

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Psychonauts 2

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Genre: 3D Platformer

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Developer: Double Fine Productions Inc.

Publisher: Xbox Game Studios

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Overview

Razputin Aquato, the newest member of international espionage agency the Psychonauts, is about to embark on his next mission: the psychic interrogation of the nefarious Doctor Loboto, freelance evil scientist and kidnapper of the Grand Head of the Psychonauts, Truman Zannotto. The mission is simple. First, create an elaborate mental construct in Loboto's mind to make him believe he works a cubicle job at Psychonauts headquarters. Second, award him with Employee of the Year and a free tropical vacation- if he can get the vacation request approved by his boss, A.K.A the person who hired him to kidnap Truman. This is one of the more normal events in Psychonauts 2.

Psychonauts 2 continues the story of previous games Psychonauts and Psychonauts in the Rhombus of Ruin, maintaining the unique tone, style and humour that made the first game a classic. In the world of Psychonauts, psychics- people who can use their brain to harness special powers and enter the minds of others- are a commonly-known phenomenon. Razputin (or Raz, as his friends call him) is a young psychic whose greatest dream is to join the Psychonauts, a group of psychic secret agents who use their abilities to help people- and sometimes save the world. After stopping Coach Oleander's plan for world domination and becoming an honorary Psychonaut at the end of the first game, Raz- who was demoted to intern as soon as he reached HQ- is now uncovering an even bigger plot: one revolving around Maligula, a powerful, murderous psychic who was thought to have been killed twenty years ago by a group called the Psychic Six. To unravel the mystery and set things right, Raz must enter the minds of the Psychic Six as well as other characters, and help them heal from their trauma and cope with their mental health issues.

Simultaneously hilarious and heart-wrenching, Psychonauts 2 tells a serious story that never takes itself too seriously, shedding light on dark themes in ways that evoke empathy as well as joy.

Characters

Junior Psychonauts

- **Razputin Aquato** – The player character. A 10-year-old psychic who has wanted to join the Psychonauts since he found out who they were. His family raised him to hate psychics because of a curse put on the Aquatos to die if they enter the water, inflicted by a psychic. Because of this, in the previous game he ran away from home to attend Whispering Rock Psychic Summer Camp, a training facility for future Psychonauts. While there, he stopped Coach Oleander's plot to steal the camper's brains and was made an honorary Psychonaut. He has almost no respect for rules and is a bit of a dork, but is always willing to help someone in need.
- **Lilli Zanotto** – A fellow psychic, also around 10 years old, who attended Whispering Rock Psychic Summer Camp. As the daughter of the Grand Head of the Psychonauts, Lilli has grown up surrounded by impressive psychic feats and has become bored with them, with a frequent refrain of hers being "I've been coming here my whole life, and trust me, nothing EVER happens". In the first game she was cold to her father- in the teenage (or pre-teenage) rebellion way. When her father contracts Psilirium poisoning and goes into a coma, the way she was acting invokes significant guilt and causes Lilli to feel like a disappointment. Lilli is usually confident, even brash, and sometimes a pyromaniac. She can sometimes be overly-aggressive, but she cares a lot for the people she's close with. She and Raz are close friends, with confusion on Raz's part about whether that's regular friends or girlfriend and boyfriend. As 10-year-olds, they're basically the same thing.

The Psychic "6"

- **Ford Cruller** – A legendary former leader of the Psychonauts. His mind was shattered 20 years ago in the Psychic 6's battle against Maligula. Because of this, he has to stay at Whispering Rock Psychic Summer Camp due to the large deposit of Psitanium there that keeps him 'together'. In the first game, he took up psychic residence in Raz's head and could be summoned by the smell of bacon. This is how Raz gets him to Psychonauts HQ, the Motherlobe. Once there, Ford splits into three different aspects that Raz reconstitutes at the urging of Truman Zanotto. The story gradually reveals that he was in love with Lucrecia before she became Maligula. Ford's scattered aspects are rude and dismissive, specifically of Raz, but also have a comedic bent. Contrastingly, Ford when put together is serious and decisive, always focused on the mission at hand.
- **Lucrecia "Lucy" Mux/Maligula/Nona** – A previously unknown member of the Psychic 6- or, more accurately, the Psychic 7. Extremely powerful in hydrokinesis. Her involvement with the original Psychonauts led to her participating in explorations of the human psyche that left her very mentally

