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Game Narrative Review

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Your name (one name, please): Richard Dansky
Your school: Dansky U
Your email: Richard@yahoo.com
Year you submitted this review: 2008

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Game Title: Dynasty Warriors V
Platform: PS2
Genre: 3rd Person Action/Button-masher
Release Date: March 29, 2005
Developer: Omega Force
Publisher: Koei
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: uncertain

Overview

Dynasty Warriors V, like all of the games in the series, is based on the traditional Chinese epic The Romance of the Three Kingdoms, which covers the epic struggles to unify China in the wake of the collapse of the Han Dynasty. It solves the issue of trying to work such a massive narrative into a game by breaking it up into short character campaigns. These campaigns then correspond with the characters' narrative arcs in the source material.

Each playable character has their own story arc, advanced through cut scenes and a "reward" closing cinematic that provides a happy ending for each character. In this, it differs from the source material – most of the playable characters end up dead – but it works within the game's conceit.

Characters

The list of characters, playable and non, within Dynasty Warriors V would run several pages. They are broken up into the three historical factions of the Three Kingdoms period (Wu, Wei, and Shu), along with a fourth "Other" faction to cover rebels, oddballs, lingering remnants of the Han dynasty, and so forth. At first, all of the factions are banded together against the threat of the "Yellow Turban" Rebellion, but as the game progresses, the factions separate and alternately war on or ally with one another in the struggle to unify China. The stories of the individual characters are woven through this larger arc, showing how individual characters' actions and traits forged the destiny of an

empire.

That being said, several characters do stand out from among the nearly fifty playable ones in the game. These are emphasized with longer campaigns, more appearances in cut scenes, and references from other characters. Among the key characters are:

- **Cao Cao** – The charismatic but unsympathetic leader of the Wu faction, he wields a sword and fights with short, controlled strokes. Dressed in rich but not overly ornate garb, he speaks constantly of his ambition to unify the Three Kingdoms. He speaks disdainfully of his rivals and is arrogant in his dealings with most, but his saving grace is that he shows respect for those who operate under a stricter code of honor than he does.
- **Lu Bu** – The “Beast” is the most terrifying figure in the game, from the massive spear he carries to the insect-like attachments to his helmet that trail out behind him. He also owns the only horse to be called out by name in the entire game, emphasizing it and his unique qualities. Lu Bu’s introduction actually comes in some of the other playable campaigns, where he is first introduced in a cut scene where he scatters troops friendly to the player and a warning from an NPC that he is too dangerous to fight. His gruff voice and crude dialogue reinforce that he is a warrior at heart, so by the time the player is introduced to him as a playable character, Lu Bu is already understood as a killing machine.
- **Zhuge Liang** – The “Sleeping Dragon” is a master strategist, and as such, is never shown fighting. Instead, he is a constant presence throughout the Shu storyline, popping up in all of the other characters’ storylines to offer stratagems, give orders, and demonstrate his wisdom. Garbed in white and bearing a councilor’s fan as opposed to a weapon, Zhuge Liang is instantly understood as a cerebral character. When exercising his powers in battle, he literally floats above the fray. His dialogue is always measured, courteous, and soft, even in the midst of combat, appropriate for a character whose goal is to serve as the architect of another man’s dream of peace.
- **Sun Quan** – The third leader of the Wu faction, Sun Quan is overtly heroic, active, and noble. This is reflected in his garb, which features tiger fur as well as a look at his heroic musculature. Sun Quan is very much beloved by his subjects, and as such the character is designed to make him seem accessible - no hat or helmet, and he is constantly taking advice from his subjects and thanking them for their wisdom. His goodness and nobility are reinforced by the other characters of the Wu faction, who constantly reference it, and their pleasure at serving under his command.

