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INTERVIEW: KASEY OZYMY, CREATOR OF JIMMY AND THE PULSATING MASS

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Aug 16, 2018

by:

[Angelo M. D'Argenio \(/web/20210125081929/https://www.gamecrate.com/author/angelo-m-dargenio\)](https://web.archive.org/web/20210125081929/https://www.gamecrate.com/author/angelo-m-dargenio)

If you haven't tried [Jimmy and the Pulsating Mass \(https://web.archive.org/web/20210125081929/https://www.gamecrate.com/reviews/review-jimmy-and-pulsating-mass-exceptional-emotional-exploration/20402\)](https://web.archive.org/web/20210125081929/https://www.gamecrate.com/reviews/review-jimmy-and-pulsating-mass-exceptional-emotional-exploration/20402) yet, you really should. This incredible indie title about exploring the mind of an eight-year-old was one of the most compelling RPG experiences we have had so far this year.

To get a little more insight about how this unique game was made, we caught up with developer Kasey Ozymy to try and figure out what was going on in his head while he

was creating this game.

Here's what he had to say.

Gamecrate: You've made a few RPG Maker games in the past but none particularly have the appearance or tone of Jimmy and the Pulsating Mass. What made you choose to go with the cartoony *Earthbound*-like art style? What made you decide to tackle this subject matter? What inspired you to start this project in the first place?

Kasey Ozymy: There's a pretty big community out there for *Earthbound* superfans, and *Earthbound* is definitely unique enough to warrant it, but it's not a community I'm a part of. I like *Earthbound*, but I'm pretty omnivorous when it comes to RPGs. So, my earlier games didn't have the same art style or tone because my intent has never been to recreate *Earthbound* (also, my earlier games used more pre-made assets.)

With *Jimmy*, the aesthetics matched the premise. Originally, the game was going to be much shorter and freeware--another game mainly for the RPG Maker community to show off what I'd learned about game design--and the aesthetics were much less like *Earthbound*. All of the maps and enemies were drawn with crayons, and the sprites had more realistic proportions (but were drawn very poorly). I made the switch to make it more similar to *Earthbound* when I decided to expand the premise and focus more on exploration, which made drawing everything with crayons too big of a task.

As for the subject matter, I started with a theme of escapism because it seemed really important culturally at the time. As I developed the game, though, it sort of turned into a celebration of imagination to a large extent, and I like approaching subjects from a more nuanced position, so I really enjoyed balancing those two themes. Inspiration came from a lot of things that ended up gelling into the premise.

I'd played *Yume Nikki*, for instance, and really loved the writing advantage of using dream exploration to allow setting to act as a form of characterization, and I wanted to do that within the space of a more traditional Japanese-style RPG. I also saw some screenshots of *Lisa* while it was in development--particularly of the fleshy mutants--and the idea of pairing a child with an overwhelming monstrosity popped into my head, and the title followed soon after.



GC: *Jimmy* is also a truly massive game. I've played it for about 50 hours at this point and I still haven't found everything. What made you choose to undertake a project of this scale?

KO: The last game I made before *Jimmy* was a little contest game called *The Heart Pumps Clay* (forgive the crummy title, I was on a deadline.) The short length requirements made me pare out a lot of stuff to make it more streamlined, and exploration was the major thing on the chopping block. And, I think the game really suffered from that, so I had a period of self-reflection over why the game wasn't as well-received as I hoped and what I really value from RPGs, and exploration and long-term stat progression were the two things that I kept coming back to. So, that's what *Jimmy* focuses on. Creating such a big world is mainly the fallout of the decision to focus on exploration. The story also demanded a pretty decent-length game.

GC: For that matter, so much of *Jimmy* can be missed on a first playthrough. Is there a reason you decided to create so much optional content rather than confining it to the main quest?

KO: Like I said, I really wanted to focus on exploration. Also, the idea of using setting

as characterization gave me the advantage of showcasing Jimmy's thoughts and fears through these optional levels, and this gives players a means of empathizing with Jimmy as they step off the grid and enter areas that make them feel entirely uncomfortable. I think I started with a desire to let players explore and built the premise around that to an extent.

GC: The Steam page for *Jimmy and the Pulsating Mass* lists games such as *Breath of Fire*, *Final Fantasy 5*, *Earthbound*, and *Yume Nikki* as influences. Can you give some particular examples of how these games influenced the development of *Jimmy and the Pulsating Mass*?

KO: *Earthbound* is obviously the biggest influence, mostly in the art style and tone to an extent. Like I said earlier, the central idea of using a dream to allow the setting to act as characterization was the main lesson I learned from *Yume Nikki*. As for *Final Fantasy 5*, I love its job system, and *Jimmy's* imagination system is very heavily inspired by that.

I said it was inspired by *Breath of Fire*, but that's more of a shorthand for a lot of games that allow players to interact with the game world in different ways. I could have also said *Lufia 2* or the *Wild Arms* series, but *Breath of Fire* seemed the most appropriate because all of the character-specific field abilities that you have tend to be used less to solve puzzles and more to interact with the world to make it feel a bit more alive.