vulnerable. When a war started in her home country of Grulovia, she went back to stop it despite her friends' warnings that she would be open to psychic interference. During the war, a dormant part of her personality- the 'Maligula Complex'- took over, and she became a cold-blooded murderer. Eventually, the Psychic 6 fought and defeated her. The world thought she was dead, but she wasn't: Ford changed her memories and made her think she was her sister, who she had killed. He then had her take the place of her sister, making her nephew- Raz's father, Augustus- believe she was his mother. Before becoming Maligula, Lucy was playful and somewhat roguish, often flouting rules in order to do what she wanted.

- **Helmut Fullbear** – A member of the Psychic 6 who was frozen in the Battle of Grulovia. He managed to send his brain to Ford Cruller, and it was stored in the Brainframe in Otto Mentallis's lab. When Nick loses his brain and his body begins getting into trouble, Raz looks for a brain to replace Nick's with. He ends up finding Helmut's brain, and helping him to regain the memories he has lost after spending 20 years with no physical input. Helmut is very dramatic and has an intense love of life, but is also prone to anxiety. After his 20 years as a brain in a jar, having all 5 senses again becomes overwhelming and he starts having panic attacks. Upon recovering his memories, he believes that he failed to protect his husband, Bob, and that his friends abandoned him. With Raz's help, he realizes that his anxiety has warped his perception, and remembers what really happened.
- **Compton Boole** – A member of the Psychic 6. He can speak to animals, but when he hears too many voices at once he gets overwhelmed and his psychic powers flare up, usually causing something- or someone- to explode. He was extremely dependent on Cassie O'Pia, his best friend. After she disappeared into the woods, the voices became too much for him and he put himself into Psycho-isolation. He is extremely socially anxious, but moreso with people than animals. When the player first meets him he is terrified of judgement from the other members of the Psychonauts, who he believes look down on him. Through his mental world, Raz helps Compton gain a sense of self-worth independent of Cassie.
- **Cassie O'Pia** – A member of the Psychic 6, and author of the best-selling book Mindswarm. On the surface she seems put-together, but on the inside she is highly judgemental of herself. Due to her dangerous past, she has developed a strategy of adopting different 'archetypes' for different situations, splitting the parts of her personality into sections and only using the part that will serve her best. After the battle with Maligula, she went into the woods because she couldn't adapt to how the Psychonauts had changed. She also wanted to take care of the apiary, but eventually became trapped by the bees, who were being unconsciously controlled by her. It turns out that what she's really trapped by is her belief that certain parts of herself are worthless. Through her mental world, Raz helps her overcome this idea, and embrace all parts of her personality.
- **Bob Zanotto** – A member of the Psychic 6, Lilli's great uncle and Truman's uncle. He struggles with alcoholism especially after his husband, Helmut, died (or seemed to die) in the Battle of Grulovia. His alcoholism caused Truman to fire him from the Psychonauts, and ever since then Bob has talked to nobody except

- his plants. Because all of his human connections have ended in pain, he believes that forming relationships and attachments is dangerous and that no good can come of it. He initially refuses to let Raz into his mind, but the psychically-enhanced plants he has been taking care of stage an intervention for him. This allows Raz to remind him that even though relationships end, there's value in having had them, and that just because certain people are gone doesn't mean you can't form new connections.
- **Otto Mentallis** – A member of the Psychic 6, the only one whose mind you don't enter. He is a genius inventor who loves creating new things, but can often come off as callous and occasionally morally bankrupt. He harbours deep guilt that an invention he made froze his friend, Helmut Fullbear, so deeply in ice that they couldn't save him during the battle with Maligula.

