

Game Narrative Review

Name: Laurel Pratt

School: DigiPen: Institute of Technology

Email: laurelp16@gmail.com

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Game Title: *Psychonauts*

Platform: Macintosh, PlayStation 3, Xbox, PC, PlayStation 2, Xbox 360, PlayStation 4

Genre: Platformer, Action-Adventure

Release Date: April 19, 2005

Developer: Double Fine Productions

Publisher: Double Fine Productions

Game Writers: Tim Schafer, Erik Wolpaw

OVERVIEW

Psychonauts is a comedic, single-player platformer that follows Razputin, a gifted young psychic from the circus. Razputin escapes to Whispering Rock Psychic Summer Camp in hopes of learning to become a Psychonaut, one of an elite group of psychic secret agents. Soon enough, he finds himself wrapped up in Coach Oleander's evil plot to steal the campers' brains and turn them into superweapons. He must traverse a host of mad and misfit minds to prevent the coach's plans and save the camp.

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

RAZPUTIN AQUATO: The player character. Razputin, a prodigy psychic from the circus, ran away from home to rebel against his family and become a Psychonaut. His own father has a hatred for psychics due to an ancient family curse that guarantees his family will die in water. Razputin is headstrong and active—he drives the story with his escape and subsequent actions to stop Coach Oleander's evil plans. By the end of the story, he has realized his own dreams of becoming a Psychonaut.

COACH MORCEAU OLEANDER: The head coach at camp. Oleander's psychic training is a front for his nefarious scheme to steal the campers' brains and turn them into psychic-powered weapons. Past

rejections from both his father and the military have driven him to prove himself with extreme measures. A gruff and bombastic outer façade disguises the fact that he grapples with both powerlessness and a lack of acceptance, which are personified by his father in the mindscape. In order to defeat him, Razputin must first defeat this fear that has been instilled in him.

FORD CRULLER: One of the greatest Psychonaut agents ever known. Ford’s psyche was shattered after a devastating loss in a psychic battle, reducing him to a simple and quirky janitor. He is the mentor for both Razputin and the player, acting as a tutorial, a vehicle for exposition, and a hint system. Thanks to his prior defeat, he is only mentally sound while confined to his lair—this allows him to believably guide Razputin without taking focus away from him or his quest.

LILI ZANOTTO: A veteran camper, daughter of the head Psychonaut, and Razputin’s romantic interest. Like Razputin, Lili’s personality is headstrong and brassy. Her motivations align with Razputin’s due to the threat on the camp. She agrees to help him defeat the threat, but is kidnapped. This increases Razputin’s motivation to act so that he may save her.

DR. CALIGOSTO LOBOTO: A dentist who fronts as a mad scientist. Dr. Loboto assists Oleander in the retrieval of psychic brains by forcing the victim to sneeze their brain out through their nose. His motives are unclear, aside from the raw joy of experimentation. He is an advocator of chaos and mad science.

SIDE CHARACTERS

SASHA NEIN: A camp counselor and Psychonaut agent. Sasha grapples with his need to suppress negative memories, personified by the shape of his mind—a blank, white cube. When a bad memory is triggered, it physically surfaces and disrupts the integrity of his mindscape.

MILLA VODELLO: A camp counselor and Psychonaut agent. Milla grapples with loss. Her mind is a constant party as she tries to repress and ignore bad memories. Despite her best attempts, the player will still find themselves dragged down into a fiery part of her subconscious she wishes to ignore.

LINDA: A giant lungfish living in the camp lake known as the Lake Monster. Linda is not evil by nature; she was mutated and brainwashed by Coach Oleander to do his bidding. This is apparent in her mindscape, in which a villain known as Kochamara is brainwashing the citizens of Lungfishopolis. In actuality, she is more afraid of Razputin than he is of her.

BOYD COOPER: The asylum’s guard. Boyd has grappled with paranoia ever since he was institutionalized for his violent reaction to being fired. Oleander then found him in the asylum and implanted an irrational fear of “The Milkman” in his mind. His mindscape is twisted and littered with suspicious figures, all playing into his wild conspiracies.

GLORIA VON GOUTAN: One of the asylum’s patients. Gloria is a faded star with bipolar disorder that grapples with her own inner critic. Her mind is a constant theater production, reflecting the rigorous training she was forced through as a child. A harsh critic judges her performances, and has instilled an intense stage fright in her star actress. The stage lighting controls the emotion of the performance, flipping from happy to sad, depicting her disorder.

