

Story Principles and Decisions for the Secret Chronicles of Dr. M

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1 Introduction

Originally, a Mario clone known as Super Mario Clone FX was released. It contained graphics ripped from the Mario games and clearly was guilty of copyright infringement. In order to alleviate these issues, the game was forked into Secret Maryo Chronicles (see [1] in the references section), which both changed the name and edged away greatly from Mario like graphics. This game still ran into problems because Maryo still sounded like Mario. Thus the game was forked again into The Secret Chronicles of Dr. M (also known as TSC or Secret Chronicles, see [2]). This fork introduced another major push to eliminate all final Mario references. Serious discussions have also taken place about introducing a new story for this game.

It is helpful to review or skim prior story submissions when reading this document. I had written the document at <http://wiki.secretchronicles.de/StoryDevelopmentDocumentVersion2.html> ([3]). This document describes Alex as an explorer and introduces Dr. M as an eccentric, intelligent librarian who ravages the countryside searching for the Malevolent Chronicles, an ultimate source of power. Danfun64 had introduced a separate proposal based on mine at <http://team.secretchronicles.de/~datahead/Danfun64StorySubmission.odt> ([4]). This document takes a much darker theme, involving slugs that eat characters' brains and zombies controlled by these slugs. In his document, Alex is a child, and Dr. M is a misguided librarian who became overly obsessed with obtaining literature.

The story for a game can do quite a bit to set the mood and immerse the player in the experience. As with any project, decisions have to be made for the depth of the story, the characters, and various elements that will be present.

This document outlines the major questions that must be decided in order to create the story, as well

as basic principles of story presentation in a game (section 2). By examining these questions and looking at how other games have handled them, we will be better able to create a quality story. I also offer a number of suggestions for the needed decisions (mostly in sections 3 and 4).

2 Story Presentation

In a novel, a story is presented as a large body of text. In a game, however, it must be done in a different manner. RPG's generally present their story through a combination of in game text, game play, and animated scenes. 2D Platformers, however, are very different. More focused on action game play, these types of games tend to use more visual elements to convey story. In many cases, they do not have much of a story at all. Thus if we want to have a deeper story for Secret Chronicles, we must adapt to the players' expectations. Otherwise the button mashers will miss the blob of text that we dumped at the start of the game.

2.1 Graphics

The most obvious means to convey the story is by use of graphics. Well created visual art corresponding to components of the story helps set the atmosphere in levels and allows the player to experience the story as he or she plays through levels. Many players do not want to read large amounts of text after coming home from school or work and tend to prefer this mode of story in a game.

Cinematic scenes are another possibility for this. Obviously, Secret Chronicles would need some sort of support for showing such scenes. Videos can be used for complex pregenerated scenes (ie. specially rendered graphics), but for scenes taking place within levels, we might consider a system for moving objects using keyframes (see figure 1). By being able

to control the animations and movements of sprites at timed intervals, it will become very easy to have scenes that take place within levels, as well as special events within levels.

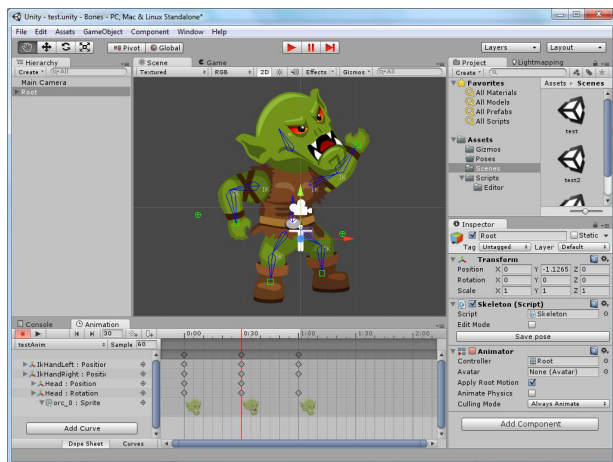


Figure 1: In Unity, it is possible to create 2D animations using a keyframe system (image from [5]).

One should not underestimate the importance of art style decisions in conveying story. These decisions affect the mood and help to set the genre of the game. It is certainly possible to break convention, but we still must give cues to the player about the themes. Many of our story suggestions so far have been heavily influenced by the existing Secret Maryo Chronicles graphics.

2.2 Narration

Not all story will easily be conveyed through the contents of levels. Sometimes even cinematic scenes may not give the feel we want. If we want to give a classic, story like feel as found in a novel or work of literature, we need to do something in a little different style.

As noted before, many people will press buttons to skip large volumes of text. Even if our game is nontraditional, this is not going to change. A possible compromise is to have a recorded narrator read major portions of the story. Players who only want to relax will be able to sit back and listen to the story, much like they would when watching a television show.

Obviously, this brings up the issue of translations. We will need to have a recorded narration for each major language. If we do not have a recording for a narration, we can default to showing only specially formatted text, described in the next section.

2.3 Story Formatted Text

In some cases, we still will need to show text to the user for the story. In this case, we might choose some sort of background that looks like the paper found on old scrolls. Combined with an interesting (but easy to read) font, people may be a little bit more likely to read the text. This will not necessarily stop the button mashers from skipping the text, but, combined with the options above, we can reduce the chances of them missing the story.

