

Review of Dragon Warrior (The Original) for the NES

by Todd Perry

Publisher: Enix

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Game Designer: Yujii Horii

Character Designer: Akira Toriyama

Dragon Warrior was one of the first role playing games to come out on a gaming console in North America. It was also one of simplest role playing games ever to become popular. It's success was not based on breath taking scenery, realistic combat scenes, or a story line that would be suitable for a block-buster movie. Instead, it captures, in the simplest form possible, the essential features of the RPG genre that inspire the imagination of the player.

Dragon Warrior is simple in every possible aspect. The graphics engine quite obviously does nothing more scroll across a grid of square pictures (or tiles). The defining quality of Dragon Warrior tiles is that none of them blend with each other. For example, all the coast lines in the game are jagged and boxy. In contrast, coast lines in the original Final Fantasy are fairly smooth because they created lots of tiles that contained some land and some water and a curved boundary between the two. The designers of Dragon warrior were not lazy though. They did go to the effort make sure that every boundary between land and sea has a rough white/gray strip. This "surf strip" is part of the water tile, and so there are actually 13 different water tiles -- 4 tiles with surf strip on 3 edges, 4 tiles with surf strip on 2 edges, etc.

It would not have been that much harder to add a few more tiles and have smooth coast lines, so this suggests that the designers of the game actually liked the blocky look of the game and wanted it to be a consistent feature. The graphics are intentionally designed to come right out and say to the player that this is an incomplete, discrete representation of an imaginary world. The player has no choice but to imagine what the world in the mind of the game's designer was actually like. Because they are simple, the graphics successfully serve as a medium for a dialogue between the imaginations of both the designer and the player. The fancy graphics of RPGs today have become a monologue for the designer while the player passively watches.

The details of the sound and message windows are consistent with the carefully crafted but rough hewn tiled coast lines. There are only five different background songs -- one for overworld, town, castle, cave, and battle -- but there are many little sounds which are more like variations on the background song than separate effects. The best example of this is the trill that gets played when you stay at the inn, which blends very nicely with the music for the town. The start and end of a battle are marked by what sounds like a piano player running hand his hand over all the keys. There is no extra song which gets

played after a victory like in Final Fantasy, but there is a special fanfare which gets played when you get a level up. The fan fare leads straight back into the normal overworld music while the information about the new level is displayed.

Even seemingly independent sound effects such the bumping sound which is played when you walk into walls and the chuck-chuck-chuck that gets played when you enter a new map (either by entering a town, cave, etc. or by going up/down stairs) occur in time with the music. Since the timing of bumping is the same as the timing of walking from one tile to another, the music is in time with the motion of the character. This explains why the character always appears to be walking, even when he is not going anywhere. He is marching in time with the music and he never stops because the music never stops. Moreover, all the people in towns are constantly marching in time with the music. These details work well with the use of old English pronouns and the elegant politeness of all the people that you meet in towns.

Future versions of Dragon Warrior did not have the marching and it was possible to do less noble things like haggle with merchants and place bets on monster fights. The monster betting in particular became addictive and was all my friends and I ever wanted to do in the later versions. It is so much easier to spend all day betting in the safety of the town than to go out into the real world where monsters can hurt you and it is not clear what you should do next. The formality of the original game is a constant reminder to the player that he has a duty to apply himself towards the greater quest.

Another simple aspect of the game that keeps the player focused on the quest is the single character. Controlling a single character makes the player feel like he is that character. When the king is benevolent but disappointed after you die, one can't help but feel a personal responsibility to make good on the king's faith. The extent to which the player feels like the hero is critical to the overall experience because the complexity of the game has to come from imagining that you are the hero. When you walk through the grass you have to imagine actually walking through fields bordered by distant forests and foothills which give way to rocky mountains. Once the imagination is involved, the experience is easily more dramatic and memorable than a series of photo-realistic movies.

The story line of the game is much like the story for any RPG -- you are a hero who must save a medieval-like world from a villain who is powered by the greater force of Evil. In the case of Dragon Warrior, the evil villain is the Dragon Lord who has stolen the Ball of Light which keeps the monsters at bay. The game is called Dragon Warrior because the most powerful monsters in the game are dragons, and the Dragon Lord got his name because he discovered a way to control them. Nobody knows why the Dragon Lord loathes the people of Alfred and wants them to live in terror, but then, why is it that monsters are bent on fighting to the death with any human that crosses their path? The only explanation is that they are all motivated by a powerful organizing force called Evil which is opposite to the forces of Good that enable people to live together in harmony and peace. The Ball of Light is a convenient symbol for the forces of Good. While the Dragon Lord is able to steal the Ball of Light, he does not seem to be able to destroy it. Good is a fragile thing which evil can easily cover in a veil of darkness, but there is always hope that it can be restored.

