

Best Final Fantasy? Maybe. Best Battle System? Yes.

A Review of Final Fantasy XII

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After years of waiting, several delays, and change in management, the highly anticipated next installment of the Final Fantasy series has finally hit the shelves. Welcome to the world of Ivalice. For those of you who have not played either Final Fantasy Tactics or Tactics Advance, this is your first visit to Ivalice, where Bangaas, Viera, and Judges are commonplace. We hope your stay here in Ivalice is exciting, and with Final Fantasy XII, you will no doubt have a terrific time in the grand world of Ivalice.

Right from the beginning introduction, before the main menu even loads up, you know this is not your usual Final Fantasy (well minus the gorgeous looking CGI). From the very beginning it just seems to have this different feeling. Right from the words New Game you are thrown in the world of Ivalice where the Archadian Empire is taking over its surrounding nation of Nabradia, homeland of Lord Rassler, who recently married the princess of Rabanstre. Confused yet? It only gets better from there.

After the introduction videos you are thrown into the fight, where you take control of Reks, a soldier of Rabanstre. Your superior is Basch, a loyal, dedicated soldier of Rabanstre who refuses to leave a fallen Reks behind. When you finally gain control of Reks, Basch will walk you through the game basics such as moving, running, and changing the camera angles. The first annoyance, and honestly maybe the only one, is the way the camera works. It is inverted and there is no way to change it. So if you were like me and like non-inverted cameras, then this will take some time to get used to, a lot of time actually because even 50 hours into the game I still had some issues with the camera. Also, the camera still needs a little work as it is not always smooth at parts. There were times when I tried to change the camera angle and ended up getting it stuck in a wall or something of that nature and had to shift the other direction. Overall though, once you get used to the inverted controls, the camera is manageable.

From the beginning you will also have noticed that graphics for this game are pretty solid. Final Fantasy XII really pushes the PS2 to the limit and you can see the artists took a great deal of time in getting the most out of the console. You will notice little details in your surroundings, especially in the first city of Rabanstre. There are pots, decorations, bottles, and all kinds of other small details that are very well done. The buildings and the environment are also top notch. In the non-CGI cut-scenes you will also notice the character's themselves are also very well done, with their animations also very good. There are of course the CGI cut-scenes, which are slightly less beautiful as say Advent Children's, but still terrific none the less.

Also you will notice a good deal of people in the cities you will visit throughout the game. You will notice that you can talk to some of them, but not all of them. There are still a lot of citizens willing to give you some information, but there are so many others that simply are there to make the environments seem more realistic. This is a very nice addition as in the past the only people in the towns or cities were people that you could only talk to. But the developers somehow managed to fit as many people into the cities as possible while still allowing the game to run very smoothly, a very impressive feat. There are also a large variety of races in each city or town including Moogles, Bangaas, Viera, and others which simply just add to the realistic environments. Finally, the load times going from area-to-area are very brief, if not sometimes non-existent making the transitions more flowing.

When speaking of transitions, you must discuss the newest and most changed feature in Final Fantasy XII, the battle system. Gone are the days of turn based combat, random battles, and the trusty old ATB. Say hello the new Active Dimension Battle system or ADB for short. Much like its MMORPG counterpart Final Fantasy XI and its RTB, the battles are fought in real time, making the transitions from exploring to fighting much smoother. There are no more swoosh transitions and loading of battle screens, if you can see the monster, you can fight the monster, all in real time. The battle system, much like the city environments, give the game a very real feeling as you just walk right into battles without having to wait. But do not be too concerned if you are a die-hard fan of the old ATB as you can still slow things down and give yourself a chance to think. By hitting the X button a menu will come up that will give you your common choices of attack, magic and items. From there you can select attack and choose your target. You can also move through your party members by moving left or right and you can have them attack or use magic however you see fit. But by controlling your attacks this way you are really missing out on the best part of the battle systems, gambits.

Gambits are basically AI commands that you can preset to each individual character allowing them to attack and cast magic without your commands. All the while, you can either sit there and watch, or stop to take control of the fighting using the menu. You can even set the party leader to attack anything on sight without you having to touch a button. It does take a few hours into the game before you can first use gambits, but once you get a chance to use them, there is no turning back. You characters will initially start off with a small number of gambit slots which you can assign commands to, but later on in the game you can add more slots by buying the appropriate gambit license using the License Board, which will be discussed momentarily. You will also only start off with a small number of commands that you can give and also a small number of targets and criteria that you can give for those commands. Eventually, either through purchase or from chests, you will acquire a wide range of criteria and commands. The in-game tutorial does a solid job of teaching you how to use the gambit system, and it stresses the importance of gambit order. It does take time to get used to the gambit system, but once you master it, it can be a very powerful ally. You can have your entire party cast protect, regen, shell and other status boosters on themselves consistently, with them recasting them when they wear off. You can also have a character who steals every battle allowing you to get more loot. Speaking of loot, that is your main source of income in Final Fantasy XII. Like XI, you make money by selling the items that monsters drop. Some monsters drop Gil, but not many. You make most of your money by selling pelts and other strange loot. So, a stealing gambit is a very useful way of grabbing some more loot to sell. Early on money is not has hard to come by, but as the game progresses, things get very costly.

Finally, the last feature related to the battle system is Quickenings. Similar to say limit breaks in previous games, they are very strong attacks that do massive damage. The difference in XII is that they first have to be earned using the License Board (once again more on that in a bit). Each character gets three quickenings which can be used from the battle menu. The catch to quickenings however, is that when used, it takes up all over you MP. As you get the second and third level quickenings however, you get MP boosts that double your MP and you get the ability to sometimes only use level one quickenings which would only take up half your MP. Quickenings can also be chained by touching the appropriate button next to each character's name when the time comes up. There is a five second timer that starts

and when the button appears next to a character, you can hit it to start a chain. If there are not any buttons next to the character's name, you must cycle through again by pressing R2. If done correctly, quickenings can be very deadly.

Finally we get to the License Board. Much like the Sphere Grid in Final Fantasy X, the License Board allows you to spend points, in this case LP, to obtain certain skills. The License Board is the same for each character and all the slots are the same. With the License Board you can pretty much turn you characters into anything you like. Do you want a white mage that wears heavy armor? Get the appropriate licenses and you can do just that. The License Board is pretty much your life line to all magic, stat improvements in this case called augments, and all of your equipment. However, unlike the Sphere Grid system, HP, MP, and all statistics rise with levels. You do not have to obtain license to raise these, however there are licenses that boost HP. So if you want to equip a certain bow or sword you would first have to obtain that necessary license. The License Board is a good new addition that gives you a different way of managing you characters, but it can be tedious at times as you have to get certain licenses that you do not want to get, simply to get the ones that you do want. Also, monsters generally only give you one license point each, with some slots costing as much as 225. So it can take a lot of battling to get most of the licenses. But overall the License Board is a very solid addition to the series.

In conclusion, Final Fantasy XII very well maybe the best in the series, that is all a matter of opinion. But the ADB battle system and gambits are not only somewhat revolutionary, but they are a very good and perhaps the best addition to any Final Fantasy ever. The battles are actually fun in this game. You will find yourself fighting for no reason at all, simply just to fight. The battle system is that engaging and that entertaining. Battling feels more exciting and less like a chore and hopefully we will see this battle system sometime again in the near future, even though it is said that Final Fantasy XIII will return to a more turn based battle system. In the end, with a great story line that includes twists, turns, betrayal, an adult feel to it, amazing graphics and CGI, and a ton of new features, Final Fantasy XII is definitely a must get for any RPG fan.