

Game Narrative Review

Game Title: Xenosaga Episode 1: Der Wille zur Macht (The Will to Power)

Platform: PS2

Genre: RPG

Release Date: February 2003

Developer: Monolith Soft

Publisher: Namco

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Tetsuya Takahashi

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Overview

Xenosaga is the spiritual successor of the cult classic Xenogears which was released on the original Playstation. While it is not a direct sequel to the original game, it takes place in the same universe, and is meant to be more geared towards a reimagining of the world. The main idea behind episode one of what was supposed to be a six part series, is in the subtitle “The Will to Power.” Taken from the 19th century German philosopher, Frederick Nietzsche, it’s an idea which states that every living being strives to exert its will onto others.

The story takes place 4,000 years into humanity’s future, after the discovery of an artifact known as the Zohar found in the early 21st century. From the beginning the player is shown that even after all this time has passed, the artifact still remains a mystery to Humanity. There is also KOS-MOS an android unit created to battle an enemy known as the Gnosis, both central to the unfolding events. Xenosaga’s story is relayed to the player through cut scenes and music as well. Throughout this installment you are introduced to a lot of the main players that will be prevalent for the rest of the series. The reward for playing through is the answers to some questions, and the revelation of more mysteries you didn’t even know were there.

The names Zohar and Gnosis were not chosen lightly. The term Zohar can originally be found in the Torah. Translated from Aramaic it means splendor or radiance, furthermore it describes a relationship between universal energy and man as well as the origin and structure of the universe. This reinforces one of the main themes of the story which also helps illustrate why an ancient artifact may be the key to humanity’s future. Gnosis is a reference to spiritual or mystical knowledge, this coincides with the fact that the gnosis in the game have an almost ethereal presence giving them a mystical look and feel.

Characters

- **Shion Uzuki** – A brilliant scientist, especially for her age, working for Vector Industries and in charge of the KOS-MOS project. While very energetic and not one to shy away from taking risks, she also brings with her all the naivete’s that come with

youth. Born on a planet known as Old Miltia, ground zero for the origin of the Gnosis, she knows the hardships of war and the loss of family members.

- **KOS-MOS** – An android built primarily to combat the Gnosis, she also has the function of trying to partially mimic human interaction. Some of her abilities come as a surprise even to that of her creator Shion. When first introduced there doesn't seem to be too much lurking beneath her exterior, but by the end there is clearly more than meets the eye.
- **Ziggy** – A cyborg (part human part machine) from a time nearly forgotten. He's an introvert who prefers to work alone, however during the course of the game is forced to work with others. By doing this he regains part of his humanity he thought he lost.
- **Chaos** – One of the games many enigmas. He presents himself as a mature adult with an air of maturity only experience can give, yet he has the appearance of a teenage boy. Not only that, he is capable of performing magnificent abilities no other human would dare dream of. Though reluctant to share his past, he is proven to be a trustworthy companion.
- **Momo** – Another character where there is more than meets the eye. Momo is a realian, a biologically engineered human with a number of special abilities. One thing that sets her apart from other realians is that she has human emotions, and desires to become fully human.
- **Jr.** - Another young traveler who appears to be wise beyond his years. Captain of the ship known as Durandal, Jr. is an excellent marksman who isn't afraid to put his talents to use. Him and Momo begin to develop a relationship that might have had earlier roots.

Breakdown

Xenosaga is an epic tale of the struggle of human survival, set as a space opera. While the story is told primarily through cut scenes, it is also conveyed through music. Through the music's rhythm the player is able to further suspend their disbelief and delve further into the game world, becoming more attentive to not only the atmosphere of the game or a particular situation, but also what the characters might be feeling.

Main characters are introduced at a steady pace (only one or two at a time) and all of them greatly affect the world around them in their own way. We are introduced to all of these characters initially in their natural environments, they all start out going about their usual tasks. As events begin to unfold they run into one another at various points and finally join together in common cause. These characters individual stories tie in very neatly to the overall narrative, and the greater mission at hand. All have a backstory which helps unveil the Xenosaga universe. Some have a previous history with one another that helps deepen their emotional ties with the player and the other character's, one has even been around for thousands of years acting as the universes' failsafe.

Due to the nature of the enemy these characters face throughout the game, they are given giant combat machines known as A.G.W.S. units to help them in their journey. While these units do

have a place in the world, their utilization is poor and underused. These units are almost never needed until the very end of the game (a little off balance since in the game's narrative world these are highly valued) which makes them little more than fluff until this point arrives. In order to better highlight the importance of these units as both a narrative and gameplay element, it may have been more prevalent to save them until they are needed, and when introduced give them a noticeable bond with their associated character.

