

# Game Narrative Review

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**Month/Year you submitted this review:** December 2019

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**Game Title:** Lisa “The First”

**Platform:** PC

**Genre:** Adventure/RPG

**Release Date:** September 10, 2012

**Developer:** Austin Jorgensen

**Publisher:** Dingaling Productions, LLC

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Austin Jorgensen

## Overview

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A young girl stands in her filthy, dark bedroom. Her name is Lisa. As you walk through her house, you notice the trash festering in the dim hallway. You try to walk into the living room, but you’re caught by a man who forces you back to Lisa’s room. His name is Marty. He’s Lisa’s father. After a while, you start to realize what’s going on.

Lisa needs to get out.

As you weave your path to stay out of Marty’s vision, Lisa finally makes it outside.

She won’t be trapped again.

You walk away from the house and explore the outdoors. The sun radiates a bright glow as the ambient sounds of a rushing waterfall fill the scene. The area is peaceful, leaving behind the darkness of Lisa’s past and shining in the hopes of a brighter future.

Lisa is free...right?

Suddenly, the soil beneath her feet grows red. The path transforms into jagged routes littered with beer bottles, trash, and vomit. Nature’s beauty is replaced by Marty’s face plastered in the background. The peaceful sounds of nature have been replaced by the disjointed sounds of Marty’s TV with low grumbles and high pitched laughter as you try to help Lisa find the right path.

You see him at the end of the path.

“You’re tryin, to run out on me aren’t you?” Marty asks.

You say yes.

“You can’t run forever. You’re wasting your time.”

The scene fades to Lisa standing in an empty world. Traveling north reveals a few doors and ladders. You’re not told what your objective is. Aside from some basic instructions on controls, there is no explanation on what to do.

It’s up to you to learn about the world around you.

It’s up to you to understand Lisa.

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This is only the beginning of *Lisa “The First”*, a short 2D game that is not afraid to make you uncomfortable. The player takes the role of Lisa, a young girl trying to flee from her abusive father, Marty. Just when escape seems so close, the player is forced to explore an abstract world of puzzles and mazes to learn about what happened to Lisa. Players must collect items to help them proceed in the game as well as VHS tapes to understand the characters in Lisa’s life. The mechanics of the game are very simple since much of the focus is on content and narrative structure. The game is very abstract in the way it presents the serious subject matter; the player is never told what happened to Lisa. Instead, it’s shown through obscure dialogue, disturbing character design, and odd symbolism that hints at what Lisa has experienced.

While the game is very dark due to the subject matter, it sheds light on a serious issue in our world that’s not often touched upon in video games. This game shows players what a survivor of neglect and sexual abuse may look like. The game has players explore this person’s mind to see how these awful events are interpreted and the damage it causes on them. There is no happy ending here, only a dark, painful dose of reality that will cause players to process the events that have transpired on their screens. For those who haven’t experienced the horrifying abuse themselves, players can start to learn the serious impact these acts have on the survivor.

## Characters

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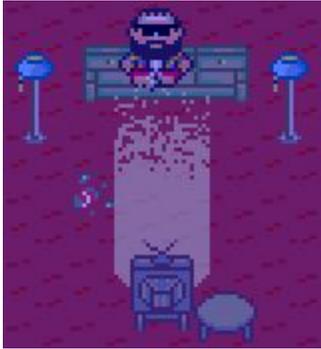
### Lisa Armstrong



Lisa Armstrong is the protagonist of the game. Lisa barely speaks, only giving short responses when interacting with items. Not much is known about the personality of Lisa. All the player knows is that she wants to escape from Marty. It’s not known if Lisa ever

had a good relationship with Marty or when the abuse began. Unfortunately, Lisa is alone and isolated from the world outside her home. Lisa is a broken girl who tries to fight against the memories of her abuse. However, she will always remember the awful things that have happened to her.

### **Marty Armstrong**



Marty Armstrong is Lisa's father. Marty is shown to be neglectful and abusive to Lisa both verbally and sexually. Marty is determined to be an alcoholic due to the imagery of beer bottles and bars within various areas of the game. Marty is a cold, selfish man who will only give Lisa attention when he wants to have relations with her. He isolates Lisa in her room and avoids any contact with the outside world. Marty appears within the abstract areas of the game in many forms such as his normal sprite, a spider version of himself, and disgusting caricatures to resemble how Lisa sees him in her mind. There is no explanation as to why Marty abuses Lisa or what could have triggered it.

