

Game Narrative Review

Game Title: Homefront

Platform: PC, Xbox 360, Playstation 3, OnLive

Genre: First-Person Shooter

Release Date: March 15, 2011

Developer: Kaos Studios

Publisher: THQ

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: John Milius (Game Writer), Chris Cross (Principal Designer, Single-Player Lead), Rex Dickson (Senior Designer, Single-player Level Lead), C.J. Kershner (Associate Designer, Writing, QA), Zachary Wilson (Senior Designer, Single-player/Writing/Backstory), Adam Bullied (Senior Designer, Backstory), Tae Kim (Story & Creative Consultant)

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Overview

Homefront depicts part of a fictional war between North Korea and the United States. Prior to the events of the game, North Korea unites with South Korea under the leadership of Kim-Jong Il and subsequently forges the Greater Korean Republic from many Asian countries. At the same time, a series of global events erodes the power, wealth, and population of the United States as well as Europe. Soon thereafter, the Greater Korean Republic initiates a war with the diminished United States using a nuclear EMP burst that devastates the American power grid.

Taking place shortly after the Greater Korean Republic has gained control of all of the United States west of the Mississippi, the game details the forceful drafting of Robert Jacobs into the American Resistance. As a trained pilot, the resistance has placed Jacobs and other pilots like him at the center of a resistance plan to fight back against the invasion.

Characters

The cast of Homefront contains a diverse cast of characters chosen to represent the traits of their respective countries and to comment uniquely upon the events of the game. The game in turn uses the premise to reflect upon how such horrific and devastating events can and will affect individuals and people as a whole. Through a sometimes harshly blunt lens, Homefront presents the cast as people driven by the purpose of their current situation and yet despite these strong defined traits, how the emotions of war reduce these

same people into faceless and nameless characters. Most characters are strongly defined not by their past but by their current situation and role.

- **Robert Jacobs** – The player avatar, Jacobs remains a silent protagonist throughout the entirety of the game. His helicopter pilot training draws Jacobs into a Resistance plan to aid what remains of the US military. As a result and contrary to many protagonists, the game treats Jacobs more as a follower and pawn within the grand scheme of things.
- **Conner Morgan** – A high-ranking figure in the Montrose resistance cell, Conner acts as the heroic lead within the story. Full of anger and sometimes arrogance while driven by blind purposefulness, Conner comes from the same mold as the classical hero; powerful and larger-than-life yet possessing fatal flaws. The story of Homefront is as much his heroic journey as it is the player's journey.
- **Rianna** – As the only female protagonist, Rianna serves as an emotional foil to Conner and the player. Whereas Conner approaches the war from a perspective of a leader and a nation, Rianna views the war from an individual and humanitarian approach. Rianna expresses disgust and distain at some of the actions forced upon her or others by the war.
- **Hopper Lee** – Among the Montrose resistance cell, Hopper acts as the technical expert. Though his skills are an important part of the resistance, his Korean American ethnicity forms the basis of some of the strongest moments in the game. Compared to the other resistance members, Hopper remains calm and collected throughout the game. This demeanor, however, hides a very real fear of the anti-Asian sentiment among portions of the American populace and a need to prove his loyalty as an American.
- **Boone Karlson** – The leader of the Montrose resistance cell, Boone develops the plan that draws Jacobs into the Resistance. An older and wiser man, by the start of the game, Boone has become a father figure and figurehead of the Resistance. The close connection he forges with the other Resistance members and his eventual death casts him as a classical mentor in Conner's heroic journey.

The minor characters develop different reactions and situations that occur during war as experienced by non-heroic people. Often, their personal stories are as tragic as the protagonists, yet overlooked in the greater scheme of things.

- **Ben Walker, the Voice of Freedom** – As the man behind the American guerilla radio broadcaster the Voice of Freedom, Ben Walker has no physical presence within the game. Instead, his voice and role serves as homage to wartime propaganda personalities such as Tokyo Rose. His broadcasts relay information to the player between levels as well as setting the mood for the level to come. In the

greater backstory of the game, Ben travels with some of the remnants of the US military and supports the fight through intelligence and morale boosting.

- **Arnie** – A civilian in one of the Korean internment camps, Arnie aids the Resistance in various ways. His role in Boone’s plan consists of helping the resistance gain access to a Korean supply depot. However, by his introduction to the player, Korean forces have captured his family. In return for the members of the Montrose resistance, the Korean forces offer him the safety of his family. Arnie consequentially betrays the resistance to protect his family.
- **The Captain** – The Captain leads a band of American survivalists living in territory beyond the heavily controlled urban and suburban areas of Montrose. In contrast to the resistance, the Captain and the survivalists serve only themselves. In addition, they display the same sort of immoral behavior as the occupying Korean forces. The Captain allows his men to torturing captive Korean soldiers, hunt resistance members for bounties, and lynch Asian-Americans. Interested only in enjoying himself among the carnage, the Captain breaks the deal he made with Boone, demanding instead Rianna and Hopper in exchange for the promised aid.
- **Janice** – A civilian with a baby who initial lives among the non-interred American population, the Korean forces attack her town in retaliation for Conner’s rescue of Jacobs. One of the set pieces of the game takes place in her home where the player must hold off Korean forces while she and her crying baby huddle nearby. In the aftermath, Conner takes her back to Oasis, a hidden resistance village for safety though Oasis is later attacked and massacred while the resistance fighters are away. Representing the innocents caught in war, Janice reminds the player that through the events of the war, the Korean forces are not the only characters reduced into hordes of faceless people.

