

Metal Saga Interview (IGN)

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With every passing year, the once verdant world became increasingly threatened by the choking pall of pollution. As the situation grew dire, humanity made the choice to place its trust in science to address the problem. In due course, it was decided to construct a massive supercomputer sophisticated enough to handle the task. Unfortunately, the machine, named Noah, came to the conclusion that the best course of action would be to eradicate its creators, who were also responsible for the contamination in their environment. To this end, it quickly proceeded to design and produce a lethal array of weapons and monsters. Civilization fell in a matter of mere days, an event now known as the Great Destruction. However, some individuals did escape. Over time, they grew in numbers, built towns, salvaged whatever technology they could, and looked to fight back.

Expected to ship in North America next month, developer Success' Metal Saga takes place after the survivors have managed to destroy Noah. However, substantial numbers of his robotic minions remain at large, wreaking havoc and posing a constant danger. Using the most powerful weapons available to them, tanks, mankind's hunters must track down and eliminate these threats. Looking to follow in his father's footsteps, a young man readies himself to set out into the barren wasteland. Seeking to improve our knowledge of the title, we set out to learn as much as we could from regional publisher Atlus, which is in the final stages of localizing it from the original Japanese. It was our good fortune to find Assistant Marketing and PR Manager Zach Meston and QA Lead Mike Manzanares able and willing to answer our usual plethora of questions.

Jonric: To help put Metal Saga into perspective, can you provide a brief introduction to the underlying Metal Max property?

Zach Meston: Metal Max is most easily described as an RPG in which you roam a post-apocalyptic landscape and fight many mutated foes with a variety of big-assed tanks.

The original Metal Max was released for the Famicom - Japan's equivalent of the Nintendo Entertainment System - back in 1991. Success, the title's Japanese publisher, followed up with Metal Max 2 for the Super Famicom (Super NES), Metal Max Returns (a Super Famicom remake of the original Metal Max), and Metal Max Kai (a Game Boy Advance remake of Metal Max 2).

Metal Saga is the third original entry in the Metal Max franchise, and the first to be localized for North America, because we here at Atlus are crazy like that.

Jonric: To let our readers know how long they'll have to wait, what is the target North American ship date?

Zach Meston: We're shipping Metal Saga in mid-April, and we've got a tasty incentive to seduce RPG fans into pre-ordering. Plunk down your bling for Metal Saga, and get a playable demo of Steambot Chronicles abso-tootly free. (Only while supplies last, our lawyers have instructed us to mention.)

Jonric: What kind of RPG is Metal Saga, what type of gameplay can we expect, and what's most distinctive about it?

Zach Meston: Metal Saga is non-linear, turn-based, and offers an obscene amount of missions to complete and areas to explore. According to our testers, there are roughly 800 events in all. The Japanese strategy guide for Metal Saga rivals Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire for sheer beefiness, so I have no reason to doubt them.

What separates Metal Saga from other RPGs is primarily the aforementioned variety of big-assed tanks, but it's also got a great (T-rated) sense of humor. I'd compare the overall flavor of the script to the PlayStation versions of Lunar, if that rings your readers' collective bells.

Jonric: What's has happened to create the situation that exists when the game begins? And are you willing to reveal anything about the story element?

Mike Manzanares: We don't want to give away too much of the plot, but here's the prologue, which I've shamelessly stolen from our promotional materials.

Desperate to find a way to save the earth from pollution, mankind created a gigantic supercomputer and named it Noah. Noah's solution, however, was to exterminate its creators. In a matter of days, civilization fell to terrifying weapons and monsters created by Noah. This cataclysmic event came to be known as the Great Destruction.

As the years passed, the number of human survivors grew, slowly but steadily. They formed villages and towns, living off of technology that they were able to salvage from the piles of wreckage.

Among the survivors were those who rose up to fight Noah's robotic henchmen. To track down and eliminate these threats to humanity, they utilized the most powerful weapons still operable after the Great Destruction - tanks! As a sign of respect, people nicknamed them "hunters."

Noah, the cause of the Great Destruction, was in fact destroyed by one such hunter. However, its ruthless offspring still roamed the world, striking fear in people's heart.

Now, a young man prepares to set foot into the deadly desert wasteland to make a name for himself, as did his father, a veteran hunter...

