

Game Narrative Review

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Year you submitted this review: 2013

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Game Title: Way of the Samurai 3

Platform: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360

Genre: Action-Adventure

Release Date: November 13, 2008 (Original release date for the Xbox 360 in Japan)

Developer: Acquire

Publisher: Spike (Original Japanese publisher)

Game Director | Creators: Kojiro Endo | Koushi Nakanishi, Koujiro Endo, Keisuke Kanayama

Overview

Way of the Samurai 3 is, by industry genre definition, an action-adventure game. Following the tradition of the series, players assume the role of a lone samurai who arrives at the region of Amana during the Sengoku “Warring States” period of Japanese History and finds himself in the middle of a conflict between three factions.

A recent war has resulted in the defeat of the former ruling Skurai clan and the empowerment of the new warlord, Shuzen Fujimori. Opposing him is the Ouka clan, comprised mainly of vassals from the former Sakurai clan, and the villagers of Takatane who are forced to overwork and pay high taxes in order to Fujimori. Among these circumstances, arrives the player character that, through story driven decisions, can become hugely influential in the big picture and determine the future of the region of Amana and the lives of villagers and samurai alike.

However, because of the freedom offered to the player, Way of the Samurai 3 is best described as a unique Kurosawa-esque hybrid of action based samurai simulator with role-playing elements and moral choices. Akin to a “period film” the greatest appeal of the game lies in the interesting plots that are interwoven through the depiction of a specific historical period. Instead of offering one long 30 hour storyline, the game’s experience is mainly focused on the telling of many different short stories generated by the player through his/her decisions and their respective consequences. Story and atmosphere play a big part in reinforcing the theme of cause-and-effect by rewarding deeds worthy of a samurai and detracting points from the players who engage in gratuitous violence.

Despite its focus on creating interesting stories generated by the players' actions, the series has always been known in the west as a niche game mainly composed by a few key characteristics such as drab (English) voice acting, subpar graphics, and lackluster swordplay. Therefore, few players become aware of the unique narrative experience in store. Since the game always begins in the same manner, the decisions made by the player in the many playthroughs represent one of many different lives that exist based on a narrative structure filled with varied ramifications. Thus, emerges the concept of narrative reincarnation.

Characters

Way of the Samurai 3 features an immense amount of characters – all of which the player can interact with. However, not all characters are essential to the main storyline. In fact, because of the game's structure, it is possible to complete the game having met only a handful of the entire roster. Therefore, the following listing is focused on the main characters that directly impact the game storyline and are present in most endings:

- **Player Avatar | Protagonist**

The player avatar is a nameless ronin. As a lone samurai who has just arrived at Amana, all that is known about the character's past is that he lost a previous battle, along with his master, but barely survived the encounter. Players can customize the main character's appearance, but that has no effect on the storyline or how NPCs perceive the protagonist. The player's samurai is essentially a blank slate molded through gameplay actions, dialogue choices and narrative paths.

- **Osei [Takatane village]**

Osei is an important member of the Takatane village because she directly helps Munechika, the village leader, and takes care of her younger brother, Kota. She despises samurai because her parents die in a great battle against the Fujimori clan. Through specific decisions and storyline paths, the player can discover that in reality Osei is the Sakurai Shizuru, princess of the previously defeated Sakurai family, hiding in disguise. One of the game's many endings has the player reuniting the remaining Sakurai clan members and aiding Osei in restoring the clan.

- **Umemiya Munechika [Takatane village]**

Munechika is the current head of the local village, Takatane. As former chief vassal of the defeated Sakurai clan, Munechika has embraced the burden of acting as protector of the villagers against the oppression of the recently empowered Fujimori clan. If the player character accepts help from the villagers right at the beginning of the game, Munechika takes care of the protagonist and then formally introduces himself.

- **Kota [Takatane village]**

Kota is Osei's kid brother. Since his parents died in the war, his sister has taken care of him. Though life at the Takatane village is peaceful, Kota finds it boring and spends his time admiring samurai and daydreaming of becoming one someday. Therefore, he

grows attached to the player character when they first meet – although he acts as if he hates them when in front of his sister.

- **Matsuzaki Genjuro [Ouka clan]**

Genjuro is the current leader of the Ouka clan, but once was a low ranking samurai of the Sakurai clan. With the Sakurai house's defeat, Genjuro decided to found the Ouka clan in hopes of restoring the Sakurai's former glory. However, during the course of the game, the player is able to identify a glaring contrast between his words and his actions. Genjuro seems lustful for power and uses dishonorable and violent tactics in order to achieve his goals.

