

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: X-COM: Enemy Unknown

Platform: PC, Xbox 360, PS3, OS X, iOS

Genre: Turn-based Tactical Game

Release Date: October, 9, 2012

Developer: Firaxis Games

Publisher: 2K Games

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Scott Wittbecker, Liam Collins (Writers) / Jake Solomon (Director)

Overview

In *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* the player faces an alien invasion threatening the survival of Earth. The player takes on the role of Commander of the XCOM Council, a global initiative to pool resources in order to counter the extra-terrestrial attack. Alternating between XCOM HQ and the battlefield, the player is an immaterial, all-knowing entity who can only give commands to NPCs.

As the player advances in the story, he discovers new types of aliens, the inner workings of the alien invasion, and puts together a plan to counter-attack which climaxes into an assault on the alien mothership. Practically, the story is conveyed through the dialogue lines of three NPCs based in XCOM HQ: Officer Bradford, Doctor Shen and Doctor Vahlen. They guide the player through the different steps of the alien invasion, and through Earth's retaliation. In the last stage, the story takes another meaning with the appearance of the Uber Ethereal, the arch-enemy who reveals the motives behind the extra-terrestrial attack.

XCOM's particularity, however, is that a significant part of the story is told through the successes and failures of the controlled units on the battlefield, which allows the player to assign personal meaning and stories to each encounter. In this sense, we can see two narratives being constructed in the game. The first one is an embedded narrative with scripted characters –that is, a storyline hand-crafted by the designer. The second one is an emergent narrative, a spontaneous assembly of meaningful moments, carried through the player's interaction with randomly-generated and customizable characters.

Characters

CENTRAL OFFICER BRADFORD – This character acts as the middleman between the Commander (the player) and the rest of XCOM. He communicates the player's orders to everyone else and performs all the administrative work, so that the player is free to focus on the big picture. As far as personality goes, he is similar to any Commanding Officer in modern works of fiction –that is, determined, reliable, and oriented towards action. As a character in a videogame, Bradford serves as an interface between the game and the player, and his presence helps the player better understand the complex system which constitutes XCOM. He pushes the story forward as he narrates the events unfolding. He does so without a personal point of view, allowing for a clear understanding of the events unfolding, without having to take into account the character's persona or biases. Emotionally, he also provides the player with positive feedback by actively praising him for his successes after each mission, and thus contributes to balancing the punishing difficulty of XCOM.

DR. VAHLEN – Dr. Vahlen is in charge of the science part of XCOM HQ, and as such is the closest one to understand the alien threat and finds them fascinating. Through her in-game comments and the research she provides by interrogating and autopsying aliens, she manages to make the extra-terrestrial threat more and more intelligible to the player. With a very curious mind, she compensates the player's lack of understanding when a new technology is being discovered, or a new alien being interrogated. In XCOM, the player always discovers new enemies on the battlefield, and is taken off-guard by their new abilities. Back at HQ, Dr. Vahlen provides a way to understand these aliens, and facilitate the player's role on the battlefield. If needed, she can also be a cold-hearted torturer, taking revenge on behalf of the player for potentially KIA soldiers. As the storyline progresses, it becomes clear that her overall philosophy seems to push always push forward scientific discoveries, no matter how that could affect the future of the human race. This trait of her personality makes her more believable as a character, and as another layer of moral responsibility on the player's shoulders.

DR. SHEN – Dr. Shen is Dr. Vahlen's counter-part. As the head of the engineering department of XCOM HQ, he helps the player into explaining the function of his department. However, he does so without forcing his hand into choosing a particular option, whether it concerns equipment or base-building. He is very careful in nature and seems to focus on surviving rather than head-on attacks that might recover alien technology at the cost of the lives of several XCOM operatives. Cautious about how the technological advancement due to gathering the aliens' weapons is going to impact humanity, he is, in some way, the counterpart to Dr. Vahlen. He is cautious and reflects the player's need to survive above all (as is the case in higher difficulties).

