

Game Narrative Review

Game Title: Cave Story

Platform: PC and Wii

Genre: Action Platformer

Release Date: December 20th 2004(PC) and March 22nd 2010(Wii)

Developer: Studio Pixel and Nicalis

Publisher: Studio Pixel and Nicalis

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Daisuke Amaya

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Overview

The story focuses around the character Quote as he explores the various areas of a floating island in the sky and tries to regain his memories. As the game progresses the main character is introduced to the antagonist The Doctor and the race of rabbit-like people who the Doctor is trying to enslave, the Mimiga. The character discovers that the Doctor is trying to use a strain of red flowers which cause Mimiga to mutate and become incredibly aggressive, to form an army which he can use to attack the surface dwellers and conquer the world. Quote takes it upon himself to try and help the Mimiga and stop the Doctor.

Over the course of the game Quote meets many different NPCs and discovers that he is a robot. He also learns the relevant history of the island and the Doctor and meets various characters along the way who both help and hinder his progress. Quote is forced to make various choices throughout the game which can all have a lasting effect on the final outcome of the story. Because of this there are multiple different ways that the story can end however there is one ideal ending.

Characters

- **Quote** – Quote is the player character. He has no memory at the beginning of the game and acts as a silent protagonist. He represents the player in almost every facet as he learns the story of the game the same way the player does, by interacting with the various NPCs. He does not have any true personality traits as all of his decisions are left up to the player. The only time he really “speaks” is when the player is given a choice of either responding “Yes” or “No” to some situation. All aspects of his personality are projected onto him by the player themselves. He is easily identified by his bright red hat and black hair. He is a war robot who malfunctioned and forgot his programming before the events of the game.

- **Curly Brace** – Curly Brace is introduced in the Sand Zone area as a second war robot of the same type as Quote who has been protecting a family of Mimigas since their mother died. Curly Brace goes through the game acting as an ally and sidekick to the player and works to help you in your fights with the island's Core and with Ballos. She is caring and kind towards others and has a desire to protect those in need. Her overall goals in the game are much the same as Quote's in that she is also trying to stop the Doctor and save the Mimigas. Her most identifiable feature is her long blonde hair.
- **King** – King is the leader of Mimiga Village and takes it upon himself to protect the weaker characters like Toroko since the legendary hero Arthur died. After Toroko is kidnapped by Misery and the Doctor, King goes out on a quest to try and save her. The player sees him once or twice while on their journey and is there to witness his final stand against the Doctor. While trying to save Toroko King is killed by the Doctor. In his dying breath he gives the player his weapon, the Blade, and asks you to avenge him. King is a brave character who has a strong instinct to protect others. He spends much of the story trying to keep Mimiga Village, and subsequently, Toroko, safe, and dies trying. He is also a very stubborn and untrusting character. When he is first introduced he is trying to force Sue out of the village because he knows the Doctor is after her. Despite his desire to protect others he decides that the village is more important than Sue is and does what he can to try and get rid of her. He is strong willed and good hearted but values the lives of those he knows over everyone else. His most distinguishing features are his oddly shaped head and his yellow/red eyes. It is implied by his appearance that he ate a small portion of a red flower as his features resemble that of a mutated Mimiga.
- **Toroko** - Toroko is a female Mimiga who lives in Mimiga Village. She is also the little sister of the legendary Mimiga Arthur. When she is first introduced she is trying to protect Sue from the Doctor and prevent King from kicking her out of town. She is a compassionate character who values the lives of others, even those she does not know, and is also somewhat shy. After she is kidnapped by the Doctor he forces her to eat red flowers and the player is eventually forced to fight and defeat her. She is most easily identified by the Blush marks on her face, and her green shirt.
- **Sue Sakamoto** – Sue is Kazuma's sister and Doctor Sakamoto's daughter. She came to the island with her mother and did not really want to be there. Before the game begins she is turned into a Mimiga by Misery and is fairly frustrated throughout the game by her predicament. She is somewhat afraid of the Doctor throughout the game as she is being hunted by him and spends a large part of the game trying to be turned back to normal. She is independent and very strong-willed. She is driven mostly by her desire to leave the island and to be turned back into a human. Later in the game she ends up being turned into a rabid Mimiga by the Doctor but is eventually healed when he is defeated by Quote.

