Takeshi no Chousenjou, a Terrible Game by Design

Howard Braham

Picture this: you go to the store and buy a new game for $50. The reason you buy the game is because it's from a designer or developer that you really love, or because it has a license that excites you. You take the game home and start playing it, only to discover that it's absolutely terrible. You're then faced with a tough decision: should you continue playing it to get your money's worth, or should you stop playing it and cut your losses? The first route might be less than pleasurable, but you can always hold on to the hope that maybe the game gets better later on. The second route will probably make you feel guilty: you've wasted all that money on a game that you only played for half an hour. It might even make you feel defeated. You didn't even try to beat the game. It's a tough decision, and it's a decision that people unfortunately have to face all too often. But is it a decision that a game designer would ever make his customers face on purpose?

The answer is, surprisingly, yes. The culprit in question is Takeshi Kitano, a Japanese comedian, TV director, and film director. He is mostly unknown in America, as his only work that has reached our mass media is the Spike TV show Most Extreme Elimination Challenge (2003-2007), which is a version of his Japanese show Takeshi's Castle (1986-1990), re-edited and inaccurately dubbed in English (on purpose, to add humor). This show is also the inspiration for ABC's Wipeout (2008-present).

Takeshi Kitano, also known as Beat Takeshi, enrolled in an engineering school, but was thrown out for being too rebellious. He wanted to become a comedian and got a job as an elevator operator at a comedy club. Takeshi got a break when a comedian was sick, and he

filled in for him. He went on to become a very successful comedian, actor, director, writer, poet, painter, and, of course, designer of a terrible video game. He has won many awards for his unconventional style, and his non-game work has been featured in modern art museums.

Takeshi has three games, all for the Famicom. His second and third games, from the late ’80s, are a lot like Mario Party (Hudson Soft, 1998), themed to match his TV show, Takeshi’s Castle. Takeshi was not involved in the design of those two games, and they have long been forgotten. His first game, released in 1986, is the one that really fascinates me. It’s the kind of thing that happens when an artist studies all the formal rules of a medium and then decides to disobey them all. It reminds me of when Marcel Duchamp took a urinal and turned it sideways, then submitted it to an art exhibition under a pseudonym as a prank meant to taunt his avant-garde peers. Like Duchamp’s artwork, called Fountain, Takeshi’s game is a prank that tests the limits of what the player will accept.

Takeshi no Chousenjou (Taito, 1986) (translated as Takeshi’s Challenge) tries to confuse you so much that you want to stop playing, while making you feel guilty and stupid because you can’t figure it out. And then, if for some reason you’re actually able to figure out what to do (despite the designer’s best efforts), the game will hit you with daunting physical tasks, trying to make you stop playing through physical challenges, if the mental challenges haven’t already succeeded. It is a game that dares to hate its audience.

Takeshi no Chousenjou is something of a legend. It is notoriously bad, weird, and hard, and has built up a mythos. Since it’s a game that many have heard about, few have played, and fewer have beaten, it’s not surprising that the difficulty of the game has been somewhat exaggerated and mythologized. Each of the following is part of the false mythology of the game perpetuated through videogame websites:

- You must use the Famicom’s microphone to sing karaoke

for an hour without stopping, and you'll have to start over if you screw up. (False: the songs you have to sing are only 10 to 20 seconds long!)

- The final boss takes 20,000 hits to kill. (False: there is no final boss!)
- The game sold 80,000 copies. (Not so: it actually sold 800,000! There was a mistranslation in the subtitles of a Japanese video that is widely quoted.)
- You have to hold a button down for an hour. (This is nearly true. One way to beat a section is to not press any buttons for an hour, as you expose a map to sunlight. Another way is to put the map in water, then not press any buttons or make any sounds for 5 minutes. Before 10 minutes are up, you have to yell "Come out," although there's no real speech detection, so you could yell anything.)
- There's a side-scrolling shooter level where you can go left, right, and down, but can never go up. (It's true that you can't push up on the controller to go up, but you can ride gusts of wind to go upwards. It actually even makes a bit of sense, as you're flying on a hang glider.)

