

A Question of Character

By Tricia Sparks

As writers it's important to look at both writing in the genre you work and at writing in other genres. Looking at the elements of story writing in graphic novels, mangas, films, or video games may prove useful as well. In this day and age when a book is now being translated into various other products, and other medias are inspiring books we as writers should look at and study all forms of writing to understand them.

In video games one of the popular titles for fantasy role playing games in the United States, or RPG's as gamers call them, is the Final Fantasy series by Square Enix. Over the years Square Soft and later Square Enix have produced twelve main stories presented to date. In recent years a few of these games have inspired follow up titles. One such was the most recent installment Final Fantasy XII in 2006 for PS2. Another is perhaps the most popular game of the series Final Fantasy VII originally released for PlayStation in 1997. While both are Final Fantasy games the stories are quite different. Both had the potential to be great but the point of view selected by the writer changed the impact of the story itself. In writing the perspective from which a story is told can make or break it. Lets look at both stories here and then we'll examine the point of view used in the story and consider what the story might have been if it was told from a different perspective.

Final Fantasy XII begins with a long awaited wedding that is overshadowed by an approaching invasion. While the wedding is complete the happy couple is split up as the groom goes off to fight back the intruders. Word soon comes back that the prince has fallen and his brides sorrow is compounded by the death of her father at the hand of the captain of his own guard. The people of the nation are told their princess in her grief kills herself and the treacherous captain is imprisoned. Two years later the kingdom is now in the hands of its invaders and a rebel fraction is plaguing the ruling government as a new governor is brought in. The rebels interrupt the ceremony and a precious treasure of the old ruling family is stolen. The princess is reveled to still be alive and in fact the head of the rebellion she desires revenge and is seeking the means to defeat the enemy. However the rebels are caught and thrown in prison where they encounter the treasonous captain who it turns out is falsely imprisoned his twin was the one who betrayed the king. The pair and the others caught in the raid team up to overthrow the invaders and stop them from their goal for world domination.

Final Fantasy VII is a far more complicated story spread over several different titles. It begins with a war between the people of Wutai and the Shinra Electric Power Company drawing near its end. Shinra becomes the dominate economic, military and political power in their world. Their power is challenged by a rebellion calling themselves Avalanche. The first part of the story follows a soldier named Zack who wants to be a hero. He is sent into Wutai to solve a mystery surrounding the disappearance of another group of Soldiers that disappeared in the area.

Throughout the process of his investigation he uncovers an ugly truth that certain members of soldier were genetically altered and they are now becoming monsters these individuals seek both a cure for their plight and vengeance against the ones responsible for what was done to them. Among their number is a great warrior Sephiroth who while assisting Zack learns the truth of his own origin and goes mad destroying the village of Nibelheim. Sephiroth and Zack both vanish without a trace for four years during that time Zack is experimented on along with a Shinra fighter Cloud Strife. Zack manages to escape and takes Cloud with him.

The two, now on the run from Shinra, are tracked down and Zack dies saving Cloud. His last words to Cloud are my honor, my dreams they are yours now. Cloud escapes returning to Midgar where he joins Avalanche. He helps them in their efforts against Shinra but Sephiroth resurfaces and he now seeks to destroy the world so that he might obtain ultimate power. So now Avalanche must work together to save the world.

Both stories are about preventing the end of the world and stopping a power mad individual's rise to god like status but the two stories are told from a far different perspective and it's that perspective that makes them different and lifts one for most players above the other. Let's look at the point of view that the storyteller chose to use for Final Fantasy XII first.

Final Fantasy XII is told from two specific points of view. One is that of a third person narrator the other is that of the main character in the game Vaan. Vaan is a young naive and rash refugee living under the new empires rule. His older brother was murdered during the invasion and that is his sole tie to the main plot line. He's just a by standard caught up in the mess two years earlier. Since he enters the main plot after the fact it keeps the player emotionally distant from the story itself and the drama of the story loses its impact. As can be seen in the following excerpt.

“The Archadian Forces resumed their advance toward Rabanastre leaving their pretenses of Peace by the Wayside; Dalmasca's Doom had been decided. It was clear resistance would serve no End.

“Sons and Daughters of Dalmasca, I bid you lay down your Arms. Raise Songs of Prayer in their Stead. Prayer for His Majesty King Raminas, ever merciful. A

Man devoted wholly to Peace.”

“Prayer, too, for the noble Princess Ashe, who, wrought with Grief at her

Kingdom’s Defeat, has taken her own Life.”

“Know also that Capt. Basche fon Ronsenburg, for Incitement of Seditious and the Assassination of H.R.M. King Raminas, has been found Guilty of High Treason and put to his Death.”

“They who at this late Hour choose still the Sword are cut of the same Cloth as the Captain. Traitors who would have lead Dalmasca to her Ruin.”