FRED BONAPARTE: One of the asylum’s patients. Fred grapples with self-esteem and motivation. In his mind, he plays a constant game against Napoleon—a distant ancestor—that Fred believes he cannot

win. His game pieces think he doesn't care about them, and therefore will not even try to compete. This is representative of his own self-doubts and lack of confidence.

EDGAR TEGLEE: One of the asylum's patients. Edgar is a painter who struggles with a long-standing grudge against the man who stole his beloved. This grudge is brought to life in the form of a bull, which storms through the streets of his mindscape and inhibits his thought process. This prevents him from completing his paintings and finding fulfillment.

BREAKDOWN

INTRODUCTION

The story of *Psychonauts* is jumpstarted when Razputin, a prodigal psychic from the circus, runs away to join a boot camp for prospective Psychonauts. He is begrudgingly accepted for a day, in which time he discovers an evil plot to steal the camper's brains, resolves the mental baggage of several mindscapes, and even gets a new girlfriend. By the end of the story, he has thwarted Oleander's plans and been elevated to the rank of Psychonaut at the young age of ten.

Within the first cutscene, *Psychonauts* does an excellent job of defining its world, tone, characters, and themes. The setting and style are both effectively conveyed through Oleander's initial speech about psychic warriors and the function of their powers. Razputin's subsequent dramatic entrance sets up his abrasive character and establishes his motivations—his desire to join camp and become a Psychonaut. Finally, the narrative theme is best exemplified through one of his very first lines: *"You were born with a special gift. But the people around you treat it like a curse. Your mother is afraid of you, and your father looks at you with shame in his eyes."* This foreshadows the challenges both Razputin and Oleander will face in the climax, and establishes the theme as "using your curse as a gift", or "acceptance".

From there, the player is left to explore the campgrounds. This gives them the levity to acclimate themselves to the controls and the look and feel of the game before they are launched into the official quest. The random chatter of the campers builds upon the emotional tone, and the openness of the level establishes the mechanics and platforming of the genre. This is useful to a point; however, the sheer amount of tutorial content—including an entire campground and three separate mindscapes—slows the pacing significantly, contributing to a slow start. These mindscapes have their purpose. Coach Oleander's "Basic Braining" acts as a controls tutorial, and Sasha's Shooting Range builds upon controls while establishing the mind as a vehicle for his character's traumas and struggles. However, multiple levels likely could have been condensed into one with the same effect.

The inciting incident finally occurs within Razputin's own mindscape, in which he witnesses Dr. Loboto stealing the brain of a fellow camper. From there, he works towards discovering and stopping Coach Oleander's plans—encountering a wide cast of characters and traversing their minds to progress.

NONVERBAL STORYTELLING

The mindscapes are the true highlight of *Psychonauts*. They are excellent examples of nonverbal storytelling, from the level design to the collectables to the mechanics. The player doesn't just learn

about the characters through exposition—they are immersed in their backstory and their emotional baggage. Each mindscape possess its own personalized shape and interactions which reflect the character’s psyche. This keeps the gameplay and scenery fresh, and leaves each cast member feeling unique and memorable. Collectable memory reels are scattered throughout the level, which give context and backstory to each mindscape within the span of just a few pictures. It’s clean and expedient storytelling, showing only what’s necessary to convey its point.

All of the mindscapes excel at this method of conveying information through personification and symbolism. Gloria’s inner voice is literalized as a play critic that judges her every move. Fred’s lack of self-esteem is made clear by his lack of confidence in his own game pieces. Edgar’s anger is made tangible in the form of a raging bull. This form of storytelling is effective because the player gets to interact directly with these symbols. They fight Gloria’s critic, motivate Fred’s game pieces, and are disrupted by Edgar’s bull when inside each respective mindscape.

Even despite dealing with heavy subject matter such as mental health and disorders, *Psychonauts* still manages to keep its tone light and comedic without downplaying its characters. By nature of going into each character’s mind, the player is forced to see from their perspective. This helps prevent the game from demonizing them for their mental health, because it presents the culmination of each character—their backstory and their struggles—not just their disorder. At the same time, *Psychonauts* is able to convey comedy without making light of the disorder. Instead, comedy is derived from the characters themselves.

OVERARCHING PLOT

While the individual levels of *Psychonauts* are exceptional in their own bubbles, they do not contribute well to the overall plot. Razputin’s quest is established when he discovers Dr. Loboto stealing brains. After a quick aside to rescue Lili from the Lake Monster, he learns that Coach Oleander is behind the scheme, and even secures a brief victory against him. He accepts the hero’s mantle when he agrees to work with Ford to stop the threat. From there, he departs to the asylum to hunt Oleander down.