2004–2006: First encounters with a game I couldn't understand

I first learned about this game in 2004, and of course I tried to play it. But not knowing Japanese, I didn't get very far. I wandered around this very small town that looked a little like River City Ransom (Technōs Japan, 1989), talked to a few people I wasn't able to understand, bought some things (having no idea what they were), and within a few minutes, I had tried doing absolutely everything I could think of. I was really frustrated, and wanted very badly to give up. But

I hated the idea of giving up, because then I would be forced to admit, "Takeshi, you beat me." I didn't want to be defeated by this prankster, especially when I wasn't legitimately stymied by the game, but only frustrated because I didn't know the language. Nevertheless, I put the game down for a while, intent on returning to it later.

Then, in 2006, while taking a Game Design class at CMU's Entertainment Technology Center, I thought that this game would make a good topic for an essay. I sat down, this time with a colleague with some Japanese language experience, and played the game. I hoped that I would finally be able to feel the catharsis of conquering Takeshi's Challenge.

But that's not how it worked out. Armed with my translator, I found out that you play as a Salary Man for a Japanese business, and the game starts with your boss berating you because the company is in trouble, and your personal performance is poor. When you exit the office building, you arrive on a small street of about 5 screen-widths. Some of the people on the street are jumping up and down repeatedly, and quite high, I might add. Other people punch you when they walk by, depleting your health meter. I had always hoped that once I conquered the language barrier, I would understand the NPC behavior. But no, that's not the type of game this is. I obviously underestimated this game's power to be confusing.

Here's what I was able to figure out: There are four buildings you can walk into on this street — a school, your company, an empty theater, and a bank. At the school, you can choose to learn Language, Sports, Music, Dancing, and Licenses. If you select any of these options, you get a menu of five topics in each category. You can choose to learn about any of these 25 topics, but they all cost money, and you don't have very much. Nothing ever explains the benefit of learning these virtual skills, and it's never clear if they even have any effect on gameplay.

If you go back into your company, your boss asks, "What do you want?" you get a list of possible response options: to write a letter

of resignation, take a sick day, take a vacation, punch your manager, or flatter your boss. If you choose to take a sick day, your boss says, "Don't expect to have a desk waiting for you when you get back." If you flatter him, he says, "Flattery will get you nowhere." If you resign, he gives you a bonus for your years of service, but only if you haven't already asked for a sick day or a vacation. If you choose to punch him, an endless stream of guards attacks you until you eventually die or run away.

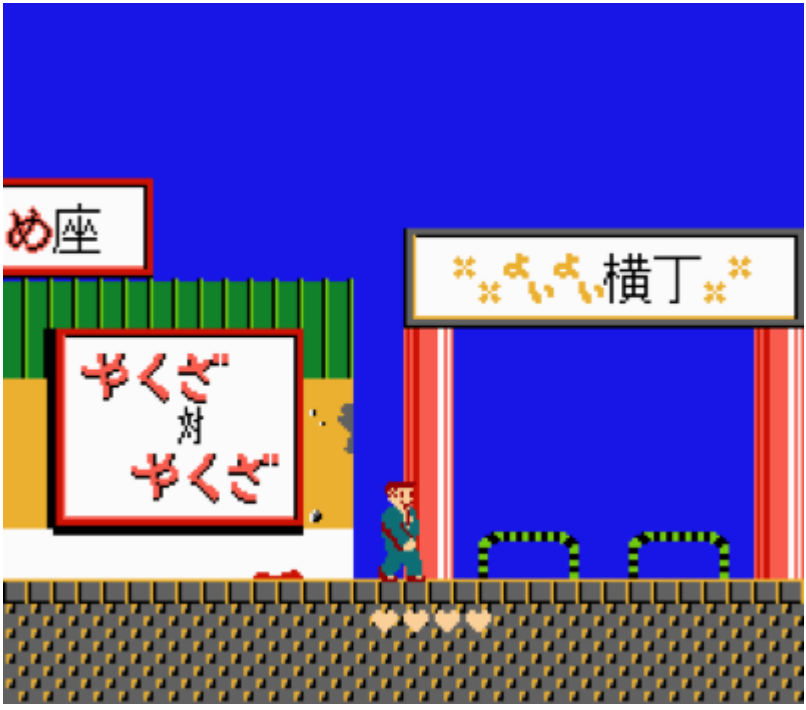
The next building, the theater, has no people in it and there's nothing to interact with. The final building, the bank, contains four bank tellers. The first three say things like "Don't put off paying your taxes," and "I don't have money for your kind." Mysteriously, the fourth teller asks you if you'd like to withdraw money and will actually give you the money!

