

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Chrono Trigger*
Platform: Nintendo DS
Genre: Japanese Role-Playing Game (JRPG)
Release Date: March 11, 1995
Developer: Square Enix
Publisher: Square Enix
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Masato Kato

Overview

Chrono Trigger is a top-down JRPG that begins in 1000 AD and follows the adventures of Crono and his friends through both space and time. It all starts with Crono attending the Millennial Fair in the Kingdom of Guardia. For the main event, Lucca showcases her newest invention: a teleporter. Marle, a volunteer from the crowd, tests the device, but something goes terribly wrong. Instead of teleporting Marle through space, the machine jettisons her back in time. Crono and Lucca bravely jump in after her, landing 400 years in the past.

Marle's relationship and resemblance to Queen Leen causes a grandfather paradox, which the group remedies. After setting history back on its correct course, the party returns to the present day. Despite rescuing Marle, Crono is accused of kidnapping the Princess of Guardia (Marle) and sent to jail. Lucca and Marle come to Crono's aid, escaping through yet another time portal. This time, they travel to 2300 AD and learn that the world was brought to its end by Lavos, a creature summoned by Magus. Devastated by seeing what lies in their future, the party promises to do everything in their power to stop Lavos from destroying their world.

From then on, Crono's group barrels through time, impacting, and being impacted by, each era they visit. They tie and untie temporal knots that influence the past – and thus, the future – of the world they live in. Journeys through many difficult battles and adverse eras bring the player to treasure the beloved members of the party. Indeed, the 16-bit party members on screen become friends with fond memories. Together, the player and the party must uncover the secret behind Lavos and defeat him once and for all, saving the world from its inevitable doom.

Characters

* Denotes party characters.

- ***Crono** – The main character of *Chrono Trigger*, Crono is the red-haired, gung-ho protagonist. Though he does not speak, it is shown multiple times that he does not hesitate to put his life on the line for others. Most synergistic combat abilities rely on Crono being in the party, implying that he is the glue that keeps the party together. After all, if it were not for Crono's impulsiveness, Marle could still be trapped in the 600s, triggering history to veer off course.
- ***Marle** – The princess of Guardia, stubborn but caring at the core. Tired of being a prisoner to the palace her entire life, she sneaks out to the Millennial Fair to experience the outside world. Throughout the journey, it is implied that she is Crono's love interest.
- ***Lucca** – A childhood friend of Crono's and Guardia's inventor. Analytic by nature, she is fascinated with science and technology. She has a knack for robots, which shines when she repairs Robo in 2300 AD, who becomes part of the party.
- ***Frog** – A frog that is met during the era of 600 AD. An unfortunate encounter with Magus in his early life left him as a frog. Raised in the time of chivalry, Frog is as noble as it gets: he speaks in Shakespearean and carries himself as a knight, even in the body of an amphibian. He is the only character able to wield the Masamune, a weapon pivotal in defeating Magus.
- ***Robo** – A robot repaired by Lucca that has no recollection of his prior mission as a robot. He is not programmed to feel but selfless, nonetheless. An example of this is when he sacrifices himself in the sewers to create a getaway opportunity for his newly acquired friends. His pseudo-sentience results in curt, mechanical words laden with care.
- ***Ayla** – A barbarian neanderthal from the prehistoric ages, Ayla is the chief of her tribe: the Ioka. She would rather go out swinging than die in hiding. Brash and hardy, she boasts her strength whenever possible. Ayla speaks through caveman-speak, often omitting verbs and lacking a large vocabulary. She cares and fights for the party as if they were her own tribe.
- ***Magus** – Initially depicted as the villain of the story: Lavos' summoner. In reality, Magus only seeks revenge. If the party spares Magus, he joins the party to prevent Lavos from destroying the world in 1999 AD.
- **Lavos** – An alien parasite that crash-landed in prehistoric times and lay dormant until 1999. A failed attempt to harness Lavos' power with the Mammon Machine in 12000 BC awakened Lavos temporarily, scattering Magus, Schala, and the Gurus to different eras of time and space.
- **The Gurus** – Melchior, Gaspar, and Belthasar are gurus that are crucial to the party's journey. Respectively, they equip the party with the Masamune, the Chrono Trigger (a mysterious egg capable of miracles), and the Epoch.

Breakdown

Chrono Trigger is often lauded for its fantastic story and praised as one of the best games of all time partially due to that, but the rest of *Chrono Trigger*'s beauty and timelessness rests on its seamless intertwining of gameplay and story. Every chapter is flawlessly executed through adroit pacing, elegant use of time travel that elicits cause and effect, and meaningful side quests.