- **Umemiya Yuma [Ouka clan]**

Yuma is the second-highest in the Ouka Band and strongly believes it is possible to restore the Sakurai clan. He is the youngest son of Munechika and desires justice through the death of Fujimori Shuzen. However, he sees his father as a coward for resorting to taking care of the village and his brother, Shinnosuke, as a traitor for siding with the enemy.

- **Rindo Itsuse [Ouka clan]**

Itsuse is an important member of the Ouka clan. As female samurai, she wears men's clothes in order to fight. Through bitter dialogue, it becomes clear that she holds a deep hatred towards Fujimori Shuzen and she states her one and only goal is to kill him. Through specific dialogues and storyline paths, the player can discover that Itsuse's family was murdered by Fujimori's army when they occupied her village. One of the game's many endings has the player siding with Itsuse and leading an assault to assassinate Fujimori Shuzen in his castle.

- **Fujimori Shuzen [Fujimori clan]**

Shuzen was a vassal of the Sakurai clan before rebelling and taking over the region as the new warlord. By forcing hard labor, collecting high taxes, and keeping an extremely restrictive control over the region of Amana, he has strengthened his army, but also generated general dissatisfaction. There many who oppose him, including members of the Fujimori clan, and his role in the story is very similar to that of a stereotypical shogun with nothing else in mind except maintaining his power.

- **Umemiya Shinnosuke [Fujimori clan]**

Shinnosuke is a vassal of the Fujimori clan, Munechika's eldest son, and Yuma's brother. As a former loyal member of the Sakurai clan and skilled swordsman, Shinnosuke is seen as a traitor by both his father and brother. Although he works for the Fujimori clan, his actions display honor and Through specific dialogues and storyline paths, the player can discover that Shinnosuke has not really betrayed the Sakurai clan. Ordered by his former master to infiltrate the opposing clan's ranks, he has been waiting for the opportune moment to take action and defeat Fuimori. One of the game's many endings has the player learning of this, siding with Shinnosuke, and helping restore the Sakurai clan.

- **Lady Aragagi [Fujimori clan]**

Aragagi is Shuzen's concubine. She holds the noble bloodline and is very well treated by Lord Fujimori. Consequently, she uses Fujimori's power to do as she pleases. Through seduction she frequently deceives low ranking samurai and officers into doing her bidding and then ruins their lives by stripping them of their money, status, and sometimes even kills them.

- **Setsuen**

Setsuen is a mysterious man that introduces himself in a vague manner to the player, but isn't connected to any of the regional clans. Through specific dialogues and storyline paths, the player can discover that Setsuen is actually a spy, possibly from Nobunaga's ranks, who acts along with a ninja in order to overthrow Fujimori's rule.

Breakdown

Way of the Samurai 3 is a sort of open world game. As soon the game begins, the player character is identified as one of the few survivors of a recent confrontation between rival clans. However, having lost the battle, the player is now a ronin, a samurai without a master, that faintly hangs onto a bit of life and treads the blood stained battlefield. From this point on, the player is free to do as he/she chooses – including refusing help from local villagers who come to the protagonist's aid.

Structurally, Way of the Samurai 3 features a world map comprised of eight locations¹ that vary from civilian filled locations such as towns and villages to lonesome roads and clan ruled castles – and an extra option to abandon the region at any time. The player can freely traverse to and from these locations, but little is taught and much is learned through exploration. Way of the Samurai 3 is not a didactical game. Through a third person camera, the player controls the avatar's movement and combat abilities, being able to engage virtually any character in conversation or fights.

The game world isn't exactly big, but is through visiting and revisiting these eight locations at specific times during night/day cycles that the player activates events marked on the map and forms bonds with the story's clans. These events also vary from jobs to dialogues and fights. They are pieces of the larger story arc that, once activated in a specific order, lead to the creation of a particular storyline – akin to how a CYOA (Choose Your Own Adventure) book works. After activating around twelve of these events, the player reaches the third and final act of his (short) story and becomes aware that another warlord, Nobunaga, will shortly invade the region of Amana. Though this may seem as an imposed story element, in reality it only offers more options because the player can also choose to align him/herself with Nobunaga's forces or try to repel them. Not long after, the game reaches one of its many conclusions based on the player's actions through all fourteen events.