3 Audience

The audience has a major effect on the design of a game. Obviously we will be catering both the the 2D platformer and probably the retro game crowd, but the age group deserves a bit more detailed discussion. We also need to consider the Secret Maryo Chronicles player base.

3.1 Secret Maryo Chronicles Similarities

We are a fork of Secret Maryo Chronicles. One question we face is whether to be a continuation of Secret Maryo Chronicles or to try to be a new game. Many of the discussions we have had recently have leaned toward being a new game. We do not want to be a Mario clone anymore, and making game design decisions that distance us from the Mario games often means distancing ourselves from Secret Maryo Chronicles by extension. We have also talked about trying a bit deeper story, something that Secret Maryo Chronicles did not have. This is discussed more further below.

It does make sense to pay homage to Secret Maryo Chronicles, however. We will probably always want to have certain elements from the original game, such

as some enemies and power ups. This will help to retain the Secret Maryo Chronicles audience while acknowledging our own history.

3.2 Target Age Group

Some games are directly targeted at children, trying to have colorful fun worlds, with simple themes such as animals and food. Such games can be enjoyed by children or adults, but they tend to cater to children. In many ways, Secret Maryo Chronicles fell into this category.

Some games are targeted at an older audience. The most common way of doing this is with more violent or adult like themes. Such games arguably should not be played by younger children, as they are not mature yet enough for the content. The other way of doing this is by having references to more advanced concepts, whether they be law proceedings, literature, or theoretical physics.

Targeting both groups, however, can really help allow everyone to find deeper enjoyment from a game. As Quintus has pointed out, we could accomplish this by having fun, bright graphics in action packed levels, while exploring deeper story themes in order to attract the older audience. By avoiding major violence in the game, we will not alienate the child audience.



Figure 2: Jar Jar Binks from the Phantom Menace is an extreme example of a character perceived as overly being for children. Care must be taken when mixing child and adult elements in a work ([6]).

3.3 Depth of Story

Many 2D platformers do not have a very deep story. Old NES games were known for having barely any story at all. Some games literally choose to have no story at all. The Mario games generally used a thin story.

RPG's tend to have deeper plots, having a narrative be a major portion of the game. There is no reason why we cannot have a more immersive story in Secret Chronicles. By taking inspiration from the RPG genre and not following the common patterns of 2D platformers, we will stand out. Young children may not appreciate this deeper story, but the older age groups are more likely to enjoy it.

3.4 Level of Cuteness

Secret Maryo Chronicles had very cute graphics, cuter than the Mario games. This is especially true of the Maryo graphics (note that Maryo is always smiling on the map), though it also showed in the waffle graphics and many others (see figure 5).

My suggestion would be to consider a slightly less cute set of graphics but to retain most of the cuteness. A good reference model for this are the Super Mario Bros and Super Mario World games. They certainly have some cuteness but are not as cute as something like Yoshi's Story. Donkey Kong Country is interesting as an example of a game that moderates the cuteness even more (see figure 7).

Doing this will help edge a little toward the deeper story themes while staying cute enough to retain the younger target audience. Retaining a reasonable amount of cuteness also prevents us from having to do a mass overhaul of the graphics, when we do not have the team resources needed. Most of the graphics would not need to be changed for this standard, thus.

4 Themes

Themes help to determine the genre of a story, and sub themes help to give a feel to it. These decisions have a major impact on gameplay.



Figure 3: The graphics used for Alex in levels, inherited from Secret Maryo Chronicles (M’s removed, from [7]).



Figure 4: The graphics used for Alex in the map, from Secret Maryo Chronicles ([8]).

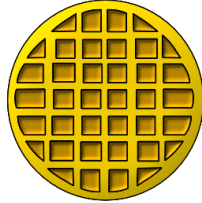


Figure 5: The graphics used for waffle tokens in SMC, replaced with jewels in TSC ([9]).

4.1 Classical Themes

We have discussed the possibility of having some references to classical themes. Dr. M could be a fan of Shakespeare, taunting Alex with quotes from the different works. We have already seen how sometimes furbot in our IRC room happens to pick a quote that ironically fits the situation. The same can be done for Dr. M.

The Great Library, if implemented as a place that avoids technology, could have classical style music playing in the background, with paintings and chandeliers in a room next to a balcony. This would match well with Dr. M if he has a refined character, and it would be in stark contrast to the technological themes in other game areas described in the following sec-



Figure 6: Donkey Kong Country had cute elements but generally moderated it in such a way that it appealed directly to all ages ([10]).



Figure 7: Yoshi’s Story had extremely cute graphics and can be viewed as being targeted more towards children ([11]).

tions.

Having these classical themes helps make the game enjoyable for an older audience. Again, children can enjoy the bright graphics and fast gameplay, while adults can enjoy the references to deeper concepts.

4.2 Social Issues

We can take the deeper themes to a whole new level by exploring social issues. For example, we could have Dr. M be a dictator who, in his view of rightness, tries to impose draconian standards such as restrictive licensing on his conquered subjects. The characters could then discuss these issues, with varying viewpoints, making the player think about matters other than getting through the levels. Again, this can help the adults enjoy the game, while the children focus on the fun game play.