The sad thing was that despite hours of attempting to make progress, that was the farthest I could ever get. I never actually accomplished anything, though I knew there were goals that could be achieved. I thought (mistakenly) that there was a final boss who required being hit 20,000 times to be killed — how could I even get to him? I also mistakenly thought that you had to sing karaoke for an hour, but where was the karaoke bar? Takeshi had succeeded, with flying colors, to set up a situation where I wanted to make progress in the game really badly, but he had blocked all my attempts. It was amazingly frustrating, and the worst part was that he did this to me despite the fact that I knew his intention was to trick me.

2011–2013: An English translation

At last, a miracle happened on Christmas Day 2011. To celebrate the 25th anniversary of the game, a translation patch was released by a fan. Finally, I thought, I could really play this stupid game. I will beat you, Takeshi. I tried everything. I learned every language, every sport, every musical instrument, every dance, and earned every license. I tried every dialogue option that existed, and nothing new

ever happened. A breakthrough came when I noticed that a sign, which was now in English, said “Joy Joy Street” (see Figure 1).



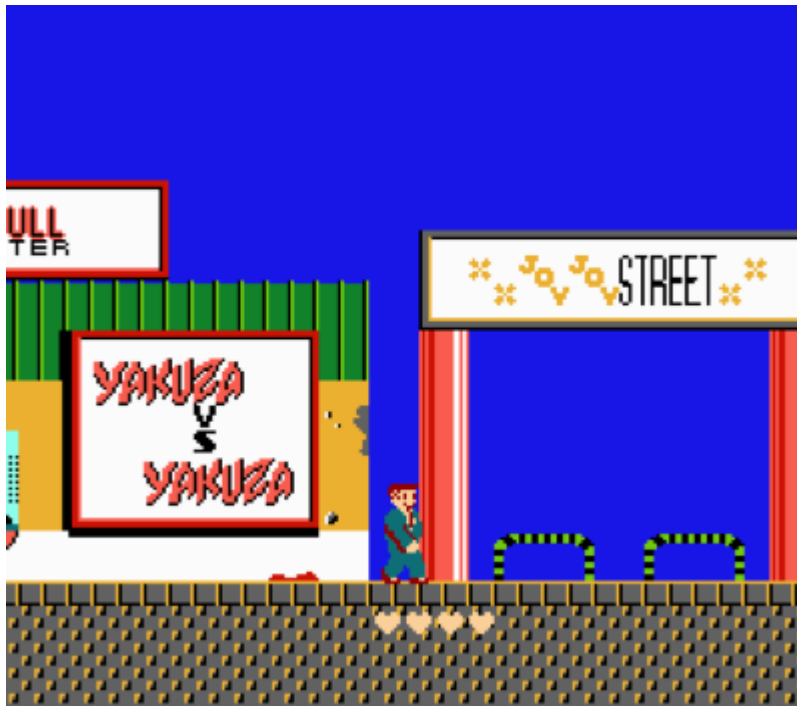


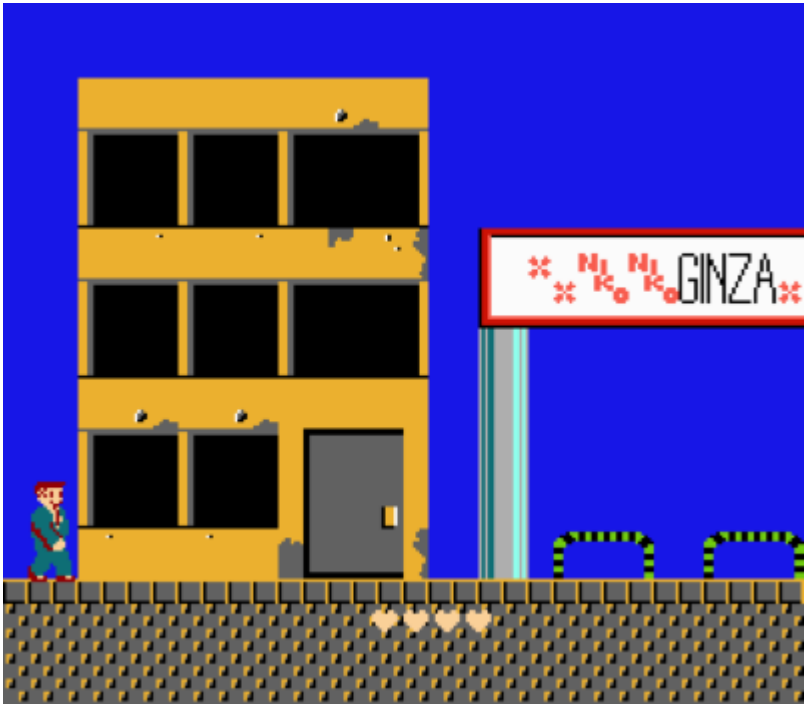
Figure 1. The literal and figurative "gate" that blocked my progress for 9 years. At the top is the original Japanese version, and on the bottom is the fan translation.

I discovered that if I walked to the center of that gate, between the two green-and-black-striped barriers, and held up on the controller for one second, I moved to Joy Joy Street, a new location with a selection of new stores. The reasons I had never discovered this before are because: (1) the sign was originally in Japanese; (2) it doesn't really look like a street; and (3) the hit area to enter the street is only about 5 pixels in size.

Now I had four more shops to enter and explore … and, oh my god, one of them was the fabled karaoke bar! Down the other street, called "Niko Niko Ginza," were five more stores I could visit, and two additional stores that had signs and open doorways but, mysteriously, I couldn't enter them. One of the visitable stores was a barbershop, where I could dye my hair or get a perm. Both cost money, and both

were absolutely irrelevant — they didn't even change the visual color or style of my hair. I could also get a haircut, but the barber would slip and cut my face, taking away lots of HP, and killing me if I was a bit low on HP. Oh Takeshi, you're so crazy!

If I were a Japanese videogame player in 1986, I probably would have found Joy Joy Street and Niko Niko Ginza without too much trouble. What hindered me most here were the language and cultural barriers. But of course, Takeshi hid two more streets behind two even more obscure entrances: walk all the way to the left or the right of the main street, stand in front of the pure blue sky, and hold up on the controller (see Figure 2).



