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Strategy Games, Fellowship, and Overcoming Evil

My efforts towards this project have culminated in a 2D turn-based strategy game which guides a player along a set storyline and specific battle scenarios. A strategy game seems perfect to capture Tolkien’s theme that fellowship is required to overcome insurmountable odds. Video games, strategy games in particular, have a unique quality in that they allow the player to feel what it’s like to be in a simulated scenario. Several elements of the game work together to fully flesh out this theme: the story shows what makes a fellowship so important in defeating evil, the characters show that a diverse group with unique attributes is required to defeat evil, and the player can only win through their own determination and hope for victory.

It is important to recognize Tolkien’s intention in choosing to call the group a “fellowship” of the ring rather than a “group” or “team”. A fellowship defines a group of friends who share a common goal, particularly one which they could not accomplish on their own. This is interesting because initially it seems like the fellowship is chosen so that every race has some representation - Legolas (elves), Gimli (dwarves), Aragorn/Boromir (humans), Gandalf (Maiar), and the hobbits. Elrond even says as much when the members are picked: “for the rest, they shall represent the other Free Peoples of the World…” (p. 275). However, given their wisdom, maybe Elrond and Gandalf had planned from the beginning that each member of the fellowship would have their own role to play. But on a surface level, the diversity of the group seems only for the sake of representation of each free race. This makes it so much more impactful as each character participates in the story and fulfills a unique role that only they could fill. Even the characters that act primarily as liaisons for their races - Gimli and Legolas - have influence on the outcome of the quest through their support in battle and their developing personal interests. Even the hobbits are valuable, though they are underestimated at first. Elrond even argues that Merry and Pippin should stay behind, however because of their bravery, and in spite of their size, each is able to earn great honor in battle by the end of their adventure. Merry becomes a squire This idea that every character makes use of their own abilities to contribute towards a common goal maps directly onto the strategy game. In the game you control multiple characters (units), where each has their own attribute values - i.e. health, attack, defense, movement amount, range of attack. Each character is able to contribute to the player’s ultimate success in their own way. For example, a dwarvish character has high defense but low movement which allows them to take greater amounts of damage and lure enemies away from other characters, while a hobbit character has low defense but high movement (because of their small size) which allows them to rush in to quickly kill weaker enemies. Likewise, a character with low defense might use a bow so that they can attack from far away. A game allows the player to come to the realization that differing traits can be used to the advantage of a group, without explicitly saying that.

Given my story touches on different aspects of this theme, it seems pertinent to structure the rest of this paper as a deeper look into my intention in every block of text from the game. The prologue introduces the world and the stakes of the game, while placing emphasis on some themes that the player should watch out for:

Come child, sit for a spell, and listen to your legacy. Do not fear, this will not be as musty as your history books - but there is great value to be found in the past! A well told story requires heroes and villains, good and evil, sacrifice and betrayal. In this, the story I am about to tell shall not disappoint. But pay attention! Do not dismiss this tale as the ramblings of an old king. There are deeper lessons to be learned! We shall begin in a time of great darkness which is now remembered only by a scarce few. From the shadows, a great Conqueror had risen in pursuit of a solitary goal: absolute power. His influence spread far across the land, obliterating all that stood in the path of his desperate plea for power. Though little did he know, in a hidden mountain grove, there were those who would rise to challenge him…

The Lord of the Rings builds its story in a similar way, with one of the first chapters showing Gandalf telling Frodo all he knows of the threat of the Ring and Sauron. The idea of a dichotomy between good and evil is also introduced in this section. When a great evil like the Conqueror in my story rises, there are those who have the goodwill with which to challenge that evil. One could go further in defining the theme, by saying that Tolkien is urging us to recognize that a fellowship of good in particular is necessary to overcome great evil. We see this in the fellowship of the ring and in the alliance of kings in defense of Gondor. The majority of the fellowship are good-intentioned with the plan to defeat evil by destroying the Ring. It is only when Boromir betrays the fellowship that the fellowship collapses. The alliance of kings is clearly good intentioned to save the people of Gondor and the entire West. There will always be hardships from the clash of good and evil, such as Gandalf’s and Turgeon’s deaths, but the ultimate victories of each of these fellowships suggests that good will triumph over evil. The fellowships in Tolkien’s story are needed to defeat Sauron - the “final boss” if you will. The game captures this theme by allowing the player to see the evil machinations of the enemy, only to overcome them in battle. In a way, the player becomes part of the good-intentioned “fellowship”, in that they guide their characters to defeat the enemy. Though individually the characters cannot stand alone, they are able to - with the player’s input - triumph over the final boss.

