

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *It Takes Two*
Platform: PC, PlayStation 4 & 5, Xbox One & Series X & Series S
Genre: Cooperative Adventure 3D Platformer
Release Date: March 26, 2021
Developer: Hazelight Studios
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Josef Fares

Overview

The very human married couple May and Cody's relationship seems to be coming to an end. Rose, their daughter, has a heart on track to be broken by the culmination of their frustrations and arguments. She unknowingly casts a spell that transforms them into miniature dolls, a situation the two are trapped in together. The couple want to get back to their real bodies, which are unresponsive to Rose's attempts to get attention, but must work together to do so. Dr. Hakim, a book also given life by magic, requires that they complete challenges before he deems them ready to get back to their bodies.

May and Cody reluctantly pursue this course, but each acknowledges what the other brings to the table the further they go. At the same time, Rose is preparing to take action and run away from the family, feeling that she must be the problem. Although the two's relationship never fully heals in the scope of the game, they learn a deeper understanding and appreciation for each other over their long, cooperative, charming journey. Upon being returned to their bodies, they reassure Rose she is not at fault. They commit to always being there for her.

Characters

- **May** - One of the two player characters. May is a married mother divorcing her husband, Cody, after years of conflict. She is quick to blame Cody for anything that goes wrong around the house or in their relationship, denying much responsibility herself, burying herself in her work and using it as an excuse. Determined, and with competencies that don't always have the opportunity to shine, she is the moneymaker in the family. She has been turned into a wooden doll, and is reluctantly working with Cody to break that spell. During gameplay, she is usually the one to execute on the setup constructed for her as opposed to making it herself.

- **Cody** - The other of the two player characters. Cody is a married father divorcing his wife, May, after years of conflict. He finds it hard to competently finish tasks, and is doubtful of his own abilities. Scared to acknowledge his incompetencies, he is quick to deflect blame whenever accused of something, and is rather ignorant to his own snappiness when he reacts this way. By default, he is kind and understanding-seeming to his daughter. He has been turned into a clay doll, and is reluctantly working with May to break that spell. He acts as the stay-at-home dad to the family, and, in-game, often takes supportive roles.
- **Rose** - The young daughter of May and Cody, Rose has learned to be independent to avoid her parents' hostilities. She is caught in their crossfire, and blames herself for their separation. Feeling like a burden and not finding acknowledgment, she takes it upon herself to try to fix the situation. Her parents' real bodies are unresponsive, and her ultimate decision is to run away.
- **Dr. Hakim** - An eccentric, obnoxious, magical book whose goal is to guide May and Cody through fixing their relationship. Brought to life when Rose looks for help with her parents' situation, Dr. Hakim has much power over the couple's situation and puts them through the challenges of the game. He encourages behaviors in them he thinks are necessary for their healing process, Book of Love as he is.

Breakdown

It Takes Two's three-act structure is in service to May and Cody's relationship development. The first sees them wanting to reach their daughter, believing she can restore the two to their bodies, and realizing they need to work as a team to get there. This is their challenge, as it is highlighted how broken they are as a couple and a team. Along the way, they are challenged by and interact with what seem to be magically alive versions of their old possessions (much of their trials take place in small areas on their property). These possessions criticize them for their mistreating of Rose. After struggling through obstacles that encourage use of basic collaboration skills, they reach Rose, but she cannot hear them or break the spell to restore them.

The pivot comes when they are about to discover the secret to their restoration. Dr. Hakim deliberately hides it, and forces them to go through his couples therapy course before he reveals it. Their eyes still set on the golden ticket back to their bodies, Dr. Hakim sets new challenges, chapter by chapter, that the two reluctantly complete. The lessons Dr. Hakim lays out for them include making time for each other and finding attraction for each other again. They learn along the way, thanks in part to how they are reminded of the reasons they married and their original love for each other, but still resist, to a degree, the idea that the therapy is helping them. The third act is when May and Cody have found out what a team they can still be, and they complete the therapy by rediscovering their past passions and, in doing so, reignite some lost passion in each other. They come out of the experience with a new perspective on their relationship. They are restored to their bodies, find a note from Rose, and rush to find her before she gets on a bus. When they reach her, they reassure her she is not the problem and they will always be there for her. The three walk back to the house, Rose in the middle holding hands with both parents on her sides.

May and Cody's individual character arcs are not prominent, and *It Takes Two* instead focuses on developing their characters in relation to each other as opposed to development on their own. This can tell the story that Hazelight set out to tell well enough, as players will see the evolution of their relationship front-and-center, as they should. However, by the end of the game, players may realize that, individually, the two have not significantly changed. For a game where players learn so much about May and Cody, and there are so many opportunities for character development, it can leave them seeming hollow. While the story does revolve around the two's relationship, it is reasonable to assume that the personal events leading to their relationship changes also affected them individually.

