

Actraiser

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While many other simulation games already existed by the time Actraiser was released in the US, Actraiser was the first introduction that I had to god-simulation games. From Actraiser, I went to Civilization, to Warcraft, to Civ II, to many others. It opened up my eyes to the world of strategy games and has led me to become a fond fan and appreciator of games of its ilk. While Actraiser has its flaws that I will discuss later, it stands up in my memory for its unique attempt at marrying two disparate gameplay types.

Historical Context

Actraiser was released in the US in November 1991, a few short months after the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) had been released in the US. Actraiser was developed by Quintet, a Japanese studio, and was published by Enix (which through various acquisitions, mergers, and the like, eventually became Square Enix).

Game Analysis

Gameplay Overview

Actraiser is a combination of an action, side-scrolling platformer and a god-simulation game. The game begins in a cloud palace where the player is greeted by an Angel. The Angel addresses the player as its Master, and then informs the Master that Tanzra, the demon who sealed the Master's power, has taken control of the Earth. The Angel states to the Master that in order to regain his strength and allow Earth to return to peace, he must fight off the monsters that have taken over as well as rekindle the people's faith in him. In order for the people to be able to move back to their lands, the Master must first defeat the first of two bosses. Thus begins the first Action portion of the game. Each action level is filled with various enemies, items, moving platforms, and traps, and each action level ends with a boss battle.

The Simulation portion then picks up shortly thereafter. The player now controls the Angel in performing miracles, defeating monsters, and directing the townspeople in how they should build their city. In this phase, the townspeople will request the Master's presence and ask him to either solve some problems that they are running into or to present offerings and gifts. Once the majority of problems with the city are resolved, the townspeople or the Angel will ask the Master to fight off any

remaining monsters in another Action level. The second Action level is much the like the first, and once it has been completed, the Master then controls the cloud palace and moves on to other cities in the game.

The game has six cities, each of which follows the same general structure of:

- Action – Act 1
- Simulation
- Action – Act 2
- Simulation Resolution

The Action portions of Actraiser are very traditional in the mechanics and controls compared to other action platformers of its time. The player is able to move around, jump, crouch, swing a sword, and use a magical ability. Four magical abilities are acquired in the Simulation portions throughout the course of the game, each of which has varying effects. Before beginning each Action level, the player must choose one magical ability to bring with them.

The Simulation portions are what I consider to be the “meat and potatoes” of the game. In this mode, the player is still addressed as The Master, but he or she controls the Angel in affecting the city, giving its citizens direction on how to build the city. The majority of the Simulation experience consists of flying the Angel above the city, shooting arrows to defeat enemies that continually spawn, casting miracles to affect the terrain, and giving the villagers directions on where to build.

Progression

As mentioned above, the game begins in the cloud palace where the player is greeted by an Angel. Once the player decides to descend to the city below, the Action level begins. At the start of this level, an emblem from the sky flies down and imbues life into a lifeless stone statue of a warrior. From that point on, the player is able to control the warrior character. This one design touch, as little as it may be, assists in painting the picture where the player is playing as a god-like character or simply, as god.

The creators of Actraiser do a fantastic job of incrementally introducing gameplay mechanics to the player without the need for any overt “tutorial level”. The player has a health bar with 8 health points. As with many other action-platformers of that era (see *Ghouls N’ Ghosts* and *Super Ghouls N’ Ghosts*) the first Action level takes place in Fillmore, and gives the player a starting environment that is fairly non-threatening– a tree-filled level with enemies that are similar to animals found in the real world such as birds and apes. The range of abilities for the player is

simple to dive into: run left and right, jump, duck, and swing a sword. The enemies are quite easy, and the player can make her way through the level without too much difficulty avoiding thorny obstacles and enemy attacks.

The boss of this first level in Fillmore is a Centaur Knight, whose two attacks consist of a quick forward stab with his spear and summoning lightning that strikes the ground three times. As with the rest of the first Fillmore level, the boss is fairly easy to defeat, and provides an excellent introduction to Action portions of the game. Once the player has defeated the Centaur Knight, the emblem flies back into the sky, returning the warrior back to its stone form.

The game then shifts into the Simulation mode for the city of Fillmore. The lighting bolts shoot out of the sky in front of the city's central building, and two small people figures walk into the building. The Angel then informs the player that now that people are able to inhabit this city, it is the Master's responsibility to help these people rebuild their city as well as defeat the various monsters' lairs in the surrounding areas.

