

## History originated game design involving fictional adaptations

-based on Koei's Romance of the Three Kingdom

### **Introduction**

Romance of the Three Kingdoms (三國志 Sangokushi, as Romance appears later) is a turn-based strategy game series since 1985 created by *Koei*. The historical settings of Romance allow player to experience ancient Chinese history of warfare and dominance as described in the prestigious novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, while provide with some genuinely intimidating strategic design that even hardcore gamers may surprise. With more than 30 years' history, 13 installments and a large loyal fan base, Romance is widely considered as the landmark in historical strategy games. Why can Romance achieve such a success? An important factor is the inspiring combination of real history and fictional story. The two aspects actually are contradictory when designing a game. But still, Romance is a representation of those successful works in the market. This essay will attempt to address the question: how can game design achieve the balance between real history for authenticity and fictional history for entertaining?

The answer would be difficult, as there is no shortcut to describe but analyze a level of depth in game design. In this essay, I will first take a look at numerical setup, which is mainly about character ability design throughout the series' variation. Second, I will choose the plot called Yellow Turban Rebellion in Romance 13 to talk about the story-telling of Romance by gaming script performance and interactive individual adventure. Furthermore, I will talk about the adaption of 'free mode' in Romance 13 to explain that such adaption is mainly for giving players more freedom to develop the plot and why this is important in gaming experiences.

### **Numerical Setup**

Numerical setup in Romance is mainly around character ability design. In addition to narrative depiction in the character's biography summary, Romance basically use a complex abstract numerical system to evaluate and unfold a real person in history. Within Romance, players begin by choose a character they will play as. Typically, the character is depicted by several abilities which are expressed by numerical values. It is quite hard to achieve comprehensive understanding of historical figures in abstract numbers and we need to search deep into Koei's efforts to design

and improve the numerical mechanism. In some of the early versions, the character might even have additional skill or trait. Chart 1 below shows how the ability parameters change along with the Romance series develop.

Version	Physical Strength 體力	Military Leadership 統率	Melee Prowess 武力	Intellect 智力	Political Ability 政治	Charm 魅力	Luck 運勢	Marine Leadership 陸指	Naval Leadership 水指
1	√		√	√		√	√		
2			√	√		√			
3			√	√	√	√		√	√
4		√	√	√	√	√			
5			√	√	√	√			
6		√	√	√	√	√			
7			√	√	√	√			
8			√	√	√	√			
9		√	√	√	√				
10		√	√	√	√	√			
11		√	√	√	√	√			
12		√	√	√	√				
13		√	√	√	√				

Chart 1: Different numerical ability parameters in each Romance version

Overall, although the parameters changes from version to version, in general they can be categorized as three kinds: Melee Prowess, Intellect, and Charm (in some of the versions, Military Leadership splits from Melee Prowess, and Political Ability splits from Intellect). In short,

Romance is trying to normalize historical figure into several major and minor attributes and then difference people by assigning certain value in these categories.

It dramatically simplifies the task of understanding character's characteristics and transform qualitative attributes like 'personality and specialty' into quantitative ones. Even players who mostly lack background knowledge about three kingdoms can quickly get access to their characters by telling the parameters, like 'Oh I know Lu Bu, he is the most powerful man in three kingdoms! But he cannot compete with Zhuge Liang in intelligence who is a military strategy expert!'. In this way players can naturally acquire their intrinsic understanding about characters based on real history yet well fitted into the in-game mechanism. Moreover, character ability design is the essential of gameplay and literally could affect everything in the game. Players need to manage their territory and carefully dealing with relationship with other regions, thus need to implement specific tactics around character build to achieve game progress.

Also Romance demonstrate its strong ability to re-balance and re-define the mechanism of numerical setup to achieve balance in real history and fictional game setting. Luck, as the parameter only appears in the version 1, is a great representation of an unsuccessful design to show

the authenticity. Luck in Romance 1 basically interferes the possibility of player's character's death.

With a higher luck, the character will have longevity during the game process. But as in the history records all people are known when they will die, so with a parameter of a seemingly "lifespan", it discourages players to use some characters died early. Disabling luck and re-design life span system would remove the player's disappointment when they had to deal with their character who is well known as dead already in certain time.