Jonric: While we know the gameworld is a post-apocalyptic one, what are the various locations like? For instance, what are some particularly interesting or unusual ones?

Mike Manzanares: Some of the stranger locations in Metal Saga, according to an extensive three-minute poll of testers Sam and Jeff, are as follows:

"A desert inhabited by ghosts of tanks from an ancient war... an ancient town where the inhabitants worship snake gods and live without the interference of technology that caused the Great Destruction... a fully functional missile silo... a town of people who hate tanks sitting on top of a town of people who love tanks... an old folks' home where the old folks attack you in mech suits... a bus stop in the middle of nowhere."

Jonric: Without giving away any major secrets, is there more you can say about the player character and his background?

Zach Meston: As blurbed above, the player character is the son of a hunter who hopes to follow his father's career path. (Although that's not entirely true - the game's goofiest ending is triggered if the PC heeds his mother's advice and becomes a mechanic instead of a hunter.) Other than that, he's a bit of a blank slate, which makes sense, given the game's multiple endings and non-linear structure.

Jonric: How about companions? Are there characters that can join the hero to form a party, and how many can do so at one time?

Zach Meston: The PC can be joined by several other characters and dogs (!) during the course of the game, though the adventuring party is limited to the PC, one mechanic, one soldier and one dog. You can switch various peeps and puppies in and out of the party as the mood strikes you.

In alphabetical order, the major supporting characters are:

- Alpha. Affable android.
- Charlene. Gorgeous gunslinger.
- Kariya. Malcontent motorhead.
- Misha. Friendly fixer.
- Rashid. Sublime samurai.

Jonric: What kind of character development system will we see in Metal Saga? Are there many different attributes, classes and skills?

Mike Manzanares: Metal Saga has a fairly simple group of stats: character class, experience level, experience points, hit points, attack rating, defense rating and driving rating. Dogs get a Coat stat instead of driving; this determines their bravery in battle.

The only category that really needs to be explained is class. There are four categories into which a character can fall: Hunter, Soldier, Mechanic and Dog.

Hunters are primarily tank-drivin' folk. Soldiers are graced with plenty of attack skills, either gun-based (Charlene) or sword-based (Rashid). Mechanics have support and repair skills. Everyone can drive a tank except a Dog, which can't be directly controlled in battle, but which will kick several hundred pounds of butt on your behalf.

Jonric: Is it correct to assume that combat is the core gameplay element? And what is the nature of the battle system?

Zach Meston: Turn-based combat is the central gameplay element of Metal Saga, but it's pleasantly brisk, I swear - minimal loading times, quick animations, et cetera. The boss battles are understandably epic, but there's enough variety in the attacks of the bosses to hold a player's interest.

There are nine selectable options in the battle sequence, conveniently arranged in a three by three grid. From upper-left to lower-right, they are:

- Skill. Use a character's skill. All characters have multiple skills.
- Item. Use an item for healing, tank repair, et cetera.
- Ammo. Reload a vehicle.
- Main. Fire a vehicle's main gun.
- Sub. Fire a vehicle's secondary gun. Weaker than the main gun, but with more or unlimited ammo.
- SE. Fire a vehicle's "special equipment" weapon. Usually an energy-bolt thingy.
- Drive. Get in or out of a vehicle.
- Defend. Guard against attacks.
- Flee. Get the heck outta Dodge.

Jonric: How substantial is the mini-game portion of Metal Saga? How many are there, and

how varied are they?

Zach Meston: There are a dozen mini-games, and they're surprisingly entertaining; not a throwaway in the bunch, if you ask me, but keep in mind I'm terribly biased. I'll go through 'em in no particular order, because I'm also terribly disorganized.

Four gambling games: video poker, blackjack, roulette and slots. All of 'em are effective ways to slowly lose all the money you've earned in battle.

Number Hunter. Much like the oldie but goodie board game, Mastermind. You get five chances to guess a three-digit number.

Frog Race. Bet on one of six frogs and loudly cheer as it leaps its watertight arse off.

Crossfire. A shoot-'em-up in which you steer a tank back and forth at the bottom of the screen, blasting enemy tanks, avoiding incoming shells, and trying not to blast ambulances and civilians. You'll end up shooting the poor bastards anyway, of course.

Dance Lesson and Muscle Training. Games in which you memorize and attempt to duplicate an ever-longer sequence of D-pad presses.

