

Next topic....

5. Character Progression:

The topic of character progression in FFXIII (in terms of gameplay) is very similar to the previous topic of “exploration” in my opinion. The player’s options of customizing or powering up these characters is very restricted and limited for most of the game. (The Crystarium isn’t the Sphere Grid that’s for sure.) But in my opinion this is an overall good thing (for FFXIII specifically) because it once again allows the designers to use the gameplay to help tell the story and reinforce the characters/themes. But of course this choice to restrict the player's options is a double edged sword.

I’ll start with the negative:

1. The Crystarium is not very engaging to the player and the player’s ability to customize their characters is very limited compared to other games.

This point is pretty self explanatory. The spending of crystarium points by Holding down X to gain the next stats/ability Orb is pretty boring. The only player choice/agency is which role they would like to level up based on the stats or abilities coming up for each role. This does offer some strategic flexibility as each roles abilities are very different and allow for different strategies. But it’s not engaging to the player in the short term if they just want to level a single role for a bit.

Now to be fair to FFXIII in a historical sense, this character leveling system is more strategic and engaging than many other JRPGs of the past (such as FFI, FFII, and FFIV. As well as other games like Chrono Trigger, Secret of Mana, Legend of Dragoon and so on.) However, compared to contemporary JRPGs, FFXIII’s leveling system is underwhelming. Especially after the flexibility of FFX and FFXII. (Though the flexibility of FFX’s sphere grid has it’s own problems too. It’s not perfect in my opinion.)

What I would have liked to see FFXIII do instead would be to keep the current system, but also allow the player the option to spend more Crystogen points to power up their current Orb. For example, if the player just aquired a Strength +3 orb, give the player the option of moving on to the next orb for 100 more points OR give them the option to change the STR +3 node into a STR +5 at the same or slightly discounted cost. If the player chooses to move on to Magic +3, then the ability to improve the previous orb is locked and now MAG + 3 could be changed to MAG +5 and so on. Then, make it very clear to the player that there is a hard cap on total Crystogen points per character per chapter. And have a counter on the Crystarium showing the remaining number of points for this chapter that can be gained. Then, once the chapter advances and the Crystarium expands, Lock out the ability for any nodes on the previous tier to be upgraded at all, even if the player is sitting on those orbs or yet to gain them.

This would force the player to make difficult choices between advancing to the next ability/crystarium tier quickly or making their character a little bit stronger. Long term planning vs short term gain. Then once the gameplay opens up in Chapter 11, have the Cieth stone missions drop a special item that can be used on the Crystarium to upgrade previous orbs that have been locked. But don’t award so many of these that the player’s previous choices didn’t matter in the end. These Cieth stone special items could also drop from main story bosses if the player gains a 5 star rating on the battle. (This would really incentivize the player to find optimal strategies for each boss encounter.)

This is just one example of how they could have designed the Crystarium system to be just a little bit more flexible to make the player feel more involved without giving them too much freedom to create overpowered characters too early (A major pitfall of some other FF games in my opinion.) This would also greatly add to the replay value of the game as a player could make slightly different choices the next time they play the game.

It's very telling that FFXIII-2's crystarium makes the player choose between what each orb will be (MAG, STR, HP or Ability, based on the role used to choose the orb). This to me suggests that the designers were aware that FFXIII's original crystarium was lacking in this regard.

OK, but even with all of that said I think there are a lot of positives to the restrictive nature of FFXIII's character progression and design. Here are some of the advantages:

1. In the early game, you cannot change the party Leader: The reasons for this are obvious in my opinion. This is used to link the gameplay/battles to the POV character for that part of the story (with the exception of Vanille, who gives narration throughout that is not tied parts of the story that are strictly her POV). This is linking the story and gameplay together. It also forces the player to become familiar with manually controlling each paradigm role to become more familiar with the system overall.
2. In the early game, you cannot change the party members/formation: The reasons for this are clear too. The game is able to introduce certain strategies through very specific paradigm combinations throughout the game. This forces the player to become at least somewhat proficient with the paradigm system in order to progress. Also, the party members are usually determined by the story/plot. For example in Chapter 4 (Vile peaks) whenever there is a 4-person party the game does not allow Hope to be used in battle. This reinforces the character/story that Hope is the least brave and weakest member of the group at that time. Players may want to swap in Hope into the active party, but the ability to do so would not be consistent with the plot/characters. This design choice once again shows how the developers are linking the story and gameplay together at the expense of player agency/control.
3. The Crystarium is divided into stages and caps character growth based on story progress: Noticing a trend here? By limiting the Crystarium options the game does not allow a player to "grind" or "power level" through any specific challenge/dungeon/boss. This forces the player to have at least a baseline understanding of the battle system and how each role should be used for specific situations and challenges. This is a very risky approach to conventional RPG game design where the player usually has the option to "over-level" their characters in order to stomp their way through the entire game or to get past a boss that they find too difficult to overcome strategically.

FFXIII's cap on the Crystarium effectively does not allow this and as a result the game is able to deliver a consistent difficulty level based on strategy instead of character Stats for most of the game. (As a fan of fighting games and strategic gameplay in general, I appreciate FFXIII's approach to game design A LOT! I really dislike grinding for levels or crafting powerful equipment as a solution to challenges. In my opinion, a game with a win-state/lose-state design should slowly demand more and more mastery of its systems and mechanics from the player. Many RPGs undermine or reject this design philosophy when they allow characters' raw stat growth or powerful equipment to eliminate the need for the player to

increase their skill/strategy level. On one hand, grinding for levels allows any player to progress regardless of skill, but at the same time it can be used as a crutch for more skilled players to bypass otherwise challenging sections of the game because they are too frustrated with the game or too lazy to overcome the challenges. I'm sorry if that comes off as "Elitist". I know not everyone shares this same view or enjoyment of games, this is just my perspective on a common pitfall of JRPG's. A pitfall that FFXIII at least attempts to avoid.)

The player's ability to perform well in FFXIII's combat is mostly determined by strategy, quick thinking/reactions, and pre-battle planning. It has very little to do with characters raw stats (until the endgame). Strategic use of abilities and team roles/formation is far more important to success. Other Final Fantasy games allow the player to skip most of these things if the game is too difficult for them (by grinding usually). As a result, FFXIII is one of the few games in the series that forces the player to grow. Which once again links the player to the game's core theme. I can't stress enough how great this design is for a videogame with this type of theme. (And whether or not this was intentional or not is irrelevant. The final product exists as it is regardless of developer intent.)

As an example, you can't just wander around Ch.10 and grind for Exp/Stats to the point where you can one hit KO Cid Raines or take no damage from his attacks at the end of the chapter. The game purposely does not allow you to do that. Instead you need to use the paradigms and abilities available to you in order to overcome Cid's specific abilities and exploit his weaknesses. If the player is not able to do this then they will simply lose, which means a lack of player growth/understanding is holding them back. This is VERY similar to the challenges the characters face in the story. (Their weaknesses and flaws holding them back. With the need to grow and reach their full potential as the solution/Goal).

4. The character stats reveal/reflect character and story: I made a point about this in a previous document regarding when the characters turn into L'Cie. To recap: The characters all gain 100 or more health and 1 ATB bar at the start of Ch.3. They have gained no stats or ATB during the first 2 chapters and the player does not have access to the Crystarium yet. But Vanille does not gain any Stats/ATB at the start of Ch.3. This uses the character progression/stats to show character development for her specifically. See the document for "Character development" for full details of that point.

5. The Primary paradigm roles for each character reinforce their personality/character archetype. (Let me explain this one in detail, there is a TL;DR if you are not interested in the breakdown of each role/archetype).

