Robin Ramirez, Jens Wouters – GDD1

Game Analysis

Title: Ikaruga (for Gamecube)

Release dates:
Ikaruga (Arcade Japan) – December 20, 2001
Ikaruga (Dreamcast) – September 5, 2002
Ikaruga (Gamecube) – May 23, 2003
Ikaruga (Xbox Live Arcade) – April 9, 2008

Editor: Treasure Co. Ltd

Designers: Hiroshi Iuci
 Director, BG Graphic Design, Music
Atsutomo Nakagawa
 Co-Director, Main Programmer
Yasushi Suzuki
 Character, Object Design
Satoshi Murata
 Sound Effect, BGM Data Edit
Masato Maegawa
 Executive Producer

Publishers:
Ikaruga (Arcade Japan)	->	SEGA
Ikaruga (Dreamcast)	->	ESP
Ikaruga (Gamecube)	->	Atari
Ikaruga (Xbox Live Arcade)	->	Treasure Co. Ltd

Type of game: shoot'em up

Category: arcade

Rating: 11+

Main target audience: shoot'em up hardcore arcade gamers

Number of players: single player (1), co-op (2)

Duration of game session: about 20, 30 minutes for the whole game

Short description / Pitch:
It's a shoot'em up where you have to change polarization to dodge enemy fire and make your way trough 5 stages of innovative level design.

Executive summary

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1: Very Poor; 2: Poor; 3: Fair; 4: Good; 5: Very Good

Theme: Scenario / Characters

very poor	poor	fair	good	very good

It's hard to know the story by just playing this Gamecube version. Other versions of Ikaruga however do include the storyline. The game doesn't really give you information about what is going on. At the beginning of every stage, there is some Japanese script with the English equivalent underneath it. But that is the only information you get from the game. If you take a look in the instruction manual, you can read the introduction which led to the events in the game.

There are two main characters which are represented in-game by their planes. If you want to know what the characters look like, you have to go to the (unlockable) concept art part of the game-disk. If you look at the game in it's single player mode, there is only one main character that flies, but the storyline does have two main characters. The second character is the one the second player controls in co-op mode.

Theme: Universe / Themes / Uniformity

very poor	poor	fair	good	very good

The game has a lot of references to Buddhism and yin-yang (the polarities). Each of the five stages carries a name that has a special meaning in Buddhism (Ideal, Trial, Faith, Reality and Metempsychosis). Ikaruga is actually a place in Japan from where Buddhism started to spread trough the country.

Other games that use a light-dark (yin-yang) concept where each colour is stronger against it's counterpart:
- Silhouette Mirage
- Metroid Prime 2: Echoes

Abstract	1	2	3	4	5	Themed
Reactive	1	2	3	4	5	Interactive
Flat	1	2	3	4	5	Progresses

Mechanisms: Originality / Innovation / Freshness

very poor	poor	fair	good	very good

The fact that makes the game original as a shoot'em up is the polarity switching. Sometimes the screen is filled with gunfire, but when you know that the same colour as your ship doesn't damage you, you can move trough these projectiles. Actually instead of harmful these bullet's can be beneficial because you can absorb them to power up your homing missiles.

Mechanisms: Gameplay / Replayability

very poor	poor	fair	good	very good

The gameplay is mainly based on the switching of your polarity and it works very well. Black is very effective against white, black projectiles won't hurt you when you yourself are black and vice versa.

The game can look pretty chaotic with all the bullets flying around, but as a compensation, you have a small hit box. Nonetheless, you WILL get shot.

Because the game is very short for today's standards, you can easily play it again when you finish it.

Note by Jens: If the game was priced like any normal game, I would have to say it was too expensive for such a short game. People who get the vibe of Ikaruga will use and explore the different possibilities the game offers, but each time it unfortunately always comes down to the same game. So people who don't feel the vibe will be bored very fast.

Note by Robin: I would pay 100 euros for this game, just because of it's brilliance. A lot more value for your money compared to today's major franchises that just keep puking out mediocre games.

Mechanisms: Rhythm

very poor | poor | fair | good | very good
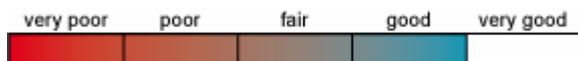
The game is fast paced from start to finish. This is mainly because of the amount attention Ikaruga requires from it's players, you can't look away from the screen for 5 seconds.

