

Game Narrative Review

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Developer: Monolith Soft

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Overview

And when we finally made it to the City...
 I realized there was a whole different world out there.
 "They're so lucky."
 I really thought that.
 I was astounded... Just by extending our years, life could be so different?
 -Mio

Life. It is the greatest treasure that we possess. No matter our differences, we are unified under its banner. Though short, the time we are given presents us with endless opportunities. To love. To dream. To endeavor to ever greater heights.

Yet, in our day to day lives, life is perhaps underappreciated. The beauty of new life being born, of living to old age with the ones we love, and of passing on our hopes and dreams to the generations that come after aren't often on the forefront of our minds. How could it be? Modern life throws an endless deluge of tragedies, distractions, and information at us without pause. Often, it is the fundamental truths that fall to the wayside as we do our best to keep up.

It does not need to be like this, however. Sometimes, all we need is a bit of context to bring us back to what truly matters.

Xenoblade Chronicles 3 is a game that takes place in the world of Aionios. Within, an endless war between two nations, Keves and Agnus, takes place. Everyone born is a soldier from one of these nations, and has a lifespan of exactly ten years. The story focuses on a group of Kevesi and Agnian soldiers who are forced together upon being granted the mysterious power of "Ouroboros", causing them to be hunted by both nations. *Xenoblade Chronicles 3* focuses on the sacrosanctity of life, not fearing change, and moving forward regardless of how difficult it may be.

Characters

Noah: The protagonist of the game. Noah is an off-seer from the nation of Keves. Off-seers are special soldiers that honor those who have passed away on the battlefield, sending off their bodies through playing the off-seer melody. While generally Kevesi and Agnian off-seers only see off those from their own nations, Noah always sends off all who have died from both sides. He is a kind hearted individual who doesn't bear any ill will to those from Agnus. Even when he was young, he constantly questioned the pointlessness of the war everyone was fighting, and wished for a world where everyone was allowed to exist in peace. Noah cares deeply for Mio, and in every single one of his previous lives has been romantically involved with Mio.

Noah's character arc revolves around him finding the will to move forward, rejecting the idea of letting things stagnate for the sake of preserving the now.

Mio: The secondary protagonist. Mio is an off-seer from the nation of Agnus. As someone who is in her ninth term, Mio is acutely aware of how little time she has left. While she acts calm about her impending death on the surface, this is simply to mask the anxieties and fears that she has. She is concerned with the legacy that she will leave behind after she is gone from the world.

Though she cares deeply for Noah, she never says his name for the majority of the game due to trauma she's experienced with losing those close to her in the past. She does this to try and distance herself from him.

N: The secondary antagonist. N is a version of Noah that had decided to become a member of Moebius after failing to protect Mio across all of his previous lives. To join Moebius, N destroys a city that he had founded, alongside all of its citizens. To N, becoming Moebius was the only way that he could be with Mio for eternity.

N is a deeply troubled man, filled with regret over his actions. While his relationship with M used to be relatively healthy when he was human, he became incredibly toxic and possessive

over her after becoming Moebius. He is relatively quiet, but will showcase a high level of sadism and cruelty towards those who defy Moebius. N has a particular high level of disdain towards Noah, seeing who he himself used to be through him. He puts Noah through various cruel circumstances to try and "break" him, in an attempt to prove to himself that his actions were correct.

M: M is a previous incarnation of Mio that was resurrected by Z after N decided to become Moebius. As a member of Moebius, she relies on the deaths of countless soldiers to fuel her own lifespan. M is disgusted by the lives that are sacrificed to fuel her own, and resents N for making her into this. While she still loves the person that N used to be, she doesn't love the person that he is now.

She seeks her own death for two reasons; she wishes to be free from the control of N, and she feels like the only way to get N to confront his own regrets is to lose the one person that he clings to for purpose.

Z: The leader of Moebius. When Melia and Nia found out their two universes were going to collide and destroy each other, they created a system called Origin. Each of their world's built an ark of sorts that contained the souls of everyone from their world. Once their worlds collided, Origin would recreate their worlds once the two worlds had passed each other. However, the souls within Origin feared the unknown future, and that fear created a being called Z. Z uses the power of Origin to create a merged world that is frozen in the split second the two worlds collided, known as Aionios.

Z is a literal embodiment of the fear of change. He seeks to maintain his "endless now" for eternity, to avoid ever moving forward into the uncertain future that will come from Origin activating properly.

