CLUMP SPIRIT – AN APPRECIATION OF KATAMARI DAMACY

Somewhere within the last twenty years or so, video games (the home variety, specifically) have infiltrated the ranks of cultural compass holders and, more significantly, become a multi-mega-billion-dollar industry. It's no longer preposterous to imagine that a major studio movie might be produced from one of the genre's typically thin narratives. Though there are rare exceptions, game-based films have hardly been heralded as successful – much less enjoyable – and yet, the field is continually being reaped for source material at the same rate as classic works of literature and miserable television series of the 1980's. The strange bedfellowship has extended to such weird outlets as Christian scare tactics ("Eternal Forces", a VG adaptation of the "Left Behind" phenomenon) and military recruitment ("America's Army", the US Army's virtual trainer), the two of which are admittedly similar.

Though there have undoubtedly been countless college theses written on the subject, the "video game as art" has not yet been fully embraced by the arbiters who manage these things. The reason is baldly obvious: video games are not art. Regardless of however loose a definition one adopts, a product specifically designed to appeal to as wide a swath of the population – with a primary focus on the teenage male – is up against it as far as art world acceptance goes. Some occasional titles have flirted with highbrow recognition, but, as of this writing, the Whitney Biennial has yet to include any Playstation-based artists in its selections. So, though the odds are against it, and in light of the fact that I am a cognoscenti in exactly neither field, I am boldly going to suggest one particular video game as being as near to art as might yet be possible.

The game is "Katamari Damacy", roughly translated as "clump spirit", a definition that becomes only slightly less nonsensical once you have been acquainted with the content.

The concise explanation is this: the player controls a sticky ball, which when rolled over objects lesser than its size, causes the objects to attach themselves to the ball. As the ball increases in mass, the size of the objects it can pick up also increases. That's, literally, it. Even though it's a ridiculously hyperbolic comparison, one could just as easily refer to the Mona Lisa as a painting of a brown-headed lady. It's the summation of the

specifics that matter, and "Katamari Damacy" has an asteroid-sized clump of charming specifics to sell the case.

A brief history:

The game's designer is Keita Takahashi, an art school sculpture graduate who entered into the field of video game design to, as quoted in a 2006 interview with Res magazine, "…create something that would inspire good feelings or thoughts for everyone. I decided not to create art that people merely look at, but rather something that could be used in daily life and make people happy." After a couple of years toiling in the Namco programming pens on others' projects, he pitched the idea that would become "Katamari Damacy".

When the game was originally released, exclusively in Japan in early 2004, it failed to attract much attention, selling only a meager amount. Its poor performance reportedly buried any chance of wider release in the US or elsewhere, until soon after its release, when Takahashi presented the game during an experimental design workshop at the international Game Developers Conference. The reaction there was enough to convince Namco to schedule a low-anticipation US release for autumn of that year. The game promptly sold out. (I, personally, had to visit five stores on the day of its release before I could find an employee who'd heard of the game.)

Takahashi became a kind of controversial celebrity within the closed-off world of game developers, both lauded for his unique accomplishments and dismissed for his blunt criticism on the stagnancy of video game design. A typical quote from his address at the 2005 GDC: "I find it very frustrating more developers aren't making more creative games. I can't understand it. One of the reasons I made Katamari was to say to people: 'Look, you can do this too'. But they don't. So it is very frustrating. There are problems with the top people, with the business people, certainly, but even among the development staff, they don't have the new creative ideas. It's all just routine stuff."

Attempting to describe "Katamari Damacy" is a lot like retelling your dreams to a friend, not a lot of it makes literal sense and, generally, they would rather not hear about it. The advantage here, of course, is that unlike the dream, the listeners have the ability to actually experience it for

themselves and then torture their friends with the contagious enthusiasm the game breeds.

The baited hook is the astounding opening animated sequence. The visuals are indebted as much to Peter Max-style psychedelia as Sanrio simplicity and fill the screen with an array of vivid imagery seemingly lifted from the Tokyo Inter-Dimensional Airport's lost and found. Dancing pandas oscillate in rainbow hues, while a cod-pieced giant looms above them, strumming an acoustic guitar. Supporting this is an amazing theme song by Yu Miyake that shares some boundaries with traditional J-Pop but willfully veers off into other unexpected territories. In fact, the entire game is scored and sound designed by Miyake to include a soundtrack of songs of varied genre written and recorded by Japanese pop artists, specifically for this game.

In as much of a nutshell as possible, the King of All Cosmos (the cod-pieced giant previously mentioned) has destroyed all of the stars in the Universe in the midst of a drunken revelry. He has enlisted you, his five-centimeter tall son, the Prince, to go to Earth and collect enough items from which he can create more stars and repopulate the firmament.

When you begin your assignment, you are given a sticky ball, a Katamari, barely larger than yourself and are only able to attract tiny items such as thumbtacks, paper clips and caramel squares. As you progress, you encounter some living things such as mice, spiders and small birds which, while not posing a threat – you can never die in this game – do serve as an inconvenience to your collection by blocking your path or knocking you backwards. Only until, that is, you are large enough to roll them up into your Katamari. From there, the world becomes your target. Motorcycles, wrestling rings, schoolchildren, sea monsters, submarines and skyscrapers all fall victim to the strange and playful terror.

It's a testament to the design and play of the game that the destruction never seems malicious. Even though the human characters resist becoming enveloped in the Katamari, it's undeniably hilarious to see an entire baseball team flee from a massive sphere of automobiles, washing machines, and fish. It's that variety of encounter and the richness of the world Takahashi has created that raise this game above the level of entertainment. He has created an entirely unique experience, specific to video-gaming, that creates only happiness.

Keita Takahashi on the success of "Katamari Damacy":
"If a simple game like this can become popular enough to even come out in the west, maybe the world's not such a bad place after all."