

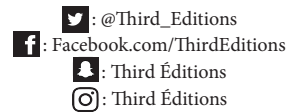
**THE LEGEND OF
DRAGON QUEST**

DANIEL ANDREYEV

For Lina.

The Legend of Dragon Quest
by Daniel Andreyev
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This educational work is Third Éditions' tribute to the *Dragon Quest* game series.

The author presents an overview of the history of the *Dragon Quest* game in this one-of-a-kind volume that lays out the inspirations, the context and the content of these titles through original analysis and discussion.

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THE LEGEND OF DRAGON QUEST





TABLE OF CONTENTS

07	FOREWORD
09	PREFACE
017	INTRODUCTION
025	▲ CHAPTER I — YÛJI HORII, THE MANGA HERO
041	▲ CHAPTER II — ORIGINS
055	▲ CHAPTER III — THE ROTO TRILOGY
067	▲ CHAPTER IV — THE TENKÛ TRILOGY
079	▲ CHAPTER V — THE SONY ERA
097	▲ CHAPTER VI — DRAGON QUEST, TOGETHER
117	▲ CHAPTER VII — DRAGON QUEST XI: ECHOES OF AN ELUSIVE AGE
131	▲ CHAPTER VIII — DRAGON QUEST AND ITS SPIN-OFFS
149	▲ CHAPTER IX — MUSIC, CHORDS AND DISSONANCE
163	▲ CHAPTER X — DRAGON QUEST, HERITAGE
173	CONCLUSION
181	BIBLIOGRAPHY
189	AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

HERE BE DRAGONS

I was a latecomer to *Dragon Quest*. In Japan this videogame series is now, after decades of success, a part of the culture—but for a European like me it has always felt much more exotic than that. Many of the early entries I played on Nintendo DS in the mid-2000s, decades after their original release. These were not just wonderful videogames but archaeological treasures, restored for new players and—thanks to the localizations—made new once again.

Dragon Quest as a whole I leave to this book's author, the heroic and hardy Daniel Andreyev. I first met Daniel in Japan and he regaled me with endless detail about all sorts of Japanese games, but even then, his passion for *Dragon Quest* stood out, and it is a series that rewards passion. These worlds are built to be poured-over, and luxuriated in, forever rewarding their most curious and dedicated players.

There are a few minor observations I would make about *Dragon Quest*. The first time these games struck me as special was around a decade ago, and the reason was a specific translation for English-speaking regions. *Dragon Quest IV* was re-released for Nintendo DS in 2007, and its localization used a total of 13 different English dialects to diversify the towns: you begin the game listening to Scottish accents, soon enough meet Bristolians, and even bump into English speakers with French accents. This was a new interpretation of the old game, replacing an earlier localization. It got some criticism.

But it really brought that world to life again, and made these places seem bustling and distinct. I live near Bristol so it was stunning to see that particular accent represented in this world, and the effort sometimes required to understand what characters were saying—you'd almost have to read the lines phonetically—felt to me like an accurate reflection of travelling to remote places within your own country, where your countrymen's accents can be hard to keep up with.

This is also a striking example of how the series has been changed over its history for new audiences. A few years later saw the release of *Dragon Quest IX: Sentinels of the Starry Skies*, designed for the ground-up for the Nintendo DS, and released swiftly afterwards in the west. Here was a completely modern *Dragon Quest* and to this day I've never had another experience like it: where the other games in the series are grand single player adventures, here you could play online with others and do almost everything together.

THE LEGEND OF DRAGON QUEST

Dragon Quest IX became a lunchtime game for myself and my workmates, played religiously every day for months and often with sessions stretching off into the evenings. We would go on quests together, take down huge monsters and bag great loot, but what kept it appealing for so long was the joy of adventuring with friends. Where *Dragon Quest* had always meant solo play, with this it became a group endeavor and, in the way it bridged single player and multiplayer, felt like the future. *Dragon Quest X* would take this concept to an extreme by being fully online, though sadly this means it is yet to see a western release and may never.

Such are the frustrations of a western *Dragon Quest* fan. Often, we play the games years later, and surely few of us have managed to play them in anything like the original order of release. It is sometimes frustrating. But it also leads to unexpected oases, a break from the 'normal' life of a videogame obsessive. I recently returned to *Dragon Quest VIII*, which was re-released on the 3DS. In the era of *Breath of the Wild*, this early attempt at an open world couldn't help but feel at first a little bare. But I remembered more, and I stuck with it.

