

## Proppellian Analysis of Final Fantasy VII

Vladimir Propp was a Russian Structuralist scholar who concentrated his studies on Russian folklore. He determined that they shared a number of common themes, and divided these up into morphemes, meaningful parts of information that can be analysed, and then identified 31 narratemes, or functions, which occur in many of the stories, following a similar narrative structure. He defined a function of a character as 'an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action'. He then divided these functions into seven different roles: villain, donor, helper, princess (and father), dispatcher, hero and false hero. [1] Propp identified that 'five categories of elements define not only the construction of a tale, but the tale as a whole'. [2] They were the functions as previously mentioned, conjunctive elements (such as chance disclosures or announcements of misfortune in the story), motivation (stating the reason why the hero or helper is doing what they are doing), forms of appearance of dramatis personae (such as a dragon arriving in a spectacular manner) and attributive elements or accessories (such as a witch's hat which defines her). The 31 narratemes are as follows:

- 0. Initial Situation
- 1. Absentation: Someone goes missing
- 2. Interdiction: Hero is warned
- 3. Violation of interdiction
- 4. Reconnaissance: Villain seeks something
- 5. Delivery: The villain gains information
- 6. Trickery: Villain attempts to deceive victim
- 7. Complicity: Unwitting helping of the enemy
- 8. Villainy and lack: The need is identified
- 9. Mediation: Hero discovers the lack
- 10. Counteraction: Hero chooses positive action
- 11. Departure: Hero leaves on mission
- 12. Testing: Hero is challenged to prove heroic qualities
- 13. Reaction: Hero responds to test
- 14. Acquisition: Hero gains magical item
- 15. Guidance: Hero reaches destination
- 16. Struggle: Hero and villain do battle
- 17. Branding: Hero is branded
- 18. Victory: Villain is defeated
- 19. Resolution: Initial misfortune or lack is resolved

There follows a number of optional narratemes which do not always feature in a story, depending on the length of the story. These roughly comprise of the hero's return to his homeland to find that he is not recognised for his efforts, and instead a false hero is applauded. The hero is then required to complete another task to show his success, and then lives happily ever after, having ascended to the throne and marrying. Propp defined this process as morphology: 'a description of the tale according to its component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole' [3].

## **Synopsis of the history of Final Fantasy VII**

One game that is particularly relevant to such theories is Squaresoft's Final Fantasy VII [4]. The game came out in 1997 for the Sony Playstation and PC with 2.5 million copies selling in Japan on its opening weekend alone. The genre of the game was a Role-Playing game (or RPG) meaning by its very nature it needed an in-depth story. Role Playing games are typically slower paced than many other console games such as First Person Shooters. They concentrate on guiding the player through an often complex storyline so that the player can play the role of a hero stuck in a particular situation. In the case of Final Fantasy VII, it was a mostly very linear story with little ability to deviate from the main storyline, it did offer a number of mini games to distract the player, but for the most part, the game guided the player through the set out storyline with no deviation. The action in the game takes place through the use of various menus to choose set actions for the character rather than being able to control the actions through the controller. Due to this however, there is a certain amount of strategy involved in choosing when to take what action. The game's story is the main thing that has garnered it so much praise over the years [5] with it being widely acknowledged for having a deep and compelling storyline. Its use of creating emotional impact from its story such as the death of Aerith, which is reputed to have made many a gamer cry having become so emotionally attached to the character, [6] has also been widely acclaimed. Due to the depth needed within the story, the game had a director and producer, Yoshinori Kitase and Tetsuya Nomura to control the story as well as the gameplay.

## **The Story**

The story of Final Fantasy VII revolves around the main protagonist Cloud Strife. Cloud becomes a member of the rebel force group Avalanche, a group who aim to disrupt the evil Shinra Corporation whose aim is to drain the planet of its life force, known as 'Mako'. Cloud and some members of Avalanche escape Midgar, the capital, as criminal outcasts, only to discover that a bigger threat looms, if all the life force is drained from the planet, the flow of life will be disrupted and essentially the world will end. Cloud also discovers that his mentor Sephiroth, who he previously thought was dead, is still alive. Once he tracks down Sephiroth, he realises that his mentor is not the same person he once knew and that he plans to bring about the destruction of the world. Cloud and his friends are then required to defeat Sephiroth as well as stop the draining of 'Mako' so that the planet becomes stable once more. Along the way Aerith, a key character in the group, is killed by Sephiroth but returns at the end as a ghost or soul, to help defeat her killer. Besides the pathos of Aerith's death, there is also the use of complex emotions such as the ability for the player to affect romantic encounters, such as Cloud's relationship with Aerith and the other two main female characters in the game, Tifa and Yuffie. Cloud also spends much of his time finding his identity as he has various flashbacks from his life that do not make much sense. He later discovers that some of the flashbacks were not true memories, merely an interpretation of events that he would like to remember: such as Cloud's return to his home village. Sephiroth also discovers that his past is not as it seems, as he finds out that he is a scientific experiment created from another biological form known as Jenova. The storyline arc suggests that this realisation is what causes him to become