The Psychonauts

- **Milla Vodello** – An elite agent of the Psychonauts, and the world's foremost expert on levitation. She is a very kind and caring person who maintains her upbeat persona in order to deal with a dark event in her past. She isn't very involved in the plot of Psychonauts 2, but as an important character from the first game she maintains a presence throughout the story.
- **Sasha Nein** – An elite agent of the Psychonauts, and researcher of the human psyche. He is logical to a fault, rarely if ever showing emotion or even personality quirks. He isn't very involved in the plot of Psychonauts 2, but as an important character from the first game he maintains a presence throughout the story.
- **Morceau Oleander** – The coach at Whispering Rock Psychic Summer Camp. He was the main antagonist of the first game, in which he attempted to steal campers' brains and put them into specially-designed super weapons in order to take over the world. It turned out that all he needed was psychic therapy in order to get rid of his megalomaniacal urges, and as such he's returned to the Motherlobe. He isn't involved in the plot of this game, but is relevant to this analysis due to his involvement in the first game.
- **Hollis Forsythe** – The Lesser (or Second) Head of the Psychonauts. She is serious and strict, but only because she has so much responsibility placed on her. At the beginning of the game, she is stressed about money, as the Psychonauts are having financial troubles and Truman is unable to lighten the load on her. She is also deeply concerned for the interns' safety after the revelation that there is a mole in the Psychonauts. Before she was a Psychonaut, she was an intern at Our Lady of Restraint Hospital. During her internship she developed a highly successful method which was stolen by the doctor she was working under, Dr. Potts. To get him to give her credit for the method, she learned how to use the psychic power of mental connections to change things in his mind. She ended up doing permanent damage, and the Psychonauts came in to fix it- and recruit her.
- **Truman Zanotto** – Lilli's father, and the Grand Head of the Psychonauts. After Psychonauts in the Rhombus of Ruin, he has seemingly contracted Psilium poisoning and gone into a coma. "Seemingly" because, as it turns out, someone

- else's brain is in Truman's body- Gristol Malik's. As such, Truman's real personality is largely unknown to the player.
- **Nick Johnsmith/Gristol Malik** – The mole in the Psychonauts. The heir to the Grulovian throne- if such a thing still exists after the monarchy was overthrown- disguised as a mail clerk working at the Motherlobe. As Nick he is well-liked, but as Gristol he is spoiled, childish, and entitled. He believes that by killing Maligula and destroying the monarchy, Ford Cruller “murdered” Grulovia, and is trying to bring Maligula back so that he can become the “rightful” king.

Other Characters

- **Caligosto Loboto** – One of the antagonists of the first game, responsible for stealing children's brains. It's revealed in Rhombus of Ruin that he was born a psychic, but his parents wanted him to be ‘normal’ and forced him to get a lobotomy to remove the psychic parts of his brain. This has caused his personality to become what some might call ‘strange’.
- **Frazie Aquato** – Raz's sister. She has hid her psychic abilities from her family because she believes that telling them would hurt them. She acts as though she's annoyed by most people, Raz especially, but it's not entirely sincere.
- **Augustus Aquato** – Raz's father. He raised his children to fear psychics, but unbeknownst to them he was a psychic himself. After appearing in Raz's mind in the first game and seeing how his son saw him- as a terrifying monster who didn't want him to be happy- Augustus has begun to make up for all those years by embracing his psychic abilities and trying to connect with Raz through them.

Breakdown

Themes

Psychonauts 2 sums up its themes before the game even starts: “Ultimately, Psychonauts 2 is a game about empathy and healing” are some of the first words the player reads, in the mental health advisory that opens when you start a new save file. This theme is one of the game's strongest elements, and is built into the narrative through the objectives the game gives you. Every quest has the ultimate goal of helping somebody, whether that's putting together Ford's shattered mind or getting Nick's body a brain to stop it from hurting itself.

Because most of the plot happens within different characters' minds, the player has the chance to build even more empathy with each character than they would from interacting with their outward presentation. The gameplay of each level represents its character's thought processes, meaning that the player symbolically experiences what it's like to be that person. It is true that this experience is highly abstracted, which lessens the intensity with which the player relates to the character, but it still provides a way of building empathy that is rarely seen in video games or any form of media.

The entire conceit of the story contributes to the theme of healing and empathy. From the beginning, it is clear that the purpose of entering people's minds is to help them- even Doctor Loboto, as Milla points out: “I think he WANTS to tell us who hired him, but he's terrified. Let's find him and help him”. The idea is further driven home at

the end of the level Hollis's Hot Streak, in which Forsythe tells Raz that the Psychonauts are "not here to change people's minds" or "'fix' people". They exist to "help people fight their OWN demons. The ones they already have". As the mystery unfolds, it soon becomes obvious that the player isn't trying to defeat some villain, but bring closure to people who have been struggling for a long time. All of this creates a cohesive theme, and gives the player empathy for each character as they learn about the inner workings of their mind.