Breakdown

Recontextualization I: Fighting to live, living to fight

Decontextualization involves extracting the meaning, textual elements, or signs from something, and removing it from the context that it was originally present in. Children often use symbolic decontextualization in play. An example of such is when a child pretends to eat while playing, they take the actions of eating and remove them from the context of eating a real meal. Recontextualization then, is the act of taking these extracted elements and placing them within a different context. This both alters the meaning of the extracted material, as well as the lens through which it is viewed. Within James Joyce seminal novel “Ulysses” many elements of the story and structure of Homer’s *Odyssey* are recontextualized to the setting of an early 20th century day in Dublin. The change in setting and culture change the core themes present within the overall structure and story of the *Odyssey*, and create new semiotic meaning relevant to early 20th century life.

The specific type of recontextualization that *Xenoblade Chronicles 3* employs is known as defamiliarization, a term coined by Russian writer Viktor Shklovsky in 1917. He describes defamiliarization as a process through which the known is made unknown, thereby forcing audiences to more critically and actively appraise the concepts presented to them. The *Pikmin* series serves as a perfect embodiment of this idea. If someone were to see an apple on a table, they would barely think about it. The process of perception is automatic and instantaneous due to familiarity with the object. However, in *Pikmin* the player character is significantly smaller than we are, leading to an apple appearing as a towering boulder. The way that a player must interact with this object, the way that it rolls, the amount of effort needed to move it, fundamentally alters its semiotic perception. They are forced to comprehend apples as if they were something entirely new.

The cycle of life and death is recontextualized in *Xenoblade Chronicles 3*. Everyone emerges from a pod and is raised as a soldier for their respective nation. Each colony of both nations must survive by refilling a device known as the “Flame Clock” which is fuelled by the deaths of opposing soldiers. As their lives are artificially shortened to 10 years, no one knows of birth or old age. The *meaning* of life in this world is therefore vastly different to our own. In Noah’s own words, they “live to fight and fight to live”. Soldiers in their world never find romance,

they never get to grow old and experience the simple joys of life, and they don't even know that babies exist, given that they simply emerge from pods when they're "born". This is further reflected in the words that everyone in Aionios uses in place of swear words. Words like "fuck" are replaced with "spark" and "snuff", words that center the flame clock (spark a fire or snuff one out) and its importance. Interestingly words such as "asshole" or "shit" are present in the world's lexicon, as the concepts behind those words are present in the world, unlike with "fuck".

While this recontextualization is important on its own, it is the characters' experience of the reverse recontextualization that proves emotionally resonant and meaningful. The group was directed by Vandham, the man who gave them the Ouroboros' powers, to journey to the Mechonis sword – a landmark in the world – and there they discover that there's an entire city located within, one where life isn't artificially shortened to a mere 10 years. They watch in awe as young children run by, people so much younger to the "first termers" that they're accustomed to. They gaze on at older folk watching over children, never having seen anything approaching a wrinkle before. They see all manners of leisurely activity that they would never have a chance to experience in their short, conflict filled lives.

However, it is a young mother who has just given birth that strikes the strongest of chords for everyone. As the group gathers around the mother, they meet a baby for the first time. "It's okay to touch her", the mother says to Mio. With the back of her hand, Mio gently rubs the face of the baby, her eyes opening wide in shock upon doing so. Turning her hand around, she caresses the baby as a smile filled with concern and care breaks out on her face. "She's so warm", Mio says with awe. "Place one finger," the mother starts, "and place it in her palm". As Mio carefully and slowly does just that, the small baby grasps Mio's finger with her entire palm. The camera zooms in on her eyes as she truly begins to comprehend how beautiful the start of our lives is supposed to be. All of the other main characters in turn place their fingers into the palm of the baby, and go through a wide gamut of emotions. Sena smiles wide, telling the rest of the group how incredible it felt. Taion expresses an uncharacteristic level of excitement when he goes to place his finger, and laughs in exhilaration. When it comes to Noah however, upon feeling the baby grasp his finger looks immediately to Mio. The two share a heartfelt look with each other, not unlike an expecting couple sitting hand in hand as they watch the first ultrasonic pictures of their own future child. Even without knowing about romance conceptually, the two's connection is immediately apparent, demonstrating the universality of the experience. Later, Monica – a member of the city – discusses the experiences that the main characters just had:

Monica:

This is how it should be.

This is human nature.

We are born defenseless, grow up,
then those who find a spouse create new life together...
...age, then return to the earth.