### **Tricky Rick**



Tricky Rick isn't a real character since he only appears in the different abstract worlds. Tricky Rick tends to be an obstacle that prevents Lisa from solving a puzzle or blocks her path. From his phallic imagery and lewd dialogue, Tricky Rick is seen as the personification of Lisa's sexual abuse. While the symbolism is disgusting and can make players uncomfortable, it shows the player that sexual trauma can leave a lasting impact

on the survivor's life. It's not easy to forget those awful events and the player needs to be aware of how serious it truly is.

### **Woman (Possibly Lisa's Mother)**



This unnamed woman only appears in the True Ending of the game. Her dialogue starts normal, apologizing to Lisa about leaving her and saying how she didn't want to die. However, the structure starts to break with weird capitalization of letters in uncommon spots which hints at a disturbing twist. There is no information about this woman within the game, but she seems to have a close relationship to Lisa. In the True Ending, Lisa goes to this woman, which is not seen with any other character throughout the game, showing that this woman meant a lot to Lisa when she was alive.

### **Breakdown**

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*Lisa "The First"* gives no objective to players or explains why they are traveling through these weird, abstract worlds. Because of this, players come up with their own theories about why this is happening. A common theory is that these levels are meant to represent Lisa's psyche and the thoughts she has about Marty and his abuse. These levels are her thoughts in which she tries to cope with what has happened to her by running away or killing the abuse. Unfortunately, however, she always has to face the memories of abuse. Though the game is incredibly vague, there are pieces of story that can be picked apart and pieced together to make a coherent narrative.

Various obstacles stand in Lisa's path to freedom. Some of these obstacles are simple, such as moving objects out of the way. Others are complex, such as using items to kill an obstacle or navigating through a horde of enemies without getting damaged. Towards the end of the game, players can start to gather VHS tapes to help give context about the character that Lisa has encountered including Tricky Rick, Marty, and the unnamed woman mentioned before. The game uses various techniques throughout its narrative through the use of portraying mental illness, symbolism, character design, and environmental design that help in making a compelling narrative.

## Characterization

Characterization in *Lisa "The First"* is used mainly on Marty for players to see that he is obviously the bad guy. It's very easy to recognize Marty as a neglectful father especially in the beginning where he forces Lisa to stay in her room. Through these abstract levels, however, players can start to learn more about Marty and how he treats Lisa through interacting with his clones. Marty's dialogue is usually short, consisting of one or two sentences that are straight to the point. For instance, when the player goes into one of the houses in the first level to talk to Marty, he will only say this:

"Stop talking to me and get me some rum."

This short dialogue shows how much Marty doesn't even care about Lisa. He only uses Lisa to get what he wants, whether it be booze or sex. These horrible actions have no effect on Marty, since he doesn't seem to care about Lisa or his wrongdoings. He shows no remorse within the dialogue and shows no real care for Lisa's well being.

The player also sees various clones of Marty when he's drunk in a bar, where the game heavily implies him to be an alcoholic. These clones in particular may be memories Lisa has about Marty's different states of intoxication. Some show him as a happy drunk, dancing to the music as he screams about how he loves rum. Others show him to be mean and aggressive, telling Lisa not to bother him when she interacts with him or not even paying attention to her. We can see through these moments of interaction that Marty is a neglectful, abusive man who has no care for Lisa's feelings. However, there is an unanswered question about Marty's character in the game.

One of the worlds the player goes into is known as "the blank road." This world is much different from others not only in its lack of interactivity, but in the portrayal of Marty. The clones of Marty here are much more different compared to the other ones seen. Here, Marty looks clean and happy. His hair is combed back, he's wearing a business suit and a smile on his face. While he says no dialogue upon interacting with him, he instead has a little heart over his head. However, that's not all this level has to offer. If the player goes between two statues, the environment changes. The floors are replaced with blood as bleeding eyes rise from the floor. Going over to these new clones of Marty show he's transformed into a blood-eyed, terrifying monster. Interacting with him results in a monstrous growl. This can be interpreted as Lisa seeing through Marty's facade. Maybe Marty never was a good father, maybe he only pretended to look good so he can gain Lisa's trust. However, the confusion doesn't end here.

