

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Pokémon Black/ White Version
Platform: Nintendo DS
Genre: Japanese Roleplaying Game
Release Date: September 18, 2010
Developer: Game Freak
Publisher: The Pokémon Company
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Toshinobu Matsumiya

Overview

By the time *Pokémon Black/ White Version* arrived, the world had been attempting to “be the very best, like no one ever was” for over a decade. Everyone knew the ropes: grab a Pokédex, collect the badges, save the world, and become the Pokémon League Champion. The Pokémon series had a predetermined formula for success that had proven true time and time again.

However, when *Pokemon Black/ White* were released, they chose to forgo the traditional, mostly lighthearted tales of old in favor of a new story that asked the questions that many trainers had been asking themselves for years. Set in a Unova, a region distant from others in the world, the game follows a new, older Pokémon trainer as they determine the morality of the Pokémon world.

Characters

- Hilbert/Hilda – Hilbert and Hilda are the default names of the player character. They act as the avatar of the story, allowing the player to immerse themselves in the Unova region.
- N – As the king of Team Plasma, an organization within Unova that acts as its own monarchy, N travels the region furthering the cause of the organization. Having been raised by Pokémon, he cares for them more than he cares for people. Because of this fact, he is helping the cause to release Pokémon from the “captivity” of their trainers and families.
- Ghetsis – Ghetsis is the adoptive father of N, giving him a home as he lived in isolation from humans, as well as the true leader of Team Plasma. As N matured, Ghetsis was one of the few people in the world who showed him kindness. However, it is revealed that he is using N as a tool in order to rule the world as the only human in control of Pokémon.

- Cheren – One of the two childhood friends and rivals of the player, Cheren is a skilled trainer and intelligent individual. Throughout the game, he pushes himself to become stronger for the sake of strength, although when questioned, he reveals that he does not understand why he seeks strength.
- Bianca – Another childhood friend and rival to the player, Bianca is a kind-hearted individual with a care-free personality. However, throughout the course of the game, she discovers that no matter how hard she tries, she is unable to gain strength through Pokémon battles. Because of this fact, she decides to, instead, pursue Pokémon research.

Breakdown

The year is 2010. Pokémon fever runs rampant throughout the world. Pikachu and his friends have infiltrated nearly every aspect of pop culture. For more than a decade, Game Freak rode high on the global phenomenon they had created. They ruled the world with one of the highest selling franchises of all time.

When the time came for a new *Pokémon* game to be released, Game Freak could have created another notch in the series by playing it safe and developing a game completely similar to previous entries. However, Junichi Masuda, director of the *Pokémon* games, stated that he planned to create a *Pokémon* game that would be enjoyed by people who believed they had graduated from the series.^[1] With this information in mind, Game Freak developed *Pokémon Black/ White*.

From the very beginning of the game, players experienced new changes in the world of Pokémon. They are introduced to Cheren and Bianca, both of whom act as the player's rivals during the game. Each character chooses a starter and battles each other. Everything seems somewhat familiar. But, because of the rock-paper-scissors nature of these Pokémon, wherein each Pokémon is weak against one Pokémon and strong against another, a triad of power is established between the three, where each character, including the player, is both weak and strong when facing the others, a first for the series. Thus, within ten minutes, the first of the player's preconceptions is subverted and shattered.

This theme of reestablishing what the player thinks about the universe and the games of *Pokémon* is carried out for the majority of the game through many different situations. Within the next town, the player is introduced to the game's antagonists, Team Plasma. In previous games, the villainous teams were fairly active, but aside from a few quests toward the end of their respective games, were hardly seen until mid-game. Such isn't the case with Team Plasma. Team Plasma drives forth the narrative of *Pokémon Black/ White*, actively terrorizing the inhabitants of nearly every city to which the player travels.

Because of the fact that Team Plasma is so incredibly prevalent within the Unova region, their story pushes the standard quest of collecting the eight badges and travelling to the Pokémon League to the side. This culminates into an end-game that does not finish with a battle against the Elite Four Champion, but instead against Ghetsis, the leader of Team Plasma. Along with this battle comes the imprisonment of the Pokémon League, an establishment that, in previous games, proved to be the governing force of the land, filled with the five strongest trainers of the region. This shows how truly powerful Team Plasma is and how they have much greater relevancy to the story at this point.

Even the message that Team Plasma promotes throughout the game is designed to subvert ideas that were introduced early in the *Pokémon* series' lifecycle. Team Plasma questions the morality of trainers and their relationship with Pokémon, comparing the pair to an owner-slave situation. While the concept of using Pokémon versus befriending them has been briefly touched upon in the games previous, this full-fronted assault of the message is new to the series. Since the first *Pokémon* games were released, they were criticized for utilizing Pokémon in such a way. With *Pokémon Black/ White*, Game Freak addressed these criticisms and, in doing so, created a deeper narrative with more meaning than any in the series.

As stated earlier, within the beginning of *Pokémon Black/ White*, the player is introduced to the character Bianca. Being a childhood friend, she travels through Unova simultaneously with the player. Early on, she exclaims how she wishes to be a Pokémon trainer and embarks on the journey against her father's wishes. However, throughout the game, the player sees her fail at becoming strong on multiple occasions. She becomes disheartened with her journey and considers giving up on Pokémon altogether. The storyline of Bianca has rather dark moments, moments which are not usually seen within a *Pokémon* game.

Throughout *Pokémon Black/ White*, the player encounters a multitude of new mature experiences from increased acts of terrorism, to the failed dreams of characters, to the destruction of things they believed were sacred. Through these mature experiences, Junichi Masuda and Toshinobu Matsumiya truly did create the *Pokémon* game for graduates that Masuda wanted.