The Simulation level in Fillmore introduces new gameplay mechanics gradually, making it easy for the player to understand. First, the citizens of the city inform the player that they are unable to expand and build their city with the trees surrounding their city center. In order to clear these trees, the Angel instructs the player that he or she can perform various miracles, such as Lightning, Rain, Sun, Wind, and Earthquake. These abilities have various functions on different terrain types, allowing the player to solve problems in the city as well as defeat enemies. Lightning, Rain, and Sun all affect a small area on the map that the player designates, while Wind and Earthquake affect everything in the city. These miracles require a certain amount of magic points to cast. As the player gains levels, the total number of magic points available increases. Once the player begins to clear trees surrounding the city's main building, the player is only able to cast Lightning 4 times before running out of spell power (SP).

SP regenerates gradually over time, but the primary way in which the player can increase the SP count is by destroying monsters that spawn from lairs. The Angel is able to kill these monsters by shooting arrows or by using the Lightning or Wind miracles. If the Angel collides with the monsters, then the Angel loses health points (which are the same amount of health points that the player has in the Action levels). If the Angel ever reaches zero health points, the Angel is unable to fire arrows and the

player must wait for his or health to regenerate. The various monsters in the game have different abilities. While all of them can simply fly into the Angel to damage it, the monsters are also able to affect the citizens of the city. The black bat-like monster can fly over the buildings and steal and kill a small handful of citizens. The blue demon can shoot lightning, burning buildings to the ground. These monsters decrease the total population and slow down the player's progress in expanding the city.

When all of the trees in the surrounding areas have been cleared, the Angel can then direct the citizens to build out their city in a particular direction. Once they begin to build farms and buildings, expanding their reach, the citizens inform the player that they have learned how to hunt and kill monsters. The player needs to direct the citizens to build on top of the monster's lair, and once they reach the monster's lair, they are able to seal it, preventing monsters from spawning any further.

When the player seals the first monster lair, one of the citizens informs the Master that he has been having premonitions, and that a nearby cliff is emitting a magical power. The player is then instructed to cast Lightning on top of the cliff face. After doing so, the citizens find and offer the Master a spell, Magical Fire. This spell and other spells to be found throughout the rest of the game in the Simulation levels, and they can only be used in the Action levels.

As the citizens continue to build more farms and huts, the population count increases for the city, which is functionally the experience meter for the player. When the population reaches a particular amount, the player levels up. The player's health bar increases, as well as the maximum amount of SP. The health bar is shared between the Action and Simulation levels, so building the city to its maximum capacity is one of the main goals for the player in order to make his or her playing experience in the Action levels much easier.

Once the player seals more monster lairs with the assistance of Fillmore's citizens, they offer a gift called "Source of Magic." Acquiring a "Source of Magic" increases the total times that the player can cast a magical ability such as Magical Fire in an Action level. Throughout the various Simulation levels, the player will be able to acquire more Sources of Magic, enabling the player to cast magical spells more often in the Action levels.

After the player seals the final monster lair in Fillmore, one of citizens informs the player that he has been having premonitions again, though this time it's a recurring nightmare revolving around an evil Minotaurus creature. Now that all of the monster lairs have been sealed in Fillmore,

the only task left is to go to the next Action level and defeat the Minotaurus.

From here, the player returns to the sky palace where he or she can choose what magical spell to bring, though the only spell available at this point in the game is Magical Fire. As with the first Action level, an emblem flies out of the sky and descends into the warrior statue, bringing it to life. The level is set in a dark underground dungeon filled with bats, statues that shoot fireballs, and various other enemies. Once the player makes his or her way through the level, he or she arrives at the Minotaurus, which is yet another relatively easy boss to defeat.

After the player has succeeded, the game returns to the Simulation view of Fillmore, showing that all of its citizens are content now that monsters no longer plague their land. They offer the knowledge of how to build bridges as a gift that the player is then able to bring to others that need it. The player is now able to return to the sky palace and travel to the other cities that require assistance.

This general formula is then repeated in each following city. Each city has problems that the Master needs to address, ranging from famine, to monsters attacking the villagers, and other such situations. Throughout the progress of each city, new situations and problems arise that the Master must solve through the use of his various miracles.

