

# Game Narrative Review

---

---

**Name:** Tyler Majewski

**School:** Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

**Email Address:** majewt2@rpi.edu

**Month/Year of Review Submission:** April 2025

---

---

**Game Title:** *Fran Bow*

**Platform:** Microsoft Windows, macOS, Linux, Android, iOS, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4

**Genre:** Point-and-click, adventure, puzzle, psychological horror

**Release Date:** August 27, 2015

**Developer:** Killmonday Games

**Publisher:** Killmonday Games

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Natalia Martinsson

## Overview

---

*Fran Bow* opens in the year 1944, where a young Fran Bow Dagenhart lives in a loving household with her mom, dad, and her cat Mr. Midnight; her one and only friend. Fran seems to live a normal life, though an incredibly lonely one, until one sudden, fateful night. A mysterious, demonic figure appears outside of her window, and a scream comes from her parents' room. Fran's worst nightmare comes true as she discovers the lacerated corpses of her parents. She runs away from home but is soon found and placed in Oswald Asylum, a psychiatric hospital for traumatized and damaged children. Without her beloved Mr. Midnight, Fran loses herself in the strange asylum as the only present adults seemingly want the worst for her, and she is assaulted by nightmarish hallucinations; she craves her home and seeks freedom. In her escape, Fran traverses macabre, surreal landscapes across time and space, phases through different realities, and fights back against abusive institutions, trauma-induced psychosis, and pure, utter darkness as she attempts to find "home", in whatever form it may appear by journey's end.

# Characters

---

- **Fran Bow Dagenhart:** The titular protagonist of *Fran Bow*. She has a profound, significant love for life itself and is extremely curious. However, her naivety and innocence, typical for most 10 year olds, tends to get in her way quite often. She experiences vivid hallucinations as a byproduct of her use of the fictional psychoactive drug Duotine, though it is unclear whether or not the drug is simply enhancing an already-present condition. All Fran believes she needs is to return home and be with her cat. In actuality, her journey follows how she must create that home, control her destiny, and find balance in the face of darkness... or she may just be a doomed victim of Oswald Asylum, trapped in a self-inflicted fantasy until her untimely death.
- **Mr. Midnight:** Mr. Midnight is Fran's pet cat, a gift from her late parents. He is the deuteragonist and the only other playable character besides Fran. Mr. Midnight seemingly has a special bond with Fran such that the two can communicate with one another. He expresses a devout loyalty and love to Fran despite the insistence from external forces that he is betraying Fran's best interests.
- **Itward:** Itward is an entity from the fourth realm of death, Senersedee, who travels across realities in a magical flying machine. He claims to be a benevolent spirit to all children who imagine him, embodying curiosity and the balance between all that is good and bad. However, he may simply be another one of Fran's hallucinations. Itward discreetly helps Fran and Mr. Midnight throughout their journey home by altering things behind the scenes.
- **Remor:** Remor is the prince of darkness, the son of Mabuka, and is a primary antagonist. Remor's existence hinges on his hunger for despair and fear, and as such, he haunts Fran and goads her to commit suicide, physically attacks her, and does everything in his power to keep Fran trapped in the "house of madness".
- **Mabuka (Mother Mabuka):** Described as "the end of light", Mabuka is the ruler of the fifth realm of death and serves as a secondary antagonist throughout *Fran Bow*. She is the mother to Remor and the Kamalas and feeds off of all negativity, anguish, and despair. Though Mabuka represents pure darkness itself, she still assists in serving Fran's role as the "keeper of the key" and leads Fran towards her prophetic journey's completion.
- **Clara and Mia Bulhamet:** Clara and Mia Bulhamet serve as the antagonists of the second half of chapter 2. Clara and Mia are twin sisters who have been experimented on by Dr. Oswald Harrison since birth. In the first chapter, we see them separated in the basement of Oswald Asylum with visible lobotomy-induced scars. They are suddenly reintroduced in the second chapter as fully-healthy conjoined twins who try to bully Fran into casting a spell to separate them at the sacrifice of her and Mr. Midnight's lives.
- **Aunt Grace Dagenhart:** Grace Dagenhart is Fran's aunt on her mother's side. At first, she presents herself as worried for Fran's well-being, seemingly defending Fran from Oswald

Asylum. It is ultimately revealed that, after years of manipulation, she has become conditioned to work with her abuser, Dr. Oswald, to collect Fran for his experiments.

- **Dr. Marcel Deern:** Dr. Marcel Deern is a psychiatrist at Oswald Asylum who attempts to help Fran navigate her life and heal beyond the death of her parents. At first, Dr. Deern is an antagonistic figure to Fran, as she does not understand why he is trying to make her remember the death of her parents during their therapy sessions. He also maintains complicity with the asylum's abuse of its children. He is eventually fired by the asylum for prodding into a conspiracy surrounding Fran, where her death is reported in the news despite her clearly still being alive. We eventually learn that he was abused as a child by his father, a core motivating factor for his actions, and that he truly cares for the recovery and health of the children despite being misled by the true, sinister objectives of Oswald Asylum.
- **Dr. Oswald Harrison:** Dr. Oswald Harrison is arguably the overarching main antagonist of *Fran Bow*. He is the founder of Oswald Asylum and executes dangerous, near-lethal experiments on the asylum's children. He will let nothing get in the way of his research, even if it means he must commit murder. He facilitates the lobotomization of multiple children, employs unethical instances of electroshock therapy, and conjoins the bodies of a pair of twins together. He is tied to the lives of Aunt Grace and Fran's mother, as his research often centers around twins, though the extent of his abuse, manipulation, and experimentation on them remains unknown.
- **Kamalas:** Kamalas are beings of pure darkness that Fran sees in her hallucinations, which may really be interdimensional visions into the Ultrareality, and act as minor antagonists throughout the game. They are born in the Ultrareality and feed on pain, fear, despair, and madness, and are constantly searching for prey. They are often found "haunting" each of the children of Oswald Asylum like parasites. Their one weakness is water, and if one exposes them to enough water, they can turn into valokas.
- **Valokas:** Valokas are beings of pure light and sound that are born in the first realm, Primeve. They are seen throughout the game across almost all realities and represent the purity of all feelings and virtue. They are somewhat omnipresent and omniscient and represent the male and female sexes simultaneously.
- **Itherstanise characters:** A variety of characters from the realm of life, Ithersta, play minor roles to varying degrees of importance. King Ziar is the ruler of Ithersta. He is a benevolent tree-like entity who teaches Fran about the multi-layered realities and helps her find her way back home. Palontras is a giant flying axolotl-like entity who serves as the doctor of Ithersta and fights back against the kamalas who enter Ithersta. Cogwind is Ithersta's clocksmith and invents the only known tool that can wake up Mother Mabuka. The Great Wizard is a strange, forgetful tree-person who is the Keeper of the Stones that allow for transport between realities. In general, the Itherstanise are extremely eccentric and unique characters who do not share the same societal rules or common sense that humans do. They live freely throughout time and are kind to those who return kindness.