The first true segment of the story sets up the tutorial and introduces the main character, Tisiphone, and her dynamic with her brother, Sisyphus:

Tisiphone: I grow tired of your restraint, brother. Why do you spar only to parry? Have I not been dutiful in my training? It does not reflect well on a knight to lower his guard! If you fail to defend yourself this time, my blows will not be kind!

Sisyphus: My sister, what you say is true, you have done all that I ask and more! You have become my equal, though I wish it had not come about in times such as this. Very well, I shan't hold back! Remember the strategies for combat. Click on a person to select them and see their possible range of movement and attributes. The yellow zone shows the area in which they can attack. Simply click on your character and then click on me to begin combat.

Sisyphus: Ah, a clean give and take! Remember that turns in battle always work as follows, every allied character gets to move or attack and then the enemy will move or attack if possible. A unit will take damage equal to the attacker's attack stat minus the defender's defence stat. Note that both of our health bars went down from the exchange. Now come at me again!

Sisyphus: As always your skills cease to impress! The village is sure to be in good hands in the coming days.

Tisiphone: Brother, will you hold firm to your decision to leave me here? As you said, I am your equal in swordplay. The great alliance has need of all the men we can muster.

Sisyphus: It is not your swordplay in question! You are certainly as brave and skilled as any man, but I would rather perish than see you on the front lines.

Tisiphone: You would perish! Oh brother, you are narrow sighted indeed, for I will perish if I stay behind.

Sisyphus: I am sorry, but I foresee that there will be need of you here. The evil influence will soon enough reach even our small village. Please hearken to my words - the front lines are not your place.

The gameplay section that follows is a tutorial of the basic mechanics, such as movement, attacking, and how character/enemy turns take place. However, it also serves as a way to deliver the narrative, allowing the player to immediately understand the dynamic of Tisiphone and Sisyphus. Their interactions emphasize the theme of breaking gender stereotypes. My story shadows the dynamic of Eomer and Eowyn, in which Eomer tells Eowyn to protect the people of Rohan while he rides off to battle, despite her desires to fight as a shieldmaiden in the war. Similarly here, Tisiphone is tired of her brother trying to protect her from the battle despite her skill matching his own. In a sense, I have attempted to rectify what I found flawed in Eowyn’s character arc - that she ends up falling back into typical gender roles. Instead, I build Tisiphone’s character arc to capture what I feel is Tolkien’s true intent - that women are just as capable as men in the battle of good vs. evil. Rather than falling in love and becoming a healer like Eowyn, Tisiphone experiences the betrayal of her brother which solidifies her decision to go to war. The topic of gender roles is very relevant to the central theme, because if a fellowship is required to win against evil, then women must not be held back from participating alongside the others. Given that the entire purpose of a fellowship is to bring together people of different abilities against a common goal, it seems counterintuitive that a woman should be barred from a fellowship when she is ready and willing to join. This is why, over the course of the game, we see Tisiphone join a new fellowship to fight in her own way against the evil threat.

The next story segment shows Tisiphone many months after being left to protect her village while her brother goes to fight along the front lines. She has found a group of orcs on the outskirts of the village, and learns that they are hunting royals under orders from the main enemy:

Tisiphone: The enemy comes right to our doorstep! I should eavesdrop ere they know of my presence.

Garb: How inviting this village is!

Gorb: Aye a bit of remodeling and it could even be comfortable.

Gurd: Arg!

Garb: And so sorely undefended!

Gorb: Seems the men left for the skirmish.

Garb: Seems so.

Gurd: Bah!

Gorb: Folly indeed! Even they cannot resist the Conqueror's influence.

Gorb: Suppose there's no royalty here.

