FM5508 - CRITICAL APPROACHES

Textual Analysis on '*Ikaruga* (Treasure, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2008)'

Ikaruga is a spiritual sequel to the Treasure shoot-em-up release of '*Radiant Silvergun* (Treasure, 1998)' which was only released in Japan. Gone are the anime cutscenes and tangible story, instead its successor focused on tightening the in-game experience via other elements of presentation and clever mechanics all combining to create a beautifully crafted videogame. Fortunately Ikaruga has been granted a much more widespread audience across a total of four platforms over eight years. It was first released on Sega's NAOMI arcade machine in 2001, followed by a Dreamcast release in 2002. The game was ported over to the Nintendo Gamecube in 2003 and was available in Europe and America for the first time. 2008 saw the release of Ikaruga for the X-Box Live Arcade with high-definition graphics, online play and scoreboards. An option in the home versions allows the choice to play on an arcade-like vertical screen without the need for proportional borders that otherwise mar the edges of the screen - rotating the screen sideways though ninety degrees requires a compatible viewing platform though. This continues to promote Ikaruga as it was originally intended and presented in the arcades with an authentic vertically widescreen playing experience.

The game of Ikaruga is a vertical shooter where the player pilots a tiny ship and subsequently into many waves of enemy ships that attack. Staying alive is achieved by firing at all enemies on screen and evading their bullets in return, testing strong focus, attention and concentration. 'Switching' and 'chaining' are the two mechanical gameplay systems involved for progressing, and the presentation combines to set Ikaruga apart from many other shooters in the same genre.

Simple intuitive controls empower the player in a game that is easy to learn but difficult to master. The D-pad moves the ship, one button repeatedly fires the ships laser beam, one button flips the polarity and the final button is for a homing bomb of stored enemy energy absorbed from their fired energy. This stored absorbed energy powers up a gauge that can be unleashed at the touch of this button, giving additional firepower just when it is required at the most critical of moments or the most tactical.

The player can choose to engage in an 'easy', 'normal' or 'hard' game by selecting the setting at the Ikaruga title screen. In an 'easy' game enemy objects do not fire return energy upon their demise. In a 'normal' game, enemies explode in a small shower of the colour they are if the player destroyed them with the same colour – hence making the enemy energy absorbed gauge fill up faster, but this a disadvantage to the player of levels where both colours of white and black are often on the screen at the same time as navigation becomes much more complicated. A 'hard' game ensues all enemies shower a small collection of their bullets upon defeat regardless of the players polarity when the enemy was destroyed. Small differences across each of the five levels are also evident based on the difficulty setting of the game including different waves of enemies and harder bosses via more health with more varied and frequent attacks.

The game has other ways of dictating a difficulty level beyond the initial setting the player chooses that are familiar to all three settings. One hit kills an instance of the player's ship, where an absence of an initial shield (save for a few seconds of

invulnerability upon respawn) adds to the frenzied dodge factor mixed with the fact there are only a maximum of five available lives per credit. There are also no power-ups throughout a game, save for an extra life every 250,000 points. The home console conversions begin upon first boot with only three credits with each game engagement with further credits unlocked each hour of play (after seven hours 'Freeplay' is unlocked with unlimited credits), hence encouraging continued engagement as the game gets slowly easier and more manageable.

The innovative 'switching' mechanic is linked to the key overarching feature of polarity that is infused throughout the game. Everything in Ikaruga that can be destroyed (enemy ships, vehicles and blocks) has a bi-polar duality, either black or white and the player also has the ability to be either one of these black or white polarities. It is possible to switch at any time between the two colours – when you are the same colour as the enemy fire or beam energies the player has the ability to absorb their energy; this instant adjustment allows the player to change which objects pose a threat or not. In turn, the polarity of the player equates to the colour of the energy the player fires, and when an attackable object comes into fire then double damage is dealt to the object if the player is the opposing colour. Switching is a source to the games intensity, especially when there is a dense combination of both black and white bullets on screen.

'Chaining' is the game's way of introducing a further puzzle element; destroying enemies in groups of three of the same polarity accumulates the most points. Elaborate routes become a staple part of the gameplay upon repeat performances through the levels; the player can challenge themselves to kill enemies in just the right order to get a much bigger score. There is an exponential increase in points awarded for each 3-link pattern of enemies destroyed - up to an eight chain combo which is the maximum, where a bonus of 25600 points are then rewarded for every subsequent chain.