Breakdown

Summarizing the narrative elements of Dynasty Warriors V is near-impossible, considering the cast and narrative scope of the game. As the player hacks and slashes their way through the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, the story - or a soft-pedaled

version of it - is fed to the player in the form of a massive series of short campaigns, each of which follows one character's arc through the larger storyline. Each of these ties into the main narrative flow and intersects with those of other characters. The storyline is given to the player in various formats: mission briefings, cut scenes before, during and after each mission, and in-mission events that affect gameplay as well as advancing the narrative. As the Three Kingdoms of Wu, Wei and Shu go to war to unify post-Han China under their rule, the various character campaigns illustrate the same sequence of events from multiple perspectives, providing a deeper and richer story element than one would expect from a game of this sort. And since so many characters bob in and out of the narrative, the story ends up supporting the campaign structure by providing a rationale for short, character-driven campaigns and unlockable new characters, all of whom are brought onto the scene as NPCs in previously played character arcs.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of the game narrative is its sheer breadth. While any of the individual elements may have their weaknesses, the fact remains that the game as a whole contains a narrative of staggering complexity if one is to count up all the alliances, double-crosses, stratagems and so forth. The fact that Dynasty Warriors V can hold so much plot and deliver it to the player while still coming across as a button-masher is an impressive feat indeed.

Unsuccessful Element

With such a large cast of characters and so little relative screen time available for each, the developers decided that the best way to make characters stand out was by giving them exaggerated and at times offensive portrayals. These characterizations are so over the top that they're distracting from the game. Among the worst offenders: overweight bumpkin Xu Zhu, gay stereotype Zhang He, and indescribably effusive Zhang Jiao. The end result is that the dialogue for these characters (and characters like them) ranges from giggle-worthy to insulting, and as a result actively works against the player fantasy that the game offers.

Highlight

The best moment in the game comes in a cut scene before an escort mission, the only one of its type in the game. On the surface, the cut scene is a sparring match between the warriors Guan Yu and Xiahou Dun with their lord Cao Cao in attendance. What could be a mere hack-and-slash exercise instead is presented as understated and slyly humorous, from Guan Yu's eye-rolling expression as he blocks his opponent's sword strike at his back to the bisected statue in the foreground that quietly falls apart after the dueling warriors have sliced it in two. This cut scene, better than any other, sets up the appeal of three of the major characters of the game, and does so without going over the top.

Critical Reception

The critical reception to the title was mixed, with overall scores in the mid to high 60s at Metacritic. Reviews basically took the tack of “If this is what you like, you'll love this game because there's an awful lot of it.”

IGN gave the game a 77, stating “Just be warned that this is one long, long fight and even though the game may be epic it would be nicer if it was not such a gigantic story that’s slow to progress”, while Computer Games magazine went with an 80 and a note that “What's truly satisfying is these games make history entertaining.” Gamespot was less complimentary, with a note that “Odds are you'll simply grow tired of grinding through the same battles yet again, with only a half-baked storyline to keep you interested.” Negative reviews tended to avoid the narrative elements and focus on the lack of innovation in the gameplay from previous iterations of the series and the game’s technological limitations.

Lessons

- In a game with lots of characters, strong and effective differentiation is key. Furthermore, there are more effective ways to do this than with resorting to broad stereotype.
- There are more ways to support character than with just dialogue. Weapon choice, animations, garb, and mention by other characters all serve to build up a characterization outside of a character’s dialogue.
- Introducing a playable character through cut scenes and NPC roles can be a strong way to have a ready-built characterization for players to slip into.

Summation

Ultimately, Dynasty Warriors V may seem an odd choice for an examination of its narrative and writing. As a button-masher, it would seem to have less use for writing than most. Closer examination reveals, however, that the game cleverly uses writing structures as the support framework for its campaign structure, and to use unique characterization of its wide range of playable avatars as a strong element in encouraging replayability. The wide range of storylines and characters also leads to greater player customization, as odds are good you’re going to find a favorite character to play when you’ve got forty-eight to choose from. In other words, strong story and character are useful and important, even in the most unlikely of places.