

**Chrono Trigger Review**

**By**

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The journey begins with an unlikely spiky-haired hero at a thousand year carnival, and culminates in an epic no holds barred battle with Lavos, an alien archenemy of untold destructive capacity. However, for Squaresoft's *Chrono Trigger*, the in-between is filled with innovation and enlarges significantly the horizons of the RPG genre.

*Chrono Trigger* was released in September of 1995 after an auspicious development under a team led by *Final Fantasy* producer Hironobu Sakaguchi. Also bringing extensive talent to the project were *Dragon Quest*'s scenarist Yuji Horii, anime artist Akira Toriyama, and composers Nobuo Uematsu from *Final Fantasy* and up and coming Yasunori Mitsuda<sup>1</sup>. The resulting game is, considering the technological limitations of the 16-bit Super Nintendo, artistically astounding, boasting a compelling musical score as well as some impressive visuals. However, even more intriguing is the unique interpretation RPG game itself, where *Chrono Trigger* departs in several respects, some quite radical, from those that have gone before.

While holding tightly to many of the most dearly held devices of the RPG storyline in the form of the princess, The Sword, and the dark mage, *Chrono Trigger* makes time travel the center piece of its plot and rejuvenates many of its older themes accordingly. Although its game play lacks the sinister dark elements of *Final Fantasy*, and the puzzle challenge of *Zelda*, *Chrono Trigger* develops an essential playability that is likely to continue to influence significantly the development of future RPGs.

*Chrono Trigger*'s success in the game market (over 2 million units sold) is partly telling. One can envision many of its elements deriving from "wouldn't it be cool if..." conversations over lunches at Squaresoft. Nich Maragos at Gaming Intelligence Agency

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<sup>1</sup> From Nich Maragos's review at the Gaming Intelligence Agency <http://www.thegia.com/snes/ct/ct.html>.

describes the mentality behind Chrono Trigger compared to other games as that of a small art house theater project to the summer blockbuster<sup>2</sup>. *Chrono Trigger* seems to consciously dispense with the more frustrating conventions of its predecessors. The overland map is safe and easily explored, devoid of the *Final Fantasy* legacy of random enemy encounters. In the very depths of the dungeons, enemies often lurk in plain sight and may be avoided, or if approached from the behind, even frightened away. Most noticeably, the game toys playfully with the most sacred of the RPG plot elements, adding multiple layers of time; a robot in search of emotions; an egotistical and isolated dark wizard concerned only with his sister; and even interspecies biological competition with reptiles in the distant past, magic-wielding orc-like creatures in the present, and human-weary machines in the future.

When Crono, the hero, is first drawn into time travel, it is to rescue Nadia, a princess in distress who is the first to be unexpectedly sucked 400 years into the past. However, in a plot that only time travel could create, Princess Nadia (who is apparently highly inbred) is mistaken for her distant ancestor, who is also missing at the same time. As an unfortunate consequence, the search is called off, the real queen is never found, and Crono must watch Nadia, in the player's first introduction to the horrible paradox of time travel, flicker out of existence. This is the first instance of a recurring theme: achieving a desired effect through cause and effect manipulation of the time stream. Here, Crono must find the real queen himself in order to restore Nadia's existence. Later, he and his companions will use mastery over time for everything from instilling positive values in a greedy man to even restoring the life of Crono himself.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thegia.com/snes/ct/ct.html>

Equally consistent through the plot is the interplay of seriousness with tongue in cheek humor. The Masamune, the game's legendary sword, is actually the unified spirit of two bantering young boys. When Frog's resilience recharge's the sword to full power late in the game, one of the boys comments, "I guess that means that the power of the hero comes from within..." and then, awed with his own profundity, "Mucho metaphysical man." A fortress run by an incompetent villain named Ozzie, Crono's domestic cat care duties, and even a Jet Bike racing contest in the distant future are manifestations of the game's playful levity, and each is, one way or another, important to the outcome of the game. However, because seriousness is allowed to coexist with the humor, *Chrono Trigger* maintains a sense of emotional involvement, much more so than a game as determinedly satirical as *Earthbound*.

Perhaps equally as important, however, is the sense of the game play. Large colorful, animated characterizations of both enemies and allies allow the exploration mode to segue smoothly into battle mode, with only the pleasant steel whistle of weapons being drawn and the appearance of small menu windows. Perhaps related to this graphical complexity is the size of the dungeon challenges, which is generally limited. Deviations from the main path quickly lead to a treasure chest or a switch necessary for further progress. Therefore, with the facility of the most advanced dungeons in the game, the sense of accomplishment is diminished from that experienced by a player of the *Zelda* or *Breath of Fire* series. However, in its place, *Chrono Trigger* establishes a game that, while rarely stifling, is consistently challenging and engaging.

