

Game Narrative Review

Game Title: Chrono Trigger

Platform: Super NES (re-released on Playstation [Final Fantasy Chronicles] and Nintendo DS)

Genre: RPG

Release Date: 1995

Developer: Square

Publisher: Square

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Masato Kato (writer)

Author of this review: Michael Brannan

Overview

After an accident at the Millennial Faire sends a young girl he just met into the past, Crono must travel across time to repair the timeline and eventually stop the destruction of Earth by an ancient planetary parasite known as Lavos.

Along the way, Crono teams up with people from across time including a noble knight who was turned into a frog, a sentient robot from the future, and a powerful warrior woman from the Mesozoic era. Crono and company unravel the mystery behind Lavos and its origins, discover the secrets of magic, and change the world in every time period they visit before finally confronting Lavos and preventing its global destruction.

Characters

Crono – A young man from the village of Truce in 1000 AD. Crono carries a katana, sports an outrageous spiky hairdo, and despite never saying a word, displays an intense loyalty to his friends and a seemingly endless amount of courage.

Lavos – An ancient planetary parasite that struck the earth some 65 million years ago, Lavos slowly absorbs the planet's energy and manipulates people and events throughout time. Without Crono's intervention, Lavos surfaces and destroys nearly all life on the planet in the year 1999 in order to prepare its "children" for their eventual departure to continue the cycle on other planets.

Magus (aka Janus) – Magus is first seen in the year 600AD leading an army of Mystics (Fiends in the DS version) against the Guardia Kingdom. The Crono team believes he created Lavos during this time and go back to stop him. However, there is more to this villain than meets the eye. Magus is actually the young prince from the Kingdom of Zeal in 12,000 BC. Then known as Janus, he was a silent, stand-offish child until his mother's attempt to summon and control Lavos went horribly awry, sending Janus along with several others to different times and destroying Zeal. Janus wound up in the Guardia Kingdom in about the year 580. He was discovered by Ozzie of the Mystics, took the alias Magus, and eventually became king of the Mystics. Magus used his position to

establish a seat of power and eventually tried to exact his revenge on Lavos by summoning the parasite and defeating it within the heart of his castle. However, he only succeeds in reawakening Lavos and expediting its eventual attack on the planet. Magus turns out to be less of a villain and more of a misguided and misunderstood tragic figure. Ultimately wants the same thing Crono and co. want—the destruction of Lavos—and eventually offers to join the Crono team.

Crono's team:

Marle – A tomboyish young woman whose real name is Princess Nadia, Marle is the heir to the throne of Guardia and hates being constantly looked after and doted upon. She throws out her royal dress, adopts clothing more akin to a gypsy, and sneaks out to visit the Millennial Faire where she literally bumps into Crono and joins him in his quest. Marle, despite her coddled upbringing, approaches challenges head-on.

Lucca – The genius inventor friend of Crono, Lucca created the Telepod device that launched Marle back in time and sparked the beginning of Crono and co.'s quest across time. Lucca's genius comes in handy often throughout the game, including creating the "Gate Key" which makes repeated use of the time gates possible, and repairing Robo when they first meet him (as well as several times after that). Lucca wields a gun (the first of which is self-made) as well as fire-magic in combat. Lucca's technical mastery stems largely from an event several years before to the game's beginning in which her mother's legs were crippled by one of the machines Lucca and Taban (her father) were working on. Lucca devoted her life to science in the hopes that she could find a way to undo the damage she feels she caused to her mother's legs.

Frog – A Knight of Guardia in the year 600, Frog is strong, noble, and intensely loyal to the royal family. He is also a four-foot-tall talking frog. However, this was not always the case. His real name is Glenn, and used to be a squire under a legendary knight named Cyrus. During their search for the Masamune, a sword said to hold the power to defeat the evil wizard Magus (Magus had been stirring up trouble for a while now). However, Magus beat Cyrus and Glenn to the Masamune's resting place, killed Cyrus, and turned Glenn into a frog as a sort of cruel joke. Glenn joins Crono's team on their quest when Crono produces the newly reforged Masamune and offers to help defeat Magus.

Robo – Robo, serial number R66-Y and originally known as Prometheus, was created in the year 1999, shortly before the Day of Lavos. Crono, Marle, and Lucca discover him in the year 2300 as a rusted hulk inside one of the decimated domes that scatter that future's bleak landscape. Lucca repairs Robo, who joins the team both in thanks for the repairs as well as to help them in their quest to prevent the cataclysm that destroyed his world. Robo is almost painfully polite, and quickly connects with Lucca for obvious reasons. He eventually becomes fascinated by nature and seeks to protect and cultivate it, largely due to living in a time where life had been nearly obliterated.