Seeing the main characters learn about the natural cycle of life -- something the viewer is already familiar with -- strikes an interesting chord. Defamiliarization causes the player to resonate with this experience, even if they already knew about birth and aging and death. Watching others experience something we ourselves already have allows us to empathize with them in ways that are easy to understand. In reference to “reaction streamers” and “let’s plays”, which involve a similar concept, Andrea Weinstein, a clinical psychologist, says that “We feel immediately bonded to them because we say, “Yep, I would have that reaction, too” (...)You feel like you’ve been heard in some way because you’ve bonded with them”. While the *experience* of learning about the nature of life as an adolescent or an adult isn’t something that is intrinsically relatable, the framing of *Xenoblade Chronicles 3* up to this point juxtaposed against knowledge the player already possesses produces a deep sense of catharsis. One of the major themes of *Xenoblade Chronicles 3* is how precious life is, and the usage of defamiliarization serves to bolster the audience’s ability to engage critically with that concept.

Recontextualization II: It’s been fun... Noah.

Recontextualization as a process forms many of the literary techniques that make up modern storytelling. “In medias res”, a literary technique that involves starting in the middle of a series of events, results in the narrative being recontextualized after earlier events are revealed and explored. Defamiliarization involves taking an ordinary or commonplace object, and presents it in an unfamiliar manner so that we see it in a new light. None however, are as well known to the modern audience as the concept of the plot twist.

A plot twist is a literary device that introduces a change that radically alters the outcome of the plot within a work of fiction. "Oedipus Rex", a play by Sophocles, is a perfect demonstration of the idea. Oedipus journeys away from his home, seeking to avoid a prophecy in which he kills his own father and marries his mother. Following this Oedipus gets into a fight with an old man and happens to kill him. Later, he defeats a sphinx that was ravaging Thebes and is awarded kingship and marries Thebes's queen. The twist occurs when it is revealed that Laius, the former king, had received the same prophecy that Oedipus received, but about his son. Seeking to avoid this fate, the child is left for dead, but is instead rescued and raised as Oedipus. Unknowingly, Oedipus has fulfilled the prophecy, and he succumbs to despair. This particular type of plot twist is known as anagnorisis. It is a type of plot twist where a protagonist is made aware of the true nature of either themselves or another character.

Xenoblade Chronicles 3 utilizes anagnorisis to particularly devastating effect near the end of chapter 5. Following the events at the city, the cast proceed to help the people of the City by allowing themselves to be captured, and staging a prison escape from the inside to free others. Steps away from success, they are confronted by N and M. The two unmask themselves for the first time, and the party is shocked to see that they're a perfect match for Noah and Mio. N steps forward to fight the party, but M interrupts him and says that she'll fight the party herself. Using a special ability granted her as a member of Moebius, M can possess the bodies of those around her. She uses this liberally during the fight but is ultimately defeated, and N is forced to step in. He makes quick work of the party and decides to imprison them while the last month of Mio's life runs out. To further add to the cruelty, N separates Mio from the rest of the cast by putting her in a prison cell right beside theirs. N proceeds to further torture the party by telling them that those who pass on during a homecoming ceremony are permanently removed from the cycle of rebirth. The party had become aware that those who die are simply reborn without their memories, however this new information means that Mio would not return if she reaches the homecoming ceremony at the end of this month.

The party does whatever they can to try and break free. They smash against walls and bars to no avail. On the night before Mio's homecoming, Noah laments his powerlessness. Mio responds, and the two start talking;

Mio:

Hey...

When the two of us first met...
 You asked me if I wanted to survive.

Noah:

Yeah.

Mio:

I replied...I didn't mind either way.

Mio:

I'll correct that.

Now I...want to live.

To live, and learn...

a whole lot more...

Noah... There's so much for us to see...

Noah:

Finally,

You called me by my name.

Throughout the story so far, Mio only addressed Noah with “you” or “hey” but never by name. Through her own experiences of loss in the past, Mio is acutely aware of the pain that comes from watching someone you love be ripped away from you, and has tried to keep a level of distance between herself and Noah. On this last night of her life, she allows herself to be vulnerable at last. Despite their physical separation, the two have never been closer together.

Mio:

Oh yeah... Sorry.

I guess I felt that...if I did...

my heart would downright break.

Because...I'd be admitting the truth.

(...)

I don't want this to be it.

If I were given the chance...

If this road I've walked...were to keep on going...

I'd like to spend that time...with my Noah.

Finally, the day of homecoming arrives. N brings the party out in shackles, so that they can watch Mio be sent off forever. The Queen of Agnus starts the ceremony just as an eclipse begins, and Mio begins to glow. N walks up to Noah, removes his shackles, and drops his offseer flute in front of him.

N:

Pick it up.

You're an off-seer. So send her.

What's wrong?

Go on, send her.

Isn't that your role?

Isn't she your Mio?!

N's disregard for the importance of an off-seer's flute serves to reinforce how little N values life. He continues to taunt Noah for his powerlessness in sadistic fashion, telling him to perform his duties as off-seer for the one person that he couldn't stand to lose. Noah picks up his flute, but quickly drops it as he looks back up and sees Mio fading away even faster. Just as the eclipse reaches its zenith, Mio turns around to face Noah. With her last breath, Mio tells Noah;

Mio:

It's been fun...Noah.

