

Game Narrative Review

Your name (one name, please): Chance Lytle
Your school: Carnegie Mellon University – Entertainment Technology Center
Your email: clytle@andrew.cmu.edu
Month/Year you submitted this review: December, 2019

Game Title: Chibi-Robo!
Platform: Nintendo GameCube
Genre: Adventure, Platformer
Release Date: June 23, 2005
Developer: Skip Ltd.
Publisher: Nintendo
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Kenichi Nishi, Hiroshi Moriyama

Overview

Chibi-Robo! is an adventure-platformer game starring the eponymous ten-centimeter service robot. Chibi is tasked with taking care of a small suburban home's chores and daily duties, but ends up repairing the residents' broken relationships and mixed up lives. The melodrama stars the Sanderson family: a mother, father, and daughter on the brink of divorce. Their familial issues are the grist for the gameplay's mill. Every night, though, the tense house also comes alive with a supporting cast of the family's personal toys and trinkets, each a reflection of the family members' crises. The father is a loser, the mother is isolated; his action figure strives for the work ethic he lacks, her toy flower dances alone save one friend every night.

While saving the nuclear family is the story's dramatic goal, the gameplay's focus is on procedural plot details as tiny as its hero. These beats and scenes are equally spread between all the cast, not just the family. Every chore is packed with imaginative opportunities, every collectible affords idiosyncratic characterization, and even every step the player takes is literally music to their ears. What makes *Chibi-Robo's* narrative come alive is how these joyful puzzles and interactions dissonate with the narrative's tedium and tension. The gameplay lets the player become an exemplar to the whole house, and in doing so emphasizes the game's theme that to have a happy home, you must strive for joy in even the smallest of tasks.

Characters

Most tales the player stumbles across are recognizable parables, ranging from a tropey, shy fangirl to a stereotypical retelling of doll Beauty and the action figure Beast. Their piecemeal, episodic presentation, inherent to an adventure game, appends both quality

length and player investment, elevating them as they intercut. Much like daily life, the experiences of the player and the characters play out messily and interwoven with others. The player joyfully overcomes a wide breadth of challenges, from making hamburgers to dealing with existential dread, with all the cast members, breeding a shared affection toward living life that is at the core of the game.

- **Chibi-Robo** – The player avatar; a 10cm service robot that can do no harm as he plucks through the house morning, noon, and night. Chibi is many things to many people, inspiring each to be their best self through his own actions of bravery, selflessness, and ingenuity. Joyful musical notes accompanying all his basic movements are all the characterization necessary, and humbly solving each puzzle for the house’s denizens is all his necessary fulfillment. Chibi himself has a flat arc because he is assured in his job: to bring joy to the whole house.
- **Telly-Vision** – Chibi’s assistant and the mouthpiece for the silent protagonist, Telly often facilitates conversations and understandings between the house’s residents.
- **The Sandersons** – The Sandersons are the characters that change the most over the course of the story. The story of the game is the story of them coming together as a family.
 - **Mr. Sanderson** – Papa is an out-of-work electronics engineer who spends his days watching otaku TV shows and his money on action figures. While he loves his family, he is stuck in a selfish rut of shame later revealed to have been caused by his quitting his job.
 - **Mrs. Sanderson** – The caring but aloof mother of the family, Mrs. Sanderson is put under understandable stress by her husband’s irresponsibility and her daughter’s social gymnastics. She serves largely as a foil to push Mr. Sanderson into doing right by the whole family, and causing them all to grow back closer together.
 - **Jenny** – Jenny is their eight year old daughter who dresses as a frog and refuses to speak normally, outside of a ribbit or two. Her story of overcoming detachedness and her own attention seeking behavior slots neatly under her father’s similar one.
 - **Tao** – The family dog who appears in many of skip ltd.’s games, Tao is a comic menace to all the plastic toys scared of being chewed on.
- **Drake Redcrest & Sophie** – *Sophie* is a dog’s chew toy with a burning, unrequited love for the dutiful space hunter *Drake Redcrest* who patrols the house every night. Drake never rests, especially when bolstering his ego, but does have a genuine sense of justice. The player helps Sophie express her true love to a man who commits himself to little else other than his work. This story mirrors Mr. Sanderson’s own lack of responsibility.
- **Funky Phil & Dinah** – A joyful, psychedelic toy, *Funky Phil* is a fake plant that dances to feel alive. He is constantly practicing for a hopeful concert career, despite being usually isolated in the family bedroom or on a windowsill. *Dinah* is a toy block dinosaur that is often Phil’s only companion, freely expressing her unconditional love for him and supporting all his endeavors. Their optimistic, unconditional relationship is explored when Mrs. Sanderson locks herself away in

the bedroom, reflecting what true love can be to Chibi as the player figures out how to heal the family.