Soon I had been taken away, and it was not nostalgia. It was the beautiful overworld score of Koichi Sugiyama, elevating these flat plains and blue skies into something faintly paradisaical. The jaunty town themes and townspeople, who soon had me running every kind of errand. Toriyama's touching and hilarious character designs, from rough-and-tumble heroes to cackling rogues and everything in-between. The sometimes-pitiful enemies and jokey quests escalating into terrible foes and an epic journey, all stitched-together by Yuji Horii to feel like your own awfully big adventure.

Videogames are inseparable from technology, and as technology improves the classics of one age fade away. *Dragon Quest* continues to survive and thrive because of the quality of its craftsmanship. These are games made by masters. However and whenever we get them, they shine like jewels.

I can't think of a better companion for these adventures than Daniel. Enjoy the journey, and may the Goddess guide you.

Rich Stanton

RICHARD STANTON

One of the best writers in video game journalism, Richard Stanton is a true veteran who has done the rounds of the British press from *Edge* magazine to *The Guardian*, *Eurogamer*, *IGN* and *Rock Paper Shotgun*. He is the author of *A brief history of Video Games*, a book which traces the epic history of video games throughout the ages. Today he works for *Kotaku UK*.

THE LEGEND OF DRAGON QUEST

PREFACE

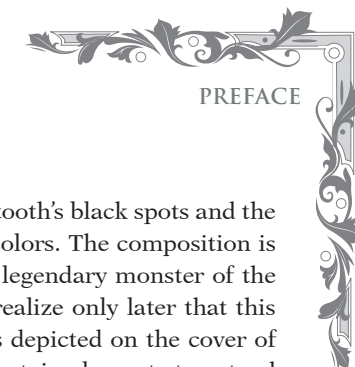


SIMPLICITY has almost ceased to exist and attempting to explain soon becomes a nightmare. We lose ourselves in metaphors and synonyms when everything is there, before our eyes, even in video games. So let's begin with the fragrance of nostalgia, because that is what I like and that is the very heart of *Dragon Quest*.

It was a summer's day in 2000 in Japan. Regulars say that summer is not the best season for visiting because of the heat. And they are right. Everyone is trying to get out of the city, which has become a furnace. We are nothing more than pools of sweat, wandering from one air-conditioned shop to another. But back then, I had a very good reason for being in Tokyo. To be precise, it is August 26, in Akihabara, and the queues are growing longer in the video games district. Reservations are not commonplace in the *kombini*, Amazon is not the huge international distributor that we now know, so it is still worth waiting outside. Pre-3G and smartphone Japan was a totally different country.

Seikimatsu. A feeling often experienced by regular visitors to Japan. It describes the impression of the end of an era. A nation condemned to perpetual reconstruction by nature itself. And in this odd moment, there is a sense that this is also the last major release of a video game, an event capable of bringing so many people together. A few months previously, for PlayStation 2, helicopters were hovering over the district. The queues wind around buildings, into the park behind the department stores. Incidentally, the park with its basketball court no longer exists, because things always have to change. Soon, people won't even have to leave their homes. So this August 26, 2000 is a celebration: the arrival of *Dragon Quest VII* for PlayStation. On the sidewalk, a camera moves towards me, delighted to find a *gaijin*. *Dragon Quest* is still an all-Japanese phenomenon, enjoying only a tiny speck of success in the West, dating back to the NES era. When PlayStation 2 came out, foreigners flooded into Akihabara to buy their many consoles, but by August, they had vanished, as if they had melted in the sun. The huge camera turns its lens towards me and asks why I'm here and what I think of *Dragon Quest*. Totally alone and not yet used to TV, in a language I do not yet master, I mumble out some kind of vapid answer. I think I said something like "Because it's brilliant." Wow, well done.

That evening, in the little business hotel where I was staying that time, in a minute and not particularly comfortable room, I switched on the TV. Young tourists may not realize this but then, almost all hotels charged for use of the TV. Every set had a coin slot. A hundred yen for one hour. An evening in front of the TV for the price of ramen, roughly. That night, I came across the release of *Dragon Quest VII* in Akihabara.



Much more interesting than me and my shy punchlines, the smiling, short-haired girl interviewed after me hesitated, thought for a moment, before saying: “*Dragon Quest* is actually very simple... fundamental even,” as if she had drawn from her own memories, her own nostalgia, to answer the journalist. She was quite right, *Dragon Quest*, a simple video game, connects primarily with the eternal child that resides inside us.