Plot Structure

Psychonauts 2 is a relatively linear game, but due to its open world and the freedom given in the middle part of the game, it doesn't feel that way. The beginning of the story is a straight path, but after the first two levels it splits into a variety of what seem like "side missions" which are actually directly connected to the main plot. This structure obscures the "right direction" from the player, giving the impression that they can explore and do tasks at their leisure. Even the way objectives are communicated is natural and unobtrusive, with main plot beats often coming over the P.A as they would in real life: "RAZPUTIN AQUATO! Please come down to the reception area immediately! Your visitors are causing a disturbance!" leads into Raz meeting his family, who have decided to visit him at the Motherlobe. The branching quests all lead into one another, slowly revealing more and more of the mystery surrounding Maligula.

The last third of the game is when the plot returns to being fully linear. This is because it is the culmination of the mystery, which causes things to be set into motion. The first half of the game is mostly about Raz- and the player- learning, whether that's Raz learning about mental ethics, the traumas of others, or clues to solving the mystery. When Ford's mind is finally un-shattered, it is revealed that Ford had shattered it *himself*, and with good reason- if he begins to remember what happened to Lucy, Maligula will return and take over Lucy once again. Ford's explanation pulls all of the simmering clues and thoughts together, and with the mystery solved the events that Raz and the player have accidentally caused serve as the climax of the game.

In the majority of the game the player isn't forced into plot points and can go at their own pace, meaning they feel like they have agency and that when something happens, they have chosen for it to happen. This structure does take away any sense of urgency. Since you can go in any order and at whatever speed you want with no consequences, there's no fear of Maligula, the Delugionists, or the mole as a looming threat. But for this type of story, it works. Especially because there *isn't* actually a threat until you put Ford's mind back together, the time taken to slowly learn more information and character details doesn't feel wasted.

Tone

The game's tone is one of its most unique aspects, and is created through various factors. One of these is the art style. It takes recognizable, cartoonish shapes and twists them slightly, making the whole game look off-kilter. Almost everything is asymmetrical, including characters' faces- one eye is often higher than the other. These shapes are combined with realistic shading to create a style that looks unique and appealing, but also 'off', a dark comedy's view of reality.

The dialogue and absurd scenarios presented also contribute greatly to the tone. While humour is subjective, things that make no sense but are treated as though they do are inherently unexpected and, as such, inherently funny on some level. With this in mind, Psychonauts 2 is a hilarious game. Every moment, something ridiculous and often disturbing is happening. For example, this turn of events. Sam (one of the interns) is making pancakes. She berates and threatens a squirrel when it brings her un-crushed acorns, since she *specifically asked* for *crushed* acorns. Once the squirrel is shaking in terror, she tells it to focus on personal commitment, and achieving excellence every day. She then apologizes to Raz, who has been staring in fear (and possibly disgust) since the interaction began. This scene captures the entire feeling of the game: the juxtaposition between a cute and light-hearted surface and a variety of dark, disturbing layers underneath.

The tone of this game is extremely important to its narrative. Its dark-but-humorous nature allows it to go from absurd jokes and scenarios to intense emotional struggles without being jarring or taking away the impact of serious moments. In fact, the tone is used to *increase* emotional impact: because of the near-constant humour, moments that are purely serious- for example, the letter Ford receives at the end of the level Cruller's Correspondence which reads "Lucy is dead. She is never coming back. --M"- hit harder because of the contrast between them and the rest of the story.

Characterization Through Dialogue and Actions

Arguably the most integral part of this narrative is its characters. The mental worlds, which are the main focus, rely on round characters in order to exist- it would be difficult or impossible to create a metaphorical representation of someone's mind if their inner world wasn't fleshed out. Psychonauts 2 gives each character a distinct and expressive personality, but the real focus is on their deeper aspects- their core beliefs, how they see the world, and their deepest struggles.