Noah screams out Mio's name, as she disperses into light. N walks up to him with cold disinterest in his eyes, sword in hand, and strikes at Noah's throat as the scene cuts to black and Chapter 5 ends.

This, of course, is not the end of the story. Upon saving and starting the next chapter, we find Noah in a void filled with fog. As he wonders where he is, he is confronted by a hooded child.

Hooded Figure:

Once more today, you've lost the one you cherished most.

Are you sad?

If you could, would you try again?

Or would you rather...
linger in the "endless now"...?

In this void, Noah is shown multiple of his past lives: lives where he fought, lives where he ran away, and even one where he fathers a child with Mio. Throughout, the hooded figure asks Noah what his motivations are. Noah initially claims to want to change the world, yet is then shown lives where he ran away. This scene illustrates what Noah was truly trying to accomplish, stripped of all rationalizations and posturing. He only cared about being with Mio. Yet the figure shows that even then, he changed. Upon having a baby, Noah begins to value someone beyond just Mio and himself.

Despite that, it wasn't enough. Noah was brought back by Z, the head of Moebius, with all the memories of his past lives. Z presents to him a Faustian bargain. If he destroys the city he held dear alongside all its people, he would bring back Mio and give the two eternal life as Moebius. He takes this deal. These are the N and M we know now. The hooded figure asks Noah whether he wants to make the same choice.

Throughout the course of the story, Noah has had trouble making decisions and moving forward with them, never able to truly choose a path of his own. In this moment, however, Noah reflects on the people he has met. At the point where their lives ended, Crys, Joran, and Mio all smiled. He had always assumed those were expressions of pity, but now he realizes it was contentment and trust in those they left behind to take care of the future.

Noah:

But it just breaks my heart, that... *that* was the only smile they could choose...

And it really shouldn't have been...

The world we have now...

It doesn't give us the choice to smile.

If the world won't let us choose

outside these narrow bounds...

I want nothing more

than to rip this world apart.

I want to repay those smiles.

That's why I'm here.

Noah admits that he may still end up taking the same path as N. Regardless though, he promises to change the world, as it is the legacy that Mio left to him. The figure asks if he will do it, even if he's alone, to which Noah resolutely states yes. Critically, Noah's choice to keep moving forward, even though he has just experienced the same grief and loss that N had, points to how Noah's life experiences have changed him. The current Noah is the only known incarnation to have been an off-seer and as such Noah is constantly reminded of just how many lives are lost in the perpetual conflict between both nations. Tested against his pacifism, Noah's off-seer duties build a deep respect for how precious life is, something that N completely lacks.

Up to this point, Noah was focused on survival in a world that wanted anything but for its inhabitants. Noah has only ever fought due to having no choice given the world that he exists in. As he stated prior, "Fighting in order to live, and living to fight" was the only way the world worked. Yet here Noah makes the *choice* to fight, for the first time. He wants to tear down this world that lets no one live in peace.

The hooded figure then tells Noah that the two of them will walk together, revealing themselves to be Mio. We cut back to the moment that N seemingly decapitated Noah, only to see that he stopped just short of Noah's neck. M had used her ability to stop N. M walks up to Noah with Mio's offseer flute in hand.

Mio:

I'm sorry...

My hair, it's gotten kinda long.

Will you still...walk alongside me?

Noah...?

It becomes clear to Noah and N that this is actually Mio, and not M. During the fight between M and the party, M had possessed Noah and interlinked with Mio, allowing the two to discuss M's gambit. M had given Mio her memories of the time she had with N, and explained what she wished to accomplish.

M (in flashback):

To my Noah,

the time with me is everything.
 I just want it to...end.
 Moebius, like me... We can exist only by taking the souls of those that grace this world.
 Nobody pays the slightest mind to the thoughts,
 and dreams those many lives espouse.
 We gorge ourselves, covet every ember,
 just to delay our inevitable ruin.
 If I die, maybe he'll see... Maybe he could somehow...realize what it is that I wish.
 That would be enough...
 Afterwards, it'll be up to you two...
 to walk the path *we* ought to have walked...he and I.

M never wished to live for eternity with N, especially not if it cost the constant sacrifice of countless lives. On top of this, N's love for M had devolved into a toxic and possessive obsession, further removing the N that she knows from the Noah that she fell in love with. The reason that she had stayed with him for all this time was to try and save him from this path of stagnation and ruin that he has chosen. Perhaps in death, N would realize how miserable this existence had made M. She wanted him to confront the choices that he has made, and go back to being the selfless and kind person that he used to be. Mio agreed to the plan, and switched places with M during the battle.