# Breakdown

## Introduction

*Fran Bow*, as one of the foundational indie horror projects of the 2010s, does not stray from its lore-heavy, secret-filled contemporaries and places an abundance of hidden narrative threads for only the most attentive players. Naturally, one of the most critical pieces of text lies within the game's content warning screen. Though it may be ironically adorned by a smattering of bright red pills, the primary purpose of this screen is to warn players of the game's display of gore, self-harm, sexual harassment, animal cruelty, drug abuse, and mental illness. Unlike most other content warning screens, the game also justifies the inclusion of these elements:

“These themes are presented through the creative thinking of Fran, a young child who undergoes trauma. The game is sprinkled with fantasy, innocence and her endless curiosity.”

This strangely placed passage immediately initiates the most critical question that *Fran Bow* asks players: are the events of the game real or imaginary? Of course, this question was never meant to be answered by the game, nor by players; it is instead manipulated by the developers to create a unique narrative experience where each element of the game tells multiple stories at once. *Fran Bow* leverages and manipulates traditional point-and-click ludic elements, dense metaphorical and symbolic storytelling, and player subjectivity to create a multi-threaded, or polysemic, narrative interface that augments the game's themes as players evaluate multiple stories and perspectives simultaneously.

As hinted at in the content warning screen, *Fran Bow* is an ambiguous story. The game is experienced by players in a third-person limited point of view, thus we only see the world through the titular Fran Bow's perspective, except in rare and short sections where we play as Mr. Midnight. It is almost certain that Fran is an unreliable narrator. She takes a fictional, psychoactive drug named Duotine at large volumes in short intervals. The drug induces violent, gory visions and her dosage supposedly contains an irregularly increased amount of an active ingredient called ektoplomatine, which reportedly affects the subconscious of users. Additionally, from patient reports in the background, we learn that Fran sleeps for irregularly long periods of time, and her body moves without her conscious input. Fran is also a victim of trauma and abuse and is at a heightened risk of conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder and schizoaffective disorder, which can be tied to hallucinatory side effects. It is not outside the realm of possibility that she is either in a comatose state, dreaming of the game's events, or that she is hallucinating while navigating reality; players may simply be experiencing the “creative thinking” of Fran. By the end of the story, the conflicting perspectives of Remor, Dr. Oswald, Aunt Grace, Dr. Deern, and Fran herself essentially forces players to question the reality of the experience they just went through.

On the other hand, there is significant evidence that the events of *Fran Bow* exist in a fantastical reality that is merely influenced by the “creative thinking” of Fran. This is significantly corroborated by external, official media from Killmonday Games. The studio released *Little Misfortune* in 2019, which is a separate story from *Fran Bow* yet takes place in the same universe, sharing the setting of the Five

Realms of Essential Existence. There have been snapshots of a chapter 6, a true sequel, and even an official Fran Bow book in the works, with their various sneak peeks often including an implicit denial of Fran's supposed death and incapacitation that is unexplainable in interpretations where the story solely occurs in Fran's mind or as if Fran was reinterpreting real-world events in a fugue-like state.

This paradoxical information is all a part of writer Natalia Martinsson's goal with *Fran Bow*. Martinsson makes it clear in interviews that the game, like it was to her in the development process, is meant to be a therapeutic experience and lesson. The story intentionally reveals itself to players in different ways based on their own perception and lived experiences, which allows the most important themes and messages to shine through.

“ Personally, I prefer to give the answers in a metaphorical way. That's [the] fun part -- to relate it to your own experiences, and be part of the story with your own points of view” - **Natalia Martinsson**

The game utilizes and intentionally creates multiple different threads for players to mentally track and investigate, both as a forum for the game's messages and themes and as a tool to connect with the varied cultural backgrounds and lives that players may come from. This is the core of the polysemic narrative interface; the game intentionally tells multiple different stories using the same elements. Interpretations of the story can be classified on a gradient, where one extremum interprets everything in the story as a product of Fran's subconscious or imagination, and the other extremum interprets everything as a fantasy-driven reality that Fran's imagination has power over. To unveil the polysemic narrative structure and the metaphorical meanings of the story's events, we can recontextualize every critical incident of the story on both extrema to help evaluate the themes that arise. On one end, as little of the story is based in reality, and it follows Fran's descent into madness. On the other end, everything presented in the story is the canonical, true reality inside of the game's universe, and the story instead follows Fran's journey towards freedom. From this perspective of two extreme ends, it becomes apparent how different intended themes and messages – those concerning perspective, duality, and the cycle of trauma – arise from the same forms and how they cross over and interact with each other throughout the narrative.

## **Introduction**

In the introduction, we are presented with Fran's purportedly “perfect” home life with her parents and new pet, Mr. Midnight. When her parents go out, she is babysat by Aunt Grace, who Fran claims to enjoy the company of. Outside of this, it's made clear that Fran is lonely, and her only true friend is Mr. Midnight.