After that, the story’s momentum drops to a crawl as Razputin is forced through hours of side quests inside the asylum member’s brains. These tasks include obtaining a costume to trick the asylum orderly, and tracking Dr. Loboto’s assistant up a long tower. They don’t challenge Razputin as a character in any way, nor do they develop the main conflict. Throughout, neither Oleander nor Dr. Loboto are anywhere to be seen, despite being the primary villains of the narrative. By the time the player has finished, they’ve practically forgotten what they set out to do in the first place. This throws the pacing way off and forces the actual plot to rush to resolve itself within the last hour of gameplay.

The main plot picks back up again when the characters face down Coach Oleander. This section boasts not one, but two false victories. First, Oleander sneezes his brain out, only for it to enter a brain tank and attack. Second, Razputin defeats the brain tank, but then sneezes his own brain out by accident. This leads to his brain melding with Oleander’s in the tank, which drives the story to an emotional pit as both of the characters’ traumas mix together and form the meat circus mindscape.

Thematically, the meat circus is a compelling set piece. It juxtaposes the hero and the villain’s ordeals, exemplifying both their similarities and differences. Oleander struggles with the memory of his butcher father, who used to kill his pet rabbits. Meanwhile, Razputin is faced with his psychic-hating father and

the grueling circus he grew up in. The two father's meld into one monster that Razputin must fight. However, Razputin's inner conflict has not been assuaged, and he cannot defeat the monster without first growing as a person. He's pushed to his rock bottom when the father he's fabricated in his head tells him he is not his son. The story then ramps up to a climax when Razputin's real father appears, reconciles, and both literally and figuratively empowers him to fight the monstrous father amalgamation. This final battle and Razputin's subsequent victory resolves both Razputin and Oleander's emotional baggage at once.

CHARACTER GROWTH

On paper, the final level does a good job of wrapping up Razputin's character arc and resolving Oleander's villainy. The reflection of both of their traumas into one is fantastic in concept, forcing Razputin to overcome his own flaws in order to defeat Oleander's. But the execution is less than perfect, particularly in the setup and pacing.

Razputin is not established as a character that needs to grow. He is not introduced with any notable character flaws, and does not change in any significant way by the end of the story. While he claims his father hates him, this knowledge does not affect his outlook or his decisions, other than his initial choice to run away at the beginning. His false victory that results in the brain meld is not spurred by any misstep on his own part, just an unfortunate accident. He starts out wanting to be a Psychonaut, and by the end, he's gotten just that. He has a flat arc that fronts as a growth arc.

What's more, his father's supposed disdain is told and not shown. Razputin claims his father hates him, but there is no backing to his statement. It is not reflected anywhere else in the narrative, nor has it been elicited by anything Razputin himself has done. This weakens Razputin's motivations, and lessens the impact when his father reveals it was never true. The player experiences no relief in this reveal, because Razputin has never been oppressed by the thought his father hated him to begin with.

The setup with Razputin's father seems to suggest that Razputin's growth is tied to stereotyping and lack of acceptance. Razputin will grow as a character when he finally earns his father's love, or realizes he had it whole time. However, there is no villain withholding that acceptance that Razputin can face. His father is not present to enforce his dislike of psychics, and so Razputin has no one to push him down and force him to grow as a person. As a result, his supposed growth is handed to him with little struggle.

NARRATIVE THEME

The theme of the story seems to want to be "acceptance", of others and of oneself. This theme is established through many of the characters, most notably the villain. Oleander was rejected a multitude of times by various institutions, until he was driven to wrongdoing. This developed into a desperate need for power, to prove himself worthy to the people that found him too soft or too short. Razputin helps defeat that need by destroying the root of Oleander's motivations, allowing Oleander to accept himself. Likewise, Razputin helps several others sort out their troubles, healing their minds by allowing them to move past old traumas. Razputin's own dispute with his father even hints at themes of acceptance.

However, the overarching plot does not develop the theme very well. The actual threat—Loboto stealing brains so Oleander can turn them into an army—has little to do with acceptance of psychics, or

self-growth. It does not oppose any character's ability to improve themselves or function in a psychichating society, and thus feels disconnected from the theme.

Given the fact that the core of the gameplay takes place in side quests, this makes sense. The theme is developed in the mindscapes, and not in the plot. This is simultaneously one of *Psychonauts'* greatest strengths and weaknesses. While its levels and nonverbal storytelling are stellar, its integration of the plot is poor. The overarching storyline often takes a backseat to the gameplay and the smaller stories, rather than being developed in tandem.