If we look at the primary paradigm roles for each character and what each of those roles represent symbolically; we can see that the character progression directly reinforces the characters and story. Each character's primary roles vs secondary roles can be found here:

http://finalfantasy.wikia.com/wiki/Crystarium_system

(*NOTE: before I start I'll just point out that the names of the paradigm roles were changed in the English release to sound more militaristic. It is believed that this was done to attract a more casual western audience to the game. It's also most likely a reference to the incredibly successful Call of Duty franchise as well. Lightning's ability "Army of One" is likely a reference to a CoD Modern Warfare 2 ability called "One man Army". Modern Warfare 2 was released in November 2009 and FFXIII in March 2010 (in English). But even with the names changed the core idea/archetype behind each role is the same. "Army

of One” was also a recruiting slogan for the US Military in 2001.
http://finalfantasy.wikia.com/wiki/Army_of_One)

Let’s break the paradigm roles down one-by-one to see how they relate to our main characters at the start of Chapter 3 when the paradigm system is unlocked:

Commando: The Commando Role itself is symbolic of confidence/courage/strength/resolve, which is why only Lightning and Snow have this role when turned into L’Cie at the start of Chapter 3. They are the only two characters who enter the Pulse Vestige as their primary goal while the other 3 characters have followed along for other reasons. (The other characters are lacking in the positive qualities of a Commando: Sazh is too cautious and pessimistic, Hope is obviously cowardly and weak, and Vanille’s somewhat confident and outgoing personality we learn is not her true self. Hiding her feelings to protect herself is cowardly. She also lacks the resolve of Snow and Lightning when faced with danger.)

Fang shows these positive traits too, so it makes sense that the Commando role is one of her primaries. Sazh gains this role as a primary when he and Vanille split up from Lightning and Hope in the Vile peaks, reflecting his need for growth and to show more courage/leadership; since it’s now up to him to look after Vanille and determine their plan/course of action. (The timing of the characters unlocking new roles is reflective of what is happening in the story at that time. With a few exceptions.)

(*Best example*) Ravager: In terms of the plot/lore, the ravager role is what gives a L’Cie access to destructive magic (other than Ruin). So which of our first 5 main characters have access to this role upon becoming L’Cie? All of them of course, just as we would expect. (This is actually Sazh’s only role at the start of Ch.3. And that is because he has not yet shown the traits of any of the other 5 roles/archetypes that the battle system/story explores.)

Looking into this a bit deeper: To “ravage” is to destroy or heavily damage something. Our main characters all have the focus to destroy Cocoon. So it would make sense for them to all have a role that would allow them to eventually cause this type of destruction. However, Fang is the only character to not have ravager as a primary role. Why is this? Her brand is frozen due to the events of the past. She has already attempted to destroy/ravage Cocoon once, but now that mission has been put on hold; which allows her other traits to be explored as her primary roles.

And if we go even further into this idea we can link the Ravager role to the “Destroyer” archetype (also called the “Rebel” or “Revolutionary” archetype) found commonly in hero mythologies. If we do that we can find something like this (source below):

“The Destroyer embodies repressed rage about structures that no longer serve life even when these structures still are supported by society or by our conscious choices. Although this archetype can be ruthless, it weeds the garden in ways that allow for new growth. The Destroyer is a paradoxical character whose destructiveness reflects the death drive and an inner fear of annihilation. As a fighter, they are thus careless of their own safety and may put others in danger too. Their quest is to change, to let go of their anger or whatever force drives them and return to balance, finding the life drive that will sustain them. Living on the cusp of life and death, they are often surprisingly humble.”

“Shadow Side: Includes all self-destructive behaviors—addictions, compulsions, or activities that undermine intimacy, career success, or self-esteem—and all behaviors—such as emotional or physical abuse, murder, rape—that have destructive effects on others.”

(My emphasis added, Source for the quote:

http://www.uiltexas.org/files/capitalconference/Twelve_Character_Archetypes.pdf . The “Destroyer” archetype is on page #4. These are the 12 character Archetypes in common storytelling outlined by Psychologist/Philosopher Carl Jung. Additional sources at the end of the Document)

Looking at the portions of the paragraph that I’ve underlined above, let’s compare that directly to the characters of FFXIII.

A. “Repressed rage about structures that no longer serve life even when these structures still are supported by society.”

– The Fal’Cie and their control over Cocoon; opposed by the main characters, but supported by Cocoon society. The Fal’Cie support life for humans physically, but their control suppresses humanity’s freedom and personal growth.