One night, Remor appears outside her window, and she hears a scream from her parents' room, where she finds their dead bodies. Fran runs away but is eventually found and sent to the Oswald Asylum. The game opens with a therapy session with Dr. Marcel Deern, and at the end, she takes Duotine for the first time, where she experiences a vivid, terrifying hallucination and promptly passes out.

Though it primarily plays out as a cutscene, the introduction establishes the core gameplay mechanic of dialogue options. Throughout the game, players are presented with two different text responses for Fran to say. This interface is sporadically used as a method for players to solve puzzles, but typically, especially in the introduction, these options have zero bearing on what actually happens. Despite the lack of surface-level significance, these “empty” options provide a critical ludonarrative service. The selection of dialogue options gives players a feeling of control over what Fran says, and in a way, who Fran is as a person. The first option players make is in response to Dr. Deern asking how Fran feels, allowing players to choose between Fran saying “I’m fine, I guess” or “I feel like dying”. The option selected has zero bearing on how the scene progresses and simply forces players to make a decision on whether they think Fran should be shy and repressed or emotionally explicit. These personality-defining moments are scattered throughout Fran Bow and exemplify the polysemic structure of the story. In small dosages, players contribute to building the narrative and slowly build their own persona for Fran, paralleling the larger-scale narrative building they make as they decide which elements in the story are fantasy or reality. These decisions also overlap, as if a player wants Fran to be upfront and explicit in this scene, it may lead them to believe that Fran is creating an imagined world where she has courage and freedom. If a player wants Fran to be secretive, it may reflect on the game’s events taking place in reality. Each respective option could be interpreted in a variety of different ways by players, and their presentation contributes to the overall subjective story creation that the writers want players to engage with. Regardless, in both of these microscopic and macroscopic decisions, the outcome will always be the same, as players are eventually led to the ultimate therapeutic messaging of Fran Bow.

Beyond introducing players to subjective story creation, not much divergence between the two extremum on the polysemic narrative interface’s interpretation gradient occurs until the end of the first chapter, but the seeds for each thread are clearly planted. Though players receive the information in the same forms, multiple different meanings present themselves and what is interpreted as allegorical, metaphorical, or literal is largely dependent on what is viewed as important, meaningful, and even emotionally relatable by the player. These interpretations are not incongruent; however, players must consider various perspectives before coming to their own interpretation, and thus the differing messages and themes that arise from the various interpretations are constantly interacting with one another and the player. The two extremes are not exactly total opposites; they simply lie on different ends of a gradient.

### *Descent into Madness*

We later discover in the story that Aunt Grace and Fran’s mother are twins who were a part of Dr. Oswald Harrison’s experiments at one point, and that Fran’s life may be tied to Oswald Asylum in more ways than expected. At the most extreme version of Fran’s Descent into Madness, Fran is in a comatose state far before the first second of gameplay, and is already a patient admitted to the asylum.

This plants the seed for how Fran’s hallucinations and delusions develop as they interact with the dangers of isolation, the contributions of societal institutions to cyclically abusive structures.

### *Journey for Freedom*

Fran’s journey begins in total darkness, with the traumatic experience of her parents’ deaths, but it can also be inferred that a deep-rooted generational trauma already existed within Fran. At first, Fran

rejects the memories of her family's death in her therapy session with Dr. Deern, and it is implied Fran has forgotten much of her childhood, but as the story goes on, she remembers more and more of her life and comes to grips with the darkness that comes with life.

## **Chapter 1, My Sober Day**

Chapter 1, "My Sober Day", follows Fran as she manipulates her environment to try to escape Oswald Asylum and find Mr. Midnight. She enlists the help of the other kids in the asylum, and eventually makes her way out despite Remor's persistent reappearances and attempts to keep her locked in the "house of madness". Upon Fran's escape, she enters a maze, avoiding kamalas, where she escapes into a sewage pipe at the end of the maze.

A core mechanic introduced in this chapter is the ability of Fran to freely ingest Duotine pills, which transports her in and out of the "Ultrareality", a hellish overlay on the real world. This mechanic is a core piece in the polysemic puzzle, where alternating perspectives and consuming layered realities become a gameplay mechanic as well as a narrative one.

### *Descent into Madness*

This may be the only chapter in the game that is undeniably at least primarily based in true reality and there is not much divergence from other interpretations. Remor here portrays Fran's fear of the Oswald Asylum and her institutionalization with Remor also being a representation of Dr. Oswald himself. Each of the children have a kamala, creatures of pure darkness, attached to them. Fran's mind cannot understand the deep and invisible complexities of mental illness, and so she portrays them as monsters.

Fran's escape here is also recontextualized. It is only in the mind that she can find solace from the confines of the asylum. Her happiness and perception of reality begin to become reliant on the recursive feedback she receives in her imagined world.

### *Journey for Freedom*

Various pieces of evidence contribute to the idea that the events of the story may take place in a fantastical reality and not solely in Fran's mind. One of the other children admitted to the hospital shares the ability to see Remor, Fran phases through reality to grab a key without being detected by the asylum's workers, and Fran navigates through the traumas of the other kids in the asylum via hints that she could not possibly understand or know about.

The kamalas, instead of being a literal byproduct of Fran's subconscious, may instead serve as metaphors for the intangibility of mental illness and its debilitating, parasitic nature. Once a kamala has latched on to these children, it will never let go and continue to feed until there is nothing left. Oswald Asylum is a perfect breeding ground for the darkness, and as the player explores more and more of it, it reveals more and more of its ugliness. The children are locked into their rooms and treated like animals, and the use of experimental medical treatments like lobotomization and drugs like Duotine paint the asylum as an inhumane space for young children, let alone those who are mentally unstable. Notably, Fran is sexually harassed by the guard, who will only give her what she wants if she gives him a kiss and sits

on his lap. We also learn that some children were admitted to the asylum after being sexually assaulted by a family member or a member of their church. This fact, combined with the actions of the guard and the explicit design choice to place crosses above each child's bed, represents the cycle of abuse that the asylum prolongs. These children, victims of trauma and mental illness, are treated synonymously with their affliction by the doctors meant to "fix" them.