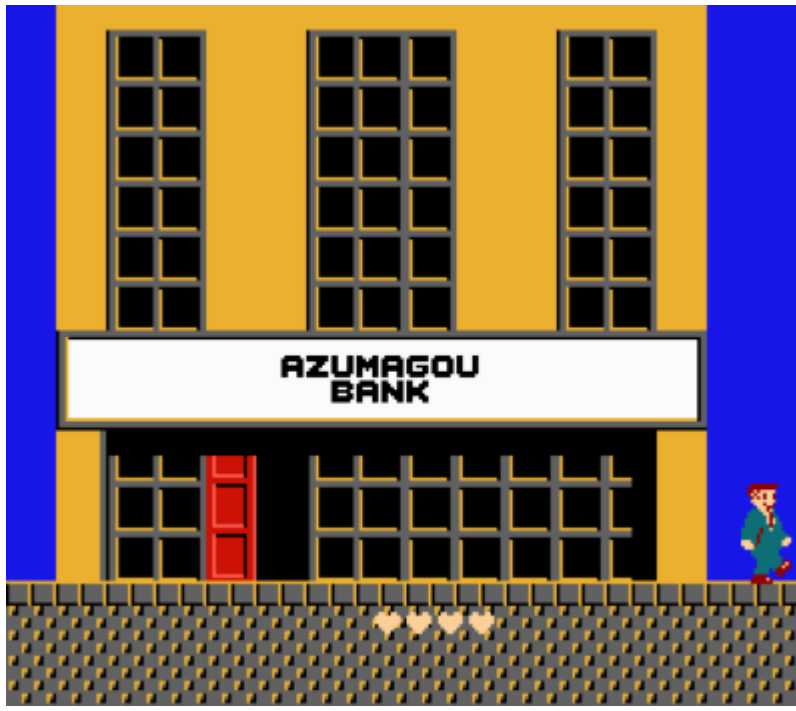


Figure 2. At the top, I'm standing in the "passageway" that leads to my house, and at the bottom is the passageway that leads to the airport.

At this point, I had finally explored the entire initial game space. I had walked every street of Japan represented in the game and entered every store and house. So surely I could finally complete some tasks and get out of this country, right? No, of course not. This is not that kind of game, but at least I had found a few more interesting things. At a bookstore, I could buy a treasure map, and the graphics matched the treasure map I was looking for — but it was unusable because the text was garbled! I could also buy Takeshi's autograph, a porno, Das Kapital, and a diet book. When I bought them, I was just throwing away my money. I couldn't see evidence of having bought anything; there were no pictures of them, and they didn't even end up in my inventory. There was no accounting for my actions, and no visible reward for spending my money. The fact that I could buy Takeshi's autograph is an interesting manifestation of the designer's narcissism, but I wish that

buying it had paid off by at least showing me a picture of it. Was he deliberately taunting me by making me pay for his autograph and then not letting me receive it?

There are so many ways to waste money and die in this game but very few ways to earn more money. Most means of acquiring cash can be used just once, and the only repeatable way I've found to earn money is to beat up and kill innocent bystanders on the street and steal their money. Yes, this was 1986, eleven years before the first Grand Theft Auto game. And if this were Grand Theft Auto, it would be as if I explored the entire starting map, bought a few upgrades and ammo, and played a few minigames, but never actually completed a single mission in the main quest. I hung up the controller, and Takeshi laughed at me again.

2014: I give up; hand me a strategy guide!

In 2014, I tried once again and got further with the aid of a strategy guide. It's worth noting at this point that the game was so confusing that the company that wrote the original Japanese strategy guide got 400 calls in one day from angry customers still unable to complete the game, forcing them to publish a second edition of the guide. With the help of my guide, I finally found the crucial treasure map and left Japan on a plane that didn't crash. After that, I encountered the next little sadistic element of Takeshi's prank — unwinnable states. Unwinnable states were actually a rather common design element in console and PC games of the '70s and '80s. Sierra and Infocom, for instance, liked to include situations where you had to do something specific in the beginning of the game, and if you didn't do it, you could make a great deal of progress, but you couldn't complete the game. King's Quest V is a case in point, where if you walk past the bakery, a cat will chase a rat. However, if you don't throw a boot at the cat (and you only have one chance to do this), the cat will eat the rat, which is too bad because the rat needs to be alive later in the game when you're tied up with ropes and he's able to chew the ropes and free you. To modern game designers and players, this may seem a bit cruel, but in 1986, this was seen as a valid and

interesting way of extending a game's playtime and allowing replay value, or more accurately, forcing replays (Giant Bomb, 2013).

Some of the unwinnable states in Takeshi no Chousenjou occur if you do not engage in specific antisocial behaviors. If you want to beat the game, you must: drink until you pass out, divorce your wife, quit your job, and beat up the old man who gave you the treasure map. Other unwinnable states can occur if you don't learn how to play the shamisen, if you don't learn how to hang glide, or if you buy an airplane ticket to the wrong destination. I bought a ticket to the USA, and my plane exploded en route. A dialog box appeared saying: "Was that a terrorist act? An accident? A mysterious explosion destroyed the plane."