The simple act of swinging your sword in *Breath of Fire 3*, for instance, could be used to mug people for a paltry amount of money. So, when I was a kid, I did what any kid would do--I ran through villages, swinging my sword like crazy, robbing indiscriminately despite gaining very little from it. I wanted that kind of interaction in *Jimmy*, so I gave all of the transformation abilities means of interacting with the world. It made the world feel a bit realer, and there's a bit of that childish glee I wanted to recapture.

GC: Did anything else influence *Jimmy's* empathy transformation system? It feels somewhat *Persona* like to me.

KO: I like the *Persona* series (especially both versions of 2--they're a bit underrated

compared to the last three), but that wasn't a direct inspiration. Mechanically, like I mentioned earlier, *Final Fantasy 5* was my direct inspiration, with the thought of changing classes mid-battle being an improvement to that idea. It also was one of those things where characterization and plot mirrored mechanics.



GC: You've mentioned that one of your pet peeves is RPGs that give you a huge toolkit of abilities but then restrict them in boss battles. I noticed you specifically tried to avoid this in *Jimmy's* battle system. Are there any other pet peeves or problems that you see with traditional JRPG design that you tried to fix in *Jimmy's* design?

KO: Yeah, lots of stuff! There's a pretty traditional problem with random encounters; lots of RPGs try to avoid them entirely. But, because of the Imagination system, I felt it was necessary to push players into combat so that they could build their different forms, and random encounters seemed the most appropriate way of doing that. That's why I tied areas to level ranges and gave players the ability to skip encounters once they met a level threshold.

Another problem is with items. Most RPGs allow you to have a bunch of items, most of which you stockpile and never really have a need for, but, when you do need them,

you have a huge safety net that kind of saps the difficulty from the game. So, Jimmy has a much smaller item pool that is more useful, and you're limited to ten of every item instead of the more traditional ninety-nine.

That also ties into the game's economy; I made the cost of items increase as the game progressed to make them still cost a significant portion of your money, as they are always useful. In the *Final Fantasy* series, for instance, a phoenix down always costs the same and is always as useful, so the cost is prohibitive in the beginning of the game and so cheap that you can always max out of them by the end of the game. I tried to iron out lots of little nitpicks like that.

GC: What were the biggest challenges in balancing *Jimmy and the Pulsating Mass's* combat and gameplay?

KO: The biggest problem with balancing combat is determining how difficult I should make it. Depending on how players approach combat and how much they have or haven't explored, fighting certain bosses could be a way different experience. I tried to balance this by going through the game and beating it without opening a single toy box, but even that was kind of a bad metric, as it was accounting for someone playing the game perfectly, and I had to nerf a lot of the bosses when my playtesters still ran into difficulty. Hitting that line where hardcore RPG veterans feel challenged while people fairly new to the genre don't feel discouraged is really difficult. I still don't know if I achieved that, and I totally get why difficulty selectors are a thing.

GC: What was the biggest technical challenge in designing *Jimmy and the Pulsating Mass*? Was there any particular section of the game that was difficult to implement?

KO: The sheer size of the game was the most overwhelming thing. Once I sat down and worked on any given component, though, I was able to tackle it without too much trouble. The Imagination system is probably the most technically complex component, and it was one of the first things I did. I thought, "All right, if I can't do this, this game's not getting made," but it came together pretty quickly.

Dark Dungeon was the single level I spent the most time on, but even that wasn't too hard--it was just time-consuming. I think this is because I've spent so much time with RPG Maker. I know its limitations, so I can plan within them pretty easily.



GC: Were there any ideas you had that eventually had to be cut either due to time, difficulty, or lack of resources?

KO: Not really; like I said, I'm familiar enough with the engine that I planned things around its limitations. For instance, I totally avoided creating anything with collision detection because RPG Maker's tile-based movement can't do it effectively.

There were a few small ideas that didn't get implemented, though. For instance, I was going to have a puzzle that involved pushing and pulling platforms in order to create a walkable path, but there wasn't a natural place for it once I started designing the levels.

Oh! I just remembered something. There's a hidden cave in the game that has pots that play different tones when water falls into them. When you walk into the next room, a song plays that still sounds a little random, but it's more structured. Originally, I wanted the song to just be a series of chords, and then have the random notes play over them, but I ended up scrapping that idea since I knew there would be issues with the rhythm desyncing once you got into battles.

GC: Was there anything you are particularly displeased with in the final release of *Jimmy and the Pulsating Mass*? Anything you wish you could have done differently?

KO: I'm pretty happy with it for the most part. I do wish that I would have caught all of the bugs prior to release, but I'd gone through it so many times that I didn't know how to approach the game differently, and my playtesters all have lives of their own and I couldn't wring anymore out of them, so I felt it was the right time to release.