B. “...allow for new growth.” And “Their quest is to change...”

– One of the main themes of FFXIII and the only way our characters will overcome their personal flaws. They must reach their full potential by overcoming their weaknesses. This is the only way for them and society overall to change for the better. (See above point).

C. “...destructiveness reflects the death drive and an inner fear of annihilation.”

– The common driving force/personal threat for all of our characters in the story. The death sentence of becoming a Cieth/Zombie.

D. “to let go of...*whatever force drives them* and return to balance.”

– The character’s personal flaws, which are symbolically represented by their L’Cie brand/focus. This is why the brand accelerates and changes when the characters’ flaws are exposed or their fear of death is increased.

The Destroyer archetype is represented well in all of our main characters. And the fact that they all have access to the Ravager role is directly supportive of the above ideas being present in all of them. This archetype is used in thousands of fiction stories throughout history, so it’s not exactly unique. It is represented in both Villain and Hero characters in ancient myths and modern stories. However, videogames have the ability to reinforce these archetypes through gameplay and FFXIII does this VERY well in my opinion. (“Black Mage” type characters in Final Fantasy and JRPGs often match the “Destroyer” archetype. Especially Vivi from FFI. “Destructiveness... reflects the inner fear of annihilation.” Personally, it’s hard to read that sentence and not immediately think of Vivi.)

Sentinel: The Sentinel role is symbolic of protecting others/self-sacrifice/altruism. Which is why only Snow has access to this role at the start of Ch.3. This is perhaps the most obvious of all of these character archetypes that are represented in the game. “I’ll save everyone!” and “Our focus is to protect Cocoon!” If we contrast this with the other characters: Lightning and Vanille are too selfish to be concerned with actually protecting others, Sazh considered/suggested killing Serah instead of protecting her and verbally

opposes Snow's plan/explanation of their focus (to protect Cocoon). And Hope is not strong/confident enough to even protect himself at this point. The difference between Snow and the others is most apparent when he stays behind to protect Serah's Crystalized form in Ch.3 while the others move on. Snow does this even knowing his own safety will be threatened by staying behind. And this threat is exactly what drives the other characters to keep running.

The SEN role is also a primary role for Fang, who is equally protective of Vanille as Snow is of Serah. Snow and Fang are the only two characters who have Sentinel as a primary role, which is directly supported by their archetypes/personalities.

(I'll also point out that the only two characters who have Sentinel/Protector Role as a Primary: Snow and Fang, are also the worst Ravager/Destroyer characters. This is interesting/consistent as well. Though the endgame content might change that a bit for Fang I believe.)

Saboteur: The Saboteur role is meant to be symbolic of insecurity, guilt, and being judgmental of others. A "Saboteur" (or "Jammer" in Japanese) also suggests hidden or covert agenda/goal. This is expressed in the gameplay too as the SAB role is the only offensive role that does not deal direct damage as its primary method of damage. It subverts the enemies' defenses and weakens them in a somewhat covert and underhanded way. These are tactics that go against common heroic conventions.

This is why this role is a primary role of Vanille and Fang only. All of the other characters openly express their desires or motivations to others at some point when they are asked. (Though Sazh does hold out a little bit) But the SAB characters keep their guilt/motivations hidden until they are exposed unwillingly (Vanille) or they are in conflict with the direction/goal of the main party (Fang). Vanille hides her extreme feelings of guilt over her role of Serah and Dahj becoming L'Cie. These feelings are so strong that she will endanger others rather than face her flaws by creating a "false self" to hide her true personality/feelings. (This is sometimes referred to as the "Guardian" sub self and "Guilty child" sub self in psychology. See links at the end of the document). Her guilt/secret is finally exposed by the antagonists in Ch.8.

Fang on the other hand does not hide her true motivations or guilt over failing to protect Vanille (which makes her character portrayal of this archetype somewhat weak in my opinion.) However, in Chapter 10 she does oppose the group when they pivot their goal to put more importance on defying their fate over their own well-being/protection. Fang is hiding her "true self" in that way; meaning she has hidden the *priority* of her motivations/goals from the group. She is placing Vanille's protection over the personal desires of everyone else. But this is very quickly resolved as her Eidolon appears at this moment and the story moves on without dwelling on this point for very long. (Fang's personality aligns very closely to the "Guardian", "Zealot", and "Saboteur" sub-selves in psychology. Links at the end).

