

SPAG Specifics: Paolo Chikiamco's “Slammed!”

I am a really, really big wrestling fan. When I was 3 I loved the Bushwhackers (... yeah) and the Undertaker; I rediscovered wrestling 15 years later (still love the Undertaker) and was hooked for a long time. It'll come to no surprise to you, then, that I think [Slammed!](#) is a really good game – but even if you don't like wrestling or think it's stupid, you should give it a shot: it is long, exciting and well-written.

In *Slammed!*, you play as a wrestler, learning the ropes at an independent federation and hoping to be noticed by the big federation, where a former friend is having some success. There are about four main love interests, two of whom are obvious and the others less so. All these are nicely integrated with the story, which is laudable. The game branches at the end, where you have three potential outcomes; my first playthrough took me about four hours, which is long for CoG.

Otherwise, *Slammed!* is mostly linear, with lots of immovable parts; the plot is exciting, but even the bad events are largely unavoidable, and what choices and stat changes exist are used to color your playthrough or reach optional side-quests or achievements. One coup, though, is how the game brings narrative tension to matches. After all, wrestling is “fake,” in the sense that the outcomes are predetermined and also the matches themselves to different degrees. If the game replicated this, the only choice you'd have in the ring is whether you deviate from the script, which would be boring (and would get you fired). To get around this, the game uses the concept of “shoot wrestling”, which is [a real wrestling phenomenon](#): the matches become more like fights, albeit ones that still use wrestling moves and ensure nobody gets hurt too much. This makes fight scenes actually unpredictable — there are twists you don't see coming — adds tension and suspense, and makes you able to lose.

All the scenes of *Slammed* are short, and all the moments feel exciting. There's also a nice variety of normal scenes, flashbacks within interviews (with [reflective choice points](#) that build your character); but you also have blog posts from a blogger (Internet fans are a huge force in today's wrestling, and the tone is well-emulated) and scenes described via the show's “screenplay”, which both make the moment feel big (“the masked man stares down from the top of the steel cage”) and are nice thematically (wrestling is acting, and you get the perspective of the audience). *Slammed* is even complete with a promo video that hypes your final match, which is epic and feels exactly like WWE promo videos. In fact,, everything in the game feels exactly like wrestling. The writing does a good job at introducing wrestling terminology, though it gets a bit carried away in the end, where terms like [“crucifix powerbomb”](#) are used without having been fully explained. But the worst that can happen is that you have a harder time visualizing the moves: you will not hopelessly drown in lingo in this game. There are a few throwaway references, like names or achievements (“bah gawd!”), or stuff that is mentioned in passing (“dangerous workplace behavior”); it's not shoving it down your throat, but if you're in the know, you'll notice and smile. The in-ring names of the wrestlers all sound convincing, and some clearly riff off real-life wrestlers; the in-ring personas are very plausible (the Angels, the Lawmakers, Harley and Quinn), as well as the storylines in which

they are involved, which (just like in wrestling) can be pretty ridiculous. The situations are inspired by real events (“sell like it’s 2005”) including references to reality TV, a road the WWE has been going down for the last few years. And nothing feels like a copy-and-paste job; rather, you the author creates an convincing alternate world that sometimes (like with the character of Madison Rio) I wished was real.

I have of course a few criticisms – or rather, letdowns. First of all, the fact that the game is extremely linear means it is focused on a single perspective, which is that mainstream American wrestling (to be clearer, the WWE) is the best, and the ultimate goal is to be #1 there. Now, the WWE might be the place to be for a lot of wrestlers – and indeed, in the last couple years a lot of successful independent wrestlers have signed there. But this ignores the different cultures of wrestling, which constantly influence each other and enable wrestling to reinvent itself. For instance, there’s barely a mention of Japanese wrestling, which is just as excellent, and where lots of wrestlers (including famous North American ones) trained and had great careers before coming back to North America. Including branches that highlight those possibilities in the game might have made it richer, and made for a first half that is much less linear.

The other major letdown that I have is about how the game reacts when you play as a woman, as is Choice Of Games’ house style. Playing as a female wrestler will give you the same opportunities and the same choices, except a particular one near the end, which doesn’t show up for male wrestlers. Otherwise, the only difference is the pronouns, and a misogynist character’s attitude towards you — that’s it. As a fun escapist game, a power fantasy, this is in a sense awesome – it is just as easy to rise to the top of the company and kick the (male) champion’s ass as a woman. On the other hand, doing this feels like it’s dodging a major issue, which is that wrestling (and especially mainstream wrestling) has a terrible attitude towards women. Women in wrestling are largely used for titillation, as sex objects or objects for other men to fight over, sometimes hired purely on looks with minimal wrestling training, are given exploitative matches and characters that range from the cold bitch to the psycho, and contend with certain male wrestlers’ attitudes on stage and backstage. There are a lot of great female wrestlers who are legitimately amazing (SHIMMER, Manami Toyota, Awesome Kong, Phoenix, Stratus, etc.), and they do get some amount of recognition — but nevertheless, there is a glass ceiling. So, when the worst thing that happens to you as a female wrestler is that one character, clearly written as an asshole, says women are weak or can’t count but he’ll still give you a chance, that’s a gross simplification. And when the game explains, in one paragraph, that “the company’s shows were misogynistic once, for two months, but they thought it was bad and they stopped”, when your game is otherwise so on-the-nose, you’re obviously refusing to engage with the problem.

It would be hard to try to talk about all that in the game – or worse, to put all those obstacles on the female route and none on the male route (although that would for sure make for interesting commentary). But if you refuse to talk about it, you avoid some interesting questions. How do you become a female wrestler? How do you train? Who agrees to put you in their show? What’s your in-ring persona like? What storylines can you create? Do you only fight women? How do you break the glass ceiling in a system dominated by men determined to use you as eye candy? Do you get breast implants or do you insist they take you seriously because you sure can wrestle? Or both? Of course, this is more difficult to design, because the male and the female routes become

quite different; and it involves dealing with social representations one might not have lived through. But what's the alternative? I'm worried that it means that, ultimately, using the argument "you can play as whoever you want" when it doesn't actually make any difference, feels either like a cheap pronoun-substitution trick or like escapism ("you can have the same privilege as straight white cis males! Maybe a few assholes won't like you but you can still win as easily!"). It's a tough call, and they went for what appears to be the safe option, which I think is a shame.

For what it's worth, the game is quite transparently written as escapism – you become the biggest wrestler, you win it all, and the other problems don't exist (and there are so many in wrestling: your body breaking down, painkiller addiction, alcoholism and other addictions to be able to cope, repeated concussions, loneliness and relationship rifts caused by being on the road 300 days a year, getting old and having to retire away from the spotlight, or being unable to do so, etc.). For other CoG games, it's not a big deal; but for wrestling, where the problems are painfully apparent and have broken into the mainstream (Hogan steroids scandals, Benoit killings, Aronofsky's *The Wrestler*, and even institutionalized racism and sexism), leaving them out completely didn't really feel right to me. Nevertheless, *Slammed!* succeeds at its main goal, which is to be an awesome game about wrestling: the author is clearly very familiar with the wrestling world, and manages to reproduce this in a world and a story that feel true.