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SPOUSAL ABUSE, RACIAL  
SLURS, AND VIOLENCE

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>> **THE UNCANNY VALLEY**  
ARE YOUR CHARACTERS  
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**POSTMORTEM:**  
THE SINGULAR DESIGN OF  
**KATAMARI**  
**DAMACY**



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DISPLAY UNTIL JANUARY 13, 2005

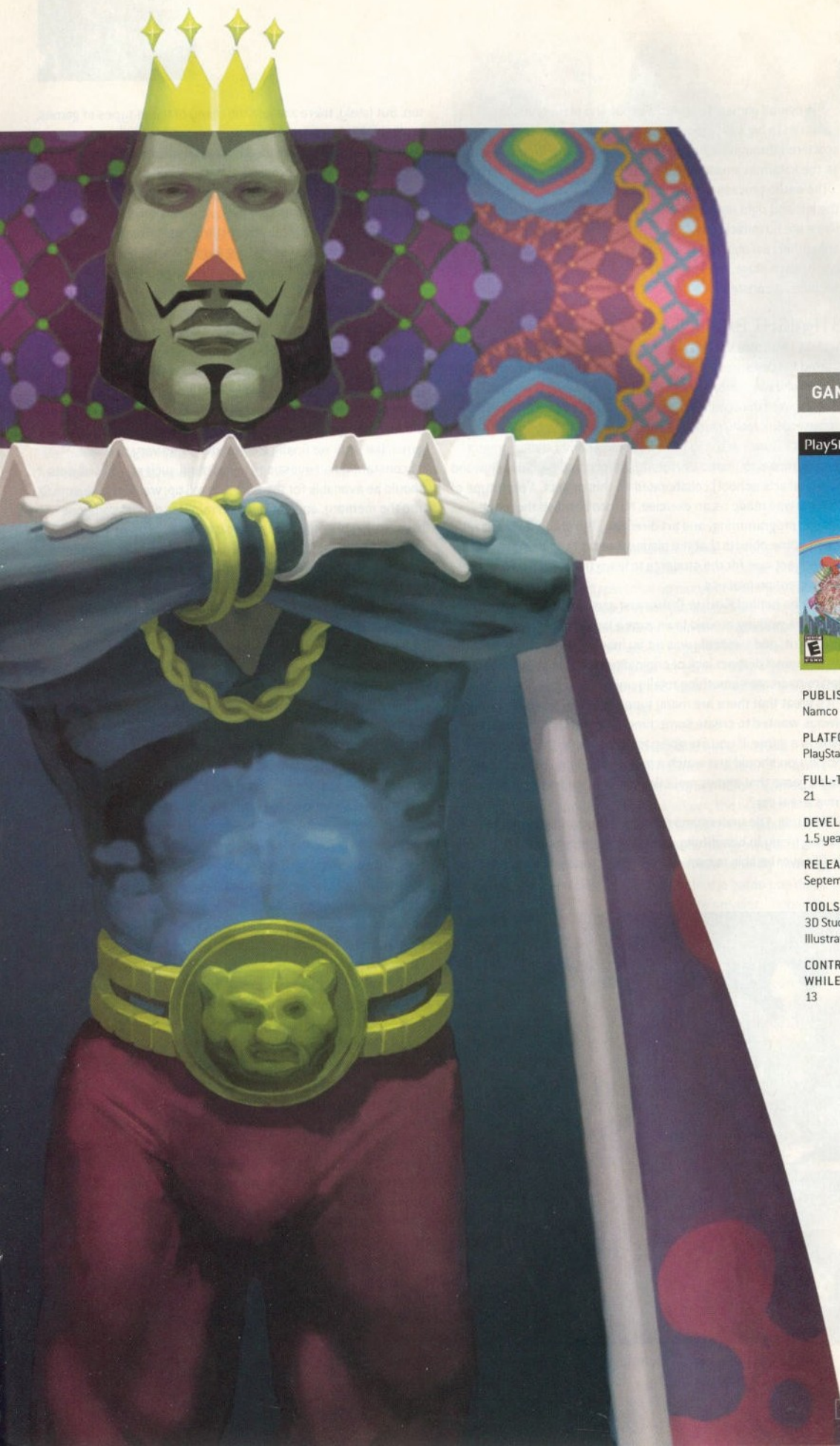
## THE SINGULAR DESIGN OF KATAMARI DAMACY

**IN KATAMARI DAMACY, THE PLAYER CONTROLS A LITTLE LIME GREEN** colored Prince, 5cm (approximately 2 inches) tall. The Prince's father, the King of All Cosmos, accidentally destroyed all the stars in the universe, so it is now the Prince's job to roll up katamaris in order to re-create the night sky. The game then progresses based on this very weird story.

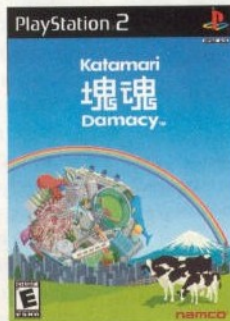


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**KEITA TAKAHASHI** was the game director for *KATAMARI DAMACY*. When he joined Namco, he wasn't familiar with computers and didn't even own a PlayStation. Send comments about his article to [editors@gdmag.com](mailto:editors@gdmag.com).



## GAME DATA



**PUBLISHER:**  
Namco

**PLATFORMS:**  
PlayStation 2

**FULL-TIME STAFF:**  
21

**DEVELOPMENT TIME:**  
1.5 years

**RELEASED:**  
September 21 (US)

**TOOLS USED:**  
3D Studio Max, Photoshop,  
Illustrator, Optipix

**CONTROLLERS BROKEN  
WHILE MAKING THE GAME:**  
13



The overall gameplay is very simple. The player rolls the katamari (a big ball) around and collects various items scattered throughout the levels. The items stick to the ball, and as the katamari amasses more stuff, it grows larger and larger.

The entire process of building this katamari is controlled with the left and right analog sticks only. All you're doing is rolling; there are no miracle power-up items or friends who help you. The only other real obstacle is a time limit for most stages. At the end of each stage, the katamari is lifted into the night sky and becomes a constellation or a star.

## STRAIGHT BALLIN'

Luckily, I was able to build a prototype of the game before we started full development. I presented it to the company, and of the people who were interested in KATAMARI, I asked the ones who I thought were the coolest to join the team. This was the first time that everyone really came together and met.