Breakdown

Homefront contains a strong premise and backstory that, through heavy research by the writing team, draws upon potential real world events to set up the events of the game. In execution of the premise, the overall narrative moves too quickly to build up tension and anticipation. Poor communication of the story progression and events not directly experienced by the player results in weak understanding of the importance of any given level.

Similarly, stereotypes strongly define each character and the story gives few nuisances to create truly distinctive personalities. Each character has a very specific and defined role that draws upon classical narrative archetypes. The character moments that Homefront do well are the moments where the game uses the details of the premise.

Conversely, Homefront contains very powerful environmental storytelling and story moments as directly experienced by the player, drawing upon cultural familiarity to affect the player. Even players who may not have encountered certain set pieces or locations can draw upon a familiarity developed through other media such as television. NPC conversations, collectable news reports, and props based off the familiar strengthen the mood and atmosphere of each level. The game uses powerful dissonant elements to shock and terrify the player.

The game narrative excels when it directly interacts with the player on a personal level. Few games comment significantly upon the protagonist or the other characters through action or dialogue. The instance in Homefront where the player must hide from enemy soldiers in a mass grave with an arm draped across the screen represents a rare moment where a game gives the player a physical presence and form. At various times during the narrative, Conner and Rianna clash over the brutality actions they must often do. The player, as Jacobs, has no explicit choice as to who is right but the game often contrasts Conner's violent dehumanization of the Korean invaders with something such as a Korean soldier screaming and stumbling towards the player in pain due to being covered in burning white phosphorous.

Strongest Element

Homefront creates personal horror well, especially in regards to the topic of race. That Hopper is a third-generation Korean-American becomes more than simply a descriptor but a poignant part of how other characters interact with him. When the protagonists go to meet the Captain, Conner specifically asks Hopper to stand further back in safety solely because Conner knows the Captain to be bigoted against Asian Americans. In turn, the Captain nevertheless calls out to Hopper using a derogatory name. For players of the game who may be Asian-American themselves, this becomes a particularly powerful moment as the Captain may very well be addressing them.

Shortly after this sequence, Hopper describes the rise of the anti-Asian sentiment in his hometown of Oakland and what he encountered. No sooner has he finished speaking then the protagonists encounter the aftermath of a mass lynching by the survivalists. Hopper promptly demands to leave the site. As with the encounter with the Captain before, for Asian-American gamers, this scene and Hopper's response become much more intimate. Beyond the personal impact of the scene, few games include a notable Asian-American character much less represent it in a realistic fashion.

Unsuccessful Element

Homefront falters the most in supporting and giving more long-term weight to the subject matter of race and war on a personal level. Though any given scene may contain a strong emotional or narrative moment for a character, once the scene has concluded, the game

does not retain that emotion through to the end of the narrative. In the instance of Hopper's ethnicity, after the player has completed the survivalist level, the game does not bring up the matter of anti-Asian sentiment again. Events that occur early in the game are rare referenced directly resulting in each scene feeling distinct but isolated from the greater whole.

Highlight

The strongest moment in the game comes when the protagonists have left Oasis after Boone's death and meet up with the Captain in order to continue with Boone's plan. Conner and Rianna step forward to talk while Hopper and Jacobs remain behind them. Prior to this point, much of the antagonism directed at the protagonists focused on them being members of the resistance. In this scene, the Captain calls out Hopper on his race. However, that the captain does not directly specify Hopper becomes the most striking part of his dialogue. The player can interpret the dialogue as being directed towards them; a powerful moment should the player happen to be Asian-American.

Critical Reception

In Colin Moriarty's 7.0 IGN review of the game, he notes "...what's important is the scene that's set is something unique and interesting. This isn't a war shooter in the classic sense..." Because of the uniqueness of the setting and the scenes the setting allows for, Moriarty comments "...All of this goes a long way towards making the world of Homefront feel real." The review further emphasizes how the presentation of the setting forms the strongest aspects of the game and even become some of the most compelling aspects. However, Moriarty notes that the shortness of the campaign hurts the value and strength of the game.

Chris Watters of Gamespot shares similar views on the game, giving Homefront a 7.0. In his review, he uses terms such as 'grim', 'chilling', 'memorable', and 'unflinching' in regards to the narrative and presentation. Throughout the review, Watters references various moments in the story that he found powerful; often these scenes did not involve the protagonist. "...one particularly shocking execution scene will likely stay with you throughout the entire game. Homefront's most intense moments aren't action movie sequences--they are emotionally wrenching, human encounters with the horrors of war." However, while he found the narrative to be powerful, Watters noted that among the protagonists, the characters themselves were poorly developed and not always very interesting. As with Moriarty, Watters also feels that the shortness of the story hurts the game.

Lessons

- Games can create much more powerful narratives by treating the player as a character rather than simply the designated protagonist. Directly addressing the player and the specifics of whom they are rather than simply what they do, results in a much more immediate and intimate relationship with the subject of the game. This in turn allows the game to evoke stronger emotions and experiences from the player in ways unique to video games.

Summation

Homefront does not stand out as a truly groundbreaking game, however, the methods by which the game narrative creates power within any given scene must be noted. Whether excitement, horror, or simply making often impersonal matters personal, Homefront should be looked at for how to address the player as more than simply a gamer.

References

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