My only other regrets have to do with marketing; I wish I would have contacted sites when the game was announced instead of waiting until it was just about released. In my ignorance, I thought that you needed a review copy to make news for a game if you weren't a major studio. Also I probably subconsciously avoided marketing as much as possible because I don't like doing it, and that was childish of me.

GC: *Jimmy* was in development for four years. That's a long development cycle. What kept you going and were there any times when the project seemed too difficult to continue?

KO: Well, I woke up just about every morning questioning my decision. I just always looked at the work that was yet to be done and thought how about how overwhelming that was--even when I was in the last few months of development. But, if you just focus on stuff like that, it can get pretty crippling.

I knew that this was something that was important for me to finish. I wanted to prove that I could make a game that I was really proud of, one that struck some balance between well-crafted writing and fun mechanics. I also hoped that I could enter the game development world through *Jimmy*; the jury's still out on if it's going to be successful enough to do that, but, when making the game, it made development a lot easier.

GC: Did you do everything by yourself? All the art, music, etc.? If so, did you have a background in music or art before you started *Jimmy* or are you self-taught?

KO: Yeah, I did everything by myself, with the exception of some of the coding. In the RPG Maker community, there are things called "scripts" which are little snippets of

code that modify the default engine. I used a lot of those, which made me able to design some things--like the stealing system--that I wouldn't have otherwise been able to. But, yeah, the art, music, writing, game design, etc. was all just me.

I don't have a background in art, so that was "on the job training;" I had a little experience with one of my previous games, but I mostly learned by doing. I think that shows, especially in some of the early areas of the game.

As for music, I've been playing guitar for fifteen years now. My minor in college was music history, so I was able to draw on a lot of that when composing. I also have a master's in English with an emphasis on creative writing, so I have a writing background more than anything.

GC: *Jimmy's* soundtrack is one of the most varied and interesting soundtracks I have heard, running the spectrum of classic JRPG chiptunes to ambient horror noise to sheer madness. What inspired these different types of tracks and how did you compose them?

KO: Well, those aforementioned music history classes helped expose me to a lot of techniques, especially in the horror compositions. Stuff like texture/density music, Charles Ives's compositions where he had two songs playing simultaneously, chance music (or at least my failed attempt at it that I mentioned earlier), polyrhythms, minimalism, 12-tone music--these are all different techniques I've been exposed to just from college or learning while practicing guitar. I've just been exposed to a lot of music, and I love music in general. The tracks for the game were all generally built around what the settings meant to *Jimmy*, and the compositional techniques were used to fit that.

GC: Will you be making another game after *Jimmy and the Pulsating Mass*, and if so, are you going to stick to RPG Maker or branch out into other engines?

KO: I absolutely hope I can make another game! I'd like to branch out to a new engine so that I can get away from some of RPG Maker's limitations--particularly stuff like the core battle system, lack of collision detection, and limitations on porting/resolution/etc. However, learning a new engine takes time, developing a new game takes even more time, and what I can do is going to depend a lot on the success of *Jimmy*. I've got a lot of ideas that I'd love to see come to life, so we'll see.

GC: Is there any chance of future content updates or DLC?

KO: New content is pretty unlikely; I set out to make a full experience, and I think I've done that. Plus, I'd really like to move onto a new project after spending so long on this one. But, I'm definitely updating to address any bugs that crop up. I'm also actively looking into a means of smoothing out the performance issues that some people have, and there are a few promising ways to port to Mac, which I'd also like to do in the near future.

GC: Would you ever consider bringing *Jimmy and the Pulsating Mass* to consoles or handhelds? Would you consider other operating systems?

KO: Looks like I got ahead of myself again! Like I said, I definitely want to port to Mac--it's a priority for me right now--and if I get that working, I might be able to port

to Linux through a similar means. As for consoles, I really have no idea how I'd go about doing that, but I'd be open to it. That kind of depends on how successful *Jimmy* is.

GC: Is there any personal message you might want to give to your fans? Or perhaps to people who haven't tried the game yet?

KO: As of writing this, Jimmy's only been out for a little over a week, but the fan reaction has been so cool. I'm just happy that it's finding an audience, and I'm grateful that so many cool, creative, interesting people actually enjoy something I created.

Jimmy hasn't blown up or anything, but the relatively small group of people who have found it seem to have really latched onto it, which is really uplifting for a developer. Game developers, writers, musicians--we're all despicable, codependent creatures who live off of the praise of others, so the reception I've gotten has been like walking out of a week-long trek through the wilderness and into an all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet.

For those of you who haven't tried it, my pitch is that if you loved RPGs when you were a kid and want to experience that joy of exploration again, *Jimmy* is like diving head-first into a toybox, but the writing and subject matter can still be appreciated by adults.

GC: Finally, I know I said I would avoid questions that might give out story spoilers, but I have to ask. What the heck does "Fresh" mean in the battle transition?

...I thought it looked cool.

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