This chain based puzzle pattern recognition and optimum polarity switching are bound together hence rewarding recognition and circumvention of bullet patterns - an amalgamation of accuracy and a strategic creative memory are required to progress; frantic reflexes fuse with thoughtful logic and need adhering to if a player is to climb superior echelons of the high score table and stay alive. Practice is required to develop a deep knowledgeable understanding of each level and as each of the five levels lasts about five minutes long this happens with time investment. The short nature of the game is in high contrast to many other games so design is more refined and subject to scrutiny by a player – yet this is one of Ikaruga's key strengths. A condensing of the gameplay experience engulfs the player, constantly challenging them to perform better – with each subsequent level the need for switching becomes more regular and the paths to gain chains less clear. Indeed a strategy deployed is overwhelming the player with a difficult game, then a reward is inevitably their own sense of achievement in the face of sheer adversity. Though there are only five levels it is not unusual to play many games after in a quest to gain a higher score, or simply to enjoy the challenge of attempting to complete the game again. Salen and Zimmerman's suggest that 'players accept the rules of the game not in order to restrict pleasure, but instead to maximize it' (330)[1]– which is further developed by Kuklich when he suggests "the playability of a game is actually increased by this strategy of deferral, because it challenges the player to spend an increased amount of time playing the game' (241)[2]. This encompasses not only the unlocking of credits but other Easter Eggs in to be unlocked upon continuous play including an art gallery and

sound test in the Gamecube version, and 'Bullet Eater' and 'Prototype' modes in the Xbox release. Each of these give a new and interesting twist on the Ikaruga gameplay formula – Bullet Eater is a score table that rewards only the absorbing of energy and bullets without any actual fire from the player; Prototype limits the number of bullets a player can shoot to five hundred each round thus forcing further use of the homing bomb, instead of erratic and otherwise relentless laser fire. The latest release for the Xbox Live Arcade adds a replay download feature so players can compare their flights; this inclusion strengthens that Ikaruga has been devised through accurate design and requires skill to be played correctly. Rather than existing as a game to be played through for narrative value there is a firm communication from the developers that pleasure is to be found in practice and study of the reasoning behind the levels; why they have been structured the way they have, why certain enemies appear in certain places, why certain polarity energies are abundant in different areas. There is no random element to any of the design; pattern recognition is the key and a high score is always the goal.

As King and Krzywinska noted in *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders*

'Contextual associations are likely to slip furthest from view in extreme states of play, at its most heightened... Little perceptual or cognitive space may be left for awareness of context when gameplay is at its most fast and furious: when the player has to move fast to shoot or avoid being shot, especially when ammunition or health are low (the latter being when the stakes are highest, especially if a long stretch of the mission will have to be repeated in the event of death). Attention has to be paid, simultaneously to navigation, the interface providing a map that indicates the direction of the objective, the direction of enemy fire and the location of friendly and unfriendly forces'(66)[3].

That is to say Ikaruga uses this to its most extreme effect - there is little need for background story; although there is a story it was never even translated for the Gamecube release (it was hinted at in through the art gallery) and the Arcade, Dreamcast and Xbox only have level introductions that are on screen for a few seconds to provide a narrative framework. Too much structure of story could prove to detract from the engagement flow of immersion the game presents. The predecessor Radiant Silvergun is a much more story driven affair yet lacks this smooth proficiency of Ikaruga's bare mechanics as a consequence. The uncluttered information displayed on screen and the continuous vertical driving of the player allows constant concentration on defeating the enemy in front. This minimalist approach is reflected in the gender neutrality throughout the game with no domineering masculine or feminine traits to either player avatar or other graphic design. The advantage of non-human aesthetic and lack of obvious story outside the manual means there is no danger of repercussive issues in the social fields of politics, ethics, gender and identity or representation - one of Ikaruga's paradoxes is present when comparing this stripped down modesty to the volatile content of the game.

What amounts to a two-dimensional game uses a three-dimensional engine much like certain stages of its predecessor Radiant Silvergun; ships and scenery all erupt over different dimensions. The sound and music perfectly suit the rousing themes of the game - sound effects of engines rumbling, lasers firing, objects moving and colossal booming explosions of monolithic machines frame the players voyage. As some parts of the game's structure is a linear on-rails experience it is possible for the developers to fuse music perfectly with the action, allowing sweeping melodies that follow the interactive

action - an example is halfway through level three where the walls start to close in and the background theme raises an octave.