One of the VHS tapes Lisa finds is labeled "Marty." When playing this tape, the players are transformed into another blank world. This time, however, the player controls Marty. As they walk through the world they see Lisa and this "normal" version of Marty sitting at a table, supposedly having a tea party. Interacting with the two characters only results in a heart being shown. This brings back the question: Was Marty ever a good

father or only pretending? Why are the players now controlling Marty? Are we now in Marty's psyche, reflecting on his past?

This part in the game could have been used well, but it comes off as more confusing than anything. There are no clues or hints as to what this "normal" clone of Marty represents. This confusion comes off as frustrating when players are unsure of what these clones are meant to represent. One explanation is that it was all just Marty being manipulative, especially with the mechanics that were shown in the blank road. But another theory could be that Marty was once a good father who took care of Lisa; but something happened to make him break. But without this information, all the player is left knowing is that Marty is ultimately a horrible father.

One suggestion I would make is that there should have been more characterization of Lisa since players don't know who she really is. She barely speaks in the game and offers very little reaction to the events that transpire around her in the abstract world. This is one of the lacking points within the game especially when it comes to why players should care about the character they're controlling. While it's understandable that players will feel bad for her from her abuse and want to help her escape, we still don't know who Lisa is. We know nothing of her interests and personality, which makes it hard for us to see her true character. This is where characterization may be needed the most to help us connect more with Lisa. She shouldn't be identified by her trauma, which is damaging for trauma survivors to see. Lisa needs to have more character to show who she is or who she once was before the trauma.

## **Depiction of Mental Illness**

*Lisa "The First"* is a heavy game that focuses on serious topics of abuse and the impact it has on the survivor. As the players explore the different levels, they can see how this abuse has impacted Lisa. Through these levels, it may be possible that Lisa is showing symptoms of peritraumatic dissociation or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is defined as "...a psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as...rape or other violent personal assault." ("What is PTSD?", American Psychiatric Association). Peritraumatic dissociation differs from PTSD in that "peritraumatic dissociation is defined as a complex array of reactions at the time of the trauma that include depersonalization, derealization, dissociative amnesia, out-of-body experiences, emotional numbness, and altered time perception." ("The Association Between Peritraumatic Dissociation and PTSD symptoms: The Mediating Role of Negative Beliefs About the Self", Hollands et. al).

A possible theory about the game is that Lisa is experiencing derealization, which can be its own dissociative disorder in itself or a symptom of peritraumatic dissociation or PTSD. Derealization disorder is "...a type of dissociative disorder that consists of persistent or recurrent feelings of being detached (dissociated) from one's body or mental

processes...of being detached from one's surroundings (derealization).” (“Depersonalization/Derealization Disorder”, Spiegel). An important aspect to know about those with derealization disorder is that the individual is aware that the experiences they are feeling are not real. While it seems that Lisa is absorbed into this other world, in the end, she realizes she's still trapped under Marty's abuse. At the end of the game, she realizes that no matter how far she tries to run, she will always have the memories of Marty's abuse and he will always try to keep her from running away.

With this theory going forward, Lisa could be using derealization as a coping mechanism, which is very common in those who have peritraumatic dissociation or PTSD. Derealization is used as a coping mechanism to push the threat of trauma, to escape from reality and block out the horrible reality a survivor is facing. This is shown throughout the game as Lisa tries to escape her abusers. For example, Lisa has to use items many times throughout the game to kill Tricky Rick. These moments signify her using this dissociation to her advantage by killing the personification of her sexual abuse. She may use her dissociation as a way to combat against her abuse by destroying the trauma and erasing it from her mind. Unfortunately, this isn't a healthy coping mechanism for Lisa and it doesn't help her in the end when she has to face the fact that Marty and his abuse have left a scar on her.