For example, a player can choose to align with the Ouka, Fujimori clans or Takane villagers before the news of Nobunaga's invasion. Then, once the game reaches its

¹ The possible locations are: Takatane Village; Posting Station; Guard Gate; Catle Minori; Kuchihagahara; Omiki Town; Castle Amana; Road.

completion, players can choose to begin again and tread a different path. Since reaching game completion takes only around a couple of hours at most, this structure incentivizes players to experiment with the many possibilities of choices and consequences through the replaying of stories. In this sense, the game feels very similar to the *Groundhog Day* film in which the protagonist, Bill Murray's character, is found hostage to a mysterious time loop. After living through February second, instead of going to bed and waking up on the third, he finds himself continuously reliving that same specific day. Both scenarios from *The Way of the Samurai 3* and *Groundhog Day* share many evident similarities. Characters relive the same scenario, but each time create alternative events by taking different actions. Therefore, at each subsequent scenario they relive, they are aware of information they previously did not know and may use that knowledge to alter the course of other events.

Freedom is also emphasized by the fact that very rarely players are not in control of the protagonist. During virtually any cutscene or dialogue, players can choose to draw their swords and let their blades do the talking – in fact, except for children, any character can be killed. However, players can also choose to use the blunt side of their weapons and not kill anyone throughout the whole game. By beating foes, instead of slashing them, defeated characters may return later on and other narrative branches may be unlocked, but most importantly, the player can minimize the amount of bad deeds committed.

Since the game keeps track of specific player data, like endings attained, money in stock, weapons obtained, and reputation points; freedom is available, but noble deeds are encouraged. The way of the samurai is not one of mindless killing and the player is appropriately rewarded if he acts with honor. In fact, the game penalizes (through a point system) villainous acts, such as attacking and killing innocent people, and deducts points after a playthrough. The player's weapons, however, act as the player character's soul because only they get better with use and accumulate experience points to go up levels. Though the player might apply the knowledge from a previous story in the next one, when it comes to combat, only the weapons retain a record of specific combat techniques. It is as if the experiences lived in previous playthroughs were channeled into the weapons, therefore functioning as a memento of past battles.

Lastly, from both an aesthetic and narrative standpoint, it is no mystery that film director Akira Kurosawa is a huge influence to the series. The plot is fictional, yet based on a historical setting, and accordingly illustrates various peculiar scenarios inspired by many of Kurosawa's samurai films. The starting point is the Segoku Warring States historical period, also presented in films like *Kagemusha* and *Seven Samurai*. A ripe situation to depict the warlords' dispute for power and the helplessness of villagers found in the thick of bloody confrontations between loyal samurai. Naturally, villagers tend to either admire or hate samurai and mostly end up being treated as oppressed pawns by the current ruler. The opinions of villagers from Takatane clearly displays this issue, while the speeches from either Ouka or Fujimori clan are all about taking back, taking over or garnering more power. Also present in the game's narrative is the convoluted relationship between two brothers and a father. Though the film *Ran* features a ruling father and three sons, the similarities make reference to brothers who each represent different clans and fight for power. In *The Way of the Samurai 3* these conflicted family values also involve betrayal, but they vary according to the player's choice.

In all, the essence of the game's structure is its branching narrative through the player can explore a myriad of paths. Without the player's participation in at least two different narrative branches, the game's experience becomes identical to one of a game with a single linear story. Nevertheless, once the player begins participating, the gradual discovery of narrative elements transforms into both temptation and reward. Each of these playthroughs can be interpreted as the creation of parallel universes in which each of the characters live their unique lives. However, one may disagree since these stories do not take place simultaneously, but rather in succession depending on the player's choices.

Based on this piece of information, one can conclude that the relationship between the player and the game is one of experience and learning (derived from these experiences). The condition is that the knowledge gained from one narrative cycle, be it combat or relationship wise, can only be applied in the next playthrough. Therefore the concept of narrative reincarnation is reinforced.

Strongest Element

Without a doubt, Way of the Samurai's strongest and most prominent narrative feature is its freedom to explore and consequently create stories. In fact, the game stands out as a whole because of its narrative – not its graphics, controls, or production values.

One could say this is an appropriate use of the game medium because this particular type of experience is not available anywhere else. By allowing the player to tread a variety of short narrative paths, the developers have been able to create a game that can last a couple or dozens of hours and be enjoyed by players wanting to play it only once or many times. As an example, by choosing to align yourself with the recently empowered Fujimori clan (among many other decisions), instead of trying to rebuild the betrayed Sakurai clan, the game encourages the player to ponder about their lives and the way in which they make decisions.

In turn, the chance to relive “small lives” and analyze how each decision leads to a different path not only incentivizes narrative exploration and character development in-game, but also helps people ponder outside of the game world and understand how the inverse logic applies to real life. Very rarely do people get the chance to calmly reflect and study the divergent paths that present themselves in everyday life. Not only does the game make you think about the topic, but it also helps you realize that once you have chosen a certain path, you are inherently choosing to not live many others. Thankfully, in Way of the Samurai 3 you can live all of them through the entertaining process of narrative reincarnation.