so destructive and evil. Ultimately the game (and story) ends with a huge battle between good and evil resulting in good triumphing and Cloud returning to his life having gained extra knowledge about his past and new friends.

## ***Analysis***

Final Fantasy VII was ideal for a Proppian analysis due to its story. For the majority of the main story arc it follows many of the narratemes that Propp has identified. It follows a very typical folklore-esque pattern in the development of its story. It follows a pattern of 'spheres' which Propp used to separate the narratemes into set themes. The first sphere consists of the introduction of characters and the setting of the story, such as someone going missing, in this case it is Sephiroth when it is assumed he is dead, the story arc continues with such narratemes as what is termed as the body of the story sphere. This is where the hero discovers a need for something, in this case Cloud's realisation of the planet's imminent destruction, with the sphere ending with Cloud leaving Midgar to pursue Sephiroth. The Donor Sequence follows which involves Cloud having to search for a method that means he can save the planet. He does this by collecting up various materia (magical items) in which to defeat Sephiroth with. This sphere is the most pivotal of the spheres and can often form an entire story by itself. It ends with the battle between Cloud and Sephiroth and the saving of the planet. There is one often optional sphere where the hero returns but this does not take place in Final Fantasy VII. Besides these spheres there are also smaller elements of the narratemes that Propp has identified. Sephiroth seems to represent the 'false hero' as he starts out as a mentor for Cloud but throughout the story becomes gradually more wicked and self-absorbed in his plans for the destruction of everything. The story tries to provide some justification for his actions by revealing that he is a scientific experiment, and he is unable to cope with the realisation. Compared to other games of its time it has a highly complex story akin to an interactive movie almost. At this time the main top selling games were games such as Grand Theft Auto (a top down mission based crime simulation, which although non-linear, had very little story to it) and Tomb Raider 2, which while offering a story, does not deal with complex emotions such as romance or the death of any main character. Eladhari argues that Final Fantasy VII is actually an interactive movie due to its in-depth storyline, [3] however this could also be argued against, as although it is very movie-like in presentation, it is still essentially a game and its relatively complex battle system could put non-games players off the experience. For the experienced gamer however, it is a very similar experience to an interactive movie.

The battle system is possibly the main feature that detracts from the story somewhat. When wrapped up in a long battle, it is simple to forget the basis of why the characters (and you) are doing this. The system works through a number of different menus. The battle is always up to 3 playable characters versus a number of monsters. Each character is able to attack physically or through the use of materia (magic) which needs to be equipped outside of the battle to be used. The materia changes in power with different colours representing different uses, such as green for support magic (such as heals or shields) and red representing the summon magic which is the most powerful magic to use, and is only able to be used once within a battle. These battles can sometimes be very brief but when a boss monster is encountered, it can take a long time to complete. Some players seek to play this game merely to become

the strongest character possible rather than to follow the storyline, this could perhaps be compared to those who watch action films purely for the car chases rather than for the storyline. Eladhari identifies six core elements to the game that define what activities are undertaken [3: 64], the movement of the characters within the geography of the game, which in turn unravels the story in a chronological order; the text-based dialogues with NPCs (Non Player Characters) which also introduce story elements to entice the player to continue playing, while giving them options in their conversations, and the pre-rendered movies (Cut scenes) which also reveal more of the story. The other three elements mainly concentrate on the action parts of the game: fighting in the turn-based battles, buying objects in shops to improve and optimising player's equipment by use of the materia system. In a sense the game can be played in one of two ways, it can be played to create the strongest player character possible, or it can be played to reveal the story much like an interactive movie. This seems to be core to the game's popularity, as it can be many different things to many different people. However by doing this, it does run the risk of being a 'jack of all trade', not being proficient enough at any one thing but being equally good at many different things.

