

Game Narrative Review

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Date of Submission: 29 November 2012

Game Title: EarthBound

Platform: Super Nintendo Entertainment System

Genre: Role-playing game

Release Date: 5 June 1995

Developers: Nintendo || Ape || HAL Laboratory

Publisher: Nintendo

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Shigesato Itoi

Overview

EarthBound opens its story in the year 199X, when a meteorite lands in the homely town of Onett, and catches the attention of a young boy named Ness. In his curiosity, Ness explores this occurrence, ultimately leading to the discovery of a creature from the future who informs him about a threat of cosmic proportions. Being a major part of the prophecy disclosed to him, Ness heads out on a journey to locate his allies and prepare himself for a battle against the threat of the future: a being that goes by the name of Giygas.

In order to achieve his full potential, Ness must unlock his spiritual body. He is able to do this by using a relic known as the Sound stone, given to him at the beginning of his adventure. By visiting his eight "Your Sanctuary" locations, the Sound stone allows him access to memories of his past and ultimately into a realm of his mind known as Magicant. Despite all that he is able to achieve, though, Ness cannot do it alone. Throughout his adventure, he meets three other kids named Paula, Jeff, and Poo, whose friendship and loyalties help him to go far. Together, they are the Chosen Four. Once Ness reaches into his spiritual realm and overcomes his inner demons, he is prepared to confront and defeat Giygas once and for all. With his wisdom, courage, and most importantly of all, the help of his friends, Ness is able to defeat Giygas and fulfill his prophecy.

Characters

- 1. Ness** – Ness is a young boy who is prophesized to save the future from destruction at the hands of Giygas. He displays a strong focus on the emotional body, being driven by his desires, experiences, and relationships with others. Above all, Ness cares for those close to him and values their support. Though he faces many challenges throughout his journey and grows in many ways, Ness never forgets the importance of those closest to him.
- 2. Paula** – Paula is the first to accompany Ness on his adventure. She represents the spiritual body, as is displayed through the dialogue long before Ness even meets her. Many of the NPCs the player may interact with describe her as special and motherly, even going as far as to imply that she is an instrument of harmony in her hometown of Twoson. Her first communication with Ness is through a dream, where she telepathically speaks to him. By the end of the game, Ness and Paula have created an inseparable friendship, and Paula appears to have a crush on Ness.
- 3. Jeff** – The third of the Chosen Four is Jeff Andonuts. Jeff helps the group with inventions and repairs, often using his thinking skills to solve any problems in his way. For this, he is the mental body of the group. It is communicated throughout the adventure that Jeff has an impersonal relationship with his father, who he calls ‘Mr. Andonuts’ rather than ‘Dad.’ This is in part because, before the events of the game, he had not seen his father for ten years. After Giygas is defeated, both Jeff and his father have grown emotionally from the experience and are ready to come together as a family.
- 4. Poo** – The final ally to join Ness is Poo, a prince of Eastern descent. Poo has undergone severe physical training, strict dieting, and special meditation trials in order to achieve his physical strength. Before he meets with Ness, he completes his training with a trial where he must continuously meditate while an illusionary and mysterious figure slowly strips his body from the physical world. With this separation from the physical plane, Poo is able to free himself of worldly objects, allowing him complete mastery over his body. His strength, health, and self-control make him the physical body of the Chosen Four.
- 5. Pokey** – Pokey Minch is a next-door neighbor and acquaintance to Ness. Throughout his childhood, Pokey has developed into a selfish and cowardly bully, most likely because of his abusive and hateful parents. Regardless of his immature personality, Pokey considers Ness a friend at the beginning of the game, and goes to him for help shortly before the journey begins. While Pokey plays a part in Ness’s initial discovery of the prophecy, he soon begins to work against Ness, each of his plots more sinister than the last. It is not until the final stretch of the game that it is revealed that Pokey was being corrupted by Giygas since early in the story, with the help of the Evil Mani Mani, a statue which spreads an evil influence wherever it goes. Due to his vulnerability and willingness, Pokey was drawn to the power of the statue and followed it wherever it went. His behavior towards Ness may be a result of his opposing lifestyle, as well. While Ness

grew up with a loving family and plenty of friends in town, Pokey could not get any friends because of the immature attitude he acquired growing up with his abusive parents.

