

The Gamer's Quarter

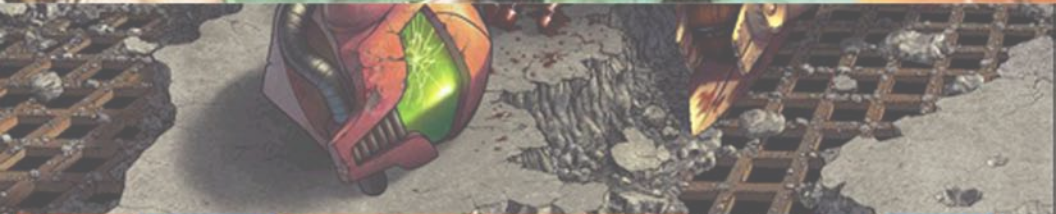
2nd Quarter

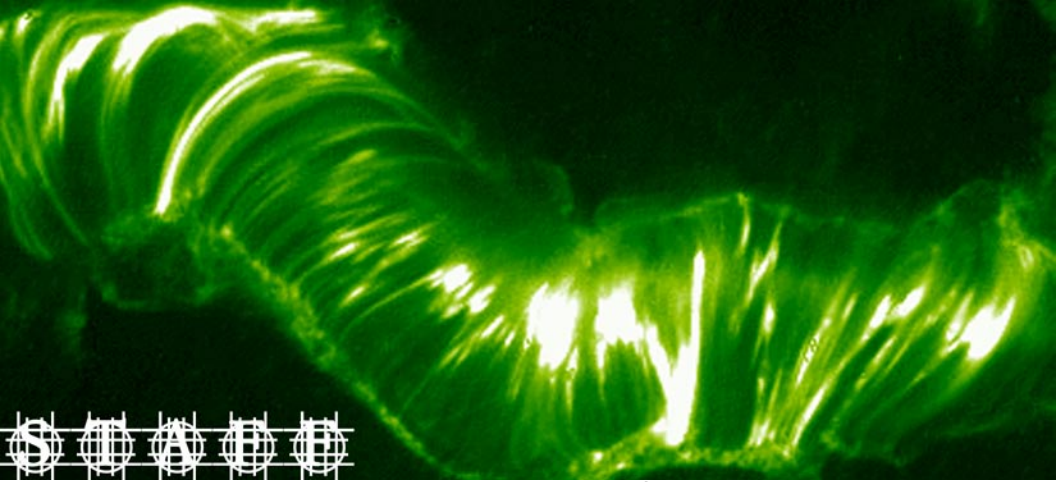
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Editor's Desk

Welcome to The Gamer's Quarter. I'd like to get some items out of the way in this preview issue editorial to free up room in the first issue's editorial, so bear with me.

A while back, stories were appearing on game websites about how game magazines were failing to evolve, often admitting that they themselves were part of the problem. No magazines were doing anything about the issue, and only websites have come about to address it.

Not wanting to sit back and watch as the video game magazine format stagnated, I decided to fill the void. I knew that there were talented writers with the drive to help on such an undertaking out there, so I began pooling together a crew. After making a few requests and even doing a bit of begging, the outstanding team you see to your right had been assembled. Together we've been working on this production since mid-October.

What you will read in these pages is just a preview of the first full issue. I hope this early preview content grabs you much as it has grabbed me, and keeps you coming back every quarter.

-Regards
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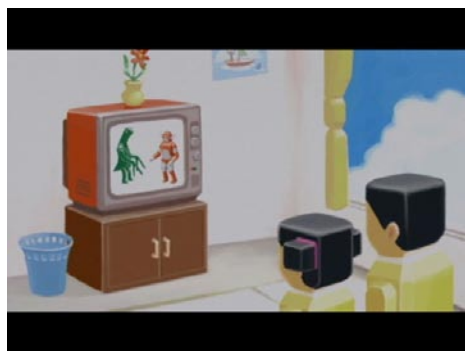


Katamari Damacy - PS2

Mike O'Connor

Innocent bears enjoy a walk in park with their favorite balloon while tandem cyclists glide past, sporting unrealistic pompadours. Dogs without escorts and children without knee joints make circles in the permanent sunlight. Though they may be unlikely customers for a small outdoor shopping mall, at least they mind their own business. This is far more than can be said for the hammer headed, green-yellow Prince who comes to slaughter them.

As the son of a violent alcoholic who seems to do nothing but belittle his only child, the Prince of *Katamari Damacy* is the embodiment of the spineless stooge one finds in authoritarian governments everywhere. After the King of All Cosmos



finishes crushing the solar system during a wine-soaked rampage, his son seeks his father's mercurial approval through the slaughter of innocents. Success is measured by the intensity of the Prince's bouts of obsessive destruction, theft and murder. In failure, the Prince just falls to his knees, groveling while pelted with rain and insults. He never says a single word, and cannot be provoked by cruel taunts at his appearance, skills or patrimony - much less the absorption of dozens upon dozens of men, women and children who are then condemned to the furnace of a constellation.

