

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Psychonauts
Platform: PC
Genre: Adventure
Release Date: April 2005
Developer: Double Fine Productions
Publisher: Majesco Entertainment
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Tim Schafer

Overview

A young boy runs away from his circus family to attend a secret government psychic training camp. This young boy is Raz, a powerful psychic who wishes to expand his powers so he can join the Psychonauts. The Psychonauts are special government agents who use their psychic prowess to defend society from evil. Raz ran away as his father will not allow him to practice his psychic powers and forces him to do acrobatics all day. Upon reaching the camp, the councilors tell him that he will not be able to participate in any of the camp activities without parental consent. However, one of the councilors, Coach Oleander, was so impressed with Raz that he decided to allow him to join the other campers for Basic Braining.

Now that Raz has started his journey to becoming a Psychonaut, he continues to impress other councilors, and opens up more for Raz to learn. Just when everything is going Raz's way disaster strikes as a deranged dentist, Dr. Loboto, has started stealing the brains of everyone at the camp, including the councilors. Raz must use his newly acquired powers to defeat Dr. Loboto and the others on his side so he can continue his training before his father arrives to take him home.

Characters

- **Razputin "Raz" Aquato** – The protagonist/player character. Raz is a son in a family of circus acrobats. He has run away from the circus, instead of to one, to attend a special summer camp for psychics. Raz is a quirky ten-year-old boy with a heavy acrobatic background, which he uses in conjunction with his psychic powers. Raz is an especially gifted psychic, but his father has forbidden him to have anything to do with psychics or their ways. This is due to the curse a psychic fortuneteller placed on his grandfather, and his entire family. A curse that all in the Aquato family shall die in water, as such Raz cannot enter water any

deeper than a small puddle without being grabbed by a watery hand and pulled under. While at the camp Raz must earn as many merit badges as possible and expand his psychic ability so that he can join the Psychonauts. Also while at camp Raz develops a love interest with Lili Zanotto, and discovers the evil plot of Doctor Loboto. Using his new powers Raz must save his girlfriend Lili and the camp too.

- **Dr. Caligosto Loboto** – Antagonists. Dr. Loboto D.D.S. is a crazy dentist; he has a robotic claw arm and always wears a shower cap. He is working with Coach Oleander in their evil plan to take over the world using people's brains. Dr. Loboto is first seen extracting the brain of Dogen Boole, using a special sneezing powder from his claw arm, which causes anyone to sneeze his or her brains out. Dr. Loboto manipulates Sheegor to collect brains for him by threatening her turtle Mr. Pokeylope.
- **Coach Oleander** – The lead antagonist. Coach Oleander is one of the councilors at Whispering Rock Psychic Summer Camp. He is a short no nonsense military man, who dresses and acts as such. The Coach is the first to recognize Raz's potential and allows him to train with the other campers right away. It turns out the only reason he allowed Raz to train was because he intended to take Raz's brain and use it in his plan to rule the world. Coach Oleander also corrupted the mind of the lungfish Linda using an implant in the form of Kochamara. Coach Oleander was a traumatized child who has grown up never being good enough; his plan of world domination is just him trying to prove his worth to himself.
- **The Butcher** – Antagonist. The Butcher is Coach Oleander's memory of his father, huge blood covered man with two giant meat cleavers. The butcher is a reflection of the Coach's childhood trauma and taunts Raz when their minds merge.
- **Augustus Aquato** – Antagonist/supporting character. Augustus Aquato is Razputin's father, and skinny middle-aged man with great acrobatic ability. Augustus first appears in the merged world of the meat circus, where he continues to disapprove of Raz's Psychic powers and blames him for ruining the circus. Later the real Augustus shows up to pick Raz up from the summer camp, and it is revealed that Augustus, a psychic himself, does not hate psychics, and only pushes him in acrobatics to help him control his powers.
- **Bobby Zilch** – Antagonist/camper. Bobby Zilch is one of the campers at Whispering Rock; he is the camp bully and directly impedes Raz's in several situations. Bobby is seen taunting and scaring the other campers, as well as preventing Raz and other campers from accessing certain areas of the camp. To the end, even after Raz has returned his brain, Bobby still wishes for Raz to "Have fun dying."
- **Sheegor** – Supporting antagonist/side character. Sheegor is a scared girl who is being forced to help Dr. Loboto against her will. The doctor is holding her beloved pet turtle Mr. Pokeylope, hostage, and she must do his bidding or Mr. Pokeylope will be cooked into turtle soup. Once Mr. Pokeylope is freed, they work to gather to help Raz defeat Dr. Loboto.
- **Sasha Nein** – Supporting character. Sasha Nein is a famous Psychonaut agent, and one of the councilors at Whispering Rock. He is a skinny, middle-aged man

