

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Psychonauts*
Platform: PlayStation 2
Genre: Action-Adventure Platform
Release Date: April 19, 2005
Developer: Double Fine Productions
Publisher: Majesco Entertainment
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Tim Shafer

Overview

Razputin, who goes by “Raz,” is a psychic and the son of a circus family. He runs away from the circus to go to Whispering Rock Psychic Summer Camp, where mentalist secret agents known as Psychonauts are the camp counselors. The counselors allow Raz to stay only until his father—who hates psychics—can come pick him up. Camp activities at Whispering Rock center on diving into the counselors’ minds, where campers can learn and practice new psychic powers. The counselors quickly see Raz’s talent and allow him to see secret areas, participate in special training sessions, and explore troubling phenomena around Whispering Rock.

When the Psychonauts leave the camp on official business, Raz finds himself alone and in trouble: Dr. Loboto has stolen many of the campers’ brains and kidnapped Raz’s friend Lili. Raz must cross the Lake Oblongata to reach the insane asylum, rescue Lili, and retrieve the campers’ brains before Coach Oleander can use them to power an army of psychic war machines.

Characters

- **Razputin “Raz” Aquato** – Raz is the game’s protagonist and playable character. Raz comes from a circus family, which allows him to perform acrobatic moves without psychic assistance. His major weakness is a family curse: his family is doomed to die in water. Raz cannot so much as touch any significant body of water, even using his powers. Raz’s goal is to become a Psychonaut, a new and illustrious category of secret agent. This is in spite of the wishes of his father, who fears psychics, discourages Raz’s studies, and is arriving at the camp soon.
- **Coach Morceau Oleander** – Coach Oleander is a camp counselor, a Psychonaut, and the game’s antagonist. He presents himself as a drill sergeant, but Raz can

- discover that the coach could not enlist because he is too short. He grew up in a butcher's shop, where his father slaughtered his pet bunny for meat. These injustices lead him to attempt to create a mechanized army powered by psychic brains to take over the world. When his mind fuses with Raz's at the end of the game, their respective patriarchal traumas meld to create the gruesomely discordant "meat circus" level.
- **Agent Ford Cruller** – This is the Psychonauts' leader at Whispering Rock, and Razputin's guide. Cruller is unable to leave his lab under the camp because his personality shattered while he was an active agent. Only the large deposit of psychically active psitanium ore under his lab keeps his psyche intact. When he appears on the campgrounds, he takes on diverse personalities: cook, janitor, ranger, and admiral. He cannot remember Raz or his true personality while in these roles, but still helps Raz in various ways.
 - **The Counselors** – Agents Milla Vodello and Sasha Nein are the other counselors at Whispering Rock. Milla is very upbeat and looks like a disco dancer; her level is themed like a dance party. Sasha Nein, on the other hand, emphasizes control, so his mind looks like looks like a plain white box until Raz accidentally starts to unravel it.
 - **The Campers** – The campers at Whispering Rock all have vibrant and disparate personalities. For example, Bobby Zilch is the camp bully and the hapless Dogen Boole has to wear a tin foil hat to keep himself from using his powers to blow up anyone's head. Clem Foote and Crystal Flowers Snagrash are cheerleaders, but have disquieting allusions to being members of a suicide cult. Lili Zanotto is Raz's snarky love interest and comrade-in-arms until her kidnapping. The campers make the world feel alive and full of personality, which makes their eventual brainless absence sorely felt.
 - **The Asylum Patients** – The latter half of the game places Raz in the minds of patients at the insane asylum. These include Boyd Cooper, the conspiracy-theorist milkman, and the dissociative Fred Bonaparte, who feels inferior to his other personality: his ancestor Napoleon. The asylum is where Raz finds Dr. Loboto, the dentist stealing the campers' brains.
 - **Linda** – Linda is a lungfish in Lake Oblongata. Dr. Loboto's experiments transformed her into an enormous lake monster. However, within her mind Raz has Godzilla-like proportions. She sees him as terrorizing the innocent lungfish of Lungfishopolis. Once Raz breaks Loboto's and Oleander's control over her, she helps Raz cross the lake to the insane asylum.