A lot of characterization is already delivered through characters' outward presentation of themselves- their persona. The player never enters the minds of many of the characters, but the game still gives them depth. One example is Frazie, who, like Raz, is a psychic raised to hate psychics, but unlike Raz doesn't think her powers are something to be proud of. While her headstrong personality doesn't suggest any self-loathing, it's clear from lines like "Look, Raz, I know we played all kinds of weird brain games when we were kids. But I'm not ready to break Mom and Dad's hearts like you did, okay?" that she has pushed down that part of herself out of concern for her parents- whether misguided or not. There's also Lilli, who shows character through her reactions. During the mission to the Lady Luctopus Casino, Raz finds evidence seemingly leading to the mole. There's just one problem: it points to Lilli. Raz doesn't show this evidence to the Psychonauts. He takes it to Lilli, whose reaction says a lot: "Look, I know I talk smack about the Psychonauts, and say they aren't what they used to be. And I know I'm a terrible daughter and a disappointment to my father, okay!? But... But..." This dialogue isn't subtle, but that makes sense- Lilli is ten, and very outspoken. It's shown throughout the game that she says exactly what she's thinking, no matter the consequences. What this reaction tells the player is the depth of Lilli's guilt, how badly

it's affected her self-esteem, and the fact that she deals with those things by acting aggressively.

Within the characterization is the pattern that different people respond to trauma in different ways. Each of the Psychic 6 went through watching their friend become a different person and having to eventually fight her, but how it affected them was based on who they were and their previous experiences. Cassie and Bob, who both had pasts filled with trauma, defaulted to their old coping mechanisms. In Cassie's case, that meant doing what she'd had to do to survive when she was younger- compartmentalize. She would separate the different parts of her personality and use whichever one was necessary for her current situation. After the battle with Maligula, one specific part- the Librarian- took over, and filed all the other parts away where they couldn't be found. Bob, on the other hand, grew up with an alcoholic mother and eventually began using alcohol to cope with pain and depression. When his husband, Helmut, died in the Battle of Grulovia, Bob started drinking even more heavily. Eventually this caused Truman to fire him, and he cut himself off from everyone except his plants, believing that human connection would only lead to pain. Compton, while not struggling with alcohol addiction, did isolate himself as well, finding it too overwhelming to be in society without Cassie after she disappeared. He had been extremely dependent on Cassie beforehand, and after she left he felt incapable of doing anything- even interacting with the world around him. His reaction was based not on past experiences, but on his self-image: he saw himself as helpless on his own, so that's what he became. And the way Ford dealt with it could be seen as selfish. He secretly implanted false memories in Lucy's head to make her think she was her sister- who she had killed in the Deluge of Grulovia- and instated her as Augustus's 'mother', even though she was his aunt. Then he shattered his mind into pieces, to stop Maligula from reawakening but also so that he wouldn't have to remember that the person he loved was gone. Otto is the one supporting character who we don't get to know very well. Raz never enters his mind, and his dialogue in the physical world is fairly surface-level. He also didn't seem to be traumatized after fighting Maligula, as he's the only member of the Psychic 6 who was both excited about founding the Psychonauts and has stayed an active member as of the game's 'present day'. It's possible that this is his own reaction to trauma- shutting off his emotions and staying closed-off in order to avoid having to deal with pain. In all of these examples, the ways in which the characters changed are realistic because they are based on those characters' subconscious behaviours and thought patterns, developed over the course of their lives.

Characterization Through Metaphor and Symbolism

While every character has well-written dialogue in the overworld, the deepest characterization happens within the mental worlds. 'Mental Worlds' in Psychonauts and Psychonauts 2 are metaphorical representations of a person's mind. The way someone's mental world works mirrors how they think; the enemies that form represent their negative emotions, and the appearance represents how they see the world. The concept itself allows for much deeper characterization than most stories can achieve, and combined with skilled execution the mental worlds show what would normally have to be told.

