Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Middle Earth: Shadow of Mordor

Platform: PC, Xbox 360 and One, Playstation 3 and 4

Genre: Action Role-playing

Release Date: September 30th (Current Gen USA), November 18 (Last Gen USA)

Developer: Monolith Productions

Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Christian Cantamessa, Based on the novels by JRR Tolkien

Overview

In the land of Mordor where the Shadows lie, a long-dead Elven wraith pairs up with a resurrected Ranger of Gondor to exact spectral vengeance on the Lord of the Rings himself. *Middle Earth: Shadow of Mordor* combines gameplay elements from several successful modern titles with its own homebrewed dynamic content generator to deliver an emergent narrative that brings life and character to literature's most famous barren wasteland, without removing the words 'barren' or 'wasteland' from the descriptor. The darkest, grittiest and goriest representation of Tolkien's works yet, *Shadow* relies on traditional lore, modern innovation[7] and more than a little randomization to make the brutalization of Orcs (or Uruks to be more precise) personal, satisfying and thematically pleasing.

Though not without its flaws, *Shadow of Mordor* provides a peek into the prospective future - a future where dynamically generated content is fully integrated into game narratives to create a brand new, personalized storytelling media. *Shadow*'s Nemesis System might just end up being the biggest proof of concept for emergent narrative design done well to date.

Characters

- **Talion** – A Ranger of Gondor, brought back to life following the murder of him and his family by the Black Hand of Sauron, Talion serves as the human-component of the player character and protagonist of the *Shadow of Mordor*. His quest for vengeance and justice against the Dark Lord encompasses the main narrative of the game and lends purpose to the otherwise mindless massacre of Mordor's Orcish residents. Personality-wise, Talion is somber, serious and focused, though not above a bit of sarcasm from time to time. Formerly a loving father and husband, Talion's deep affection for his family turned to hatred for their murderers after he witnessed, first-hand, their brutally painful deaths. Despite his hatred of Sauron's forces, Talion is not against showing empathy for his foes, even though this empathy does little to dull his blade. While his characteristics and mannerisms may be described as somewhat 'generic' as far as video game personalities go, it is the unique nature of his existence that truly makes him an alluring audience avatar. Symbiotically bound to the Elven Wraith, Celebrimbor, Talion is 'banished from death'[8] [9] and unable to rest no matter how many times he falls in battle. This functional immortality makes death a core mechanic of the game and ultimately ends up being the main driving force behind *Shadow's* Nemesis system.

- **Celebrimbor/The Wraith**– Ghastly, vengeful, and rotting, the playable Wraith is a mere shadow of his glorious, living self. Once known throughout Middle-Earth

as the greatest Smith of his Age, Celebrimbor of Eregoin forged the Rings of Power at the behest of Annatar, a beautiful Elven emissary of the Valar. In truth 'Annatar' was merely an alter ego of the Dark Lord Sauron, who, in secret, forged the One Ring to corrupt and rule over all of Celebrimbor's handiwork. Sensing 'Annatar's' betrayal too late, Celebrimbor attempted to hide the Rings of Power and to wrest control of the One Ring away from its Black Master. His defiance was short-lived, however, as the One Ring turned against the Elf Lord, leading to the painfully drawn out deaths of Celebrimbor and everything he held dear in the world. Now bound to the undead body of the human Talion, the wrathful spirit of Eregoin's last prince finally has the chance for vengeance. In many ways Celebrimbor is both a contrast and an exaggeration of his Gondorian 'companion'. While Talion reserves some empathy even towards those he hates, Celebrimbor is thoroughly beyond compassion. Where the Ranger looks for a way to minimize casualties, the Wraith favors a more direct, destructive approach. Finally, while the two share a body and co-operate for most of the game, Celebrimbor's enigmatic and manipulative personality keep their personal motives from aligning [10]. Does Celebrimbor merely want to avenge his family, as he keeps telling Talion? Or does the Elven Wraith's shattered visage hide more sinister schemes than he is letting on?

- **Sauron** – The Lord of the Rings himself, *Shadow of Mordor's* version of the iconic character is a combination of his literary counterpart mixed in with the aesthetics of Peter Jackson's film adaptation. While his on-screen presence is kept to a minimum, the Dark Lord is no less menacing here than any of his other

incarnations. Part of the reason is that Sauron in the game is portrayed as more of a diabolically intelligent evil mastermind than as an ironclad, unstoppable brute: someone who pulls every string, sets up every evil machination while remaining unseen himself. Sauron's appearance as the deceitful 'Annatar', although surprising to many movie fans, is completely canon in Tolkien's Legendarium. Indeed, one can almost say that *Shadow*'s Sauron is closer to what Tolkien had in mind than Jackson's Flaming Eye [6].

