

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Star Wars: Battlefront II*
Platform: PlayStation 2
Genre: Action, Third/First-Person Shooter
Release Date: 2005
Developer: Savage Entertainment, Pandemic Studios
Publisher: LucasArts
Game Writer: Michael Stemmler

Overview

A third/first person shooter, *Star Wars: Battlefront II* lets you play as the 501st Clone Legion in battles ranging from Geonosis to Hoth in the *Star Wars* canon (of 2005). The campaign story is narrated by a veteran of the 501st, recounting some of the major battles that shaped the galaxy. Filtered and edited in-game cutscenes are played with the narration, which adds a feeling of age to the veteran's story (*a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away*). At the beginning of each era in which the campaign is divided into – **Fall of the Old Republic** and **Rise of the Empire** – there is a title crawl like in the *Star Wars* movies. These introduce the 501st Legion as Republican clone troopers during the **Clone Wars** and Imperial storm troopers during the **Galactic Civil War**, respectively.

Although the narration does most of the work for the story, there is some in-game dialog by commanders and fun barks by the soldiers. There are also biased descriptions of each mission in menus and objectives in-game, even extending to the loading screens. Specifics of the story events are fleshed out by the gameplay objectives, letting you see and feel to an extent what the clone/storm troopers saw and felt. Though not often, you can also play as heroes/villains at certain points in the game. This broad approach to storytelling helps us empathize with the 501st Legion, all the while fitting well within the limits of the shooter genre.

Linked is a video playlist of a no-commentary walkthrough of the campaign:
<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQj3DvVsngxj-a4QS40Ut5FhcyYhMYe1p>

Characters

- **The 501st Clone Legion** – The playable clone/storm troopers. The 501st is an elite Clone Legion. They're a part of the Republic and Empire factions. They have

- “barks” in-game but story-wise are only represented by the Narrator. We assume their thoughts and feelings are echoed by his narration but are not sure.
- *“Order had finally returned to the Galaxy, in no small part due to the efforts of the fighting men of the 501st.” – 501st Journal Entry: Hoth, Our Finest Hour*
 - **501st Journal Entry Narrator** – The narrator for the campaign’s cutscenes and the story. A veteran clone trooper of the 501st Clone Legion. He is not physically seen/alluded to. He hopes to keep peace and order across the galaxy. The Narrator is conflicted for some of his past actions but remains loyal to the Republic/Empire and his men. He is scared to fight many early battles, but later becomes somewhat elitist/prideful and vengeful. The latter especially after the Death Star’s destruction.
 - *“My first day as a member of the 501st. It was hot, it was sandy, chaotic. Nothing at all like the simulations on Kamino. Of course that's pretty much the way it was for all of us, wasn't it? All that breeding, all those years of training... it doesn't really prepare you for all the screaming, all the blood, does it? Frankly I'm still amazed we ever made it through the first hour, never mind the first day.” – 501st Journal Entry: Geonosis, Attack of the Clones*
 - **Chancellor/Emperor Palpatine** – The supreme commander of the 501st. He orders the 501st and the player to fight many of the battles. Is mainly a “plot device” for the (star) wars rather than a character. He is mentioned by name many times but never shows up in the campaign’s gameplay or cutscenes.
 - *“In the waning months of the Clone Wars, the 501st faced missions critical to the agenda of Chancellor Palpatine.” – 501st Journal Entry: Mygeeto, Amongst the Ruins*
 - **Darth Vader (aka Anakin Skywalker)** – Playable character on Coruscant and Hoth. The commander of the 501st after Order 66 is declared. A skilled Jedi turned Sith, he is second only to the Emperor. He helped defeat the Jedi inside the Jedi Temple. He orders around the 501st a bit more than the Emperor due to proximity. Punishes the 501st for failing to keep the Death Star plans safe.
 - *“In recognition of our service and loyalty to the Emperor, the 501st were placed under the direct command of Lord Vader.” – 501st Journal Entry: Coruscant, Knightfall*
 - **Aayla Secura** – A playable character on Felucia. A Jedi Master and General in the Grand Army of the Republic. Led the 501st in an unwinnable battle on Felucia. Is kind and compassionate to the 501st, earning their admiration and respect.
 - *“When the 501st was finally rotated out of Felucia, Aayla Secura made a point of seeing us off personally, calling us ‘the bravest soldiers she had ever seen.’ It's a good thing we were wearing helmets, because none of us could bear to look her in the eye.” - 501st Journal Entry: Felucia, Heart of Darkness*

