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Art History 340- Final Paper



Figure 1: Gameplay

Total War: Three Kingdoms is a PC game released in Q1 2019. It was developed by Creative Assembly and published by Sega. [Figure 1](#) Three Kingdoms is an ancient war simulation game combining elements of turn base and real time strategy. Three Kingdoms features highly stylized art heavily influence by ancient Chinese culture combined with a rich battle experience thanks to strong simulationist design elements, many remarkable animations and fantastical character abilities taken from popular cultural beliefs.

The 2D character art for the character Lu Bu in Total War Three Kingdoms is highly stylized and colorful. [Figure 2](#) The amount of color and high contrasts was an intentional design

Figure 2: Lu Bu character portrait

choice by Pawel Wojs, the art director for Three Kingdoms, “color, lots of color. It’s a period of hope. The Han Dynasty has fallen. It’s about gaining that mandate of heaven back to the kingdoms”(Takashi). The character is color coded by class and his specific fire element type inlays red throughout his portrait. It is important to understand the style choices behind the character illustrations in Three Kingdoms. The art style is comparable to the eastern theme seen through many historical texts. This is derived from Chinese culture painting calligraphy with long fine brush strokes dipped in ink. This has carried over to a very certain aesthetic of Chinese art such as Huang Gongwangs 1300’s



*“Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains”*. Figure 3 This is a piece of rolling landscape displayed with long beautiful brush strokes, “a visual feast of methods and techniques, with bold tones and subtle shades, wet and dry brushwork, sparse and dense applications of ink, as well as the twists and turns of calligraphic lines” (Sheng). Huang used hemp-fiber textural strokes. Which are multiple layers of long and thin strokes (Sheng). Wojs brings this style to Three Kingdoms by taking a new approach through a modern lens incorporating “lots of flowing black ink ... All of that filling with detail to give you the character illustrations, and this painterly effect. Almost



Figure 3: Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains

this ethereal, mystical depiction of China.” (Takashi).

Lulu Zhang a concept artist for Three Kingdoms stated she “collected references from lots of different

resources (such as games, books, TV shows, cartoons, and movies, as well as a lot of ancient Chinese armour references)” (McConnell) when putting together the

concept art for Lu Bu’s adopted father Dong Zhuo, a character in Total War Three Kingdoms. Therefore it is likely Creative Assembly’s art was heavily influenced by Koei Techmo’s Romance of the Three Kingdoms games which until now led the game industry with high quality illustrations of the same characters. [Figure 4](#) These illustrations have

quickly gained notoriety in their own style of game art. Interestingly enough the two companies have decided to team up and host the ultimate three kingdoms fan art contest with a submission period between November 22, 2019 and January 6<sup>th</sup> 2020. This shows the close similarity between the two styles and how these two companies are tapping into a very unique take on an art style not present elsewhere in the game industry.

Figure 4: Romance of the Three Kingdoms 11



Without even knowing the representation of the element system, the blazen red color does well to elude to possible personality traits of the character. An interpretation of heavy reds conveys the character would be aggressive and have fiery tendencies. Lu Bu is portrayed heavily armored with a grandiose level of detail to this armor. This depicts him as an important character that would have unique armor to this level of detail. His posture shows him as taking up space, which is very masculine stance. This stance depicts him as someone who is tough and has no fear, as a warrior should. It is odd however that Lu Bu’s armor seems to lack a typical Asian aesthetic from other armor in this era. The chainmail and metal plating design looks heavily stylized in a western way, more typical of a medieval knight. Of which can be quite confusing and disappointing for some fans of this Chinese era.



Figure 5: Road to Osaka miniature units



As the 13th title in the Total War Franchise, the battle system for Three Kingdoms is built off of its predecessors. To understand its roots, we must take a look back at 2001's Shogun 1 as it is the first title in the franchise. At the essence of the simulationist battle system in Shogun 1 is built on the concept of numbers. These come in the form of number of units, number of men in a unit, stats of the unit such as morale, attack and defense. This systems gamification is most likely derived from early war games such as Road to Osaka. Figure 5 Road to Osaka is a board game published by Daisho Publications in 1995. Two players control different armies comprised of miniatures representing a battalion of soldiers. These battalions have different attack and defense stats based on the type. The representation of battalion stats are present as a way to

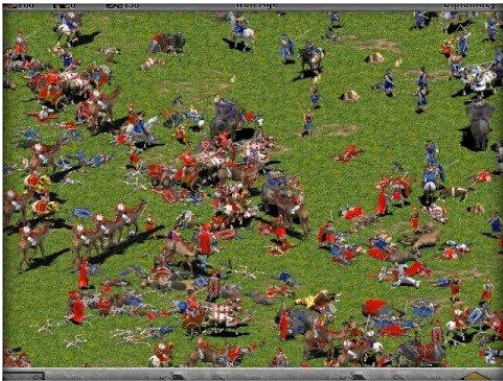


Figure 6: Age of Empires battle

simulate the depth and diversity found in aspects of real-world war.

Another simulationist game the TW series likely takes its inspiration from is 1997 Age of Empires. Figure 6.

Aside from the world building and resource collection phase, Age of Empires uses a similar stat system to represent unit strength. However, in this title units are comprised of 1 man instead of multiple. Age of Empires is a 2D sprite game which mimics 3D space. The units appear to move around in a 3D space. Total War is fully 3D and really locks in the ability for the player to position their troops anywhere in a 3D space which is essential to the core feel of the real time strategy portion of the battle system. This is where Total War's

battle system excels, the gamification of unit stats and movement in 3D creates the immersive experience of being on the battlefield.