That's only half the story. To comprehensively depict one character is much more complex than just assigning numbers. For example, the separate of Political Ability in the chart illustrates how designer add a new angle to depict characters more accurately. Though Political Ability in Romance is more like the ability to deal with domestic affairs, it is different from Intellect which more involves with war strategy. In the first two versions, Political Ability isn't separate apart from Intellect, which means they automatically set characters have high Intellect also can do great on political actions. But then Political Ability becomes an independent parameter after version 3 until now.

Next I will compare the numerical setup on three main characters in the overall 13 versions, taking

Melee Prowess and Intellect as examples, to see how the game depicts and re-balances particular characters compared to real history.

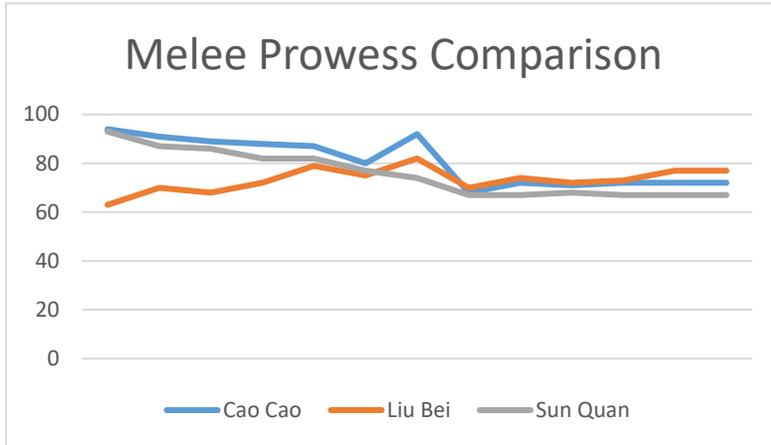


Fig. 1: Melee Prowess Comparison among Cao, Liu, and Sun.

Cao Cao's average of Melee Prowess is 81, the highest among the three. Sun Quan only gets 76.

Liu Bei has the lowest number 72. At the beginning, Cao Cao and Sun Quan's value is obviously higher than Liu Bei's. Then Cao's and Sun's decrease in the same time, Liu's increases until all of the three don't change for a few versions.

Cao's and Sun's value is high in the beginning mainly because there's no Leadership in the early version. So to show their skills on leading army, the Melee Prowess becomes higher than expected.

This causes later their value gradually decreases, even under Liu's when it is recent version. Liu's value is rather low from the start, since Liu Bei is never described as a great general or warrior in

the novel or history records. What's more, Guan Yu or Zhang Fei's Melee Prowess is much higher, just like the novel depicts.

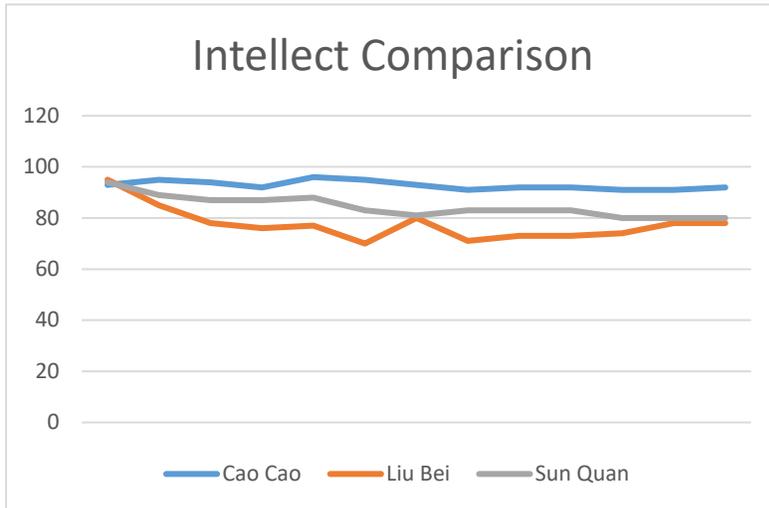


Fig. 2: Intellect Comparison among Cao, Liu, and Sun.