UBER-ETHEREAL – Encountered during the last stage of the game, the Uber-Ethereal is the only enemy capable of talking. Interestingly, he also addresses the player directly, although the game does not specify how this is possible. Bradford, Vahlen and Shen all refer to the player as the “the XCOM Commander”, but the Uber-Ethereal speaks generally about the human race, which could be interpreted as the humans in the game or humans in general. While it is never clear who the Uber-Ethereal addresses, this ambiguity, along with the seriousness of his message, adds a lot of depth to the character. His role in the game is to retell the whole storyline from the aliens’ perspective, giving a new meaning to the plot. While the human NPCs were able to explain the “how” of the alien invasion, this character provides the “why”. Indeed, once the storyline has been experienced by the player, it is being explained by the antagonist; in other words, after the player has been through the ordeal of battling the complex and punishing system that is XCOM, he can now understand the narrative motivation for such a system.

SOLDIERS – Representing the base of the XCOM system, they are highly customizable and malleable, and seem, at first, their value seems to be exclusively related to gameplay. It is through them, and via each encounter, that the player concretely repels the extra-terrestrial invasion. As such, each time the player manages to successfully annihilate an alien threat, he also assigns narrative value to these stereotypical units, and this creates an emotional link between the player and the units he creates personal storylines for, mission after mission. Even though they are never acknowledged by the main cast, they are the vector for the emergent narrative that made a significant part of XCOM’s success. Their narrative can seem sometimes disconnected and not acknowledged by regular characters, until the appearance of the Volunteer.

THE VOLUNTEER – The Volunteer is an embedded character standing at the junction between XCOM’s embedded narrative and its emergent narrative. Originally a simple soldier, he or she turns out to have psychic powers, turning that soldier into a super-human, a bridge between Earth and the aliens. This character then activates a device allowing the player to access the last stage of the game, and thus becomes the Volunteer, entering the game’s embedded narrative.

Breakdown

XCOM: Enemy Unknown's narrative has two particularities. First, it is closely linked to the game's usability. The player learns about the game at the same time as he learns about the narrative. This is done mostly through the field missions and the NPCs at XCOM HQ. As the player learns about a new part of the system he is interacting with, an additional part of the story unfolds. Therefore, this game, from a franchise considered one of the most complex, obscure and punishing in videogames, aims at becoming more user-friendly by introducing new mechanics or enemies along with a new piece of narrative. This is clearly experienced at the beginning of the game, where the player discovers both strategic (XCOM HQ) and tactical (Battlefield) layers of the game. On the other side, *XCOM: Enemy Unknown's* narrative establishes a bridges between embedded and emergent narrative.

The first mission is one of the two most narrative-heavy missions in the game. Soldiers and characters alike comment on the player's every move, constructing the story of the first alien encounter along with gameplay inputs. We see here that this mission, acting as a tutorial through story characters, closely links discovery of gameplay and storyline. The personification of the soldiers killed during that first encounter is a way for the designers to emphasize through narrative the unforgiving nature of the system. The emotionally affected player realizes that he will lose many troops before overcoming the alien threats. Right after this costly victory, the player embodies the newly-appointed Commander of XCOM and learns about the nature and goal of the human response. Major nations around the globe have funded this initiative as humanity's last line of defense, in order to destroy the extra-terrestrial threat. He is then walked through the complex by Officer Bradford, Dr. Vahlen and Dr. Shen, as they explain how XCOM HQ functions.

The game is, from then on, characterized by the alternating dance of player progression through the challenges presented by the system, and story beats communicated by the NPCs. This is how XCOM manages to neither privilege emergent story or embedded story. After the player has concluded a series of randomly-generated terror missions, and a particular, hard-coded mission, the story moves forward and gives the player another objective to reach, introducing more complex aspects of the game, like new technologies, new research or new facilities.

During the last mission, the antagonist of the game is finally revealed. After crossing the alien mothership, fighting a group of every single alien race he has encountered during his playthrough in different room, the player meets the Uber-

Ethereal. The strongest enemy encountered in the game provides an interesting plot twist, as it unveils the other side of the story experienced by the player on both emergent and embedded levels. On the embedded level, he explains that the different races encountered by the player were “failed experiments” meant to achieve the ascension towards greater existence. These races’ homeworlds were invaded in the same manner that the Ethereal Ones tried to invade Earth, in order to awaken in them the capacity to become greater beings. The Uber-Ethereal concludes that humanity has now outgrown his race and the cutscene fades to the last battle of the game. This first part of the narrative in the last mission is in fact a metaphor for the player understanding and mastering the system. Throughout the game, the NPCs have explained the functions of the interacting parts of the game (through autopsies, weapon and armor manufacturing, ...), presenting the possible player interactions as the only means to fight back against the alien threat, itself a narrative representation of the game system. The player has then used this knowledge to overcome every alien race, repeated here as different sections of the levels are populated with these same aliens. He re-enacts this by using all the skills mastered during gameplay, gradually acquired within the narrative framework of a fight back against the alien invasion. As the player beats the strongest enemy, the strongest part of the system, the narrative acknowledges the player’s supremacy over the system as the victory of humanity over the extra-terrestrial threat. Here, XCOM’s narrative is clearly presented as a way to introduce and guide the player through different gameplay mechanics, and to facilitate their understanding.

