




Katamari Damacy Rolls Up to Be Sky-High

Katamari Damacy has no enemies. It has no trustworthy companions or nefarious villains. There is no journeying, war-making, or unraveling of mysteries. There is no combat, weaponry, or violence. There is no health, rejuvenation, and or death. There are no resources, upgrades, or special abilities. There is no money, experience, or character advancement. Despite this, Namco's *Katamari Damacy* for the PS2 may be one of the best games of recent times. 


Instead of the aforementioned, all you do in *Katamari Damacy* is roll around a ball. The premise is that the King of All Cosmos has accidentally destroyed all the stars in the sky, and you, the Prince, must replace them. To accomplish this, you are given a magically adhesive ball called a *katamari* and must gather up objects on Earth which will form new stars. Initially, the *katamari* is small and limited to picking up thumbtacks, blueberries, and pieces of chalk. As you roll up more and more objects into the *katamari*, it increases both in size and in its capability of rolling up larger objects, including shoes, chairs, people, trees, buildings, and eventually landmasses.


While a game based on the concept of rolling around a sticky ball might seem overly simplistic when sitting next to the MMORPG's and war simulations on the shelf, *Katamari Damacy*'s simplicity is actually its principle appeal. It takes this simplicity to a childlike level of both innocence and surreality, which is immediately evident from the gameplay. The activity of picking up anything and everything practically lends itself to wreaking havoc, and experiencing the immense freedom provided by the game in this respect is extremely pleasurable. In fact, this childlike philosophy is present throughout *Katamari Damacy* and is, perhaps unexpectedly, at the heart of what makes the game so endearingly fun. 

The consistently childlike aesthetic is one notable example of this. The various objects that can be picked up are all subject to a relatively low polygon count, resulting in stiff blocky shapes, a far cry from the graphical realism of other games running on the same technology. However, the art direction clearly

intended to eschew such realism for a more cartoonish aesthetic, as evidenced by the use of flat, saturated colors. In addition, the low polygon count per object allows the game to render an absolutely staggering number of objects once the *katamari* starts getting humongous, creating a sense of fantastic wonder.  All along, the insanely catchy soundtrack (I'm still humming it), which includes a song for children's choir, and the intuitively simple controls reminiscent of remote-controlled toy cars are gentle reminders to take it easy and have fun.


While the game's aesthetic sets a constant carefree mood, it is the attribute of size, a recurring motif, that gives form to this childlike experience's fun factor. Size immediately defines the role of a child for the player. You, the Prince, stand at a miniscule height of five centimeters, a speck on the screen when the camera later zooms out to accommodate the *katamari*'s size. On the other hand, the King of All Cosmos is a towering figure¹ who employs the royal "We" in speech. He often upbraids you for offering him a *katamari* that is too small, blaming your own height. The nature of this rather humorously dysfunctional father-son relationship clearly caricatures the child's common desire to be larger, believing that size is proportional to power.

Indeed, in *Katamari Damacy* size does represent power; the larger your *katamari*, the more objects you can pick up, ignoring the fact that the Prince stays small. And while it is possible to lose objects already in the *katamari* by colliding with objects that are too large, the stray objects never go far, and there is never a dearth of suitably-sized nearby objects. Consequently, the *katamari* almost constantly increases in size. In addition, the size motif measures progress through the game. The game consists of several stages, and generally the goal of each is to create a *katamari* of a certain size, e.g. to reach 6 meters. Since the stages set progressively larger goals, you experience an inherent sense of progress that is manifested in the ability to pick up larger and larger objects. The constant acquisition of new objects is a natural indication of your constant empowerment, and thus it is the metric of size that provides *Katamari Damacy*'s inescapable sense of visceral pleasure. 

While the gameplay  *Katamari Damacy* is first and foremost exceptionally fun, it also happens to be intensely funny at certain moments. It may not be surprising that the motif of size also motivates a

¹The sequel reveals him to be approximately continent-sized.

good portion of this humor. Additionally, the humor is often surrealist in nature, heavily making use of non sequitur and absurd juxtaposition. Most prominent is the royal family's visual stylization: the King, Prince, and secondary character the Queen are all humanoid, but their heads have the shape of horizontal cylinders extending out to the side over their shoulders. The *katamariis* also bizarrely cartoonish; it is generally round but features about twelve short, vividly colorful stumps or knobs protruding out, presumably related to its magical adhesion. Merely the initial sight of a green, cylinder-headed Prince pushing a knobby ball among mundane Earthly objects is enough to be absurdly humorous.

The subsequent efforts to collect these various objects result in similar non sequiturs that are reminiscent of surrealist art. Indeed, *Katamari Damacy* almost abuses the surrealist art technique of juxtaposing disparate objects outside of their context, and inside a giant *katamariis* certainly out of context for everything you pick up. Suddenly, objects such as watermelons, businessmen, and sperm whales lose their ordinary meanings when all that really matters is enlarging your *katamari* and putting the stars back into the sky. The fact that the game designers included an almost dizzying number of objects in the game only takes the statement that everything can be picked up to a ludicrous extreme. Whole circular rainbows, the negative space of ocean whirlpools, and clouds trying their best to rain downward can all be picked up. In the competitive multiplayer mode, the other player's *katamari* can be picked up. Even in the opening saved game selection screen, the saves are embodied by the phonemes "na," "m," and "co" of the game publisher's name Namco, and one of these must be picked up in order to load the corresponding save. 

The fact that virtually everything can and should be picked up is democratizing. All objects can be viewed as equally helpful to the *katamari* at various stages of its existence. The ubiquitous attribute of size merely places them in a natural order in which to be picked up, and this results in an amusing paradox. Under high magnification, an object's size is of utmost importance; a couple centimeters can mean the difference between adding it to your *katamari* or losing a couple objects from your *katamari*. On the other hand, ultimately size has little say on matters; all objects are potentially *katamari*-enlargers. This almost tyrannical adherence to the philosophy of the size motif is one of the reasons *Katamari Damacy* is so whimsically delightful. It imposes virtually no constraints, letting you approach the task however you like.

The world is just waiting to be rolled up.

In the end, it doesn't matter that *Katamari Damacy* doesn't have any of the gameplay constructs you'd expect from an ordinary game, or even an ordinary puzzle game. The fact that it features neither a deep, engaging plot nor immersive, graphical realism doesn't hurt it. The childlike innocence and near-nonsensicality is enough to carry this game where all you do is roll a sticky ball around. And the fact that a carefree title could be the best game in an industry that is trying to grow up may be a sign that we all need to just take it easy.

