

Game Narrative Review

Your Name: Matthew Zhang

Your School: The University of Texas at Austin

Your Email: matthew.zhang.306@gmail.com

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Game Title: Chicory: A Colorful Tale

Platform: Steam, PlayStation

Genre: Adventure/RPG

Release Date: June 10, 2021

Developer: Greg Lobanov, Alexis Dean-Jones, Lena Raine, Madeline Berger, A Shell in the Pit

Publisher: Finji

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Greg Lobanov

Overview

Chicory: A Colorful Tale is a game made by Greg Lobanov and friends about “trying to be somebody ~~you’re not~~.” It plays like a Zelda-esque open world adventure game where the player uses a magical coloring brush to draw whatever and wherever they want in an otherwise colorless environment. Normally, this brush is wielded by a lineage of successive, highly privileged artists, aptly named “the wielders,” who are each tasked with the responsibility of maintaining the world’s color for their time as wielder. The player avatar, however, is a small dog who takes hold of the brush after Chicory, the current wielder, suddenly disappears. While progressing through an interconnected world, the player uses the brush to solve puzzles, help other citizens, decorate, and face a dark force threatening to swallow everything. Although the game presents itself under innocent and wholesome imagery, it weaves a rich narrative filled with difficult themes of creative struggles, depression, art institutionalization, and fan culture.

Characters

Chicory’s character set breaks down into a small group of core characters supported by a very large selection of side characters. Those core characters include:

Pizza (default name) – The player avatar. Pizza is the janitor at the Wielder Tower before Chicory disappears, when they take hold of the brush and must swiftly come to terms with the responsibility that it entails. They harbor a deep admiration for Chicory as a wielder and aspire to become like her, but throughout the story, they struggle to overcome a constant feeling of self-doubt and unworthiness. Despite this, they do their absolute best as the new wielder to help everyone they can, which quickly transforms the pace of their life.

Chicory – The deuteragonist. Chicory was the former wielder, succeeding Blackberry, but she stopped wielding after succumbing to the pressure of the role. Chicory attained her status by investing nearly all her time in her earlier life to the pursuit of art, hiding her imperfections and weaknesses. However, after having to abandon the brush, she becomes aimless and depressive, lacking a sense of self that she previously pretended to have. Despite her shortcomings, she gives her best attempt to mentor Pizza until they are ready to stop the corruption that threatens life across the world.

Blackberry – A major character. Blackberry was the wielder before Chicory for decades, and she took her job extremely seriously. She mentored Chicory before the end of her career, attempting to mold her into the perfect successor, but at the final moment, her doubts about Chicory were too heavy, and she rejected her. Even after Pizza gains unconventional access to the brush, she continues to uphold traditional values about the nature of wielding.

Additionally, the game features side characters who fill the world and provide brief but interesting side moments that contextualize Pizza's role as a wielder. A small sample of these characters include, in no particular order:

Clementine – An art student, and Pizza's younger sister. Despite the pressure to excel and potentially become the next wielder, she takes her studies in a more relaxed manner than her peers. She lends wholehearted support to Pizza as a wielder on every occasion.

Pickle – Pizza's long-time friend. They were excited to see Pizza with the brush, and the player can optionally give Pickle a trial run holding the brush. Unlike other characters, Pickle speaks to Pizza using informal texting vernacular.

Peppermint – Pizza's biggest fan. They constantly show up around Pizza's art, showering them in praise and admiration. Later in the game, if the player completes a certain painting, Peppermint produces fanart of it and gives it to Pizza.

Beans – A resident of the world who takes in lost children that you find around the world and trades them for decor that you can place around the world. The player can optionally unite Beans with someone to help out, who eventually marries her.

Queen Drosera – The monarch of the bug kingdom. When the player enters their lair, they gush about how cute Pizza is and ask for their assistance with the overgrown roots in the area. Their pronouns are "we/us/our."