Mechanisms: Player Experience

very poor | poor | fair | good | very good

If your just a casual gamer, there is a good change you won't have a good experience with the game. Even on easy, the game demands fast reflexes and quick thinking.
The player experience shifts the longer you play the game. The first time you play, the only thing you'll want, is to survive until the end. Once you have reached the end a few times, you'll be wanting a better and better high score, which can only be achieved by making chains (see scoring system for an explanation). Or you'll want to make it through the game without dieing a lot (dieing = losing one credit), since there are galleries and a sound test, which you can unlock by clearing the game on easy without losing a credit and by clearing the game on normal without losing a credit.

For a beginner, it takes some time to get used to the fact that bullets of the same colour won't hurt you.

Because the game was originally an arcade game, it isn't a surprise the game can be very hard. Arcade games are invented to earn as much money as possible.

Mechanisms: Rules System

very poor | poor | fair | good | very good

The rules in a nutshell: shoot enemies, don't get shot, reach the end of each level. Of course, the shooting is very depended on the polarization mechanism. Shooting with a certain colour on an enemy of the opposite colour does double damage. Enemy fire that's the same colour as your ship doesn't hurt you, It actually raises your rocket amount.

Cliché	1	2	3	4	5	Original
Feeble	1	2	3	4	5	Effective
Cumbersome	1	2	3	4	5	Efficient
Luck, Randomness	1	2	3	4	5	Control

Mechanisms: Game Flow / Phases / Player's Turn

very poor	poor	fair	good	very good
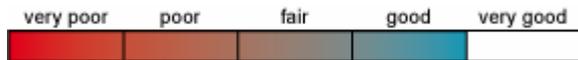
The game has no loading screens, which is nice. If there would have been loading screens, it would have been irritating because the game goes so fast.

The game exists out of 5 stages and at the end of each stage you have a boss battle.

Co-op is played simultaneously in the same playfield. Luckily, you can't crash into each other, but you can push each other. This can be dangerous in the last stages where you have a lot of obstacles where you can crash into.

Note by Robin: However you can also save each other in co-op mode (example: Ship one is black and a stream of white bullets is coming towards him/her, ship two is white and jumps in front of the stream of bullets and absorbs them).

Mono-Dimensional	1	2	3	4	5	Multi-faceted
Friendliness	1	2	3	4	5	Competitiveness
Simplistic	1	2	3	4	5	Calculative

Mechanisms: Scoring System

very poor	poor	fair	good	very good

You can get higher scores by linking up chains. A chain is formed by shooting three enemies of the same colour. So if you want a good high score, you'll have to be careful and not just shoot every enemy.

Note by Robin: This is what I really like about Ikaruga, all levels are designed so you can chain link all the enemies. Sometimes it's very challenging but always possible.

Editorial style: Terms, specific syntax

very poor	poor	fair	good	very good

The most of the text appears in the menu and in the tutorial. Except for the game's name, every word can be translated without a problem.
However, in one of the concept art drawings, there is a translation error. The text says: "I'm not regret".

Editorial style: Tone

very poor	poor	fair	good	very good
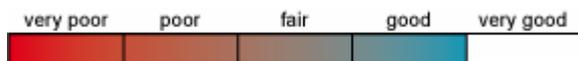
Because every word that is available in the game isn't really connected with the game story, there isn't a specific tone in the text. It's plain simple text.

Editorial Style: Contents

very poor	poor	fair	good	very good

How the game handles information is just right, not too much and not too little. It only disappoints on the storyline contents.

Graphics: Logotype

very poor	poor	fair	good	very good

The logo is very simple but that makes it good. The original logo exists out of two Japanese symbols with each of them in a square. There is also a logo that exists out of letters which is actually just the word.

Graphics: Style guide, graphics

very poor	poor	fair	good	very good

The visible game elements all blend nicely together. They have a futuristic feel. Although the 3D models are small and mostly have a simple form, they show a lot of detail. The visual elements are all machines.

The game doesn't use the full screen. This gives a black bar at the left and right of the area where the game occurs. The heads-up display is put into the black bars so you don't have anything that blocks the action. Only at the top of the playfield, there are 2 parts of the HUD which overlap. These don't block your vision because the game scrolls vertically and when there's a boss battle, it overlaps the back of the boss which doesn't launch attacks. They cross the three onscreen areas (2 black bars and the playfield) which breaks the tight 3 stroke structure and thereby make it a bit more interesting.

The only negative point is the fact that the health bar of the bosses is placed at the top of the screen while you're more focused on the area around your ship. This leads to the fact that you probably won't know how many damage you'll still have to deal to finish him. Or it can result in your ship getting shot and destroyed when you look up at the health bar.

