

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Golden Sun

**Platform:** Game Boy Advance

**Genre:** Role-Playing Game

**Release Date:** November 11, 2001 U.S.

**Developer:** Camelot Software Planning

**Publisher:** Nintendo

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Uncertain, English

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## Overview

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Golden Sun is a RPG where the player assumes the role of Isaac and his party. Isaac lives on Weyard, a world where Adepts, or people who can psychokinetically control a classical element, are rare. His village guards the Elemental Stars, the keys to unlocking Alchemy, but mysterious outsiders who wish to rerelease Alchemy back upon the world steal the stars. If the four Elemental Stars are set into the four Lighthouses scattered around the world, Alchemy unleashes, ushering in a new age of power and war over that power. The elders exile Isaac and a friend from the village to follow the thieves and prevent the release of Alchemy, beginning a journey into an unknown and dangerous world.

Isaac gains allies as he travels throughout Weyard, learns new Adept Psynergy that aids him both in battle and on the field, and finds powerful weapons and small elemental creatures called Djinn that boosts an Adepts power and allows access to massive summons. The party trails after the thieves and their growing band of allies, hoping to gain enough power and skills to prevent them from restoring the lighthouses.

## Characters

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As an RPG, and a modern one, Golden Sun includes a huge cast of characters, some merely acting to populate the world and others as major figures and quest givers. While Isaac interacts with many people as he travels Weyard, listed below are some of the more important and prominent.

- **Isaac** – The 17-year-old player avatar. He is a Venus, or Earth, Adept living in the town of Vale at the foot of sacred Mount Aleph. He loses his father to a supernatural disaster at the start of the game, and three years later Vale exiles him to chase the thieves that followed Isaac into Mount Aleph and stole the Elemental Stars. Isaac is a silent protagonist; he never speaks throughout the game and lets

his party talk for him. When addressed directly, a Yes/ No option appears for the player to respond with. Venus Adepts like Isaac balance defensive and offensive Psynergy, ranging from healing moves and growing vines to causing earthquakes.

- **Garet** – Isaac’s 17-year-old best friend. Garet is the son of Vale’s mayor, and joins Isaac at the beginning of his quest. Garet’s hotheaded personality and outspoken behavior generally regulates him as the active voice of the party, which often lands them in more trouble than they began in. Garet lags behind his friends somewhat in intelligence, often requiring them to remind him of key events or items, and may be the source of his impetuous behavior. A Mars Adept with great physical strength, Garet provides most of the brawn of the party, using sheer offensive prowess to hack and burn enemies away.
- **Ivan** – A 15-year-old from merchant town Kalay. Ivan meets Isaac early in his quest, and quickly joins the hero after receiving an act of selfless kindness from the wanderer. Ivan begins a bit quiet and reserved, a result of growing up the only Adept in Kalay, but quickly opens to the party after seeing their own powers and personalities. Ivan acts as the voice of rationality and patience for Isaac’s party, directly in contrast to Garet’s rashness. Ivan’s Jupiter Adept status grants him control over the wind and lighting, and acts as the team’s primary mage and status buffer.
- **Mia** – A 17-year-old girl from Imil. Mia lives in frozen, northern Imil as the last of a clan of healers; her apprentice and only other clan member Alex left some time before the game began. She keeps constantly busy trying to keep the entire population of an arctic city healthy by herself, and guards nearby Mercury Lighthouse tasked to her clan. Upon joining Isaac’s party, Mia acts as a compassionate and kind young woman who keeps the party’s morals in focus and is always pressing them to help the needy they encounter. Mercury Adepts like Mia utilize water to primarily heal and cure allies of afflictions, but can also create ice to attack in a pinch.
- **Saturos** – The mysterious man who makes up half the pair that stole the Elemental Stars. Saturos is cunning in mind and strong of body, able to knock Isaac and Garet aside with ease on their first meeting and later use the boys to find the Elemental Stars for them. He is a man of his word, but is extremely literal: if he promises not to harm a hostage in exchange for a ransom, he does not harm the hostage, but does not release them either. Saturos is a Mars Adept from a distant village, and is far more skilled as a warrior than any one of Isaac’s party. His distinct blue skin and pointed ears make him easy to spot.
- **Menardi** – The mysterious woman who completes the pair that stole the Elemental Stars. Menardi is an intelligent woman, but acts as a foil to Saturos’ cunning by relying more on brute force and intimidation to achieve her goals. Just as powerful a warrior as Saturos, trifling with Menardi’s Mars powers is unwise, and a precise strike of her scythe can fell even the healthiest warrior.

## Breakdown

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The game opens inside Isaac's house in Vale, awoken by his mom who warns him of a terrible and sudden storm threatening to destroy the village. Isaac joins with Garet and they witness the loss of friends and family, but before they can run for help the two who accidentally triggered the storm, a defense mechanism for the sanctum in the nearby mountain, ambush them. The two outsiders were trying to break in, and knock the two young boys unconscious to make them forget their presence.