- **Giga-Robo** – The Sandersons’ previous service robot, *Giga-Robo* shut himself down before Jenny was born and after blaming himself and his power costs for the economic decline of the family; his defunct chassis has rested in the basement ever since. He is a nostalgic symbol of the family’s happy past, and mysteriously responsible for bringing the house’s toys to life. Reactivating Giga-Robo is the game’s true ending and bring the home’s happiness full circle.

Breakdown

The game begins on Jenny’s 8th birthday with each family member giving her a gift. Papa Sanderson pulls a large, metal box out from under the table, and drops it center stage. Each family member, even Tao, knows the gift is really for himself, but brushes it off in their own individual ways. Out pops Chibi-Robo and Telly; the family all end up beside themselves and excited anyway. The party goes late into the night and ends as a successful introduction to both the player character and the family. Chibi has been bought to tidy up the house and ventures out for his first night of cleaning and caring.

The game’s primary narrative is of the family coming back together, but multiple subplots and side quests of their toys are necessary complements. Distinctly, the family’s story is told through causal incidents and active character choices, while the toys’ are through coincidences and more passive revelations. For example of the former, the family’s story’s inciting incident, the purchase of Chibi-Robo, leads to Papa Sanderson spending the night on the couch for spending another dime on another toy. For the latter, the lovesick tale of Sophie and Drake Redcrest is happened across as the player makes their way to take care of Papa. This distinction lets the toys’ stories act more as reflections and emphases on the family’s story rather than harsh, disrupting notes. Their coincidental storytelling also consonates with the nature of a cleaning robot: Chibi-Robo doesn’t seek out issues and quests but comes across them as he would a stain or crumpled litter and handles them lovingly. This is the core gameplay loop, and players learn it the same way Chibi learns the house and all of its residents’ complicated drama, from that of a human or canine or toy or frog. During this time, the player also stumbles across the defunct Giga-Robo in the basement, something talked about with longing by the toys and never mentioned by the family.

The game’s major turning point comes when Mrs. Sanderson finds yet another receipt for yet another toy. Mr. Sanderson’s laziness and lack of compassion directly leads to his wife locking herself away in the family bedroom and threatening divorce--she sends a letter through Chibi saying as much. Papa is pushed to change himself, but instead of fixing any root behavior, he decides to start helping more around the house. It is something, at least. Of course, he needs the guidance of the exemplar housekeeper, Chibi-Robo, to make a true difference. The dissonance of Chibi gleefully completing household chores is displayed best here. Mr. Sanderson chugs through each one he asks the player to do with him, but the player is always happy to have an engaging gameplay segment, bright and happy sound feedback, and cute visuals as their reward. This act of the game is where the majority of gameplay like this is, and has the player further

balancing tensions throughout a house in open conflict. Even though the player sees the joy in any chore or quest, they must teach the rest of the house it by joyful example. The player and Chibi also take it upon themselves to secretly recharge Giga-Robo. Maybe the relic could provide insight into Mr. and Mrs. Sanderson's relationship?

The game's climax and resolution unfortunately sputter out across two or three confused, different scenes. The first has the player stumble across a UFO in the backyard as they do any other passive story. If living toys are accepted, then aliens can be as well. The aliens reveal they are here to visit their old friend, Giga-Robo. Chibi and Telly break the news to them that Giga-Robo is no more, and they become literally sick with heartbreak. Chibi takes care to help them the best he can, as he always does, and stumbles into a pod on their ship that thrusts him back in time to when the Sandersons were happily married and when Giga-Robo himself was thriving. The atmosphere of the past is unlike anything in the colorful present, with sepia nostalgia for an unseen time permeating each interaction with the younger Mr. and Mrs. Sanderson. This is the way it should be in the present-day house. This scene provides a firm goal for the player to push toward in the final hours of the game, but is quickly undercut upon returning to the present. Chibi happens to notice the combination for a briefcase he had seen around the house, and flees back to the present with Telly. The time travel plays into some other side characters' stories as well, but unfortunately only as novel puzzle design. The aliens remain ill in their ship for the time being.