Breakdown

To open with some context, the emotions within the story of *Chicory* derive from the combined feelings of all five primary developers of the game. Each member of the team is a highly creative person that engages with common mental pitfalls shared among most online creatives, but which manifest in slightly different ways to create a highly nuanced shared experience. For Greg Lobanov, in a Medium post entitled "Reflecting on Wandersong," he notes aspects of his own experience, such as feelings of creative inconsequentiality and the struggle to land with journalists on his previous project. These

particular feelings materialize in *Chicory* in the forms of Pizza's struggle with making their mark and Chicory's adversity toward the traditions of wielding, which become evident as the story progresses.

The story opens with Pizza cleaning a studio inside Chicory's tower when suddenly, the earth tremors, and all of the world's colors are erased in an instant. When Pizza leaves the room, they somewhat giddily nab the brush and begin repainting parts of the world. This is an important moment in the story because it establishes the player's role as the lead artist and gives the player a large sandbox to play around with the mechanic before progressing.

The first half of the story is sequential and focuses on bringing out the player's creativity. Here, Pizza helps Chicory recover by wielding in her stead, helping citizens with their immediate problems and defeating multiple of the world's corruptions, which depict various fears and doubts felt by them. At this stage, in order for the player's goals to align with Pizza's goals, the player has to stay internally motivated to create art, so the developers cleverly weave drawing into every moment of the gameplay to give the player strong reasons to keep doodling. Traversal puzzles throughout the world demand drawing from the player: at one moment you're coloring in dark caves to produce light, then you're painting inflatable bombs to clear obstructing rocks, and later you're drawing paths through waterways to swim to new areas. By tying movement interactions to the brush, the developers ensured that the player would never distance themselves from their own ink, incentivizing otherwise unenthusiastic players to engage with drawing. Additionally, a countless number of drawing-based sidequests are available to players: you can create a new logo for a pizza shop, or color people's houses to their liking, or copy famous paintings in art class, or decorate your bus pass. These give the player outlets to express themselves, which contributes to a narrative sense that Pizza, as a wielder, is also expressing themselves.

This player/avatar connection is critical for the second half of the story, as the game branches into four unordered "Wielder Trials," shifting the focus to developing the complex relationship between Pizza and Chicory. On each of these unique treks, filled with advanced puzzles and sparse dialogue, all of the side material is stripped away as the spotlight falls entirely on the two main characters. Here, the player is given complete freedom to decide the order of the trials, which allows them to plan their own route into Chicory's heart, just like Pizza would. The player autonomy in this portion is essential because it gets the player emotionally invested in Chicory, as they get to decide how the relationship comes together. In addition, conversations in these segments illuminate details about Pizza and Chicory's collective anxiety. The player learns that there are two different bases for these thoughts: Chicory burned out after doing nothing but art for years and pretending to be OK, while Pizza struggles with imposter syndrome since they became the new wielder essentially by chance. The contrasting dispositions between Pizza and Chicory give their interactions more depth and nuance and give the player more reasons to relate or become attached to them.

The end of the story sees Pizza using their empowered bond with the brush to tackle the root corruption atop the Wielder Tower. But everything goes wrong when Pizza's doubt takes over, and the brush disappears. The resolution to this ordeal is one of the most cathartic moments in the game, not in small part due to its dramatic musical moments, and it is a sure candidate for the strongest element.

Strongest Element

It is challenging to resolve a story that deals with mental health problems because most solutions or self-revelations that could work in other stories will come across as superficial. That is why *Chicory's* approach to closing its tale pleasantly surprised me. In the key climatic epiphany, both Pizza and Chicory realize that they can create their own brush, which eliminates the hidden source of their struggles: that there is only one wielder. This is a solution unlike others in that it doesn't treat the characters as unrealistically malleable or strong, but instead proposes that the societal structure governing them can be made flexible instead, which reads as much more genuine. It helps that Greg Lobanov's team, as a collection of indie creators with experience with anxiety, was very well positioned to deliver this type of message. Combined, it produced a profound, unpretentious change of tradition that speaks in an important and inspiring way for creative people such as myself.

