

Game Narrative Review

Game Title: Dark Cloud

Platform: PS2

Genre: Dungeon Crawler / World-Builder

Release Date: December 14, 2000

Developer: Level-5

Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment

Creative Director: Akihiro Hino

Author of this review: Chris Parthemos

School: The Guildhall at SMU

Overview

The story of *Dark Cloud* follows the familiar, if successful, monomythical narrative pattern of the Hero's Journey. The hero, Toan, has his life thrown into chaos when a mystical creature known as the Dark Genie tears almost all elements of human civilization from the face of the earth. A benevolent entity known as the Fairy King uses his magic to spare Toan, and gives him the task of rebuilding the world, one town at a time, as well as finding a way to destroy the Dark Genie.

To complete this task, Toan must brave the dangers of several evil dungeons, retrieving a resource known as Atla, which contains the essence of the people and places destroyed by the genie. Each village unlocks a new playable character to add to Toan's party, and contains its own self-contained narrative within the scope of the central plot.

Characters

- **Toan:** The story offers little information about its protagonist, which is typical of the Hero's Journey monomyth. He comes from the small village of Norune, and his story begins with his efforts to rebuild his home. Toan is consistently displayed as exceptionally kind, to the point of self-sacrifice; early in the story, he even risks his life to save a housecat. Toan's appearance matches his character; he wears simple, plain clothes with warm, earthy colors. His little green hat, perhaps a knowing nod to Link, is indicative of his youth, as well as his good-hearted, occasionally naïve outlook on the event unfolding around him. Ultimately, Toan is a silent narrator, and many personality traits he appears to have exist simply as projections from the player or the story; however, this dynamic is appropriate for the Hero's Journey.
- **Xiao:** A young cat-girl, she is the humanoid incarnation of the aforementioned cat rescued by Toan, given a transmutation potion. Her role in the story is minimal, but her appearance as a young, sharp-toothed girl with a slingshot is accurate to the vivacious youth she displays.

- **Goro:** Goro is a young hunter in Matataki village. Powerfully built and soft-spoken, he seeks to follow in his father's footsteps, protecting his village from the evil serpent that haunts it.
- **Ruby:** Ruby is a strong-willed Genie from the Seaside Village of Queens. Her role in the story is minimal, but her relationship to her original master, a Mafioso mayor, provides some comic relief.
- **Ungaga:** A warrior from the Muska Lacka tribe, he seeks to recover his people and resume his role as their protector.
- **Osmond:** The eccentric leader of the Moon-People, a rabbit-like race with science far beyond that of Toan and the other Earthbound humans' comprehension. Osmond oversees the construction of the Sun Giant, a humanoid robot capable of Battling the Dark Genie.
- **Seda:** A mysterious young man; the first few times he appears, he challenges Toan to a duel, but lets him live. Ultimately, Toan learns that Seda was the first human to summon the Dark Genie, and travels through time to correct his mistake.
- **Fairy King:** A relatively comical old man with a bent back and an overlarge mustache, the Fairy King's power is nevertheless not to be underestimated. His magic allows the world's people and places to be stored in Atla, and rebuilt by Toan.

Breakdown

The Hero's Journey is a successful story model (cross-reference *Star Wars*, for example), and the primary story of *Dark Cloud* follows it closely, almost to a fault. The secondary stories contained within individual villages provide both a distraction for the player and layers of depth for the game world. Where the game shines, however is, in synchronicity between story and gameplay. The Hero's Journey often puts the Hero in the position of restoring order to his world, but *Dark Cloud* gives the player, as Toan, the task of literally rebuilding it. All the NPCs rescued by the player have specific requests; some tie into primary or secondary requests, some are as simple as placing the house so that it faces the sunrise. There are multiple ways to rebuild a given village to satisfy the villagers' requirements, and the act of rebuilding them leads to serious player investment. The secondary characters generally tie into the stories of the place where the player recruits them, but often fade into the background when the main plot moves on. They provide color and flavor, which makes the archetypical structure of the Hero's Journey more palatable.

Strongest Element

The strongest narrative element of *Dark Cloud's* narrative is player investment, which receives a significant boost from its unique mechanics. Many meaningful interactions come from rebuilding the city to the villagers' specifications; players may learn a bit of the NPC's personal history, or progress the secondary story for that particular area. Additional rewards such as rare items come of this, but the story progression is a major motivation. To progress the game, the player must recreate the village to 90%, allowing them to experience a great deal of this story content.

Unsuccessful Element

Unfortunately, there are ways in which story and gameplay do not mesh as well. For large sections of gameplay, the narrative fades away, disengaging the player. While exploring the dungeons to recover Atla, there are few if any plot-related events, except for on a few floors (boss or mini-boss floors). Similarly, the game has a tendency to get bogged down in the secondary story of a village or villager, and when the player devotes so much story-less time to discovering all of the Atla necessary, it is very easy for them to lose track of the big picture.

Highlight

In most areas, the player collects Atla to recover pieces of buildings, or even human beings. In the game's final area, however, Toan and his party are progressing backwards through time, collecting the memories of Seda. As the player pieces these loose narrative threads together, they gain a deeper understanding of the character, and he moves from a hostile enigma to an empathetic victim. At the last, the player realizes that all of the events of the game; the Dark Genie, the destruction and rebuilding of the world, transpired because assassins took the life of Seda's fiancée. This ability to construct – literally – a game's narrative is a powerful tool, and one players do not often receive.

Critical Reception

Overall, critics reviewed the game favorably; it has an eighty out of one hundred from Metacritic, and a 78.09% from GameRankings. Although individual critics complained of technical issues with the game, and some complained that it was too similar to *Legend of Zelda*, most praised the game for its story, and particularly for the World Building mechanic. Allgame described it as “truly unique,” while indicating the franchise would need “more emphasis on creative, original storytelling.” Planet PS2 praised its world building, but and narrative, but noted that there were “as many cons as pros.” Absolute PlayStation2 credited the game for the freedom the world-building provided, but acknowledged flaws in the dungeon exploration itself.

Lessons

- If a game features multiple characters, plot points involving them should be scattered throughout the story. Otherwise, the player will forget about them, particularly if they come in to the story late.
- Allowing the player the ability to shape the game world literally is a powerful tool, regardless of the extent. Allowing them full access to world-building is powerful indeed, but should be supported by the story, and the way the player interacts with NPCs.
- Synchronicity between gameplay and story strengthens both, and failing to achieve this weakens them. Dungeons in Dark Cloud lack narrative drive, and can become tedious. World Building fuels the narrative, and is consistently entertaining.

- Even a story structure as familiar as the Hero's Journey can feel new if invigorated with secondary stories, new twists, or even gameplay mechanics that increase immersion.

Summation

Dark Cloud is an interesting case for narrative review, but it is also a special one. Much of what makes its narrative great falls under gameplay, but there is also a great deal to consider from a writing standpoint. The synchronicity between gameplay and narrative is fueled by both design and writing, and both disciplines benefit from this approach. However, it is also a good case of how this approach can fail. Had the designers of *Dark Cloud* taken more care in incorporating environmental storytelling into their dungeons, or at least maintaining narrative flow there, the player would be far less likely to lose track of the narrative while exploring these randomly generated levels. Similarly, if the narrative itself had been more complex to begin with, there may have been more to incorporate into the dungeons, and more to get out of the experience of *World Building*. A key lesson from *Dark Cloud* is that a number of disparate elements can make a decent game and an immersive player experience, but one poorly implemented idea or mechanic can interfere with the narrative flow of the entire game.