- 6. Giygas** – Giygas is an alien who, ten years in the future, sends all of existence into eternal darkness. Ness and his friends must defeat him before he is able to do this, but they must first overcome the consequences of his influence. Throughout the game, Giygas corrupts animals, people, monsters, even entire populations, to keep Ness from progressing.

Breakdown

Throughout his journey, Ness faces many obstacles and challenges in his quest to collect the eight melodies. Much of the story and dialogue is rich with meaning, and it is easy to become emotionally invested in the characters. *EarthBound* succeeds in many ways, but of the game's accomplishments, I feel that the best ones are the inclusion of the hero's journey, the portrayal of enemies, and the Chosen Four's connection to the four lower bodies. Throughout his adventure, Ness simultaneously fares a different Hero's Journey for each of the four bodies, offering me an experience unlike many others. With Giygas' evil influencing the natural world, I felt that the method enemies were represented was both fitting and meaningful. Finally, the representation of the four lower bodies through the Chosen Four and the support it receives from the gameplay felt like the strongest points to me.

Joseph Campbell's hero's journey is well known for being a framework of many stories, and *EarthBound* follows this framework in an extremely creative and intriguing way. The game begins with the call to adventure, when Ness is awoken by the comet and is curious to see it. From there, the refusal of the call comes into play, but not by Ness's choice, as the local policemen have barricaded the comet and Ness cannot physically make it through. When he finally does see the meteor later that night while helping Pokey look for his brother, he meets the mentor. This mentor, Buzz Buzz, protects Ness for a short while and tells him of his prophecy and the journey he must face before dying at the hands of Pokey's mother, literally. Ness accepts this journey, and begins his quest to fill the sound stone that was given to him with the eight melodies scattered throughout Eagleland. Later on in the game, after many trials and obstacles he must cross, Ness reaches the approach, ordeal, and reward stages of the hero's journey. By collecting the eight melodies in his sound stone, he opens way to the spiritual world of Magiant, where he must face many trials to unlock his fullest potential. These trials are concluded with a battle against Ness's nightmare, or as it is known in Japan, Ness's Devil or Ness's Demon. Once defeated, Ness becomes much stronger and is finally ready to fight the battle against Giygas. From there, he and his friends reach the resurrection stage, where they must sacrifice their physical bodies to confront Giygas, with no promise that they will be able to return to their

familiar world. Once the battle is over, the final stage, return with the elixir, comes into play. Ness and his friends are able to return, and the natural world no longer needs to fear the influence of Giygas. This hero's journey resonated with me strongly not only because of its unique approach to the stages, but also because the story is set up so that Ness accomplishes four simultaneous journeys throughout his adventure, one for each of his four lower bodies. For example, during the meet the mentor stage, Ness receives aid from Buzz Buzz in four different ways. From the physical journey, Buzz Buzz casts a shield around Ness and protects him from an attacking alien who serves as the first boss. From the mental journey, Buzz Buzz informs Ness of the prophecy and his journey, warning him of the challenges he will face. From the spiritual journey, Buzz Buzz gives Ness the sound stone which, while not immediately helpful to him, sets the stage for the unlocking of his spiritual potential later in the game. Finally, and most importantly to Ness, the emotional journey has Buzz Buzz giving Ness the promise that he will find three friends to help him throughout his adventure. Being a character with a strong emotional bond, having support from those close to him is what he will treasure most during his trials.

