

Kessen II – Narrative Review

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Month/Year of Submission: December 2016

Game Title: Kessen II

Platform: Playstation 2

Genre: Strategy

Release Date: 29 Mar 2001 (Japan), 26 Sep 2001 (North America), 15 Mar 2002 (PAL)

Developer/Publisher: Developed and Published by Koei

Narrative Designers: Kou Shibusawa (Producer), Takashi Atsumi (Director), Tomokazu Takeda (Main Game Design)

Overview

“All things are yin or yang, created from two essences.”

Thus begins the opening cinematic of Kessen II. Throughout the game, the player is exposed to the recurring theme of strong contrasts that resemble a yin-and-yang relationship. Kessen II reinforces this through its composition of several disciplines such as music, film, visual art, and character design. Because of the interactivity of the game medium and the combination of several disciplines, the player can experience the perspective shifts on a much deeper level than other media.

The story itself is broken up into two parts, each told from the perspective of a warlord, Liu Bei or Cao Cao, who is the opposite of the other in terms of morals and ambition. Though heavily borrowing from a fantasized rendition of the Chinese classic, The Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Kessen II does not follow the same events as its source, instead having the freedom to create new stories that focus on the contrasting themes in its drama.

Characters

The character design of Kessen II is one area where the game really shines. There is variety in almost every aspect including back-story, personality, motivations, relations to other characters, morals, and their role to play in the narrative, giving ample room to incorporate contrasts in creative ways. Every character has their own outfit that displays their personality, specialty in warfare, and culture. Even characters expected to be “generic”, such as those encountered a single time, have unique details given to them. Considering that there are around seventy characters detailed in such a way, it would not do to list all of them. Instead, only the most plot-relevant characters, those that have contradicting natures within themselves, or those with interesting relationships with others are listed.

It must be noted that the game-play of Kessen II is split into two chapters. The first for playing as the good-hearted Liu Bei and the second to play as the Machiavellian Cao Cao. These two stories are vastly different in plot structure and style of delivery yet share the same timeline and many events from beginning to end. This perspective shift is incredible in how it portrays characters as either good or evil during one play-through and offers an entirely new viewpoint in the next.

Liu Bei

Liu Bei's Perspective

"To restore Heaven and Earth's balance, to govern the people fairly, to rescue Diao Chan..." – Liu Bei

Liu Bei is compassionate and genuine in kindness. Reflecting his humility, Liu Bei does not feel entitled to the position of ruler, even though he is of Imperial blood. He and Diao Chan are lovers, and Liu Bei strives to rescue her from Cao Cao and restore the Han Empire instead of using the support of the people for his own gain. In fact, his followers flock to him because they admire his character and want to fight against the greedy, tyrannical Cao Cao.

Several times in his story, Liu Bei agonizes over whether or not he is doing the right thing. Over time, Liu Bei builds his belief in himself and his cause as his followers reassert their support of him.

Cao Cao's Perspective

"He's loved by the people? Don't make me laugh. The people want someone who's strong!" – Cao Cao

Liu Bei is a hopeless idealist. He cannot rule the land with a strong enough hand to ensure peace. The question of who should take the Emperor's throne must be decided in battle, even if he is Cao Cao's long lost brother and only remaining biological family.

Cao Cao

Cao Cao's Perspective

"I hate war, but I must fight to make a peaceful world." – Cao Cao

Cao Cao is rational and decisive, doing what he must to quell the chaos by taking the throne by force and ruling with strength. He strikes before being struck, deep down fearing that if he shows compassion he will be seen as weak. His vassals admire his might and recognize that if anyone can put an end to the senseless killings, it's Cao Cao.

As the player goes through Cao Cao's campaign, he grows from a merciless warlord into a ruler who uses his might for a noble purpose. This is just as much a development of character as it is a pre-existing notion about Cao Cao that can be learned by experiencing his side of the story.

Liu Bei's Perspective

"Cao Cao, thinks of nothing else [but world domination]." – Diao Chan

Cao Cao is devious and cold-blooded. The people will never truly submit to a tyrant like him. It doesn't matter if Heaven has granted him its Mandate, he must be opposed and Diao Chan rescued.

Diao Chan

Diao Chan is the love of Liu Bei's life and the one to whom the Emperor entrusted the secret location of the Imperial Seal, an object that legitimizes one's ascension to the Emperor's throne. Cao Cao kidnaps her to discover its location, and Liu Bei then swears to fight Cao Cao until she is returned.

