

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Patapon
Platform: PlayStation Portable
Genre: Rhythm game, god game
Release Date: December 20, 2007 (JPN), February 26, 2008 (NA)
Developer: Pyramid, SCE Japan Studio
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Hiroyuki Kotani

Overview

Long ago, the Patapon tribe flourished under the leadership of the Almighty Patapon. However, the Patapons have since fallen on hard times. In an effort to regain their former glory, the tribe sends their bravest warriors into the wilds to seek the guidance of the Holy Drum and the Mighty One who wields it. The Almighty's triumphant return reinvigorates the Patapons, and they set out to fulfill their sole desire: to venture to Earthend and find eternal contentment by gazing upon "IT."

The journey will not be an easy one. Once exiled by the Zigoton Empire, the Patapons must now reclaim their land, fighting back against the Zigoton army and their relentless general, Gong the Hawkeye. As the Patapons push farther and farther into Zigoton territory, Gong becomes increasingly desperate to stop them before the queen sells the souls of the Zigotons to evil in a final bid to stop the Patapons' advance. After beating back the Dark Ones and Queen Kharma herself, the adventure culminates in a battle against the powerful demon Gorl with the fate of the world hanging in the balance.

Characters

Patapon Tribe

- **The Almighty Patapon** – The player's avatar is the Almighty Patapon, the unseen god of the Patapons. The Almighty communicates through "talking drums" (the □, O, Δ, and X buttons), by striking rhythms that represent different commands, such as Advance, Attack, and Defend. Priestess Meden serves as the official link between the Patapons and their god, although seemingly any Patapon (and even Zigoton) can address the Almighty. In addition to guiding the Patapons' actions, the Almighty is responsible for performing miracles, such as creating rain or a strong tailwind, to aid in their travels or assist in combat.

- **Priestess Meden** – Kind, helpful, and a little airheaded, Meden is the priestess of the Patapon tribe. The significance of her role is indicated by her colorful feathered headdress (as opposed to the standard-issue helm most Patapons wear) and green cloak. A Patapon scout acts as her aide, informing her of the goings-on between missions, while Meden herself offers the Almighty advice for the road ahead. Although she is ever-supportive of their god, Meden at times questions the justness of their cause, and expresses remorse for the fact they must fight the Zigotons in their quest to reach Earthend.
- **Hatapon** – The first Patapon the player encounters is Hatapon, found guarding one of the sacred drums in the hopes that the Almighty would one day return. Hatapon carries the banner of the Patapon tribe and acts as the center point of the army during missions. He has a fair amount of HP and is immune to status conditions, but in the event he does fall in battle, the mission is automatically forfeit.
- **The Patapons** – Small and round with a single large eye, don't let the Patapons' cute appearance fool you – they are fierce warriors with indomitable spirits. As long as the Almighty is there to guide them, that is; Patapons are quite ineffectual without the inspiring rhythm of their god's talking drums. Once they come together, though, there is not a force on earth that can stop them! Patapons are grouped by class, and the Almighty's army can consist of up to three classes: Tatepon (shield), Yaripon (spear), Yumipon (archer), Kibapon (cavalry), Dekapon ("gargantuan," club), and Megapon (sound-based attacks). The Patapons are at odds with the Zigotons, who look very much like the Patapons except for being squarish in shape and red where the Patapons are colored white.

Zigoton Empire

- **Queen Kharma** – Ruler of the Zigoton Empire, Queen Kharma is every bit as refined as one would expect of a queen, and every bit as ruthless as one would expect of a Zigoton. She has no qualms about offering up the souls of her people if it means stopping the Patapons from gazing upon IT and bringing about the end of the world. First encountered in the fight against Gorl's right-hand servant Beetleon, Queen Kharma assists by casting a sleeping powder from her butterfly-like wings; only when the Patapons confront her face-to-face are the true depths of her powers revealed. Those powers, gained by sacrificing the Zigotons to Gorl, allow her to bring meteors down from the sky and strike with crippling electric blows.
- **Gong the Hawkeye** – Gong the Hawkeye is the general of the Zigoton army. He is easily identifiable by his horned helm and the large scythe he uses to conjure whirlwinds. Gong is portrayed as a valiant warrior who will do everything in his power to stop the Patapons and prevent Queen Kharma from selling the Zigotons' souls to the forces of evil. Despite his hatred of the Patapons, he acknowledges the Almighty's power and provides a constant, formidable obstacle in the Patapons' quest toward Earthend. Gong makes his last stand in Doyon Basin with Makoton providing backup, but when the tides turn in favor of the Patapons, Makoton flees, leaving Gong to die a hero's death.
- **Makoton** – Makoton was at first an ordinary spear-wielding Zigoton, stationed at a desert outpost with his friend, Aiton. (It is reasonable to assume that Aiton and Makoton are more than just friends, though nothing is ever stated outright.) When the Patapons attack

