

Game Narrative Review:

Earthbound

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Game Title: *Earthbound* (North America), *Mother 2: Gyiyg no Gyakushu* (Japan)
Platform: Super Nintendo Entertainment System
Genre: Role Playing Game
Release Date: August 27, 1994 (Japan), June 5, 1995 (North America)
Developer: Ape/HAL Laboratory
Publisher: Nintendo
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Shigesato Itoi
Author of this Review: Chase Gordon
School: Southern Methodist University

Overview

The story begins as Ness (the player) awakes from a meteorite that falls from the sky close to his home. Ness, his dog, and his neighbor, Pokey, investigate the crash site and meet Buzz Buzz who describes a future in which Giygas dominates the planet. Buzz Buzz tells Ness that he must travel to eight locations and then defeat Giygas. As Ness travels, he meets and allies with Paula, Jeff, and Poo.

After activating the sanctuary points, Ness and company travel to the past in robot form using an invention created by Jeff's father. Pokey, who also travelled to the past, activates an evil machine manifesting Giygas in a physical form. Paula prays to people on Earth, and eventually the player, whose combined prayers defeat Giygas. Once Giygas dies, the group and Pokey return to their normal bodies.

Characters

While the player starts the game by naming the playable characters in the game and several facts about them, the following character names and personalities serve as the default:



- **Ness** – Ness assumes the role of the main player avatar of the game. An average young boy from a small town on Earth (Onett), Ness enjoys baseball and steak. Ness has dark hair and wears a baseball cap, a tee shirt, shorts, and tennis shoes. An unlikely hero thrown into a chaotic world, Ness uses his baseball bat and psychic powers to defeat the evil creatures living in the world.



- **Pokey** – Pokey serves as the comical antagonist to Ness. Ness's overweight neighbor carries out Giygas's plans. Pokey's habits annoy Ness and Pokey always finds methods that make Ness's journey harder. Pokey runs from frightening events and demands much from Ness without returning any friendly behavior.



- **Paula** – Paula exists as the first character that joins Ness permanently in the game. Ness meets Paula telepathically as she contacts him because she needs rescuing. A deeply spiritual character, she mainly uses offensive psychic powers, but also uses a frying pan when attacking physically. The 11-year-old blonde girl with a red bow in her hair from Twoson often shows deep caring feelings for Ness.

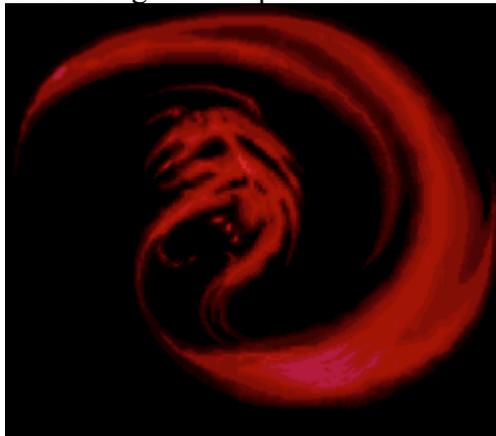


- **Jeff** – Jeff joins Ness after Paula. The player meets Jeff after zombies lock Ness and Paula in a room. Paula telekinetically talks to Jeff and he heads to their location. Jeff fights with guns, bottle rockets and special gadgets that he makes using his high IQ. Jeff begins at the Snow Wood Boarding School in Winters and

has a famous scientist, Doctor Andonuts, as a father. Jeff wears glasses and has blonde hair.



- **Poo** – Poo joins Ness in the adventure after all the others. Poo, the Prince of Dalaam, completes an arduous ritual, which focuses his spiritual energies and psychic powers. Poo uses a sword to attack physically, but relies on his magical abilities when devastating enemies. All main characters in the game are Caucasian except for Poo who is Asian. Mostly bald, Poo has some black hair that looks like a ponytail starting at the top of his head.



- **Giygas** – Giygas assumes the role of the over-arching evil nemesis in the game. Giygas exploits the evil qualities inside people and animals and controls them. The beings he controls carry out his will and include aliens, robots, animals, and people. Conquering the universe remains as Giygas's only goal. Giygas's extreme power destroyed his rational thought and physical form, leaving only uncontrollable and unconstrained power.

Breakdown

Earthbound's unique story follows the conventional RPG character's rise to power and eventual thwarting of evil while constantly poking fun at the genre and parodying American culture. The game covers the what-was-then present day times of 199X and includes a final leap into the past to defeat the final boss.

The game begins as the player names the characters and chooses personality traits for them. By creating the illusion that the player influences the game more than he does, this step immerses the player in the game, creating personal ties within the game.

Earthbound makes these questions humorous, which sets the tone of the game and relaxes the player, informing him that the game differs from all others of the genre.

The inciting incident of the game depicts a small bee named Buzz Buzz that describes the evil force that Ness must face. The player's new ally instills confidence as his strength is unmatched, but Pokey's mother mistakenly swats the bug, comically defeating the ally and giving way to the story of the game. Before the bug dies, he describes the tasks that Ness must perform before defeating Giygas.

The game's story divides logically into sections, all of which relate to youths in some aspect or another and expand on their fantasies. For example, the player meets Jeff during his escape from a boarding school. Children detest school and relish the opportunity when helping a character run from one. Another child event kids relate to includes the circus scene in which players defeat a circus tent gone mad.

Exploiting children's likes and dislikes takes the story to a completely new relevant level. Ness eats pizza, devours hamburgers, and rides a bike, all of which the typical American kid does. In addition, the game features a helpful monkey and most kids love the friendly and silly antics of monkeys.

One of the major sections of the game includes a dream sequence in which Ness fights odd molecules and random objects in Ness's mind. This eerie, but warm portion of the game makes the player feel a bit disconnected from the main story due to its seemingly random cause and entry point. While it makes the player laugh, its actual importance to the story makes the player question its existence.