Very small cutscenes are deployed for dramatic effect when the level name fades upon the screen and shortly before and after the boss fights. These do not fracture the flow of the game as there is no cut to an external full motion video that would alter this flow; the same graphics are used in such a way that the linear and non-linear elements merge into one. The level titles themselves are stylishly displayed on screen with a philosophical musing; the text fading in and out for only a couple of seconds hence generating haste – the player must even read fast as well as play fast (image 1 below). The same applies to the few second short interludes before a boss is launched – the phrase 'WARNING: NO REFUGE' flashes on screen as an alarm wails, with a robotic voice reading out tiny descriptive text, adding to the sheer sense of overwhelming panic and velocity (image 2 below). These cutscenes evoke notions of postmodern semiotics as the literal text itself is the not the symbol that is read by the player - rather it is the accelerated editing fashion in which they are displayed that is used to designate the meanings of the signs.

Images 1 – An example of Chapter introductions and postmodern semiotics in Ikaruga.

Image 2 – Another example of postmodern semiotics in Ikaruga, this time of the warning before a boss encounter.

All elements of the level designs, from the smallest background component to the grand bosses, enemies and energy beams all have a fantastic anime influenced futurism aesthetic. This is displayed in a consistent style throughout the game; the closest comparison being the art of Masamune Shirow, especially the dystopian cyberdelic futures of '*Appleseed (1985)*' and '*Ghost In The Shell (1989)*', each saturated with atmosphere. Considering the freedom of simulated flight in Ikaruga it makes sense that the name itself means 'Mottled Dove' and each of the bosses are named after a species of bird - Chapter 1: Eboshidori, Chapter 2: Buppousou, Chapter 3: Shigi (miniboss), Uzura (boss), Chapter 4: Misago (the whole stage), Chapter 5: Tageri and then finally the extra-terrestrial Stone-Like[4].

The attention to level design throughout the players maximum half hour of gameplay extends to the games difficulty curve. Initially Ikaruga may seem to be lacking in a logical learning structure and aesthetic with the potential to be viewed as being mindlessly difficult and having a sporadically abstract mise en scene, yet closer inspection reveals a certain thread of progression weaved throughout the game. Chapter One (Ideal) introduces the player with wide-open spaces, trees to fly over and the Samurai inspired boss (image 3 below) is the most anthropomorphic of the battles to be fought whom has a sword and shield – not too unusual. Chapter Two (Faith) begins with an aerial dogfight over a city although the majority of the level takes place subterranean, evoking claustrophobia. The boss is much more complicated (see image 8 below), mirroring the levels concentration on player switching and duality. Chapter Three (Trial)