Ayla – The brash, headstrong chief of the Ioka tribe in 65,000,000 BC, Ayla fights with reckless abandon. A typical Cavewoman, Ayla refers to herself and others in third person,

and speaks in short bursts, omitting any word that isn't a noun, verb, or direct adjective. However, Ayla is far from stupid and is definitely pure of heart. Ayla joins the Crono team first when they come looking for the Dreamstone, then permanently when the Crono team fights Azala.

Breakdown

Chrono Trigger's story is a massive, sweeping story that spans a world consisting of several kingdoms across five distinct time periods (not counting the Day of Lavos in 1999 and the End of Time). In a nutshell, *Chrono Trigger* follows Crono's journey through time, beginning the morning of the Millennial Faire celebrating the beginning of the year 1000 AD and follows Crono and the allies he meets on a quest to stop the Day of Lavos from occurring in 1999 AD.

Of particular note here is that Lavos appears rather early in *Chrono Trigger's* story. In a game that typically takes over twenty hours to complete, the player learns about the Day of Lavos—the day Lavos surfaced and destroyed the world in 1999 AD—a little over two hours into the game. Crono and co. vow then and there to defeat the monster and prevent the Day of Lavos. At this point, barely over 10% into the game, the player already knows their ultimate goal, with the consequences of failure clearly laid out: the utter destruction of the planet. However, the player has no idea how to accomplish that goal. Eventually the player receives a hint that Magus, a sorcerer who waged war against the humans in 600 AD, created Lavos during the war to wipe out humanity. After a sidequest to reforge the Masamune, a legendary sword with the power to defeat Magus, Crono and co. storm Magus's castle and fight the sorcerer in a climactic battle. However, as it turns out, Magus did not actually create Lavos, but rather summoned the creature in order to destroy it. This false climax (crisis) marks the first in a series that lets the player get inches away from completing their ultimate goal, but pulling them away at the last moment. This provides a very active overall plot arch with several moments of high emotion and periods of falling action while maintaining a visible goal throughout the vast majority of the game. *Chrono Trigger* creates its tension not through the usual mire of ambiguity and slow, gradual revelation of mysteries, but instead provides a clear goal and builds tension by setting obstacles in the player's path toward achieving that goal.

Chrono Trigger's story and gameplay both center on time travel. Any action Crono takes in an earlier era affects the world in later periods. For example, if Crono takes an item from a chest in 600 AD, that item is absent from a chest in the same position in 1000 AD. Conversely, if Crono takes the item from the chest in 1000 AD and then travels back to 600 AD, he can take the item from 600 AD, as well, effectively gaining the same item twice. The first and most visible example comes from Crono's actions during the Millennial Faire. Nearly everything Crono does at this stage affects the trial after Crono is arrested after returning Marle to Guardia Castle.

Probably the best example of *Chrono Trigger's* time travel system and its affect on story comes from the quest to save Fiona's Forest. This quest sequence first introduces itself without the player knowing it when, early in the game, Crono and co. come across a large desert in the middle of the southern continent in 1000 AD. Later, in 600 AD (remember,

there's time travel) they discover a forest in the middle of where they remember a desert to be and meet Fiona, who mentions that she is protecting the forest that surrounds her house in memory of her husband, who hasn't returned from the war with the Mystics. Crono and co. are unable to do anything with this information until much later in the game, after they receive and plant a seed in 12,000 BC. This action in the distant past has unforeseeable consequences in the future. When Crono and co. return to Fiona's Forest in 600, they discover that a strange sand portal appeared near Fiona's Forest. The source of this portal is a giant desert monster drawn to the powerful life energies surrounding the forest caused by the seed planted in 12,000 BC. Crono and co. must defeat the desert monster sapping the forest's strength. After defeating the monster, Robo volunteers to stay in 600 AD and help Fiona cultivate the forest. Crono and co. can then travel to 1000 AD and find that the desert that once covered the southern continent has become a vast forest with a chapel in the middle. There the player finds Robo's rusted hulk. The Crono team all camp out in Fiona's forest while Lucca repairs Robo and a scripted sequence wraps up the quest.

Strongest Element

More than any other game, *Chrono Trigger* fuses storyline and gameplay. The game is based around time travel, which provides a common link for these two fundamentally important game design elements. Nearly every action the player takes in one time period affect the game's world in later eras. By providing such a powerful link between gameplay and story, *Chrono Trigger* established a strong foundation for its characters and created a paradigm that worked to draw the player into the game's world and immerse themselves in the characters' plight.

