

*Tao: The Way* is one of those rare old games that is so strange, so inexplicably weird, and almost completely unknown and undocumented that it is legitimately mysterious.

It's not genre defying like Capcom's cult hit *Sweet Home*, nor is it as kusoge as *Hoshi wo Miru Hito*, nor as genuinely good as *Lagrange Point*. As far as 8-bit JRPGs go, *Tao* is mediocre, sometimes frustrating and obtuse. But there's something special about *Tao* that could allow it to become a cult classic. It is a mythic piece of unexplainable software, as weird as something like *Monster Party* (before the prototype surfaced anyway).

*Tao: The Way* was developed by Pax Softonica (known for developing *Mother*, for Nintendo) and published by Vap. Neither of these connections offer any useful context. The mystery surrounding this game furthers.

Playing *Tao: The Way* is tedious. It is somewhat a *Dragon Quest* clone in the way that most post-*Dragon Quest* RPGs are, with town maps, world maps, and random encounters. Moving through cities is a hassle, as NPCs can block narrow passages, forcing players to wait or take a longer route, opening them up to the dangers of more random encounters.

Battles are an unintuitive mash of the A-button and that's it (there are a few items that can be used later in the game, including one that transforms the player into a demon). After a few of these, players' hands will definitely be tired.

The sole protagonist does level up and can purchase and equip a gun. Without grinding steadily with each new wave of stronger enemies, the game can become impossibly difficult. *Tao* has the barebones of what makes a JRPG, but these elements only get in the way, making the game a real chore.

When approaching something, either an object, location, or NPC, the player is given a series of redundant adventure game actions for interaction. Most NPCs speak in a series of nouns or short descriptions. If players are lucky, the NPC activates a flag for the story to move along.

While featuring many genre tropes, *Tao: The Way* is unlike the rest of its peers. Players first find themselves in a location seemingly set in the real world, what seems to be a pre-1900 version of somewhere in East Asia, except for the fact that there's a modern train station and a helipad in the starting town. Referring to the box artwork, players see an Akira Toriyama reject standing next to some train tracks with a tyrannosaurus-rex (!). In better scans of the artwork, there appears to be a smog-covered city in the background.

Digging a bit further, the game seems to take place not in the past, but in the future, making *Tao* more similar to the *Megami Tensei* series than anything else, a spiritual science fiction narrative full of demons and pseudo-religious dogma.

The first five minutes of the game has players carrying an old woman to a Buddhist shrine, where she turns into a demon, steals a scroll, turns into a giant, then disappears. While the monks philosophize on the meaning of being, the head priest decides to send the protagonist on a quest to locate the eight elements of the trigram. The priest gives the protagonist his element, a block of wood. Alright. Not even *Tao*, as different as it is, is immune to the collecting orbs JRPG trope, it seems.

There's also a strange meteorite that crashed into town (the developers of *Mother* made this, huh?), which seems to be at the center of the plot. The protagonist returns to town, where the train station is now open, which is arbitrarily convenient.

These arbitrary story flags plague the game, more so than any of its other JRPG peers (which means it must be pretty bad). The first few moments in the game are confusing, but easy enough to trudge through. Later, when random encounters become a thing, in towns and on the world map, talking to every NPC again and again becomes a real chore. Due to this, a guide is recommended. One is provided by fan translator snark, which is one of the only pieces of info on the internet about this game.

Following the guide, players will quickly reach the point where snark writes "Ride the dinosaur to Moskva." Two things: Moskva seems to be referring to Moscow, Russia, which gives a bit more context to the game, and two, uh, the protagonist rides a dinosaur to Moscow. For a game with a dinosaur on the cover, it's hilarious that the dinosaur is merely a mode of transportation, Flintstone-style, that the player accesses through purchasing a train ticket. Nowhere else in the game does this tone of wacky science fiction exist.

In Moskva, players visit a cathedral, and there are NPCs that complain about donating to the church when they don't believe in God. The plot spirals out of control quickly, as a hunter hoarding a pile of cash like in *Breaking Bad*, a fight with a three-eyed lion, something about constellations, and rumors of an evil billionaire in a tower lead the player to Crosston, the "Christian town" (get it?). Here, the "Christian" NPCs are contrasted strongly with the Buddhists met earlier, and it's difficult to tell with the slight dialogue, but the NPCs appear to be intolerant of the other religions.

What follows is a series of back and forth fetch quests and event flagging between the different locations. There are a handful of boss battles with enemies such as Hindu god "Ganesh" and the "Cosmos God Mochona," a god that a cult in the game worships. At some point, the helipad becomes active and players can ride a pink pterodactyl around.

Eventually, the protagonist meets Ridley, the billionaire in the tower, who demands some sacred items. This quest ends up getting the protagonist thrown in prison, where he shoots police officers with an automatic weapon (if he bought one earlier). It's a lot to take in, and players have to wonder how heavy this game is actually supposed to be.

While collecting these items, the protagonist revives a mummified Buddhist deity, who explains that he was mummified by his followers because they did not like his teachings, making the religion a total sham. It's one of the few truly interesting and fleshed out scenes in the game, and even the monks break down in tears.

The Tokyo world map is one of the largest areas in the game, and it recalls wandering Tokyo in the *Shin Megami Tensei* Super Famicom game (a compliment). Here, NPCs gossip about the cult and the player learns of a yakuza gang. The game seems to be expounding some religious commentary, but it's buried deep.

As more details of the world's cosmology are revealed, *Tao* hints at having Yiguandao themes. Yiguandao (meaning the Consistent Way) is a real world Chinese religion that was outlawed in China in the 1940s, but still exists today and has many followers in Taiwan.

A monk in *Tao* describes at length the Wusheng Laomu, or Unborn Ancient Mother, making this possibly the only Yiguandao video game in existence. Later, the mummified deity explains that all modern religions are warping the truth, and that Raum (the game's version of the Unborn Ancient Mother), who gave birth to all souls, is the only path to salvation.

Unlike almost all other JRPGs of the 1990s, *Tao: The Way* has an entirely pro-organized religion theme. Without completely spoiling the ending, *Tao* is consistent in its view of Laomu. While most JRPGs give

the player the okay to fight creator gods and place the power of friendship over the power of faith, *Tao* seems to exist to spread the message of Laomu. It's difficult to call the game propaganda, but it does make one wonder how seriously the developers were when writing the plot. It recalls *Xenogears*' relationship with Gnosticism, but the text is so slight, the lines between theme and propaganda are impossible to distinguish.

Like *Mother*, *Tao: The Way* has a varied and complex, real world-ish plot, more so than any other game on the console. The music is a mixed bag, with the catchy/repetitive/mysterious crunch of the world map theme being a highlight.

If nothing else, *Tao: The Way* can be praised for its assorted 8-bit sprites, interesting set pieces, and, of course, insane religious conspiracy plot. It's moody, potentially controversial, and clunky. Those interested in the *XRZ* series will find something of value in *Tao*.

The game's page on ROMHacking.net describes *Tao: The Way* as having themes in common with philosopher Umberto Eco, mystic Edgar Cayce, occultist Helena Blavatsky, Nostradamus, and *the Matrix*. *Tao* is, arguably, in some obscure, 8-bit way, sort of related to these items (not so much *the Matrix*), but its relationship with the Yiguandao religion is on the nose.

In a lot of ways, *Tao* doesn't quite live up to its name: a sci-fi Taoist Famicom JRPG with cults and real world ties should be mind blowing and completely mystical, but most of its presentation is mediocre and uninspired. Still, it's one of the Famicom's stranger footnotes, and definitely worth a playthrough.