Three years later, the two outsiders return, forgotten by the village, and using Isaac and friends steal the Elemental Stars hidden inside Mount Aleph and Sol Sanctum. Mount Aleph erupts in response, spreading stones that empower beings with Pysnergy across the globe and causing disasters. The elders exile Isaac and Garet for leading the villains around, and hand them the task of retrieving the Stars to prevent Alchemy from reawakening in the world. The four elements of Earth, Fire, Wind and Water can combine to create Alchemy, and whoever holds its power can drastically change the world and prolong their own life. To prevent wars over Alchemy from waging, the boys' task is to prevent the lighting of the Elemental Lighthouses via the Stars. Thus, the two 17 year olds leave the village for the first time.

Along the way, they help Ivan recover a stolen rod from bandits and prove him innocent of thievery, earning his trust and membership in the party. Mia joins them upon failing to protect the Mercury Lighthouse under her guard. They travel the entire continent following Saturos and Menardi, saving a village from a curse of becoming trees, learning more about the nature of their powers, save Ivan's caretaker from a village of thieves, aid a ship in crossing an infested sea, and participate in a tournament to prove their worth to a town leader and learn more of the history of the world. All the while, they see the effects of Mount Aleph's eruption, and portents of the perils of Alchemy.

Isaac and co. reach the second Lighthouse, Venus Lighthouse, just before Saturos and Menardi can light it. The two sides engage in combat, with Isaac's party emerging victorious. A last ditch throw lands the Star inside the beacon and the resulting energy allows the two Fire Adept foes to merge into a massive, two-headed dragon. The heroes barely overcome them, and Saturos and Menardi fall to their deaths inside the beacon. Surprisingly, Isaac's friends and Saturos' hostages decide to light the rest of the lighthouses, and escape before the party can follow them. This moment actually ends the game, and promises to continue in the sequel.

Isaac's point of view always presents the story, though his party does the talking for him. It progresses extremely linearly, but offers enough chances to roam, explore, and backtrack to previous locations that the world seems more open than it is. There is really only one path through the game. Though Isaac often receives the choice to agree or disagree with a question via a YES/NO option, it never changes anything more than the next few lines of dialogue. Still, this gives the player a slight connection to the story, and can help shape how they view Isaac. As each of his partners, and many of the supporting character has a distinct personality, it becomes very easy to recognize their patterns and predict their behavior, allowing realistic banter between people that often drags on too

long. Though Golden Sun's main story is immutable, the side quests and backtracking reveals content and changes that shifts according to players completing them or actually visiting a location later. Supporting characters feature prominently in their areas, letting them appear more than just random NPCs, and often referenced later on in the story, making the journey more cohesive. One of the unique aspects of Golden Sun is how Ivan can read nearly every NPC's mind, expanding on what they know and sometimes is necessary to solve a puzzle. This shows that the designers placed thought into the world and its inhabitants.

## **Strongest Element**

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The strongest aspect of Golden Sun's narrative is how the world evolves alongside the story progression. Townsfolk in dire need of aid when Isaac arrives change their dialogue and reaction to him when he really does fix what was wrong, or at least tries to. If the party backtracks to earlier towns and areas later in the story, he finds the place is not the same as how he left it, unlike many other RPGs. In addition, many Psynergy attacks used in battle have an additional use outside of it, often involved in puzzle solving and making Psynergy more than just a standard magic battle component, they are an actual part of the story. These elements make the world believable, and show that time is passing in the world and Isaac's travels do have an effect on it. These events weave together with the rest of the story, and at upon the game's completion a clear game save and transfer option is added to the main menu, hinting that what Isaac did in this game has repercussions in the sequel.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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Golden Sun is a long game. At least, it feels long. Not because battles take time to complete, or that the random encounter rate is high, or because significant level grinding is required, but because there is an absurd amount of dialogue to read. Critical story sections and major plot points contain pages worth of dialogue, shifted back and forth between characters stating their own views and, often, the obvious. It is true that the majority, if not all, of the plot delivers its twists via dialogue and machinima. The player must wade through large amounts of fluff text to reach those twists, though. Significant dialogue length may not have been too noticeable or irritating if it had come from complex characters, but sadly, Golden Sun's characters act one-dimensional. There is little character progression, and the party displays little change in their personality or actions during their travels. Thus, how Garet and Ivan speak at the start of the game is how they speak at the end.

## **Highlight**

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There are many striking moments in Golden Sun's plot. The most striking event to me, however, occurs only a third of the way into the game. Isaac and his completed party ascend the Mercury Lighthouse, the first Lighthouse seen in the game. The Lighthouses have already been built up as important locations in the story, and Mercury Lighthouse is easily the most unique and challenging dungeon at this point. Upon reaching the Lighthouse aerie, the party despairs at finding the Lighthouse already lit by the Mercury Star. Mia especially is distraught, as protecting the Lighthouse was her duty

as a Mercury clan member. Isaac and Garet are also worried, as they have already failed a fourth of their own mission.