- **The Separatists/CIS** – A playable faction, but not in the campaign. The 501st battles against this droid army during the Clone Wars era, and once again on Mustafar during the Galactic Civil War era. It is led by General Grievous and Count Dooku in the former era, and a revitalized force is led by Geonosian Gizzor Dellso in the latter.
 - *“By the time we'd made our way to the molten surface of Mustafar, it was apparent that Dellso had been a busy little bug. All by his lonesome he'd found a previously-hidden droid factory, fired it up and cranked out his own private army of battle droids. Needless to say, this got the men of the 501st ... a little hot under the helmet, and not just because of all that lava. Truth be told we'd all had our fill of those gear heads during the war, and we couldn't stomach the thought of going through another one. So we blew them up -- blew up the droids, blew up the factory ... damn near blew up the planet.” – 501st Journal Entry: Mustafar, Tying Up Loose Ends*
- **The Rebellion** – A playable faction, but not in the campaign. The 501st battles against many rebel forces (like the CIS, Jedi, and clone rebels) but first encounter this organized Rebellion militia on Polis Massa. These rebels are the ones seen in the original *Star Wars* films. They fight against the 501st for the last 6 missions of the campaign. In these the Rebellion leaks the Death Star plans, wins battles against the Empire, destroy the Death Star, and are defeated on both Yavin 4 and Hoth. The Rebellion is the final and greatest obstacle to the 501st achieving peace across the galaxy. Thus, the Rebellion draws the most ire from the 501st than any other antagonistic faction.
 - *“No one ever complained about the cold on Hoth. We never felt it. Even though we were blinded by blizzards, we could see the final end of the Rebellion in our blaster sights. Was it only a mirage? Perhaps. But on that day, on that planet, our blood ran hot with dreams of victory, melting the ice that stood in our way.” – 501st Journal Entry: Hoth, Our Finest Hour*

Breakdown

CAMPAIGN SUMMARY

Fall of the Old Republic: Missions List

- *Geonosis: Attack of the Clones*
- *Mygeeto: Amongst the Ruins*
- *Coruscant: A Desperate Rescue (Space)*
- *Felucia: Heart of Darkness*
- *Kashyyyk: First Line of Defense (Space)*
- *Kashyyyk: A Line in the Sand*
- *Utapau: Underground Ambush*
- *Coruscant: Knightfall*

Fall of the Old Republic: Synopsis

The first half of the campaign follows the 501st Clone Legion and the battles they fought in *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005). If you play the training mode your first battle is on Geonosis, otherwise you begin on Mygeeto. In the latter, the 501st try to get energy crystals for Chancellor Palpatine. Then, the 501st fight a space battle above Coruscant to help rescue the Chancellor. The later battles on Felucia and Kashyyyk proved to be difficult for the clones. But thanks to Aayla Secura, Yoda, and the Wookies they were able to come out alive. Afterwards, the 501st defeat the Separatist forces on Utapau. Then Order 66 occurs because the Jedi have betrayed the Republic. The 501st storm into the Jedi Temple and, with the help of Anakin Skywalker, kill all the traitors.

Rise of the Empire: Missions List

- *Naboo: Imperial Diplomacy*
- *Mustafar: Preventative Measures (Space)*
- *Mustafar: Tying Up Loose Ends*
- *Kamino: Changing of the Guard*
- *Death Star: Prison Break*
- *Polis Massa: Birth of the Rebellion*
- *Tantive IV: Recovering the Plans*
- *Yavin 4: Vader's Fist Strikes Back (Space)*
- *Yavin 4: Revenge of the Empire*
- *Hoth: Our Finest Hour*

Rise of the Empire: Synopsis

The second half of the campaign focuses on the 501st as stormtroopers in the newly formed Galactic Empire. Some battles are unique to the game's narrative while others are based on the original 1977 *Star Wars* film. The rise of the Empire led to continuous rebellion by many groups across the galaxy. The 501st (aka Vader's Fist now) "silences" the Queen of Naboo. They stop a Geonosian from building a new droid army on Mustafar, and also put down a clone rebellion on Kamino. Due to their services the 501st gained the honor of patrolling the Death Star. As boredom settles in, a prison break occurs and the prisoners manage to steal the Death Star plans. In pursuit of the plans the 501st infiltrates Polis Massa. A well-organized rebel militia forces the 501st to retreat empty-handed. Darth Vader then tracks down the plans to the Tantive IV consular ship. The 501st board the ship, disposing of rebels and capturing Princess Leia. On the final 3 missions, the 501st seek revenge for the destruction of the Death Star. The battles on Yavin 4 and Hoth are ruthless victories for the Empire and the protagonists of this story.