The plot twist of Mio and M's swap recontextualizes various points of the story presented thus far. The usage of anagnorisis changes the nature of all of the interactions that the party had with Mio following the swap. The night before her homecoming, Mio told Noah that calling him by name would break her heart and force her to admit the truth.

This wasn't just about Mio closing herself off to Noah by not using his name: it also alluded to M not being able to call N, Noah. M tried to create a separation between N and the Noah that she had known, due to her inability to reconcile the changes to his personality after becoming Moebius.

M also says that she wishes to spend time with "my Noah", referring to Noah in third person even though she is speaking to him. Initially, this is viewed as Mio using more romantic language to refer to Noah. In reality this is clearly M referring to N, or rather the person that he used to be. Given all this, M not only wishes to die for the reasons previously stated, her choice

to sacrifice herself is an act of love for her partner. Speaking to Noah, a mirror of the person that she truly loved, M realizes that she truly wishes to live and see more of the world with her own partner. Rather than planning her own suicide, her actions are born out of desperation to bring N to reason.

"Music plays a key role in showcasing the power of recontextualization with this plot twist." During the prison cell sequence, the song "A Step Away" plays. Here is a passage from the opening of the song:

I thought I'd be forever by your side protecting you
Assuming that's what you wanted too

I had no clue that we had nothing between us
Perhaps I was so scared to know the truth

While listening to the song in the hopeless prison scenes, the natural assumption is that this is a song told from the perspective of Noah to Mio. Under this lens the first verse seemingly refers to Noah's desire to protect Mio, but only if it is truly what Mio wished. The first line of the second verse: "I had no clue that we had nothing between us" can be interpreted as Noah saying he didn't realize that there were no barriers between him and Mio, while also employing a level of situational irony at the literal wall between their prison cell.

After the plot twist is revealed, it becomes clear the song was actually about N's perspective, and his feelings towards M. The first verse refers to N and how clueless he was to what M truly wanted. The second becomes a much more sorrowful message of N realizing that there was nothing left of their relationship, but he overlooked M's feelings for fear of acknowledging that fact.

This musical foreshadowing extends to other tracks as well. When the party is fighting against who they believe is M, the Moebius battle theme variant has Mio's flute – an instrument only the current incarnation of Mio has as off-seer – as a core instrument, subtly indicating that this is Mio that the party is facing.

N, upon realizing that the person who had died was “his” Mio, loses his grip on reality. He screams and starts swinging his sword in the air, lamenting the loss of Mio while simultaneously blaming her for “doing this to him”. Noah and Mio attempt to reason with N, trying their best to break through to him, but nothing seems to work. The group is forced to fight N to try and get through to him. Tragically, N showcases uncritically the exact traits that M was trying to point out through her sacrifice to him. The manner in which he reacts is also in stark contrast to Noah, who didn’t lash out and devolve into self-pity.

Though their previous attempts at fighting N had ended in the party being effortlessly defeated, this time they prove his match. At the climax of their fight, Noah reaches into his Ouroboros form’s core, and pulls out the sword of Origin (the form Lucky Seven takes upon manifesting in Noah’s Ouroboros form).

N:

The Sword of Origin...!
You are going to end it all?

Noah:

If the world holds our lives back, I will end it!
It's as simple as that!

N:

It is impossible!
I tried... We tried to walk that path, and failed!

Noah:

You're full of shit! You never tried, you're just a coward!

Noah:

If you meant it, you'd've found a way!
But you didn't even try to make the effort...did you?!
So what do you know, of the world and of life?!

Noah effortlessly slashes N away, decisively defeating him. This point marks the true inflection point for Noah’s character, where he decides that he will destroy Aionios so that the world can move on from its unending stagnation. While Noah would *react* to events, he never truly **acted** up until this point. His choice of calling N a coward reflects back to a conversation that happens in chapter 2. Noah breaks his practice sword, and tells the Nopon Riku that he needs a

replacement as he can't summon a blade of his own. Riku presents Lucky Seven to him, yet Noah refuses it, telling him that it is too strong. Riku admonishes him, saying that choosing not to fight is the same as letting his friends die. It's revealed that Noah *is* able to call his blade, yet chooses not to out of a desire to not fight anyone.

Riku:

If death is not option, should live.
 Only way is fight like life depends.
 Thinking of self...alone...is way of coward.
 Though, Riku know feeling well.

