Game Narrative Review

====================

Game Title: *Total War: Shogun 2*
Platform: PC
Genre: Strategy
Release Date: March 15th, 2011
Developer: The Creative Assembly
Publisher: SEGA
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Mike Brunton (Writer) / Mike Simpson (Creative Director)
Author of this review: Campbell Crapsey
School: The Guildhall at Southern Methodist University

Overview

Total War: Shogun 2 delivers deep narrative in a unique fashion, allowing the player to reenact and reimagine Japanese feudal history around the 16th century. Everything from the campaign map visuals, menu screens, character skills, military units, to the historical choices empowers the game with vibrant Japanese themes. This turn-based strategy game challenges the player with difficult decisions and hours of gameplay in a way that enhances the player-driven story. The game narrative evolves from the player's actions just as often as it conveys an independent story to the player.

The special quality to the narrative in Shogun 2 stems from the way scripted events in the game serve as trail markers, but the player's actions and choices throughout the game fill in the trail itself. The Creative Assembly succeeded in presenting a story that captures the essence of Japanese feudal war, but that unfolds according to the player's vision for their faction.

Characters

Part of the power of Shogun 2's narration revolves around the inspired way in which they treat their "characters." While there are many different units present in the game, ranging from assassins to generals, the true characters in Shogun 2 are the factions. Each faction's starting location, racial bonuses, and initial strength dramatically alter the player's play style. A strategy that works well with one faction fails utterly with another. The narrative delivered through each of these characters represents one of the true strengths of the writing in Shogun 2. Historical events connect the story in Shogun 2, but the true narrative emerges from the player's unique play style and how they choose to react to a challenge.

Each faction differs so completely from every other that the player quickly learns to play in a manner consistent with the historical "personality" of their faction. By placing the player in the driver seat of the story the writers and designers deliver narrative in a far more impactful manner.

- **Chosokabe** – The Chosokabe faction starts on one of the smaller islands in southern Japan. Their position strongly influences their military expansion and reinforces a largely defensive style of play. The only way in which the Chosokabe can expand onto the mainland is to build up and then surge out en masse. The narrative for the Chosokabe quickly becomes one of resisting the major players on the mainland in a desperate attempt to hold onto territorial conquests.
- **Date** – The Date faction resides in the far northern provinces of Japan. The starting territory and early conquests are largely devoid of useful materials for building or warfare. As such, the Date struggle to survive for the early part of the game and must travel long distances to attack enemies. By the time the Date achieve northern dominance, the central and southern factions are generally more advanced and possess larger armies. This leads the player to employ highly specialized agents to undermine their enemies and to use well-trained samurai in battle to defeat larger enemy forces. The Date player often experiences the Shogun 2 story from the perspective of constantly playing catch-up with the powerful central factions.
- **Hojo** – The Hojo are one of the more unique factions in Shogun 2 because they tap into the civic aspect of the game more than any other. The Hojo are master builders and enjoy useful bonuses to their "Zen" research queue, which allows the player to effectively manage their agents and buildings. A typical Hojo narrative revolves around the experience of creating a powerful dynasty built upon fully upgraded castles and strong religious/authority presence while resisting wave after wave of enemy attackers.
- **Mori** – The Mori are one of the westernmost factions in the game and enjoy dominant naval bonuses. This encourages the player to create a strong navy that attacks enemy factions all around Japan. The Mori narrative is one of manipulating trade and alliances to maximum effect and then using a powerful navy as a first-strike weapon against distant adversaries.
- **Oda** – The Oda are located in central Japan and as such some of the most aggressive factions surround them. More than any other faction, the Oda must constantly strive to improve and enlarge their military at the cost of infrastructure. The player experience with the Oda represents the most combative and aggressive story of feudal Japan.
- **Shimazu** – The Shimazu are the southernmost faction and as such start with a commanding position to expand across fertile territories. This faction relies on a strong military and good tax management to create a powerful base from which to conquer the rest of the island nation.
- **Takeda** – The Takeda are unusual because their faction emphasis rests on the use of cavalry. Almost all other factions rely primarily on foot troops, but the Takeda player often fields armies based heavily on cavalry units. If the player can emerge from the early rounds of the game with a strong position, then they can rampage

through enemy territories very quickly due to the increased range of cavalry units. The emergent narrative almost takes on a nomadic steppe-warrior theme, with powerful raids to capture and loot enemy provinces but without much ability to hold them against focused enemy forces.