When Chibi casually unlocks the briefcase with the found code, as he would any other collectible or treasure in the game, he unleashes a mess of villains among the house. The Spydorz are a robotic menace that I will discuss later as the games' most unsuccessful element, and tie little into the story. These villains act as a *deus ex machina* by forcing Papa Sanderson to take responsibility for his family's wellbeing, in the direct terms of saving their lives. A hardly climactic boss fight (the only one in the game) is slogged through with clunky combat, and Mr. Sanderson puts himself in danger to finish the fight. Then, a quick resolution of the family reuniting, free from locked doors and relationship strains as they all agree to communicate their emotions better and, per Chibi, help out around the house equally. This slapdash finish links little to the player's view of the happy past, to any relationships they made with characters, or to any mechanical skills they have gained along the way, but if the family is actually getting along after all, the player's goal feels somewhat met, if a little empty.

Chibi is then free to explore the now-loving house, and clean up any side quests he may have missed. There remains the question of Giga-Robo uneasily resting in the basement--with a half-charged battery if the player has been keeping up with him. Eventually, the player will charge and repair him fully, causing him to stand upright and walk suddenly upstairs. Side characters stand plastic mouth agape as their old friend saunters by, intent on going somewhere or meeting someone. The family upstairs are equally shocked at this walking memory, before Giga-Robo makes it outside and meets his old alien friends. It turns out Giga had rescued the aliens long ago, and they rewarded his kind heart by bringing all of his friends, the toys, to life. This revelation adds little to the game, but is a nice way to encourage Giga's status as a pure symbol of a happier past. The aliens return

to the house in the first place to grant a second wish Giga had made: to provide infinite energy to him so he could never disappoint, in his eyes (sensors?), his family again. He shares this power with Chibi, and the game comes to its true end by having the family circle back to their original time of happiness, fully complete with all members new and old helping out around the house. This resolution serves more as a denouement, and could have instead been rolled into Mr. Sanderson's active climax, but is a happy, deserved ending for Chibi and his efforts nonetheless.

Strongest Element

The game's tint of consumerism deepens the story's focus on the everyday. *Chibi-Robo!* tells its sidequests' tales with common, generalized tropes from commercialized superhero shows, fairy tales, and electronics fads. But by making these clichés characters with their own routines and interactions, player attention is drawn to the connections made with and through them, rather than tossing them aside as familiar toys to be nostalgic about. Traversing a tale of hard-working justice with the action figure Drake Redcrest draws out Mr. Sanderson's hypocritical laziness of falling asleep to the space hunter's own television show each night. The anxiety of Funky Phil replicating his clockwork, manufactured dance moves for a new generation echoes Mrs. Sanderson's own anxiety of maintaining a successful home for her daughter. These toy stories are ones the audience have heard countless times before, but in reflecting the narrative of the family, they rise above the impersonal, disposable nature of a normal consumer good, a faux tearjerker car commercial, or an inauthentic plastic hot dog packaging. The audience loops around from an initial association with the common tropes, a following dismissal upon recognition, and an eventual lasting significance as the sub- and main narrative play off each other. This is the pathos of the game, the love possible in the minutia of everyday, and in a world as commercial and empty semiotic as today's, it is a standing message.

Unsuccessful Element

Around the middle of the game, a mysterious robotic menace appears in the house: the Spydorz. As their edgy, very mid-2000s name would suggest, they are the ostensible and properly angular bad guys; they serve as cannon fodder that harass Chibi at random intervals as you do your chores around the house. The game shoehorns in a blaster upgrade to destroy them with, but there is little effort to fit it with the game's other, benevolent tools of a toothbrush-mop and helicopter hat. They are kept mysterious throughout the game, until the climax where they take over the house. Mr. Sanderson admits that his employer forced him to create the Spydorz, but this is a throwaway line barely noticed during his real character moment of taking firm responsibility for his family and their safety. The quality conflict and tensions of *Chibi-Robo!*'s plot come from the characters' own flaws and revelations, not an outside villain-of-the-week like the Spydorz. Their inclusion muddies not only the gameplay with purposeless combat, but the story with a purposeless villain.