the guard tower on their way through the desert, Aiton is killed in the skirmish, and Makoton vows revenge. He kidnaps Meden, but his attempts are thwarted before his troops can bring her back to Zigoton territory. Makoton later fights beside Gong, acting as a sort of second-in-command, and flees once the Patapons gain the upper hand in order to make his own deal with darkness. His quest for vengeance ends as “Scorpton,” when the Patapons confront him and the demon he sold his soul to, Baban; he perishes in the fight, his final words expressing regret that he may never see Aiton again.

Breakdown

Patapon's narrative echoes its gameplay: simple but deep. The Patapons want nothing more than to venture to Earthend and behold IT, and to that end the player, in the role of the Patapon god, uses magical drums to guide them. Along the way, the Patapons clash with the evil Zigoton Empire, long-standing rivals who seek to stop them from ever reaching Earthend. When the Patapons begin to encroach onto Zigoton territory, the queen of the Zigotons makes a pact with demons in a last-ditch effort to squash them, giving up her soul and the souls of her people in exchange for great power. But not even their demonic master Gorl can stand up to the Almighty, and at long last the Patapons arrive at their destination...which, as it turns out, is not Earthend after all.

Strangely enough, while the Patapons are the de facto protagonists of the game, they do not see nearly as much development as the Zigotons do. This is due in part to the fact that the Patapons are meant to be regarded as a group instead of as individuals; they are at the strongest when working together, united by the music of the Almighty. This is the story of their *tribe* seeking Earthend, so there is little need to shine a spotlight on certain members.

By contrast, there is more meat to the Zigotons' arc, not only because a compelling antagonist makes for a more compelling story, but to help subvert the “us vs. them” idea of the Zigotons as nothing more than mob of irredeemable villains. (They do, after all, become allies of the Patapons post-credits.) Players don't often think twice about mowing down the bad guys, but as soon as those “bad guys” are given names, or distinct personalities, or clear motivations and desires – as soon as they are humanized – it becomes that much harder to pull the metaphorical trigger. So it is with characters like Gong and Makoton, Zigotons who are not inherently evil and are simply fighting for their own reasons, deserving of respect or pity despite their “role” as villains.

It is also worth discussing how *Patapon*'s mechanics impact the narrative. Gameplay revolves around call-and-response, the player commanding their Patapon troops with a four-beat rhythm, and the Patapons singing (and carrying out) the command in response. The core of the game is divided into a series of 30-some missions. Every mission, the Patapons set out in a rightward march, overcoming various obstacles (wild animals, Zigotons, or hulking bosses, depending on the mission type) in order to reach the goal post at the end of the stage.

The Patapons can only march forward, and cannot retreat except in short, evasive bursts. Their means of progressing through a mission involve destroying everything in their path, be it Zigotons, enemy encampments, or the graves of their own ancestors. Refusal is not an option. There is no “interact peacefully” command. Thus there is a certain sense of futility in the overall undertaking, that no matter how much the player might wish to spare a character's life or leave a

given structure intact, they – the Almighty – *must* do whatever it takes to guide the Patapons to Earthend.

Patapon faces a unique challenge in the demands of rhythm-based gameplay: telling the story during gameplay itself. A fair portion of the story comes from mission descriptions and Meden’s dialog between missions at Patapolis, when the player is free to read at their own leisure. It is during missions that the story progresses in real time, through speech bubbles that appear over characters’ heads. The trouble arises from the fact that the player must then divide their attention between maintaining the beat, planning their next action, *and* reading the dialog. For new players, this can be quite a handful.