There is also an item that is used to represent a physical symptom of these disorders. One item that is scattered throughout all the levels is a toilet. Interacting with this toilet will play the sound of Lisa vomiting. This item is one of the key points in learning about the possible symptoms Lisa experiences after going through her trauma. Nausea is known to develop after being exposed to trauma and it could also serve as a risk factor during peritraumatic dissociation in developing PTSD (“Nausea in the Peri-Traumatic Period is Associated with Prospective Risk for PTSD Symptom Development”, Michopoulos et. al). Nausea is common in victims of sexual abuse that could cause bodily distress and vomiting as seen within the game. The implications of these physical symptoms help in educating the player of what a survivor of sexual abuse may face both mentally and physically.

Despite not having a clear diagnosis for Lisa, the game is able to depict symptoms of mental illness and how trauma can affect the mental and physical well being of a survivor. *Lisa “The First”* allows players to explore the mind of a survivor of this abuse and seeing the suffering that it causes them. From an outside perspective, this could be a very educational experience to learn more about trauma and its effects on both mental and physical health.

## **Tone**

The game is not afraid to push players into the story without warning. When going into the first level of the town, a clone of Marty sticks out. This clone tends to

follow the player through odd, disjointed movements. If he runs into Lisa, he will tell her this:

“You can’t escape.”

This short sentence helps in setting the tone of the game. It puts players in Lisa’s mindset of feeling trapped and lost. She can’t take anymore abuse, yet she seems to never escape in reality. As the player traverses through the worlds in her mind, Lisa is able to move forward in these paths. However, there’s always something blocking her way or something horrible that catches up to her. The game offers no hope for the player or no possible resolution other than putting the player in the mindset of Lisa.

The atmosphere of the game is dark, which helps with the narrative but it also hinders it. The dark tone helps in shedding light on this serious subject of neglect and sexual abuse. It’s a serious issue within our own reality and many players of the game may not see how it affects the survivors in real life. To be able to explore a mindset of how one processes these events can be a learning process and help players start to see how survivors in reality face these horrible events.

However, the dark tone also hinders it by not providing any positive outlook for the survivors. As mentioned before, the game’s tone is dark by character constantly telling Lisa that escape is impossible. This is incredibly damaging for a survivor to hear and it makes them feel worse about themselves. While it provides insight on how a survivor may possibly feel, it also doesn’t give them hope in trying to get better. Without this, players may not be able to learn how to help those who struggle with the abuse in reality since there is no resource provided that can help survivors. A suggestion I would make in this game is to at least have another playable version of this game where players can see how to help those who are going through these awful events. This game could be incredibly educational not only through telling Lisa’s story, but by also providing feedback on what we can do to help survivors in reality.

## **Depictions of Abuse Through Personification & Abstract Art**

Various enemies and obstacles in *Lisa “The First”* are meant to represent Lisa’s abuse. In various levels, Lisa has to traverse through a set of enemies without coming into contact with them. These enemies are spiders that have Marty’s face on them. When she comes into contact with them, the spider makes a terrifying screech and Lisa is sent back to the beginning of the maze. These enemies are meant to represent the physical abuse Marty has done to Lisa. While it’s never mentioned through any dialogue how Marty has abused Lisa, the function of these enemies show how Lisa sees Marty and why she wants to avoid him at all costs. When she comes into contact with Marty in her reality, she experiences nothing but pain.

An important character in the game is Tricky Rick, a lewd, disturbing character that personifies Lisa’s sexual abuse. Tricky Rick often shows up as an obstacle in Lisa’s

path. When talking to Tricky Rick, he will give hints about how Lisa can get rid of him to proceed forward as well as disturbing dialogue that hints at the sexual abuse Lisa has faced. When Lisa first encounters him, he will say this:

“You’ll never forget. You slut. Bad little bitch. I’ll always cut through your mind.”

The hint in this line is that Lisa must get a razor to cut Tricky Rick to reveal a hidden path. This is where the dissociation starts to fall apart for Lisa. While she seems to use dissociation as a way to fight back against her abuse, these negative thoughts will be spoken through Tricky Rick about the unfortunate reality that she faces.

After Lisa gets the razor and walks the path, he will appear in the next scene blocking the next part of her path. He will then say this to Lisa:

“Did you really think that would work? I’ll never leave you. You have to swallow me, get over it.”