Unsuccessful Element

The dialogue in *Chicory* is heavily distilled: each conversation contains only the most important content needed to deliver cutscenes that are meaningful to players who invest in the story without annoying players who only want to explore and draw. However, in some cases, this approach to simultaneously designing for two different types of players introduces issues for members of both groups. Some exploration-focused players found that the flat, terse dialogue given by the characters made it difficult to immerse themselves in the world. On the other hand, I, as a player fully invested in the story, would have thoroughly enjoyed longer cutscenes with more drawn-out conversations, especially as the story approached its end. If Greg Lobanov traded some of the less impactful side content in favor of more main story development, there could have been opportunities to further explore key characters outside the main duo, such as Blackberry or Peppermint. *Chicory* gets really close to a perfect balance between gameplay and story, though, so any improvements to this aspect of the game's narrative style would have to be approached very delicately.

Highlight

In the transition between the linear portion and the branching portion of *Chicory's* main questline, there is a climatic moment where Chicory experiences a panic attack. This section of the game is an action-packed survival sequence, synced with the background music, in which Pizza tries to calm her down. A typical action sequence in *Chicory* involves

some kind of combat, in which you deal damage to a manifestation of the corruption by painting over it. However, the sequence where Chicory breaks down is unique because it lacks this combat element, which makes it a more empathetic moment that aligns more closely with *Chicory's* wholesome aesthetics. It is this kind of marriage between gameplay and narrative that makes helping Chicory recover a major emotional highlight.

Critical Reception

Despite its relatively low exposure, *Chicory* was very well reviewed by nearly everyone. Two such positive reviews with contrasting content are:

Source: Destructoid

Reviewer: Zoey Handley

Score: 9.5

This review speaks highly of the game's emotional narrative as a highly relatable and revelatory experience. Zoey, as a writer with artistic tendencies, resonated heavily with the themes that the story tackles and the messages that it delivers about the nature of creativity, and reports that anyone with similar creative struggles would find it similarly therapeutic.

Source: GameInformer

Reviewer: Ben Reeves

Score: 8.75

Although this reviewer didn't have high expectations going into the game, he found deep relaxation and comfort in the drawing mechanics. The game's cute characters and worldbuilding, according to Ben, complimented this atmosphere well, producing many delightful moments of humor and emotion. This review serves as evidence that wholesome games can thrive in an industry predominantly focused on combat and aggression.

Lessons

- **Put the emotion first.** The developers of *Chicory* were able to strike deeply in the hearts of their players because they injected the characters with their own personal struggles. By actively seeking to convey a sincere thought through each cutscene, they created a compelling narrative where players could latch onto something that they also feel and become invested in it. It helps that they were able to create two characters, Pizza and Chicory, with similar emotions of self-doubt but for contrasting reasons, giving players more opportunities to see themselves reflected in the story.
- **Decrease the scope by focusing on two characters.** In *Chicory*, the most developed characters by far were Pizza and Chicory, with every other character acting as support. As a result, the cast of side characters could be dynamically expanded to

include additional side material, representations of the developers, and Kickstarter backers without bloating the story. Most players were able to ignore the one-dimensionality of these side characters so long as they were able to attach to the primary two. This demonstrates that a handy model for character building is that of extreme depth in a couple characters, but a wide breadth of side characters.

- **Leaning into two different audiences produces a more solid but less potent experience for both.** *Chicory* deals with some indecisiveness in that it appeals to players who only care for the exploration but also to players who only care for the storyline. In doing so, it had to make compromises in order to create a good experience on both ends. The critical reception of *Chicory* indicates that this was likely a wise decision, as the game attracted a much wider fanbase and fewer negative reviews than it would have otherwise, but in a parallel universe, the story would have had more room to grow if the game emphasized its narrative aspect more heavily.

Summation

Greg Lobanov's creations have a reputation for seeming small on first glance but providing immense charm and value as a whole. *Chicory* appears at first as a casual stress reliever, but manages to deliver a unique and powerful emotional experience through its cleverly composed narrative told through the act of drawing. As a digital creator, I see *Chicory* as the single most important game released this year, and from the character design to the integration of gameplay and story, it has a whole host of successes in narrative development to thank for that.