ANALYSIS

Critique on Structure

The mission structure of the campaign is simple yet effective. It allows for the story to be told like a historical war story would be, covering only major battles while adding some context to each before and after. This is one of the many ways that the game grounds us in the narrative. The missions going over each major battle act as levels as well, which lets us enjoy the game in a traditional game-like way. This balance of grounded narrative and enjoyable/comfortable gameplay is a strength to admire from *Battlefront II*.

An issue there seems to be with the structure that all the space missions are skippable. This is presumably done since the game is a third/first person shooter inspired by the *Battlefield* series and space combat is unique to *Battlefront II*. Mastering space combat is difficult, and the developers must have not wanted to frustrate the player to get through the campaign. They had a target audience in mind – third/first person shooter gamers and general *Star Wars* fans. Thus space battles are side notes in the story, even though some of the most important battles where in space in *Star Wars*.

The destruction of the Death Star in original film was that story's climax. In *Battlefront II* we go from the beginning of that story (Tantive IV mission) to after its end (Yavin 4 missions). One could say that the developers excluded the Death Star battle because they didn't want to frustrate the player with defeat, especially in space combat. But they already did something like that story-wise with the missions inside the Death Star and on Polis Massa. That last final blow could have made the subsequent missions on Yavin 4 and Hoth to be more emotionally felt by the player. It would have also helped with the flow of the narrative, because as it stands it is always jarring to go from "we captured Princess Leia" to "the Death Star is destroyed, time for vengeance."

Critique on Story

There might be another reason as to why the Death Star space battle, amongst others, is skipped though. **The protagonists of this story are the member of the 501st Clone Legion.** The writer must have thought that this story should be its own thing, separate from the movies while still a part of the world they resided in. Our protagonists should therefore be treated as such, in narrative and gameplay. This is why even when the 501st is defeated, like in *Death Star: Prison Break*, the missions convey all the objectives as successful.

These mission objectives and story structure could also be the nature of video games – a player should be able to win when they play a game. Making the player lose against their best efforts could make them quit the game altogether. There have been games, shooters included, that flip this trope on its head. (For instance, a mission in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* shows a player character dying after a nuclear bomb explodes, losing/dying with no form of preventing it all). But the fun aspect was prioritized over the story in this regard, preventing the narrative from exploring more avenues of expression.

But the real question is, **why have the 501st Clone Legion be our protagonists?** The answer is because of the *Star Wars* films. Each *Star Wars* movie is based either around the Jedi, the Skywalkers, or the Rebellion. Both *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* and *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* showcase the Clone Army as a major plot device for the story. Without it, Order 66 – in which the clone troopers are ordered to execute all Jedi – would not have been able to occur, and the Empire wouldn't have rose. Although they are an integral part of the story, they are not characters in these films. The clones are simply faceless soldiers that are commanded by Jedi (as Generals) and ultimately do the ~~Chancellor's~~ Emperor's bidding. So, one can suspect that the

reason the 501st are our protagonists because writer Mike Stemmle and his team decided that such important characters should be given a story.

There is also an in-universe 20 year gap between the stories of *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* and *Star Wars* (1977, sometimes referred to as *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*). There is no explanation in the films as to what happened in that time, so Stemmle and co. decided to fill that gap. Four missions – beginning with *Naboo: Imperial Diplomacy* and ending with *Kamino: Changing of the Guard* – explain how the Empire came to be how it was in *Star Wars*. These stories fit in narratively, showing the Empire as a great power combating insurrections. They also explain why most senators in the Empire decided to play it safe, why a second Clones Wars never happened, and why not all stormtroopers are clones. The remaining missions in *Rise of the Empire* detail how the Rebels stole the plan (this was before *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*), and showed them as formidable adversaries to the Empire.

There is one last point to make about the story itself. Why have a narrator telling us about it all after the fact in the game's *501st Journal Entries*? Why not have sole main character like in other games, or other media in general? First recall that this is an action/shooter video game, where a player can die repeatedly. Next consider what the writer wanted to do for clones. Because this is an action game it would be hard to give a story to just one clone, or a group of individual clones even. We wouldn't be able to empathize or at least sympathize with the clones as much because of this. Plus, in the films they are faceless soldiers. So, if you can't really make a story in the usual defined-character way, the next best thing is to look at other forms storytelling.