STRONGEST ELEMENT

The mindscapes and nonverbal storytelling are by far the best part of *Psychonauts*. They are the epitome of show, don't tell. The players are allowed learn about the characters and story at their own pace on a deeper, more interactive level. The memory reels provide an incentive to explore, and reward the players who wish to discover more without forcing those who don't care through backstory and exposition. Even then, what is conveyed is concise and streamlined. Each character is turned into their own puzzle or game, which keeps engagement high and makes them more memorable. Each new level is unique and interesting, which reduces repetition and leaves the player excited for what's to come.

UNSUCCESSFUL ELEMENT

Razputin's character, while enjoyable, isn't the best developed. He has a personality, goals, and a backstory, so it is clear he is not meant to be a clean slate the player can project onto. However, he lacks character flaws, and does not grow by the end of the story. This lack of growth also leads him to fail to tie in with the narrative theme.

The groundwork exists for both a flat and growth arc; however, Razputin exists somewhere in between. A facsimile of a growth arc exists in Razputin's relationship with his father. His one character flaw is his belief that his father doesn't love him, thanks to their family's water curse. This belief is only enforced by Razputin's own word, and never reflected in his character. Razputin has the scantest of moments to feel broken up about his father's supposed rejection before his real father appears to set the story straight. His death beat isn't earned, because it is not built up to. His growth is fed to him by another character, and does not change him in any way. He does not have to earn it, nor does he suffer from his initial misconceptions.

Were this interaction not present, Razputin would have a serviceable flat arc. While he himself doesn't change, he does help several characters through their own growth arc by going into their minds and resolving their emotional baggage. This ties him somewhat to the theme, as he brings acceptance to those he heals. Unfortunately, his failed growth arc distracts from his flat arc.

Preferably, Razputin would have his own growth on top of that which he brings to other characters. To accomplish this, Razputin needed to be introduced with some flaw or insecurity tied to his father's

disapproval. This flaw could then be accentuated in his death beat, and would give him room to improve as a person. An example of a workable flaw would be a hero complex. The disapproval of his father would drive Razputin to try and prove himself. This would enforce his desire to solve other people's problems, and would damage him further when his father rejects him. It would also liken him to Oleander, who feels an equal need to prove himself to those who doubted him.

His father's rejection would then need to be reinforced throughout the narrative. Even if his father wasn't there in person, some symbolic representation of his father would need to be omnipresent to build up Razputin's flaw. The water curse could make a suitable vehicle for this. Already, it is an effective gameplay tie-in, and easy to sprinkle throughout levels. If the curse was in some way caused by Razputin himself, it would better develop his father's hatred of him, and carry the weight of Razputin's failures. The player's struggle navigating water-filled levels would then reflect Razputin's own inner struggles.

Tying the water curse to Razputin's character growth would also provide opportunity for the curse to resolve in some way by the end of the story. As it stands, the curse only exists to give Razputin's father a plausible reason to hate psychics; it does not build to anything, nor does it have any conclusion. Razputin's growth as a character could either reverse its effects, or put him in a position to come to terms with its existence. Whatever the case, leaving it completely unmentioned by the end of the story was a dangling thread that could have been better addressed. Likewise, never giving an explanation for the curse's origin makes it appear shoehorned.

HIGHLIGHT

Many would say the "Milkman Conspiracy" level is the most memorable part of *Psychonauts*. It exemplifies the game's humor and creativity, and is a perfect example of nonverbal storytelling.

Boyd, the asylum's guard, is paranoid and delusional. He is certain an unknown milkman has it out for him, and spends the entirety of the level locked away in a room attempting to root them out. The level itself is twisted and convoluted, mirroring Boyd's warped thought process. Agents litter the street, disguised as anything from road workers to grieving widows. Like Boyd, they don't trust anyone. This forces the player to collect set pieces to blend in, allowing them to mechanically participate in the paranoia. The psychic power "clairvoyance" is also unlocked in this level, allowing the player to look through another person's eyes and see the world as they do. This introduces the theme of perception versus reality, a concept Boyd struggles with. All of this character building is done with minimal dialogue, and leaves a lasting impression on the player.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

While the game initially suffered from poor sales, it received strong critical praise. Ratings range around the 80% mark. It earned an 8.7 from IGN, an 8.7 from Metacritic, and overwhelmingly positive reviews on Steam.

Overall, reviewers agree that the comedic writing, unique cast of characters, and unorthodox levels are what make the game exceptional. They praise the creativity, originality, and general craziness that the game exudes.