Diao Chan isn't just a "damsel in distress" as she could give Cao Cao the Seal's location and return to Liu Bei, thus ending the fighting. However, she deems Cao Cao unworthy of the throne and denies it to him. Furthering her importance to the story, Diao Chan reminds Cao Cao of his deceased mother, therefore being the only one able to bring out his gentle side.

Himiko

The young mystic that interprets both Liu Bei and Cao Cao's oracles at the beginning of the game that sets Diao Chan's kidnapping in motion. Himiko has a crush on Cao Cao and does whatever she can to protect and assist him. She is one of the sources of comic relief, but she plays a huge part in the plot which makes her purpose in the storytelling contradictory and interesting. It is this "meta-contrast", where her conflicting traits are not inside the story that causes the player to always pay attention to whatever she is doing whenever she appears.

Zhang Fei

"Mei Mei, I will avenge your death. On that I give my word." – Zhang Fei

A sworn brother of Liu Bei, he also fights Cao Cao to seek revenge for his daughter, Mei Mei, who was killed when Diao Chan was kidnapped. However, he remembers that there is more to live for than revenge, and tames his vengeance into a firm resolve. He does not let go of his anger, but simply chooses not let it control him.

Xiahou Ba

"How dare you disobey? You leave swearing to avenge your father, you return with your tail between your legs!" – Cao Cao

Son of Cao Cao's greatest general, Xiahou Yuan. When Xiahou Yuan is killed by Zhang Fei in a duel, Xiahou Ba is consumed with seeking revenge while striving to live up to his father's reputation. Xiahou Ba remains focused on vengeance, and the young-blood relishes the opportunity to meet Zhang Fei in battle, making rash decisions at the cost of Cao Cao's forces.

Between Zhang Fei and Xiahou Ba exists a yin-and-yang portrayal of revenge.

Breakdown

Both of Kessen II's stories share much of the same timeline, but the player must play through Liu Bei's before Cao Cao's. Therefore, the player experiences the disdain for Cao Cao and feels Liu Bei's struggles before experiencing Cao Cao's change of character that is hidden from Liu Bei's perspective.

The plot of Liu Bei's campaign is one between two rivals, where the superior antagonist first provokes the protagonist before the protagonist grows in power, climaxing at a final confrontation between the two. What is most integral to this plot is not the events that take place, but the motivations

behind each of the rivals. As the player goes through Liu Bei's story, the player only sees one side of Cao Cao until the very last cinematic, where Cao Cao tells Diao Chan that all he wished was to quell the chaos. This perspective shift and sudden realization that Cao Cao's motivation is not born from greed and ambition, but from the pain of losing his mother and his determination to make a world without war, is a perfect segue into Cao Cao's story.

Cao Cao's story is one that deals with the transformation of a man trapped in his anger and pain into a vehement leader who has learned freedom by letting go of anger. The antagonist is not Liu Bei, but war itself and the Mandate of Heaven. Liu Bei is not "just another enemy" that Cao Cao fights, which would create an extreme amount of ludo-narrative dissonance since Liu Bei is the enemy for the majority of Cao Cao's battles. Instead, Liu Bei becomes equated with his hatred of warfare; whenever Liu Bei is the subject, the player can see Cao Cao's pain surface, Cao Cao often showing it in an insensitive way as to not appear weak. This is true before and after Cao Cao finds out that Liu Bei is his only living relative, but he is more comfortable showing his true self after. Towards the end, the Mandate of Heaven is explicitly seen by him as a burden, as if it were forcing him on the warpath and keeping him from creating his own destiny.

Liu Bei's Story

Cao Cao, after saving Liu Bei from bandit-rebels, violently kidnaps Diao Chan, the love of Liu Bei's life. As Liu Bei begins to lead small armies against the more powerful Cao Cao's, Imperial bodyguard Zhao Yun joins him and states that Liu Bei is of royal blood and next in line for the throne.

Liu Bei seeks the help of master strategist and magician, Zhuge Liang, to even the odds. The player gets to see that Liu Bei is not a greedy conqueror at heart when he says to Zhuge Liang, "I don't give a damn about the Mandate [of Heaven] or the restoration of the Han Empire. The only thing I want is Diao Chan!" The characters come to the conclusion that Cao Cao holds the Mandate of Heaven, which is the reason why Cao Cao has as much strength as he does.

Liu Bei forms an alliance with Sun Quan, a powerful regional lord, and faces off against Cao Cao's navy. During the naval battle when Zhuge Liang is performing a ritual to set their enemy's ships on fire, Liu Bei defends Zhuge Liang from supernatural beings and defeats what appears to be some sort of avatar of Heaven. This sort of event is odd for Kessen II, but it indicates that Liu Bei is willing to immediately defy the Mandate of Heaven, something that Cao Cao struggles with.

