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Ogre Battle Review

This review is of the cult Super Nintendo hit *Ogre Battle*. In my eyes, it achieved cult hit status because of its appeal to hard-core gamers as well as its limited release (only 25,000 US copies!), despite being extraordinarily successful in Japan. Its innovative gameplay has not been emulated by any other games to date (besides sequels). As a monument to *Ogre Battle*'s amazing replayability, I still play the game today on an SNES emulator.

General information:

Full name: *Ogre Battle Saga, Episode 5: The March of the Black Queen*

Publisher: Atlus

Developer: Quest

Copyright Date: 1993

Genre: real time strategy with RPG elements

Platform: Originally released for SNES, ported to Sega Saturn and Sony Playstation, with sequels for SNES, N64, Neo Geo Pocket Color, Sony Playstation

Players: 1 player game

Storyline:

This game has a tremendously deep storyline for a console game, rivaling most RPGs. When I say deep, it is not in the traditional interactive fiction sense. There are no cutscenes in the game, and characters do not talk to each other. Rather, what makes the game deep is not the plot, but the completely branching structure of the plot. The story itself is not extremely original:

The game takes place thousands of years after a huge battle, called "The Ogre Battle," was fought. This war was between mankind and demonkind, with

the winner to rule the world. Mankind won and sealed the demons in the underworld. However, an evil wizard created an artifact called “The Black Diamond” that could destroy this seal. Recognizing the threat, the forces of good created the Zodiac Stones, which enabled the capture of the evil artifact.

Peace reigned for thousands of years, until an evil wizard named Rashidi was able to gain control of the Black Diamond. He and Empress Endora of Zetegenia go on a rampage, taking over all the woefully unprepared countries of the continent. However, a small rebellion, that includes the player, forms in Zenobia, planning to rid the continent of evils for all time. Thus, the second Ogre Battle begins.

The point of the game is to go across to all the regions, liberating cities from the powers of evil. Each region has a unique story, giving it character. Through his actions, the player can modify his reputation and, along with it, the story. This allows the branching storyline to end in as many as 22 different endings. Towns will provide information advancing the story when they are visited. However, this is the extent of plot development, as there are no cutscenes. There also isn't much character development among the unique characters that you can acquire. They don't talk, basically becoming puppets in your army.

Gameplay:

This is the strong point of the game. The game allows you to assemble various parties of characters that can go roaming about the overworld map in real-time. This is

really an innovation in a strategic game with role-playing aspects (which itself was an innovation at the time). It has never been properly replicated, though Warcraft 3 looks like it might have some promise in this area. Enemies within a certain range can be seen on the map, and moving characters into enemy icons will begin a combat mode. Each party can consist of up to 5 units (except for large units that take 2 slots). In the unit editor, players can mix and match 15 parties from their selection of 100 units. Each unit has individual attributes such as strength, agility, intelligence, luck, charisma, and alignment. These stats will increase based on levels and items used.

The player has a 'main party' that consists of the player's hero and followers. This hero gets generated Ultima-style from various morality questions answered at the beginning of the game. The answers given by the player will determine the class and stats of the main character. Making immoral choices will cause one to start out with a character on the dark path and vice versa.

Characters have stats such as speed and hit points that affect their combat effectiveness. The truly great thing is the class system. Characters can be recruited from liberated towns. These characters can start out as lowly fighters and valkyries, and advance through a complex class system to monks, dragoons, sorcerors, princesses, or any of a large number of classes. To give a taste of the complexity of the class system, it is based not only on the level of the character but his stats as well. For example, only characters with low alignment (evil) can become mages and ninjas, while good characters can become knights or clerics.

How do characters change their alignment scores? If they allow liberated cities to be retaken over by the enemy, their reputation and alignment will go down. Likewise if

they brutally slaughter much weaker enemies, kill healers, or use evil items. This prevents the player from building up a killer party that can wipe all enemies out of existence, as doing so is the path to evil.