Breakdown

In the game's opening cutscene, Coach Oleander gives a speech about psychic warfare. He ends by saying that anyone who fails to become a Psychonaut will die. This is when the camera shows his audience: a group of terrified children. This humorously sets the tone for the entire game. It is engaging, funny, and has a slightly dark edge to it at times. When the player gains control, there are several optional cutscenes and collectables available en route to the first level. Thus, before even reaching the first gameplay goal, the player has the opportunity to engage with the world and the people within it. Raz can

dig up arrowheads made of psychic stone, find cards that contribute to leveling up, and watch Dogen have an argument with squirrels.

The world only becomes more expansive as the game progresses. There is always someone to talk to and something to do. Though *Psychonauts* is only 10-15 hours long, players can easily triple that time by talking to every character frequently and exploring every crevice. Each character has interesting, frequently funny things to say, and have enough unique lines that they can talk for minutes at a time without repeating themselves. This is *Psychonauts*' first narrative strength: a stunning breadth of interactions with a diverse cast of unique, flavorful characters.

Despite the exceedingly high quality of its writing, *Psychonauts* finds its main narrative strength in the levels themselves. The levels exist within various characters' minds, so the geometry of the levels reflects who that character is. There are just as many things to find within the levels as there are in the camp, but these collectables also tell the player about the person whose mind they occupy. Figments of the imagination represent their fears and fantasies, mental cobwebs block disused parts of the mind, and mental vaults hide their most intimate memories. The more the player explores, the more they can contextualize everything about the character.

During the first few levels, Raz plays with the other campers in their camp activities, going through Oleander's "basic braining" and Milla's dance party. Raz also gets to explore his own mind using Sasha Nein's Brain Tumbler, and discovers some incongruous elements that foreshadow future conflicts with Linda, Dr. Loboto, and even Coach Oleander.

Because of the time and effort spent developing each of the many campers, the shift when Dr. Loboto steals their brains is much more impactful. Thus, Raz embarks on a journey to an insane asylum to recover the brains. Within the asylum, the player encounters alien mentalities. Instead of exploring a play space with friends, Raz must identify the damage to each person's mind and repair it. The design of the levels gives Raz the clues needed to advance. In Black Velvetopia, Raz must avoid a giant bull called El Odio while reconstructing Edgar Teglee's flawed memory of his first love. At the end of the level, Edgar realizes she was not the angel he remembered, and El Odio is simply an aggrandized version of the boy who dated her next. By playing the level, an incomprehensible mess of inverted colors, giant bulls, and beast-like wrestlers becomes a clear analogy for Edgar's altered memory, his anger, and his friends on the wrestling team who failed to support him.

Psychonauts is at its core a character-driven game. The characters even determine the topography of the levels the player sees. It is fitting that the characters are the most well developed element of the narrative. Each character—even ones whose minds Raz never enters—has a full personality to offer, and each one is meaningful to the progress of the story.

Strongest Element

The strongest narrative element in *Psychonauts* is how the level design and character development go hand-in-hand. For example, within Milla's stage, the majority of her mental space is a dance party, which is very representative of her effervescent personality. However, if Raz ventures into a certain carefully hidden room, he sees that phantoms haunt Milla. The orphanage she ran burned down, killing all the children inside. Simply playing through each level tells the player everything there is to know about the character: how they present themselves, how they see the world, their secrets, and their influences. Their most dominant traits pervade their levels, while their deepest burdens are correspondingly difficult to unearth. The rich personalities in *Psychonauts* provide both engaging characters and gameplay, creating a unique and powerful narrative element.

Unsuccessful Element

Because characterization in *Psychonauts* relies so heavily on its gameplay, its uneven difficulty curve acts as a detriment to the narrative. The first half of the game—before Raz encounters Linda and reaches the asylum—has forgiving gameplay. However, Linda's Lungfishopolis level and beyond are more difficult than anything for which players are prepared. Only very skilled players can take time to notice some of the subtleties of the level design. For example, the meat circus takes advantage of everything the player has learned about both Raz and Oleander and presents it in a cunningly intricate way. Raz's and Oleander's biases twist their memories of their fathers into monstrous versions. However, the level is so punishingly difficult that many players do not have the opportunity to appreciate these aspects of the narrative. Additional work toward balancing the game and smoothing the difficulty curve would prevent frustration and keep players absorbed in the game world.

