

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Fire Emblem: Blazing Sword
Platform: Game Boy Advance
Genre: Tactical turn-based RPG
Release Date: April 25, 2003 (Japan), November 3, 2003 (North America)
Developer: Intelligent Systems
Publisher: Nintendo
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Ken Yokoyama, Kouhei Maeda

Overview

The seventh game in the *Fire Emblem* franchise, *Fire Emblem: Blazing Sword* stars three lords who attempt to prevent a sorcerer from summoning long-time banished Fire Dragons back into the human world Elibe for his personal gain. The game is broken into over thirty levels featuring unique maps and narrative arcs, blending the line between protagonists and antagonists by allowing a handful of enemies to be recruited.

Within the major narrative arc, players can also decide individual character endings by placing characters together to trigger “support conversations,” in which characters talk to one another to increase their bond. Other than the three main lords (with a couple chapter-specific exceptions), every other character can die without altering the major storyline; however, through the support conversations, many of the characters can have happy endings, including marriage and lifelong partnership. Characters can only have an “A” support with one other character, meaning players will have to replay the game several times to unlock the many different relationship endings.

Characters

- **Lynndis** – Granddaughter of the Marquess of Caelin, Lynndis is one of the three main characters in the game that the player controls. Born in the Sacaen Plains, Lyn seeks to avenge her parents and tribe, who were slaughtered by bandits. Her quest eventually leads her to Castle Caelin, where she meets her grandfather for the first time and, one year later, seeks help from Eliwood and Hector to protect the castle from a siege. Although known for her kind-hearted temperament, Lyn is quick to show bravery and devotion when protecting her tribe and friends.
- **Eliwood** – Born of the noble house of Pherae, Eliwood is another one of the three main characters the player controls. After his father is kidnapped by the Dark

- Druid Nergal, Eliwood goes on a quest to save him. Along the way, he learns of Nergal's darker ploy involving a group of assassins and resurrecting the Fire Dragons at the Dead Isles. To defeat Nergal, Eliwood must find a legendary weapon called the Durandal (the "Blazing Sword") and prevent him from opening the Dragon's Gate, the portal connecting the human and dragon worlds.
- **Hector** – The last of the three main lords the player controls, Hector is a young lord of Ostia and close friend of Eliwood. Straightforward and blunt by nature, he decides to help Eliwood search for his missing father. He, too, acquires a legendary weapon, the axe Armads, to defeat Nergal. Although quick to enter conflict, his strong loyalty and devotion to Eliwood and his quest proves his strength.
 - **Nergal** – Nergal is the main antagonist, a Dark Druid corrupted by darkness and power. He discovers the magical essence of "quintessence," which allows him to steal the life force of other living creatures to become more powerful. Initially a man interested in amassing knowledge, Nergal once lived in Arcadia, a world where humans and dragons could live in peace. After his dragon-wife Aenir is kidnapped, he sends his children through the Dragon's Gate to protect them. As he gathers enough power to open the gates to reclaim his children, he is consumed by darkness and cannot remember why he wanted to open the Gates in the first place – he just inherently knows he must open the Gates. Using his quintessence, Nergal creates a group of "morphs" – beings who appear human-like and follow his bidding.
 - **Black Fang/The Four Fang** – Originally a justice group of assassins that killed corrupt noblemen to help the poor, The Black Fang is overthrown by Nergal and his morph minions in order to wipe out any opposition. The Four Fang are the most elite assassins of the Black Fang, including sons of the Black Fang's initial leader, Brendan Reed.
 - **Ninian/Nils** – Ninian and Nils are half-human, half-dragon, children of the ice dragon Aenir and the antagonist Nergal. Although weak in stature, they have the sole ability to open and cross the Dragon's Gate. Upon entering the human world in search for their father, they lose the majority of the memories and their quintessence, therefore turning into their human forms. After Nergal discovers their power of opening the Dragon Gates, he steals their quintessence to gain more power, not realizing they are his children.