While each class has its own special powers and attacks, so do each creature, and every single creature (excepting some bosses) can be persuaded to join your rebellion! These creatures also grow and change. It's a pleasure to raise a small faerie into a potent sylph, or a small dragon to the immensely powerful Tiamat. Some creatures will aid you in the overworld map, either moving fast, flying, or being especially adept at traversing forests, water, or some other kind of terrain. All have special combat abilities, ranging from the faerie kiss (enhancing attack power) to the Princess's powerful Starlight attack (rain of holy light especially damaging to undead).

Combat is fairly unique compared to most strategic games. Basically, combat is automatic, with both sides controlled by the computer. The player can give simple commands that change targeting priority. For example, the player can have his units attack the strongest, weakest, or leading enemy. Otherwise, all you can do is sit back and order retreats if things are going badly. Or you can use tarot cards that have special magical powers that can change the tide of battle. Some players may not like the automatic combat, but it does make the game go faster. The sheer amounts of battles would make it tedious to control all of them.

Ogre Battle's gameplay is complex, with some deeming it the most complicated SNES game ever. Regardless, it offers a far deeper experience and more replayability than most console gamers are used to.

Graphics:

The main part of the game takes place on a 2D overworld map that has nice simple animations like moving water. Also animated is the passage of time, with night and day slowly creeping across the map. This actually affects gameplay, as some units function better in the dark (vampires, etc.), and there are items that can change day to night and vice versa. However, even with these animations, the overworld map remains fairly static and the characters moving around the map are simple icons that are difficult to differentiate.

Battle mode occurs in a fixed _ isometric view. The characters have detailed artwork, but very simple attack animations. Characters are drawn in a cartoonish style that lends itself well to the game. Spell effects are nicely rendered on a non-3D platform. Since there are massive amounts of different units, some artwork is reused with minor palette swaps for similar units.

Music and Sound:

Each region in the game has different tracks, and they are all excellent given the limitations of the hardware. Battles also have their own tracks. The tracks are very memorable and dedicated players will remember them even today, with some quoting certain tracks as their favorite of all time.

Sound effects, on the other hand, are quite lacking. The ones that are there are fairly minimal and not worth noting. There are actually a few voice effects in the game,

but they sound muffled and are barely intelligible (you wouldn't know what they said unless you read the text bubbles).

Artificial Intelligence:

The combat AI follows simple scripts using a greedy algorithm. For example, your characters will hit the enemy with most hit points if you choose to attack the strongest enemy. The enemy AI doesn't make intelligent decisions, sometimes attacking the least effective of your characters first. Also, on the overworld map, the enemy AI consists solely of making a line and heading straight towards your headquarters. This is easily predicted and manipulated by players.

Game Design:

Overall, the strategy game with role-playing elements had never been done on a console before, and definitely not in real-time. While some may argue that the game is only quasi real-time, as the combats are turn based, *Ogre Battle* is still a unique hybrid. The game lends itself to addiction by using the standard role-playing aspects that are so popular in RPGs. However, it becomes extended to multiple characters, making it even more enjoyable. The depth and complexity of the game is just incredible for a console game. Player reports say that it could take approximately 70 hours to finish the game, and that's only seeing one ending!

Multiple endings and storylines help make this game extremely replayable. Also, there are tons of hidden towns, items, and classes that can give players extra challenges

after they have finished the game. It's a shame that the popularity of the game was curtailed by its limited release, as games of this type are becoming hugely popular.

Ogre Battle is a real-time strategy game, but not like the RTSs that came around its time (*Dune II*) and after (*Warcraft I and II*, *Command and Conquer*, *Starcraft*). Those games emphasized resource gathering and allocation, while *Ogre Battle* emphasized the role playing aspect. Blizzard has been influenced and decided it was a good idea, coining the phrase Role-Playing Strategy for their upcoming sure-to-be hit *Warcraft III*. Overall, I feel that *Ogre Battle* is a landmark game based on its gameplay that unfortunately missed landmark status due to poor marketing decisions. It has the same appeal as strategy hits *X-Com* and *Final Fantasy Tactics* (which, incidentally, was made by the same development team). *Ogre Battle's* influence still lasts today, through sequels and upcoming games using the Role-Playing Strategy label.