Because of the hastily crumbling Han Empire (or perhaps due to Liu Bei's paranormal fight with Heaven), natural disasters begin to occur. Liu Bei becomes forced to be the initiator in a fight against a neutral faction or face destruction, gaining much needed strength to fight Cao Cao. He is distraught over this, but in a manner suggestive of yin-and-yang, Liu Bei contains enough aggression to go against his nature. After all, attacking a neutral faction is something that Cao Cao would do, not Liu Bei.

Cao Cao proclaims himself Emperor, and more natural disasters occur. People rumor that Liu Bei's defiance of the Mandate of Heaven is causing them. Liu Bei and Cao Cao meet face to face on the eve of battle, and Cao Cao's men reiterate the notion that he is causing natural disasters, chanting, "down with

the rebels, down with Liu Bei!” Zhao Yun rejoins with Liu Bei after a hiatus, stating that the people love Liu Bei and the reason for the natural disasters is because Cao Cao created a government against the will of the people. Because of the people’s love of Liu Bei, he continues to grow in strength.

At this point in the game, the player has a choice of three different battles to partake in, each one having its own cut-scene containing news of Diao Chan’s death. In each cut-scene, there is a major contrast of mood right before the messenger arrives. One has Liu Bei reasserting his love for Diao Chan to another character who tries to be of romantic interest to him, another has Liu Bei and some vassals laughing and joking, and yet another has him and his entourage surviving an assassination attempt (containing some comic relief).

On the eve of the final battle, Liu Bei and Cao Cao meet face-to-face a second time with Diao Chan, actually alive, making an appearance. The cut-scene detailing this moment is the exact same as the one present in Cao Cao’s story. Having been told that the natural disasters are Cao Cao’s doing, how the people support Liu Bei, and how Cao Cao violently kidnapped Diao Chan, the player at this moment likely sides with Liu Bei.

In a blind rage, Cao Cao’s sorceress, Himiko, tries to create a “disorder between Heaven and Earth” in order to create a catastrophic destruction that would kill both armies and herself. Zhuge Liang stops her. After Liu Bei’s forces win, there is a happy reunion between him and Diao Chan. Diao Chan then recalls the last moments of Cao Cao’s life and how he truly wished to end violence.

Cao Cao’s Story

Cao Cao’s play-through starts at the end of the first, this time Diao Chan beginning a narration with a statement that sets the mood for his story: “...for some, gentleness is forbidden. And despite their kind and gentle hearts, they are forever destined to move through life clad in an armor of ice.” The player is given a heartbreaking flashback of Cao Cao’s last memory of his mother. It is a happy memory until his mother leaves the house never to be seen again. Right at the beginning is a stark changing of mood, contrasting happiness with the terror of being alone.

Himiko the mystic reads Liu Bei and Cao Cao’s oracles. Cao Cao’s assures him that he has the Mandate of Heaven and that Diao Chan will change his fate, and he kidnaps Diao Chan to learn from her the location of the Imperial Seal, which would legitimize him becoming the Emperor.

To put pressure on Diao Chan, Cao Cao attacks Liu Bei, threatening to kill him. Liu Bei is a touchy subject for Cao Cao, who standoffishly tells his followers to “shut up” when bringing him up. Cao Cao’s uncle talks to himself, unsure of whether or not he should tell Cao Cao the secret that is he and Liu Bei are brothers. The player is not aware of this secret yet.

Himiko pulls a magic prank on Diao Chan, and Cao Cao is angered, saying that Diao Chan reminds him of his mother. Cao Cao and his most trusted general, Xiahou Yuan, are riding with their men along a path when they are ambushed. Xiahou Yuan sacrifices his life and urges Cao Cao to escape to safety, saying, “Who among us would quell this rebellion? I beg you, put your faith in your loyal servant.”

Natural disasters begin to happen, and Cao Cao tells Diao Chan that they are happening because Liu Bei is defying Heaven's will. Diao Chan still protects the secret location of the Imperial Seal, stating that she will only tell a worthy hero. A well-learned hermit, Sima Yi, shows up in Cao Cao's court and rebukes him for thinking about himself and how he doesn't realize that his followers would gladly give their lives for him. Cao Cao is amused by his fearlessness. Sima Yi's words in court likely evoke Xiahou Yuan's sacrifice.