GAMESPOT: Alex Navarro rated *Psychonauts* an 8.4 out of 10 for its bizarre characters, fun dialogue, and its mindscapes. He found Razputin enjoyable as a main character, as loved the explorative nature of the camp: *"...the biggest boon for the camp world is all the little bouts of dialogue you can discover...In some instances, you can literally just stand next to a pair of characters while they converse for about five minutes or longer and never hear the same line twice."*

In particular, he complimented the mental levels: *"...the most interesting aspects of Psychonauts' characters don't come from their real-world conversations, but rather from their internal monologue...This is where Psychonauts truly shines."* He found the uniqueness of these levels keep gameplay interesting and amusing, with minimal repetition.

TRUSTED REVIEWS: Stuart Andrews rated *Psychonauts* 4.5 out of 5 for its surreal humor, oddball charm, and imagination. *"The script is razor-sharp –peppered with the cool one-liners and those odd bits of sideways (even backwards) thinking that made Day of the Tentacle so great"*. He especially enjoyed the Milkman Conspiracy level, referring to it as the game's signature: *"wild, distinctive and – above all else – original"*.

EUROGAMER: Kristan Reed rated *Psychonauts* an 8 out of 10 for its heartwarming and funny tone. Again, he praised the Milkman Conspiracy level in particular; *"Eventually, you'll even begin to reel off obscure anecdotes about those infinitely hilarious bits that you'll probably miss the first time around, exchange utterly hilarious quotes and wallow in the stand out genius of The Milkman Conspiracy."*

He had minor complaint with certain levels, in particular finding Sasha's shooting gallery to be uninspired. Most of his complaints related to mechanical difficulty, however, and not narrative.

LESSONS

LESSON 1: Narrative in level design. *Psychonauts* does an excellent job of making its narrative discoverable, and conveying it through the level itself. The mindscapes in particular are perfect examples if symbolically portraying narrative concepts in a spatial manner.

Psychonauts has the advantage of theming to support its level design, as it literally represents its character's minds as physical entities. However, this narrative device can still be made use of in other games. Like *Psychonauts*, the current state of the narrative or the character's mental state can be reflected in the level. Vast and open levels can represent opportunity. Tight and twisting tunnels can represent tension, or uncertainty. The objects that populate the level can have more than one meaning—the literal meaning, and the symbolic one. This can further enforce narrative themes and build on characters without explicitly stating so in a forced cutscene or exposition dump. It ties all aspects of the game together, creating a cohesive final product.

LESSON 2: Narrative in mechanics. Similar to its levels, *Psychonauts* connects narrative and mechanics. This connection does not have to be symbolic or metaphoric, though it can be. It can also establish basic world building and tone. The psychic abilities that Razputin unlocks, as well the very act of going into

people's minds conveys a lot about the setting. The way that the player interacts with the levels tells them about the story and the character whose mind they are inhabiting. Again, this is an issue of cohesiveness and conciseness of narrative.

LESSON 3: Developing characters through more than words. In *Psychonauts*, this is done through their levels, puzzles, and boss fights. The key point is extension past written or spoken word. The cast is shown to the player, and not just spoken of. Their actions, mindscapes, and backstories all expand upon their characters, making them memorable.

Psychonauts makes the act of getting to know a character interactive. It does not just feed the information to players. Rather, it allows them to discover the information themselves. This increases their engagement with the content, because they are active participants in the story. It also allows them to discover just as much as they want to. Players aren't obligated to know more about a character than is necessary.

LESSON 4: Levity and risk. *Psychonauts* balances out its difficult subject matter with humor. It grabs the player's attention because it is not afraid to make surreal and unconventional jokes, or introduce bizarre concepts. It avoids being derivative, even at the risk of losing members of its audience. The players that stay are engrossed in the off-the-wall nature of its tone and story, always wondering what crazy antic it will pull out next.

LESSON 5: Discoverable narrative. This comes in many forms, from the chatter around camp to the memory reels to the various interactions of the different psychic abilities with the world. None of this content is required. Players can choose to listen in on a conversation between campers, or hunt through levels and find all of the collectables, or test their various powers on every character and object. This makes the interactions all the more rewarding for those who do care.

The interactions are kept succinct, only conveying as much as needed will still getting a point across. They encourage players to explore and experiment, and increase replayability. While they may only appeal to a certain percentage of players, they are satisfying for those who search them out.

SUMMATION

Psychonauts is an imaginative and hilarious experience that tackles the subject of mental health with levity. It is an excellent example of nonverbal storytelling, with lovingly crafted levels and mechanics that enhance the overall themes and the individual stories. Its characters are one-of-a-kind, charming, and enduring. While it does face some thematic and pacing issues, with plotlines that feel disconnected and levels that detract from the forward momentum of the plot, the game is overall a joy to play. Its distinctive brand of humor and oddball appeal carry the player through with much laughter.