This approach to the game in general is facilitated by *Chrono Trigger*'s unique diversity of possible plot twists and story endings. The player can experience around

twenty different conclusions to his adventure, some much harder to attain than others.

The main body of the story is, of course, still highly linear, but the multitude of endings make the player aware that his choices during the game have repercussions for its outcome. Naturally, most players are curious to experience not only their first ending, but to also to experience at least a few, if not all, of the alternate possibilities.

*Chrono Trigger*'s answer is the "New Game +" option. Once the game has been successfully completed once, this new option allows the player to start his adventure all over again—with all of the powers and items from the adventure that he has just completed. Since the enemies received no such power-ups and principal bosses fall with a single swipe from your radiant blade, the game seems, at first, ridiculously easy. However, the ease with which Crono can both dodge and defeat his enemies allows him to navigate freely. It also allows the player to toy with the consequences of beating Lavos, the powerful alien nemesis, at different points in time, even very early in the game. As reward the player views new endings that are either humorous or portray yet untold elements of the characters' lives.

Whereas past RPGs had largely imparted variety and newness to their worlds by expanding their geographic size, *Chrono Trigger* provides a relatively small world that can be traversed through many millennia, as well as responded to in many different ways. Therefore, the player is driven less by his desire to drive through a rigid plot structure, and more so by a desire to become more intimate with his world, and explore the range of options that it presents—rather than seeking to despoil it in the shortest amount of time.

Battle tactics, too, offer a range of strategies. Though not to the extent of *Final Fantasy III*, each character in the game does have distinct strengths and weaknesses as

well as a unique set of techs, or spells that they can cast. No single spell is duplicated between characters, and because *Chrono Trigger* permits characters to combine their spell attacks in increasingly devastating double and triple “techs,” each different combination of characters leads to a different battle strategy.

*Chrono Trigger*, therefore, avoids the repetitious battle sequences of games in which a single supremely powerful spell may be learned by all characters, but it raises the question of whether the characters are equitably balanced. There are sets of characters in the game, unfortunately, whose particular one two punch of healing and attack spells is almost excessively effective. On the other hand, *Chrono Trigger*'s dungeons often demand the skills of a particular character. In one case enemies can only be weakened by the impact of water spells. Equally, sometimes enemies lock out the use of techs and items or are otherwise most susceptible to physical fighters. *Chrono Trigger* allows players to make use of the attributes of all characters by allowing the player to instantaneously change the members of his party, even in the midst of a dungeon. Although level building through experience points is important to *Chrono Trigger*, unplayed characters are not left behind. After the completion of each mission, the levels of all characters are pulled up to the level of those that completed the task. Consequently, the option to switch between characters and use multiple resources remains viable, even if the player neglects certain companions during the early stages.

Then, while *Chrono Trigger* maintains the RPG construction of level building, level building qua level building is largely eliminated. In its place the game provides circumstances and mission that naturally tend to elevate the characters to their needed skill levels. It is a step towards the idea that the player simply completes the mission and

incidentally develops his cast. Here, though *Chrono Trigger* fails to challenge the ancient paradigm of experience levels, it lays important ground for the willingness of future developers to do so.

Between the time of *Chrono Trigger* and now, the arrival of the Playstation and the cinematic sequences of the *Final Fantasy* series has reinvigorated the RPG genre, and both the level of available technology and the money available for the production of a game have risen dramatically in response. Yet the success of a game in the RPG genre still largely depends on its ability to creatively incorporate the old elements of adventure in productive new ways. In that process is a gradual winnowing of the old frustrating elements that keep new players from being drawn into the genre, while sacrificing none of the epic elements that are essential to the genre. Sacrifice the tedium of level-building and perhaps you also sacrifice the player's feeling of personal investment. Attempt to break the chains of plot linearity and perhaps you weaken the keenness of the narrative, or remove part of the player's motive force.

A successful game, then, both broadens the audience of the genre and raises the standard for its performance. *Chrono Trigger's* contributions include a more natural user interface; a game play that leads the player through adventure, rather than subjecting him to brutally bleak dungeons and indecipherable directions; a delicate balance between levity and sincerity and challenge and playability; and, probably most recognized, a serious investigation into the physics of multiple outcomes. However, *Chrono Trigger* itself would not have been possible without the elements of its predecessors, *Final Fantasy* and *Secret of Mana*. As Squaresoft forges ahead larger production budgets will make for more beautiful graphics, more epic games, and maybe, gasp, realistic dialogues,

yet the incorporation of innovation and balance from successful games past will remain essential. After *Chrono Trigger* has pushed the envelope of game play, graphics, and replay value, producers can no longer ignore those elements as limitations on the genre itself. As *Chrono Trigger* wrestles with issues, so are future games challenged to and the struggle embodies both the hopes of players for the ultimate vicarious experience, as well as the persistent points of resistance with the genre. How the two will be reconciled only time (travel) will tell....