However, Fang's flaws resurface again during the final confrontation with Bart/Orphan. (The fact that the Villain Chooses to try to exploit Fang into becoming Ragnarok at the end, the character who has had the least amount of time during the story to overcome her personal flaws, is intentional/logical. The villain is trying to exploit her flaw/weakness.)

In my opinion, this role is the worst represented and developed archetype in FFXIII (compared to the other 5). Probably because it is mostly a negative role like Ravager and the other 4 roles represent positive aspects of the character archetypes in this story. But the story and characters do not support the idea behind the SAB role as well as the RAV role. I've heard that the SAB role was the last one added to the game because the designers didn't want to exclude the debuff abilities from the game and also because its

inclusion balances 3 offensive roles with 3 support roles. (The SAB role was also called “Tactician” in earlier builds of the game. But that name does not match the two character’s personalities. The name change to “Saboteur” (or “Jammer” in Japanese version) may have been chosen to better fit the secret or hidden aspects of Vanille’s/Fang’s personalities. But that is just speculation on my part.

[http://finalfantasy.wikia.com/wiki/Saboteur_\(Final_Fantasy_XIII\)](http://finalfantasy.wikia.com/wiki/Saboteur_(Final_Fantasy_XIII)))

Synergist: This role is symbolic of encouragement, inspiration, and cooperation. The characters who have this role as a primary are Sazh and Hope. Sazh is the most cooperative member of the entire group. He follows Lightning early in the story and helps her on her quest to save Serah despite not having any obvious reason to do so. He also stresses to the group (mostly Lightning) that they should stay together and come up with some kind of plan. He often tries to encourage Vanille when she is depressed or indecisive, even if he is depressed himself. His paternal nature reflects this archetype quite well during the game. He also doesn’t unlock this role until mid-chapter 3, which is shortly before Snow leaves the group and forces Sazh into the active party, allowing him to express this archetype in battle with the SYN role.

Hope on the other hand is very negative and does not show much comradery or cooperation until later in the story. He starts to show these traits when he travels with Lightning as his relationship with her changes. Prior to that he only shows these traits out of necessity as he is not strong enough to fend for himself without the protection of the others. (Because of this I think it would have been a better choice to have Hope unlock the SYN role after the Odin battle or at the start of Chapter 5. But since he is used so little in battle up until that point it’s not really a huge error.) Later however, once he has overcome his own personal flaws and reconciled with his father, Hope is often portrayed as the most encouraging and inspirational character of the entire party.

The other characters do not consistently show the positive traits of a SYN. (though you could argue that Lightning does somewhat from chapter 11 onward.)

Medic: I mentioned this role in an earlier topic when I was explaining Lightning’s character development as it’s related to the Odin battle. To summarize, the Medic role is symbolic of kindness, empathy, compassion, etc. The only characters who have this role at the start of Ch.3 are Vanille and Hope. Vanille has shown compassion towards Hope from the very beginning. And Hope supports others out of necessity/survival. Lightning gets this role later in the story when her character starts to grow and overcome her lack of empathy/compassion.

This is very consistent with these three characters’ personalities. In contrast: Snow’s naivety and cockiness gets in the way of him being truly empathetic to others. And he is supportive in an altruistic sense which is not the same type of support expressed by the medic archetype. Sazh you could argue should have this role, but his paternal archetype is more suited for being expressed by the synergist and commando roles. (Just like Snow it’s a matter of his supportive nature being better expressed by a different role/archetype.) And Fang shows a lack of empathy towards the people of Cocoon in general as she is more concerned with her own family and less with the suffering of others. She is altruistic like Snow, but in a more flawed/family-centered way.)