A seemingly small, but very important, aspect of the mental worlds is consent and responsibility. These are major themes in the second level, in which Raz and the other interns have been let into Forsythe's mind. Raz is intent on going on a mission to find out why Nick's brain has been taken, but Forsythe thinks it's too dangerous. At one point, Forsythe leaves the interns alone in her mind, and at the egging of his peers Raz messes with Forsythe's thoughts and causes her to associate risk with money so that she'll let the interns help with the mission. This does happen, but with an unforeseen result: Forsythe has gained a gambling addiction, and only wants to go on the mission because it takes place at a casino. Raz, realizing his mistake, enters Forsythe's mind once again to undo the damage he's caused. Throughout the level, Forsythe doesn't speak to Raz and at first doesn't know he's there at all. She spends the level shut up in the High Roller's Lounge, with no awareness of or input into what Raz is doing. After the mission, Sasha further emphasizes what Forsythe told Raz at the end of the level: "You thought you could manipulate another person's mind, to bend their will to your own! There are few things worse, Razputin". In every level from then on, Raz asks for permission to enter the person's mind, and the character whose mind it is is present for the level and knows what is happening, even commenting on and affecting it. This is an important distinction, because it means that the characters you are helping are participating in their own healing process rather than you "fixing" them. Interestingly, a subversion of this belies one of the major twists in the game. In all three of Ford's levels, his mental avatar is constantly telling Raz not to dig deeper, not to un-shatter his mind. This makes sense when you find out that Ford shattered his own mind and why he did so.

Symbolism is one of this game's strengths, and it is used to great effect. While not particularly subtle, the representations enhance the emotional impact of each level by linking them to familiar objects and situations and letting players make the connections themselves. Even if players don't have personal experience with the issue at hand, they understand how said issue can affect someone and, through the process of connecting signifier to signified, feel a bit of how it would affect them. The level Bob's Bottles is, for lack of a better word, the saddest level in the game, and this is felt mainly through its layered symbolism. In the beginning of the level, Bob is tending a garden on an island. The garden is barren, and Bob explains that he has lost all his seeds and been unable to plant anything. In the first few minutes, there are already two metaphors: the island is Bob, isolated from others, and the seeds are his relationships, all of which he has lost. Throughout the level is the constant motif of bottles, representing both Bob's alcoholism and a 'message in a bottle' - a desperate attempt to reach someone, anyone, with a very low chance of success. Raz pries open one such bottle to enter a section of the level reminiscent of Bob's childhood home with memories revolving around his mother, Tia. This shows just how strongly Bob associates his formative experiences with alcohol, and partially explains why he struggles so much with it. Each time you return to Bob's childhood home, it becomes more overgrown, representing how alcoholism took over his mother's life and began to suffocate her. The connection between the plants and alcoholism isn't obvious at first, but lines of dialogue from Bob's memories soon fill in the gaps: "How can these plants look so sick? You spend so much time on them!" lets the player know that Tia is using the greenhouse for something other than agriculture, and "Hey, mom. Are you heading out to the greenhouse again?" "What are you doin' out in

the greenhouse for so long?” suggest that she has been ramping up whatever she’s really doing there. Combined with the bottle motif and the knowledge of what Bob is struggling with, the player slowly realizes that Tia is an alcoholic in the same way that Bob would have as a child- knowing something was wrong, but only gradually realizing how serious it was. This culminates with Tia’s funeral, which has no guests. The pews are replaced with planters, the church is flooded and overgrown with moss, and instead of Tia’s casket there is an elegy of her made of plant matter. As you approach, Bob calls out to his mother, hoping desperately that what he fears isn’t true. The cause of Tia’s death is never stated, but through this symbolic reliving of Bob’s childhood it is *felt*.

Strongest Element

The symbolism of the characters’ mental health and trauma through the levels based on their psyches is the most iconic aspect of the Psychonauts series, and Psychonauts 2 is no exception. The mental worlds communicate character in every facet- their environmental design is filled with metaphor, the actions required to complete a level fulfill and sometimes alter characters’ thoughts and memories, and the new abilities you gain mirror the strategies each character uses to face the world. They also provide a unique perspective for plot points that gives them more meaning: rather than learning about past events purely as pieces of a mystery, the player sees how they affected an individual at the deepest level of their psyche. On a less serious level, they can and do have environments fuelled by unbound creativity, levels that couldn’t happen in a literal context. This unique feature is the narrative’s strongest element because it is the basis for the emotional, intellectual and thematic story that it tells.