- **Tokugama** – The Tokugama, like the Hojo, are one of the more unique factions in the game. The strength of the Tokugama clan comes from their incredible agent bonuses and bargaining power. Situated between two of the most threatening factions in the game, the Tokugama must fight off the Oda and the Takeda using special agents and negotiation. The player weaves a story of deceit and manipulation in order to take control of central Japan.
- **Uesugi** – The Uesugi faction focuses heavily on religion and manipulating it to undermine enemy factions. Not only are Uesugi religious agents more powerful than those of any other faction, but the Uesugi can also recruit specialized religious zealot warriors to fight the enemy. This faction presents the player with the role of playing as a Buddhist missionary to undermine enemy factions.
- **Christian Traders** – Christian Traders are not a playable faction in Shogun 2, but deserve mention because of the unique opportunity they provide the player throughout the game. In keeping with Japanese history, the writers at the Creative Assembly included a Christian faction that would offer improved weapons (all based on gunpowder advances from the West) in return for increased exposure to Christianity. The player's empire eventually converts to Christianity if the player opens up enough trade with the Christians which results in riots and increased unhappiness across all the player's provinces.

Breakdown

The story in Shogun 2 is loosely constrained by historical events and choices that the player must make. However, within that framework the player is free to conduct themselves as daimyo (leader) of their faction in whatever manner they see fit. By allowing the player to create their own story, the writers deliver a very impactful narrative. The player gets the feeling that they are the cause of much of the story and they also create a wholly unique experience for themselves. The player's emotional investment in the story comes from that unique experience, because everything they do in the game adds to their personal legend. The gameplay allows the writers to gently direct the player towards a particular experience in order to deliver impactful narrative. The effective use of directed narrative and player choice enhances the quality of the game.

Shogun 2 delivers narrative within a constrained framework that guides the player to play as a Japanese daimyo. This method of delivery empowers the player to act as they see fit while still giving the writers control of the direction and tone of the story. There are several tools that the writers used to accomplish this task, all of which resemble trail markers along a path to guide the player. The use of these markers takes several forms, including historical events, historical relationships, and finally earned abilities.

Historical events are scripted events within the game that occur for all players and help create the narrative of a war-torn feudal Japan. The player must react to these events to shape their own story. The story can seemingly differ wildly depending on the player's

decision, which convinces the player that they are writing their own narrative as they play. The reality is that these historical events are actually the easiest tool for the writers to deliver planned narration at times of their choosing. The writers use the historical events to connect all players back to a common story before giving them the freedom to branch out again. There are only ever two possible outcomes from a historical event which simplifies the writer's task when creating the story. Those outcomes give modifiers to the player's characters and faction which affect the success of their play-style in turn. An example of a scripted event is the Christian trader Black Ship that regularly appears along the Mori coastline during the game. The ship travels back and forth between the mainland and Japan with goods. Should the player capture the Black Ship then they gain control over the most powerful naval unit in the game. From the writing perspective, the Black Ship serves as a tool for narrative because the player's choices put them at odds with the Christian factions or the Buddhist factions at the same time as their navy either grows to include a powerful unit or allows the Christian traders unopposed trading access.

Another tool that directs the narrative is the starting historical relationships between the player, other factions, and the Shogunate. Allies are incredibly useful in Shogun 2 and exceedingly difficult to obtain mid game. Consequently, the writers guide the player in a direction and play style based on the initial conditions they set for each faction. For example, the Date start with one already contested territory in an area of Japan that does not possess ample resources. The Date narrative always revolves around overcoming adversity in remote Japan in order to rise to power. However, the Tokugama narrative differs wildly from that of the Date. The majority of the Tokugama experience revolves around manipulating the superior factions around them to fight wars on behalf of the Tokugama. The Creative Assembly used this faction to create a story that always follows the path of intrigue and cunning over military superiority. In addition, the writers affect the pacing of the game by situating enemy factions near the player that are actually in allegiance with the Shogunate. If the player goes to war with an ally of the Shogunate, then they quickly end up at war with large portions of Japan. At some point, this event always occurs, but the writing strength comes from the flexibility of the narrative because the event can occur early, mid, or late game with a different level of risk to the player depending on their geographical situation and starting faction.