They find Menardi standing nearby with captives Jenna and Kraden, friends from Vale. Menardi prepares to engage the party, but Saturos steps out from behind the massive blue glowing sphere that is the Lighthouses' elemental light, and sends Menardi away to watch the hostages while Saturos deals with his pursuers. The last encounter Isaac had with Saturos was near the start of the game, along with Menardi and with only Garet in the party, and the two Mars Adepts wiped out the boys in less than three turns. Despite the fact that Saturos is facing them alone, and the party has grown in strength and numbers, a nervous and fearful feeling fills the heroes as Saturos steps forward. Right before the battle starts, Saturos mutters that Mercury Lighthouse is inhibiting his powers, and he must act quickly.

The battle is a difficult one, and although Saturos' powers seem weaker than the first encounter three years ago, the party faces a wider variety of them, and must win the fight this time. During the fight, Mia's Psynergy power constantly regenerates, a curious quirk not yet experienced. The party eventually triumphs, and Saturos collapses on the ground, refusing to answer any questions. Alex, Mia's former apprentice and ally to Saturos and Menardi, steps forth to explain Saturos' lack of strength – the water power of Mercury Lighthouse reduced the magnitude of Saturos' fiery Mars power, which allowed the party their chance. The Lighthouse's beacon also was the source of Mia's rapid regeneration of power. Still, both Alex and Saturos underestimated the party's rapid growth since their last meeting. Before Isaac can finish off Saturos, an act which Alex doubts he can truly do, Saturos stands. Alex bought time for Saturos to recover, and they escape. Mia laments her failures, and decides to join Isaac permanently to aid him in his quest now that hers has failed. She comments that a prophecy states that when Mercury Lighthouse lights, healing waters flow into a pool at the base. The prophecy is true, and Mia feels safe in leaving her village behind.

## Critical Reception

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Critical reception to Golden Sun has generally been positive. IGN's Craig Harris wrote, "To explain the story in Golden Sun would ruin the enjoyment of the game for anyone interested in playing through this adventure, as the plotline has been so tightly integrated into every ounce of the adventure." He ended the review with a high 9.7. Gamespot reviewer Ricardo Torres praised the combination of story and gameplay, stating, "By assigning djinn to the proper character or by picking up special items, you'll find that you can use psyenergy powers in town or in dungeons. The powers can be extremely useful, giving you the ability to read the minds of people you encounter, move stones, or reveal hidden items or paths in dungeons." Torres gave the game an 8.6.

At RPGamer, Zachary Lewis' reception of the story was positive but mild, giving the game an 8 of 10. He said that the story had enough twists to remain somewhat interesting but, "nothing in this game is especially new. Old school can mean a lot of things, but it can generally be read as 'recycled' in today's gaming industry. At the very

least, the plot is well conveyed with the spectacular translation job.” Harsher negative reviews focus on the length of the dialogue and common tropes and predictability of the story. Nearly all reviews detail the powerful and stunning graphics of the game and its surprisingly deep gameplay for a handheld.

## Lessons

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- Characters do not need to develop in order to present a story and follow its progression. However, it can definitely enhance it, and potential for greater storytelling is lost if development is not utilized.
- Building NPCs with more in mind than populating a world is an effective tool for making the world seem alive and unique. The ability to Mind Read them all and learn something about the city or the current puzzle is proof of this.
- Blending gameplay and story, when done correctly, can enhance the presentation, make the story deeper, and make the normally battle only spells seem relevant to the world and not just a mechanic. A spell that causes low ice damage to an enemy becomes more important when it solves a puzzle by creating an ice pillar outside of battle, and makes Psynergy actually unique and important in the world.
- Allowing the world to flow and change with the story makes it more dynamic, a reward to explore and an incentive to backtrack. For instance, returning to the first town outside of Vale, visited at the start of the game, reveals the bandits that Isaac helped imprison broke out and are now seeking revenge. This triggers an optional but rewarding event in the second game.
- RPGs naturally have large amounts of text, but too much text can dilute the experience for even veteran RPG players. Major plot twists hide between bantering and long dialogues. At the start of the final third of the game, Isaac needs a ship to cross a sea. What would normally be a quick sequence of finding a key, fighting four battles and then one boss battle becomes a 30-45 minute affair since Isaac must talk to multiple people between each puzzle and fight.

## Summation

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Golden Sun remains unique among its RPG brethren in being the first major one released on the GBA, and the first many agreed that held quality gameplay and story that rivaled that of a console RPG. The game encompasses a scope that became too large to contain in one game, and in fact, many of the duos biggest plot twists happen in the second part of the story. Nevertheless, gamers know Golden Sun for its lengthy dialogue, puzzles and gameplay mechanics incorporated into the story, and surprisingly deep plot that pleases those who delve deep into the game and its narrative. While the lack of character development is disappointing, it is not a crushing blow to the game, and merely enhances its unique way of presenting a narrative.