Unsuccessful Element

The biggest flaw with the game’s narrative comes from the incompatibility between two core parts of it: the theme of forgiveness, and the realistic conflict with real-world implications. This only comes up at the end, with Lucy’s character resolution. After defeating Lucy’s ‘Maligula Complex’, Lucy’s previous personality returns, and she is accepted by Ford, the rest of the Psychic 6, and the Psychonauts as a whole. Within the game and its world, this is fine: Lucy, due to having strained herself psychically, opened herself up to being taken over by a separate, dormant part of her personality. It was the Maligula Complex who attacked peaceful protesters and killed hundreds of people, not Lucy. In-universe, it isn’t clear whether or not Lucy could have prevented what happened, so forgiving her makes sense. It also makes sense in terms of theme, since a simple “kill the bad guy” ending would be underwhelming after the strongly-communicated theme of forgiving people for their mistakes.

The problem comes when you take the message this conveys into reality. If you try to derive any meaning from this resolution outside the game’s narrative, the questions of Lucy’s guilt and whether she can redeem herself become muddier. Treating Lucy’s character arc as a metaphor, try to extend it to reality: someone in an extremely vulnerable state returns to their home country to stop the war that’s happening there. They choose the side of the reigning power, against whom the common people of the country are rebelling, and due to being in such a vulnerable state they are manipulated

into committing war crimes. There are many real-life precedents for this, which is the problem. It's been proven that human beings are preconditioned towards compliance with authority- the Milgram experiment, in which regular people delivered what they believed were deadly electric shocks to a person at the behest of the researcher running the experiment, being the most famous example- and it's also been proven that seemingly-normal people can be corrupted by power (the exact outcome of the Stanford Prison Experiment, as well as other experiments and real scenarios like cults). Additionally, real people who have committed atrocities during wartime have tried to defend themselves by saying they were following the orders of their leader. So this entire situation raises a variety of questions about responsibility and morality: what, if anything, can absolve someone of responsibility for unforgivable actions? If this resolution is to have meaning outside the text, this question needs to be answered. But the raising of the question was inadvertent, so they don't. Lucy is accepted, and seen as not being at fault.

Compare this to the first game, where Coach Oleander is forgiven for stealing children's brains and using them to power and pilot armoured tanks. The reason this feels natural is for two reasons: one, reliving the coach's childhood memories and resolving his issues with his father tell us why he was in the state of mind to do this, but more importantly, his plan was almost completely removed from reality. Nobody in real life has sneezed their brain out and had it put into a tank. The results of being brainless are also presented comedically, and since brains can be put back into their bodies without issue there are no permanent consequences to it. Maligula's crimes, on the other hand, are very realistic except for the fact that she used psychic powers to commit them. She killed hundreds of peaceful protesters. Throughout the game, the devastation Maligula caused is felt throughout the setting, though Ford and Augustus build it up the most. Ford's "Those were peaceful protesters, Lucy," in his mental world after Raz washes away a group of lice, symbolically reenacting the Deluge of Grulovia, and Augustus's stories about his father, who died in that very flood, make it painfully clear how much irreversible damage Maligula has done. After all this, on top of the real-world precedents for Maligula's actions, absolving her of responsibility sends a message that seems both unintentional and opposite to the game's overall themes.

Highlight

The most pivotal narrative beat in the story is the sequence that plays out after you fully reconstitute Ford. It starts similarly to the previous Ford levels' endings: Raz completes the mirror with the final shard he pulled out of Ford's brain. Ford's reflection, now full, says, "Razputin." From there, this exchange happens:

Raz: "Agent Cruller! How do you feel?"

Ford: "I've done a terrible thing. And so have you."

Raz: "But... we just wanted to undo what Maligula did to you!"

Ford: "Maligula didn't do this to me. That's the first thing I've learned in here. The rest you're going to have to see for yourself."

The rest of the sequence is too long to describe in detail, but it involves Raz going through Ford's mind and speaking to his different aspects. Each one tells him a bit more information in cryptic fashion, with the third and final Ford shard saying this about

Maligula: “She’s with family”. From there, the environment shifts and Ford explains that Lucy didn’t die after the Battle of Grulovia. As Ford says, he used a device called the Astralathe to “isolate and neutralize the part of her psyche that was... Problematic”. The part that made her Maligula. He knew she could never return to society as herself, though. She would never be forgiven. He had to hide her somewhere. Just as Raz is asking *where*, he comes to a door. One that looks exactly like the entrance to the Aquatos’ circus tent. Raz steps through it, out of the caravan he was born in, and Ford finally says it: “I hid her among her family, Razputin. Among YOUR family.” Raz sees Maligula’s face. The face of his grandmother.