Fran's intense desire to return home further exemplifies the indictment of society's institutions and core pillars: the church, the family/home, and the hospital. These institutions often harm the mentally ill and neurodivergent children they are meant to protect and teach. The scariest scenes in this chapter are arguably the ones Fran sees without any influence of Duotine. Even though the setting of the game is set in the 1940s, the message still carries over to the modern era, as dangerous experimental drugs like Duotine and procedures like lobotomization can be seen as a brutal metaphor for how society's desire to "fix" and "cure" these mental ailments is self-serving and dangerous.

Regardless of if these events are purely imagined by Fran or not, they speak to the same core theme of cyclical abuse, and navigating these elements while considering the varying perspectives only augments the power of the messaging as they are introduced with multiple dimensions.

## **Chapter 2, Curiosity Symptoms and Double Personality**

Chapter 2 is divided into two parts, "Curiosity Symptoms" and "Double Personality". In "Curiosity Symptoms", Fran interacts with a large cast of fantastical creatures from giant talking ants to pinecone people to creepy talking heads with long, fibrous hair. Eventually, these creatures lead Fran to create a door to the inside of a closed-off well, where upon entering, magically transports her into the second part of the chapter, "Double Personality". Fran wakes up trapped in a strange house situated on a small island. Here she meets the conjoined twins, Clara and Mia Bulhamet, who supposedly have Mr. Midnight trapped in the locked attic. They claim Itward has cursed them to be stuck together, and they task Fran with casting a spell to separate them. The potion has ingredients on it that would require the death of both Fran and Mr. Midnight, so Fran tricks the pair with an alternative potion that "reveals the true soul". The potion causes the twins to turn into dust and their souls to flee the Earth. Fran escapes the island on a magical giant frog, reuniting with Mr. Midnight at last. Unfortunately, their attempt to return home is cut short when Remor tosses the duo off a cliff.

### *Descent into Madness*

From the perspective that Fran is descending into madness, her venturing further and further from the asylum causes the realism of the world to fall apart. Fran does not know what awaits beyond the confines of her home and the asylum, and thus must use her imagination to fill in these gaps. Even still, this imagined world is cruel, unforgiving, and full of people ready to take advantage of her. It takes a full divorce from reality, in Chapter 3's Ithersta, for Fran to imagine a world with a community willing to help her. Fran lacks the ability to imagine humans who love and support her because there is no frame of reference for this in real life. Fran's lack of positive role models after the death of her parents has created a negative feedback loop, where even in her imagined reality, she is damaged, put down, and further traumatized by the world.

Additionally, though this is complicated by the final chapter's events, Fran feels an immense guilt for killing the twins that follows her throughout the rest of the story. This is a direct parallel to how Fran feels guilty for the death of her parents, regardless of whether she had any role in this outcome or not. As players, we know by the chapter's end that the twins killed each other. Despite this fact, Fran deep down thinks she really did kill them. This guilt and paranoia compound on Fran's trauma, and she digs herself into a deeper and deeper hole because of it.

### *Journey for Freedom*

The player slowly learns the truth about Clara and Mia's fate as the story progresses. Dr. Oswald's research is obsessed with twins and treats Clara and Mia as mere experiments, and sews their bodies together. The twins' hate for one another becomes too much to handle in this state, and they end up killing each other, and their corpses are thrown into the well that Fran creates the magical door to. Itward tries to give the girls another chance at life in another reality, but they fail to settle their differences and do not realize that their hatred for one another stems from the neglect of their parents. In the universe of *Fran Bow*, death does not exist so long as one continues to love, and the ascension of the twins at the end of the chapter represents the absence of love in their lives.

What all of this is intending to speak to is the overarching theme concerning duality. Natalia Martinsson once said in an interview,

“Life is about being able to open your eyes and realize that shit happens and there are beautiful things awaiting for you to find.” - **Natalia Martinsson**

Really, Fran Bow is all about coexistence with both the light and dark, and how experience and understanding with both represent the totality of the human experience. Clara and Mia represent a rejection of duality and, in this rejection, choose to continue the cycle of abuse for each other and for others, including Fran. In Fran's journey, she must balance the light and darkness metaphorically and literally to truly become free and not end up as another victim to the system like Clara and Mia.

### **Chapter 3, Vegetative State**

In chapter 3, Fran and Mr. Midnight wake up from Remor's assault in a strange, magical place called Ithersta. In Ithersta, Fran has turned into a tree and must enlist the help of King Ziar and Palontras to turn her back into a human. They give her arms and limbs, but Fran goes on various quests for the Great Wizard to return to her true human form and eventually go back home. In this chapter, instead of using Duotine to change reality, Fran uses a clock to change time between fall, spring, winter, and summer. Fran eventually completes all her tasks despite interference from kamalas, her own hallucinations, and the strange social structure of Ithersta and enters a portal that is supposed to return her home.

Here, players learn that the *Fran Bow* universe operates as five realms, called the Five Realms of Essential Existence (F.R.E.E.), layered on top of the “Ultrareality”, which acts as an invisible blanket that

covers everything. Ithersta happens to be one of these realities, and Fran learns about the F.R.E.E. throughout this chapter from various characters like King Ziar and Palontras. The five realities are described as follows:

The Five Realms of Essential Existence		
Order	Name	Description
First Realm	Primeve	The home of The Great Valokas, the realm of light. Where all valokas are born.  Not seen in-game.
Second Realm	Ithersta	The realm of light. Embodies the search for wisdom and truth.  The setting for Chapter 3.
Third Realm	Pandora	The human world, indirectly receives darkness and light from the other realities.  The setting for Chapter 1 and Chapter 4's second part.
Fourth Realm	Senersedee	The realm of death.  Though unconfirmed, it is likely the setting of Chapter 2 and Chapter 4's first part.
Fifth Realm	Obscura	The home of Mother Mabuka, the realm of darkness.  The setting for Chapter 5.