While this may seem to be a harsh - or unnecessarily insane - light to throw on what is an outstanding game, it's to the credit of its makers that it invites such outlandishly stupid theories in the first place. For example, holding up *Katamari Damacy* as a criticism of "consumerist culture" seems to be a common online crowd favorite, even though that's a bit like pouring gasoline on your sidewalk between bouts of haranguing SUV drivers for murdering Iraqi children. Another line of reasoning talks about themes of size, of space, of collection and accomplishment - all of which are quite reasonable - but aren't nearly as enjoyable as my mass-murder-simulator-meets-collectivist-horror



chinstroker.

Great games - or great moments in average games - inspire flights of insipid whimsy. Cherish them.

A disturbingly unworthy hero, as his jerk dad might say

Easily the most adorably violent game of 2004, *Katamari Damacy* finds one celebrating state-sanctioned horror through comfortable controls and coherent art design. This vision is built from a blocky, cartoonish style that's a blend of 1950s American pop shtick and *Gumby*. While this is demonstrated during the little vignettes that suitably illustrate the appropriately vapid story, it's elevated to far greater heights in the opening credits as the musical theme of the happy family that's anything but. Or one can point to the very first few hummed bars that drown in a bathtub reverb during the game slot selection screen.

Katamari Damacy is far too self-aware to be called "quirky," an atrocious backhanded compliment which - at least as far as games are concerned - should be reserved for genre pieces which go too far and the products of foreign minds and lands which have nothing going for them but their weirdness. Dating sims, for example, are "quirky" - though "aggressively virginal" is probably a far better description - and *Katamari Damacy* is no dating sim. As we've already covered, it is a rollicking rollerball of monarchist ultraviolence.

So it falls to a milquetoast Prince to put the sky back together again. Pleasing the codpiece-sporting tyrant who created



this mess in the first place involves collecting the detritus of the world with a studded ball you push around, a blessedly simple concept anyone can get behind. And as with any atrocity, the Prince starts small - thumbtacks, candy, dominoes, mice, note cards (there are many unused bundles of stationery about, for some reason) and other household items feature heavily in the earlier stages. When it comes time to rebuild the moon entire continents fall under the shadow of your katamari, along with ships, giant squid and rainbows, if you're good enough.

The player is forced to learn to collect similar types of objects in the bunches they appear in before tackling larger bits - the breakfast crumbs sitting on a table become the architect of it's eventual doom.

Visual rewards, like *God*, are in the details. For example, when underwater the Prince sports a cute little snorkel and goggle set. Television sets show the action as it happens on one's screen with a "LIVE" watermark in the corner. Swaying geese dance in the background of the Cygnus constellation level, in time to a crooning love song about rolling up

“into a single star in the sky” and assorted wonderful pap. On that note, the self-referential music is another kind of bonus for being mindful of your time assisting public enemy number one. The soundtrack is distinct in its stylistic spread, a mixture of glitchy techno and bilingual electronic cabana pop with the occasional youth chorus lounge act. A surprisingly fresh cannibalization of dozens of styles, though it’s a shame the Force Inc-inspired soundtrack playing on the training level is never repeated in the rest the game.

Roll `em all and let the King sort `em out

There are nine standard play stages for forming stars and nine stages of building constellations. To build a star, one must make the katamari as large as or greater than the required size. The constellation levels are a bit more complicated. Cygnus requires geese eggs, cancer features crab collection, Virgo is (presumably) virgin-laden, and so on. The cow and bear levels require another step beyond this by littering the entire level with cow pylons and tiny bear statues and grading the Prince by the size of the first



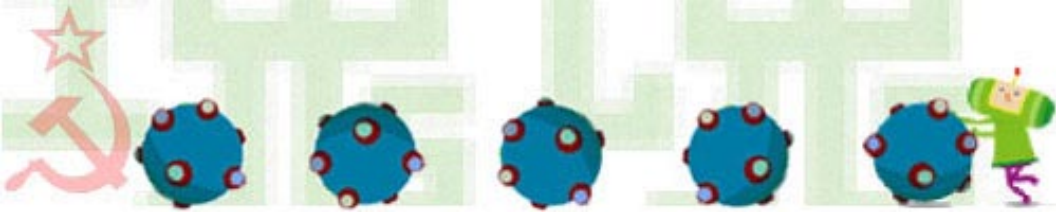
object rolled.