Highlight

The highlight of the game is in every small interaction the player has: the joy expressed by Chibi upon cleaning the smallest stain or picking up the smallest bit of crumpled paper is unmatched, and speaks to the core theme of the joy in the everyday. Chibi is built to be a service robot, and is far removed from an emotionless Roomba. His animations, sound cues, and feedback bring him to life in every mundane task. Narratively, this lets him express this to every character whose quest he completes. Mr. Sanderson learns to show love to his wife through loving what he does for her alongside Chibi; Sophie learns to not be shy by taking every setback in stride just as Chibi does.

Critical Reception

“Chibi-Robo is an oddity: a game with a simple goal but a great deal of freedom in making the journey. It's a game about tiny altruistic robots helping humans with real problems told in a light-hearted manner that will appeal to a wide audience.”

- Sean Aaron for NintendoLife, November 5 2009. **9/10**

Sean Aaron hits upon the purity of the narrative: its altruism. The player uses their provided tools to clean and help, not uplift themselves or to destroy any negative antagonist. The freedom of choice he mentions compliments the passive nature of happening upon each side quest. In a game where you can explore anywhere, a feeling of freedom is expressed when you accomplish or find something with only partial intention. *Chibi-Robo!* uses this freedom to let players naturally fall in love with their freedom.

“At night, or when the humans aren't looking, the toys in the Sanderson household have their own active lives that Chibi-Robo can help in his adventures, getting involved in events that pan out like miniature plays, with love triangles (nay, love dodecahedrons) between toys, and some scenes with a real pathos behind them. It's honestly one of the most touching games I've played in ages, and it's these scenes, with Chibi-Robo as a quiet, passive observer, that make it so heartbreaking when your time in his world comes to an end.”

- Matthew Kumar for Eurogamer, March 16 2006. **8/10**

“Chibi-Robo [is] an almost astonishing surprise” for Matthew Kumar. His noting of the Chibi as a “passive observer” relates to the player acting as an exemplar for the stories instead of an active participant. This role lets the game play out naturally, like everyday life, and sends home the message of its *joie de vivre*.

Lessons

Pair the Up With the Down

Bittersweet moments are well established narrative boosters; *Chibi-Robo* uniquely sources its narrative charm from combining sweet gameplay with often bitter and sad character arcs.

Tackle Themes from Many Angles

Like any good narrative subplot, any good sidequest in a game should interact with the main story's themes and beats. *Chibi-Robo*'s adventure game approach to doling out its sidequests nonlinearly and nonsequentially let the toy's stories complement the family's well and unobtrusively.

The Exemplar Player

The defining trait of the game is how the player passively represents what every cast member should aspire to through their own bravery, creativity, and compassion. This goes against common "chosen one" or "pure savior" narratives by not placing the player in the center of the melodrama, but by having them simply move through it.

Summation

Chibi-Robo's task of cleaning up, both the house and the family's lives, embodies the game's plot, but the narrative's heart lies in the mere act of doing it. The game has the expected score of a soap opera, but all the player's minute actions are more memorable sonic treats, from guitars strumming as you scrub with a toothbrush to scaling a rope alongside a musical scale. Each side character has an overarching message, but the player is instead charmed into remembering all their small, wonderfully varied idiosyncrasies. In these elements of sound design and gameplay, *Chibi-Robo!* illustrates the joy in everyday life. In the game's narrative design, being put in the shoes (shoes?) of Chibi puts the players not only into the middle of the house's drama, but in the role of an exemplar to grow and display their own *joie de vivre*. Working equally with cast members big and small, passively forming relationships and passively watching active character arcs, and doing the little chores that bring happiness to everyone support this. *Chibi-Robo!* shows that the best fun can be found on the smallest of scales.