Each moment is defined by a coordinate in time and space, and time is infinitely layered on top of itself allowing for the seemingly impossible manipulation and transport across the seasons as seen in this chapter. Fran is dubbed the Keeper of the Key, a being destined to unlock the doors between each realm, explaining the control she has over reality and time. These multiple realities become directly connected to Fran's trauma, as one of the core beliefs and themes of *Fran Bow* is that one must have both darkness and light to understand and see all; duality is critical to living. Fran's journey becomes one intertwined with prophecy, where she must learn to accept the duality that resides in life to achieve "control". Whether that control is simply emotional or includes reality-shifting powers is up to the player's perspective, as the different layers correlate to the state of Fran's journey as she either descends into total madness (from life to death) or creates her path towards freedom and understanding by finding personal balance.

### *Descent into Madness*

As initiated in the second chapter, as Fran goes further and further from the asylum, the world becomes more and more unrealistic and fantastical. Chapter 3 is the climax of this, a full rejection of reality. Fran's imagination has fully become her only crutch to keep her alive. The only way for Fran to imagine a world full of life, curiosity, and happiness is to imagine one as far from reality as possible. In the realm of Ithersta, various characters also parallel those in the real world and act as idealized replacements. Palontras is likely supposed to be Dr. Deern, except now the doctor has a perfect, magical remedy that can cure any wound (the inability of the magical remedy to cure mental wounds is likely due

to Fran's subconscious fear that she will never be "normal" again). Various characters also appear to be modifications of the nurses and children of Oswald Asylum, with Fran even making note that the blacksmith says something extremely similar to one of the nurses from the first chapter. Fran has become completely obsessed with her fantasy and finds community there, as nothing remains in reality for her to go home to. Though Fran rejects the suicidal messages of her hallucinations, it appears that the only path for her that remains in her descent into madness is that of death. This underlines the ultimate failure of society's core pillars. The idyllic concepts of home, traditional family structures, and religions that build our lives have the power to perpetuate trauma to the point of death.

### *Journey for Freedom*

On the other hand, Fran's stop in Ithersta is one of the most important for her personal journey towards freedom. As King Ziar states, "death is nothing more than an absence of love", and "once you can't feel loved, you die, even if your body walks". Ithersta provides Fran with the love and community that she desperately lacks. Palontras is the first doctor who actually heals Fran in any capacity, and Fran's curiosity and pursuit for wisdom is met with answers instead of rejection. However, Fran does not realize this. She holds onto faith that her old home still exists and there is love to be found in Pandora. This is an allegory for how survivors of trauma and abuse become trapped by their abusers and the systems that traumatized them, and feel like the only world that is left for them that can exist is a painful one. At this point, Fran's true journey becomes apparent: she must build her own home and free herself from the binding perspective that society and its institutions have forced her to fit into.

Throughout the chapter, Fran also faces various hallucinations, which are likely a product of kamalas and Remor himself. These hallucinations are a representation of Fran's paranoia and suicidal thoughts, but she is able to navigate amongst them with the help of Mr. Midnight, a constant force of love that keeps Fran alive no matter what. Ithersta and chapter 3 represent the need for community, acceptance, and love in overcoming mental illness, trauma, and abuse, a stark contrast from the isolated Oswald Asylum.

### **Chapter 4, My Imaginary Friend and Doctor's Prescription**

Upon leaving Ithersta, Fran and Mr. Midnight unfortunately find themselves lost once again, but they meet Itward for the first time in the game's story. Itward has been slightly affecting the world and providing hints to the duo to help them meet each other and return home. He has a magical flying machine that he takes Fran and Mr. Midnight on to return them home. Here, we learn more backstory on Clara and Mia, and Fran celebrates her 11th birthday. The ride eventually goes astray when a kamala lands on the ship and causes it to crash.

The second part of chapter 4, "Doctor's Prescription", opens with Fran and Mr. Midnight waking up right near their house. In an attempt to get through the locked door, Mr. Midnight goes through a window alone, just for Fran to be taken by Dr. Deern, and the duo become separated once more. Shockingly, Dr. Deern has no malicious intent, as he had been fired by Oswald Asylum for investigating too much into the conspiracy of Fran's disappearance. For some reason, the asylum had manipulated the news to claim that Fran had died. The two go to the cemetery to dig up Fran's coffin for evidence where

they find that, instead of Fran's body, there are the skeletal remains of a cat. After exiting the cemetery with this knowledge, Remor appears and takes away Dr. Deern and Fran.

### *Descent into Madness*

Itward, in the descent into madness perspective, is simply Fran's imaginary friend, a manifestation of her curiosity. However, he is also a ferryman of death, like Charon of Greek mythology. He comes from the realm of death, Senersedee, and takes on the appearance of a skeleton. His transport of Fran and Mr. Midnight across realities in his flying machine parallels Charon's transport of the dead across the underworld, further supported by his ties to the previously deceased Mia and Clara. Itward represents Fran's looming death and acts as a sanitized euphemism that Fran's brain creates to help her cope with the event. Once again, Fran's imagination is the only place she can find solace from the cruelty of her reality.

From an absolute extreme perspective, none of what occurs in the second half actually happens, and Fran is simply filling in the gaps of her life in a comatose state inside Oswald Asylum. She will never be given the proper answers by the adults who aim to manipulate and abuse her, especially as she reaches the end of her life.

### *Journey for Freedom*

Directly stated in the text, Itward is an entity that represents duality. He takes on the appearance of a skeleton, moves in the shadows, and takes on a physically imposing appearance, but his sole motivation is to serve and protect the damaged children of Oswald Asylum. Notably, in the Ultrareality, he appears as a clown to Fran. Clowns are often considered creepy and horrifying, but their role is typically to cheer up children, augmenting Itward's representation of duality. As seen in the first chapter, clown paintings are strewn all across the wall of Oswald Asylum, playing into the idea that Itward watches over and protects the children. Ultimately, Itward's role as a manifestation of duality and a protector of the children goes hand in hand with the game's core theme concerning duality, as accepting the bad alongside the good is critical to achieving enlightenment.