Stars Wars is based on what is in the title – wars. Specifically modern wars, like World War II and Vietnam. So then, how are war stories told? Usually we hear them from soldiers themselves, whether in person or from their diaries. The diary format allows for these stories to be told after the happenings and with the soldier's biased view. (Note that a biased view is not necessarily a bad one, just a biased one.) The diary is thus extremely personal and emotionally charged. That is why there is a Narrator in *Star Wars Battlefront II*. His 501st Journal is a personal, biased, and emotional story that is told from afar to us.

One last note is that documentaries are tied to modern wars. We see old footage in these, of battles and their aftermath, and sometimes hear the voices of those that fought through the war. The cutscene format of the campaign's intro tied with the Journals make us really experience the story like a war documentary. Thus although *Battlefront II*'s campaign is a story from *A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away*, we can feel how grounded it is in reality. And so we are able to empathize with a faceless legion of soldiers that die again and again in a video game.

Critique on Missions

Each mission is objective based. These objectives tie into the story told in each 501st Journal Entry quite well. They, much like the structure of the campaign, are simple yet effective in both conveying the story and having fun gameplay.

Take for example the perfectly named mission *Coruscant: Knightfall*. The last mission in *Fall of the Old Republic*, it starts with a somber Journal Entry by the Narrator. The orchestral music starts out silently and picks up pace and volume as the Narrator speaks. The in-game footage shows the clone troopers arriving at the Jedi Temple, running through it, and fighting against all its inhabitants.

“What I remember about the rise of the Empire is ... is how quiet it was. During the waning hours of the Clone Wars, the 501st Legion was discreetly transferred back to Coruscant. It was a silent trip. We all knew what was about to happen, what we were about to do. Did we have any doubts? Any private, traitorous thoughts? Perhaps, but no one said a word. Not on the flight to Coruscant, not when Order 66 came down, and not when we marched into the Jedi Temple. Not a word.”

This intro sets the mood for the mission. There’s doubt and a sense of remorse for their actions, but the clones do their duty for the greater good of the ~~Republic~~ Empire. Once the player takes control they have to do as what was shown in the video – march through the Temple. The first objective is a simple “capture the command post,” something the player has done many times before. But since the command post to capture is at the other side of the map, at the end of the Temple, it forces the player to fight their way through Jedi and Temple soldiers. There are more objectives of course, and you even get to play as ~~Anakin Skywalker~~ Darth Vader. But speaking about it all would be too much for this review.

This gameplay design enforcing and enhancing the narrative is found countless times throughout the campaign, even in the space missions. It is one the reasons why the campaign stuck in the minds of many after it was played. The story told was already intriguing. The gameplay put you in the place of these soldiers – the 501st clones – and made you see and feel what they did.

Recall that this is an action/shooter game. The gameplay can become intense at some points for this same reason of empathizing with the 501st. We see this in *Coruscant: Knightfall* and in *Polis Massa: Birth of the Rebellion* (here the 501st is ultimately forced to retreat from the rebels). Dying is also a part of this empathy process. The 501st, whether clones or stormtroopers, are mostly faceless avatars for you to take control over. The Narrator helps with this issue and starts off the empathy process. He may not be a face, but his voice most likely echoes the emotions that the 501st felt during each battle. The opening and closing *501st Journal Entries* place the player in the mood for the battle and make them sympathize with the 501st, before allowing for the gameplay to empathize the player and reinforce that empathy with the closing *Entry*. The gameplay, where players can and most likely will die multiple times over, is no longer just assuming faceless soldiers. These are now men that died fighting for their duty – and although not explicitly stated, for each other. The *Journal Entry* lets us know that the battles were terrible experiences. The gameplay reinforces that, showing how hard it is to survive.

This almost appeared as an anti-war message upon first analyzing *Battlefront II*. It could be interpreted that way, but it could also be refuted by seeing how the Narrator spoke of aspects of the fighting in a positive way. The last few missions especially painted the war against the Rebellion as justified. One could also view this as a tragedy, seeing how the soldiers went from questioning their actions in *Fall of the Old Republic*, while they increasingly became more violent in *Rise of the Empire*. In the end, it's up to each player to decide how they interpret the story.

Strongest Element

Although there are many things to admire in the game, the narration itself from our veteran 501st member is at the core of the story's success. As described previously, the Narrator's Journal is grounded in real life diaries of soldiers. The emotional weight of each line is enhanced by the voice actor, who does a terrific job at conveying emotion. And of course, each Journal Entry is well written, conveying enough information and emotion in each to build the story successfully on all fronts.