This also brings up the question of how serious the game should be. Exploring social issues such as licensing and right and wrong tends to require a little bit more serious plot. At the same time, we want to have enough light hearted elements that we retain the younger audience. The Legend of Zelda games

tend to do this very well, presenting Ganondorf as clearly evil while at the same time having many colorful and fun elements throughout the game. This in turn affects the level of slapstick and comic characters in Secret Chronicles. A certain amount of this will work very well, but we probably would not want it to be excessive if we go with social issues and a deeper story.

Some themes should probably be avoided to prevent alienating some groups in the audience. As Bugsbane has pointed out, heavy religious themes are a fast way to make certain groups of people refuse to play the game. Likewise any social theme that many religious groups do not want their children to see may need to be avoided. If a lot of religious groups are complaining that public schools are indoctrinating their children into a given belief or topic, this topic may need to be avoided in our game. This must be dealt with on a case by case basis.

4.3 Age and Profession of Alex

Lastly, we will want to think on the age of Alex. Officially Secret Maryo Chronicles had no age for Alex, but the graphic made many people assume he was a child. I think it might make sense to set an age in order to solidify our story.

My suggestion would be to make him a young adult, maybe twenty two years old. Being an adult worked well with Mario in his games, allowing him to be a plumber as his profession, bringing this into game play with pipes as a theme. It also can prevent adults from thinking the game is overly focused on children, while keeping him young enough to still potentially appeal to children.

For his profession, I would suggest making him a treasure hunter or explorer. This would work well with exploring the vast world and with collecting jewels. If we decide to make him a child, I think we should at least define a major hobby related to the game.

It might make sense to consider redoing the graphics for Alex, now that we are a fork. Making Alex look different would make a distinct mark that we have launched our own game and are no longer a continuation of Secret Maryo Chronicles. In these

graphics, it would make sense to take our decisions for both his age and his profession into account.

There has been general agreement in the team that there needs to be a second female lead character. It probably makes sense to have her be the same age as Alex, so as to be an equal. We also have talked about having additional playable characters. These characters could easily be given different ages. Danfun64 did this pretty well in his story document, having a grandpa fox character and two child fox characters. These extra playable characters are less likely to be available early in the game and have smaller roles in the plot; thus their ages are less likely to have an impact on target audience groups.

4.4 Magic and Technology

Should Secret Chronicles be a fantasy world with magic but no technology? Should it be a science fiction world with no magic, coming up with a science explanation for anything that seems unnatural? Should it take a modern-world approach? Might a mix of these work best?

My suggestion would be to go for a mix. Having only magic is what the Mario games did, excepting the air ships and tanks; they had princesses in castles and characters waving wands. We do not want to seem overly like a Mario game anymore. Introducing some science fiction style elements creates interesting possibilities for machines that Dr. M uses as well. We will of course have to be careful to make sure Dr. M is not too much like Dr. Robotnik from the Sonic games, though; by having a focus on something else such as a classical theme, we should be able to avoid this.

Magic can be used to explain unnatural events such as floating boxes in our game. We could also have the malevolent chronicles possess untold power, linking to a magical realm. Science fiction type concepts might work well for robot enemies, monster factories, or even a ship run by Dr. M. Modern technology can also be referenced in places such as a monster factory, having conveyor belts and old fashioned gears. By using these different elements together, we will not be restricted in our ideas.



Figure 8: We have considered using these graphics by Warya for either a robotic or mecha version of Army ([12]).

4.5 Military Weaponry

What on earth is this doing in this document? This would be too violent for children, or would it?

Having traditional guns (hand guns or machine guns) is widely seen as too violent for a game played by children. This should be avoided. Tanks, battle-ships, and air vehicles are a bit more complex. For these kinds of weapons, it greatly depends on how they are portrayed in the game. Super Mario Bros. 3 had traditional cannons with cannon balls, fired out of tanks (see figure 11). Nobody questions this game for being overly violent. Likewise they had bullets, but the faces on the bullets added a harmless cartoon element that reduced the level of perceived violence.

Thus having war weapons in the game will not necessarily be perceived as overly violent – it depends on how it is presented in the artwork. If Dr. M has access to science fiction technologies, one would expect him to use a number of machines if he launches an attack. Otherwise we end up restricting ourselves to magic and falling into a very common vein in games.

5 Conclusion

There are many possibilities for the story. No answer is right or wrong, but if we find a way to be a bit different, we can both eliminate our perception of being a Mario clone and leave a mark amongst the world of platformer games. Having a deeper story also means that players will learn something if they play the game. My hope is that some of the children do follow the story and end up building critical thinking skills in the process.



Figure 9: Tanks are not seen as overly violent in Super Mario Bros. 3 because of the way they are presented ([13]).



Figure 10: Contra 3 is a 2D game with guns – it clearly is violent ([14]).



Figure 11: Super Mario Bros 3, however, fires cannonballs from cannons and is not seen as violent. You can even stomp on the balls ([15]).

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