In the second half of this chapter, Dr. Deern's twist as a hero rather than a villain is foreshadowed by Palontras earlier in the plot, who suggests to Fran that he could be a good person who is just following the rules laid out by the world around him. This is a continuation of the themes of institutional oppression that the mentally ill and neurodivergent children face. Dr. Deern, who is revealed in this chapter through an Ultrareality vision to himself as a victim of domestic abuse, genuinely wishes to help children. However, the institutions in place, or "the rules", simply do not allow for this. Dr. Deern, who likely wishes to take his experiences with abuse to help others, becomes unknowingly complicit in the same cycle of abuse that afflicts him by blindly following his education as a psychiatrist of the time and following his role under Oswald Asylum. Additionally, this vision into Dr. Deern's life serves as a supplement to the idea that the game's events are a form of in-universe reality. Fran reveals she knows about his trauma to him despite the fact that she should not know any of it, which is supported by Dr. Deern's confused and shocked reaction.

Fran's journey approaches its climax, and her perspective on what she believes to be "home" is finally challenged in Pandora, the human world. Everybody believes she is dead, and it is somewhat implied that the dead cat in her grave is Mr. Midnight, who likely only presently exists due to the fourth realm of death, Senersedee. Similar to the descent into madness interpretation, Fran's worldview begins to fragment and it seems nothing remains for her in Pandora. However, in her journey to freedom she chooses to piece everything together, though not alone.

## **Chapter 5, The House of Madness**

Fran wakes up from Remor's attack, chained to her bed by Aunt Grace, who claims Mr. Midnight is who killed her parents and claims Fran's "hands do bad things when they are untied". She leaves Fran alone, tied to the bed. To escape, Fran enters Ultrareality to reach a room inside of Oswald Asylum where a younger version of herself lives. This younger Fran frees the older Fran, and the room turns back to normal.

Upon leaving the room, Fran finds herself in the fifth reality, Obscura, where she must confront Mother Mabuka, the omniscient Queen of Darkness, to help her find Mr. Midnight. In their confrontation, Mabuka dubs Fran as the Keeper of the Key, claiming this was all predestined as foretold by the Great Valokas. Mabuka opens her heart, where Fran has a final confrontation with Remor. He reveals to Fran that she was the likely culprit of her parents' deaths. Fran then finds Dr. Deern strapped to an electroconvulsive therapy machine, who was placed there by Dr. Oswald and Aunt Grace, both suddenly appearing. Dr. Oswald claims that he enlisted Remor to possess Fran to kill her parents as they were obstructing his research, and that he now must collect Fran. Aunt Grace, who we now know is in cahoots with Dr. Oswald, takes Mr. Midnight and throws him off a cliff to kill him once and for all. In a rage, Fran jumps on Aunt Grace, but she suddenly gets shot by Dr. Oswald. Itward and Palontras, with a rescued Mr. Midnight, end up saving the day, and they blow away the two adults, heal Fran's gunshot wound, and take her to Ithersta, where Fran has found her new home and chooses to be free.

### *Descent into Madness*

Through the lens of the descent into madness, Fran can no longer discern any parts of reality, and her fantasy as the fifth realm of darkness blends with real events. The scene with the younger Fran is actually Fran pulling out a memory from her subconscious; her whole life has been connected to Oswald Asylum, which corroborates with an image of Fran's mother and Aunt Grace showing they were involved in experiments with Dr. Oswald. In an interpretation where nothing is real, the ending is Fran's resignation from reality. There is nothing left in the real world for her to return to. She likely truly passes away and ascends into the afterlife to follow her parents and Mr. Midnight, the only place left where she feels like she can find love.

### *Journey for Freedom*

In the end of Fran's journey towards freedom, Fran conquers the cycle of abuse, rejecting Aunt Grace and Dr. Oswald and choosing the people who truly care for her and the friends she made along her journey. Regardless of whether Fran killed her parents or not, she makes the active decision to no longer

participate in the vicious cycle of abuse and darkness, tearing her reality apart. She chooses freedom and picks her own destiny.

## Discussion

### *Perspective*

As seen through the core narrative experience, gameplay mechanics, and symbolic elements, *Fran Bow* unveils the power of perspective; changing one's outlook can reveal previously-obscured truths and assist in building paths towards healing. Perspective rules all in *Fran Bow*. As seen with the polysemic narrative interface, the story changes depending on the player's point of view, but the same messages and themes appear no matter what. As the player evaluates what they believe, they must evaluate all of these possible perspectives. The varying perspectives then align to provide multiple dimensions to the same augmented themes. How everything ultimately connects is up to the player's evaluation of what truly matters to them and how their life relates to the events of *Fran Bow*. As stated in the game, "reality is shaped by one's perspective". No matter your interpretation of what truly is reality in-game, Fran's lived experience contains the events presented to the player. This is what allows for the coexistence of the various interpretations of the story because, at the end of the day, *Fran Bow* is about a traumatized child who grapples with said trauma. Fran's transportation across realms and evolving perspective on reality puts players into the realm of trauma, abuse, and pain that the mentally ill must deal with every day, helping players understand the importance and weight of the narrative's messaging.

This idea of coexisting perspectives encapsulates the therapeutic messaging that Natalia Martinsson intended for *Fran Bow*. The game's story is quite autobiographical to Martinsson's life.

"*Fran Bow* is purely based on painful and beautiful things that happened in my life and of course it feels very therapeutic. It is the last piece of the puzzle to, in a way, feel free." - **Natalia Martinsson**

Though the details are unknown, Martinsson revealed she had faced religious trauma, domestic violence, medical experimentation, and grappled with mental illness throughout her early years, content which appears throughout the game. Through the intentional manipulation of player subjectivity, Martinsson's self-therapeutic experience can serve as therapeutic to others. Paths towards healing require the interplay of multiple, varying perspectives to truly succeed.