Not only did the Creative Assembly build the narration based on starting conditions that the player must overcome, but they also created earned abilities that allow the narrative to evolve in response to the player's actions. Just as crossing trail markers signify several overlapping paths, several storylines comprise the overall narrative in Shogun 2. The player's actions and choices earn reputation and abilities for their characters and faction. Those traits change the way other factions respond to the player over time. As an example, factions are wary of trusting aggressive militaries or factions that serve a dishonorable daimyo. In keeping with the historical religious relationships, a player achieves greater success when dealing with factions that resemble the player-faction's own culture and religion. Thus, the writers deliver the same story of Christian conflict and conversion no matter what faction the player starts with, according to their religious choices. In addition, the notion of honor and respect become incredibly important when dealing with other factions, which reinforces the historical importance for each Daimyo to use Bushido to their advantage. A dishonest series of actions may

cost the player an alliance whereas giving aid to an embattled ally earns the player the respect of all of Japan. These specific storylines react to the player's choices and weave together to form the overall guided narrative.

These narrative elements combine to deliver a powerful story to the player that the player has an important role in shaping. The narrative takes advantage of the power of video games to provide an interactive experience that seems unique to each player. Because the writers structured the narrative in a trail marker format with gaps between each event and choice, the gameplay serves to connect the story, which provides a high level of replayability and immersion. That level of player immersion represents a huge success for the writing team because they built a game that delivers detailed narrative while still offering incredible flexibility. Shogun 2 represents an important take on narration in games because it provides the flexible gameplay that makes the medium great while telling a story to the player that brings life to each character, faction, and the game world as a whole.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of the story must be the effect that each faction plays out as a different character in the game. The Creative Assembly did an amazing job of balancing each faction's location, resources, and abilities to encourage the player to reenact that faction's historical attitude and temperament. Militaristic and aggressive factions like the Oda and the Takeda dominate if allowed to build up strong militaries, while factions like the Date and Chosokabe play more like outsiders attempting to break in. Each faction truly represents its own character and the player walks away with a dramatically different experience each play-through due to that great balance.

Unsuccessful Element

One of the least successful elements in Shogun 2 is the implementation of religion, especially as it relates to the Christians. Historically, once a daimyo or other Japanese leader ingratiated themselves with Christian traders they obtained incredible weapons, support, and materials. While Shogun 2 does a great job of demonstrating that interaction, they failed to emphasize the true gulf in power between gunpowder firearms and traditional samurai warfare. In the game, a Buddhist or Ikko-Ikki player can win a battle against a large Christian-armed enemy by using traditional attacks. In reality, drilled Ashigaru (peasants) would slaughter oncoming samurai if they possessed firearms. That difference in weaponry was one of the causes of the end of the Samurai and the rise of the peasantry.

Highlight

The highlight in Shogun 2 arrives about around midway through the game. By mid-game the player's agents have reached an experienced level and are capable of implementing powerful abilities. In addition, the player has had time to build up their economy using the tools that they see fit, such as taxation, trading, or looting. Armies are potentially

powerful enough to expand across much of the country. The importance of all of this is that the player begins to live their fantasy using the tools in the game to carry out their wishes.

The first time the player uses coordinated agents, armies, and diplomacy to full effect in order to further their faction's influence represents a powerful storytelling moment. The player no longer solely reacts to the story signposts laid out before them, but instead begins to act upon the world and shape it. The narrative and gameplay still interact in the same manner, but now the player creates their own story while the writing reinforces that imagination.

Critical Reception

The overall critical reception to Total War: Shogun 2 was overwhelmingly positive, with a combined metacritic score of 90%. Two of the positive reviews came from G4tv.com and IGN. G4tv.com gave Shogun 2 a full 5/5 and took time to praise the Creative Assembly's attention to every detail and the historical accuracy of the period while still releasing an "addictive" product (Bryan Stratton). In comparison, IGN went on to give Shogun 2 a 9/10 (classified as "Amazing"). The review praises the "staggering attention to detail" and the welcomed simplicity of the world and its impactful delivery (Charles Onyett).

Lessons

- Dynamic story provides a more meaningful gaming experience for the player
- Allow the player to tell their own story within the game's narrative framework
- Dialogue is not necessary to tell a great story
- Plot does not always have to be what the writer tells the player. Sometimes the player creates the plot. That is the power of video games over other mediums.

Summation

Total War: Shogun 2 delivers an incredible story through refined narrative. By using historical events and themes as gentle guidelines to direct the player's experience, The Creative Assembly enhances their storytelling delivery by encouraging the player to create their own story within the Shogun 2 narrative framework. The player's personal story evolves from their choice of faction, play-style, and reaction to the world events. That personal experience forms a powerful connection between the player and the narrative. The importance of Shogun 2 as an example of excellence-in-storytelling cannot be overstated because the video game industry can learn an enormous amount about how to tell meaningful stories by letting the player create their own space within the game instead of dictating the entire story to the player.