takes place amongst ancient temples wherein the first part emphasizes more on weaving between moving blocks with attached energy lasers, and the second part increases the pace and constricts the playing area. The boss is a giant rotating wheel where the player is tested on similar precision control of movement found in the level leading up to the battle (image 4 below). Chapter Four (Reality) is the boss – the whole level consisting of a monolithic satellite in the sky, culminating in a duel with the core (image 5 below). The main part of the level is completed via a sweeping across the screen from left to right as the satellite unleashes waves of opposing colours in a certain rhythm - the player must concentrate on this pulsing regularity to achieve completion. The final Chapter Five (Metempsychosis) is set in a dark blue cyber-mechanical hall where the final bosses await at the end in their own chambers (image 6 below). The level itself is a comparatively short sequence fashioned from mainly white enemies with an angelic aesthetic until the player reaches the bosses who seriously test every skill learnt thus far, especially switching and rhythmic firing of the homing bomb. The very final boss disables any player fire, so it is down to sixty tense seconds of avoiding and switching polarity to complete the game. Even though grimy engines burn and dilapidated warehouses have exploding cargo, what should be an exercise in grungy steam-punk artistic notion instead has this paradoxically elegant and clean Eastern 'Neo-Zen' visual design. By its nature as a shoot-em-up the player is involved in creating as much explosive carnage as possible, but instead of being about murder Ikaruga is renowned for its hypnotic beauty.
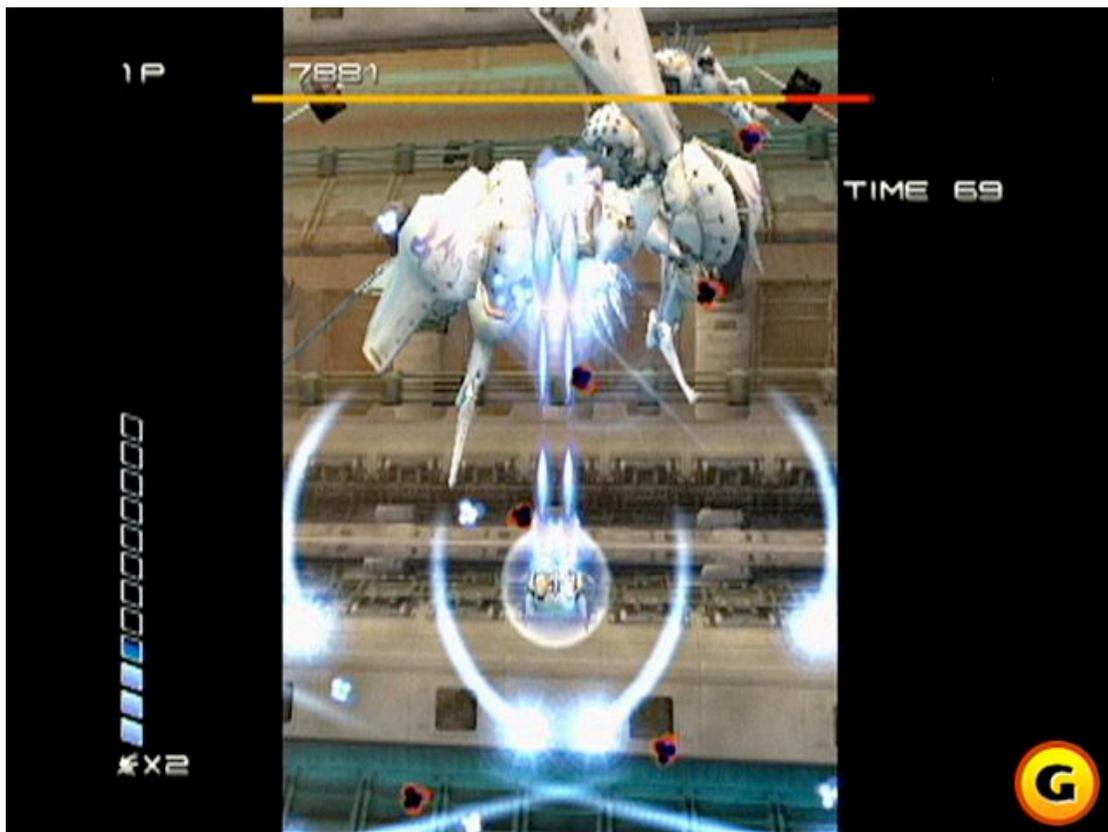

Image 3 - Ikaruga battles Eboshidori, the samurai inspired boss of Chapter 1.

Image 4, above – Versus Uzura from Chapter 3.
Image 5, below - Ikaruga inside Misago from Chapter 4.
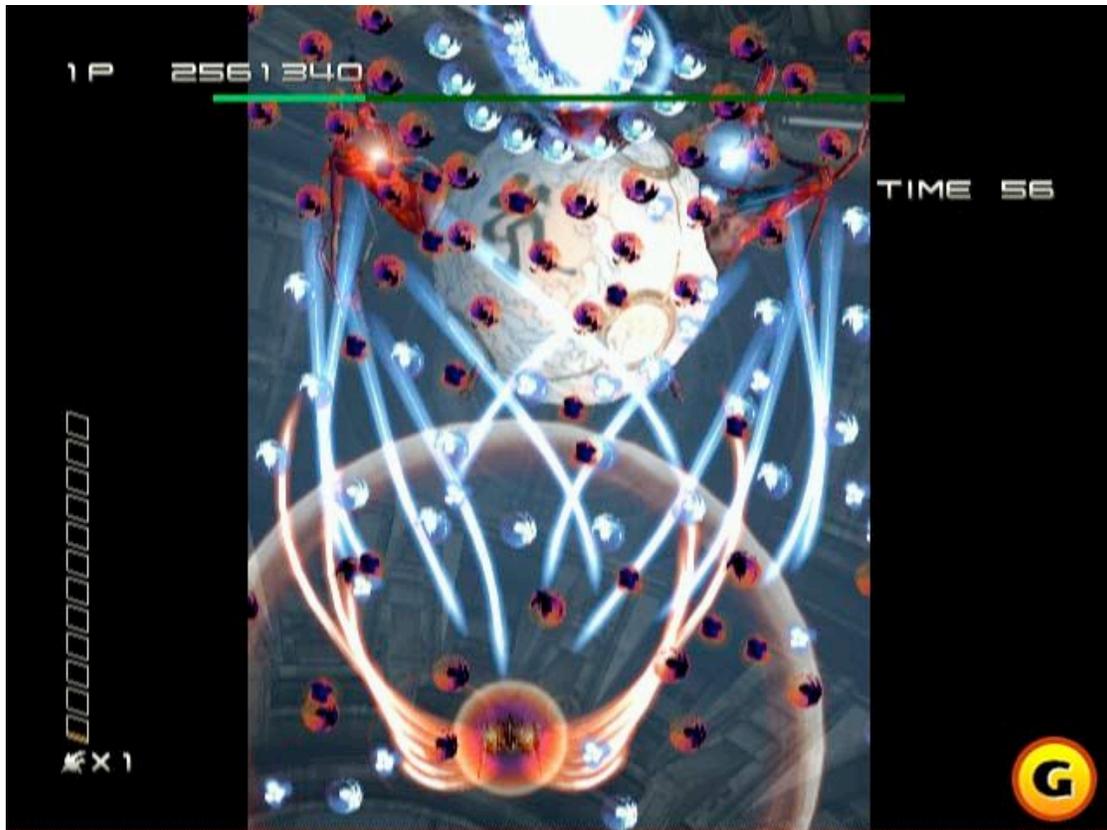
**Image 6, above – Firing bombs with Tageri before the final showdown in Chapter 5.**