Every chapter of the game is more in service of the two's relationship development than individual development, but one is during Dr. Hakim's lesson about passion. They visit Cody's garden, one of the things he was most proud of, and rightfully so. They then help May learn to sing again, an ability of hers and a passion that she had given up. These may seem like examples of strong individual development, but that is not the whole story. The lesson the two learn from this chapter is to reignite the passion they once had for each other. While one might call this individual development, it is character development in service of relationship development. Because this is *It Takes Two's* primary goal, it does not try to shape either of the two more than it needs to continue to evolve their relationship. The audience doesn't know whether May and Cody would apply any of the lessons they learn to other relationships in the case that they don't stay together. From the player's perspective, it often seems that it is only the marriage that develops, and the characters change over time, without as much deliberate effort as it might take to learn lessons applicable elsewhere. For characters meant to be relatable and simple, this is a shortcoming.

Every section of *It Takes Two* sees May and Cody each given new abilities to progress through that section. These abilities are generally asymmetrical: for example, Cody is first given a nail gun to pin objects in place and create points for May to swing from with the hammer she is given, which she can also use to smash buttons and break objects. Each of these ability pairs represents the role Dr. Hakim wants them to take on to learn his lesson at the time. One instance is when Dr. Hakim wants Cody to focus on reigniting his passion for gardening, and for May's goal to be supporting him in doing so. Cody's given ability is to truly interact with the garden, pulling things in the environment with the vine on his head. May is given a water hose that, when used correctly, unleashes the full potential of the garden and Cody's ability.

The asymmetricality of these abilities is significant. It signifies that, while the couple are becoming a better team, they still have different skill sets and different things to contribute to the relationship. The characters notice more and more that the other is bringing things to the table with their unique ability that they wouldn't be able to. This is part of their relationship development throughout the story, but also one of *It Takes Two's* more pertinent messages to real life. The game emphasizes how important it is for all members of couples to acknowledge the others' strengths and play to them when trying to accomplish something together.

Given how relatable *It Takes Two's* characters are presented as, it is particularly reasonable to assume the messages in-game are meant to apply to just about everyone. When May and Cody argue about whose fault it is that their old vacuum cleaner is still

broken (which does have gameplay implications), it is so the players can relate to the kind of everyday disagreement they are having as opposed to a more obscure issue. They then become invested in that dispute, given that they likely remember a similar disagreement they have had with someone else. It follows that they become more attached to the characters and open themselves up to interpreting *It Takes Two's* messages. This was a desired effect, as the resolutions to these situations are something that players are supposed to listen to.

The game leaves whether or not May and Cody actually stay together up to interpretation. As applicable *It Takes Two's* hopeful tone may be to modern human life, it is still silly to assume every relationship can be healed even with two people motivated to fix it. Hence, the game does not assume May and Cody's will, instead leaving their final status up to interpretation with only a nudge in a hopeful direction. The only assurance the player is left with is that Rose remains a priority for both of them and they will remain united in some way through her. This can apply to many analogous relationships, as, often, those who are bound together by something significant can have their disagreements and still prioritize that significant thing above those feelings.

Despite its cartoony appearance, *It Takes Two* does not shy from realism where it sees fit. The most clear example of this is that there is every chance May and Cody may stay separate. While the game takes a realist approach much of the time, it errs on the side of hopefulness rather than bleakness. This is vital for it to maintain its cheery tone even while covering dark subject matter. While it certainly isn't necessary for a game about divorce to have such a tone, it may be if the game is designed to be approachable for two people in any kind of developing relationship. A couple two weeks into dating isn't likely to pick up a bleak story about marriage failure.

Strongest Element

It Takes Two's changing mechanics follow whatever dynamic the two are focused on during that part of the game. It is one thing to constantly mix up players' abilities in a cooperative context, providing variation and freshness, but another to add this layer of depth. Another cooperative game may allow two players to hold hands to swing each other through a level, showing the characters' friendship and teamwork. Here, though, May and Cody must use ability sets that encourage them to first learn collaboration again, then giving each other time, then concepts of attraction, and so on. Because the player's agency is through these abilities, their learning is also more in line with the characters'. This is another of the elements required for the two to be as relatable as they are to the audience.

Unsuccessful Element

Although May and Cody grow to appreciate the other more throughout the game, they often uncharacteristically miss chances to reflect and develop in other ways. While it may be true of some people to not take opportunities to self-improve, the two experience situations too disturbing to ignore afterward. The believability of the characters suffers for this. The first part of the game sees them convinced that the way to break the spell and be restored to their bodies is by making their daughter cry on them. Despite the genuine importance of Rose and her feelings to both of them, they carry out a plan to

make this happen with little argument. What is more disturbing is, after the plan fails, and Rose is distressed and alone in vain, May and Cody do not discuss the harm they inflicted. As parents and not particularly uncaring people, they should be impacted. This incident is not mentioned for the rest of the game. This not only damages the players' respect for the two, but it is also an example of completely missed potential for character development. This is the most egregious case of multiple where May and Cody's missing evolution is particularly apparent. Although the overall story is about their relationship, the two must be portrayed as realistic people with their own arcs. However, as they fail to individually develop by the end of the story, it is harder to accept them as the dynamic people the rest of us all are, which is *It Takes Two*'s most significant failing.