Symbolic messaging, gameplay, and visuals also contribute to showing the power of perspective. The core gameplay mechanic of changing realities to unveil solutions and the implicit trait of point and click games to reward shifting one's perspective neatly couple together. Ludonarrative harmony is achieved as players are rewarded for changing perspectives as Fran gains power by warping the infinitely layered states of time and reality.

The game often utilizes the symbol of eyes and the differentiation between omniscience and all-seeing to express the importance of perspective. To go from scene to scene, to literally change the game's point of view, you click on eyeballs. Characters, especially Fran, bleed from their eyes. Mother

Mabuka, whose eye sockets also bleed, is omniscient; she knows all, but it is explicitly mentioned that she can not see all. Darkness may be present everywhere, but light is required to see. Fran's journey hinges on the evolution of her perspective and her ability to change what "home" is and means to her despite her trauma, the blood coming from her eyes, obscuring her perspective.

### *Duality*

The definitive philosophical belief of *Fran Bow* is that to heal, to be enlightened, and to truly understand life is to also understand and accept the pains, troubles, and negativity that come with love, success, and happiness; to have duality is to be empowered.

Though it lacks a presence in the core narrative, religious trauma quietly hangs over *Fran Bow*'s narrative, primarily representing itself with the use of religious symbols such as the cross and pentacle. The use of the pentacle or pentagram appears all over the Ultrareality, in the spell Fran casts in chapter 2, on the door to other realities, in the Great Wizard's magic from chapter 3, and inside of Oswald Asylum throughout chapter 1. These are very clear and repetitive references to the pagan god Baphomet, who is often associated with the symbol. Baphomet represents duality, and just like valokas, portrays the male and female sex. This reference to a god of duality is merely a supplement to the narrative. The war between light and darkness (valokas and kamalas), Clara and Mia's conflict, and the switching of realities all seemingly contribute to a dichotomy between two opposing sides. However, as mentioned and explained earlier, *Fran Bow* is truly about the experience, acceptance, and navigation amongst all sides. Baphomet is referenced not because they represent two different sides, but because they represent a union and synthesis of different sides.

When a kamala is given too much water, it turns into a valoka, showing that the two entities are far from simply being pure, ideological opposites. Light and dark exist on a spectrum that constantly interacts with itself, just like the story's interpretation gradient. Itward is described as a link between darkness and light; his color is gray. Itward's embodiment of grayness is what allows him to help struggling children like Fran, Clara, and Mia. Additionally, to see into the different realities, it is noted that one must understand and see both darkness and light. The ugliness of reality is what makes the beautiful moments important and powerful and Fran's recognition of her traumas and her confrontation of them is what allows her to move on and attain freedom at the story's end.

This is a critical aspect of the polysemic narrative interface that wraps together all of these elements. Though the polysemic nature of *Fran Bow* can be understood using two extremes, these "ends" are far from polar opposites. The player consumes these alternative perspectives simultaneously, and the story's themes emerge as they synthesize together. Depending on the player's personal beliefs and their life story, their perception of the story and core takeaways can lie anywhere along what is truly a gradient. The polysemy of the narrative hinging on player subjectivity is what allows the cathartic, therapeutic elements to emerge, which makes the structure of the narrative itself directly support the narrative's internal philosophy concerning duality.

## *Cycle of Abuse*

As compounded by the multi-layered narrative structure and the backstories of various characters, *Fran Bow* centers around the cyclical nature of abuse and how it is critical to evaluate one's reality rather than blindly subscribing to the myths of society. *Fran Bow* explicitly denounces the core pillars of modern society. Traditional family structures, religion, and the healthcare system are all displayed as potentially unreliable, dangerous forces, despite society hinging on the fact that these institutions work. *Fran Bow* aims to unveil the myth that these systems and institutions function properly and asks players to not be uncritical of what they unassumingly believe in.

This challenge of society is critical to the story especially when taking into account the time period. It would be remiss to simply treat the negligence of Oswald Asylum as a product of its time. Though we know much more about mental illnesses compared to the approximate World War II setting of *Fran Bow*, biases and medical malpractice persist, and our knowledge of these conditions remain limited. In a world lacking definitive answers, *Fran Bow* asks players to constantly question the methods perceived to work and rather than try to "cure", to understand first.

The limits of this institutionalized abuse reaches far beyond just the asylum as well. *Fran Bow* covers generational trauma and the dangerous cycle of abuse as well, where the most damaged people are most capable of causing damage to others. We see generational trauma through Dr. Oswald's experiments on Aunt Grace and Fran's mother and how that cascades into affecting Fran's life. Additionally, Clara and Mia, Dr. Deern, and Aunt Grace all contribute to the direct abuse of others despite being victims themselves. Fran's journey hinges on her escape from this cycle of abuse and whether or not the player interprets this as her death or her choosing freedom with the love of her friends and community at the end depends on their perspective.

As seen throughout the story, this theme is firmly cemented by the polysemic narrative interface. On one end of the spectrum, players are exposed to a story about a severely ill girl being failed by the system, and ultimately dying as a result. On the other end, players are exposed to a story about freeing oneself from the confines of society and redefining these core pillars. If one believes that the story follows Fran's descent into madness, the most important takeaway from this general concept of abusive cyclical structures may concern the tragedy of the victims. However, if one believes the story's events genuinely occur, the most critical takeaway may seem to be how finding your community, redefining these societal structures, and choosing your destiny allow one to escape their abusive entrapments. Due to the polysemic narrative structure and gradient of interpretations, players are exposed to both takeaways regardless of which takes precedence over the other, and the true, multi-dimensional messaging is exposed. All perspectives, interpretations, and beliefs are equivalent in their coexistence.