Emergent narrative can be defined as the result of player assigning meaning to in-game events without the guidance of the designer. In this game, this consists mostly of creating a personal plot based on the successes and failures of the soldiers led in the battle. At first, one might consider this type of narrative opposite to an embedded, designed narrative. However, *XCOM* finds an interesting way around this apparent contradiction, as the embedded narrative remains discrete and secondary enough to leave space for the player to experience his own story.

The final mission also ties in both embedded and emergent storylines. The character of the Volunteer is introduced during the cutscene at the beginning of the mission. He or she was originally part of the Soldier cast, randomly-generated and customizable characters which carried the emergent narrative through the game. By being given a name, being referenced to by other NPCs, and by being featured in a non-interactive cutscene, The Volunteer enters the embedded narrative. This is the game’s acknowledgement of the other strong pillar of XCOM’s narrative: the stories invented by the player as he interacted with his squad, mentally building up personalities and histories for each of them. By limiting his or her lines to one single word and using the 3D model of the in-game character, the narrative is subtle and generic enough not to contradict the players’ emergent stories. XCOM’s story allows here for the re-uniting of emergent and embedded gameplay, merging them into one complete story.

Finally, it must be noted that the NPCs of the game are very precisely constructed by the writers. In line with the stereotypical quality of the Soldiers, they are generic enough not to distract the player from the challenge presented by the system, and not to add hand-crafted drama by focusing too much attention on themselves. Furthermore, they do not participate in every aspect of the game. Indeed, such narrative presence would have overshadowed the emergent part of XCOM's narrative, considered by most fans of the series as a very significant part of the gaming experience. However, their personality is developed in another direction, towards the overarching plot of the alien invasion, as they provide different points of views on the moral and ethical implications of humanity's interaction with alien races. As such, the player is presented different lenses through which he can look at the events unfolding, leaving him the freedom of interpretation. This way, the NPCs in XCOM: Enemy Unknown provide, first of all, an interesting embedded narrative leaving gaps for the player to fill with his own stories. They are also a way for the player to grasp how the system operates.

Strongest Element

The original XCOM game, revered by an incredible amount of players for the past twenty years, was also known for the unfriendliness of its interface, both on the strategic (XCOM HQ) and tactical (battlefield) layer. Presenting the player with two complex systems interacting with each other, the game did not provide any help in order to help the player get comfortable with a very deep game, where every action potentially had a life-or-death consequence.

The strongest element of the most recent XCOM: Enemy Unknown, is the ability to bring together very elaborate, non-user-friendly gameplay mechanics and an emergent narrative through the use of a very delicate and subtle embedded narrative. As a matter of fact, the characters in the game have dual roles: they help the player understand what is going on in the game, whether it concerns base management, equipment purchasing or the ability of some newly-encountered aliens, and they provide different perspectives regarding the ethical implications of discovering that humans aren't alone in this universe, whether coming from a human perspective (the aggressive Dr. Vahlen and the cautious Dr. Shen) or from an alien perspective (the Uber-Ethereal).

XCOM is therefore particularly successful in providing a narrative light enough for the player to enjoy the game as a rich system, but also present enough so that the player doesn't get lost in that system.

Unsuccessful Element

The unsuccessful element in XCOM may be Central Officer Bradford. While Dr. Shen and Dr. Vahlen are fully-fledged characters providing an interesting take on an otherwise stereotypical story, Central Officer Bradford is little less than a GUI made humanoid. Even though it does help with making the game more user-friendly, and more accessible to a larger audience, it hardly contributes to the overall quality of the narrative. Central Officer Bradford is a very bland character, without providing any ethical insights regarding the reasons of the aliens' invasions, merely describing the events unfolding. One way around this issue would have been to add another dimension to Bradford's personality, such as a tendency to doubt, which would have made him more interesting in the eyes of the player.

