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### The Crystalline Dream of Square Enix: Final Fantasy X

A mop-topped, fit youth traipses through an abysmal, thundering landscape. A blinding flash obscures all view for an instant, and he narrowly dodges a perilous bolt of lightning. Suddenly a network of cracks fissures the field of vision, the brittle plane of reality shatters into blackness for a moment, and gallant battle music plays as the abrupt segue into combat begins.

Such are the sensations of being plunged into the realm of Spira (as the game's protagonist, Tidus), the mythical setting of "Final Fantasy X." Frightened and perplexed by his new surroundings, Tidus, the adolescent hero, embarks on a quest which parallels that of the neophyte player from the beginning, as both grapple with the trials of interacting in this exciting but alien world. Tidus (whose name the player may change) is an inquisitive youth with a mutable identity; the idea, as is the case with many RPG's, is that the player may project elements of his or her real-world identity onto the virtual hero.

As the tenth installment of Square Enix's flagship "Final Fantasy" series, FFX holds a unique place among its peers. While it may never surpass the lofty precedents and near-universal renown of FFVII, FFX's thoroughly engaging plot, complete with nuanced character development and staggering cliffhanger / epiphany moments, earns it a supreme ranking in the RPG genre.

It was clear that Square Enix had released one whopper of an opus when "Final Fantasy X" first hit the market in 2001 for the PS2 platform, shattering franchise sales records and garnering near-salivating reviews from critics and fans alike for its unique playing-modality and

consummate storyline. And while nearly a decade has elapsed since then, there is a certain intimation of immortality in those first, doleful, tinkling harp notes, which beckon one at the game's load-screen. In this sense, even the new release of FFXIII for the beefed-up PS3 and Xbox360 consoles merely tickles our nostalgic spot, and the preponderance of "Final Fantasy" deadheads are pining dearly for the series' heyday of earlier staples like VII and X.

Let's start with the hero: Tidus is an easily-likable protagonist. His joshing antics and sometimes flippantly immature humor can be forgiven early on (especially when contrasted against the laconic and solemn demeanors of stolid, no-nonsense characters like Kimahri and Auron). Both gamer and projective-identity hero start at level footing: ground zero. Sin, the giant whale-like, crustacean sea monster, ensures this with the decimation of the futuristic city, "ancient" Zanarkand (Tidus' hometown, and the megalopolis of his stellar Blitzball team, the Abes). The intelligently-placed animated cut-sequences flow seamlessly into the game's action, with miniature CGI film-bits leading directly into heated battles. Indeed, from the gothic-appareled Lulu to the mysterious and stoical, red-robed Auron, all of the main characters are first introduced in their higher-resolution, animated forms via these movie snippets. A drawback to these detached scenes, however, is that they operate largely to the exclusion of the player; at watershed moments in the game's narrative, one is merely a passive spectator to predetermined, rolling footage, and there is no way to actively "play" during these terse motion-picture segments.

As Tidus is washed up on distant shores and warped inexplicably 2,000 years into the future, he encounters curious races like the tech-savvy Al Bhed, or the Hawaiian-esque citizens of Kilika, and is able to glean bits of information concerning his strange whereabouts from fragmentary anecdotes and his pleading, clueless inquiries to these exotic peoples. Encountering

a gargantuan sea monster with skeletal underbelly and narrowly escaping engulfment, the player gets a feel for the game's turn-based battle system<sup>1</sup>. Tidus may perform cut-and-dry attacks with his sword, cast a litany of magical spells, execute specific "skills" inflicting status ailments on foes, or activate his charged "overdrive"<sup>2</sup> bar, unleashing a fiery burst of pent-up energy.

Our hero meets the affable Wakka and cohorts when washed up to the isle of Besaid, where much to his delight, the mini-game and atavistic "Blitzball" is still being played two millennia later<sup>3</sup>. When his new comrades introduce Tidus to the village's priestess, Yuna, the two immediately spark a fuzzy connection, and the romantic Tidus is obliged to accompany her as a guardian on her sacrosanct pilgrimage (which, fortuitously, reaches its terminal point in Zanarkand, Tidus' now long-in-ruins home city). The game's primary missions involve protecting Yuna from Al-Bhed kidnappers in the large seaport of Luca, and defeating inconsequential sub-bosses that include giant Venus flytrap-like plants in the Kilikan jungle, or residual "Sin spawn," which have flaked off of the oceanic monster and embedded their jagged shells into the allies' ship, hatching as nasty surprises for Tidus and his crew.

The strategy-based elements of gameplay are admittedly lacking; most pivotal moves in battle involve selecting ham-fisted, blinking "trigger command" functions at the side of the control screen, which might make Tidus slam the gate on an aquatic hydra-monster, or crush a formidable robot by hitting the lever on a nearby crane. These basic, single-option strategies, with no possibility for deviation or erring, actually detract from the "challenge level" of the game, skirting conservatively inward from the player's "regime of confidence" and limitations.

The major exception is the game's "Cloisters of Trials," which require rigorous (and often aggravating) persistence at the trial-and-error method—endless tinkering to solve intricate puzzles and pattern configurations in order to advance in the game. The involved logic can

actually be exhausting. Faithful FF buffs will be pleased to see that the hallmark feature typifying the “Final Fantasy” series, “summoning,” is back in full-swing, with Yuna’s “aeons.” These powerful, mythical creatures are the embodied spirits of dead allies, and provide an excellent cover in fights against tougher adversaries. Lastly, the game’s convoluted “sphere grid” leveling system is probably representative of its playability as a whole: difficult to master, but rewarding in the end.

Square Enix deserves highest accolades for their achievement here. FFX is a game that surpasses its predecessors in an already entrenched series among the console RPG’s. Completely immersing a gaming audience of multi-millions into the abstract, fantasy realm of Spira is no small task. And to weather nine years in the ballooning games-industry as a standout favorite for one of the most popular consoles in the trade— well, that just might transcend even the most stalwart gaming optimist’s final fantasy.

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<sup>i</sup><sup>1</sup>At max capacity, the party actually contains seven members (in order of appearance): Tidus, Auron, Rikku, Wakka, Lulu, Kimahri, and Yuna— only three of which may be active in combat at a given moment. Party members may thus be “swapped-out,” with the L1 and proper analog pad button combinations.

<sup>2</sup> Each character’s overdrive is distinct, but most boil down to a sort of aggrandized attack dishing out exorbitant damage; an important exception is Rikku’s, which lets the player “mix” items to concoct various lethal bombs against enemies or potent healing potions for the party.

<sup>3</sup> It is here that Tidus immediately makes a name for himself by brilliantly executing a “Jecht shot” and notoriously pronouncing himself as star player for the Zanarkand Abes<sup>3</sup> (in characteristic, oblivious levity))