Unsuccessful Element

Kamino: Changing of the Guard is one mission that didn't resonate with me emotionally. It should have been in the highlight section of this review, considering that the 501st were killing their own kin. Instead the writing for the Journal Entry was more informational than emotional. It explained how the clones were substituted in the Empire and even has Boba Fett in it (which should also have been an emotional encounter). If there was a way to kill the Kaminoans as well, then we could see the 501st taking vengeance. Or maybe if Boba Fett had a chat with the 501st, even if it were to be quoted in the Journal Entry, there could have been something. In the end, it's the highlight of the missed opportunities in the campaign.

Highlight

I could say that the highlight of the game was the mission *Kashyyyk: A Line in the Sand*, due to its amazing gameplay that immersed the player in the battle as described by the Narrator, line by line. But that would be doing a disservice to the most emotionally missions in the game, *Yavin 4: Revenge of the Empire*. The Narrator describes the events as follows:

"By the time we landed on Yavin, whatever shock we'd felt at the destruction of the Death Star had been replaced by anger. For months we'd treated the Rebellion like a disobedient child, only to be repaid for our tolerance with treachery on an unimaginable scale. Frankly, I don't remember much of the fighting. I guess we won."

The gameplay is tough, but each objective is like a continual advancement on the map. The 501st in this mission pushes the Rebels back with fury, and without remorse. It may

not be emotional to the player as other missions – like what the Narrator says about Aayla Secura in *Felucia: Heart of Darkness*. But it was to the Narrator and to the 501st, and that's all that matters.

Critical Reception

Reviewer: Ivan Sulic

Publisher: IGN, 2005

Score: 7/10

Source: <https://www.ign.com/articles/2005/11/03/star-wars-battlefront-ii>

Here Sulic describes the campaign of *Star Wars Battlefront II* as a positive improvement to the previous game's lack thereof. He also says that it is “an enjoyable introduction to the basic mechanics and premise of Battlefront II, but also as a worthwhile experience in its own right. This thanks to the varying objectives that update in-mission and the political workings that carry the 501st through Star Wars' major betrayals.”

Reviewer: jkdmedia (couldn't find a real name)

Publisher: GameZone, 2012

Score: 8.4/10

Source: https://www.gamezone.com/reviews/star_wars_battlefront_ii_xb_review/

In this review we find that the campaign is viewed as an interesting addition to the *Star Wars* canon for letting us see another perspective. It mainly talks about the campaign's use for learning game mechanics and briefly summarizes the 501st's dilemma of following Palpatine's orders unquestionably.

(Note: Sadly this latter review is the norm in forms of talk on this game's campaign story. Brief overviews and how it's a nice touch to the single-player mode. Most reviews bypass the campaign altogether.)

Extra not-officially-reputable-but-still-touches-on-the-campaign Review

Reviewer: The Act Man (username)

“Publisher”: YouTube, 2017

Score: AWESOME

Source: <https://youtu.be/2fJidsBpexY>

This review describes the campaign as a simple yet effective story. There is admiration for what was done with so little, only having a voice actor communicate the narrative over in-game edited footage. The Act Man also appreciates the way the clones are humanized even through one clone's perspective, “something that was lacking in the movies”. He also likes how only some modes are available in the campaign (like clone vs stormtrooper in the *Kamino* mission), making it more special. He understood that there were moments in the story where the clones doubted their orders on an emotional level. This ties into the idea of highlighting “the horrors of war,” which he recognizes the

campaign attempts to make. Lastly, although he sees the gameplay as linear, he still gives credit to the effort that was put into the campaign.

Lessons

- We can and should look to tell stories in more than one style in video games. The inspiration for the narrative's format was not from movies but from war diaries and documentaries. This being born out necessity for not only the gameplay but for representing an entire legion of characters rather than just one or a few. I think we can use this knowledge of looking beyond the character-based system of storytelling to make more unique and heartfelt stories in every medium.
- The game design should always tell as much a story as the explicit narrative does. The continual advancement in the *Yavin* mission, the continual retreat in the *Kashyyyk* mission, and the overwhelming amount of forces in *Polis Massa*'s tight corridors show this perfectly. The story can be told with every element of the game if one wants to.
- We shouldn't be afraid to make the player experience failure. The *Polis Massa* mission was a perfect example of this done right, and I think the game could have expanded on that. A mission against the heroes of *Stars Wars* over the Death Star would have made the *Yavin* and *Hoth* missions so much more impactful. It's both a success and a shortcoming of this game.

Summation

Star War: Battlefront II is a game that deserved analysis for its unique story campaign and its great execution. It expanded the mythos of the *Star Wars* universe, gave character to an entire faceless army, and provided fun gameplay that is interconnected with the story. It did this all in its own unique way, and there's much to learn here for future games.