- **Kazuma Sakamoto** – Kazuma is Sue’s brother and Doctor Sakamoto’s son. He is introduced in the very first scene when he is searching for Sue. He came to the island with his mother on her research trip. His goals throughout the story range from trying to find Sue and stop the Doctor to trying to get off of the island safely. Overall Kazuma is a smart guy but he is a bit of a pessimist. One of the possible endings is that the player and Kazuma take one of the first chances they are given to leave the island and just fly off leaving the Doctor to take over the island, and the other characters to fend for them self. Even if you choose not to go with him, he tells you that if things start looking bad he will leave without you. This can be forgiven to some extent as not leaving would almost certainly mean death but nonetheless he still seems a bit selfish. He can easily be identified by his green hair and the fact that he never opens his eyes. He is driven by a desire to help his sister and a bit by his own desire to survive.
- **Doctor Sakamoto** - Doctor Sakamoto is Sue and Kazuma’s mother. She came to the island to do research and brought the doctor with her to help. She is driven by a desire to stop the Doctor and to help her children. When she is finally introduced she helps the player reach the doctor by building a rocket which he can use to get to the final cave. She is a very nice person and cares more about the Doctor’s defeat than her own personal survival. She helps the player when possible and seems to feel a little guilty over the fact that she brought the Doctor to the island in the first place. She can easily be identified by her green hair and her lab coat. She is driven primarily by a desire to stop the Doctor and rescue her children.
- **Professor Booster** – Professor Booster came to the island with Doctor Sakamoto to help in her research. Throughout the game he provides items to the player and helps the player to accomplish his goals. He mainly wants to help Sue and to stop the Doctor. He is a caring person and very smart. He is easily identified by his white Mohawk and his red glasses.
- **Balrog** – Balrog, along with Misery, is one of the Doctor’s minions. Despite this though he is really a very relaxed guy who basically just doesn’t want to cause any problems. In the player’s first encounter with him he is told by Misery to stop the player. Once Misery leaves he asks the player whether they want to fight him. If the player says no, he just up and leaves rather than fighting you. While he does not do this any other time, it shows a lot about his character that he did not really want to fight either. He is also a very jovial character. Whenever he enters the room, he loudly proclaims “Huzzah” or “Oh Yeah!” depending on the version you are playing. By and large he is simply a guy with a job to do and not much more. In the end it is revealed that he, like Misery was being forced to follow the Doctor’s orders because the Doctor was wearing the Demon Crown and that he did not actually have any problem with the player, or want to listen to the Doctor to begin with. He is easily identified by the fact that he yells “Huzzah” or “Oh Yeah!” when he enters the room, and the fact that he looks like a giant toaster

with eyes. He is driven primarily by his own desires but also partially by the wearer of the Demon Crown.