KATAMARI DAMACY actually grew out of my senior thesis project for a Namco-sponsored university. Namco and Digital Hollywood [a digital arts school] collaborated on this project. A prototype of KATAMARI was made as an exercise. Namco handled the game design, programming, and art direction. The students made all the in-game objects that the player could roll up. The purpose of this project was for the students to learn the overall flow of the game creation process.

The idea behind KATAMARI DAMACY just came to me. It's not as if I had been walking around town, saw a large ball with something stuck to it, and suddenly was hit by inspiration. Current games suffer from a distinct lack of originality, and this sparked my desire to create something totally unique.

It's great that there are many types of videogames, but I've always wanted to create something different that can only be done in a game. If you are going to play a game that resembles a movie, you should just watch a movie, and if you are going to play a game that shows realistic cars, wouldn't it be more fun to drive a real car?

Of course, I do understand the fun aspects of these games. Moving freely in beautifully drawn environments or driving a car you'll never be able to own—those are definitely fun experiences

too. But lately, there are just too many of those types of games, and I think it has become boring.

Games these days are also really complicated. There are lots of buttons, and there are a lot of items to keep track of. I'm just tired of all those complications. To hold a controller in your hand and control the action displayed on the screen is a minor thing nowadays, but I still think it's a little miracle. There's no need to add a lot of extra stuff to make it more difficult.

## WHAT WENT RIGHT

**1 RESEARCHING SCALE.** There is a stage in the game where your katamari starts at 1m, and the ultimate goal is to grow the katamari to more than 500m in diameter. In about the seventh or eighth month into development, we were able to show this growth in one sequence. I really let out a sigh of relief when that all came together. Before we began, I had carefully considered the map design and object placement to work together in the game, but until we finally executed it, I was very nervous.