The battle system is also comprised of a series of checks and balances that come in the form of counters. This type of system is commonly referred to as the “Rock, Paper, Scissors” approach. Typically this comes in some form of spear beats horse, horse beats archer, archer beats spear. However this isn’t set in stone, as it seems each game tends to evolve and branch off of that in different ways based on the tactics and technologies of the time period. I had the chance to ask Attila Mohácsi, one of the design leads at Creative Assembly about what went into the early design for Three Kingdoms. He explained, “Usually we start looking at the subject material to understand the key aspect of warfare at the given time. Once that's done we try to replicate the key elements in the game. Like in 3K we put a lot of emphasis on spear/halberd and crossbow units as they were the staple-mark units of the era”(Mohácsi). These first steps are the crucial foundation for how the game develops. CA works to nail down the simulationist aspects by focusing on these backbone units of the era. This level of historical authenticity is a necessity for players who are fans of the franchise and time period. The design doesn’t stop there, Attila continues, “When we were looking up others like Cao Cao it became clear that we have to do something about cavalry as well. In that particular case we made a decision that cavalry charges have to have more impactful than ever. First prototypes were geared to get the "feel" right then we started balancing the systems around to make it not too over powered and to have counters against cavalry like spears and certain formations.”(Mohácsi). This is quite possibly the biggest selling part of the whole system, *the feel*. This feel is present in a few different ways.

Firstly, since this is a real time battle, the player is able to watch events unfold in real time and in a 3D space. This comes through in the form of remarkable animations, and in 3K the cavalry charge animations are bolder than ever. These animations provide an immersive experience watching cavalry breaking through enemy lines, or spearmen repelling them. The player has the control over the camera, so they can zoom in and see these synchronized animations close up and watch two soldiers duel it out. Alternatively they can get a bird's eye view by zooming out and watch as ranks of men clash with one another.

The second way this feel is present is by the unit stats and match ups which wholly contributes to the counter system. Understanding different unit match ups is a must for strategy. Being a good commander means recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of army compositions. The player can familiarize themselves with these stats and get the feeling they have knowledge they can capitalize on. For example, knowing that spears have a stat bonus against cavalry means the player is equipped with heuristics to win the battle.

A feature intertwined within these unit stats and flashy animations are the new general abilities. Each army in 3k can consist of 3 different generals and their retinues. Each general may have up to 3 different abilities depending on their level. These special abilities range from passive or active area of effect stat increases, decreases, damage or healing. Triggering an active ability is usually accompanied by a unique animation as well. When asked how CA approached these new battlefield skills, Attila stated "most of the ideas came from the Romance of Three Kingdoms novel. Like Zhang Fei's Roar ability where he shouted on the bridge and the enemy routed. Other inspirations though came from various sources from the

2010 TV series and also even Japanese animes” (Mohácsi). The Romance of the Three Kingdoms novel is a mix between fact and fiction where characters central to the story are represented as large than life heroes. The event Mohácsi referred to was depicted in the novel as, “Zhang Fei’s war blood rose at Steepslope bridge: Spear leveled, horse poised, eyes round-fixed. With a single thunderous cry that shook the ground, Alone he turned Cao Cao’s mighty host around” (Luo 2006).

Creative Assembly realized that these larger than life characters are going to need powerful abilities with flashy animations to match their portrayals from the novel and other media. The belief that these individuals were so supreme that they could sway the outcome of the battle is the underlying reason for these skills. This belief comes from Chinese culture which has been bred from Luo Guanzhong’s novel. “Chen Shou was an excellent literary stylist, and his vivid portrayal of the primary characters and events of the Three Kingdoms period was one stimulus for the growth of a rich tradition of historical fiction that culminated, many centuries later, in the great novel Sanguo yanyi 三國演義 (Romance of the Three Kingdoms)”(Denecke, Li & Tian, 2017). I spoke to DUOTHEDEATH and IruRobin, two Chinese Total War players. They explained that kids in China grow up with these characters as children’s tales. They are not explicitly taught them in school, however the novel is similarly popular to them as the bible is to western culture. The novel has been around for years, so it is embedded into their culture and endless media has arisen from it. This effectively has turned these characters into superheroes like western characters in the marvel universe (DUO). Attila continued “when we started looking at the novel we realized quite quickly that these abilities have to be very powerful to give justice to the subject material. The animations were quite heavily impacted by the characters

themselves. Guan Yu's God of War ability had to have the beard stroke at the end as it is fundamental to him, his peerless beard”( Mohácsi). Lu Bu has a special ability called “The Dragon’s Gaze”. This is an active skill that triggers an immediate area effect around the character, followed by a short cool down. It immobilizes enemies caught in this range applying negative morale and melee evasion for a 30 second duration. This debuff is a powerful gameplay mechanic in a strategy game where immobilizing units may expose them to arrow fire or cavalry charges, let alone worsen the performance of the affected units in battle. The lessening of unit morale may cause those units to route, turning the tides of battle. This ability is also designed uniquely to his character, as Lu Bu struck fear into his enemies. These area of effect hero skills are not seen in potential predecessors to the genre such as Road to Osaka, or Age of Empires solely due to the cultural effect from the novel. There would be no purpose for such exaggeration, and it would have felt out of place. 3k is different than other historical strategy games because it is based off real events but with embellishments to the story. We know that these were mortal men and they did not possess supernatural powers, but it has become common culture to imagine they did, and this makes for a new kind of fantastical gameplay.

Creative assembly’s approach to adaptive gameplay based on different source material and culture is likely the reason why Three Kingdoms became the fastest selling title of the franchise, selling over 1,000,000 copies in the first week (Ella). Three Kingdoms shows a high attention to detail and is thoughtfully designed in every aspect, from its art to its gameplay mechanics.



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