

Game Narrative Review

Game: Ōkami

Platform: PS2

Genre: Action-Adventure

Release Date: September 19, 2006

Developer: Clover Studio

Publisher: Capcom

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Uncertain

Author of this Review: Evan McCrain

Overview

Ōkami is derived heavily from Japanese mythology, and most of the characters and events are derived from the myths – though the main plotline itself does not directly correspond to any single myth. It tells the story of the sun goddess Amaterasu, in the form a wolf, on a journey to rid Nippon of the demons that have started to plague the land. The narrative uses the myths it borrows from in order to throw plot twists at the player – usually by transitioning from one myth being the focus to another – revealing that the journey is not yet near its end.

Characters

- **Amaterasu** – The player avatar; she is the goddess of the sun in the form of a white wolf. She power causes her fur to bear red-colored markings that are only visible to those that believe in the gods. Due to being in the form of a wolf, she relies on Issun to convey what she is saying to others. She is has been forced away from the Celestial Plain due to an event in the far past, and is consequently focusing on eliminating the evil that has been spreading across Nippon. Her journey begins when she is reawakened to defeat a revived Orochi.
- **Issun** – Amaterasu’s insect-sized partner. He is short tempered and tends to joke around a lot, despite the gravity of their quest. He seems to be one of the few characters in the game that is capable of understanding what Amaterasu is thinking, and consequently acts as her interpreter throughout the game so that both the NPCs and the player will understand her. He decides to accompany Amaterasu on her quest when he discovers that she is able to use the Thirteen Celestial Brush techniques, as is personally goal is to find them for himself.
- **Waka** – A mysterious young man who appears at various points throughout the game. He is aware of what Amaterasu really is, and his appearances usually reveal some of Amaterasu’s back-story or a clue as to how to progress the story. On some of these occasions, he battles Amaterasu – presumably to gauge her strength. Throughout the vast majority of the game, it is unclear whether his is an ally or a foe.
- **Orochi** – An eight-headed serpent, with each head bearing a different elemental power. He is a reoccurring boss throughout the game, and is part of the reason that Amaterasu

is no longer on the Celestial Plain. The game initially leads the player to believe that he is the main villain of the game, but this is overturned after the player defeats him for the first time.

Breakdown

The narrative for *Ōkami*, though highly linear, gives a sense of breadth that many games do not. Its use of many Japanese myths and folk tales gives the game a large amount of material to work with, and allows the game to tell many separate stories as a part of a greater, overarching tale. This is primarily done by treating them as fairly discrete tales within the whole, which creates the illusion of the game telling a much more complex story.

Part of how this is handled is the game's boss encounters. Each boss battle is in direct correspondence to a narrative climax, as well as behaving as a gameplay climax. Additionally, it also uses the boss encounters to increase the amount of narrative content by having them tell a miniature tale of how the beast were defeated rather than being a simple "and then the villain was defeated" type of encounter.

Ōkami's use of myth is the biggest factor in how the game manages to create a story with as much substance as it has. Much of this comes from the symbolism that is innate to mythical stories. This is particularly effective for the non-Japanese portion of the audience do to the tales being unfamiliar to the player; allowing the symbolism to be more subtle and consequently more effective.

Characterization also helps to give the game its narrative depth. By taking the characters from the myths and tales and the characters introduced by the game itself and giving them both very distinct and memorable personalities, *Ōkami* manages to increase the perceived narrative content. This also helps to steer the player through the game's narrative by making it easier to recall who a given character is.

Overall, *Ōkami* does an excellent job of generating a compelling and deep narrative. It thrives upon the use of myths for both story and character components of the narrative, and knows how to modify them in order to suit their purpose in the overarching story. As a result, the game maintains substantial interest throughout the narrative, despite a story that is somewhat linear.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of *Ōkami*'s narrative is the integration of all the Japanese myths and fairy-tales that the game makes use of. Though many of the myths the game borrows from have very little to do with one another – if anything at all – the narrative manages to tie them together in such a way that those who are not familiar with the tales won't notice. This is done primarily by having characters appear before and after the main story gets to their tale, and giving them at least some significance at those times. The use of the myths and fairy-tales also

lends the game a broad scope of symbolism that it is able to call upon. This leads to a much more fantastic and immersive story; at least for the western audience for the game.

Unsuccessful Element

One of the less successful elements of the narrative would be the pacing. The narrative feels too fast, and rarely slows down for a moment – even after the player has beaten the game. This lends the game to feeling incredibly thick with story when a player runs straight through, ignoring the narrative potential held by the side-quests. This can potentially have the effect of overwhelming the player with the story, and consequently putting them off from the game.

Highlight

The best moment in the game’s narrative would be the player defeats Orochi for the first time. Up until this point, the player has been led to believe that this was supposed to be the climax battle of the game, and it is here where it is revealed to be just the beginning. The cut-scene that occurs here uses a series of still pictures in a traditional Japanese art style and praises Amaterasu greatly for accomplishing the deed. But at the end of this cut-scene it reveals that there is still much more to come, and gives the player a new weapon before sending them on their way. This scene does a wonderful job of making the player feel like they have really accomplished something, and makes them eager to see where the story is going next.

Critical Reception

Ōkami received a favorable reception, with the reviews mostly scoring the upper eighties and nineties. IGN gave the game a 91, claiming that “One of the most surprising things about Ōkami is how good the story is,” likely due to similar game – such as the *Legend of Zelda* series – having much less of a focus on the story. Similarly, GameSpot gave the game a 90, saying “You don’t need to be familiar with the source material to appreciate this game – you just need a bit of an open mind.”

Lessons

- Myths, fairy-tales and other folk lore are great sources to borrow from when creating the story for a game. Furthermore, they work well even when the players are unfamiliar with the stories that the game derives from, as they contain time proven story and characters that have the necessary appeal.
- A game’s narrative must be integrated with its gameplay in order to achieve the greatest effect. This can be done by having the player execute an action that would normally be handled by a cut-scene, or simply having the cut-scenes contain more user interaction.
- Even the most linear game narrative can benefit from optional offshoots. They provide the player with a way to deviate from the main story without interrupting it, and consequently help to keep the core narrative from overtaking other parts of the game.

Summation

Ōkami is a wonderful game, especially in terms of its narrative. As such, the game deserves recognition for what it did by drawing upon mythology and stories outside of the usual Greek and Roman mythology, as well as for taking a type of game that does not usually find itself with a particularly deep story and making the story one of the game's most important parts. Ōkami also shows that story can benefit greatly from being integrated with the core style of the game.