This line of dialogue serves as a double meaning. The first is the hint that the players must decipher through this strange dialogue. This hint is that Lisa must collect a bottle of pills to shove in Tricky Rick’s mouth to make him die so she can continue. The second meaning implies the sexual abuse Marty has done to her. With this lewd dialogue, it’s extremely uncomfortable for players to read that. But it also serves to deliver the message that Lisa could never forget the awful abuse that has happened to her.

Tricky Rick is confirmed to be the personification of Lisa’s sexual abuse towards the end of the game where she gets the first VHS tape. If the player goes back to the hub and plays the tape on the TV, they will be taken to Tricky Rick. Upon interacting with him, he will say this to Lisa:

“...My name is Rick. I like exploring caves. I like friction. Oh, and I’m a sensitive guy as well. But you already knew that didn’t you...I hope to see you soon...Don’t run too far...I’ll be waiting...”

Through this short dialogue, this explains all the player needs to know about Tricky Rick. The game doesn’t need to explain the purpose of Tricky Rick because it’s done so through Tricky Rick’s lewd, disgusting dialogue. When seeing this VHS tape, it can finally confirm the player’s suspicions that Tricky Rick is the sexual abuse that has impacted Lisa. His use of the word “friction” should send a signal to players that he’s talking about intercourse. He mentions that Lisa already knows these things about Tricky Rick despite never actually having these conversations with him. When he says he will see her soon, this is the negative thought of reality that’s telling her that Marty will stop at nothing to get what he wants out of her. He will never stop this abuse and he will never feel sorry for the pain he has caused her. Tricky Rick is a truly disturbing, disgusting character that Lisa has to face in her mind.

## Symbolism Through Sound & Visuals

Symbolism is one of the key narrative points in *Lisa "The First."* This game doesn't focus on telling its story just through dialogue. Instead, it uses symbolism through imagery and sound design to help players understand the story. An example of this is in the first level where the player must go into a bar to get a bottle of rum. This bar serves as a powerful image in Lisa's mind to represent Marty's alcoholic state. This bar is filled with clones of Marty; some move upon interacting with them, creating a maze-like puzzle for players to navigate through to find the item. Others have dialogue of slurred words and weird sayings, representing the different times Marty is drunk. However, one Marty clone sticks out of this crowd. Upon interacting with this one, he will say this:

"I'd fruuck her, is she huh? Ooooooooooh..."

Upon first encounter, this may just seem like an odd line of dialogue from a drunken man. However, the bar offers more than dialogue.

The music in the bar is a low, thumping beat. Aside from the odd pattern of electric notes, the song sounds like a typical club song. But if the player stays in the bar for a while, the song begins to change. The tempo speeds up at an alarming rate, the beat pounding fast against the speakers of the bar. This odd, hectic tempo wasn't made by mistake.

It serves as auditory symbolism of Lisa's sexual abuse.

This can make the player incredibly uncomfortable, especially since topics of sexual abuse are rarely discussed in video games. *Lisa "The First"* makes it known that this is about Lisa's abuse. This game forces players to pay attention through its use of visual and audio. If it were dialogue, players may not pay attention or skim through it. But with visual and audio enhancements, players are forced to look at it and hear it. Players are forced to acknowledge the horrible abuse Lisa has gone through and how that has impacted her life. It serves an important lesson that sexual abuse happens and we can't just turn a blind eye to it. We need to know about it if we want to stop it from happening.

There is another important level within the game that uses symbolism called "the bile road." Entering this area is incredibly nauseating. The environment is dark, littered with trash and splashes of vomit around the setting. The trash and vomit serves to disgust players, making them feel the same way Lisa may feel about Marty. Exploring the houses in the area reveals distorted clones of Marty with horrific faces and monstrous gurgles. These clones serve to represent how Lisa may feel about Marty and how she sees him as a disgusting monster. This may show how much she hates what he's done to her and how horrific he truly is.

There's an important piece of information to note in the environment.

Every house has at least one crucifix outside, a symbol for Christianity & Catholicism.

This use of symbolism can be tied to events happening in reality. There has been a long history of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church that unfortunately continues to grow. This jab at religion is used in two ways: It shows the hypocrisy of Marty claiming to be a religious man while doing these awful things to Lisa and it brings up a disturbing fact in reality; places of religion such as the Catholic Church hide behind their religion to justify the awful sexual misconduct they have done. The game is able to convey a message by killing two birds with one stone by not only connecting it to the narrative within the game, but also tying it to a serious real world issue.