Cosmetic robots aside, the character depth presented in Xenosaga appropriately reflects the grand tale the game is trying to tell.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of the game narrative is the music used in harmony with the game's visuals because it very accurately captures the mood of the setting. It's almost like a well choreographed dance. A well scored piece of music can carry the observer into the situation, into the character, and into the characters emotions. From the mysterious beginning to the climactic ending, the music helps draw the player further and further into the world. Sometimes music can be so powerful it becomes synonymous with the game itself, such as *Aerith's Theme* from *Final Fantasy VII*. In this case, rather than there being one clear theme to remember alongside the name of the game, nearly the entire soundtrack deserves remembrance when reflecting on any portion of the game.

Unsuccessful Element

Xenosaga's world is extremely vast with many mysteries left for the player to unlock. Many have deep roots and require a good deal of time and thought to process and fully understand what's going on. In order to fully communicate to the audience the story they wanted to tell, cut scenes were in high order. In fact, they're half the game if not more. There are literally hours of cinematics in a game that takes roughly thirty to forty hours to complete. The problem here is that not only are there more cut scenes than even the average RPG contains, they're extremely long. While players are able to pause these cinematics, it is impossible to go back and revisit them short of playing through that corresponding part of the game again. This leaves an overwhelming amount of information needed to be remembered for those who want the whole story.

Highlight

The element of game narrative through music is depicted very eloquently with the opening cut scene. The player starts off by hearing a very mellow hymn, one that's become a staple of the space opera genre especially with the release of Halo. The tempo rises and falls based on what's

being visually displayed to the player. It leaves a mysterious air as the screen goes black and reveals the names of people who worked on the project, and it levels off to the point you almost can't hear anything as we are shown a person touching the Zohar artifact disappear, indicating a sense of despair. Then it picks up again as soon as we are shown the schematics for KOS-MOS indicating a sense of hope. This adds an emotional depth to the game and improves the suspension of disbelief.

Critical Reception

Xenosaga was received reasonably well by most critics. The common denominator in all of the reviews would be that they all have something to say (some nice, some not so nice) about the very long and seemingly overtly extended cut scenes. IGN put it the most succinctly, "Xenosaga is a deeply enriching thrill ride towards the cosmos ... Not without a few gameplay-to-cinema pacing problems."

Gamespot believed the game held a strong cast of characters with strong visuals and audio, while still holding its reserves about the pacing of the plot. RPGFan also sang its praises and held an optimistic view towards the future of the series, "As the introduction to an enormous epic, Der Wille zur Macht does an impeccable job of setting the tone for great things to come."

Lessons

- When most (if not all) of the narrative architecture of a game takes place in the cut scenes, the game medium deteriorates in value because now we simply have a game wrapped around a movie. This begs the question of why not just make a movie instead when the interactivity holds little value.
- Gameplay in games is analogous to grammar in a novel, or the actors in a movie (one could argue characters as well). The overall message and story you are trying to convey may be compelling, but it is being told through one of these vessels. If this vessel is inadequate or is presented in the wrong way, suspension of disbelief is lost as well as the message. How can a person get through a game they have difficulty playing due to poor gameplay, or a book they can't read. This does not mean narrative architecture has no place in a game, quite the contrary. When narrative architecture and the use of symbolism are utilized correctly, both in cut scenes and gameplay, it substantially immerses the player. However, it is important to remember the medium we are using and rather than try to work around the limitations (each has their strengths as weaknesses), we should embrace their strengths and utilize them as much as possible.
- If cut scenes are going to be a key point in storytelling, they should be highly accessible. Playback availability would be favorable, as would be breaking points in some of the longer cut-scenes. A large amount of information in smaller doses generally makes it easier to swallow.

Summation

While Xenosaga may seem like a long and drawn out movie to some, there is no doubt that it is a full and rich game filled with an unparalleled narrative. Even though RPG's generally rely heavily on their story element, Xenosaga manages to put together the various pieces of narrative architecture which culminates in an unforgettable experience. A recent article in *Scientific American Mind* states "Music seems to offer a novel method of communication rooted in emotions rather than meaning. Research shows that what we feel when we hear a piece of music is remarkably similar to what everybody else in the room is experiencing." This might very well be one of the reasons why the allure of music contributes so much to a narrative. Furthermore, it shows how music can be more meaningful than sound effects, words or visuals and how it will affect game design in the future. As we, the observer, are pulled deeper into the emotions of a situation through music, those around us are being affected similarly. This has grand implications for online games in particular where a number of players can experience the same thing at the same time, allowing them to feed off the energy of the crowd.