Throughout my experience with *EarthBound*, I found that the portrayal of Giygas and his control over otherwise natural creatures was very creative and extremely fitting for the story. The country of Eagleland is normally devoid of any danger, but with the growing influence of Giygas corrupting the creatures that populate it, it has become a very unnatural environment to navigate for Ness and his friends. Many of the enemies they fight are normal people or animals who have been taken under the influence of Giygas, but his control is not strong enough that their natural behaviors cannot be restored. Giygas does not physically appear until the very final battle of the game, but his influence over others is so strong that his presence was active throughout much of the adventure. The writers are able to communicate this in a brilliant way, through the enemies the Chosen Four confront during the adventure. Very rarely do the players come across a normal animal or usual person in battle, but rather, they will encounter strange variations of them. Ness is not battling a dog and a crow; he is battling a *runaway* dog and a *spiteful* crow. He comes across many mice in his adventure, but it is not until he sees a *rowdy* mouse that a battle is necessary when confronting it. These types of names are very common in the game, as if to remind the player that it is not natural for this crow to be spiteful, or for that mouse to be rowdy. In fact, it is unnatural enough that these new behaviors need to be added to the names in order to clarify it. When a battle opens telling me that I am now fighting a mad duck, it is as if the game is reminding me that I am not just fighting a normal, innocent duck. I am fighting a duck that has fallen under the influence of Giygas, and is now mad as a result. Giygas itself is not a physical being, but is instead a literal embodiment of evil. It can be argued that when I fight a mad duck in *EarthBound*, I am not fighting a duck, but I am fighting Giygas itself. The goal is not to kill the duck; the goal is not even to defeat the duck. Whenever Ness overcomes an enemy in battle, it does not say "The Runaway Dog has been defeated!" or "The Rowdy Mouse has fallen!" Instead, it tells you that the being has returned to normal, or has become tame. The narration does not even imply that the creature has been harmed as a result of

the battle. This portrayal of Giygas, as well as the creatures that are under his control, work together perfectly in these instances. It allows the player to see the usual enemies as the victims of a much greater threat, one which they would not dare to cross under usual circumstances. In addition to all of this, I also enjoyed that many of these enemies would sometimes show their natural behaviors during the battle. Every so often, a runaway dog will skip a turn to begin howling, or a spiteful crow will glare at Ness rather than actually attack. It is these behaviors that show how much of an effect Giygas has over the creature. While minor creatures such as runaway dogs and spiteful crows may not be a target of Giygas' influence, other enemies such as the insane cultists from Happy Happy Village show fewer signs of natural behavior, never taking a break from attacking except to call for other cultists. Around the second portion of the game, Ness visits Happy Happy Village, a village with a mad obsession for a religion based around the color blue. It is soon revealed that the townspeople are under the control of the Evil Mani Mani, a statue used to channel Giygas' influence more strongly than usual. Because of its close proximity to the statue, the village is much more corrupted than other towns, and Ness must defeat the man using the Evil Mani Mani in order to free the village of its influence. This is just one example of how Giygas uses his influence at a greater scale to halt the player's progress. Once Ness and his friends complete their journey and finally defeat Giygas at the end of the game, its influence disappears and Eagleland is saved from the future of darkness Ness was told about at the beginning of the game. There is one character who is not freed of Giygas' influence, though. Pokey Minch, Ness's neighbor, becomes more and more sinister throughout the story because of the corruption he endures from Giygas, and escapes to a time and place unknown just before the final battle. He goes on to become the main antagonist in *EarthBound's* sequel, *Mother 3*, meaning he was never able to free himself of the evil that overcame him. It is thought that, because of his abusive parents and lack of friends growing up, Pokey was a vulnerable target for Giygas, and in his acceptance of the influence, he seals his own fate. With his disloyalty and untrustworthiness, he is almost a sort of polar opposite to Ness in the way his character is built.

The final element I found to be notable in *EarthBound* is the Chosen Four's representation of the four lower bodies. Ness represents the emotional body, valuing those who are closest to him above all else. This representation is demonstrated by the gameplay. While he may not be the strongest magic user, he is the best of the Chosen Four with Healing and Lifeup magic, which expresses how much he cares about keeping his friends safe. Of the Chosen Four, Ness is the only one who can become homesick, and he must talk to his mother in person or by phone in order to feel better again. Ness's father will save his game, as well as provide moral support. He will even call Ness up every so often and ask him to take a break before he gets tired. While each of these mechanics were added for design reasons, *EarthBound* took it a step further and used these points to communicate Ness's closeness to his family and friends. The second of the Chosen Four, Paula, represents the spiritual body. She is the strongest magic user of the Chosen Four, and is the only character that is able to pray to receive assistance from a higher power. While Ness is the protagonist, it is ultimately Paula who defeats Giygas with the help of