- **Your Nemeses** – Unique, unpredictable, and unforgiving, these powerful Orc warriors each have a randomized set of strengths, weaknesses and personality traits that combine to make them formidable opponents for Talion and Celebrimbor. Some are mighty warriors, some crafty archers. Yet others are bold leaders of Uruks, inspiring their dark brethren into a fighting frenzy. These Captains of Orckind are in a perpetual state of competition with their equally unforgiving rivals for a chance to rise up Mordor's crude military hierarchy. Woe betide the player should they fall to their Nemeses' wicked blades. Any Uruk bold enough to take the Gravewalker's head will find themselves soaring up the chain of command, gaining strengths, losing weaknesses and becoming more powerful overall. Thanks to the Nemesis System, each Orcish Captain remembers their last encounter with the Talion. Most of them will be more than happy to remind the Ranger too, while attempting to disembowel him of course!

Breakdown

To understand the uniqueness of *Shadow*'s narrative, one must take a look at the three major types of narrative structures most commonly seen in video games : embedded, environmental and emergent[5]. Traditionally, embedded narratives have been the most prevalent in the games industry. These can be thought of as stories, scenarios and dialogues scripted or 'embedded' into the game by the developer's themselves. Players find themselves becoming the audience to stories written by the game's creators and the lines between cinema and interactive digital media grow blurry. Pre-rendered cut-scenes, cinematics and linear level progression can be seen as a few prime mechanics used in this approach to game narrative [2].

Though this method of delivering a story-driven experience has been done very well by some games and not so well by others, it often ends up underutilizing video games' primary strength - their interactivity and versatility. Purely in terms of delivering an embedded narrative, *Shadow of Mordor's* story has been derided as somewhat average by critics[10]. But this does not, in any way, mean that *Shadow*'s scripted storyline is uninspired or uninteresting.

Facing the monumental task of adapting not just any book series but one of literature's most thoroughly discussed and dissected tomes, *Shadow* had the Herculean task of not only bringing forth Tolkien's core themes of duality, parallelism, contrast and opposition[11] into an interactive media but also of doing it in such a way as to

accommodate solid gameplay. Despite initial public apprehension and some retooling of established lore, most people can agree that *Shadow* succeeded on both counts.

Shadow of Mordor's player character can be thought of as an embodiment of many of Tolkien's themes. The player avatar's nature of existence as a merger between the humble, steadfast human ranger Talion and the haughty, vengeful, Elf-wraith Celebrimbor embodies both Tolkien's ideals about dualism while also representing his fondness for drawing parallels in his extensive Legendarium. Celebrimbor's enigmatic charisma heavily contrasts Talion's straightforward sincerity, drawing yet again on Tolkien's depiction of morality and his deep distrust of individuals unwilling to open up at all.

From a gameplay standpoint, Celebrimbor and Talion's disparate personalities easily explain the dissonance and sudden personality shifts shown by players in many role-playing games. A shift from being a stealth-based assassin to a furious berserker may simply happen because the player gets bored of one particular playstyle. But from the perspective of in-game lore, the change can be explained as the wrathful Celebrimbor gaining more control over their shared body.

The use of Celebrimbor himself as a major character is, in itself, a brilliant move on the game writers' part. Instead of using a self-insert, original character who is disproportionately important to the setting's plot, Monolith chose to bring in an established character whose back-story was still vague enough to allow quite a bit of embellishing.

The environmental narrative of *Shadow* also does an amazing job simply by the virtue of the detail that went into some of the object/collectible placements. Examining

the 'memory point' on an old iron shield may reveal the rather haughty personality of its former owner, but finding the shield itself in a Graug's lair speaks volumes about the shield bearer's gruesome fate.

However, the true star of the game is, without a doubt, the **emergent** component of the narrative. *Shadow's* Nemesis System is said to 'provides a clearer road map for the next generation of AAA games than anything that has come previously' [3] and this is especially true for the art of in-game storytelling. The randomly generated Orc captains do not just have a hodgepodge of the same six personalities picked in random out of a queue. On the contrary, the sheer amount of variables that define each individual Uruk make running into two identical ones nigh impossible. And that is before factoring in their personal relationships with Talion.

For most gamers, no two in-game experiences will be identical. Every single time a player encounters an in-game obstacle he or she will employ a slightly different approach (if possible) to overcome it. The Nemesis System doesn't just embrace this fact to expand gameplay. It actively makes the diversity of player choices a narrative medium. *Shadow of Mordor* is definitely a game that makes full use video games' interactivity to tell a story.

Strongest Element

As mentioned above, the **emergent narrative** of *Shadow* is its greatest strength. The sheer number of personalities that can be spontaneously generated by the Nemesis System, coupled with the game's perfect balance of combat difficulty, make every player's experience different. Every foe Talion faces is unique and the use of Orcs, one of the most stereotypical examples of 'bland enemy race characters', as the focal point of

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the Nemesis System innovates the 'mindless enemy' archetype while also bringing depth to a game which would have otherwise been just about massacring enemies. This depiction of Orcish psychology is done in such a way so as to not be in conflict with Tolkien's established behavior patterns for these creatures. The Nemesis System makes Uruks interesting without using the clichéd 'hidden depths' trope or making them overly sympathetic.