Highlight

"The Milkman Conspiracy" is the level set in Boyd Cooper's mind. Boyd is a conspiracy theorist, so his level looks like a normal suburban neighborhood that is literally twisted. Raz must traverse local streets that loop, corkscrew, and break off into nothingness. The signature element of this level that makes it such a highlight of the game is how it plays off what is real and what Boyd imagines. In his mind, the real, tangible objects are secret cameras, faceless government agents, and cult-like Girl Scout analogs. The figments of his imagination—which are collectable items in the game—look like families having cookouts, housewives baking pies, and children playing with their pets. This reversal of reality and fantasy reinforces Boyd's psychosis brilliantly and pervasively. It allows the player to understand how Boyd sees the world and to identify with him even though his mindset would otherwise be unfathomable.

Critical Reception

Psychonauts released to general critical acclaim, earning an aggregate score of 8.6/10 on Metacritic. Hilary Goldstein of IGN had great praise for the first half of the game, saying, "Psychonauts' true genius is displayed when Raz enters someone's mind. Each

mental level is tailored to that specific character.” She also but stated that “by the end of *Psychonauts* things were degrading from fun to frustrating.” She had very little to say about the narrative or levels in the insane asylum, focusing instead on the frustrations and difficulty. Overall, she gave the *Psychonauts* an 8.6/10.

Alex Navarro of Gamespot echoed Goldstein’s review. He gave the game an 8.7/10, especially noting the characters interactions. “Thanks to the game's excellent design, you'll have no shortage of opportunities to get attached to [the cast].” His biggest compliment was for the connection between characters and their levels: “the most interesting aspects of *Psychonauts*' characters don't come from their real-world conversations, but rather from their internal monologues. ... This is where *Psychonauts* truly shines.”

Sources:

<http://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-2/psychonauts>

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

<http://www.gamespot.com/reviews/psychonauts-review/1900-6127843/>

Lessons

- Level design can tell a story. Even without its smart and abundant dialogue, each level in *Psychonauts* would still tell the player everything about each character’s personality, history, needs, and goals. One device for this in the game is the Mental Vaults, which contain slide shows displaying a character’s past. These contain optional, silent glimpses into the character’s past, adding great depth to the story for players willing to look.
- Great characters make a story more impactful. Many games feature a threat to a population, but very few games attach the player to each character as well as *Psychonauts* does. When the campers start losing their brains, the world feels more and more empty, greatly motivating the player to retrieve the joy from the early game. Even though there are dozens of characters, the player has meaningful, memorable interactions with each of them, and all have a unique personality.
- Humor and deep storytelling are not mutually exclusive. *Psychonauts* is patently ridiculous and riotously funny, but that does not make the characters any less complete or smartly written. *Psychonauts* is full of nuance that adds to the experience. Players can replay it several times and find new subtleties even after hearing all the jokes. For example, the very first level gives the player a glimpse of Oleander’s blueprints. This detail expertly foreshadows the end of the game without telegraphing it.
- Gameplay is always the first focus of a game. No matter the quality of the writing, sound, or visuals, frustrating gameplay can mitigate or destroy these elements. While *Psychonauts* generally has fun and smooth gameplay, some mandatory sections can cause players to quit. As an example, the fight with Linda has a unique but poor camera perspective. Combined with difficult timed platform jumping and little conveyance as to how to beat her, the fight sequence can be long and frustrating.

- Extraneous character interactions are valuable. Each character in *Psychonauts* has dozens of lines of dialogue, and there are hundreds of collectables to find. While these are very large numbers for the size of the game and they are not directly relevant to the core gameplay, the effort is not wasted. Since the characters inform the level design, having fewer lines of dialogue or fewer figments of their imagination would detract from the character, which in turn detracts from the gameplay. This is not only true for this game. Any game that relies upon the player making a connection with a character benefits from the effort of extra interactions with them. To make a character interesting, they must say multiple interesting things. It is frustrating to want to have more interactions with a character, but have them only say one thing in return every time.

Summation

Psychonauts has wide appeal with its fun gameplay, colorful characters and art style, and hilarious dialogue. It also has a depth that requires a closer look to appreciate fully. Tim Shafer and Double Fine took great care in designing everything the player experiences. Each level is a window into a living, breathing person, and players are free to explore every detail of who that person is. There are hundreds, if not thousands of unnecessary lines of dialogue, and each one of them adds something to the world of *Psychonauts*. There are also hundreds of collectables to find scattered throughout the entire game, far more than necessary for a game of its size. Double Fine made the whole of Whispering Rock a fully alive, believable place through its writing and level design, setting a high bar of detail and quality for its players. Rich characters, intelligent writing, and a close connection between the story and the design make *Psychonauts* a valuable reference for any narrative designer for games.