When called upon to collect fish in order to rebuild the constellation of Pisces, the Prince is dropped into a landscape that’s filled with anything remotely aquatic. There are trout trophies, mermen and merwomen (merfolk), and the usual gangs of swimming, jumping and flopping fish arranged throughout the level. They hang out of pipes and off of lines, forcing the player to keep a sharp eye. This doesn’t serve to make the objective difficult to accomplish - far from it - but it rewards attention with both a higher fish count and, more importantly, a greater sense of fishiness. That’s what’s most important in a scenario like that - one must feel the fish in, around and about. It’s nice to see something silly which takes itself seriously.

This adherence to coherence makes the mayhem in the background all the more sinister in contemplation, for those inclined to political trivialities. Yet another reason *Katamari Damacy* gets plastered with “quirky.”

I feel the cosmos

The tactile feedback from the push and bounce of the Prince’s ball of death is a joy to use. It’s not too hard to master and gives information on your katamari’s relation to a potential addition’s size without stats. The first encounter with a large and mobile unicyclist, for example, results in being kicked back into the wall. A few minutes of collection later and the circus freak is wobbling, nearly ready to be gobbled up into your rolling cornucopia. This bypasses stats and scores - the



gameplay would be completely ruined if each object were marked with a size value - and focuses on feedback that bypasses language entirely.

One of the more constant criticisms of this game is its length. *Katamari Damacy* is at its best when torn through the very first time. Every single abusive jab can be absorbed with bits of guilty laughter, and every increase in scale can be appreciated with the eyes of novelty. If nothing else, it keeps the schizoid moods of the King fresh, which helps sharpen one's loathing of both the tyrant and his spineless progeny as the game wears on. As an added bonus, these single-shot amusements can almost always be skipped or forwarded through, which again proves how awake at the production wheel the creators were.

While it can be enjoyable to flip back to previous stages, attempting to beat previous records doesn't thrill forever. The extra gifts are purely cosmetic comedy. Scarves and swan floatation devices are cute extras, but the focus is mostly bears and cows and uprooting buildings. On that note, one great disappointment is that when revisiting old levels with

honed skills, there are artificial barriers in earlier stages which prevent you from reaching the ridiculous heights of later episodes. While no doubt necessary from some programming or design standpoint, it places a blockade in front of the satisfying experience of making your tiny ball into a world-shattering sphere. The earlier stages exist to teach the player the mechanics and rules of *Katamari Damacy*, and in this sense their teasing is understandable. But the forced deceleration, which is most obvious during the three "eternal levels" you unlock, is a glimmer of a great potential passed by.

Head-to-head mode is unremarkable, for the most part, and rewards speed above all. It's an amusing addendum to a game which didn't need anything added. A different approach would have been interesting - large-scale collection battles across giant islands ending with a meet in the middle for a county fair weigh-in, and so forth - but it's a bit much to ask from a \$20 game. It also would have poked holes in my "preciously cute mass murder simulator" theory, which I've grown quite attached to.

One can only hope that decision makers at other game companies are





asking why this budget title is far more cohesive in vision and execution compared to titles twice the price. While *Katamari Damacy* is obviously a simple game, everything that went into it isn't. The soundtrack in particular is unnecessarily complex. Time was taken to make the little bits work, which may be the luxury of not being a major title.

It's still frustrating, however, to see so much done with so little. Nothing else in 2004 came close to being such an undiluted bundle of fun or demonstrated such subtle moral ambiguity. *Katamari Damacy* leaves *San Andreas* to wallow in its uncouth juvenilia. We too have

our fashion accessories.

The upcoming sequel will be called *Everybody Loves Katamari Damacy*. This neat title satisfies at least some of the worry that a ham-handed sequel will blemish the memory of the first - recorded character voicing lurks behind every corner these days. And though the hope of a random level generator or galaxy-spanning collection contests are compelling, far more important is the attention to the perfect little details which made this blatant disregard for life, liberty and the pursuit of property one of the best pure games released in a long time.





COMING SOON...



This limited edition preview of The Gamer's Quarter Magazine provides a mere glimpse of the sort of sensitive, thought-provoking articles that you will find in our first full issue. This publication is devoted to offering readers a more sophisticated alternative to mainstream gaming magazines. We aim to publish writing that is not merely informative but also insightful; writing that digs deeper into what the medium can offer. Our goal is not to deliver screenshots or ratings, but perspective. Visit the website on March 15 to get your copy of the first issue. Until then, enjoy this brief view of what's to come.



www.gamersquarter.com

The Gamer's Quarter magazine is a collaborative project by dedicated gamers who don't just play games, but experience them. Rather than sitting in a lonely room plowing through a game just to attach a few numbers and witty quote for the box art, we play the games we want and write about how and why they attach themselves to our hearts and minds in a way that no other form of media is capable of. It is our intent to publish honest, provocative, and entertaining writing which reflects our belief that video games can be more than mere vehicles for entertainment, but also creative, meaningful works.