- **Misery** – Misery is the daughter of the witch Jenka and one of the Doctor's minions along with Balrog. Before the game began Misery asked Ballos, Misery's uncle and Jenka's brother, to make her the Demon Crown but he made it so that whoever wore the crown would be able to control her instead. Throughout the game Misery seems to be an evil heartless person who does not care for others but later it is revealed that she was acting solely under the control of the crown and subsequently the Doctor since he was wearing it. She is not seen at all after the crown is destroyed and the curse is lifted so it is hard to know what her true personality is like. Misery is easily identifiable by her almost pure white skin and her black attire. She is driven entirely by the Doctor's orders throughout the game.
- **The Doctor** - The Doctor came to the island with the Sakamotos and Professor Booster under the false pretenses of helping them. In truth he knew about the island before hand and went specifically to get the Demon Crown. After getting the crown he proceeded with his plan to use the red flowers to control the Mimiga and take over the world. The Doctor is an evil character who is purely out for his own gains. He had no qualms about manipulating and downright controlling others so that they would do his whim and did not care if they got hurt at all. He is very much the classic villain. He is very selfish and does whatever he can to accomplish own goals. He is easily identifiable by his demon crown and his lab coat. He is driven by his goal of conquering the world and taking control of the Mimigas.
- **Ballos** – Ballos is Jenka's brother and Misery's uncle. Before the game occurred he was a powerful sorcerer. He was tortured by a king who wanted his power and was eventually driven insane because of it. He created the Demon Crown. Because of his power Jenka sealed him deep inside the core of the Island and that is where he stayed until the end of the game. He is not seen very long and thus he is hard to characterize. He seemed to be after his own gains when you meet him and based on what he did to Misery he probably cares very little for others. He is also very powerful. He is driven primarily by his own goals and does not care much for anyone else. He is easily identifiable by his green and white robes which have two red eyes on the front and the fact that he has bright yellow skin.

Breakdown

The overall arc of the game is pretty basic, Quote is introduced to the world, he is presented with a small problem, he solves the problem and is introduced to a larger conflict, he chooses a side, and finally he prevails. That, however is not the only way that the story can go. The story is very variable and the end is based heavily on what you as a player did or did not do. Throughout the game you are presented with different choices

both direct and indirect. Not all of these choices affect the storyline, some of them just affect which guns the player will use but they still can have an impact on the game itself.

Some of the choices are very direct in their presentation like the choice to leave the island with Kazuma and not fight the Doctor, or to take a chance and try to save everyone. This choice was direct in both its presentation and in its effect. Not only does Kazuma straight up ask you which you want to do, but it is immediately clear what impact your choice has on the ending. Choosing to leave with him ends the game immediately whereas choosing to stay and fight causes the game to extend at least another couple hours while you fight your way through the final bosses and dungeons. There are other dialogs like this one. In your first encounter with Balrog, he asks you before the fight whether you want to fight him. If you say no he just leaves without a second thought. While this particular choice has little, if any, effect on the final outcome of the game, it has the immediate effect of you not having to do the first boss fight. This leads to strong characterization of Balrog himself, and a strong feeling of free will in the player.

Despite all the direct choices though there are also many indirect choices that you are given throughout the game. At one point, after one of the boss fights, Curly Brace is on the verge of death. If you made the choice to explore the room you were in before the fight, you find an item that makes it possible for Curly Brace to be saved, if not, you cannot save her and she dies and you cannot achieve the ideal ending. Not only is this an indirect choice but it is one that you must go out of your way to find. Another choice like this one is the choice to save an NPC known as Mr. Little. Early in the game you meet him but he will not talk to you. Later after you are almost done with the game you can find his family who has been looking for him. If you choose to go back, find him, and bring him back to his family you are rewarded with a more powerful gun. Interestingly though it is possible to bring him with you, and not return him to his family. If you do this, and he is still with you after you beat the final boss, he pops up in the final dialog asking why you didn't bring him home.

This idea of the story influencing the gameplay and vice versa works to great affect most of the time but there are also some flaws to it. The fact is Mr. Little is very hard to find if you are not explicitly looking for him. If I did not know where he was because of a friend's tip, I probably would not even have realized he existed to return to his family in the first place. Same thing goes for the item that saves Curly Brace's life. If I had not been given advice by a friend I may never have found it. There is something to be said for hiding things in games but when it is as closely tied to the narrative as this it seems a little over the top in my opinion. That said I think it works well and the degree to which player choice and interaction impacts the story's outcome is rivaled by only a few games.