Unsuccessful Element

There are plenty of unsuccessful elements in Way of the Samurai 3. Namely, the production values stand out as elements that can easily hamper the game experience. If a particular player cannot overcome the difficulties offered by the confusing user interface, clunky controls, stubborn camera, poor graphics; then the rewarding narrative experience can be

easily dismissed. Most likely due to localization issues, the game's original quirky writing has been translated into occasional typos and artificial dialogues.

Also, from a narrative design perspective, the game could use tutorials. The player is never told what to do in *Way of the Samurai 3* and though that might be good at times, it can also drive away players who just need a bit more guidance to get involved. The closest there is to a tutorial in the game is a woman who is being harassed by two bandits and will give a couple of hints if the player decides to aid her. However, if a player hasn't even been taught how to draw his/her sword and attack, how will one be able to save the lady?

In turn, the same applies to the many unknown narrative events that the player can trigger to form different storylines. Experimentation is an integral part of the game experience, but a lot of content is left untapped the discovery of many possibilities are sometimes seen as obscure, rather than enticing.

Highlight

A few scenes in *Way of the Samurai 3* deserve mention as narrative highlights due to their illustration of the player's narrative reincarnation through the game's freedom:

The first scene of the game features the protagonist limping away from a bloodstained battlefield as two NPC merchants notice him. The men approach, offer help, and the player is prompted for a response. Four options present themselves. The first three are dialogue lines split between a slightly humorous response, a dramatic death-like statement, or an angry bark. However, being a samurai means you also have your sword at your disposal and as your fourth option you may draw it and manifest violence (or the threatening of it) as your reaction. It is interesting to see that though the game may always start in the same manner, the decisions made by the player at this point represent the first step in one of many different lives that exist based on a narrative structure filled with varied ramifications and branches.

The *Way of the Samurai 3* is so resolute on the idea that the player is living one of many different stories, that direct elements from the game, such as save spots, illustrate this aspect. The player saves game progress by talking to specific NPCs scattered throughout the world. The surprise is that these "Save Spot NPCs" are actually biwa minstrels spread throughout Amana. The biwa is a short-necked fretted Japanese lute very important to the Japanese history and culture. Japan's indigenous spirituality, the Shinto, portrays the biwa as the instrument of choice of Benzaiten, the goddess of music, eloquence, poetry, and education; and during the Sengoku "Warring States" Period, samurai from the Satsuma Domain used the biwa for moral and mental training. Apart from these specific references, the biwa has always been a typical tool of Japanese narrative storytelling (similarly to the lute used by western bards), and this becomes evident when each of the minstrels seem to save progress by actually "learning about the player's story". It is not clear how they learn it or why, but the game implies they will later compose a song about the player's wondrous tales. This feature works marvelously because regardless of how the audience is addressed,

the suspension of disbelief maintains itself by reinforcing the idea that this current story is but one of many others the player has yet to live.

If the player chooses to save the aforementioned “tutorial lady” she will give the player a few pointers as to how to play the game. However, when the dialogue begins, she notices the player is familiar and asks if they know each other. If the player says he/she already knows her, she then acknowledges that it isn’t the player’s first time in that world. This line of dialog not only breaks the fourth wall, but also establishes how natural the narrative cycles are to the game world. Each cycle (or playthrough) lasts an average of 2 hours and means that instead of living a novel, the player is actually taking part in various different short stories. All of them start the same way, but change according to the decisions made. The player might want to drop the controller after pursuing a couple of narrative paths and will still have “finished” the game, but won’t have completed the whole “short story collection”. What essentially drives the player to do so is the liberty to choose any path and see the results in a relatively short time span, when compared to other games.

Lastly, the feeling of experimentation deserves mention. Nothing surpasses the excitement of wanting to restart the game, after finishing, it in order to fight a character you have previously helped or even use knowledge from previous playthroughs to further develop character relationships. This freedom is exemplified when a certain character in the game even has a line that addresses this aspect (and indirectly refers to the audience). Setsuen says the player character has an interesting future ahead of him and *“It’s almost as if you could become everything and nothing all at once. If I were to use a metaphor, I might say your future is like that of a cloud.”* In other words, Setsuen is making both the character and the player aware of their narrative freedom.

Critical Reception

Way of the Samurai 3 received mainly mixed reviews with a Metacritic score of 58 on the PS3 platform and 55 on the Xbox 360. When closely analyzed, most reviews criticized the low budget production values (such as the graphics and camera), but praised the game’s freedom.

