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# Game Review
# SAMOROST 3 (Puzzle)
Amanita Design, 2016

A review of *Samorost 3* (the basic version can be downloaded from the Amanita site for €20) fits perfectly in an issue of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* that deals mainly with comics and comic movie adaptations because this game draws most of its fascination from comic-like characteristics. I will do my best to avoid spoilers whilst hiding my enthusiasm for this incredible token of creativity.

Being into computer games since 1983 (on a C64 then, trying hard to endure more than three levels of *Impossible Mission*), I have encountered a good num- ber of concepts and ideas. In the past I saw a lot of bad ideas sold with over- whelming graphical power, as well as great ideas that suffered from a weak game concept. Over the last two years I have had little time to play, but then a friend showed me *Samorost 3* on his Mac – the very next day, I bought the game, and I played it over the following weeks.

## THE GAME PLOT

In the native Czech language of the developers, *samorostly* means something like 'unspoilt' or 'genuine', and, indeed, the player starts somewhere in an Ar- cadian landscape with blossoming trees, a flowery lawn, grazing rabbits and a sleeping dog (see fig. 1). All of a sudden, a horn drops from the starry heaven and startles the dog, which starts barking. Its owner, a small white fig- ure, is awakened by the noise and comes out of the observatory-like tower he lives in. Closer



Fig. 1: The player's character in his home.

inspection of the horn reveals that it can be used as a hearing aid and a music instrument. At this point, the player takes over control of the white dwarf and starts to explore the environment, which turns out to be the surface of a small planet.

With the help of the horn, the player can now find out what features parts of the planet provide. Somewhere down in the rocky valleys lives, for example, a gifted engineer and remarkable welder who might even build a small spaceship if he just had the leisure to stroll around and collect the components one needs for such a project (see fig. 2). Solving interactive riddles in other areas of this planet produces a pocketknife from a mushroom picker, a plant, some levers from a ruin and a discarded plastic bottle, which seem perfect components for that job.



Fig. 2: The Gyro Gearloose of the Samorost Universe.

That task complete, the player is able to leave the planet and visit other stellar objects to solve other riddles which may involve intoxicating substances (see fig. 3). Along the way, why most of the planets are devastated or ruined becomes evident: obviously, a beast is hidden even in this miraculous world(s) and poses a constant threat to the few intact spots. Far from being a hero, the player (i.e., the white dwarf) starts to gather more information and tokens in order to find – after a long journey and some really difficult riddles – the location of the literally sleeping beast and the location of a hero, who must be awoken to fight the dragon.

Fig. 3: Hospitality for the hero: a teahouse of a different kind

## GAME DETAILS

The game developer, Amanita Design, is based in the Czech Republic. The company was founded in 2003 by Jakub Dvorsky, and now consists of nine members, about the size of a regular family business. Amanita Design is well known for its fancy graphics and creative illustrations, but also does music videos and websites. It uses Adobe AIR for the development and distribution of *Samorost 3*, and thereby ensures that it runs on a great variety of platforms.

The hardware prerequisites are mid-level. On my i5 6200u / 2.3 GHz with Intel HD520 graphics chip, the game runs smoothly even on the 4K display, with neither flickering nor clicking disturbing the game experience. The user interface is simple: a point-and-click system controls the white dwarf and the tokens/persons he interacts with. The menu provides the usual options: save, load, game preferences, and a hint book, which is a piece of art by itself, a small game within the game.

The graphics are really impressive. I have hardly ever seen such an accumulation of colorful Neverlands that are so enchanting. Colors, proportions, scales, sounds … everything blends together seamlessly. Also, the music is more than just an accessory: both score and "instrumentation" are essential – I use quotation marks as only a part of the sounds is obviously related to known natural instruments – and it really helps if one recognizes a theme heard before in another place.

## MY OPINION

What fascinates me so with *Samorost 3* (and has done from the very first moment) is the complete absence of text, written or spoken. In a sense *Samorost 3* is a mute adventure. It contains noise effects that are very well made, interesting music, made with craftsmanship, and babbling sounds when someone is speaking, but nothing one actually understands. The communication is partly shifted to a highly symbolic level – icons appear in speech balloons, and riddles have to be solved in inserted subscreens (see fig. 2 and 4). And no lesser part is played by music: listening and repeating musical motives and manipulating various tokens, from ropes to bugs' antennae (see fig. 5), to produce sound sequences are vital for the game to progress.



Fig. 4: When charmed by the horn, the plant answers.

On the surface *Samorost 3* is non-violent. I was unable to provoke a killing. The player cannot die; if one is unable to solve a riddle, one simply gets stuck in the environment. However, death is somehow present: the wastelands on some planets speak of catastrophes that may have happened, and the antagonist and his creature have to be defeated in order to save this little universe, a task delegated, however, to the (mechanical) hero, whom the player has to awake. Here is a wonderful example of the sacrificial process René Girard has described. So, in the end, for all its fascination *Samorost 3* remains stuck in a scapegoat mecha-

Fig. 5: Antenna music solves a riddle.

nism, but this characteristic is possibly a prerequisite of any computer game that goes beyond Tetris.

*Samorost 3* is not suitable for children under the age of eight, not because of any violence that might be encountered (there is none), but because the riddles generally require, I believe, not only profound logical thinking but also some knowledge of traditional iconography. Several religious aspects are interwoven with the game. Structurally, one could read the game as the mythological Hero's Journey described by Joseph Campbell. However, the white dwarf's complete renunciation of violence and fighting brings a new note to this approach. The initiation rite represented by the journey is highly symbolic, but it works, since in the end the white dwarf (i.e., the player) is accepted into the small circle of monks, to play music with them.

These monks are drawn in a form typical of the average Western mind's conception of Buddhist clerics: dressed in orange robes, they dwell in a peaceful nature and are busy caring for nature and studying the scriptures (see fig. 6). There is, however, something very uncanny about them. It turns out that the evil counterpart of the player is a monk himself, his face badly blemished and obviously suffering (see fig. 7). Apparently, he was once a member of the community, but this community was not strong enough to give him shelter after whatever had happened to him. He became – actively or passively – an outcast, and thus his rage takes on a human and understandable character. This is not a glorious chapter for the small congregation.

What about a Jesuanic interpretation of the player and his mission? In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul states, 'God hath chosen the foolish things

Fig. 6: Walking, working, writing: wise men in orange robes.


Fig. 7: The antagonist is badly blemished.

of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty' (1 Cor 1:27, KJV). Salvation comes from the weak, from a child-like figure that has no power at all and yet is able to make the mightiest and wisest bow before it. The analogy is neat, but so wrong: the white dwarf is weak in himself, but he hires a powerful fighter to finish off the antagonistic figure. Amanita Design missed a chance here. They could have bent the storyline to a new kind of ending, better matched with the

extraordinary concept of the game. But would it work? It might, but it might well not, for the audience wants a heroic story even if it is clothed in camouflage (or here, in white).

## CONCLUSION

*Samorost 3* contains a bonanza of ideas, of beautiful pictures, of great music and interesting sound. It is fun to play, and sometimes it is relaxing just to sit back and watch the animation, enjoying ever-new glimpses of enormous creativity. I would discourage someone who is into shooters and/or fast action with spectacular 3-D effects and sophisticated control mechanisms from buying this game. However, for someone who prefers smart riddles, great graphics, marvellous music and an almost meditative (i.e., absolutely relaxing) game, *Samorost 3* is, no doubt, one of the best choices currently available.

## GAMEOGRAPHY

*Impossible Mission* (Epyx, 1984).