While I was writing this book, a close friend sent me the new advert for the release of *Dragon Quest XI*. He added a cheeky: “The campaign for your book’s not bad.” The advert states: “And so we became heroes.” There are *Dragon Quest* players of all ages, using all kinds of consoles. The ad starts with the same familiar fanfare found in all the episodes. All players, children, teens, adults, are represented from the salaryman rushing home to finish his session to the kid dreaming of teleportation, from the guy waiting in the rain for a new episode to be released to the girl studying, with a handwritten note pinned to the wall: “No *Dragon Quest* until exams are over,” from school kids reading the guide-book during recess to mom demanding that the console be switched off for dinner. This advert is accurate in so many ways, even down to the accidental unplugging that we have probably all experienced! This series, more than any other, invites nostalgia. These two minutes remind us of who we are at a specific moment, where we come from and what brings us together.

This is where I come from. My first *Dragon Quest* was *V*. I still remember its crushed cardboard box. The logo caught my eye in the aisles of a second-hand game store in République, the video games district in Paris, especially in the 1990s. At the time, France was all about *Dragon Ball Z*. Fans everywhere were seeking out even the most trivial representation of Son Gokû and his family. The Internet as we know it did not exist. We were alert for news. We would try to piece together bits of the coming story with the first *shitajiki*¹ or a simple picture from a magazine, and let our imaginations run wild. The cover of the fifth volume represented so much: an invitation to travel, a long quest and a love story. The torn clothes and walking stick of the main character suggest a complicated journey. The cape recalls the post-apocalyptic costumes of *Fist of the Northstar*, while the hat, a kind of wound turban, is a direct reference to Son Gokû’s clothes when he comes back as an adult from a long training session. The unique style of Toriyama is most obvious in the faces of the two heroes, gazing out towards the horizon, haircuts very reminiscent of Yamcha and Bulma. The sabretooth, which we assume to be both aggressive and loyal, reminds us of Cringer, the fighting companion of He-Man in *Masters of the Universe*. The little dragon makes me think of Lockheed, Kitty Pryde’s pet in *X-Men* and, let’s be honest here, who doesn’t like baby dragon mascots? The range of colors reflects the good taste of Toriyama’s beautiful

1. Literally “under-sheets,” these document holders were made of plastic whose flexibility and transparency varied according to the versions. Rarely used in offices, they are generally sought out by collectors for their illustrations and the series from which they are taken.

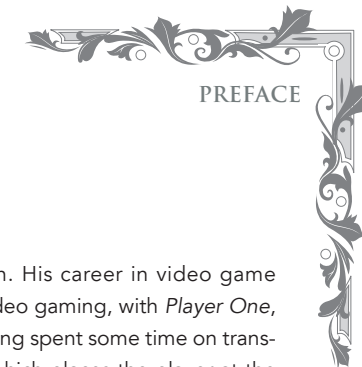
drawings from those years. The balance between the sabretooth’s black spots and the white of the hero’s tunic is sublime, enhancing the other colors. The composition is also perfect. At the foot of the main character, Slime, the legendary monster of the series, adds a comical aspect to the illustration. I would realize only later that this was the first time that the “Pikachu of *Dragon Quest*” was depicted on the cover of a game of the series. Akira Toriyama took care to allow certain elements to extend slightly beyond his frame. The picture makes perfect use of the vertical format of Super Famicom cartridges, which were original at a time when most were horizontal. Even today, I still think that it is one of the most beautiful video game illustrations ever.

And so, I purchased a game for its cover. It was an impulse buy, a bit like choosing games for the screenshots on the back of the box. Of course, back then, with less information available and less experienced sales staff, that was what we often did. I could go on with the illustration of the instructions, which shows the same hero as on the cover, but younger, in the company of a mustached, square-built chap who, at first glance, appears to be his father.

As soon as I got home, I slid the cartridge into my console. And then, fantasy became reality. In 1992, *Dragon Quest V* was an RPG that was somewhat dull to watch. As was often said, “It arrived a generation too late.” The graphics were not that different from those of the old NES. A lot of imagination was required to see the little splotches of pixels as the brave traveler depicted on the game cover. But in spite of the not-so-exciting first impression, I persisted. What made me persevere at first was the prospect of a story that covered several generations. *Phantasy Star III: Generations of Doom* was already available on Megadrive, proposing the exhilaration of an epic poem, relayed over several decades. The *Dragon Quest V* adventure relates a long family saga covering more than half a century. I did not know then that the *Dragon Quest* series was based on the traditional pattern of the “elected hero,” like Avatar, the main character of *Ultima*.