Strongest Element

The most successful element of the story is easily how player interaction affects the final outcome. While I have already stated a number of ways the player can influence various events throughout the game, there are many more. The fact is depending on what

you consider a unique “ending” the game can be said to have minimum of 4 different endings. On top of that the items that the player gets throughout the game can change drastically depending on what you do. If you trade the first gun you are given for a machine gun after entering the Sand Zone area, you never get the chance to gain the Spur which is arguably the best weapon in the game. This type of thing happens with a number of different guns where depending on which guns you have, you would never even learn of the existence of the other guns. Overall player choice can have such a strong impact on the events that it stands out as the strongest element of the narrative in my opinion.

Unsuccessful Element

I think the least successful element of the narrative was the way it was told to the player. Much of the information was simply told to you directly by the NPCs. While this works from a story perspective since Quote is not supposed to know where he is, or what’s going on, it is still a very “cheap” way of getting the story across. On top of that, it is often told to you in large chunks by one character or another. Daisuke Amaya could have easily written it so you gain little bits of info from various people over time rather than everything from a given character at specific times. I think that the presentation works well enough considering the circumstances but it definitely could have been improved to some extent.

Highlight

For me the best moment was when Balrog just walked away after I said that I did not want to fight him. So many games script dialogs like that, or have both options lead to the same end point making the dialog essentially useless and it always annoys me. By giving me a true choice there it did so many positive things for the game. First it characterized Balrog so clearly in my mind as just a relaxed guy who really wasn’t too concerned about the situation at hand. On top of that it really made me think about all of my other choices later on. By knowing that my choice actually had an impact it made me want to see what different directions the story could go in if I took other “less-obvious” choices. On top of all that it was also just very funny to see this giant toaster shaped man charge in, yell “Huzzah”, and make a big deal out of everything, and then just walk off since I didn’t want to fight. Overall it really showed the thought that had been put into the presentation and the writing itself.

Critical Reception

The critical reception of the game was very good.

“It’s a game that tests your reflexes and engages your mind, all while laying out a simple but intriguing story.” Jeremy Parish, 1UP.com, A

“Through an extended platforming adventure and a varied mix of locales and challenging encounters, players gradually unfold a deep and imaginative story.” Matt Miller, Game Informer, 8.75

“Cave dwellers, both friend and foe, populate the diverse topography, spinning an endearing mystery of rabbit people called Mimigas, old wars, and a toaster called Balrog.” Unspecified, GameTrailers.com, 8.7

Lessons

- The way in which the game uses player choice to affect the story really helps the player feel involved in the game. The ability to choose no to fight Balrog, to quit before the going gets tough and leave with Kazuma, or to not return Mr. Little to his family all make the player feel in control and build on the game’s stellar gameplay.
- When you start the game it thrusts you in without any knowledge and the way it manages to keep you in the know without divulging too much at once is great and should be used as an example by other games. When you first start all you know is that some guy name the Doctor is after some girl named Sue. Once all of that makes sense in context you learn about the red flowers, and then their effects, and then about Sue’s family. All the while you feel like you have a good idea of what’s going on in the story even though you still don’t have a “complete” explanation.
- Show don’t tell. As I said when talking about the characters, King’s appearance and characterization implies that he ate some of the red flowers but the game never explicitly says this. By not giving the player all the details about the world it gives a great feeling of a larger world around the player. If the player knew everything the world would feel small and confined but because they don’t it has a feeling of vastness and unexplored territories.

Summation

The truly amazing thing about this game for me is that it was made by a single person. Daisuke Amaya not only wrote the story but built the engine, drew the art, edited the music. Everything was done by him and him alone. Even when it was ported to the Wii from its original PC version, to the best of my knowledge, he still did a large portion of the new work. I think that is one of the things that make this story so interesting. Not only was the story built to this great depth but it was also done by one guy. I think this game deserved the analysis because it does what so many other games attempt and fail at. It gave me, the player, a true feeling of impact on the game world. My actions did not reset when I left the room, it wouldn’t have turned out the same if I had said the opposite things, and did not force me to do what was “best” or what the writer wanted. Instead it just put me in the game world and let me explore my surroundings and discover the mystery and just plain, have fun. This game deserved an analysis because it kept me engaged, and gave me a true feeling of involvement that few other games can match.