who quickly takes interest in Raz's potential. Sasha is a devoted scientist and spends most of his time conducting experiments in his lab. He offers to allow Raz to participate in his experiments if he would like, and enviably helps Raz's uncover Dr. Loboto's plan. He also teaches Raz about the Censors and how to fight them. After being lured away, likely do to his love interest Milla Vodello, Sasha has his brain removed and needs Raz's help.

- **Milla Vodello** – Supporting character. Milla Vodello is a famous Psychonaut agent, and one of the Councilors at Whispering Rock. She is a tall, laid-back woman who is known best for her levitation prowess. Milla objects the most to training Raz, but after a little sweet talk, she agrees to teach him levitation. Milla has a heavily repressed dark past that Raz uncovers, revealing one of her inner demons. Milla covers up this dark past with an always happy, always partying attitude, and even scolds Raz for not partying hard enough. Milla is also lured away, and has her brain removed, calling Raz to action.
- **Ford Cruller** – Supporting character. Ford Cruller was the most famous Psychonaut the agency ever had, but after a great battle, he was left with a fractured psyche. This fracture causes Ford to assume different personalities, all of which fortunately enough work different jobs around the camp. Ford's great power allows him to project himself into Raz's mind whenever Raz needs help, and give him advice. Ford helps to train Raz in various different powers and abilities, and even helps fight Coach Oleander.
- **Linda** - Antagonist /supporting character. Linda is a giant Lungfish who has been mentally corrupted by Coach Oleander. While corrupted Linda abducts Lili Zanotto in front of Raz, taking her deep into the camp lake. After fighting Raz it is discovered that Linda has been implanted with a device that has corrupted her mind. Once the implant is removed, Linda offers to help Raz cross the lake to repay him for his help.
- **Lili Zanotto** – Supporting character/camper. Lili Zanotto is a young girl, and a gifted psychic. Lili is one of the only campers that seems to care about Raz joining the camp; she even develops a relationship with Raz, seeing him as a knight in shining armor. She is captured by Dr. Loboto but due to a cold stopping up her sinuses and rendering her immune to the sneezing powder. She is locked up in Dr. Loboto's tower until Raz frees her.
- **Dogen Boole** – Supporting character/camper. Dogen Boole is an especially powerful psychic child; he wears a tinfoil hat to suppress his powers as he can not control them. Dogen is the first camper that has his brain taken out by Dr. Loboto, and helps to show Raz about the camp and its campers.
- **Campers** – Supporting characters. There are many other campers at Whispering Rock each of which has a complete individual personality, giving the player a sense of a full realistic camp. All of the other campers, except Lili, end up losing their brains to Dr. Loboto and give Raz an opportunity to prove himself.
- **Censors** – Antagonists. The Censors are enemies in the mind of each individual; they work to remove all bad/impure elements on one's mind. The lack of censors in some people's minds leads to the belief that that person has a dissociative disorder, prevent his mind from sorting out their thoughts.