Image 7 – an example of the celestially inspired Chapter 5, as Ikaruga battles a massive angelically inspired enemy ship.

Regarding the celestial artistic direction of the final Chapter (image 7, above) it is also seen in another on-rails shooting game '*Rez* (Sega, 2001)' before the unveiling of the final boss showdown. Giving an inspired vision influenced by classically theological notions of epic grandeur is used as a means of granting a pure feeling of truthful transcendent absolution as the game draws to a close. The '*Final Fantasy (Square-Enix, 1987-)*' games also deploy the same narrative tactic upon drawing their sprawling quests to a satisfyingly epic conclusion where Seraphim (Safer Sephiroth – the One Winged Angel, *Final Fantasy VII*) battle amongst winding cyclic clouds, Sorceresses (Ultimecia, *Final Fantasy VIII)* clash in Eden-esque paradise gardens and spiritual deities fight in ancient floating classical coliseum (Necron, *Final Fantasy IX*).

Image 8, above -Ikaruga battles Buppousou at the end of Chapter 2. Note the aesthetic similarities of the boss-machines centerpiece to the Chinese symbol of the Yin-Yang, Image 9, below.
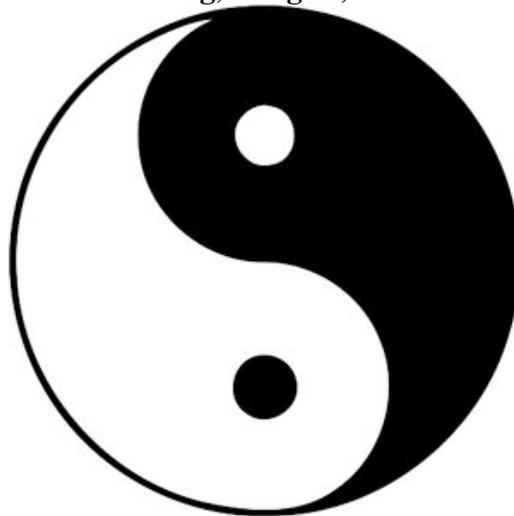
Upon closer inspection Buppousou (image 8, above) almost resembles a gigantic Yin-Yang (Image 9, above, stemming from Chinese philosophy about how opposable polarized forces are bound together intrinsically). On a more abstract level, the Yin-Yang is a symbol for defining the artistic context Ikaruga portrays - the constant binary battle of black and white energy forces in the game, and how the opposing bodily organizations of both a calm peaceful mind and frenetic physical reflexes are required to work in

harmony for successful play – a mind/body dichotomy. The five level names of Ideal, Faith, Trial, Reality then Metempsychosis, respectively in order, suggest a spiritual journey of ascension to a higher state of consciousness - the ship(s) of Ikaruga or two player's Ginkei even eventually end up sacrificing themselves after the concluding battle with the Stone-Like in a tragic final detonation thus ending the avatars and players lives simultaneously, yet with a deeper awareness and perception for when the next game is played – in a higher state.