Unsuccessful Element

Despite being fairly intriguing, the **embedded narrative** of *Shadow* is definitely its weakest element, especially when compared to the quality of its emergent narrative. One of the main reasons for this is that the pre-scripted storyline simply fails to keep up with the pace and tone of the narrative created by the Nemesis System. The most egregious example of this is when the main storyline fails to take into account, or outright undervalues, the player's accomplishments when free-roaming. A lot of this is understandable as making the primary storyline reflect every choice made in the non-scripted parts of the game is unfeasible. But to expect Talion, or the player, to be afraid of a specific Orcish captain when he has murdered dozens of his brethren seems a bit far-fetched. The low impact the Nemesis System has on the final storyline mission is also an indicator of the embedded narrative's failure to keep up. The last boss fight especially stands out as a prime example of a missed opportunity, being both anti-climactic and non-conducive to the game's core experience [7]. Much of this could have been avoided if the number of Uruks you had under your control affected the final boss fight in some way.

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Highlight

Undoubtedly, the unique, randomized experiences provided by the Nemesis System are the true narrative highlights of the game. Urzog the Beastmaster was my personal Nemesis. A lowly Orc peon who managed to get a lucky hit in during a chaotic melee, Urzog's rise to power was unprecedented. A slew of unsuccessful assassination attempts and timely interventions by other Uruk captains saw the Beastmaster soar through Sauron's Black Ranks until his Power level was maxed out. Finally, after some careful planning, I managed to separate the Beastmaster from the rest of his companions and took him down in an extended, bloody duel. A sense of accomplishment, tempered with an inexplicable sorrow, engulfed me and I felt invulnerable. I thought myself the strongest warrior in all of Mordor while, subconsciously, wishing the Beastmaster would come back to challenge me once more. One morning, as I snuck through an Orcish stronghold, not too long after Urzog's death I spied a gang of Uruk's huddled around a campfire. Instead of sneaking around it, I, overconfident after vanquishing my nemesis, attempted to stab the largest orc in the group from behind. Imagine my surprise when the Uruk not only managed to stop my assassination attempt, but also threw me away towards the nearest wall effortlessly. As I got back on my feet and charged the insolent Uruk, I found myself looking into the battered, mangled face of the Beastmaster himself! Through Sauron's sorcery or Orcish medicine, Urzog had come back from the precipice of death. And he was angry. The spontaneous, seamless way in which this event was integrated into the game, coupled with the extremely appropriate response my rival threw at my face cemented the narrative potential of the Nemesis System for me.

Critical Reception

With a Metascore aggregate of 84[12] and a GameRankings score of 86.7% [13], *Shadow of Mordor* has been received quite well by critics and users alike. As expected, the Nemesis System was widely praised as being both innovative and bringing personality to the setting [6]. The combat and navigation, although previously criticized for borrowing heavily from pre-existing franchises, manages to more than hold its own and positively affect the game's core experience [1].

While several critics criticize the main storyline for being average [6], it is almost unanimously agreed upon that the game provides the necessary tools for players to create their own, deep, emergent narratives [3].

Lessons

- **Story does not equal narrative**: Simply put, a story deals with a sequence of events whereas a narrative handles how these events unfolded. *Shadow of Mordor* is the perfect example of a game with a decent story but an extremely well thought out and innovative narrative system. The unique situations and characters experienced by the players make them create their own narratives – narratives that, in most cases, completely overshadow the scripted overarching plotline of the game.

- **Emergent Narratives can hold their own:** With the amount of praise *Shadow* is getting for its Nemesis System it is pretty clear that emergent narratives are gradually becoming more mainstream. The quality of *Shadow's* spontaneous random content generator and enemy AI prove that video game stories don't have

to be pre-scripted or embedded at all, if need be. Emergence also greatly complements good world building by allowing players to take in lore at their own pace, without having it forced upon them as exposition.

- **Source material need not be completely discarded to make room for mechanics:** Although Shadow took a few liberties from Tolkien's Legendarium when shaping their setting; they stayed surprisingly close to the source material – closer than many other games in the series that claim to be otherwise. Despite this, the designers managed to utilize the strength of Tolkien's literature to create an immersive, rich world while filling up blanks in JRRT's history to create amazing original content. The symbiosis between established and original content was essential to constructing the game's feel.

Summation

'Middle Earth: Shadow of Mordor tells a good story but provides tools to tell even better tales' [3]

I believe *Shadow* not only shows us some of the best modern day narrative design but also the future. It shows us just what game narrative may evolve into one day. If the Nemesis System is any indication, that future will be glorious.

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