Breakdown

Psychonauts is a very creative, funny, and deep story, which gives the player a sense of fulfillment and accomplishment. They designed each of the characters similarly, for instance, The Butcher, Coach Oleander's mental depiction of his father is of a giant, blood-soaked man, with meat cleavers and meat hooks. However as we go along with the theme of the game it is easy to see that, the depictions is just how Oleander's inner child sees his father, when in reality his father was likely of normal height, and has probably never dual wielded meat cleavers. In the story there is a significant turning point for Raz, when the councilors have been abducted leaving him to save the camp on his own. This really puts the player in a position of need and power; leaving the player to his own devices with a large world full of collectables. Yet the story is so enthralling that most players dive right into the main story of the game, keeping the frill of the game as delicious icing spread evenly across every level of the game. The story at this point is one of less instruction and more exploration, Raz now has a door he can use to enter almost anyone's mind. He must use the door, sort out the problems of Whispering Rock's inhabitation, and stop the evil Dr. Loboto from taking everyone's brains. However as Raz works towards the goal it is revealed that Coach Oleander is ultimately responsible for the plot to take over the world. Dr. Loboto is merely one of his henchmen collecting brains for Oleander the whole time.

Strongest Element

The strongest element is the subtle nuance built in every character. Each character had significant depth and story elements, even the other campers that had no association to the core story of the game. On top of the individuality, each of the significant characters in the story displayed a specific mental disorder. For instance Sasha Nein represent OCD, this is shown when you go into his mind; it is clean and organized, no clutter anywhere. As soon as Raz messes up the place, Sasha immediately works to get everything back in order. Oleander is a combination of inferiority complex tied with napoleon complex, Milla has repressed memories, Ford has multiple personality disorder, etc...

Unsuccessful Element

Everything is a bit too easy for Raz; he is able to train with the other students even after they expressly said he would not be able to. Ford goes out of his way to help Raz anytime he needs help, often without Raz even asking for it. Raz only has one day before his father arrives how could that possibly be enough time for to earn eight different merit badges, save the world, and develop a love interest. It just seems to unrealistic, and breaks some of the immersion.

Highlight

Psychonauts is full of many highlights, the best of which is the end. Augustus arrives to pick up Raz, and reveals that he is also a psychic. He goes on to tell Raz that not only does he not forbid Raz from training his psychic powers, but also he is forcing him to train in acrobats to help him control his powers. This helps to put the whole game into perspective, making you rethink everything you have just experienced.

Critical Reception

The Critical reception of Psychonauts was good, with almost all reviews at or above a rating of 80, averaging to a score of 86.

Hilary Goldstein at IGN, who gave Psychonauts an individual rating of 86 commented on the successes and failures of the game. "Psychonauts' true genius is displayed when Raz enters someone's mind. Each mental level is tailored to that specific character." "While I certainly enjoyed much of the platforming aspects, I must admit that by the end of Psychonauts things were degrading from fun to frustrating. There is no "smart zone" where, if close enough, Raz will grab a ledge or bar."

Source: <http://www.ign.com/articles/2005/06/22/psychonauts>

Nich Maragos at 1UP gave Psychonauts a score of 90, and commented on the various aspect of the game. "The humor will make you laugh, not smile: the writers tend not to go for the obvious joke...not just for Raz or his immediate supporting cast, but for virtually every character in the game, which number in the hundreds -- gives each out-of-left-field payoff the impact it deserves."

Source: http://www.1up.com/reviews/psychonauts_2

Lessons

- Each character in a game, even the minor side character, should have a full and interesting backstory. Like the characters in Psychonauts, giving each character a full personality brings the whole game together, and reinforces immersion.
- Though a strong story can lead to a great game, it can be easily be ruined by a difficult or unresponsive controls. This is one of the few reasons for a drop in points for Psychonauts, its difficult camera-based control system proved frustrating for players.

Summation

Psychonauts is an amazing game, with an especially amazing story, and enjoyable game play. The game has many humorous and enjoy smaller stories compounding inside the main one, keeping the player completely immersed and in a humorous mood. The creative story and unexpected twists, combined with the hidden meanings behind everything, paints a beautiful picture for the player to enjoy.