Patapon’s designers took a few clever approaches to ensuring that players do not miss dialog critical to the story. Spacing and timing are one and the same in *Patapon*, since the Patapons always travel a set distance with the Advance command (as far as they can march in the span of four beats). For certain encounters, there tends to be a fair amount of empty space between the Patapons’ position and that of the enemy, providing the player a little “breathing room” and time to read the enemy’s dialog while their troops march forward. At other important encounters the game will instead halt forward movement entirely until the character finishes their dialog, at which point the Patapons can march again. This has the added effect of letting the player build Fever prior to combat and go in guns a-blazing.

There is more to *Patapon* than what the main storyline offers. Every item in the game, from the mightiest Divine Weapon to the humblest tree branch, comes with flavor text describing its origin or place in tribal legend. The red algae and magma of Bovo Volcano contribute to the creation of items such as the Strength Helm, Fire Halberd, and Crimson Horse. Hard iron, a seemingly innocuous material used to create certain classes of *Patapon*, is a rare and highly sought-after metal over which many bloody battles have been fought, according to Zigoton myth. Megapon’s Memory recounts the legend in which the handsome warrior’s music “brought one hundred maidens to tears.” These item descriptions provide glimpses into the culture and history of the Patapons that are sure to please players who enjoy digging deep into the game’s hidden backstory.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of *Patapon* is the unique spin it puts on the traditional story of good vs. evil. The Patapons and by extension the player are depicted as heroes, fighting for the Patapons’ homeland and questing for eternal happiness. The player goes about this in a very game-like fashion: by destroying everything in their path. Aiton’s death, Makoton’s quest for revenge, and Gong’s demand for the player to consider the ramifications of their actions sows the seeds of doubt in the player’s mind, begging the question: can you justify going to such extreme lengths in order to achieve your goals? Meden claims to feel a “tragic emptiness” in Gong’s death, and there is a peculiar sense of injustice about the wicked Spiderton’s declaration that “the Zigotons belong to us now!” When one considers that every step of the way the Zigotons were only ever acting out of self-preservation, suddenly the entire game is cast in a different light, blurring the line we’re so used to drawing between right and wrong.

Unsuccessful Element

While a fantastic game in and of itself, *Patapon* suffers from a somewhat unsatisfying ending when viewed as a standalone experience. A few major plot points are tied up at the end of *Patapon*, but the ultimate question is left lingering for subsequent games in the series to answer: Will the Patapons ever reach Earthend and gaze upon IT? (And just what is IT, anyway?) If we approach *Patapon* as the first part of a trilogy, we can appreciate the ending for the cliffhanger that it is – the Patapons arrive at the coast and watch the sunrise, but when the sight leaves them unfulfilled, they reason that Earthend must in fact lie across the sea, and the final scene after the credits roll shows the Patapons and Zigotons working together to construct a large boat. But on its own, *Patapon* may leave players feeling just as unfulfilled as the Patapons themselves when they discover their efforts have only brought them part of the way through their journey, and they won't see the narrative's true completion until a future installment.

Highlight

For this reviewer, the highlight of *Patapon* is the mission “Gong Vows to Fight,” wherein the Zigoton general makes his final stand against the forces of the Almighty, and Makoton, having risen fairly high in rank by this point, leaves him for dead once things start looking bleak. The impact of this mission is twofold. Primarily, it acts as a sort of Point of No Return for the narrative. Gong's attempts to thwart the Patapons were an effort to prevent Queen Kharma from sacrificing herself and the Zigotons for the power to do so herself, and his death all but forces her hand. Subsequent storyline missions pit the player against the Dark Ones, insect-themed Zigoton generals who have been corrupted by the forces of darkness.

Secondly, we are shown the lengths to which Makoton will go to exact his revenge on the Patapons. Makoton dutifully follows orders to call in reinforcements, but as the battle continues, Gong's dialogue (“Makoton! Stop messing about!”) gives the impression that he is not as invested in the fight as he should be. Indeed, once the Patapons have taken care of the Zigoton troops and Gong's duplicates, Makoton declares the battle “a joke” and backs away; from this point on he no longer attacks, despite Gong's demands to back him up. He tells Gong to “die like a man” and before the player can shift focus from the fallen Gong to Makoton himself, he is already retreating offscreen, saving his own hide so he can give up his soul to destroy the Patapons. The player can be sure that the next encounter with Makoton will not be a pretty one, and like this mission was for Gong, it will very likely be his last.

