Astro Boy reborn as a game
Matt Slagle
The Australian
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Tetsum Atom is a butt-kicking, pint-sized hero that wants nothing more than peace between humans and robots. More than a half-century after debuting in Japanese comic books, "Astro Boy" — as he's known outside of Japan — is starring in two new video games from Sega. "Astro Boy: Omega Factor" for Nintendo's Game Boy Advance is an enjoyable title that pushes the little handheld game device to its limits. There's also a mediocre PlayStation2 version, simply called "Astro Boy."

Astro Boy has appeared in many cartoons and comic books since he was created by Osamu Tezuka in 1952. The wide-eyed robot, coifed with a shiny head of slicked black hair, has a heart of gold and a childlike optimism that makes him very likable and a positive role model for kids.

Astro Boy can dole out some serious punishment when diplomacy fails. He boasts one million horsepower strength, his arms double as laser cannons, a machine gun sprouts from his back and he flies with the help of red boots that double as rockets.

The "Omega Factor" story covers Astro Boy's quest to uncover a plot to incite war between humans and robots.

The 40-plus levels have you running, jumping and flying around caverns, cities, even a futuristic Antarctica. The levels usually end in confrontations with giant "boss" monsters. It takes a full cache of weapons and plenty of finger dexterity to beat these super-sized, overpowering enemies that nearly fill the entire screen.

Between battles, there's scripted dialogue where you'll encounter a roster of friends, enemies and some characters between good and evil as the overarching story unfolds.

Meeting friend and foe is vital to boosting Astro Boy's "Omega Factor" — a sort of life force that lets him evolve his powers.

"Omega Factor" packs nicely drawn backgrounds, detailed animations and atmospheric effects on the Game Boy's diminutive color screen.

There's a trade-off, though: occasionally choppy gameplay. While dodging electrified floors and fighting robots in a steamy power plant, my Game Boy Advance SP was clearly overwhelmed as the game slowed noticeably.

After finishing "Omega Factor," I tried the PS2 version, where we finally see "Astro Boy" in three dimensions. Graphics aren't enough to help this one.

What could have been a great opportunity to let fans freely roam Metro City instead comes off as a thin ploy to sell more Astro Boy merchandise.

Without the licensed characters, you're left with a very average title: The very short game (I finished it in an afternoon) boils down to a series of increasingly tough fights.
In between, you can hunt for hidden collector cards (yawn), chat it up with the locals and smash the occasional pack of robots. You develop additional powers such as X-ray vision after beating a boss or completing some other task.

There's just nothing here that really stands out. The gameplay is average, as are the cartoonish graphics. The sound is nothing special and even the big, spectacular battles are extremely average.

Unless you're a big Astro Boy collector, I don't see any reason to plunk down $US40 ($56). The curious will probably have their fill after renting it for a few days.

"Omega Factor" is a far better deal at $US30 with its interesting story, colorful presentation and gameplay variety.

There's a positive message within these E-rated games as Astro Boy grapples with weighty issues such as human-robot racism and the meaning of life and death in a way that should please parents and engage children. Perhaps that's Astro Boy's greatest ability.

Three and a half stars out of four for "Omega Factor," two stars out of four for the PS2 version.

*The Associated Press*

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