Riku tells Noah that he can keep Lucky Seven disguised within his blade. If ever a time came when he truly needed its power, he would simply have to draw it. This scene illustrates Noah's core struggle over the course of the game – even though he has the power to carve his own path, he has always lacked the will to do so. He only used Lucky Seven in moments of desperation, such as when the party needed to break a flame clock. This time however, he draws the blade on his own, and admonishes N for displaying the same cowardice that he himself had shown up to this point. N excuses his failure to stop the hold of Moebius on the world as it simply being an impossible task. Yet Noah knows better. Having experienced the feeling of desperation that N has, as well as sharing the same memories, Noah is acutely aware of the fact that N is trying to assuage his own sense of guilt. The line “You're full of shit! You never tried, you're just a coward!” is the first and only time that Noah swears over the course of the game, showcasing the degree of anger he feels over N's hypocrisy. Noah slashes N down, ending the fight in a single decisive strike. After this turning point, Noah gains the ability to use Lucky Seven at will upon filling a gauge, granting him a large boost in strength. Yet he still maintains his gentle side, switching to the blunt side of the weapon when facing human opponents.

What ultimately makes this plot twist so effective is the manner in which it is used to both draw parallels between N and Noah, while also acting as the point where Noah's motivations truly become his own. He has finally escaped the allure of the “endless now” in all its forms, no longer wishing to stick to a present with the ones that he loves if it means the suffering of everyone else. It also serves to elucidate the core message that the game is trying to convey:

that one must keep moving towards the future no matter what your chosen path is, and to not fear change.

Recontextualization III: Chance encounters

As discussed earlier, Noah and N are one and the same in many ways. The nature of their relationship is used in a manner that makes N both a mirror and foil character to Noah, to great effect. After N is defeated and subsequently escapes, Noah says the following to Mio:

Noah:

I can't help but wonder... Would I have been able to save you?

I wanted time to stand still...

More than anything.

I felt completely powerless,

I wished time would stop.

If the moment could have lasted forever, we...

I wished for the unthinkable.

Just like N.

I proved to be just like him...

Noah felt desperate in the moment he thought he'd lost Mio. Yet here he reflects and realizes that while N's actions have been reprehensible, they're completely understandable due to the experiences that he himself had just gone through. No longer angry with N, Noah simply feels pity for the version of himself who took the wrong path.

N meanwhile feels both jealous and angry at Noah, especially after having lost M. "Why was he the one that got to stay with Mio? What makes him different from me?" He wonders. Up to the point where he lost M, his relationship with Noah was purely ideological. His entire plan around Mio's execution and keeping her away from everyone else was presented as 'an amusing distraction' by N, yet in reality the purpose was to validate his own choices.

One can look at the names of N's attacks to elucidate his feelings toward Noah. Of particular note, N has an attack named "Shred the Strawman". A "straw man fallacy" is when an individual attempts to refute a different argument than the one that was made, while conflating

the two as one and the same. The "straw man" then, is the false argument used to refute the opponent under pretense of addressing their points. N harbors deep repressed regret for both repeatedly failing to save Mio across their countless lives, as well as for his decision to become Moebius, abandoning all of his ideals and hopes. Yet he forces himself to believe this was the only path forward and the only choice. Within Noah, N sees who he used to be, and as such a refutation of who he currently is. Noah represents the discarded ideals that N had abandoned, and therefore N does everything he can to break Noah's spirit. He *needs* Noah to sink into despair and lose Mio to justify his own decisions, regardless of the contrivances he has to use to force that outcome. He needs Noah to be the strawman that he can easily tear down, because otherwise his senseless slaughter of the first city being necessary loses its cogency. N even refers to Noah as his "long shadow" during his breakdown at the start of chapter 6. In Jungian psychology – Carl Jung's works being a constant source of inspiration for Takahashi's writing – the shadow refers to unconscious aspects of the personality that conflict with the ideals of the ego, or the conscious self. As a defense mechanism, the conscious self rejects the shadow and projects it in various manners. This is of particular note given the multiple implications that Noah was "born" (and subsequently added back into the cycle of reincarnation) from N's regrets, embodying the hope and ideals that N has rejected.

This all comes to a head during the final confrontation between N and Ouroboros within Origin. As Noah and the others make their way to Origin's center, they find N guarding the Queen, who was captured by Z. Upon seeing N, something is clearly different. The light in his eyes – a bright highlight present in the rendering of every character's pupils – is missing. N has lost all hope and will to live after losing M. He bitterly remarks on Noah having "his girl" on his arm, a further indictment of his lack of understanding for why M chose what she did. After conversing and engaging in combat, Noah and Mio begin to finally break through to him.

Noah:

You took the wrong path,
and then you had to walk it alone...
You just messed up...
You messed up royally!

