not “tell”, bringing the characters to life and making each member of the brotherhood a believable, genuine human being. Much of this is shown through the party’s interactions in and out of combat. In battle, the encouragement they display towards each other through assistance, quick one-liners, or small nods of support bring out the unspoken bonds between the boys and their devotion to one another. The game also chose to incorporate a “danger” mechanic. Instead of killing a character outright when their health falls to 0, there is a grace period where their health can be significantly restored if someone gets to them. It’s in the subtle motions of a pat on the back from a teammate bringing another out of

¹ Poll data. *Final Fantasy XV*. <https://howlongtobeat.com/game.php?id=3537>. Howlongtobeat. 2017.

danger that goes leaps beyond what words alone can express. Another contributing factor to *Final Fantasy 15*'s believable characters is its quiet humanity. This is shown through the light-hearted banter that occurs throughout the game as the player traverses from one location to another. There are hundreds of short tidbits of casual dialogue that occurs in game, none of which are particularly important narratively or plot-wise on their own, but together, they sew a picture in the player's mind of each character and their relationship to one another. In doing so, the game mirrors the reality of the small talks scattered throughout our daily lives. No one is constantly engaged only in meaningful, deep conversations with their peers. The game also acknowledges the comfortable silence that often transpires with close friends, choosing to reserve little to no dialogue for when the four boys are on the road. This allows the player a chance to observe, reflect, and truly appreciate the environment around them. More often than not, games try to overcompensate with dialogue to make the characters feel believable. Yet in *Final Fantasy 15*, the very same effect was achieved to a higher degree by doing the exact opposite.

To complement the authenticity of the characters, the strongest aspect of storytelling in *Final Fantasy 15* lies in its ability to echo and enhance the theme of brotherhood through its gameplay mechanics. The danger mechanic mentioned above is one of the many examples. As an action RPG, the combat is a huge part of the experience. Deviating from the traditional turn-based system of the Final Fantasy series, *Final Fantasy 15* starts the player off with a party of three companions who remain throughout the rest of the game. Though occasionally one would leave or a side character would temporarily join, the main cast does not ultimately change. By removing the player's control over their fellow comrades, the characters feel more real - with wills and motivations of their own. It shows that Noctis views them as equals by not commanding, but suggesting the actions they take. Although players do not have any direct control of Ignis, Gladiolus, and Prompto, they can still upgrade combat techniques through the Ascension Skill Tree. *Final Fantasy 15*'s gameplay is designed to support the protagonists, with each character's unlockable technique visibly reflecting the role they play and their importance to the team. Their battle styles closely tie in with their drastically different personalities, and illustrate how they complement and contrast one another. For example, Prompto's techniques are mostly to distract the attention of enemies and buy his allies time, since he is not the most

trained fighter. Gladiolus, in contrast, is the tank with powerful, AOE damage techniques and ones that protect Noctis from danger. Ignis, on the other hand, possesses arguably the most useful skill in game called “Regroup”. It brings all four allies together in a stalwart defense, rescuing them from danger and restoring HP quickly. As the caregiver of the group, this technique is befitting of his role, as well as telling of the brotherhood’s reliance on him. Outside of battle, Ignis is also an integral part of the gameplay as he has the ability to cook. Meals yield buffs that last until the next sundown, and are essential to success in battle. However, midway through the main storyline, Ignis is injured and left permanently blind. The importance of Ignis and the impact of losing his eyesight to the team is echoed and felt through the rise in difficulty, as Ignis changes to a low-damage ranged attacker and can no longer cook status-boosting meals. The player must now also move slower in the dungeons to accommodate his new lack of mobility. If they decide to move ahead, Gladiolus and Prompto begin to criticize and ostracize the player. This further illustrates the comradery between the four friends and the critical blow of losing even one member.

With life-like interactions and a genuine cast of characters, the game succeeds in making the player connect and empathize with them. As the player fights and grows alongside their comrades as Noctis, the fate of this group of friends begins to take on a personal significance. The game now has the audience in the palm of its hands, and with each step it takes in the narrative, the players are hooked and invested. The events that unfold begin to feel real, since they now share an empathetic bond with the characters. Now, as the scene moves to the turning point where Noctis is lured into a trap by Ardyn, and consequently falls into a deep slumber, one cannot help but fear the uncertain fate of the rest of the brotherhood. When the cut scene fades to black and the player regains control over Noctis, they find themselves in a world cloaked by darkness for the past ten years – awaiting the return of the King of Light. The familiar, lush land of Eos is now overrun with daemons, and death and chaos penetrate every corner. As the player begins to realize that things may never go back to the way they were, the longing for the simpler, happier times with their companions on the road fills the pit of their stomachs with grief. This feeling of dread lingers even as Noctis finds his way back to Ignis, Gladiolus, and Prompto. Although nothing has changed between them, everything simultaneously has. Now, the climax nears

and the final battle with Ardyn awaits. The player comes face to face with the realization of the sacrifice Noctis must make in order to defeat him. Every aspect of the game is designed to make the player invested enough to feel for this moment – the music, the memories, the photos. After an emotional and grim farewell to the band of brothers that the player has grown attached to - an epic battle ensues between the last two Kings of Lucis, and ends with none remaining.

Throughout the course of *Final Fantasy 15*, the player experiences loss, wonder, grief, joy, loyalty, and most important of all - the true meaning of friendship and brotherhood. All of which is amplified by their deepened connection with the cast of characters. *Final Fantasy 15*'s narrative is unconventional in a sense that it's the characters who support and develop the story, not the other way around. The game establishes a strong bond between the player and its protagonists, thus making the emotions inflicted by the narrative more heartfelt. Although most of this is not apparent on the surface, by looking a little deeper, the player will realize the poetic beauty and melancholy behind the brotherhood that makes up the core of *Final Fantasy 15*.

