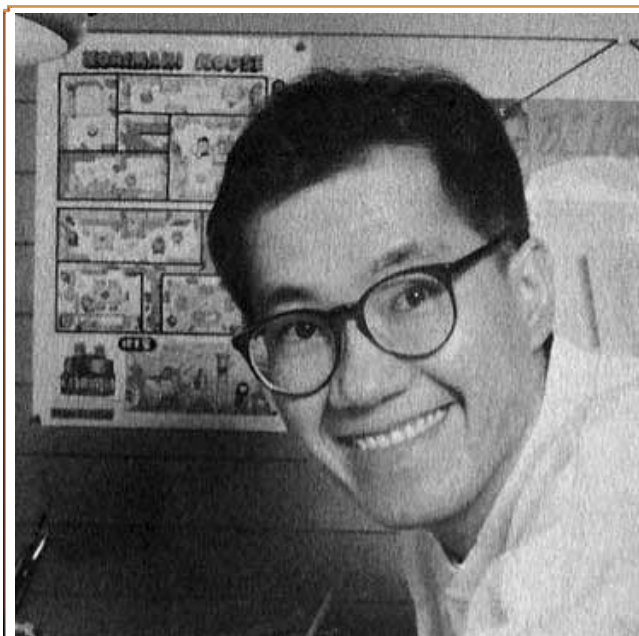


I'm going to write about two things here. This is more opinion than fact. I write what the heart remembers, because my first experience with Chrono Trigger was a massively soul-shaping moment for me. And like so many things, Akira Toriyama played a part in that.



Akira Toriyama



But before I write twelve chapters gushing about how I adore every single pixel in Chrono Trigger, let me talk about Akira Toriyama. In the USA, Dragon Ball Z is almost like the “Star Wars” of the anime world. It feels like it invented the shonen action genre overnight, regardless of whether that’s technically true. Because one day we were a bunch of kids watching cheap garbage like The Smurfs, and the next day we saw motherfuckin’ Dragon Ball Z! It’s hard to describe just how massively badass anime was when it arrived here. It was an apocalyptic moment in American cartoons, *utterly humiliating* everything that came before. Even Disney felt like baby-stuff. Cute Widdle Bambi wasn’t going to go super-saijyan and blast

someone’s head off. There was *no* going back! And like so many foundational things, Akira Toriyama was a part of it.

It wasn't even a contest...



It was a goddamn massacre!



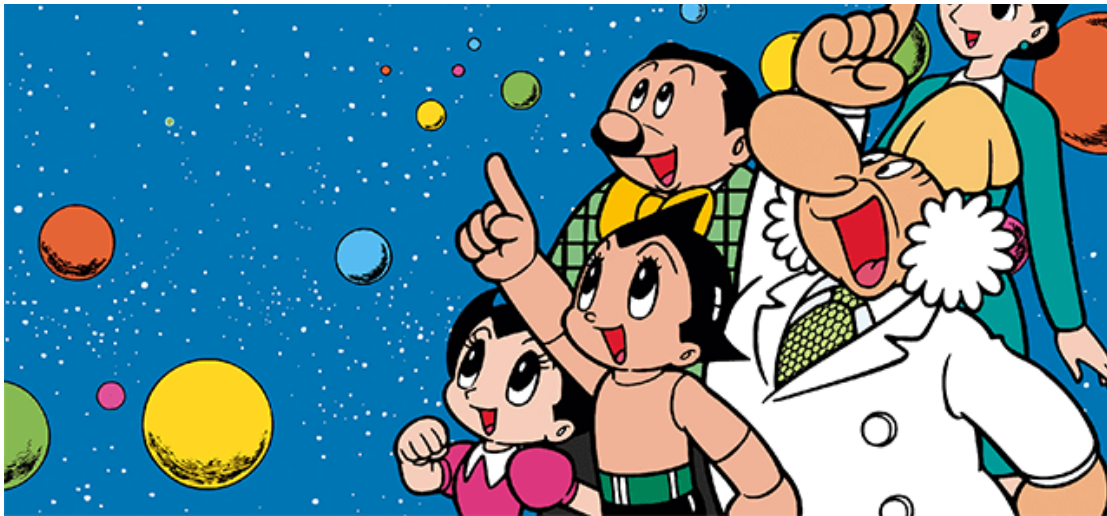


Long before Chrono Trigger came out, JRPG's had to be invented first. There was Dungeons & Dragons. But turning exploration, adventure, and storytelling into a video game genre was largely defined by Dragon Quest. It didn't technically invent RPG's but it defined so much about the genre that it might as well have. And like so many foundational things, Akira Toriyama was a part of it.