Ultimately, N only begins to grapple with his own regrets and feelings of sorrow through acceptance and acknowledgement of his frame of mind and reasonings. It is fitting, then, that the one to do so is another version of himself that chose a different path. Noah and N share the same desires, the same motivations, and up until recently the same goals: to do whatever they could to make sure those close to them survived. Noah acknowledges how little they differ during this conversation.

Noah:

Perhaps...
we just got lucky.

N:

"Got lucky"...?

Noah:

Trace it to chance encounters.
I've met...so many people.
Lanz, Eunie, Taion, Sena, Riku and Manana...
My friends have been invaluable.
And of course,
I met Mio, too.
There's a very small difference,
between you and me.
If I had been in your shoes,
I'm sure I would have chosen the same.

Noah recognizes that in all likelihoods that he would make the exact same choices that N had, given the circumstances. The biggest difference between the two is that Noah had friends. He had a stable support network that allowed him to keep moving forward, regardless of how hard it was. Noah refers to this as his friends allowing him to "choose the future".

N initially acts as a foil to Noah through his sadism, blatant disregard for others' lives, and active protection of the status quo. As his backstory unravels, it becomes clear that he isn't only a sympathetic villain with understandable intentions, he is Noah's mirror. All of his actions are in line with Noah's character, after being forced to make an impossible decision. Mio herself makes this clear when she says "To protect, and to endure... They're shapes a wish can take". Noah and N wished the same thing, but their wishes took shape in different ways. N's flaws are the

same base traits that led to Noah's strengths, shaped through his experiences in life. This is ultimately what makes him a uniquely compelling villain. The evolution from being a foil to a mirror of Noah highlights and elevates his character arc, through knowledge of just how little of a difference it would have taken for Noah to have ended up like N. His character also serves to reinforce the core message of the game, by showcasing the costs of resisting change.

Strongest Element

The relationship between Noah and Mio is a particularly high note for the narrative of XC, namely due to the high degree of communication between the two. They casually talk about a wide range of topics, from the light hearted to the heavy. When either are lost in thought, the other will walk up and ask them how they're doing. They'll get into a fight, step away to gather their thoughts, and will reconvene to communicate on why their feelings are hurt. As time passes and they grow closer together, the manner in which they interact with the rest of the group begins to change as well. During conversations where they're not directly talking to each other, they'll share glances and reference things the other has said. Noah and Mio even start to do things to look after the group together, such as covering Taion's chores when he's been having a tough day. The way their relationship grows and evolves feels incredibly natural, due to well-utilized subtext being combined with dialogue that accurately captures the development of a healthy relationship.

N and Noah's motivations hinge on the feelings they both respectively have for Mio, a motivation that would fall flat if the relationship between Noah and Mio wasn't compelling. Their chemistry also serves to highlight how tragic the relationship between N and M has become, given how different he was from the man that she loved. A sense of grief and loss necessitates love and understanding from the departed, and XC3's central romance serves as an excellent example of what a well-executed relationship brings to a story.

Unsuccessful Element

While not necessarily a fault in the narrative of the game itself, the lack of exposition for many of the phenomena within the game is a notable weak point when stacked up against the two preceding *Xenoblade Chronicles* games.

To reiterate, the more ambiguous style of storytelling that *Xenoblade Chronicles 3* employs is not a weakness in and of itself. Rather, it is an issue of the expectations that the audience has from earlier points of the story and previous *Xenoblade* titles revealing "something bigger" behind the happenings of the plot.

In both *Xenoblade Chronicles 1* and *2*, there are specific moments near the end of the game where characters expound on key details of the world, providing creative and surprising explanations for events and phenomena that add an additional layer of richness to the overarching story. In *Xenoblade Chronicles 1*, Alvis explains that the Mechonis and Bionis were born from an experiment initiated by a scientist named Klaus on an earth-like planet, which recreated the universe. *Xenoblade Chronicles 2* meanwhile has the Architect explain that Klaus's experiment created a *new* universe, and that the events of the story take place in the remains of Klaus' original planet.

Due to *Xenoblade Chronicles 3* being described as "an end to the Klaus saga" before release, as well as prominently featuring locations from both previous games on the box art and in the game itself, there is an expectation that the game will wrap up the overarching story established in previous games in a satisfying manner. However, the small amount of information provided at the end of the game by Queen Nia is a very straightforward and short explanation of events that doesn't change the player's understanding of the world in a meaningful way. It gives enough detail for the player to understand their motivations for the final portion of the game, but nothing more than that. Furthermore, the ending of XC3 is rather self-contained, and doesn't expand on the overarching plot of the series to a meaningful degree. These factors lead to a sense of disappointment within a large portion of the core audience, due to a lack of fulfillment of the setup expectations.