The game opens with a reason to celebrate, and a goal to be accomplished: visit the Millennial Fair. Immediately having a goal greatly benefits the pacing of the game and the story; it is not urgent, yet ever-present. There, Crono runs into Marle, helping her find her pendant, and becoming her acquaintance. The player explores the environment – petting nearby cats, participating in fair games, eating an abandoned lunch, etc. – while also moving the story forward. The goals are unified; the next part of the story begins somewhere at the Millennial Fair, and so does the next section of gameplay. Soon enough, Marle gets sucked into the time portal, launching the story into motion. As Crono and Lucca land in 600 AD, she disappears before their eyes.

Most video games would leave it at that. The game would consist entirely of adventuring the lands only to eventually rescue Marle and restore peace. Instead, Crono and Lucca quickly deduce that the queen of this era, Queen Leene, has been kidnapped. So, when Marle was mistaken for being Queen Leene, it halted the search for the real queen. Knowing this would cause a grandfather paradox, Crono and Lucca pivot their goal to be the recovery of the actual Queen Leene. Along the way, they find a new party member by the name of Frog. He assists them with setting history back on the right track. Then, Crono, Lucca, and Marle go back to the present, where Crono is accused of treason. The trial convinces the jury of Crono’s guilt by citing the player’s actions at the festival, calling Crono a thief if the player ate the man’s lunch, accusing him of scaring off a little girl’s cat if the player pets the cat, and finally concluding that Crono premeditated kidnapping Marle, proven by him “stealing” her pendant. This is a jaw-dropping moment for players because, within the first few acts, *Chrono Trigger* demonstrates its ability to remember the player’s actions. It affirms that the player’s actions are real and have definite effects in-game.

When Marle and Lucca come to rescue Crono from his holding cell, they escape to 2300 AD. The party’s stomachs rumble, and the underground society echoes that hunger. A mom and her child tell Crono that the dad left a while ago to get food for the colony. Crono and the party go through the sewers to find food, but instead find an old computer with a visual record of what happens in 1999 AD: the world comes to an end at the hands of a creature called Lavos. The party finds the family’s dad dead in the failed ration compartment and returns to tell the mother the unfortunate news. The child, spared from the harsh truth, remarks “Daddy’s sure taking his time”. A grave murk consumes the player. Not only was the party unable to find food, it was also unable to find the family’s dad... alive, anyway. *Chrono Trigger* exhibits its ability to make the player feel real emotion, even if it is for a nameless, seemingly unimportant family. Proceeding through the level, the group finds an abandoned robot production facility. Lucca, with her affinity for robots, sees that one is heavily damaged and decides to repair it. Nicknamed Robo, it offers to return the favor by turning on the generator to the society’s dome. However, they are stopped by Robo-clones that start to dismantle Robo, labeling him defective. The party fights off the robots and escapes with broken Robo through another time gate. Instead of being back in 1000 AD, the instability of traveling with 4 party members causes them to arrive at the End of Time.

There, the party is introduced to Gaspar, who tells them more about time travel, even allowing them to fight Lavos then and there. There is so much more game and story ahead of them, but if the party fights Lavos and succeeds, it unlocks one of the 13 available endings. *Chrono Trigger*’s abundant endings are a testament to the weight of

player agency in this game, and proof that the story is ingrained deep within the gameplay. Defeating Lavos is extremely difficult, but if the player goes this path, the story follows suit. Otherwise, the story continues from there, with the party learning that Magus summoned Lavos in 600 AD. To slay Magus, the Masamune needs to be repaired, so the party travels to prehistoric times and obtains the resources to forge it. The party reforges the Masamune with Ayla and Melchior's help and confronts Magus in 600 AD, stopping the spell halfway only to have it backfire, sending them ever further into the past.

They appear in 12,000 BC and find the Kingdom of Zeal, whose Queen plans to summon Lavos and use its power to achieve immortality through the Mammon Machine. Queen Zeal banishes the party from this era under the guidance of her trusted Prophet, sealing the time gate behind them. At the End of Time, Gaspar directs the party to find the Epoch, a time machine that will allow them to travel back to Zeal Palace to stop Lavos once and for all. They get there just in time to see that the Mammon Machine is starting to charge via Schala's sorcery. Schala, writhing in pain, begs for freedom only to be ignored by her mother, Queen Zeal. Alas, nothing could be done: Lavos is still summoned. Discarding his Prophet disguise, Magus attempts to destroy Lavos, to no avail. Crono, the only one left standing, faces Lavos' strongest attack, sacrificing himself to save everyone else.

Saved by the last of Schala's magic, the party wakes up in 12,000 BC, in a peaceful town, Crono's death hitting everyone like a truck. A crucial piece of the party, gone. It could be argued that this cuts so deep because Crono is such a loveable character, and he is... but Crono has not said a word the entire game. No, the reason this pains the player so much is because Crono is the projection of the player; and seeing the player's – Crono's – friends in sorrow? It causes an ache that's stronger than words. The party meets Magus yet again, but this time is different. They can either fight and defeat him or forgive and spare him. If spared, the kindness of the party will warm his usual, cold self to the idea of joining the party and he will help search for Crono.