Dog Fight. A mini-game in which you pit your party's attack dog (which has an enormous weapon strapped to its back) against a series of five randomly chosen but increasingly stronger enemies.

An unnamed game (we call it "Get To Arthur" in-house) that's an explosive version of the kids' favorite Red Light, Green Light. Try to walk forward on a red light and you'll be blown into the air like you just don't care.

Another unnamed game (we call it The Drinking Game) in which one of your party members chugs as many bottles of milk, soda and vinegar (!) as he or she can manage in one minute. Don't chug too fast or your character executes a lovely spit-take.

Jonric: How many types of vehicles will be available, and to what extent will they be customizable and upgradeable? And do the characters also have personal weapons and armor?

Mike Manzanares: There are 19 vehicles that the player can purchase, and 10 "rentals". You can customize the heck out of the former - detailed paint jobs, upgradeable weapons and armor, et cetera.

Vehicles are always more powerful than characters, but there are plenty of areas where vehicles can't enter, so it's important to keep upgrading your personal weapons and armor. There are some rare and unique goodies in addition to the standard issue items.

Jonric: Referring to the earlier mention of 800 events, what are these like, how are they initiated, and do they involve defeating a wide variety of enemies?

Zach Meston: Metal Saga has 800 events, all of them optional: hunting outlaws, finding lost teddy bears, eating fried potatoes, collecting lenses, getting married, et al. An event is usually triggered by having a certain party member, talking to a certain person, or defeating a certain enemy.

Mike Manzanares: There are several hundred "regular" enemies, and 40 bosses, all of which are freaky-deaky. The first boss, an animated and semi-intelligent pile of refuse, sets the tone.

Jonric: What are the notable aspects of the game's graphics? And do you feel the visuals constitute a strength?

Zach Meston: I can't speak for Success, but I can say that I'm impressed with Metal Saga's engine; it's colorful, it's smooth, and it lets you zoom in and out (outside of battle). The graphics aren't going to win any awards, much as my PR weasel self wishes they would, but they're consistently above average. And the "bazooka dogs," as we call 'em around here, are adorable. Blowing the crap out of someone with a rocket launcher-toting St. Bernard

Jonric: What can we expect in terms of the music tracks in Metal Saga? And how much voice acting will we hear?

Zach Meston: Metal Saga's very sweet animated intro movie (which combines CG and hand-drawn art) is accompanied by two minutes of righteous butt-rock, while the rest of the game is roughly divided between rock and lounge music R&B. There's also a jukebox in the game that lets you listen to most of the musical selections.

Metal Saga doesn't have any voice acting, and while we thought about adding speech to the North American version, the added time and expense wouldn't have been worth it. Besides, the text and graphics already do a great job of drawing the player into the gameworld; there was no need to embellish it.

Jonric: Can you tell us a bit about the developer, Success, and the Metal Saga team? And what is Atlus' role in bringing the game to North America?

Zach Meston: Success is a developer and publisher located in Japan that does all kinds of games: shooters (Cotton series), budget games (SuperLite 2000 series), puzzle games, RPGs, et cetera. Several of the principal developers from the Metal Max series worked on Metal Saga, which gives it a pleasantly old-school vibe despite its new-school appearance.

Atlus' role regarding Metal Saga is the double duty of localization and publishing. The localization process was butter-smooth (as localizations go), and our translators and editors did a great job of bringing the game's surprisingly light-hearted attitude to an American audience. Every tester in the office has been quoting dialogue from the game, which I take as a good sign.

Jonric: Are there other important aspects, features et al that you'd like to note for our readers, anything you'd like to tell them, or something you want to ask?

Zach Meston: Man, if we haven't covered it all by now, we're doomed. :) Thanks to RPG Vault for conducting this exhaustive / exhausting interview, to our QA department for being a wealth of information, and to our fans for their wonderful support. We hope you enjoy playing Metal Saga as much as we've enjoyed bringing it to you.

We've unquestionably enjoyed learning about Metal Saga from Zach Meston and Mike Manzanares of North American publisher Atlus. The company has established an exceptional track record of localizing solid RPGs we might not otherwise have the chance to play. We offer our thanks for that in general, and also specifically for giving us plenty of reasons to look forward to this game when it ships; happily, it looks like this will be within only a few weeks.

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