Of course, in each unwinnable scenario there are absolutely no hints to guide you to the right path. It seems that Takeshi wanted people playing his videogame to try every conceivable combinatoric option until they got it right. According to Tetsuo Egawa, a salesperson at Taito who took part in development of the game, the developers didn't just take a celebrity's input and then use it to craft a playable game, but would listen to a very drunk Takeshi ramble on about what might be interesting, write everything down, and then implement everything exactly as he first described it. They let a completely unqualified person who hated videogames be the lead designer (Game Center CX, 2003).

To get to the last area of the game, the treasure cave, you have to stand atop a particular mountain, on a particular pixel, and crouch (see Figure 3). Of course no hints are provided, not even about standing on top of a mountain.

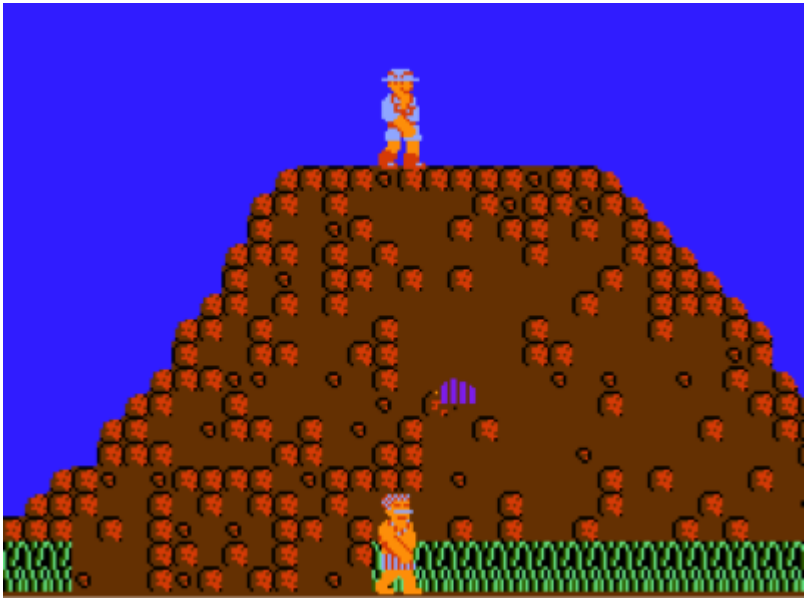


Figure 3. The entrance to the last area of the game

I eventually got to the end of the treasure cave, collected the treasure, and reached the ending. A small picture of Takeshi's head appeared, and the words "The End" were in the lower right. Takeshi said "Amazing" and then the game seemed to be over (see Figure 4). I waited for five more minutes, and then Takeshi delivered his final insult to me (see Figure 4 on the bottom). Yes, I actually did beat Takeshi's sadistic game, but he had the last laugh.


THE
END

Figure 4. The elusive and insulting ending

The End

In a way, Takeshi Kitano is a brilliant game designer. Looking at his work from the point of view of Jesse Schell's (2008) Art of Game Design, Takeshi inverts many of the lenses of good game design. Instead of using them to create a pleasurable experience, the inversion offers a terrible, frustrating one. For instance, other games use the "Lens of Resonance" to tap into the power of a positive theme that players can relate to, whereas Takeshi built this experience from the resonant themes of guilt, frustration, and despair. Other games use the "Lens of Flow" to ensure that players have a clear goal and understand how to get closer to that goal. Takeshi, on the other hand, gives you clear goals — save the company, save your job, and find a buried treasure — but some of these goals are red herrings, and there's no clear information or play choices to help you progress towards the real goal. Additionally, there's very little feedback to

let you know how you're doing, and the feedback that does exist is all negative. Many games use the "Lens of Essential Experience" to deliver a fun experience to the player, but Takeshi delivers the experience of deep, embarrassing failure by putting you in the role of a failing businessman, and then making you fail in everything you try to do. Takeshi knows that people like learning by trial and error, so he sets up a situation where trial and error looks like an effective strategy but is in fact completely useless.