Symbolism helps to show the story instead of telling it. While dialogue is incredibly helpful in some aspects of storytelling, *Lisa "The First"* doesn't overdo the dialogue to a point where the player just glazes over it. Instead, the game uses visual and auditory symbolism that forces the player to acknowledge the narrative. These pieces help the player understand the narrative and why these specific parts were put into the game.

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*Lisa "The First"* takes a lot of aspects for narrative and uses them in a short amount of time. A lot of the game's narrative focuses on visual imagery that forces the player to look at it and acknowledge the story. It's sparse use of dialogue is done well by having players decipher what it means and interpret it to fit into the narrative. Without these visual guides, the game's narrative may not be as powerful as it currently is.

## **Strongest Element**

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The strongest element in *Lisa "The First"* is its take on the serious topic of neglect and sexual abuse. Through the use of grotesque imagery and odd dialogue, the game takes an abstract approach to talking about the subject matter. There is no dialogue in the game that explicitly says what kind of abuse Lisa is facing; instead, players pick up through the visual cues that the abuse is on neglect and sexual assault. The use of visual stimuli helps keep the players aware of the story and take in the information to interpret it into the dialogue. The game encourages players to explore every environment, every house, and every corner of the game to understand Lisa's pain. The game has players decipher the story through these abstract clues to make them work on why they should care about the story. The game takes a "show don't tell" approach to the subject matter, which is not seen in many other games.

It's also important to talk about how many video games don't talk about these serious subjects. Many mainstream games are afraid of talking about the subject of sexual assault due to the controversy it may ensue. However, *Lisa "The First"* doesn't care

about the controversy or how some may not like a game that's so serious. The game only cares about one thing: Telling Lisa's story and letting players see how her trauma has affected her. This game could be used to spark social change within game design to talk about these serious topics and how they can encourage education and growth through playing them to learn about what survivors may be going through.

## Unsuccessful Element

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The most unsuccessful element in *Lisa "The First"* is its lack of positive content. While the game does a great job at its serious depiction of trauma, there is no hope on how to escape from trauma. The reason why this hinders the game is because it makes survivors of the abuse feel helpless and that they can never escape the abuse. The game doesn't serve any benefit to those who have gone through the trauma or offer healthy coping mechanisms to help them recover. It's understandable the game is dark with its subject matter, but it doesn't help in giving hope to survivors on how to overcome the trauma. What could have helped make the game better is providing some feedback for players on options to recover from trauma and how to help those who have gone through trauma. Instead, the game makes Lisa feel identified by her trauma and makes her feel like no matter what happens, there is no happy ending to her life, which is not true in the case for real survivors of abuse. Recovery is possible, and with the right resources survivors can help to grow and overcome what happened to them. But the game doesn't have this information, making it a much more depressing experience for the player.

## Highlight

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The highlight of *Lisa "The First"* is the ending sequence of the game. Players may think the game has one ending but actually, there are two. Through this use of endings, players are lead with an expectation of reaching some sort of conclusion or happiness but instead, they experience tremendous heartbreak with a dark, depressing end that makes them look deeper into how survivors feel with their trauma.

As the player goes through the hallway of the final level, there is a tall door at the end of the hall. Going through this door reveals Marty in a disgusting form. His head looks normal, but the rest of his body has turned into a nauseating pile of flesh, booze, and garbage. He doesn't say or do anything, he only stares at Lisa. The abstract background noises fill the room, making the player squirm in as they navigate around the room. So, how must the player proceed?

They must go through Marty's body.

As Lisa walks through the blood red stage of his body, the music turns somber. The slow, low piano keys set a mood of sorrow and horrible pain to come. At the end of

this path, Lisa sees a clone of herself. Upon interacting with it, the scene will fade to white. After a moment, the scene fades back into view.

Her clone has been replaced by Marty.

This scene has no dialogue, but it is one of the most emotionally captivating scenes within the game. Lisa can't even look at herself without thinking of what Marty has done to her. She has been abused so much that all she sees is what Marty has done to her when she looks at herself. Marty has isolated her to be his slave. Just when she thinks freedom is in her grasp, she is forced to remember the awful abuse she has faced.