Highlight

The highlight of XCOM's storyline comes during the very last cutscene where the Volunteer decides to sacrifice his/herself in order to prevent the Earth from being caught in the alien mothership explosion. This is the only time a soldier (supposedly anonymous) speaks during a cutscene, and the only thing said is "Go !". Through this, the game acknowledges the emotional attachment the player has with these soldiers, without forcing a bond between the two. It is a relation established by the player with a particular character, and this character is then given its "legitimacy" by the game, as a recognized part of the embedded storyline.

Critical Reception

Most reviews of *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* focused on the game as a system rather than on the game as a narrative experience. Indeed, it seems that the storyline was only acknowledged as far as being a stereotypical invasion of Earth by blood-thirsty aliens. This shows that, the narrative of the game, while existing, does a great job at focusing the player on the actual game rather than on the story surrounding it. Most reviews, notably Gamespot (<http://www.gamespot.com/reviews/xcom-enemy-unknown-review/1900-6397891/>, Kevin VanOrd, 8.5) and Gamespy (<http://pc.gamespy.com/pc/xcom-enemy-unknown/1226328p1.html>, Dan Stapleton, 8.5), focused on the emotional attachment to players, rather than on the subtleties of the NPCs personalities: *"The characters themselves aren't terribly interesting, of course, but they're not*

there to steal the show from our own stories.” Indeed, XCOM did not replace emergent narrative by an embedded one, but rather lets them co-exist.

Most reviews, however brought the player’s attention to the excellent usability of the game (<http://www.giantbomb.com/reviews/xcom-enemy-unknown-review/1900-533/>, Ryan Davis, 5/5) and its ability to communicate to the player what is important and what is not. While not directly about the game’s narrative, this does show us the significant user-friendliness of the game, partly through good User Interface, partly through character development.

Ruch Stanton, ar Eurogamer (http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2012-10-08-xcom-enemy-unknown-review_3) is particularly impressed by the scriptwriting, “*a snappy mixture of military designations, sci-fi jargon and salty battle dialogue*”, which makes the soldiers even more likeable. In his review, he acknowledges how parts of embedded narrative elements - here, pre-scripted sentences spoken by soldiers – can allow for deeper immersion in the game.

Lessons

Customizing existing characters is not contradictory with narrative.

On the opposite, allowing players to customize their soldiers provides meaningful engagement with them, and creates a strong emergent narrative. Players will spontaneously create an emotional link with the representations of soldiers that he leads to battle, and will interpret their actions (critical shots, wounds, reactions) as part of their own mental storyline. By giving these players the tools to make these characters resemble more closely the player’s idea of them, the game will provide more meaningful play.

Characters can provide insights on the plot without monopolizing it, and comment on actions after the player has executed them. For example, after an encounter with a new type of alien, Dr. Vahlen would autopsy that alien and give more details about it, allowing the player to better grasp his enemies’ behaviors and plan accordingly.

Good narrative structure leads to good usability. If a story is clear enough, and takes into account gameplay elements rather than try to dismiss them in ludo-narrative dissonance, the result is a highly coherent game. Since some characters in XCOM are embodiment of their function (science, engineering, military hierarchy, antagonist), they allow these elements to be grasped more easily by the player, and provide a more enjoyable experience.

The thin line between stereotypes and interesting, heavily crafted characters. While stereotypical characters allow players to drop in and out of a game without losing a sense of who’s who, this approach doesn’t leave a lot of room for innovative character building. On the other side, heavily crafted

characters tend to steal the spotlights from the game itself. The NPCs in XCOM, particularly Dr. Vahlen or Dr. Shen, are created in such a way that the player acknowledges their personality, but are left vague enough so that he has to fill in the gaps using his imagination.

Summation

In the end, the narrative in *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* deserves attention for two reasons: for using story as a tool to make the player better understand a system, and for merging two different narratives (the embedded, designed narrative and the emergent, player-driven narrative).

The means through which this is accomplished is also praise-worthy: the characters in *XCOM* are carefully balanced between archetypes with clear motivations -this can be seen as the functionality of some characters as they help the player get a grip of the system- and interesting, personal point of views regarding the alien invasion. The game thus provides an additional, both ethical and narrative layer of meaning on top of the tightly-designed challenge of fighting endless waves of aliens.