Before leaving 12000 BC, a woman tells the player about Sun Stones, created by leaving a Moon Stone in direct sunlight for millennia; seemingly unassuming, the information is in fact a prompt for a side quest. It requires the player to buy expensive spiced jerky from a shop in Porre (1000 AD) and give it to the Mayor's family in medieval times (600 AD). The rich and greedy family offers the player lots of money for the jerky, but the player has a choice to give it to the family for free. If they do, the Mayor's greed is replaced by generosity, and he gives them a Moon Stone, which the player can charge up by visiting the prehistoric era, leaving it in the sun, and traveling to the future to obtain its altered version: the Sun Stone. *Chrono Trigger* makes sure the kind deed, no matter how small, does not go unnoticed; the player is rewarded with one of the strongest items in the game and the future mayor of 1000 AD becomes charitable, following the Mayor's precedent of 600 AD.

Otherwise, the party travels to the End of Time and Gaspar gives them the Chrono Trigger, with which the party can summon Crono again. This is an arduous ordeal and as such there are alternate endings based on whether Crono has been revived. To revive Crono, the party must journey through time and help various people across time and space to have even a chance to bring Crono back. This is another way in which *Chrono Trigger* shines. Instead of repetitive fetch-kill quests, the arduous labor always involves

bettering someone else's life. The party must stop Robo's maniacal creator, give Frog closure for his dear friend Cyrus' death, unmask Guardia's Chancellor as a monster, help restore a forest destroyed by a desert monster, and prevent an accident that crippled Lucca's mother. Doing so will unlock a powerful, heartwarming cutscene, where the party rests in Fiona's Forest, the one that has been restored due to Robo's sacrifice. They all sit around a campfire, as the music from the End of Time plays, and reflect on their friendships. It is a scene that sends the best kind of chills: seeing the pals resting together by a campfire, philosophizing about how memories are a form of time travel.

With or without Crono, the party eventually returns to 12,000 BC to triumph over Lavos and Queen Zeal in the new version of Zeal Palace, the Black Omen. With the world's impending doom annihilated, the party celebrates at the Millennial Fair once more before returning to their own times.

Strongest Element

Without a doubt, the way *Chrono Trigger* nurtures the friendships the player forms with these fictional characters transcends storytelling. The strength of the party's bond ignites a similar affection in the player's heart, causing them to grow closer to the beloved characters. One such example is when Robo travels with Lucca to a time when her mom lost her legs due to a horrific accident. Robo offers to let her mom have his robotic legs, opting for treads instead. Touched, Lucca calls Robo a great friend:

"A... friend?"

Me, a robot?"

You called me your friend?" Robo replies. Such candor is created due to Robo's ability, and inability, to understand human emotions and relationships. His non-humanity juxtaposes his very real, human response and causes the player to fall in love with these companions even more.

When the party takes a break in the calm of the restored forest, warming bodies and hearts by the campfire, it brings a feeling of unrivaled comradery to the player. For a brief – glimmering – moment, you forget that these are hardcoded characters with programmed dialogue and move sets. They are real. Many games can cause the ever-famous willing suspension of disbelief, but only a select few have been able to move one step past that and create a tangible reality.

Everyone plays *Chrono Trigger* differently; there are 13 different endings, after all. Furthermore, every party character, including Crono himself, can be renamed. Naming is a staple mechanic in video games, especially in JRPGS like *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*. But in *Chrono Trigger*, the names you choose for the characters envelop their character. Even if first named as jokes, the names grow on you just like the characters themselves. The names become endearing memories, guaranteed to brand themselves into the player's mind for years to come – never to be forgotten. Ostensibly proving Robo's hypothesis at the campfire, these memories manifest a form of time travel. A game about time travel builds those same, impossible time gates in real life by telling a life-altering story. A story that, when looked back on, feels like it really happened. A story, rich with characters – *comrades* – that helped you on the journey to save the world.

Unsuccessful Element

At this point in this review, a portion of the game narrative must be chosen to examine its shortcomings. Although, in a game as timeless and impactful as *Chrono Trigger*, a detail like that is nigh impossible to find. Granted, the re-releases for newer consoles are not groundbreaking; the features they introduce are empty and shoehorned with no real narrative connection. But *Chrono Trigger*'s original story, untouched by the lazy additions of the remakes, is a perennial masterpiece, leaving an eternal impression upon completion.