I constantly had questions in my mind such as what objects should be available for the player to roll up, would the objects fit into the memory, and how long, in minutes, would someone have to play to get to the target size. The final game came together pretty well, and we were able to effectively express a great change in scale through the various objects collected, and the feeling of enormity. In the end we just had to implement objects and roll them up to see if they would work or not. We made adjustments using a trial-and-error method, rather than trying to figure everything out in our minds.

**2 NO POWERUPS.** I decided from the beginning of development that we would not use any power-up items or similar devices in the game. We didn't even consider implementing special power-up objects that would make the katamari bigger for a limited time, or items that would allow the katamari to roll up objects more easily. I think this allowed us to stay simple, allowed us to create a game where you just "roll stuff up and make it bigger." It was great to be reminded that a game can be fun without such complicated items.

We thought about giving the player a specific level objective, in addition to just making the katamari bigger, such as rolling up a particularly large object to complete the game, so the player would have a clear mission. However, if we did this, rolling up this particular object could become the main objective of the game, and increasing the katamari's size might have been reduced to just a mere process of reaching this goal. So, in the end, we decided not to use this idea.

**3 CONTROLLING THE ROLLING.** I think we were able to express the sense of rolling really well. Subtle elements of the game, such as the sound effects generated when you roll something into the katamari, and the vibration from the controller, had a very big effect in adding to the overall feeling of the game.

We also made adjustments to the game design, so it really reflected the uniqueness of rolling the katamari. For example, this game actually does have some combo elements. In fighting games, the combo is usually expressed by a number, but in KATAMARI DAMACY, if you roll up multiple objects in a row, you will see fireworks, confetti, or twinkling stars around the Prince shown in the bottom right area of the screen.

**4 PEACEFUL, EASY FEELING.** The overall peaceful ambiance of the entire game is really great. This includes many individual elements, such as the graphic style, the color, the sound and music, the movies and cut-scenes, the giant space

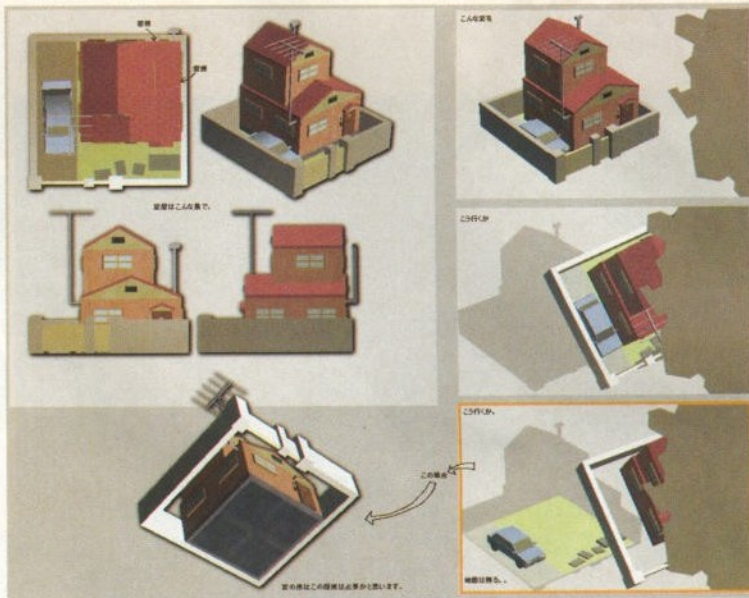


To make a star, you can roll up objects into your katamari, including animals and people.

The Katamari team.



**How to roll a house, KATAMARI style.**



mushroom, and the overall theme of recreating the night sky.

I am influenced by what's going on in reality, and it often shows in what I create. I am sure the terrorist attacks and the war in Iraq, which started just as we began development, affected me to some degree. Of course, I didn't really create this game with a direct reference to the concept of peace, but there are some things that I consciously chose to do here.

There is a lot of aggressiveness and violence in games nowadays. I do not denounce this violence completely, because it is a part of human instinct and is a very straightforward thing to express. What I tried to do was not only bring peaceful feelings to the game, but also create something totally different, which would be more exciting than just being peaceful. I wanted to stimulate human instinct on a different level.