Breakdown

The narrative of Fire Emblem: Blazing Sword is extensive, as players travel across the map of Elibe, following Eliwood and Hector's quest to defeat Nergal and prevent the return of the Fire Dragons. The game presents narrative in between and before each "chapter" or level, describing the main lords' encounters with a variety of allies and enemies of different kingdoms. They must first fight the Black Fang and the Four Fang to eventually reach Nergal. Although they initially set out to save Eliwood's father, after learning of Nergal's dark plans, they switch course to save Elibe from Fire Dragons by defeating Nergal and closing the Dragon's Gate. In addition to the level narrative, which mainly focuses on Eliwood's plight, other character stories are embellished throughout

the support conversations, which players can trigger to see specific character-to-character interactions.

After completing Lyn's initial story of fighting her way to Castle Caelin (which also serves as a tutorial for the game), the player must choose Eliwood or Hector's route. The two routes are fairly similar in overall plotline, but Hector's route is generally more difficult and contains more levels – and therefore more narrative. Only through Hector's route can the player understand the depth of the narrative, especially with regards to Nergal's tragic backstory. The major narrative is linear. Players fight through different tactical maps, gradually leveling up their troops as they defeat stronger and more important bosses throughout the game. Each chapter ties back to the overall plot of Eliwood and his group, who the player recruits over time, traveling to the Dead Isles to save Eliwood's father and then searching for the legendary weapons to eventually fight Nergal in a final battle.

While the main narrative is engaging in its own, what makes Fire Emblem replayable is in the ability to recruit NPCs or enemies and engage all the characters in a variety of support conversations. Many of the narrative nuances occur in the character interactions. Players must choose certain characters they want to focus on training, as levels restrict the amount of troops players can use. Additionally, because each character has unique personalities, when they are killed during a chapter level, players will not be able to use them for the rest of the game. Players must decide to continue the game without that character or to restart the game to preserve their story.

As a prequel set twenty years before *Fire Emblem: Sword of Seals*, Fire Emblem also successfully plants hints of future events that only Fire Emblem fans will pick up, such as character cameos – narrative Easter eggs that players appreciated.

Strongest Element

The strongest element in the game is the narrative reveal tied to specific chapters. While the player progresses through the main thirty chapters, several side chapters are only available when the player completes certain unspecified conditions (such as killing a boss within 13 turns). Particularly, the game reveals Nergal's backstory over the course of three difficult-to-unlock side quests. Although the side quests do not alter the major timeline of the game, as the player will always fight Nergal in the final chapter, learning that Nergal was once a kind father and wise scholar changes the player perception of the entire narrative of the game. Nergal does not remember that he wanted to open the Dragon Gates to find his children, and Ninian and Nils do not remember that they entered the human world to find their father. After realizing their connection, Nergal's abuse of power when finding his children (who he does not recognize) turns his story into an unfortunate tragedy rather than one about a power-hungry individual turned to darkness.

Unsuccessful Element

Some characters are more essential to the plotline than others. This potentially causes confusion because if those characters are killed during a battle, they will “retreat” and

still appear in certain cutscenes, but other minor characters will die and never return. While scripting out the potential cutscenes to consider character death is much more difficult, the discrepancy can be confusing between different characters. Major character death, such as the death of the three major lords and Ninian, leads to an automatic chapter restart. Potentially, having any character important enough for cutscenes to trigger restarts would narratively make more sense instead of separating “retreating” characters from characters who experience perma-death.