The implementation of the technical mechanics shape and influence a game that fosters further fervour with each level progression. It constantly facilitates a sustained tense loop of aporia and epiphany, which Espen Aarseth defines as 'the aporias are formal figures, localizable 'roadblocks' that must be overcome by some unknown combination of actions. When an aporia is overcome, it is replaced by an epiphany: a sudden, often unexpected solution to the impasse in the event space' (38)[5]. Each level is maintained by ratcheting up a continual flow of this aporia and epiphany and the result is where solid difficult puzzle ludus fuses with the invention and joy of paideaic arcade freedom; both accentuated by the awarding of further striking, loud cinema opulence. Kuklich suggested 'The player controls the game through the protagonist but the game also controls the player. Therefore, the pleasure of digital games can be said to derive from equilibrium between the player's control over the game and the games control over the player' (108)[6]. This is true of the distilled nature of the design of Ikaruga, wherein the accuracy and puzzle tasks asked of the player correlate with the balance of control from the player throughout gameplay.

The Ikaruga experience is a thrilling flight; a game of beautifully delicate design balance that ironically plays out in the most explosive fashion.

[1] - SALEN and ZIMMERMAN (2003) 'Rules of Play' - MIT Press, Cambridge

[2] - KUKLICH J in GARRELTS (ed) (2005) 'From Interactivty to Playability: Why Videogames are Not Interactive' in Digital Gameplay – McFarland, North Carolina

[3] - KING and KRZYWINSKA (eds) (2006) 'Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders'– IB Tauris, London & New York

[4] - JEFFERSON (2005) –'What does Butsutekkai mean?' [Online]. Available from http://www.super-play.co.uk/forum/index.php/topic,902.0.html [Accessed 16/10/08].

[5] - AARSETH E (1999) 'Aporia and epiphany, doom and the speaking clock: the temporality of ergodic art' in ML RYAN (ed), Cyberspace Textuality - Indianapolis University Press, Indianapolis

[6] - KUKLICH J in RUTTER AND BRYCE (eds) (2006) 'Literary Theory in Digital Games' in Understanding Digital Games– Sage, London

Gameplay images - http://uk.gamespot.com/gamecube/action/ikaruga/ [Accessed 16/10/08].

(All images from the Gamecube version for continuity and a found abundance on the Internet in comparison to the Xbox Live Arcade version).
Yin-Yang image - http://medicineworld.org/images/blogs/5-2007/yin-yang-15470.png [Accessed 16/10/08].
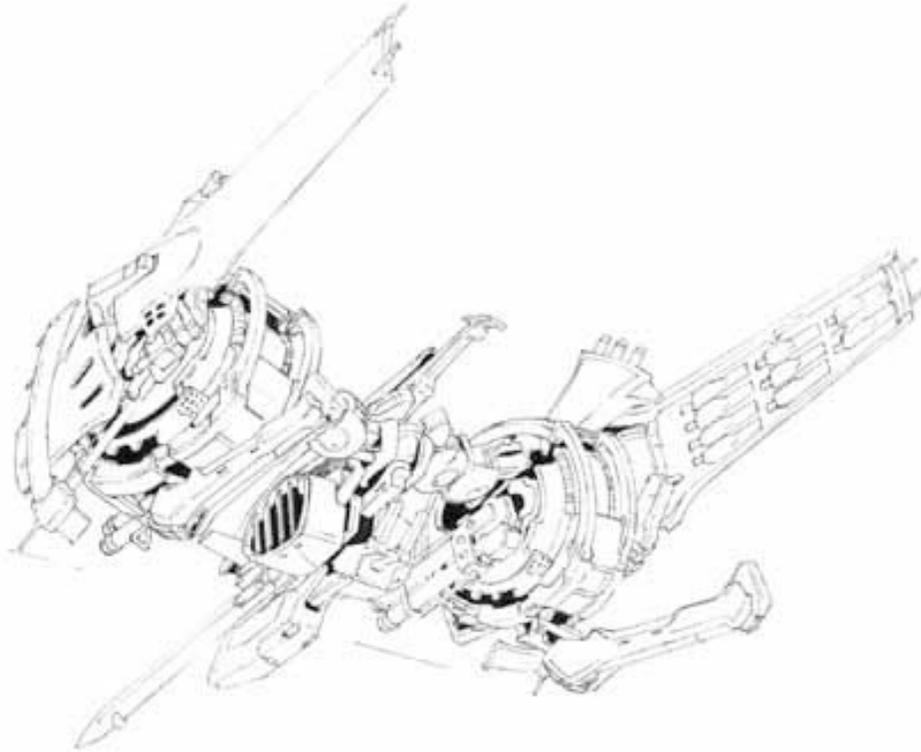
Image 10, above – Ikaruga artwork showing the elegant design of the ship from underneath.