The reason this scene works so well is because of the pacing. A slow trickle of information leads the player on as they gradually piece the puzzle together with a growing sense of panic. This twist causes a massive increase in tension- while previously the threat was hypothetical, now it’s become real. Maligula is alive, and is about to awaken. It leads to characters questioning themselves- specifically Augustus, the most closely affected person other than Lucy. If, like in Augustus’s case, the story you’ve been telling yourself about who you are is a lie, who are you? What’s left after you strip away your memories and deeply-held beliefs? This twist recontextualizes the entire narrative, and on top of that it was completely unexpected. It has the perfect combination of building it up without giving it away- for example, Augustus’s story about the family curse doesn’t make sense. If the Aquatos are cursed to die in water, how did Marona survive a flood- and, due to its relation to Raz and his understandable anger, has a strong emotional payoff. To top it all off, the broken, abandoned environment the player travels through ramps up the tension even more as they try to figure out what exactly they’ve done.

Critical Reception

Tom Marks from IGN gives the game an 8/10, impressed that it continues where the previous games left off and “does so in a way that feels fresh and modern while still maintaining everything that made its predecessor so special – from its strange but lovable characters to the fantastical mental worlds inside their heads”. He comments on the creativity and plot-driving nature of the mental worlds, and describes each character as “unique, well-written, and a joy to get to know”.

Keza MacDonald rates the game 5 stars out of 5, commenting that despite 25 years of playing video games, she “never knew what to expect from Psychonauts 2,” and “can’t think of a greater compliment to its unconventionality and creative spirit”. She mostly focused on the mental worlds, describing discovering each one as “a gift”. She also felt the writing was refreshing, with its style being “funny but also not pleased with itself” in contrast to other comedic games. Overall, MacDonald writes that the strength of the game is in it being “unashamedly itself”.

Kurt Indovina from GameSpot gives the game a 9/10. He believes Psychonauts 2 “sets itself apart as a classic in its own right”, not just as a sequel to the first game. He defines the game’s story as “a dazzling display of Double Fine’s signature humor and creativity”, but also “a game about choices and forgiveness”, and commends the game for its nuanced handling of dark themes. Indovina says that the complex story is the best part

of Psychonauts: “the most rewarding aspect hasn't just been mastering its platforms or combat, but peeling back the layers to see what's beneath it; to take a closer look at its characters, the depth of their struggles, fears, and regrets, all of which serve as the game's foundation.”

Lessons

- **Let players figure things out.** Allowing players to put together plot points for themselves makes the storyline more satisfying and emotionally resonant. Similar to show, don't tell; when players come to realizations on their own, the effect of the realization is much stronger than if they were explicitly told. This is also an effective tool for building empathy, not only towards characters but towards situations players may be unfamiliar with.
- **Pay attention to implications.** While using realistic conflicts can ground a story, they also mean you have to contend with the real-world implications of those events. Attempting to redeem a character whose actions closely mirror real violence may send an unintended message, or seem to be ignoring the victims of the violence committed. This is especially jarring when the impact of the character's crimes has been built up throughout the story.
- **Translate overall storytelling techniques to characterization.** Going beyond traditional means of characterization can lead to deeper and more relatable characters. The mental worlds gave each character a developed sense of self, and communicated things that would feel unnatural to say as dialogue. While dialogue and actions are important, symbolism, metaphor, and allegory can capture deeper levels of a character, making it easier for the player to see them as a person and not an abstract idea.

Summation

Built into Psychonauts 2 is the belief that nobody is beyond help. People you think you've lost, who seem to have become someone else, or disappeared, or abandoned you, are not lost forever. For all of its dark themes, this game has an overwhelming sense of hope, and that's why the endlessly creative metaphors and hilarious dialogue feel meaningful. Its abstract take on mental health is refreshingly fun, providing those who struggle with mental illness a less terrifying way to think about it and those who don't a less intimidating introduction. In all, Psychonauts 2 is exactly what it says- a game about empathy and healing. It deserves to be analyzed because, despite its cartoonish and over-the-top surface, it is deceptively good at getting players to *feel*. Not manipulating them into it, but giving them the tools to empathize- not only with the characters in the game, but with the people around them.

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