Highlight

The ending. Upon defeating Z so that Origin may be properly activated, the audience is left with the devastating reality of what that truly entails. The splitting of the two worlds results in the separation of the party given that they were from opposing realities. Sena, Taion, and Mio are to be separated from Lanz, Eunie, and Noah. The party splits off into pairs to give their final

goodbyes. While all of these final conversations are bittersweet, none are more so than that of Noah and Mio. Right before their two worlds split, the two share this moment:

Mio:

Guess this is goodbye.

Noah:

Yeah...

Still, even if we're worlds apart,

I swear I won't...

Mio:

I won't let go.

Not ever. I'll always be with you.

Our feelings...forever interlinked.

Mio gently places her hand in Noah's. Noah draws close, raising his hand to hold Mio's cheek. They share what is to be their first and last kiss. While emotional on its own, the poetic reference to interlinking – the process of two characters becoming one to take on their Ouroboros form – is particularly heart wrenching. No matter the distance, no matter how much time may pass, their hearts will always be intertwined.

The time finally comes, and their worlds begin to drift apart. The world around them splits into two planes, slowly drifting away as Noah and Mio let each go.

Yet in that last moment that they wish would last for eternity, they start running for each other. As the plains start to drift faster, they are pulled further apart no matter how hard they try. Both stop as two cliffs drop straight into the ocean. They promise to see each other one day, as they disappear into the distance.

The ending serves as an incredibly emotional capstone to a story of choosing one's own path, despite the costs. The combination of cinematography, music, dialogue, and subtext come together to reiterate the core themes of *Xenoblade Chronicles 3* in a resonant manner.

Critical Reception

Easy Allies - 9.0 / 10

Michael Damiani of Easy Allies says that “Xenoblade Chronicles 3 is a fantastic follow-up that takes some of the best parts of its predecessors, and weaves them into something impressive.” He goes on to discuss the strength of the narrative, the quality of life improvements over previous entries and the excellence of the soundtrack. He ends by stating “As a whole, it stands as a phenomenal RPG with a one-of-a-kind sense of exploration you can’t find anywhere else.”

Destructoid - 9.5 / 10

Chris Carter of Destructoid similarly had a positive impression of Xenoblade Chronicles 3, stating that it’s “arguably the most accessible entry so far, is yet another example of why I’m glad that Monolith Soft is sticking with it.” On Noah and Mio, Chris talks to the strength of their roles stating that “Allowing the heart of the party (Noah and Mio) to serve as off-seers (trained officers who are meant to usher souls into the afterlife after falling in battle) provides for an emphatic, relatable lens through which to take in the story.” He ends by saying “The cast, the weight of the story, and the freedom of party composition are the power trio that won me over.”

IGN - 8 / 10

Travis Northup was more critical of Xenoblade Chronicles 3, discussing how “there are a fair amount of odd game design choices, like its annoying and repetitive combat voice lines and uninteresting cookie-cutter boss fights”. But his overall impressions of the tidal were positive overall. He closes out his critique (and the review) on a more positive note, saying “none of that should deter you from going all-in on another fantastic odyssey in a series that is worthy of a massive amount of your time.”

Lessons

Recontextualization through defamiliarization enables players to engage more critically with your story. When one grows familiar with events, objects, and meaning, they tend to perceive it in a more "automatic" manner. However if one takes something familiar and presents it in an unfamiliar context, a viewer processes what would otherwise be understood in

a second as something new. Applying this concept to storytelling, presenting familiar concepts in novel manners heightens one's ability to truly comprehend a work in all its nuance.

Plot twists require an evolution in the underlying themes or message of a piece to be truly effective. The plot twist in chapter 5 serves to elucidate Noah and N's respective motivations while also acting as a turning point for Noah's character, and the themes of the game as a whole. Recontextualization necessitates a change in meaning. If a twist does not result in a change of the core message, its lasting impact will be diminished regardless of how technically effective it was in execution.

The more specific the contrast between protagonist and antagonist, the more effective it becomes. Conflict is what drives a large portion of modern storytelling, especially in the interactive medium. The closer these two parties are in terms of ideology, motivation, and personality increases the visibility and importance of the differences that *are* there. Singular ideological differences are highlighted even more strongly when the two parties share multiple similarities, rather than existing as polar opposites. The small core differences between Noah and N serves as a wonderful showcase for this, and makes N's tragedies all the more striking.

Summation

Xenoblade Chronicles 3 is a very effective example of the importance of context. Through its usage of defamiliarization, many fundamental aspects of life are brought to player's attention. Through its effectively utilized plot twists, the story and its themes go through an evolution in a manner that is both shocking and long lasting. Finally, through the relationship between N and Noah, XC3 showcases how much more impactful the conflict between protagonist and antagonist can be by *reducing* their core differences.

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