Robert VerBruggen from Cheat Code Central gave the game’s highest Metacritic score, a 76, and noted its unique aspects: *“Way of the Samurai 3 warps players back in time to this period [Warring States], and combines a number of great ideas in doing so. The game features the swordfighting of the three-dimensional Zelda games, the open-world gameplay of the Grand Theft Auto series, the multiple endings of a Choose Your Own Adventure novel (remember those?), and even a touch of the emphasis on character stats and alliances that an RPG has.”*

Øystein Furevik from Gamer.no gave it a 70 and praised the game’s many options: *“Games ten times the size can’t offer half of the options Way of the Samurai 3 brings to the table. The game definitely has its notable and at times serious flaws, but if you dive into this enchanting world, you’ll be greatly rewarded.”*

Chris Carter from Gamer Limit evaluated it at a 7.5 mainly due to rewarding story based experience with *“In the grand scheme of things, Way of the Samurai 3's narrative isn't particularly engaging, but it does the job. Just imagine a storyline involving feudal lords and warring factions, then put a wandering samurai in it: that's your initial story. But the beauty of the game doesn't necessary lie with the backdrop; it's how you choose to make your own story.”*

Lastly, Shiva Stella from Gamespot gave the game a 5.5 out of 10, despite its novel design: *“The most intriguing aspect of Way of the Samurai 3 is its design as an open adventure that gives you total control over your destiny; you're completely free to join any faction or make a living out of beating villagers with sticks. The game capitalizes on a cause-and-effect mechanic, prompting you to perform certain actions during key moments, such as bowing in apology or sheathing your weapon. This makes something simple, such as drawing your sword, problematic because it has both immediate and unforeseen consequences. This also keeps the action enticing because it affects potential alliances and endings.”*

In sum, all reviews praised the narrative freedom granted to the player, despite the numerous technical shortcomings.

Lessons

Way of the Samurai 3 teaches important lessons based on both what works and what doesn't in the game:

- **Various short stories can best a single novel**
Way of the Samurai 3 presents a different narrative structure than most games. Instead of offering a single story, regardless of length, the narrative experience is grounded on the concept of narrative reincarnation or, in other words, the exploration of the game world through the subsequent reliving of many lives. The creation of a collection of short “CYOA” stories is much more effective and inviting to exploration than a game that takes thirty hours to complete. In fact, one can end up spending even more than thirty hours in Way of the Samurai 3, but will have seen the completion of at least a dozen narrative arcs.
- **Production values matter, but are not the essence**
One of the main reasons the Way of the Samurai series is considered to be a niche game in the west is due to its low production values. It is hard to believe that this is a samurai game with clunky swordplay and this definitely plays against the series' reputation – not to mention the graphics and translation. However, the narrative experience is so unique that it is able to salvage the whole. Nevertheless, numerous potential consumers drop the game in the first few minutes because of aspects that detract from the core.
- **Always integrate theme, story and gameplay**
Using a theme as main grounds for the development of a game's narrative is crucial to having a cohesive design. Once the theme serves as bedrock for the plot, players will feel engaged and notice a harmonious meld between embedded narrative elements (as

characters) and emergent narrative elements (as gameplay). Way of the Samurai 3 does this by making good use of historical issues inherent to the themes and then allowing the player to directly affect them through the protagonist's actions.

- **Empower players, but show that freedom comes with consequence**

Players like it when they are empowered and given the opportunity to make important narrative decisions. Way of the Samurai 3 does this well by revealing the protagonist initially as a simple and unknown character, but later as a hugely influential figure capable of determining the fate of the region of Amana. However, the greater the power, the greater the expectations become. Players can easily tell if a narrative decision has been met with the appropriate response - which the game usually does -, but this becomes blatant in a negative fashion when killed NPCs are merely replaced with clones.

Summation

All things considered, the Way of the Samurai 3 is an excellent experience that intelligently combines both emergent and embedded narratives. It is only through the emergent narrative (or player action and decision) that each of the embedded narrative (or pre-established script) branches are discovered and lived. The result never feels too open or too linear.

Unknown to many western players, Way of the Samurai 3 is a Japanese action-adventure game that demands patience and understanding. As the player becomes more and more engaged with the narrative, it becomes easier to fit pieces together and complete the “world mosaic”. Exploring one path allows better understanding of characters and their motivations, which in turn enables the player to apply that information in order to explore other branches.

Not only does the game present an elaborate narrative structure, it also delivers an experience drenched in cultural influence, ranging from cinema, history, and religion. This defines the game as a work of expression capable of conveying powerful and meaningful messages, especially ones referring to the freedom of living many different stories. Choice and consequence serve as the structure of narrative and ethical testing grounds. In essence, it is an experience that allows the player to examine his own values by taking part in the process of narrative reincarnation.