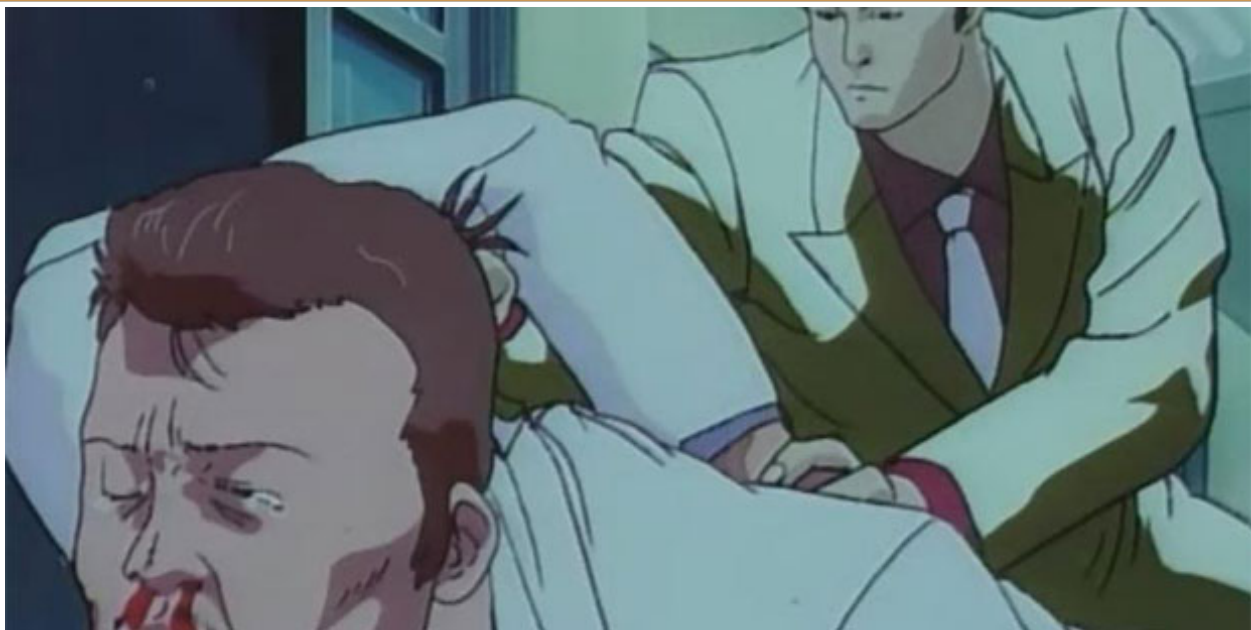


I think my favorite thing about Toriyama is his utterly unique art style. You will never mistake his art for any other artist. I'm proud to say that I'm jealous of him. He inspires me to explore and develop a unique art style of my own. To find an expression unlike anybody else. But one has to wonder, where did Akira Toriyama's art style come from? What inspired *him*?? To answer this I think we need to look at the things he watched and read while growing up. In the earliest days of the 1960's and 70's, anime and manga were full of cute characters overflowing with fun personalities.





And when that style faded in the shadow of the golden era of robot space-operas and gory erotic horror, a few artists like [Rumiko Takahashi](#) and Akira Toriyama continued carrying the torch of charming wide-eyed personalities forward many decades into the future long after most of the world forgot about the cute anime of ancient times. And so in a way, the old styles became their own. But there is still no mistaking Toriyama's art. It has a personal touch all his own. An epic blend of personality and cool.