Graphics: Cover, Packaging

very poor	poor	fair	good	very good
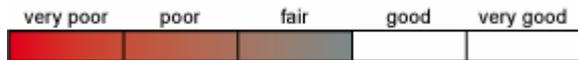
The European Gamecube packaging is pretty straightforward and not really different from most games. It just shows the logo with underneath it the plane head-on while it is firing. The American cover is more stylized. The Japanese is the same image as the European, but it has a bluer colour scheme, whereas the European packaging has a redder colour. The word Ikaruga in roman letters also isn't placed on the cover. The Dreamcast version had a picture of the mothership.

Note by Jens: I'm surprised the cover of Europe and the cover of America weren't the other way around. The straight forward covers appear mostly in America and Europe mostly has more stylized ones.

Graphics: Components

very poor	poor	fair	good	very good

As said before all the Graphic components blend well with the game and it's theme without harming the gameplay of Ikaruga. They're kept simple.

Sound: Effects

very poor	poor	fair	good	very good

Sound effects are nothing to complain about. They just work.

Sound: Music

very poor	poor	fair	good	very good

The music is fast paced, futuristic and it suits the visuals. The only downside can be the fact that it can get a bit monotone.

Different possibilities to play the game

The game exists out of a couple of modes.

The standard mode has 3 difficulties: easy, normal and hard. Every difficulty adds a new element into the game. When playing easy all the enemies are harmless when destroyed, when playing normal enemies that are the same colour as you when you destroy them will send out a spree of same-coloured bullets, when playing hard mode all the enemies send out a spree of bullets when destroyed. So the game gets harder because of new gameplay elements. The question here is: how fair will people experience this? The adaptation of the existing game elements creates situations you haven't encountered before in the lower difficulties.

If you want, you can play a mode where you haven't got credits and you can play over and over again. This mode only contains the first two stages though.

The next mode is conquest mode. Here you can practice segments of a stage. Every segment has a demo video and the ability to play the game in slow-motion.

The game also offers a tutorial, but it isn't interactive. This explains the main gameplay elements of Ikaruga.

The game can be finished without shooting. The Gamecube version gives you the possibility to disable each button so you are sure you can't use the action mapped to one of them. If you want to make the game really hard, you can even disable the polarisation button.

Controls
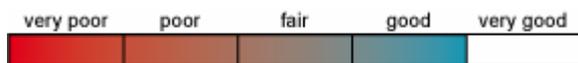
The standard controls feel good. But if you wish, you can reassign each action to an other button.

Note by Jens: I personally would have find it more logical to map the shooting to the big A button because that's the main action. But Robin made a good point that it depends on what you think is important. The button is normally mapped to switch the polarity and this can be considered as the most important action in the game (you can finish the game without shooting).

Overall difficulty

The game luckily looks harder than when you actually play it. This doesn't mean it's easy though. You need to develop skills before you'll be able to finish the game without losing to much credits. It is more unforgiving than today's game standards. You'll learn most things from your mistakes.

Level of interaction

A. interaction in the game world

The interaction between the objects in the game is shooting each other or crashing into one another. Destruction is the way of communication in this game.

Note by Robin: Though absorbing bullets can also be seen as a way of interaction

B. interaction between game and player

The player gets feedback from the game through rumbling of the controller when he or she destroys a boss.

Learning curve

Note: Jens has never played the game before. Therefore we will focus on how he will experience the game.

The game is a bit intimidating for someone who never played it before. You see a screen filled with enemies and gunfire and think it's almost impossible to play.
The first time you play, you only focus on taking down the enemies. You don't really think about the polarization option. This makes the game much, much harder because you try to dodge all incoming fire. It's hard to get the mindset to switch between black and white and negate the hazards.
Once you finally pay attention to the polarisation idea, the game becomes (falsely) a bit easier.
The first runs you don't pay much attention to your rockets. Your ship fires fast, so why would you actually want to use rockets? Well, they automatically find their target and are very effective in tight situations. When you finally consider the rockets, you'll also start to absorb enemy fire to get a whole bunch of rockets. The rockets eventually prove to be invaluable to destroy the bosses. Each boss shoots so much bullets at you, you can collect rockets in no time.
Once your accustomed to the basics, you can start to play for high scores. You will link chains together to get more points.
There is also the possibility of course, to begin to play the higher difficulties before you want to break high score after high score.
Eventually, you become a person who can dodge/absorb bullets with ease, creates chain after chain, pulverizes the bosses and gets high scores that dazzle people.

It's a steep learning curve, but because of the shortness of the game, you learn fast by playing round after round of the 5 stages. If you're totally into the game, the learning only stops when you know every position of every opponent in the whole game and know how to deal with each one of them.

Note by Jens: I thought you had to tap the fire button each time to fire, but Robin told me you could also fire by just holding the fire button. And it goes much faster then tapping :)

Note by Robin: Though tapping does has it's functions! Precise firing to destroy enemy's in a certain order to get a higher score.