I think that Takeshi no Chousenjou differs from the other abusive game designs mentioned by Doug Wilson and Migel Sicart (2010) in Now It's Personal: On Abusive Game Design. The games noted (such as VVVVVV (Terry Cavanagh, 2010), Kaizo Mario (Unknown, circa 2007), Desert Bus (Imagineering, 1995), PainStation (///////fur///, 2001), and Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem (Silicon Knights, 2002) et al.) cater to an audience that desires the abuse, or cater to an audience of spectators who want to watch others be subjected to abuse. The designers of these games are all winking towards some target audience. Takeshi is different, because he's basically holding the middle finger up to all possible audiences. The fact that anyone could actually enjoy this game (and it happens to be one of my favorites) is purely an accident and was in no way intended by the designer.

I've tried to reflect a bit, to analyze why I enjoy Takeshi's Challenge so much. I think it's because it's a game that dares me to beat it, but really doesn't care whether I do or not. When I play it, I don't feel like I'm playing against the game, or against the computer, I feel like I'm playing against the game designer and his narcissism. The voice of Takeshi Kitano is so evident in this game, and that's a rare quality. If this were an independent game or a student game, I'm not sure that it would hold my attention in the same way. I think the fact that it was a mainstream commercial game with high sales is a large part of its appeal — there aren't that many commercially successful practical jokes. I've been on a 10-year journey with this game; it has frustrated me at every opportunity, but I have always returned to this well played game.

When this game was released in Japan in 1986, it was extremely successful, selling 800,000 copies. But unfortunately, most of the people who bought and played the game were young children — the group least equipped to understand a game of this sort. The result was that thousands of children called Nintendo's hint lines while crying, saying that they tried everything, but they couldn't get anywhere because they failed at everything they did (Rogers, 2004). Ultimately, Takeshi was extremely successful at achieving what he set out to do. I would argue that Takeshi no Chousenjou belongs in modern art museums, in the Dadaist section.

Dadaism is an art movement that started between 1915 and 1916 in New York and Zurich. On the art timeline, it fell right between the better-known movements of Cubism and Surrealism. The founders of Dada felt that World War I was a gigantic display of senseless violence, and they wanted to distance themselves from the bourgeois culture that started the war by upholding the values of nonsense and irrationality. They created an "anti-art" by rejecting all of the principles of mainstream art. They used nihilism, cynicism, and randomness to create art that was designed to offend people. They also felt that museums only displayed very traditional art, and wanted to test the boundaries of "what is art?" So Marcel Duchamp started making what he called "readymades," such as a bicycle wheel mounted on a stool, a bottle rack, and a urinal. He submitted these to exhibitions under a pseudonym, and prized the rejection letters he got. One wonders what Duchamp would think about the fact that 100 years later, Fountain is considered to be one of the most influential works of modern art.

Similarly, Takeshi Kitano created an anti-ludic game by rejecting traditional principles of game design. Nonsense and irrationality were his guiding principles when crafting story, dialogue, and puzzles. By forcing the player character to drink until he passes out, divorce his wife, quit his job, and beat up helpful innocent old men, Takeshi reinforces the nihilistic belief that life is meaningless. Takeshi's cynicism is blatantly obvious in his taunt at the end of the game. He set out to test the boundaries of "what is a game," and offended his

audience, causing thousands of children to cry. But of course, Takeshi loved the audience's rejection. If Super Mario Bros. (Nintendo, 1985) is gaming's Birth of a Nation (Griffith, 1915) (first game and first film to have a beginning, an end, a narrative, and real characters), then Takeshi no Chousenjou is certainly gaming's Bicycle Wheel (Duchamp, 1913). It is the world's first and possibly only commercial Dadaist videogame.

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