## **Strongest Element**

One of the clear strengths of *Fran Bow* is the natural integration of its extremely detailed environmental storytelling with gameplay. Naturally, as a point-and-click puzzle game, players are tempted to click everything that is interactable to ensure nothing is missed and to figure out the answers to each puzzle. *Fran Bow* distills depth and breadth to the world and its characters through non-essential

interactables such as nursing reports, photographs, paintings, and hidden scenes which are passively fed to players. Some of the most impactful story moments come from the “connecting of the dots” of the content that a player accidentally stumbles on while attempting to solve puzzles. In the first chapter, as you explore Oswald Asylum, there are various reports and logs from the psychiatrists and nurses plastered on the walls. One of the first children you interact with, Adelaida Fugents, is revealed to be a victim of domestic sexual assault through one of these reports. When the player goes into the Duotone-induced reality, a doll replaces Adelaida with bloody handprints on its body. This is a symbol for her traumatic experience of course, and very early on teaches players that everything is a metaphor for something meaningful; you are not just looking at randomly placed blood splatters and viscera.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

Throughout the story, a betrayal by Mr. Midnight is explicitly planted. As Fran peers into the Ultrareality (or hallucinates), various references to Mr. Midnight as a traitor appear, like the infamous “Queen Fran Bow” hallucination in Ithersta. In the end, the payoff is merely an offhand comment that Aunt Grace makes in the final chapter, where she justifies her animosity towards Mr. Midnight as he is a “traitor” who caused the death of Fran’s parents. This is not particularly developed or explicitly explained any further, nor does it have any consequences on the literal events that follow. On one hand, the representation of paranoia is apt to a certain degree, if Mr. Midnight actually betrayed Fran, it would be contradictory to the story’s messages and would not represent the irrationality of paranoia. However, Fran herself never has an interaction with this line of belief. There is no impact of this paranoia on the story or Fran’s line of reasoning and thus the entire plotline fails to have any tangible impact, especially since it expresses itself through external forces. If Fran and Mr. Midnight had a conflict in the final or fourth chapter, maybe Fran believes Mr. Midnight leaves her intentionally, this would have paid off the tension built and created a satisfying resolution to this narrative thread. A conflict between Fran and Mr. Midnight would still fit within the themes and messages of the story as people at their lowest often reject help and push away everybody close to them. In the resolution of their conflict, Fran would learn to overcome her irrational fears and recognize/internalize the love and community others offer her.

## **Highlight**

The story of Clara and Mia, which is masterfully yet slowly revealed as the game progresses, is easily one of the most harrowing, detailed, and impactful parts of the game. They first appear, without any context, in the first chapter in the lower level of Oswald Asylum. They are starving, sickly, and appear to have lobotomy scars on their foreheads. Though it is never truly stated that they are Clara and Mia, the fact that they are twins, with one having a beauty mark on their cheek, as well as the fact that “Itward” appears on the wall when you enter Ultrareality heavily suggests this to be the case.

When Clara and Mia reappear in the second chapter, they are combined with one another and are seemingly healthy and fully cognizant. They are abusive towards Fran, and they are responsible for the death of another girl. This connects flawlessly with the themes of cyclical abuse and how hurt people are privy to harmful coping mechanisms. When their real, physical bodies are revealed at the end of the chapter, we learn that they are not actually conjoined twins, but rather they are a product of an experiment

conducted by Dr. Oswald. We later learn of Dr. Oswald's obsession with research concerning twins, where Clara and Mia's story connects perfectly with Fran's, as her mother and Aunt Grace are revealed to be twins that were also experimented on.

Clara and Mia make their final real appearance in the fourth chapter's first part, where we learn of their ties to Itward and more about their personal lives that led to their situation. Though Clara and Mia generally do not have a super massive impact on Fran's journey, they could honestly be written out, they enhance the narrative and its themes in such a way it would be impossible to imagine *Fran Bow* without them. The story of the twins is extremely tragic, produces some of the most horrifying visuals in the story, and genuinely invokes gut-wrenching emotions, which a game that covers mental illness in as raw and intentional of a way as *Fran Bow* does should be trying to do.

## Critical Reception

*Bambi for Riot Pixels, (53/100)*

"Bambi" of Riot Pixels compares *Fran Bow* to similar titles such as *The Night of the Rabbit* and *American McGee's Alice*, criticizing the narrative as a retread and comparing the elements they believe fail in comparison to these titles. They criticize the narrative as nonsensical, that the blood and gore is merely used for shock factor, and argue that none of the characters are representative of anything. They conclude that *Fran Bow* is a poor, meaningless attempt in a lineage of dark fables.

*Katie Smith for Adventure Gamers, (80/100)*

Katie Smith praises *Fran Bow* for its balanced atmosphere, characters, and worldbuilding. However, they criticize the game's various plot holes, lack of definitive answers, and ambiguity that obfuscates what characters mean. Despite this, Smith believes the characters are still extremely memorable, and the uncertainty the game creates in who you can or can not trust is lauded. Notably, Fran herself is praised for her endearing charm and approach to the story's bizarre worlds.

## Lessons

- Polysemic narratives and the consideration of multiple narratives at once emphasize and reveal themes while also allowing readers to self-insert their beliefs and lived experiences into the narrative as a therapeutic experience.
- Allow stories to be told in the margins to reward attentive players. Sometimes the most impactful moments are the culmination of a process that spans an entire experience, that "aha" moment, rather than a singular conclusion you receive at the very end.

- Do not be afraid to express the raw emotions and feelings that may be produced when covering a topic such as mental illness. Without the gore and visceral imagery of *Fran Bow*, the messaging would be less impactful and meaningful.

## Summation

---

*Fran Bow* represents the often under-represented, harsh reality that many children across the world must deal with. Trauma, abuse, and mental illness can affect anybody regardless of time period, personality, or age. Whether the story tells players about an unjust system that causes the debilitation and deaths of the innocent or a beautiful journey about finding home and love while addressing the darkness that lies within, *Fran Bow* candidly exposes the weakest parts of our world and asks players to, at the bare minimum, walk forward in life with love, care, and respect.