Garb: S'pose not.

Tisiphone: The enemy is hunting royalty? We should have expected this - the seer spake that only true royal blood can usurp the Conqueror's throne.

Gurd: \*sniffing\* Urg!

Garb: How's tha? You smell a royal?

Gurd: Rah!

Garb: From the mountains?

Tisiphone: I've been spotted, alas I fear I cannot defeat all three on my own. Brother, it seems I will perish in battle sooner than you had feared.

<After 1 turn>

Iphi: Seems like you're in a bit of a bind there lassy!

Phos: Guess we made it in time.

Tisiphone: In the darkest of times, my hope is restored! But who are you? Why do you come to these lands?

Garb: Keep blathering on little princess! The darkness comes quicker than you think!

Gorb: Strike while they're distracted!

Gurd: Rarg!

Dartfoot: Unfortunately princess, your question will have to wait.

We learn that Tisiphone is of royal blood and can assume (at this point in the story) that she has been hidden for her own protection. Familial ties are integral to Tolkien’s world, with Aragorn being the best example. Aragorn has blood from the line of Isildur and is therefore the true King of Gondor: “Thus came Aragorn son of Arathorn, Elessar, Isildur's heir, out of the Paths of the Dead, borne upon a wind from the sea to the kingdom of Gondor” (Return of the King, Book 1 Ch 6) . Part of what gives Aragorn the right and ability to do miraculous things like heal terrible wounds is his royal lineage (although another part of Aragorn’s ability comes from how he is raised). In the story of my game, all those in the realm of royal blood are being hunted by the Conqueror because a prophecy states that only they may defeat him. This ties back to the central theme by highlighting that though one individual may have royal or divine right, they cannot defeat evil on their own. Aragorn would never have made it to his goal without the support of the fellowship, and similarly Tisiphone cannot succeed solely because she is a princess.

Additionally, in the previous gameplay segment, we see Tisiphone attempt to fight even though all hope seems lost. Because this is a game, the player is uniquely enthralled in her demise, because if the playable character loses the battle, then the player loses the game. The player can see that it is impossible to win because the stats of the enemy are too high, however they must muster the courage, as Tisiphone does, and play on. After taking their turn, the player is surprised to find that friendly units have come to save them. Just like Tisiphone says, “in the darkest of times, [the player’s] hope is restored”. This scenario is representative of the way support comes in the most hopeless of times in The Lord of the Rings - when all seems lost horses are conjured out of the water to save Frodo, Aragorn sails out into the fields of Gondor, or giant eagles come to the rescue. This gameplay element uniquely captures the theme, because people often argue that these occurrences are a “deux-ex-machina”, as if the problem was solved because Tolkien wanted it to be. But I would argue that the reason for these occurrences is because in the hopeless moments, the characters continued to fight. Tolkien is saying that as long as we don’t give up when things are hopeless, good will still find a way to triumph over evil. The player is granted a better understanding of the theme because they were in a hopeless situation, but continued to play, only to find that they were rescued during their last stand.

The final scene that I’ve written is a is a battle between your brother, Sisyphus - the one who you trained with in the tutorial, and yourself:

Phos: Keep back, I sense that this is no longer the brother you knew.

Tisiphone: Brother, my friends and I have journeyed so far, come and join us!

Sisyphus: I fear that the time for that has passed, oh darling sister. I have been offered power beyond anything I've ever known, and with it I will ensure no further harm comes to this land.

Tisiphone: Stop this foolishness at once! If you side with him then you will have betrayed me, your people, and worst still, yourself.

Iphi: Watch yourself dear, we don't know what he's capable of.

Sisyphus: Hearken to your friends! I do not wish to harm you, but if you choose to fight me, it will not end well. All of this is to protect you!

Tisiphone: Don't delude yourself. I was unsure, but now I am certain - I must cut you down.

<After defeating Sisyphus>

Tisiphone: Alas it has come to this, the truth of war. My life for thine. How could you betray us?

Sisyphus: The Conqueror showed me... visions of your death... over and over... I wanted to save you... to protect you...

Dartfoot: This is the power of the Conqueror, he is not conqueror in name alone. He is able to conquer desires - your brother had the desire to protect you, whether misguided or not, and the Conqueror used that to sway him to evil deeds.