this ability. Jeff is the third of the Chosen Four, and he represents the mental body of the group. Where he lacks in physical strength he makes up for in his ability to build handy weapons and items out of broken materials. Lastly is Poo, the final member of the Chosen Four. He as the physical body of the group is represented through the limits players are given when he joins the team. Whereas each of the other characters receive health or power from eating cheeseburgers, cookies, pizzas, and many other food items available throughout the game, Poo must eat food that fits with his diet in order to receive a worthwhile benefit. On a similar note, Poo is extremely limited with the items he can equip, and he oftentimes fights with his bare hands rather than having his own weapon like the rest of the group. With these tradeoffs come the benefits of Poo's physical health. He is a very strong character, he does not need equipped items as much as the other characters, and he can be healed by simple consumables, such as water. As a result, he does not require a lot of money to manage, and he is almost always at his physical peak. These mechanics fit in very well, considering that Poo's training allowed him to separate himself from worldly goods, such as money.

While *EarthBound* offers up a fairly lengthy story, it uses the elements it is given to the best of its advantage. The story, the narrative, and the characters are so full of life, and at no point does the experience feel forced or unnecessary. This is a rare investment for a story to make, especially in a video game. With so many games having a primary focus on gameplay but little priority for the narrative experience, it is refreshing to see a game which can successfully blend both together. Through its story, *EarthBound* follows the hero's journey, but in a way that feels unique and new. The villains are portrayed brilliantly, keeping priority over discovering the true enemy rather than a simple 'good vs. evil' structure. Lastly, the characters create a genuine representation of the four lower bodies, to the point where it becomes a part of the gameplay itself.

Highlights

Of *EarthBound's* many successes within its narrative, I feel that its greatest highlight is its merging of story and gameplay. I rarely have a chance to experience a game that works this hard to make the narrative such a significant part of the mechanics. Whether I had to call Ness's mother to cure him of his homesickness, go out of my way to receive special equipment for Poo, or use the pray ability several times in a row in order to defeat Giygas, even to the point where the game calls to me by name to pray with all my heart as well, the game keeps me emotionally involved the entire way. The experience one receives from a game and the narrative the game offers do not have to be mutually exclusive, and *EarthBound* proves that in more ways than some players think are possible.

Weaknesses

One weakness that stuck out to me in *EarthBound* was the inconsistency of some of the dialogue. Some people will go out of their way to wish Ness luck on his adventure, though they have no way of knowing he is on an adventure in the first place. One particular example is when Ness speaks to a mini-boss named Frank after defeating him. He will tell Ness that his adventure is only just beginning, even though he should not have enough knowledge on the subject to come to that conclusion. In cases like these, it almost felt to me as if Shigesato Itoi, the writer, was attempting to wish the player luck by channeling directly through a non-playable character. While there is good meaning behind it, this kind of dialogue only caused confusion for me, distracting me from the narrative to wonder why such a line existed in the first place. In addition to this, inconsistent dialogue was also existent among some of the general populations. When I first reached Twoson, the second town Ness visits on his journey, I was given a free bike rental, I met a doctor who paid me in exchange for curing an illness I currently had, and most of the townspeople were generally friendly to me. All signs pointed to this town being sincere and kind. Though, certain characters, particularly store clerks, were surprisingly rude to me. One clerk called me a loser for not buying anything from her. This came off as strange to me, as even the criminal of the town, Everdred, went out of his way to help me on my journey. I see no reason to include characters with such opposing behaviors to a town which seems to be trying to give me a completely different vibe. It got to the point where some locations, such as the Chaos Theater, made me feel like I was not even in Twoson anymore. One could argue that it is Giygas' influence making people meaner, but even that idea strays away from the general narrative that is familiar in the game. Personally, it seems to me that many of these rude and nasty dialogues were played for laughs, but regardless of how funny I found them, it still felt inconsistent and unfitting compared to the initial experience I received from visiting Twoson.

Summation

EarthBound is a special game to me. It contains all the elements necessary for a great story and fulfills its expectations in unique and interesting ways. Ness's journey to collect the eight melodies and reach his fullest potential is carried out from the multiple perspectives of his lower bodies. He must overcome the challenges set forth by Giygas, even if it means going up against people and animals that have fallen under its influence, including his neighbor Pokey. Along the way, he makes new friends which help him to become whole in his journey. As is prophesized by Buzz Buzz at the beginning of the story, Ness gathers his wisdom, courage, and most of all, the loyalty of his friends, to rescue the world from darkness.