Religious References

For sake of full disclosure, I'm squarely atheist. When I first played Actraiser I was in second grade, so the religious overtones flew over my head. By and large the religious references and storyline don't have too much of an effect on the actual gameplay. The general conceit of "There is an evil force, it's your job to save the world," is so commonly used and re-skinned in games and books and movies that it didn't strike me until I replayed it later how overt the developers were in utilizing religious characters, symbolism, and themes.

The player plays as the Master, and perhaps taking a cue from other "God games" that came before Actraiser, the Master is never seen; when the player is playing the Action sequences, an emblem from the sky flies down and imbues life into a warrior statue. During the Simulation levels, the Master is also never seen; he instructs and directs the Angel to carry out tasks while he casts miracles from above. While the game makers could have simply had the player control the warrior character and control the angel without this added explanation, this tiny detail goes a long way in giving the player a greater sense of who he or she is controlling. The player isn't simply a warrior fighting monsters or an angel guiding

citizens; the player is an all-mighty being waging a war against an evil force to save human kind.

Other religious references are quite apparent, ranging from the Master's home being in a palace in the clouds to having an Angel as the Master's primary companion/assistant. In Actraiser 2, Actraiser's sequel, it is revealed that the Master's original name was God and Tanzra's was Satan. Due to concerns about the potential controversy in the U.S. of directly referring to the characters as God and Satan, their names were changed in Actraiser, but the religious allegory remained intact.

Each of the cities that the Master visits throughout the course of the game is related in one way or another to some sort of religion, mythology, or cultural history. The two bosses in Fillmore, the first city you encounter in the game, are a Centaur Knight and a Minotaur, both of which originate from Greek mythology.

In the next city, Bloodpool, the first boss is a manticore, also of Greek origin, and the second boss is a wizard who turns into a werewolf, both of which have origins in European folklore.

In Kasadora, a clearly Egyptian-inspired city, the two bosses that the player encounters are a sand monster and a giant Golden Pharaoh head.

In the village Aitos, the first boss you encounter is a water serpent, while the second boss is a flaming wheel with an eye in the center. While serpents have many and varied stories in different mythologies, the flaming wheel definitively conjures up images of Cyclops from Greek mythology as well as coming from the underworld or hell, being on fire and the entire level taking place underground.

Marahna is a tropical and rain forest-like area that has a giant plant-like monster and Kalia, a snake god, as its two bosses. The giant plant-like monster is a fairly generic enemy. The snake god, or Kalia, is a direct reference to a popular story in Indian mythology where Krishna battles a multi-headed snake monster by the name Kalia.

Lastly, in Northwall, the two bosses that are encountered are a merman and an Arctic Wyvern. Mermaids and Mermen have a long and storied history, originating all the way back to Assyria, and wyverns have origins in medieval history.

At the end of the game after the player has defeated Tanzra, the game takes the player through every city and shows the changes that have occurred in each city over the course of the game. The Angel then informs the player that once people are content and don't have any impending threats, they start to forget that the Master exists. The developers could

have ended the game simply with an overview of each of the cities, but by appending this commentary, as heavy-handed as it may be, they are making a statement on how people who don't have major catastrophes or disasters in their lives often lose sight or forget about religion or the possibility of forces larger than themselves.

Conclusion

It is unclear whether the creators of Actraiser intended to push a message of Christianity as the "correct" faith or if they were simply using Christianity as a basis for widely recognizable benevolent imagery. In either case, the end result is the same, as the game portrays any and all of these "other" creatures and religions as malevolent. In the Simulation portion of Marahna, the primary plot point revolves around the villagers worshipping another God. The Angel even states to the Master that, though the villagers seem happy, something is amiss. It is later revealed that this other God is evil and the player shortly defeats this God.

The religious overtones aside, the gameplay still stands up fairly well. Compared to today, the action portions of the game don't control very well anymore and the simulation has less depth than many other sim-type games of its time (often times consisting of introducing a problem, presenting a solution, introducing another problem, presenting another solution, etc.). How well players play in the Simulation levels, both in finding items, magical spells, scrolls, and increasing their level have a direct effect on how they are then able to play in the Action levels. That said, Actraiser is a great early example of how two disparate gameplay types could be integrated and contribute to one another's gameplay.