Another essential feature of the Dragon Warrior story is that you are not just any hero; you are a descendant of Edrick. Edrick was a lone warrior who single handedly fought back against the monsters that had been unleashed when the Dragon Lord stole the Ball of Light. Edrick represents the possibility that the forces of Good can emerge *ex nihil* within a person and be quite formidable. Unfortunately Edrick was not formidable enough because he never returned from his final quest to kill the Dragon Lord. As the descendant of Edrick you desire to destroy the Dragon Lord not only because you are a gifted warrior for good, but also because you seek revenge for your ancestor.

The final detail of the story is that the Kings daughter was kidnapped. Since you are a noble warrior it is your duty to first return her to the safety of her family and then punish the villain responsible. There may only be three main features of the story, but they fit together in a way that strikes a chord deep within us and makes us want to be the hero in the middle of it. Just as the five different songs that play in the background are carefully embellished with meaningful trills and chords, these three features of the story are embellished with appropriate details and subplots which always add to the main features rather than distract us from them.

The final aspect of this game which makes it great is its game play. Playing Dragon Warrior is tedious and repetitive, but then so is writing or computer programming or any other creative act that occurs within an mentally empowering framework. Dragon Warrior is addictive because you slowly get stronger throughout the game, and the amount of territory that you can safely explore is proportional to your strength. Like other RPGs, strength grows in several dimensions -- weapon, armor, magic, hit points, and the vital statistics about the character such as strength and agility which rise with levels of experience.

When ever we improve at anything in life, the rate of improvement is either roughly linear or roughly exponential. Linear improvement does not inspire passion within us, and to lead meaningful lives, we must find some activities that we can become exponentially better at. Examples of linear improvement are memorizing the digits of PI or weaving the same rug design over and over again so that each can be sold for the same price. The processes of learning and creative expression are exponential because each step builds on momentum from all the previous steps combined. Dragon Warrior, like most RPGs, simulates this feeling of exponential growth and that is why it is so fulfilling to work towards the next level and watch how your strength grows in comparison to a given monster. To be concrete, the number of experience points needed to get to levels 2, 3... respectively are 7, 23, 47, 110, 220, 450, 800... This shows that your strength grows exponentially because the number of experience points that you get from killing a monster is directly proportional to the strength that you need to kill it. Furthermore, the rate at which you increase levels is more or less constant throughout the game.

The exception to the exponential rule comes towards the end of the game. Starting at level 19, you need 4,000 experience points to get to each level there after. The max level you can achieve is 30, but it is possible to beat the game at level 27 or less if you do everything just right. Somehow this change seems very natural to us, perhaps because we are used to experiencing diminishing returns in improvement as we approach the limits of

whatever paradigm we are working in. It is a matter of personal preference whether you like to push a paradigm as far as it will go and attain level 30 so that you can beat the game easily, or whether you find exhilaration in trying to beat the game at level 25 so that you can move on to a new game. The game gives us the same choice that life gives us and that is why it is compelling to play.

The dynamics of the battle scene are repetitive, but it is like gambling in Vegas with the odds in your favor, so it doesn't get boring. It is fun to learn about all the different monsters and master each individual monster and each class of monster. It is always exciting to see a rare monster like a red dragon or a goldman. Unlike Final Fantasy, there are not tons of pointless weapons and armor pieces to sift through. At any point in the game you usually have to decide whether to buy the next best weapon or hold out a little longer and skip a level in the normal progression of weapons. Since you know from the manual what the next weapon will be it is exciting to finally buy something that you've been working hard for and then watch how it helps you in battle.

Dragon Warrior has a lot of replay value in the long term. It's not the kind of game you want to play over and over again. It's more natural to take a few weeks or months or even years to reflect upon your last quest before playing another one. There are always things you can do differently, but more importantly, the same things seem different after you've had a chance to grow in real life. Playing a Dragon Warrior quest is one of the best ways I know to reflect upon the meaning of adventure, duty, good, and evil in our lives.

As a final example, it never seemed special to me when I was younger that Charloke castle, which is the lair of the Dragon Lord, can be seen across the water from the castle where you start the quest. If I could just find a way to get across the water and then have exceptionally good luck I could walk straight into Charloke castle and kill the Dragon Lord and then I would have accomplished the goal of beating the game. Of course, the lesson you learn from the game is that before you can jump over the water and kill the dragon lord you must first explore every other corner of the world while learning and growing. The game is full of little details like that which can say so much to an imaginative player.