Dalmasca’s Surrender without Terms was soon to follow.” (Excerpt taken from Final Fantasy XII script)

The writer’s choice to use this point of view dampens the emotional power the story itself possesses. Now if this part of the story had been written from a different perspective for example Ashe’s then maybe the event would have had a stronger emotional impact.

“Please let him be okay.” My mind whispered. I’m not sure I can bear the weight of another loss. “Vassler,” the thought of his name alone pricks my lashes with tears. My gaze moves from the stars above me to the circle of gold on my hand. A promise made not only to me but also to my people. Together we were to stand against our nations’ enemies but that promise was broken before it was even an hour old. He left my side to defend us from the approaching invaders. Now he’s gone and again I find myself alone. The silence of cool evening is broken as a voice demands entrance to the throne room. I step back inside as one of the troops entered the room.

“My lady, forgive the intrusion but I have grave news.”

“What is it?”

“Your Father is lost. His captain Basche betrayed us all. The empire deceived us.”

“No.”

“I’m sorry my lady.”

“Princess what are we to do?”

My gaze fell upon the historian as the gravity of what was happening began to settle in. With my husband gone and my father murdered I was now responsible for not only my nation but that of Vassler’s as well. It was up to me to see that my people were unharmed.

“My lady?”

“Inform the people that I’m dead.”

“What?”

“Stricken with grief for the loss of my loved ones and the loss of my nation I ended my life. I am no more. Tell them not to fight back against the enemy I’ll not have another soul lost needlessly. For those who would move to oppose the enemy tell them that they are no better than the treacherous captain Basche.”

“But if we don’t fight back the empire will take control.”

“Yes, I know. It will be easier to defeat the empire from the inside.”

“You can’t leave your people without a leader.”

“I’m not but a hidden leader is better than a public one that can be manipulated to give them the power they seek. Forget the princess Ashe she is no more.” I said once again before I turned and exited the throne room moving down one of the secret passages hoping to make it out

of the city before the enemy arrives. As I depart I pray that my advisor heeds my words and carries out my wishes. I push aside the pain of loss and concentrate on the anger that is just beneath it. If I’m going to succeed in my efforts at all I’m going to need it.

Rather than being told about these events the player would have been in the middle of them. Then perhaps the story could have picked up with the Captain Bache’s perspective at his arrest and followed him from that point in. Now rather than being a distant observer looking in the player is caught in the middle of the plot and more interested in what will unfold.

Final fantasy VII is also told through 2 main perspectives through out its saga. One is that of the Solider Zack. The first portion of the story follows him through the thick of the war with Wuti and the turning of Sephiroth up to his death. The second part of the story follows that of another fighter Cloud Strife as we can see here.

"That's as far as you go." The Shinra solider shouted in challenge.

"I don't have time to be messin' around with you guys." I answered with disgust. I'm running out of time if I'm not careful I'll miss my meet.

"Enough babbling! Grab him!" The soldiers close in as I back away, but my path is blocked. I soon find myself at railing. Below me are the train tracks. As the soldiers close in I consider my options then seeing no better move I jump off the balcony onto the train as it rushes by. (Excerpt from Final fantasy VII script)

Since the main character in both cases is caught in the thick of the main plot the player more easily connects to the drama as it unfolds and is more invested in what happens to the characters. The writer's choice to place their audience in the center of everything with a limited knowledge of what is happening helps the story.

On the other hand if Final Fantasy VII had been told from the perspective of one of the other characters in the game the story would most likely lose a lot of its impact. If for example the story had followed Yuffie the game would be completely changed.

I find myself standing in the basement of a rundown bar called Tifa's 7th Heaven. Oddly enough this is the secret headquarters of the rebellion Avalanche. The guy with the spiky blonde hair his name is Cloud and I heard that he was once a 1st class Soldier in Shinra's army but for reasons unknown has now switched sides. I have mixed feelings about working with this guy since he likely played a part in ruining the economy of Wuti, but I've heard he's pulled off some crazy moves. Apparently on their first run out he was being pursued by Shinra troops. Found himself cornered backed into to some railing no where to go. Most people would have given up but not this guy instead he leaped over the rail and dropped on the roof of a passing train below.

Rather than a story of a tormented fighter who works to save the world you'd have a story told by either a third party at a distance from everything or the story of a princess seeking vengeance against the company who all but destroyed her home. Rather than a story of the rise of a hero you'd have a vengeance plot and the game loses something.

In both cases a change of the point of view would change the entire story and the audiences' perception of it. As writers we must consider carefully the point of view we chose to use because that choice sets the stage for our work. It can either strengthen are work and give it power or it can weaken it to where our audience has little interest in it and puts the piece down. So next time you sit down to work on that story you've been writing ask yourself is this being told from the best possible point of view.