Because of the uniqueness of the game, it was natural that the movies, sounds, and interface all carry this similar, unique tone.

**5 AUDIBLE EXCELLENCE.** The music/soundtrack of the game came out really well. Games and music have a lot in common. I have really had enough of the standard "the boss battle has music with tension" approach, however. In *KATAMARI DAMACY*, there is no boss and there are no enemies, so we created a soundtrack that's original to the game.

I'll let Yu Miyake, our sound director, tell you about the music he created in his own words:

"Takahashi, the director, allowed me to direct the music any way I wanted. I would never have been given that kind of creative freedom working for an ordinary director. My goal was to have the music appeal to everyone, and so I tried many different methods of directing and creating tunes in order to have that appeal.

"I often record melodies that I have in my head using my cellular phone or PC by humming. My workspace is not completely private, and my co-workers make fun of me if they hear me humming, so I always record my humming secretly. I decided to insert this humming in the title sequence of the test version of the game because I thought it would be funny and a bit kooky. It was just a joke at first, but then people started to like it, so I decided to keep it—and that's why you hear some weirdo humming when you first load the game.

"I think the humming differentiates *KATAMARI DAMACY* from other titles and fits the gameplay perfectly. This humming is also included in the opening theme music. I suppose what I'm trying to say is that singing is the best instrument we humans have.

"Collaborating with outside musicians is now very popular in the game industry, so we decided to hire 10 somewhat well known vocalists. As you know, this game is very unique, and we weren't really sure which age group it would appeal to, so we decided to hire 10 in order to get a range of talent to appeal to everyone.

"After selecting the vocalists, our next step was to figure out how we could enhance the mood of the game through the music. We actually used a somewhat backward process in that we created the music after selecting the vocalists, instead of before, so that we could use the vocalists talents most effectively.

"We were very serious when creating the music. Most game music nowadays is pretty forgettable. I wanted to create a soundtrack that would stick in players' heads, sort of like an evil curse. I also wanted to avoid using a single musical genre. Everything from the selection of the vocalists to the selection of song lyrics, was carefully considered."

**WHAT WENT WRONG**

**1 TIPPING THE SCALE.** This game is all about "getting bigger," but sometimes I wasn't able to truly feel that we had accomplished this feat. Again, this is my personal opinion, but when you become big, you instantly forget about when you were small. Even if you come back with a big katamari to the map where you initially played with a small katamari, you've forgotten about the experience so you don't feel like you've gotten really big. I wish we could have engendered the feeling of "Wow, I've gotten so big," a bit more effectively during gameplay.

**2 FALLING APART.** I thought it would be fun to include a feature that would make the katamari reduce in size and crumble. My idea was that when the katamari comes across something it can't roll over, or bumps into a large object; the objects that it had rolled over previously should fall off, and the katamari shrinks a little. Basically, a katamari that has grown to 300m in diameter can become as small as 2m in diameter by bumping into something and thus crumbling, so in the game you don't just grow bigger, but you also can become smaller. I hoped this would make the overall gameplay experience feel really free, but there were various issues, and it turned out to be impossible.

Minor crumbling was implemented, but we decided not to fully implement this feature because we couldn't really figure out natural solutions to some issues. For example, objects rolled up by the katamari are absorbed into it in order to reduce the load on the CPU, so when they are no longer visible, the memory of the object is deleted. We were not sure how to deal with objects that are absorbed and then have to reappear and then disappear again when a katamari crumbles down to nothing. As a result, the whole crumbling feature became vague and wasn't very effective in the end at all.

**3 THE CAMERA AND THE QUEASY.** The camera control didn't go as well as I thought it would. Thinking back on it, we could have used the camera to add scale for the overall "gigantic" feeling, but we simply didn't have enough time. I wish we had more. Honestly, I'm still not sure what camera angle would have been best for this game.