Propp theory does have a number of failings which Final Fantasy VII helps to highlight. It fails to look at mood or emotion conveyed within a story, merely concentrating on the surface story, rather than looking deeper. It is also a highly structured theory meaning that to match it; the story needs to follow an identical pattern to be appropriate. In the case of Final Fantasy VII, events such as the exposing of Sephiroth as a false hero happens midway through the game rather than at the end as Propp would have expected it to. It could also be argued that Propp is too simplistic in his analysis. He ignores the fact that not all stories are so clear cut, not all stories have heroes and villains that are clearly defined. In the case of Final Fantasy VII, Cloud starts out as a not very obvious hero as he seems mostly uninterested in his own gain and is not interested in saving the environment, until it becomes apparent that the world will end unless he intervenes. In the case of Sephiroth, although evil and delusional, he was created that way. Initially he was a helpful mentor for Cloud until his realisation that he was a failed experiment which leads to his madness. This makes his villainy not as apparent as he has been used to an extent as well by the Shinra Corporation and the power has become too much for a human mind to take. There are also more than one hero in the game. Characters such as Barrett, Tifa and Aerith have as much character development as Cloud and play a pivotal part in succeeding in the mission to save the world. Propp's theory would state that there could only be one hero. The crucial fault with Propp's analysis is that it is excessively structured, there is no ability for deviation so although many simplistic stories such as folk tales and, more recently, Disney films follow this path exactly; many other writers choose to deviate slightly to make the story seem more original, even if it is not necessarily the case. Propp's theory has a number of shortcomings but it is still something that can be applied in many cases in a variety of story based media. A number of games follow a very linear path such as the one described by Propp, such as earlier RPGs as Dragon Warrior [7] and a number of action based games that just wish to create a basic story to give motivation for the player to progress. However, one could argue that with the evolution of treating games as more of an art form [8] and respected media, stories within games have become more complex to attract another demographic market: people who want in-depth stories that they can interact with. As games have grown in age, so has the age of the players with the majority of players seeming to be 18-49 in

the US according to recent research by the ESA (Entertainment Software Association) [9], this could indicate a shift in stories in games trying to be less linear and allowing different options in dialogue, such as displayed in Final Fantasy VII. To properly determine this, however, would require research to be conducted on the different types of dialogue used in modern games. Warren Spector [10] while developing Deus Ex believes that there are around five different communication options that can be used. He suggested that there are branching tree/keyword systems whereby a player can respond to an NPC by using specific keywords which will trigger the next important line of dialogue, however this tends to feel more linear and less like a proper conversation. There is then linear conversations, sometimes called the 'NPC as signpost' approach whereby the response options are limited and that the NPCs are merely used to signpost where the player needs to go to next, often through very obvious methods. There is the binary decision point which is used by Final Fantasy VII. This is where the conversation is linear until it reaches a yes or no point whereupon it switches to another branch of the conversation and can affect the outcome of part of the rest of the game. There is then the reaction-based conversation, typically used by games such as Knights of The Old Republic, where a player can choose the tone of voice that they answer a question in which can affect the reaction of the NPC. Finally, Spector suggests that you can merely deny the existence of conversations by removing all 'human' interaction and enabling the player to learn the background to a game via notes left scattered across the game.

An appropriate method of resolving how effective Propp theory is to analyse games such as Final Fantasy VII would be to conduct research on other games, in particular Role-Playing games to determine how accurate it is for this form of media. It could then possibly be adapted to serve the purpose of games analysis by creating a more modern day equivalent of Propp theory, taking into account the fact that stories and dialogue across games, films and television have become a lot sharper and quicker in their nature since the days of Russian folktales.[11] The idea of narrative within games has been examined by some researchers [12] [13] but not from the perspective of Propp's theory which has mostly been constrained to folktales and some film analysis. As Final Fantasy VII is nearly 10 years old, there are probably even better examples of good narrative and dialogue such as games like Jade Empire for the X-Box and the forthcoming Mass Effect for the X-Box 360 which promises to have much less linear stories. It could also be argued that MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games) that have become much more popular in the past 10 years such as Everquest 2 and World of Warcraft have constantly non linear stories which would defy Propp's narratemes and morphemes hugely, yet still keeping some of the core ideals within their storylines.

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