Highlight

It Takes Two knows just what to do after players have experienced the first few hours of gameplay, where May and Cody, reflecting the players too, bicker all the way through the challenges. Where a marriage therapist might suggest having a nerf gun battle to express frustrations in an ultimately harmless way, *It Takes Two* presents the players with a torture chamber, leaving one locked inside and the other with the controls. This is a release point for the building tension one player feels, but can strengthen the other's. In addition, by giving this psychological release valve to one player via an arbitrary choice, that unfairness can add to the other's feelings in a way that reflects May and Cody's experience. The constant arguing and frustration they have engaged in up to this point is important for the players to feel, too, but it is also important for them not to feel stuck in it. The context for the torture chamber's existence is the accentuation that the experience needs to be an authentic emotional one of its own. This kind of emphasis on engaging the players in the feelings of May and Cody is a high point of *It Takes Two*.

Critical Reception

- **Geeks under Grace, Wesley Lantz, 9.5/10:**
Citing what he learned about his own relationship with his wife (who was also his co-op partner) while playing *It Takes Two*, Lantz argues that the game has a counseling effect on the players. By using communicative and collaborative skills required by the gameplay, he found the real changes in dynamic between himself and his spouse mirrored, in some ways, those of the characters in-game. Lantz appreciates how the over-the-top movie-like qualities of the story (even calling the experience "like playing a Pixar movie written for adults") don't keep it from being a grounded tale about real issues that the game treats with respect.
- **IGN, Tristan Ogilvie, 9/10:**
Ogilvie praises much of *It Takes Two*'s story. His most significant criticism is Dr. Hakim's character: he finds the book "insufferably cringy", even though he enjoyed the product of the characters' conversations with him, and much of the rest of the story. He takes note of how the gameplay incorporates aspects of how the couple are trying to heal, citing the area based on attraction, where the characters are equipped with magnets which are not-so-subtly-metaphorical. Ogilvie also feels that "the story's final moments aimed for Pixar-style poignancy

but came off as slightly saccharine”. This implies failings in *It Takes Two*’s tonal approach, particularly given the over-the-top nature Ogilvie also sees in Dr. Hakim.

- **The Review Geek, Greg Wheeler, 6.5/10:**

From the perspective of a man who has been through divorce, Wheeler is not so impressed with *It Takes Two*’s narrative. He does not feel that May and Cody could be healing as much as they are, given that much of the change in them comes from remembering past hopes. He criticizes the lack of character development of May and Cody, noting that they never go as deep as they should into actually analyzing and resolving their marital issues. He is also particularly critical of certain moments in the game he finds uncharacteristic of two parents, and is frustrated by what he feels are overly expositional and common cutscenes. The story is what he is most disappointed by.

Lessons

- **The players’ communication style should reflect that of the emotional representatives of their experience** - Part of the reason the players can understand May and Cody’s experience is that they are encouraged just as much to bicker in real life as the couple is in game. When one player is given control of, effectively, a torture chamber, and the other is left helplessly inside, it’s inevitable that one will become tired of being crushed, burned, or turned into an acorn. The natural response that incites is a reflection of May and Cody’s actions, mirroring the kind of frustration and argument that May and Cody act out after, for example, one misuses their vacuum and the other fails to fix it after promising to do so. This is a big part of the connection players form with the characters.
- **Game mechanics should reflect the feelings of the characters as directly as possible** - Game characters’ agency in the world should reflect their traits and abilities. *It Takes Two* steps up by using its constantly changing game mechanics to represent the emotional challenges the two are going through. Because it is up-front about the emotional meanings of these mechanics (Dr. Hakim often being an over-the-top exposition machine), the player has a better understanding of the characters’ challenges. Of course, this is a significant part of their engagement with the characters and the story, leading to their taking more away from the game overall.
- **It is doable to be realistic while having an optimistic, inspiring tone** - Despite *It Takes Two*’s unfailing positivity, it can still be representative of realistic life situations. While taking every chance to be hopeful - the very premise is a divorcing couple learning to appreciate each other again, something that simply is not possible for every couple - *It Takes Two* knows to stay grounded enough to be believable. The story does not culminate in a happy-ever-after ending, instead only acknowledging that new perspectives were found and the characters took steps in a healthy direction. This is proof that any media can present a story with a

tone just as positive as this without detracting from the harsh reality of the worst subjects or situations.

Summation

It Takes Two is dissimilar to many cooperative games in that they might have many elements accomplished entirely alone by one player, with communication less necessary and collaboration less required. Instead, almost every element of its gameplay is cooperative, which interweaves players' feelings more closely with its story. There are layers of reasons the players will become thus attached. This unique kind of bond players form with the characters and settings, along with subject matter analogous to much of life, is what makes *It Takes Two* a target for narrative analysis that sticks out.