Cao Cao overhears a song hummed by Diao Chan, and tells her that he heard it somewhere, and Diao Chan responds that Liu Bei had taught it to her. The song's melody is part of the soundtrack and is also the theme of Cao Cao's mother. This sets the stage for when his uncle tells him that he and Liu Bei are brothers.

Xiahou Ba squanders a key strategic position for a chance at revenge, returning to Cao Cao's court prepared to be executed. Cao Cao remembers Sima Yi's words and spares his life as his father saved Cao Cao's.

In an attempt to stop the natural disasters, Cao Cao ascends to the throne without the Imperial Seal. Cao Cao is finally told by his uncle that Liu Bei is his brother. Diao Chan learns this from Himiko, who counsels Cao Cao torn by his emotions. Cao Cao's character begins to turn around, stating that he had no fear for he had nothing to lose, but now he has a brother he never even knew he had. Diao Chan tells him that his heart is hidden behind a wall of ice, and that his true self has yet to be revealed.

Himiko causes Diao Chan to faint, and Cao Cao tells her to stop, saying that Diao Chan has taught him something precious and set him free from the Mandate of Heaven. Having a dual nature of comic relief and relevance to the story, Himiko becomes jealous by misinterpreting this to think that Cao Cao and Diao Chan are romantically involved.

Before the final battle, Cao Cao asks for Diao Chan's forgiveness that they are still going to battle. Diao Chan offers the Imperial Seal, but Cao Cao further renounces the Mandate saying "there is no longer any need." The next cinematic is the same as Liu Bei's before the final battle. This time, the player has knowledge of both Liu Bei and Cao Cao's characters, now knowing that Cao Cao is not the cold-blooded tyrant that he used to be. Cao Cao in the next cut-scene says, "I have found it. My true self...I hate war, but I must fight to make a peaceful world," also implying that Liu Bei is not strong enough to rule.

Himiko, upset over being passed over for Diao Chan, is intent on destroying everything she can. In what the player thought was great comedy quickly developed into the exact opposite: a great threat. Cao Cao and his vassal stop her. After winning the battle, it is revealed that Liu Bei is still alive. Diao Chan and Cao Cao say farewell as she goes in search of him, Cao Cao giving her a keepsake hairpin that reminds him of his mother.

Strongest Element

Kessen II brings together every aspect of the game to support the narrative. This cohesion permeates the experience of the game in ways that the average person may not realize, such as with music and camera angles. It is through these numerous disciplines that Kessen II can reach the player in multiple ways at once. Everything is either about yin-yang contrasts or perspectives, usually both.

The music, created by veteran film composer Reijiro Koroku, gives an excellent aural accompaniment to the game, but specifically in the pre- and post-battle intermissions and cut-scenes. Reijiro Koroku contributes to the narrative by interleaving into the music what can be best described as a sense of masculinity and femininity, the two sensations emerging and withdrawing in accord with one another (easily identifiable in the soundtrack piece titled "Military Rule"). This is perfect for telling a story about a man on his quest to save his love, or perhaps a peace-seeking man who dons an "armor of ice" to deal with the harsh world he lives in.

Film, photographs, and museum displays depicting Chinese council meetings of this time period often have viewing angles that suggest that the viewer is either a subordinate or an invisible spectator. During intermissions containing such council meetings in Kessen II, everything is presented from the perspective of a warlord. Characters attending these councils commonly start with "my lord," or "lord Liu Bei/Cao Cao," and a gesture of respect (such as a bow or salute) before continuing with their message. This empowers the player and reinforces the sense that the game takes place from the perspective of either Liu Bei or Cao Cao.

Unsuccessful Element

Coming from Japan, Kessen II had to be localized for audiences in the West. It seems some information was lost during translation and some phrases in the English voice acting became incredibly awkward or out of context. These are forgivable and the solution is more or less straightforward, but Kessen II's bigger problem is the contrast between Asian and Western audiences.

Several issues result from the game borrowing from the setting and characters of The Romance of the Three Kingdoms, which is well-known in Asian countries but virtually unheard of in the West. Unless they are exposed to The Romance of the Three Kingdoms (such as fans of the Dynasty Warriors series, certain anime, manga, etc.), Westerners do not have an initial understanding of the characters. However, these players are not expected to know the characters and can learn about them if they make an effort, but this is not enough to make up for a lack of introduction and familiarization of minor characters.

Audiences who know of The Romance of the Three Kingdoms have the opposite problem, ironically of the same yin-and-yang relationship that Kessen II frequently exhibits! They know the Three Kingdoms world too well. Some changes to the setting, characters, and storylines were jarring and in some cases ridiculous, such as Liu Bei and Cao Cao being brothers. A player in this audience might be too distracted with these changes to pay further attention to the story or worse: lose interest.