The player sees that evil corrupted Sisyphus’ desire to save the one he loved in order to gain his trust. This mirrors the corrupting power of evil in the Lord of the Rings. Boromir was corrupted by the ring, and so he betrayed the fellowship. Saruman also was corrupted to betray the other wizards through his contact with evil. The moral being that a fellowship of good may defeat an insurmountable evil, but an individual’s attributes can be swayed to result in evil deeds. Even when the intentions of a fellowship are pure, an individual can still be corrupted and ultimately cause the downfall of the fellowship. Because this is delivered through gameplay, the player feels a duty to strike down a character that they have fought alongside and grown to see as a sort of role model. The corruption caused by evil is even more vilified because the player sees the consequences, and is forced to bear the guilt of dealing with those consequences. The main takeaway of the game should be that it is necessary for many diverse peoples to unite against evil, but that there are ramifications of the battle against evil. It is not simple enough to take a stand against evil, but we must wholly commit ourselves against evil, often in spite of a terrible cost.

Unfortunately, the finished game feels sparse of content, more so a demo, because I had underestimated the challenges that would arise when tackling a database of the size required for this game. For some technical background, every level requires a TileMap (that defines the size of the grid and where players/enemies will be placed). This TileMap, along with the Pathfinding algorithm for calculating movement and attacking, caused me no end of grief. The final implementation performs the calculations correctly, but it took me much longer than I anticipated to implement. Given this, I had to cut several of the important planned features which I will discuss here. One main mechanic that is missing is the ability to gain attack boosts from adjacent players - that is, if one of your characters attacks someone and a different character is in an adjacent tile, then your attack should be boosted. The idea being to show that through cooperation, the members of a fellowship become stronger. This is similar to how Boromir and Aragorn are able to trudge a path through the snow for the hobbits, or when Aragorn and Boromir stay behind to help Gandalf fight the Balrog. Additionally, I didn’t have time to implement a hope system to show how evil corrupts people’s desires until they inevitably turn on each other. The idea would be that when a player character’s HP reaches 0, they switch to the enemy side, and when an enemy character’s HP reaches 0, they switch to the player’s side. This would allow for an interesting game mechanic where every battle is like a tug-of-war, when you lose a character the enemy gains a character, and vice versa. Every choice has weight because it is up to the player to decide if it is worth it to put a character in harm’s way to possibly capture an enemy. This would demonstrate the central theme in that hope is what keeps a fellowship together, and when all hope is lost evil has a greater ability to corrupt. Boromir felt that defense of Gondor was hopeless without the ring, and so the ring corrupted that hopelessness. However, the reverse is also true, there was a point where the companionship of Frodo and Sam started to awaken some of the hope and goodness in Smeagol.

If I had time to fully complete the game, I would have the story be completely linear, with a single ending in which good triumphs over evil. Everything would build towards the final battle against the Conqueror, and it would be the hardest battle yet, but the player would ultimately be strong enough to succeed (maybe after getting a few game overs). The game would end with the Conqueror dying and losing his control over the evils of the world. Just like in The Lord of the Rings, everything would end happily. However, I would emphasize the long-term effect of war differently. Tolkien presents this theme through Frodo’s illness on the anniversary of receiving his scar from the Nazgul blade, and then Frodo leaves Middle-Earth to be healed. However, I think Tolkien wrote it this way so that Frodo’s pain doesn’t take away from the primarily happy ending. Specifically, Tolkien ensures that the story ends with Sam’s family rather than Frodo’s departure. I understand that the point of featuring Sam’s family is to show that one must move on from the war and take time to heal, but I feel like that starts to remove the impact of the struggle itself. In my game’s ending, I would show that Tisiphone has to live with the fact that dire circumstances led her to slay her own brother. The end will still feel happy, with short asides to wrap up the stories of the side characters and showing Tisiphone returning home. However, the final scene would be Tisiphone placing a flower on her brother’s grave, to compound on the point that war doesn’t often end happily, but while still giving a sense that one has a duty to move on and clean up the mess that was made by evil.

Works Cited

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