Unsuccessful Element

The weakest narrative choice in *Chrono Trigger* is the ability to resurrect Crono after his sacrifice at the Ocean Palace. While the quest to "resurrect" Crono is highly involved and interesting, killing Crono off only to have him revived later greatly weakened *Chrono Trigger's* story. The narrative would have been much stronger had Crono remained dead and lived on only in memory. In fact, one of the strongest, poignant, and most emotional endings comes if you defeat Lavos without reviving Crono. In the original SNES release, this ending depicts Marle sitting at the base of the tree at the top of Death Peak, thinking about Crono and mourning his loss (The Playstation and DS releases changed this ending significantly). Killing a major character is certainly a powerful narrative device, but this device is only fully realized if the writer sticks to the decision and does not allow that character to be revived. That character's death will become a major plot point, define the rest of the game, and ultimately the game's narrative will be stronger because of the decision to let that character die.

Squaresoft learned this lesson shortly after making *Chrono Trigger*, and their next major game, *Final Fantasy VII*, stands as a powerful testament that if you kill a major character, you should make sure they stay dead. Aeris's death largely defined *Final Fantasy VII's* plot and the fact that there was no possible way to revive Aeris underlined her death's significance. Had there been some way to revive Aeris, not only would her death have lost much of its significance, but Cloud's remorse and self-doubt would have felt thin and

cheap, and the deep-seated hatred for Sephiroth would have been weakened. The difference in fan reaction to Crono's death in *Chrono Trigger* (practically none) and Aeris's death in *Final Fantasy VII* (some players even hacked the game in order to forcibly place Aeris back on their team) demonstrates that the narrative decision to let a major character die and remain dead greatly improves the impact of a game's narrative.

Highlight

Magus was an early villain and for a time seemed to be the game's final boss. Portrayed as the ultimate bad guy, Magus waged war on the otherwise peaceful kingdom of Guardia and was pegged as Lavos's creator when he supposedly summoned the monster to his castle. However, as Crono and co. later learn, Magus was more of a tragic figure, thrown into a dark and distant future from his homeland in the kingdom of Zeal and searching for his lost sister, Schala. Eventually, the player encounters Magus again, only this time their goals are in parallel, trying to defeat Lavos in the Ocean Palace. After Crono's sacrifice to save his friends, the now-Cronoless remnants of the Crono team have the opportunity to either fight and kill Magus once and for all or accept Magus onto the team and help him find his lost sister. This reversal of fate marks possibly the most memorable point in *Chrono Trigger's* narrative and allows the player to connect strongly with a character they previously learned to hate.

Critical Reception

Chrono Trigger received almost universal praise, earning an overall 8.8 on Metacritic. Finding a negative comment on *Chrono Trigger's* storyline is difficult, if not impossible.

Mark Bozon at IGN gave the DS version of *Chrono Trigger* an 8.8/10, stating that "the theme of causality and travelling through time to change the course of history, making sure certain destruction doesn't come to pass is such a refreshing change of pace as it's something that's truly epic." He cites *Chrono Trigger's* outdated graphics and the lackluster additions to the DS version as reasons for the game not receiving an essentially perfect score.

Daniel James at Gamestyle gives *Chrono Trigger* a 10/10, saying, "the storyline twists and turns as new people are met and join your team - a different person from each time period, all fighting for a common goal. And your actions in-game will also affect certain characters' availability as well as the outcome of the ending."

About the harshest any reviewer rated *Chrono Trigger* was an 80/100 from David Jenkins at Teletext, who said that "although it still relies heavily on the steampunk look familiar to many mid-era Final Fantasies, and concerns a giant planet threatening bad guy, the game's plot manages to keep things interesting with an unusual time travelling motif." He also cites the DS's weak additions and out-dated graphics for deductions from *Chrono Trigger's* otherwise perfect score.

Lessons

- Providing early visibility of the main antagonist provides clear direction for the player and allows a game to create storyline and tension through clever misdirection and obstacles on the path to the final boss.
- While truly evil villains are fun to hate, they only really gain depth and come to life when they have believable goals and understandable motives.
- When gameplay and storyline are closely linked, the two elements build on each other and enhance the effectiveness of both.
- When a main character is killed off, only to later be revived, it cheapens the character's death and results in a weaker overall story.

Summation

Chrono Trigger seems an obvious choice for review. It received near-universal praise, has stood the test of time making best-selling status through multiple re-releases across three completely different platforms, and holds a spot on just about every “best game” list compiled. However, the narrative basis cited for these achievements is often simply “good storyline” or “excellent characterization.” Qualifying and examining the narrative design choices that helped make *Chrono Trigger* the perennial powerhouse it is provides several lessons useful for continuing to make games with strong narrative.