I then bought the guide books from a Japanese bookshop in downtown Paris, partly for the same reason as I had bought the game: beautiful illustrations. These proved vital considering the laborious and complicated nature of certain passages. My Japanese was very rudimentary then, but I had faith: only a short time before, I had managed to finish *Breath of Fire* in Japanese. Even so, you had to be keen to get through *Dragon Quest V*. Paradoxically, with today’s enthusiasm for retro-gaming, it would go down quite well.

Even with only limited knowledge of Japanese and somewhat difficult technical conditions, the story was very well told. This was perhaps what surprised players most. *Dragon Quest V* is a large family cycle of emotions, as transparent as an epic tale by Alexandre Dumas, the author of famous works such as *The Three Musketeers*. In the end, I was lucky that my first taste of the series was this excellent episode, since *VI* was far more extravagant, with its tales of parallel universes and heroes traveling on flying beds. A slightly puzzling game, but not without levity nor offbeat humor. One of the most emotional moments of *Dragon Quest V* is when we end up going back in time to change the past, thus saving the future. The time travel theme has been so



often used in science fiction, particularly during the 1980s, that it should have left me impassive. It was not even the first time I had experienced it in a video game. But this adventure, with its simple graphics and persistent melodies, glanced lightly upon feelings that leave no one unmoved. “What would I have done differently if I could have changed things” is a very common concept used in fiction, from *A Distant Neighborhood* by Jirô Taniguchi to the *Quantum Leap* series. Well-told, it is so simple and so effective that it affects each and every one of us.

It was also around about then that my father would come into my room to see what I was up to. I was always playing *Dragon Quest*. He laughed at me, at my game and its characters who were following each other around. It even led to him coming up with a silly nickname for RPGs. As a true descendant of the Russian intelligentsia, he hated video games. Totally unyielding. I never managed to explain what I got from those hours spent glued to my screen. Since then, I have wanted to share the things I love. In my work, I try to understand why a work can create an emotion, convey something. And so, I will not fail you.

As I bring this preface to its conclusion, I am celebrating twenty years as a journalist and twice that in years. It just so happens that *Dragon Quest* is also celebrating its thirtieth anniversary. So many reasons to celebrate with a book.

If you are reading this today, I would like to thank you for your confidence. I am also counting on you, assuming that you know what an RPG is. And that you have heard of Akira Toriyama. The purpose of this book is not to review all the *Dragon Quest* games. I have no intention of summarizing the sometimes bizarre adventures that players can encounter, or of reviewing the characters of every episode. Do not expect a full alphabetical list of all the monsters either—that would bore the both of us. The same applies to details of sales and versions, listed line by line on *Wikipedia*. This book is not an almanac — there are plenty of perfectly good official Japanese publications for that. I cannot illustrate my ideas either, which makes the job somewhat tricky.

What has always interested me in video game journalism is not “How many levels,” “How many weapons” or “How many characters can you play.” The real question is why. This book looks at “Why *Dragon Quest*?” My goal is to describe the creation and development of a series, a legend, a commercial success, a sociological phenomenon, and my private passion. In short, I aim to get you interested and entertain you.

“Simplicity,” as Bruce Lee said, “is the key to brilliance.” In the simplest manner possible, I therefore invite you to join me in the imaginary world of *Dragon Quest*.

DANIEL ANDREYEV

Daniel Andreyev is an author and journalist of Russian origin. His career in video game journalism began twenty years ago, during the golden years of video gaming, with *Player One*, *Consoles +* and *Animeland*, with a particular interest in Japan. Having spent some time on translation, he is now part of the *New Games Journalism* movement, which places the player at the heart of the video game experience. He produces the *After Hate* and *Super Ciné Battle* podcasts. He also trades memories with his friends in *Gaijin Dash*, the *Gamekult* show on Japanese video games. He is a fan of far too many things to list them all here. But when he is not writing, not watching a movie, not reading comics and graphic novels, not climbing mountains or exploring ruined buildings, he might be cooking, exercising or dreaming of one day owning a dog.