For intellect, the averages of Cao, Sun, and Liu are 93, 85, and 77. Except the first generation, usually Cao's will be higher than Sun's, which is higher than Liu's. Cao Cao, as the Prime Minister of Han at that time, should have great strategy and political skills. Instead Liu Bei depends more on Zhuge Liang in these aspects.

The numerical setup above constructs the fundamental historical and entertaining aspects of Romance.

## **Story-telling**

Story-telling in Romance is mainly divided into two categories: Game Script Performance and Interactive Individual Adventure. Allow me to take Yellow Turban Rebellion, the first plot in the story mode of Romance 13, as an example, which starts from Feb. 184 and involve three major historical events: Oath of the Peach Garden and Rise of Yellow Turban, Suppression of Yellow Turban, Emperor Ling's Death.

“Game script performance is set plot that occurred automatically when player reach certain waypoint or timing in the game.” (GameDesign 2016) Those pre-programmed character behavior play the role of story-telling very well in the game. A great example to exploit this is the replay of signature historian events like Oath of the Peach Garden.

The game's plots background reads: Shortly after the Yellow Turban Rebellion, a young man saw the call to join the volunteers by Liu Yan's army. He then got to know Zhang Fei there, later he knew Guan Yu. The three persons then became sworn brothers from an oath in the Peach Garden, who later would become the founders in establishing the State of Shu.



Fig.3: The in-game scene of Oath of the Peach Garden.

It is noticed that whoever the players play as, these signature historical events will always happen at certain point regardless of game progress. It brings up players with sense of participation in history progress, while guarantee more perspective into the same event from different angles.

These set plots based on historical texts occur everywhere in the game, either in form of CG movie or “real-time actions”. If players take Zhang Jue as their character, they would even watch the animation episode of the Rise of Yellow Turban as Zhang Jue got the sacred book, distributed charms and potions to afflicted, finally started the Yellow Turban rebel with the song “*the Azure Sky is already dead; the Yellow Sky will soon rise*”. Massive detailed game script performance scenes give players a living and impressing historical stage.

That's not enough. A historical stage without actors is nonsense. One important factor involving interactive individual adventure in Romance is branch story-telling. Take a look at the Suppression of Yellow Turban. This event will happen after players destroy the Yellow Turban Army or kill all of Zhang Jue, Zhang Bao and Zhang Liang. This limits that players cannot use any character of these three brothers. After player completes the requirement, Emperor Ling then will reward all people who join the suppression. And player could also get fief, which varies with the character who player plays as. It created massive division between in-game plots and novel. In the novel, Zhu Jun and Huangfu Song defeated the rebellion troop, and reason of Zhang Jue's death isn't mentioned. (Moss 1999: 19) However, the reason of Zhang Jue's death is mentioned in the Zizhi Tongjian by Sima Guang: "Jue is dead because of illness before". (Sima 1956: Volume 58) Neither of these two is the same as the game, as basically the character who players play as will do all the things, so there's possibility that Liu Bei or Cao Cao could kill all three brothers, and Zhang Jue won't die because of illness.

'Interactive Adventure' is not as simple as 'Click and Go', it has to take rationality of consequences of player's behavior under certain time stage into consideration. Branch story-telling structure can

be either presented with tree diagrams or network diagrams. Through reasonable deduction on the influence of player choice on accumulative history progression, it can provide players with individual history adventure. Player's involvement actually deconstructs fixed historical structure and replace it with authentic but fictional story-telling. Romance provides with a carefully designed historical stage and players are active actors who can write and perform their own fictional stories. Romance achieved great success in seeking balance between real history and fictional story when setting up its story-telling mechanism.

In general, the story-telling of Romance, like the plot of Yellow Turban Rebellion is based on the historical text, but not every events will happen as expected when players play as some certain characters. It is a mixture of historical event and player choice. Players would experience some most exciting moments in the world of three kingdoms but not restricted to certain historical process. In addition, the character will act directly upon the players' choices: if players never destroy the Yellow Turban or kill the three brother, the game world will "stop" before next event until player used up the time limit (in this plot is Nov. 189). Through this gaming system, players "see" the history as well as "join and interfere" the history. The later part is important in the macro

level of game design, which will be talked next.