Chrono Trigger



The day I rented Chrono Trigger was life-changing. Decades later I can still vividly remember lying on the carpet of my grandmother's living room with my Super Nintendo hooked up to my little white 12 inch TV set on the floor in front of me. The battle music was the coolest song I had ever heard. I was completely enthralled with the story. And all those glorious special attacks... *oh my god* I think I spent hours searching for battles just so I could keep replaying those attack animations over and over. I think I even made up some stupid lyrics to sing along with the battle music just for the Delta Force attack, which was the first triple-technique you learn in the game. The game had a way of one-upping itself with every new move you

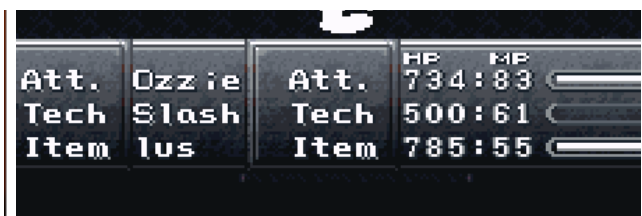
learned, escalating into cooler and cooler effects. And the first triple-attack took things to another level. At least it felt that way. It's hard to describe how a few flickering triangles and flashing sprites could be so deeply moving for a kid in 1995, but part of it was because it looked 3D. And in 1995, 3D graphics were the most amazing thing you could possibly witness on a TV screen. It's a 2D console. You are *not* expecting this. So when you see the first triple-attack in the game and it suddenly starts going 3D on you, your jaw hits the floor! ... and it'll be days before you pick it up again.

OMG it's three-deeee!!



Accurate self-portrait





But even at the beginning of the game I was amazed by the very first battle in the forest, because it took place on the *same screen*, and I had never seen an RPG do that before! This felt like the next stage of evolution for the entire genre! It was such an obvious improvement that I was certain that every RPG that came out in the future would handle battles this way, and never look back. Of course I was naive. I was 12 years old. But the point is that Chrono Trigger felt like an improvement out-doing every game I had ever experienced before that day in every single possible way.