Eventually, Lisa is teleported into a blank room. The sound of low piano keys being played let the players know that nothing good will happen here. Someone starts to talk to her, yet it's unclear of who this is. This unknown narrator could be Marty, taunting Lisa as she wanders around this empty world trying to find a way to escape. It could also be the negative thoughts that have filled Lisa's head from the awful abuse.

"You really thought you could forget?...Accept it...You can't fight something that already happened...Accept it...I'm here to stay."

The background comes into view. Marty stares at her.

This moment gives players a deeper look into the thoughts that may come from a survivor who has experienced sexual trauma. They may fear the abuse will come back. They may feel shame when they're unable to escape their perpetrator and get justice. They may think horrible thoughts that manipulate them into feeling weak and powerless. Without support to escape, Lisa feels stuck. She feels that escape is impossible.

Or...is it?

If the player ventures to the left of the stage, they will see an unmarked VHS tape. The player can return to the hub and go to a TV to play the tape. When this happens, Lisa is transported into another world. A world of grey and white.

This is the true ending of *Lisa* "*The First*."

A woman stands in front of Lisa with her back turned to her. The music falls silent.

"Lisa...Is that you?"

Lisa steps forward. It's important to note that this is the first time Lisa moves on her own within the game. The player only reads the dialogue, they are no longer in control of Lisa. From this, we can see that this woman must be close to Lisa. This is the one moment of characterization we see in Lisa. When she goes to this woman, it seems that this woman is the only person she feels safe with.

Don't get your hopes up.

"Lisa I..I'm sorRy. III'mmM soRRy..."

The odd capitalization starts to change the mood. What seemed peaceful and relieving now slowly turns into something disturbing and strange.

Lisa keeps moving towards her.

“LiiiiisSSAAAAAAAAA...”

The woman turns around. Lisa steps back.

“I Did’NT waaaaa...NT Too LEEEave.”

The woman’s face...is Marty.

A low, distorted beat begins to play in the background as Marty’s face is plastered behind the scene. The music quickens, a warping sound grows louder and louder until it reaches full volume. Distorted laughs play in the background.

“Liisa, I looveEE YouU.”

Lisa takes a step back. After a few moments, Lisa turns and runs away. The woman calls for her to come back, but Lisa continues to run. As she runs, the woman says one line with perfect clarity.

“You can’t run...”

The game is over.

This final ending captivates the awful tale of *Lisa “The First.”* While the player never knows who this woman is, we know that Lisa was close to her. Lisa felt safe with this woman, she felt she could trust her. Yet just when she thinks she has one good thing to hold onto, one good thing to make her safe, it’s taken away. Her thoughts and memories of this woman have been tainted by Marty. Rather than feeling relieved in safety, she is now taunted by Marty taking over. While these endings are incredibly depressing, it has a deep, emotional impact on the player.

## Critical Reception

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Unfortunately, *Lisa “The First”* has not been prominent in the public eye. Since the game is only available on RPGmaker.net, the game has not received much attention aside from reviews on the game page as well as a few sparse reviews from others.

Jonathan Kaharl of Hardcore Gaming 101 describes the game as “...a crude, simple game, and honestly not particularly impressive.” This criticism can be due to the basics of the controls since the players mainly walk around and gather items to use for Lisa. However, Kaharl still gives the game some praise in terms of the narrative, mentioning that it does handle the serious subject matter well. Kaharl concludes the review by saying “It’s mainly notable for shock value and what it helped spawn.” As stated before, *Lisa “The First”* uses disturbing imagery and dialogue to help convey the message of abuse and neglect within the game. It did also help in continuing the series of Lisa which spawned two more games: *Lisa: The Painful RPG* and *Lisa: The Joyful*, which are much more well known within the series.