Highlight

The story of the Reed brothers is one of the strongest narrative elements of Fire Emblem, as it brings out the truly morally ambiguous line between good guys and bad guys. Sons of the Black Fang leader Brendan Reed, Lloyd and Linus are two of the elite Four Fang, well-trained in combat and loyal to their father. When their father is corrupted by his wife Sonia, who is also one of Nergal’s morphs, they continue to obey their father, distrusting their step-mother but still respecting their father. Following the former Black Fang code of keeping innocents out of battle, the brothers are respectful of tradition and life, even if the Black Fang members under them are not. As Eliwood and his group are gathering information on the Black Fang in the pursuit of finding Eliwood’s father, they run into Lloyd, the older and more composed brother. He confronts and battles them, believing he is fighting on the side of justice. Once bested, Eliwood manages to convince him that Nergal is feeding the Black Fang lies through his morphs. Immediately, Lloyd returns to inform his brother, but one of Nergal’s morphs finds him and steals his quintessence, killing him. Linus, the younger and more rash of the two brothers, soon finds his brother and, deceived by the morph that killed his brother, is told that Eliwood murdered his brother. He swears vengeance. Eliwood and his group find him guarding the shrine of legendary weapons, and they must kill him, as he is blinded by fury and cannot be convinced otherwise.

Their story, alongside Nergal’s backstory, highlights the question of morals and perspective. The Reed brothers, former heroes, are fighting for justice but are simply misguided by a corrupt leader. Eliwood and Hector are similarly fighting for justice, but through them, the player must kill the second brother to progress in the game. Interestingly, both Lloyd and Linus’s names mean “grey,” perhaps suggesting that they are neither good nor bad.

Critical Reception

The critical reception of the game was fairly high, with an average Metacritic score of 88%. Lower ratings noted the at-times frustrating factors of perma-death and difficult levels that even the best players may have to replay. Craig Harris of IGN scored Fire Emblem a high rating of 9.5/10, describing the single player quest as “incredibly challenging and fulfilling” and requiring of a “careful mind for its strategy and gameplay.” He nods to the game’s tutorialization, which blends Lyn’s storyline with a well-crafted tutorial that teaches players the nuances of the game’s strategy and gameplay, as well as the “rewarding” experience of acquiring new characters through

side-quests. Overall, he applauds how “each character” is given a “unique personality in the pages upon pages of text that unfolds the storyline.” Bethany Massimilla of Gamesport rated Fire Emblem a 9.1/10, describing the game as coupling “a compelling, character-driven epic tale with strategic gameplay.” She notes how the game’s narrative is “very tightly scripted” but that “there are enough little plot twists, scheming, melodrama, and genuinely funny and touching moments to make playing through the tale a very rich, satisfying experience.”

Lessons

- While major narrative branches are important, side plots are just as important to develop. Creating interesting interactions between otherwise uninteresting characters leads to replayability and an increase in engagement. Some players play the game for the strategy, but many players will play the game for the story. The support conversations are particularly interesting, as players will have to replay the game to unlock new interactions.
- Small story beats help progress the larger narrative plot. Fire Emblem cleverly pits the player against a progression of enemies – bandits, the Black Fang, the Four Fang, Nergal’s morphs, and then Nergal himself and Fire Dragons. The narrative progression lends in well to the gameplay progression, allowing troops to level up as the narrative runs deeper.
- Characterization comes not only from dialogue but also from appearance and weaponry. Each Fire Emblem character is uniquely distinct and easily recognizable in both cut scenes and battle animations, and their temperament and personality is often reflected in their “class” (mercenary, cleric, lord, etc)
- Allowing players to unlock side quests and recruit NPCs or enemies leads to interesting narrative elements. Players essentially have the chance to create the stories they want through the characters they wish to develop and train.
- If the game is a series (a prequel/sequel), leaving hints of future or past games is exciting for players to discover. For example, in the Nabata Desert chapter, if the player visits one of the villages, they run into a Fire Emblem character from *Sword of Seals*. Although she is not unlockable in Blazing Sword, being able to see her leaves players pleased.

Summation

Overall, Fire Emblem: Blazing Sword was rightfully critically acclaimed for the depth of its narrative and characterization. The wide range of individual character personalities mixed with the necessities of character class in creating a robust team leads to engaging, emergent gameplay even though the main narrative itself is linear. The ability to learn about the large cast of characters and watch the smaller story beats occur alongside Eliwood’s story is what truly sells the game.