Highlight

The most pivotal moment in Kessen II is during a cut-scene after playing through the last level of Liu Bei's play-through. Diao Chan describes Cao Cao's last moments, where he explains to her his violent actions introspectively and wishes Liu Bei farewell. Up until this point, Cao Cao is a heartless villain undeserving of pity, but here is the first moment where the player can see Cao Cao's humanity, where the player can relate to him and see that he was not truly evil at heart. The emphasis on Cao Cao's mother is very humanizing, and with greater clarity than ever we can see the yin-and-yang relationship inside him. To quote some of his last words in the cinematic:

"Foolish men waged war to satisfy their vain desires, and I was torn away from my mother. Of all my family, only I survived."

"I have seen too much of this world. Man is a beast. He must change. I swore to use my strength and will to end war..."

"...tell him [Liu Bei] to make a world where a person like me cannot be born."

What works so well for this perspective shift is that it is so closely-related to the plots of both Liu Bei and Cao Cao's stories. Liu Bei's story because the motivation of Cao Cao (which has now radically changed) is so integral to his demonization, and Cao Cao's because it explains his "curse" – the beginning of his entrapment in the pain of losing his family.

Critical Reception

Many fans of The Romance of the Three Kingdoms novels or media based off them (such as Dynasty Warriors) were upset with how little Kessen II's story reflects the Three Kingdoms saga. However, Kessen II does an excellent job in creating its own original story from a well-known source. If Kessen II followed the same story as The Romance of the Three Kingdoms, then there is simply nothing that would give a new experience or set up opposing perspectives that encompass several themes. A review on EuroGamer.net gives the game a positive recommendation despite poking fun at the story, voice acting, and historical accuracy, stating, "Luckily the sheer silliness pervading the whole game makes it a joy to play, with the sometimes frankly surreal cutscenes either carrying the story forwards or simply leaving you staring at the screen in utter disbelief" (Gestalt).

In Japan, where the game was first released, the game magazine Famitsu gave Kessen II a 35/40, an impressive score from Famitsu. According to an article from IGN, the reviewers of Famitsu "...thought quite highly of the expanded gameplay elements and improved graphics in the second evolution of the Agent System [battle simulation]" ("Kessen II Scores Platinum Famitsu Award").

IGN rated Kessen II an 8.4 and compared it with the first Kessen, which has an entirely different story taking place in feudal Japan. While most of IGN's review focuses on the strategy mechanics, it takes a positive view on the change of portrayal of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. "...it's the Three Kingdoms world that makes the game -- the new emphasis on powerful magic and the use of heroic

characters is perfectly in keeping with the theme of the story. It's an unusual synergy between presentation and gameplay, and it works to enhance what is already a solid strategy game" (Smith).

Lessons

The notion that too many characters creates too much noise isn't always true. Kessen II gives details to every character in the game to make them recognizable, but it doesn't try to fit all of them into the spotlight at once. Instead, characters will briefly enter the spotlight and fade away, giving the narrative designer a chance to expose a multitude of unique characters to the player while not drawing attention away from a greater drama. Furthermore, this gives a certain richness to the game's world as well as flexibility in terms of building themes and advancing the plot.

Be prepared for a backlash when incorporating content from a well-known source, especially if the audience is familiar with it. Nerds have a tendency to scrutinize at will and get wrapped up in details that are beside the point. This is not to say that the community should control one's work, but estimating the reaction of the community is a good first step towards directing their attention on the narrative matters they should be focused on.

Absolutely everything can strengthen the narrative. The music, camera angles, color schemes, character outfits, script, voice acting, level design, mechanics, and everything else that the player might be exposed to should support the themes of the narrative.

Just because the player does not make plot-affecting choices does not mean that the video game medium is any less powerful for delivery. There are many elements of storytelling that can be used in different ways if told via a video game medium, not just the ability to control the story. For instance, Kessen II's use of perspective is more effective due to its nature as a game, allowing the player to experience the perspectives and their shifts on a deeper level.

Summation

Kessen II's narrative is much deeper than it first appears. In several different ways, it serves as a good example of a well-structured game narrative by using and expanding on multiple literary devices in ways that make use of the video game medium, being a composition of numerous artistic disciplines (music, writing, visual art, etc.), and hosting an array of characters that give flavor to the drama without overtaking it. Almost every aspect contributes to its theme of duality, of contrast and perspective changes, carefully thought out and reflecting its contrasts upon one another.

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