### **Interactive Experience**

Video game industry and game narrative styles have witness magnificent changes in ages. More and more players are in favor of living open world games and non-linear game narrative styles which give them much more freedom to do what they like. Romance also learn from some representative games like *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* to adjust to its consumer demand.

Besides the ‘story mode’, Romance 13 has a ‘free mode’ that players could play as a character from the start time point (which varies from different characters but most of them start from Feb. 184). In this mode, players will complete given missions, improve self’s numerical values and battle with other cities or kingdoms, finally union the whole China in that timeline. This mode gives much freedom to players to develop any character as they want, without do anything same as what the characters did in the novel or history records. Players play in a history environment which all other non-player characters (NPCs) will perform action as recorded in the text, which

shows the game's greatest effort to restore the real history in that time. To be more detailed, even players choose to do nothing, the power distribution map will change as usual.

In another aspect, players could do much more than history record. With carefulness and patience, even an infamous character could grab the chance to be the duke of a city, defeat other great characters and union the world. Romance 13 even can use some fictional characters that actually didn't exist in history. In Romance 12, people could even use characters in *Nobunaga no Yabo* (another game series form *Koei*). This cross-over experience can only be expressed in a game like this.



Fig. 4: The power distribution map when player plays as Liu Bei in Mar.184 in the free mode.

Free mode introduced a brand new way to seek balance between real history and fictional story,

which can be abstracted as interactive experience. Players are freed from their character's historical identity and experience an active point-to-point interaction with many other historical figures. The stage is still built upon historical texts like restricted productivity level but there is literally no written chapter in these historical records. As there is no more any inevitable results but many accidental events could occur, gaming experience tend to become more and more fragmented.

If we really look deep into the essence of 'free mode' in Romance 13, it actually deconstructs history into many constant but individual events. Such structure is similar to the concept of '*Meaningful Nonlinear Re-Sequencing*' defined by David Freeman (David 2004: 251). It allows players to choose different experiences and complete missions in different orders. Thus the narrative sequence can be reconstructed in different ways but guarantee meaningful experience in every single sequence. Players can play in the same time period over and over again yet gain fulfilling experience in each adventure.

After all, what does the 're-playability of history' mean? Professor Claudio indicated in '*Digitalizing Historical Consciousness*' that '*History, as a virtual experience, could transform the traditional 'presentation' into 'interactivity' in the immersion type video game.*' What I want to

point, beyond his work, is that history as a virtual experience has become a mimesis type narrative of original history. History become a database and every player could download to construct their mimesis narrative which later being uploaded to the database. What really matters here is that mimesis replace the original: originated fictional story being replacing the real history throughout the player community unconsciousness in constructing their historical consciousness. It gave every virtual timeline meaning, on a macro level. ‘No two distinct things exactly resemble each other.’ (Discourse on Metaphysics, Wilhelm Gottfried Leibniz), what’s more interesting is that even in the mainstream of community historical consciousness, independency of individual still exist. As no two originated timelines could be the same. It is really inspiring to see what narrative could immersion video game offer to experience fictional but originated history in the future.

Romance 13’s adaption is to keep the essential interactive experience of fiction stories based on real history in the series while add new features to reflect changes in consumer demand. It basically explained why Romance could still earn loyal fans under the huge change in player base. It is because Romance series continue on satisfying specific players who want to experience their own interactive stories in three kingdoms.

## **Conclusion**

There are very few game series that can survive for more than 30 years yet still seek for chances like Romance did. To produce a milestone game designer would have to deal with the ultimate question for video game: What narrative can we offer to design the ideal 'stage' for players? We concluded that balance between real history and fictional adaptations is the key part to make Romance series respectful but innovative. And numerical setup, story-telling and interactive experience are fundamental aspects to play Romance as turn-based strategy game. Inspiration from Romance series strengthens our understanding about game design and historical imagination.

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