Another review comes from YouTuber Hikikomori Media. Hikikomori Media describes *Lisa “The First”* as a game that “...lays disturbing groundwork for its more notable successor [*Lisa: The Painful RPG*] to build on.” Hikikomori Media mentions the game’s simplistic mechanics while focusing on “trying to decipher the implications of the

narrative through creepy, vague imagery and not so vague dialogue.” There are a few criticisms Hikikomori Media makes such as how items are not clear on how to use them. It’s also not explained why Lisa gets these particular set of items. While each item is used within the game, it still brings to question on why these items are the most notable throughout the game. Another criticism focuses on the mazes in which the spiders of Marty move in odd patterns. Some of these patterns are incredibly complex to solve and can take many retries in the game, which can take players out of the story. As mentioned before, *Lisa “The First”* does struggle with balancing of story and game structure since the puzzles within the game are extremely difficult and makes players lose interest in the story due to its incredible difficulty. Despite this criticism, Hikikomori Media still describes the game as “a short but effective glimpse into the mind of an isolated and desperate individual...it’s more unsettling by the events the player doesn’t bare witness to.”

## Lessons

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- **Displaying mental health symptoms through narrative**
  - *Lisa “The First”* doesn’t hold back when using mental illness as part of the narrative. The player is able to see what an individual with possible PTSD or peritraumatic dissociation faces. The player can start to take note of the symptoms in how trauma affects a survivor’s mental and physical being. While the use is very abstract, the game brings awareness to how damaging facing trauma is. This lesson can be used in other games to bring more representation on mental health. Being able to understand what a character is seeing and thinking is an enlightening experience, especially a character who has to live with a mental illness. It can also make the players empathize with the character and learn more about how serious mental illness is.
- **Make the player care about the player they’re controlling**
  - A game won’t be successful if the player hates the character they control. While *Lisa “The First”* can make players care about Lisa and want her to escape from Marty’s abuse, we still don’t know who Lisa is. Unfortunately, Lisa is defined by her trauma, which isn’t the right representation for abuse survivors. The game does a great job in showing how painful trauma is, but we still don’t know what Lisa was like before. We only know her trauma, and nothing else. Accurate representation needs more than just trauma; players want to understand these characters on a deeper level.
- **A story can have a great impact with few words**

- *Lisa “The First”* focuses more on the narrative being told through visuals and sounds rather than dialogue. In the game, dialogue is used sparingly to create a heavy impact. It’s a difficult trick to do, but it does a great job in showing the story instead of telling it. The game focuses on visuals and sounds to help enhance the story and make players pay attention to the information they’re being shown instead of glazing over dialogue pieces. Using visuals and sound can help keep players engaged in the story and force them to pay attention. Visual stimuli is more enticing to people compared to words, which can help in promoting the narrative and make it more powerful.
- **Balance is key in game design**
  - One of the hindrances of *Lisa “The First”* is that some puzzles are much more difficult than they should be. Due to this difficulty, it takes players out of the story and may even stop them from playing the game altogether. The game offers no tips or hints on how to go through these mazes, which becomes even more tedious. The balance of gameplay and narrative need to be finalized within the game so that the player is not frustrated and gives up. Gameplay doesn’t need to be so simple it’s boring, but it can’t be so difficult that players are unmotivated to play it. A balance of interaction and story need to be made to keep players thoroughly engaged.
- **It’s okay to use serious topics in game development**
  - In many popular games, it’s extremely taboo to talk about the subjects of child neglect and sexual abuse. However, *Lisa “The First”* uses these subjects to create an experience for the player. It’s not about having a fun time, it’s about learning a character’s story. Lisa’s story is one of sadness and pain, which is how trauma survivors may feel after their abuse. While this may deter people from playing the game (which is completely understandable), it can help give players insight about how serious this issue is. More games on serious issues can help to shed light on why they matter and what we can do to educate ourselves about it. Not talking about these subjects doesn’t make them go away. We need to acknowledge that this happens in our society and work on creating experiences that can help educate players and possibly spark a positive change in our world.

## Summation

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*Lisa “The First”* is a game that not many people know about. Despite its heavy subject matter and how it’s presented, the game is not well known. However, this game does deserve recognition. While it is flawed in some areas, it takes a unique approach on narrative by using visuals and audio to tell a story. It focuses on serious subject matter

that is not usually found in other games. *Lisa “The First”* was made to make players uncomfortable. This will make people not want to play it, which is understandable. But if you can stomach the depiction of abuse through a sad, horrifying narrative, it’s a small game that can have a major emotional impact on the player. It may be short and simple with its use of mechanics, but its narrative is one that will leave a lasting impression on players.

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