The eight locations that Ness visits during the course of the game all relate to youths. At the first location, Ness sees a small puppy. At the second, Ness sees a baby (himself) wearing a hat. The third location consists of Ness hearing his mother. At the fourth, Ness smells steak. At the fifth, Ness sees a baby's bottle. The sixth location consists of Ness viewing his youthful mother. At the seventh, Ness sees a vision of his father holding him. The final location shows Ness watching himself as a baby. These touching moments all create emotional ties and deepen the story.

Other humorous plot points in the game include helping a popular band escape the confines of their contract, using a jar of fly honey defeating a puke monster, fighting hordes of evil department store items, and battling giant dinosaurs in an ancient world. All of these aspects of the story help relate the gameplay to the player while preying upon the desires and fantasies of young children.

Strongest Element

At the conclusion of the game, *Earthbound* features a unique plot novelty that no game ever cared exploring. Possibly parodying other RPGs, *Earthbound* takes Ness and the group into the past where the group confronts the final boss before it developed its supreme power. When games allow time travel, characters in the game never approach this strategy even though it logically makes the most sense. Following this logic, the player understands why the characters never battle the main foe head-on earlier in the game and understand how they physically overcome the boss in the end. If the players level and toughen up, it only makes sense that the boss can, as well. By using time travelling in a clever way, *Earthbound* explains how the characters overcome the final boss using sound logic.

Unsuccessful Element

While *Earthbound* explored a new way of defeating the final boss in an RPG, the actual execution of the plot device failed due to its odd implementation. *Earthbound* explains that the characters must transfer their souls into robots because their time machine destroys organic material during time shifts. The player attachment to the characters falters here as the next portion of the game features the party in robot form. The game never supplies a substantial reason for the robots other than the fact that organic material dies during time travel.

This unnecessary plot choice ultimately confuses the player. While the characters now exist in quirky robot form and later return to normal form after the final battle, its pointlessness never furthers the plot or enhances gameplay in any meaningful way. In fact, as Paula prays when defeating the boss, the player may question its rationale, which leads to a decline in player immersion.

Highlight

During the final battle against the evil Giygas, the game forces the player to realize that the only method of defeating Giygas, an optional attack up until this point, includes Paula praying. While most games encourage physical and overwhelming offense combined with strategic healing moments, *Earthbound* chose a more meaningful and relatable tactic, which instills a message of hope in the player.

Paula's spiritual nature recurs throughout the game and culminates in this sequence as Paula prays to people Ness met along the journey and eventually the player. As it turns out, praying nine times in a row defeats Giygas and good triumphs over evil. Paula's prayers increase player immersion as the game even addresses the player during the battle. This iconic global message seems like a cheap gameplay tactic at first, but the parable-like subtext enhances the story.

Critical Reception

While the game sold rather poorly for its genre and time, critics and players praise it for its humor and gameplay. *Earthbound* received above average scores in most, if not all, of its reviews and many regard it as one of the best classic RPGs ever.

Jeremy Gomer at Nintendojo gave the game a 9.0/10, stating that it is "filled up to the brim with personality, atmosphere, and entertainment." Mr. Gomer states that the game attracts fans of RPGs and great storylines. He explains that the lack of visually seeing the characters during battles detracted from the game score.

Jonathan Dunder of freeinfosociety.com gave the game five out of five stars stating, "The gameplay, dark humor, good sound, and bizarre storyline make this game a lot of fun." Mr. Dunder claims that the graphics contribute to the biggest drawback of the game.

Lessons

- Poking fun at the genre does not have to ruin player immersion. Throughout the game, plotlines and characters point out the mere cheesiness, but the quality

gameplay, switching minor storylines, and continual advancement of the story draw the player in.

- Reminders of earlier moments in the game make the player feel happy. During the game, a photographer appears at times and takes screenshots, which then display during the credits at the end of the game. This reminder makes the player feel like things he did in the game mattered and the experience varies from person to person.
- Subtle hints at sequels provide humor to the player, but may or may not lead to an actual sequel. The game created a cult following in America, and although it parodied American culture throughout the game, its prequel and sequel only released in Japan.
- Gameplay elements that tie into the story help improve its worth. The game introduces Paula's prayer skill tactically and reuses it later in the game creating an emotional connection to the player. In addition, Ness's feelings of homesickness felt throughout the game force the player to call home, giving way to clever banter from Ness's mother.
- Unnecessary or poorly explained plot devices tend to cheapen the player experience. When the characters turn into robots, only to turn back later without sufficient or reasonable explanation, the player loses interest and it creates confusion.

Summation

Straying away from the seriousness of the genre and approaching the clichéd plotlines of classic RPGs head on, *Earthbound* successfully kept the player immersed through a relatable and humorous story. Relating gameplay elements and storylines to the player should be one of the top priorities of the development staff. Since *Earthbound's* target audience consists of mainly young American boys, it only makes sense that Ness, a typical young boy, wears pajamas, sports a baseball hat, and uses a baseball bat. Players enjoy humor and compiling solid RPG gameplay mechanics with silly dialog and over- clichéd plotlines makes for a fantastic game.

References

Jeremy Gomer's Review:

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Jonathan Dunder's Review:

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Ness's Picture:

http://www.gamespite.net/verbalspew/archives/archive_2006-m04.php

Pokey's Picture:

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Paula's Picture:

<http://www.videogamesprites.net/Earthbound/Party/Paula/>

Jeff's Picture:

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Poo's Picture:

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Giygas Picture:

<http://images2.wikia.nocookie.net/earthbound/images/thumb/5/51/BossGiygas.png/250px-BossGiygas.png>