With all of that said... (TL;DR)

The game is very consistent in its portrayal of the characters *at the cost of player agency/choice*. For example, the game does not allow the player to teach Snow SYN abilities (prior to chapter 10). Because prior to that point the SYN archetype is not compatible with Snow’s character and personality. Another example could be Sazh and SEN role. Sazh has already lost his son, so it doesn’t really make sense that he

would protect/sacrifice himself for others with his personal motivation to do that already lost. The character does not show the qualities of the SEN archetype and so the player is not able to put Sazh down that path until later on. Same goes for Lightning and the SAB role, Hope and the COM role, and so on and so on... (FFXII in contrast is pretty much the exact opposite design choice, which I believe lead to a less memorable cast overall).

Only when the characters have mostly overcome their character flaws in the story does the game allow the player to unlock their secondary roles for development. The timing of this is too closely linked to the events of the story and main theme of the game (the need to overcome personal flaws to grow and reach one's full potential) to be a mere coincidence.

Not only that, but the high CP cost to develop secondary roles on the Crystarium reflects the idea that becoming a more well-rounded individual is HARD. It requires more effort than working on your personal strengths and will take more time before you see significant growth. (That is to say, if you are more outgoing/courageous, but lack empathy; it's generally a lot more difficult to start developing your empathy than it is to become even more courageous/outgoing.)

Conclusion: So why is all of this information important? To show that *the character progression of FFXIII is directly tied to the archetypes and growth of the characters.* (Even the game's menus reinforce the "characters-first" design idea by showing gigantic portraits of the characters whenever the player can equip weapons/accessories, develop the crystarium, change paradigms, etc.) Nearly everything in this game points to the characters as the primary focus. The plot structure, the lack of exploration, the battle system, the menus, the leveling system, pretty much everything.

Many players may not like that FFXIII is so restrictive in this way for most of the game, but its benefits are the same as I mentioned in the "Exploration" topic. Storytelling through gameplay. The developers are clearly more committed to this idea in FFXIII than most other JRPGs in my opinion. And they stuck to this idea even if that meant restricting the player's agency/options.

Character progression systems from game to game are often very subjective so it's difficult to judge certain aspects as objectively "good" or "bad". Some games give you tons of flexibility and options in how you develop and use your characters (FFV, FFXII) while others give you very limited options, but better tie the character's abilities and progression to the overall narrative and story (FFIV, FFXIII). And some (great) games are able to find a balance of both (FFVI, FFVII, FFX). Personally I prefer the character progression to be strongly tied to the story and character arcs if possible. In my opinion, this strengthens the primary purpose of JRPG's and Final Fantasy overall. To tell a story. So I would subjectively score the character progression of FFXIII a **8/10**. It's overall very good at helping to tell a story, but is just a little too restrictive for my personal taste. A few tweaks in my opinion could make it truly great.

Thanks for reading
-DudeMcGuy on Discord

Sources:

Vanille psychology reference:

"Guilty child": http://sfhelp.org/popIF/guilty_child.htm

"Guardian" or "False self": <http://sfhelp.org/gwc/pop/guardians.htm>

Fang psychology references: (See “Guardian”/”False self” also.)

“Saboteur”: <http://sfhelp.org/popIF/saboteur.htm>

“Zealot”: <http://sfhelp.org/popIF/fanatic.htm>

The 12 character archetypes of ancient Myths/Legends (based on Carl Jung’s ideas/philosophy):

http://www.soulcraft.co/essays/the_12_common_archetypes.html

<https://www.novel-software.com/blog?article=12-character-archetypes-infographic>

The source I used for this document (which has the most detail on the archetypes):

http://www.uiltexas.org/files/capitalconference/Twelve_Character_Archetypes.pdf

Archetypes for each character in FFXIII mapped to the source above:

Everyone- The Destroyer and (eventually) The Creator

Lightning- The Warrior, The Seeker, The Ruler, The Caregiver (compassion)

Snow- The Warrior, The Caregiver (altruism), The Lover

Hope- The Innocent, The Orphan

Vanille- The Caregiver (compassion), The Magician

Sazh- The Innocent, The Lover (parental), The Sage

Fang- The Warrior, The Lover, The Caregiver (altruism)