I would have also tried to prevent some of the 3D movement nausea that some people experience while playing. Previously, I thought I needed to show how the katamari grew in size during the game, so we made the camera zoom out automatically



**A 741m katamari rolls up clouds, volcanoes, and giant squid.**



Rolling, rolling, rolling.

when the katamari grows so big that it occupies the entire screen. But maybe it would have been good enough to allow players to look at the katamari simply from the Prince's point of view. It may have added more sense of scale if we had the tip of a katamari blurred, or had some clouds over it as it grows and becomes gigantic.

**4 NOT GETTING OBLONG.** I felt strongly that the katamari should roll the way it would if it actually picked up a new object. For instance, if you pick up a long stick-like object, such as a pencil, the pencil sticks out of the katamari.

In the real world, it's impossible to roll something like that grouped into a single object, but in this game, we've ignored the rules of physics and allowed for any large object to stick out. The katamari will still roll, but in a large arc. This arc-like movement will then adversely affect gameplay—the control becomes unwieldy, and causes you to lose time. Of course, we didn't just add this movement in order to adversely affect the roll of the katamari—it is also a fun addition to enjoy a weird rolling experience.

Truthfully, it actually doesn't look that fun, so I don't think it's executed well, but I was hoping to create a game in which a negative effect could become a positive experience. Also, the various objects scattered all over the stages are just components that help you make your katamari bigger—but that's boring. Every object has a shape, and all the unevenness that's created by rolling up the various objects gives the katamari a real "existence."

In choosing the objects players could gather, I wasn't consciously trying to choose unique objects. I just added what I thought players would want to roll up—though I'm not really sure about the giant mushroom and giant daruma statues. I couldn't come up with any really large objects, so I just put "giant" in front of the names of the objects that are normally not that big.

The King of All Cosmos commands it!



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**5 TIME LIMITS.** Originally, I wanted to eliminate the time limit and let the player simply roll the katamari to make it bigger. But, I couldn't figure out how to make the game fun without a time limit, so I gave up on that idea at an early stage.

I still think that game developers are bound by too many rules, and the time limit is one of them. Some of the missions don't have time limits. This is a small remnant of my original intentions.

### GATHER NO MOSS

The game itself does not rely on words, and you can play the original version even if you don't speak Japanese. So I guess it is natural for the game to be available in South Korea and North America, but we still think this is a minor miracle.

Not many games use totally original IP and game design, as most of the best sellers in Japan are established franchises. Original games don't typically sell well, so I think it's a miracle that Namco decided to take a chance on an oddball title like this. It is even more encouraging that they decided to release it overseas. It really is quite a miracle.

In making *KATAMARI* I learned that at a game studio, we don't need partitions or instant messengers. The most important thing is to talk directly to each other as a team. By doing so we were able to develop a game exactly as we wanted. I think that really shows.

I worked on the basic concept on my own. I found that if I started to listen to others, the concept tended to become diluted and unfocused. However, once the basic concept was decided, it was helpful to have open discussions with the team. There were many more ideas that were not used in the game, but I still got something out of all the different ideas that were brought up even if I didn't use them as they were presented.

We had several goals when making *KATAMARI*. We wanted to make a game that would appeal to people who have become disillusioned with recent games and rekindle their passion. We wanted to do away with the current stereotype that has become the norm in the industry where both the developers and the players have come to accept a set of arbitrary rules as standard, despite the fact that videogames are still a very new media. Most importantly, we wanted people to have fun and enjoy their gameplay experience.

Like most game creators, I am not totally pleased with the final product. Also, I expected that some people would love it and some would hate it, because the game features very unusual graphics. I am surprised and pleased, however, to receive mostly favorable reviews to date.

I am honored that most of the reviews (in Japan and the U.S.) recognized the uniqueness of the game, which proves that many people are tired of the games that are currently available. However, we couldn't make the game quite new enough.

We are living in a strange world when I see that this "half-baked idea" is being praised as something totally new. I'm not trying to be humble, but it would be great if the favorable reviews of this game motivated other people to create something new, without focusing on the bottom line for once. ❖

*Lindsay Gray, Ko Kimura, Naotaka Higashiyama, and Yoko Nakao are acknowledged for translating this article from the original Japanese.*