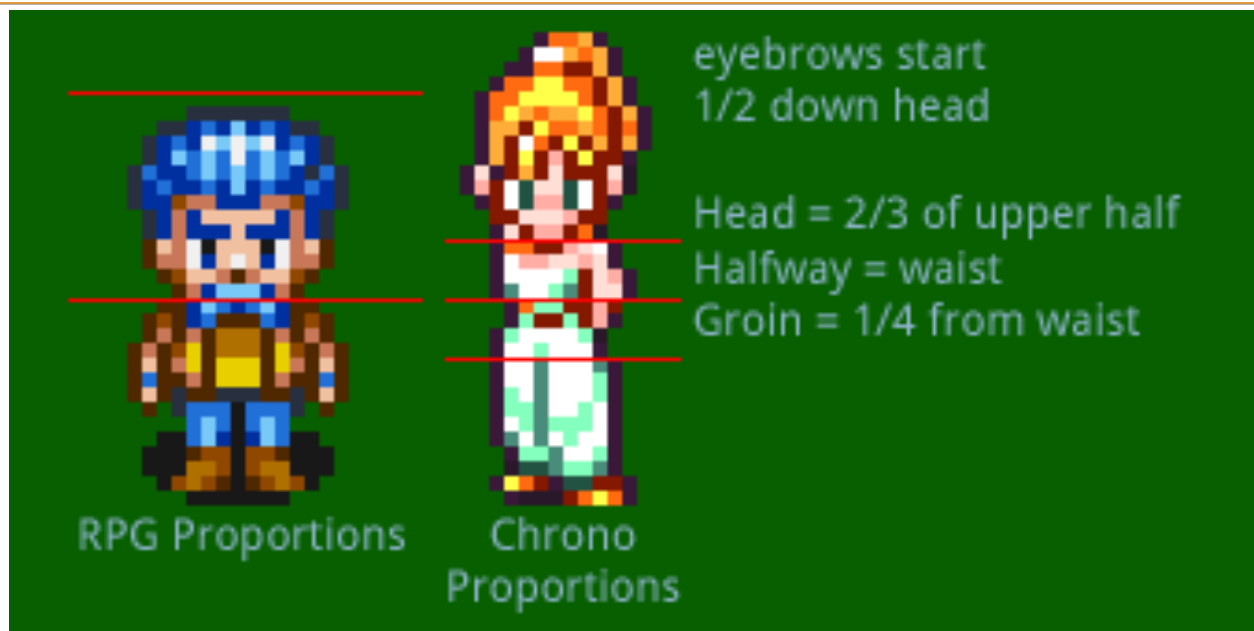


I know I am biased. I know that games with better graphics have come out in future decades. More great stories. More genres. More exploration. Goddamn *open-world* games! And of course that whole... 3D thing. So in my heart, Chrono Trigger mostly represents a pinnacle of 16-bit games. Over the past 30 years I have replayed this game so many times that it's honestly hard to really experience it anymore. Every strategy and movement has been committed to muscle memory. My eyes glaze over because I barely have to think about the game. I'm on auto-pilot. So instead I study it. Every pixel. Every story beat. Every clever design choice. The game is just 16-bit perfection to me. Yes I am *absolutely* biased, and I don't even care.

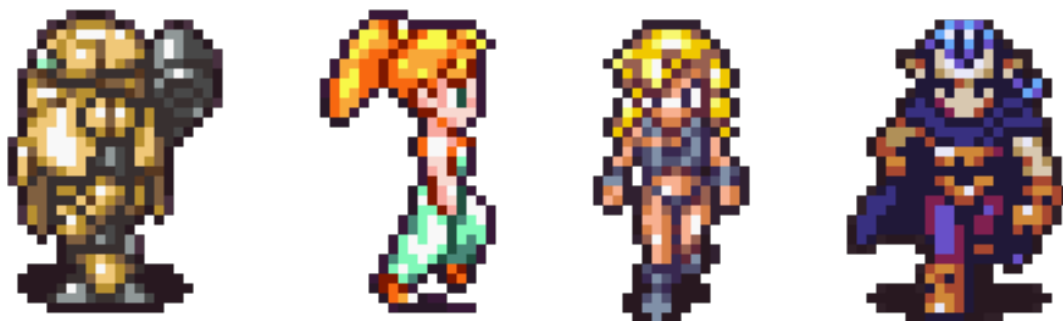
Even subtle things like the way that every cutscene has dialog written for exactly half of the main characters in your party at any given moment, so that no matter who you choose, it feels like they're always part of the story.

There is a lot to love, and barely any flaws I can bring myself to notice. But if I had to pick my absolute favorite thing about Chrono Trigger it's the sprite art. I don't know of any other RPG on the Super Nintendo that uses these proportions for characters. It's almost 3-heads tall, but the torso is smaller to make room for longer limbs to make the poses clearer, the ladies sexier, and to give the large heads more expressive eyes.

...and to give the large heads more expressive eyes.



The anti-aliasing is superb, packing so much subtle detail into the smallest possible space. Every pose and animation shows off the personalities of the main characters. And I bet you'll never guess which animation has the most frames... Walking! Not the fancy attacks or the mind-blowing story moments. The goddamn walk-cycles! Why? Because this is an RPG and that's what the player is going to be seeing for 95% of the entire game. That is a stroke of genius! But it goes even deeper. The characters don't even walk the same way. They're all different. You can actually *see* their unique personalities. Robo is a wood-stove on feet. Marle walks like a delicate princess. Ayla is brimming with strength and swings her fists. And Magus moves with a menacing strut because he is a magical badass... when he's not freakin' flying!



This Has Affected Me

Decades later to this very day I am still studying those walk-cycles. Marle taught me how feet move so I could make Princess Sally walk. Ayla demonstrated the way hands recede three dimensionally so I could make Bunnie Rabbit look strong and make Little Red Riding Hood prance around. And I am an absolute glutton for anti-aliasing. You'll rarely see any picture from me where I didn't spend hours pouring over every edge of every pixel to get all the shapes juuuuust right. And somehow I love every minute of it. You can thank Super Metroid and Chrono Trigger for making me fall in love with this process. It doesn't feel tedious to me because I'm too busy being impressed by the art I'm making while pushing the detail of every pixel to its absolute limit. Even though I've been experimenting with larger pixel-art recently, sprites still feel like a bigger accomplishment to me, because they are more densely detailed. Achieving more with less. Their small size forces them to make every pixel count. So the sheer feeling of accomplishment out-weighs the "unnecessary" challenge.

Me placing every pixel by hand like a lunatic