Strongest Element

The narrative guiding *Pokémon Black/ White* contains complexities not seen before within the series, ranging from a triad dynamic between the player character and their rivals to the antagonists who may or may not be doing what is morally good. However, the strongest element driving forth the narrative is its theme of ideals versus truth. Many characters and plotlines within the game embody this theme.

Cheren and Bianca, for example, two characters introduced early in the game, are seen as contrasts to one another. On one hand, Cheren is a man of ideals. He seeks to fulfill his dreams of attaining great power through the Pokémon he befriends. He goes so far as to become rude and brash with the Pokémon League Champion, the strongest trainer in the region. However, when he realizes he is not sure why he fights, he embarks on a quest of inner growth to discover his purpose. Bianca, on the other hand, learns the sad truth that not everyone can become a strong trainer. From this experience, she gains knowledge of how the world works and inevitably loses some of the innocence that defined her character.

The theme of ideals versus truth manifests itself within the lore of the Unova region as well. The region of Unova was founded by the unification of the peoples under the leadership of two brothers and their legendary dragon Pokémon. However, this unity did not last, however, as one brother sought to pursue and lead with ideals, while the other sought to pursue and lead with the truth. This caused the dragon to split into two separate entities, with each brother being joined by one of the new dragons. The brothers fought with fire and lightning and the Unova region was destroyed, to be re-inhabited later. This duality of truth and ideals and the destruction that comes from their conflict

represents the differing world views of the inhabitants of the Unova region, as well as the rest of the Pokémon world.

Unsuccessful Element

While *Pokémon Black/ White* were quite successful in creating an engaging narrative experience, the games did have some flaws. One such flaw that can be cited as the least successful element within *Pokémon Black/ White* was the post-game storyline. Within this epilogue, the player is given the task of apprehending a group of individuals known as the Seven Sages, leaders within Team Plasma. Once all of the Sages have been arrested, the player is given information as to the whereabouts of N.

While it is apparent that this quest line is supposed to provide a sense of closure to the game, it does so ineffectively. The task of searching for the Sages is tedious at best, consisting of simply revisiting old locations and searching for their sprite within the area. This alone would create a dull quest, but the revelation given at the end, the closure which the player had been waiting for, simply states that N is in a far off land, information that the player could have easily inferred already.

The idea of fully stopping the remaining forces of Team Plasma and thus finally restoring peace to the Unova region is quite interesting at the conceptual level. There is also a bit of saving grace within the quest by the backstory that it provides to Team Plasma. However, it could have been implemented more effectively if the quest had more depth and the information given had more meaning. Instead of simply searching for the Sages, it could have been cool for the Sages to each retain small remnants of Team Plasma which could be used to battle against the player leading to a final showdown with the Sage. Or, the player could have had to solve a new puzzle in a remote, unexplored area in order to reach the Sage as they were hiding in seclusion. When the quest was completed, the player could have instead learned that N was in a specific region, researching the culture there and discovering how different people treat Pokémon differently. Any of these options could have given the quest more of a sense of purpose and thus given more closure to the player.

Highlight

The greatest moment in *Pokémon Black/ White Versions* happens towards the end of the main storyline. As the player advances toward battle with the Pokémon League Champion, the epic ending of their quest to be the greatest trainer in the region, they instead discover that N, the man who wishes to create a world of harmony between humans and Pokémon, has defeated the Champion in battle. N states that, as the most powerful trainer in the land, he will force all to release their Pokémon, thus saving them.

The player confronts N, hoping to stop his mad scheme. However, N instead raises the castle of Team Plasma to surround the Pokémon League, attaching his home base to the place of power. It is here that the player realizes how strong N truly is, for he has destroyed the sanctity of power that is the Pokémon League, a nigh-impenetrable and unquestioned symbol of strength and protection since the first *Pokémon* games were released.

Critical Reception

Reviews for *Pokémon Black/ White* generally give the games high scores, with Metacritic giving the games an average score of 87, citing the lack of older Pokémon for most of the games, improvements in various gameplay aspects such as the use of TMs and rebalanced experience gains, and a beautifully designed region as highlights. Jack DeVries of IGN gave the game a 9/10, praising the usage of Team Plasma within the game and how they “drive the story [and] bring up concepts about the morality of Pokémon that are pretty heavy for the series.”^[2] Keza MacDonald of Eurogamer said that “it reminds you what there was to love about Pokémon in the first place,”^[3] giving it a 9/10 as well.

Lessons

- The fact that a series is well versed in tradition doesn't mean that disrupting its flow will cause the game created to be poorly received.
- When designing quests that are meant to give closure to the player, be sure to provide new meaningful information instead of explicitly stating what could be determined with some thought.

Summation

While often cited as a “kid's game,” the *Pokémon* series, with its lighthearted themes of friendship and wonder, are still able to resonate with players of all ages. However, *Pokémon Black/ White* prove that the series is able to explore more mature themes and settings as well. As the beginning of a pseudo-Renaissance of the *Pokémon* series, this game will stand in the series' history as one of its greatest.

[1] Masuda, Junichi. "増田部長のめざめるパワー." 増田部長のめざめるパワー. 9 Apr. 2010. Web. 23 Sept. 2015.

[2] DeVries, Jack. "Pokemon White Review - IGN." IGN. 5 Mar. 2011. Web. 25 Sept. 2015.

[3] MacDonald, Keza. "Pokémon Black & White." Eurogamer.net. 3 Mar. 2011. Web. 23 Sept. 2015.