Critical Reception

While reviews of *Patapon* abound, very few touch on the narrative aspects of the game. The focus of reviews tends to be on the novel gameplay and colorful audio and visual style, perhaps indicating that the reviewers found these elements to be more compelling than the story. But I believe *Patapon* should still be acknowledged for its story, straightforward though it may be, and how seamlessly it is conveyed, being a rhythm game with very simple mechanics.

Jeff Haynes of IGN writes in his review of *Patapon*, “From the story to the mini-games and its action sequences, *Patapon* is an enthralling underdog tale with excellent characters.” He lauds *Patapon* for its sound design, adding that its music “coupled with the enthusiasm and

cheerful zeal of the Patapons can't be denied." The lack of a pause function and the inability to reliably obtain weapons and armor are problematic, but Haynes ultimately gives *Patapon* a score of 9.2. He summarizes with *Patapon* as "[...] a title that not only exalts in creativity and unique style, it delivers a fun, addictive, engaging experience that keeps you playing over and over again."¹

In his review for 1UP, Nick Suttner gives *Patapon* an Editor Rating of "A." Like Haynes, Suttner touches on the "unforgiving economy of the collectibles," as well as the necessity of replaying past missions in order to strengthen ones troops. His description of *Patapon* as whole commends the game's usage of rhythm-action and real-time elements, stating that "Its musical approach may disguise its hardened strategy roots at first, but the elegant union of those mechanics makes *Patapon* so damn compelling that it puts another must-buy feather in the PSP's cap."²

Patapon received awards for "Best original music" and "Most innovative game" in GameSpot's "Best of 2008" awards, and has an aggregate score of 87% on Metacritic.

Lessons

- **Gameplay comes before narrative, and may end up overshadowing it.** *Patapon's* unique mechanics and charming aesthetics shine so brightly that people tend to overlook its story – which is fine, because *Patapon* wants players to have fun *playing* more than anything else. When designing a game, think about how you will hook the audience, and realize that if that hook is especially compelling, players may unconsciously neglect other aspects of the game.
- **Don't be afraid to subvert expectations.** *Patapon* is at its heart a cheerful, lively little game bursting with personality, and it has its sobering moments to balance it out. Looking at the box art, you would likely not anticipate *Patapon* taking such a dark turn, but the game is all the better for it precisely because of how unexpected it is. And all the while, *Patapon* manages to stays true to itself, the story never feeling like it is at odds with the game's overall jolly atmosphere despite the themes it touches on. If executed carefully, challenging the expectations the audience has based on genre or style can have a great impact on the game and how the player experiences it.
- **There is no genre prerequisite for narrative.** *Patapon* is a rhythm/god game and *it* has a full-fledged story, so who's to say a puzzle game, a racing game, or a sports game can't? Of course, that doesn't mean you ought to shoehorn narrative in just for the sake of it. But if you have a story to tell, don't be afraid to experiment with your game's genre. Pushing the boundaries of game design can lead to some truly wonderful discoveries.

Summation

¹ Haynes, Jeff. *Patapon Review*. <http://www.ign.com/articles/2008/02/15/patapon-review>. IGN. 2008.

² Suttner, Nick. *Patapon Review: Rhythmic Real-Time Strategy*. <http://www.1up.com/reviews/patapon>. 1UP. 2008.

As video games grow as an artistic medium, it behooves us to seek new and innovative ways of working narrative into gameplay. *Patapon*'s is far from a traditional storytelling genre, yet there is indeed a thoughtful little story to this rhythm/god game nonetheless. Mechanics and narrative effortlessly intertwine as the player (the Almighty Patapon) presses buttons (plays divine talking drums) to the beat of the music (the rhythm of the earth) in order to control their army (guide the Patapons). The story plays out both behind the scenes, in mission descriptions and optional dialog from Meden, and during gameplay, through dialog from allies and enemies alike. The black silhouettes of the characters against vibrantly-colored backgrounds provide an eye-catching contrast, perfectly in fitting with quirky but catchy music that starts with a percussive beat and grows in complexity with the energy of the Patapons.

Every element of *Patapon* has an impact on the narrative and how it is intended to be received: the story is quite simple, and is ultimately optimistic, but that story – like the game itself – is first and foremost *fun*. *Patapon* never takes itself too seriously, never lingers on a particularly solemn note for too long (not without a little injected humor to lighten the mood – Gong's last words being "Plop!" comes to mind). For *Patapon*, gameplay is king, and narrative gives it a heartfelt form.