Strongest Element

The strongest narrative element of *Final Fantasy 15* comes from the uncannily realistic interpersonal relationships between the main cast. The director Hajime Tabata himself once said in an interview that “the core concept of this idea is going on a journey with your mates.”² This is reflected in the final game as every component is placed with the intention to tell a story of four friends on a road to self-discovery, helping one another grow along the way. By closely intertwining the gameplay with the distinctive characterizations of Noctis and his friends, the game places a strong emphasis on the heartfelt dynamic shared between the four boys. Which in turn, makes the ending and the central storyline more impactful.

² Diver, Mike. In *Conversation with 'Final Fantasy XV' Director Hajime Tabata*. <http://bit.ly/2BJmDRg>. Vice. 2016.

Unsuccessful Element

Although the story of brotherhood is told beautifully and supported by the game's mechanics, not much else can be said about the narrative that stands out. Unfortunately, the emotional impact that the game leaves is not a fact that every person who's picked up a copy of *Final Fantasy 15* can account to. Due to the infamous ten-year development cycle of this game, there are many flaws and holes in its overall narrative. The worst being its underdeveloped second half of the game. The pacing was horribly linear, and many supporting characters were essentially dropped and forgotten. Overall, the game requires hours of investment before the player can begin to experience the core of its strongest element. This, from a game design standpoint, is flawed. A game shouldn't require hours before the player becomes engaged and immersed. Perhaps earlier in the development, the story could have been scaled down to capture the attention of its audience sooner in the storyline. *Final Fantasy 15* could've easily become a classic had the rest of its narrative match its handling of the main characters.

Highlight

"Still, knowing this is it and seeing you here now, it's... more than I can take."

The highlight of *Final Fantasy 15*, is ironically, in its final moments before the credits roll. The tale of Noctis ends with a flashback to the four brothers the night prior by the crackling fire of their final campsite. They sit in silence, none seemingly able to find the right words for a moment like this.

"Well, what can I say?"

Noctis speaks up. Without the need for a grandeur speech, the game comes to an emotional end that induced tears in the majority of its players with five simple words that were both bittersweet and devastating in its finality:

"You guys are the best."

Critical Reception

David Roberts posted a review of *Final Fantasy 15* on Gamesradar that accurately sums up the game in a single line: “Humanity and warmth shine through even when the story leaves you cold.”³ Within the gaming community, *Final Fantasy 15* is generally not reviewed as favorably. But overall, it received high ratings with IGN giving it an 8.2/10, and Polygon an 9/10. It is one of the best-selling games of 2016, and was overall a commercial success. Vince Ingentio from IGN provides an in-depth analysis of its successful elements such as the brothers-in-arms, the open road, and the small mundane details, as well as criticizing that “when it funnels me into linear scenarios and drab, constricted spaces that plunge the simplistic combat into chaos, my blood boils a bit.”⁴ Philip Kollar of Polygon gave a mostly favorable review stating “Final fantasy 15's big heart and ambition easily outshine its flaws,” while also pointing out its flaws: “The second half feels out of breath in its pacing, moving past whole nations and plot beats far faster than they can be resolved.”⁵

Lessons

- **Make a player care emotionally about the characters, and they will subsequently care just as much about the story.**

The same logic applies in the real world, a person cares about what happens to a close friend more than an acquaintance. The cliché plotline of *Final Fantasy 15* is salvaged by the chemistry and brotherhood of its main cast. It's this unbreakable bond that the gameplay further emphasizes that draws players in.

³ Roberts, David. *Final Fantasy 15 review: "Humanity and warmth shine through even when the story leaves you cold"*. <http://www.gamesradar.com/final-fantasy-xv-review/>. Gamesradar. 2016.

⁴ Ingentio, Vince. *Final Fantasy XV Review*. <http://ca.ign.com/articles/2016/11/28/final-fantasy-xv-review>. IGN. 2016.

⁵ Kollar, Philip. *Final Fantasy 15 Review*. <https://www.polygon.com/2016/11/28/13661570/final-fantasy-15-review-xv-ff15-ps4-playstation-4-xbox-one-square-enix>. Polygon. 2016.

- **A narrative can be established through what is left unsaid, rather than what is explicitly stated.**

Sometimes, silence can leave the biggest impact. This concept is reflected through the way the characters of *Final Fantasy 15* act around one another that paints them as real, living beings. It is also a concept that is utilized to its full potential during the [highlight](#) of the game.

- **Details in gameplay mechanics and character movements make a difference.**

Final Fantasy 15 shows that the details in character interactions and abilities will not go unnoticed by the players. Although none of the subtle and minute features in the game are necessary for fun and enjoyable gameplay, it is essential for good narrative storytelling.

Summation

After ten long awaited years, Square Enix's *Final Fantasy 15* creates an immersive open world experience, populated with a cast of genuine and believable characters. The game successfully utilizes all its elements to enhance the core central narrative of *brotherhood*. Through its intricate mechanical metaphors and rich character developments, *Final Fantasy 15* draws the player into the story of Noctis Lucis Caelum. It is a tale filled with humanity, love, friendship, and sacrifice - one that the player is able to empathize and experience first-hand. If given the chance, the brotherhood depicted and felt throughout their journey is one that will leave an everlasting impact on those who experience it.