Highlight

With much difficulty, Crono is revived and rejoins the party. The final task inside of an optional detour calls for Robo to stay in 600 AD and bring a desecrated forest back to life over the course of 400 years. Leaping through time, the party travels to 1000 AD, finding a luscious forest where there used to be a desert. Celebrating their 400-year reunion, the party takes a well-deserved break by the campfire. Crono, Marle, Lucca, Frog, Robo, Ayla, even Magus: they all take a breather from adventuring the lands to talk about time, friendship, and the journey so far.

This homely, golden moment is something I hold very dear to my playthrough of *Chrono Trigger*. I spent so much time with these friends: always fighting *something*, rescuing *someone*. So, when everyone gathers, free of worries, saying that it made me feel fuzzy would be a gross understatement. Everyone, player included, lays back in the air of tranquility before continuing the hefty, taxing journey to save the world. In a game that keeps you occupied with one goal after another, the pace comes to a stop, resting in the eye of the storm; it is a much-needed period of reflection, both for the player and for the characters. A realization dawns on you: you have been through a lot with these characters and you do not have much more to go. It is a bittersweet but warm moment, recognizing all wonderful journeys must eventually come to an end.

Critical Reception

- [IGN](#) – **Lucas M. Thomas – 10/10** – Lucas M. Thomas of IGN writes that *Chrono Trigger* is one of the best video games of all time. Thomas remarks that time travel in *Chrono Trigger* was beautifully executed, for one can go into the past and see the effects of their actions in the future. He notes that not only do their abilities work with one another in combat, but the side quests involved with each party member also reinforces the “wonderful interplay” between characters.
- [Gamespot](#) – **Lark Anderson – 8.5/10** – Gamespot’s Lark Anderson writes that *Chrono Trigger* offers “storytelling and character development ... that even the most stone-hearted will find emotionally stirring”. He adds that every action taken in the past brilliantly and accurately affects the future, citing the fact that “every deed at the Millennial Fair in the very beginning of the game may potentially come back to haunt you not long afterward.” The cause-and-effect cornerstone of storytelling permeates throughout the game, increasing the potency of an already expertly crafted story. Though, the “lackluster additions” and dull side quests found in the remakes of *Chrono Trigger* hurt its rating.

- [Nintendo Life](#) – Corbie Dillard – 10/10 – Corbie Dillard of Nintendo Life writes that *Chrono Trigger* executes its narrative superbly through its polished use of art and music. He goes on to comment that “every single area and time period has its own distinct trademark look”, and this only improves *Chrono Trigger*’s ability to tell its masterfully woven story. Every piece of the narrative is accompanied by a fitting music piece and palette that gives the tale a more vivid feeling.

Lessons

- **Hide choice.** When players are traditionally given a choice, it causes microfractures in the suspension of disbelief; the game stops and waits for input. But within the first minutes of *Chrono Trigger*, the player makes decisions that, unbeknownst to them, will affect the way the game plays later. What you do at the festival is sure to come back to plague you – or bail you out – in a scene not long after. As soon as this happens, even once, the game feels miles more real than it once did; actions that are commonplace in RPGs (taking, selling items) now have a consequence. *Chrono Trigger* is not the only game to have pulled this off. Games like the *Elder Scrolls* series also use this principle to convince players of the reality within their game. When a game fluctuates in accordance with your subconscious choices, it directly parallels real life, where the future changes under every seemingly insignificant decision you make.
- **Use art to convey the feeling you desire.** Though dialogue is usually used to portray emotion in a video game, music plays an equally important part in making sure the media evokes the desired message. The importance of music cannot be overstated in *Chrono Trigger*, where almost every environment, era, and event has its own soundtrack. The sound of the wind blowing over a destroyed, desolate landscape in 2300 AD fosters a bleak atmosphere. A hovering, shrill note with spaced maniacal laughter in the distance perfectly sets the scene for a terrifying transgression into Magus’ castle. In moments where time seems to be standing still, a song with metronomic motifs will play. Details like this encircle the player, creating a much more authentic, holistic experience and bundling the gameplay with narrative and feeling.

Summation

Chrono Trigger’s life-long, lasting impact cannot be described with just one word. For a game as disgustingly beautiful as *Chrono Trigger*, the story it tells and the friendships it kindles are otherworldly. It is not a video game with a good story, and it is not a story with good gameplay. It is a rare, phenomenal example of when the video game and story combine to be one and the same. When someone plays *Chrono Trigger*, they are not experiencing a fairy tale that has agency. They are crafting the tale before themselves, constructing it as they go, and falling in love with the wonderful friends that accompany them on that journey through a land they have never been to. Despite being created years before virtual reality became viable, the aftertaste the game leaves you with outdoes the immersive technology of this age. No amount of haptic feedback, pixel density, or refresh rate will be able to convey the way a soul blossoms after a completed playthrough of *Chrono Trigger*.