

This semester, I plan to play Psychonauts and then the Sly Cooper series (or as much of it as I can get through). I've wanted to try Psychonauts ever since I first heard about it, whereas I didn't know much about the Sly games until I started researching other games in the platformer genre. My list of possible games originally also included Bioshock, War- and/or Starcraft, Heroes of Might and Magic V, and Jade Empire, but as I talked about the choice with others it became clear that I was the most enthusiastic about Psychonauts and the Sly series.

My main goal in selecting games was finding ones that I would enjoy playing. I've generally enjoyed the console platformers I've played, so that genre seemed like a good place to start. A bit of background: I have never owned a video game console; my parents reasoned (quite correctly) that if I had one I would spend all my time playing with it. I was limited, then, to occasionally playing bits and pieces of games on my friends' systems. As a result, I've played through the first quarter to third of a variety of platformers--including Jak and Daxter, the second Ratchet and Clank game, Banjo-Kazooie, and Super Mario Sunshine--but have never actually beaten one. In fact, the biggest difficulty in picking games or series in this genre was in finding ones I'd never tried.

As the list of platformers I've played might suggest, I'm naturally drawn toward colorful, cartoonish games with a quirky sense of humor; Psychonauts and the Sly games both seem to fit this description perfectly. In fact, Psychonauts is the work of Tim Schafer, the writer/designer behind Grim Fandango and the Monkey Island series (McDonald, 2005), both of which frequently had me laughing out loud while playing them. The level design is also very creative: my interviewee said that the thing that most motivated him to play the game was discovering what the inside of the next character's mind would look and play like (Kelch, 2007). The Sly games, meanwhile, have a very slick, cel-shaded look, and while some people might find cel-shading annoying, I've always loved it for that Saturday-morning-cartoon feel. Having seen Psychonauts in action and watched gameplay videos of Sly Cooper online, I have to say that I find the general aesthetic of both games very appealing.

The games' play styles also align with my tastes. Psychonauts is pretty heavy on collecting--there's purple arrowheads, figments, Psychic Cards, and Scavenger Hunt items, which the IGN review summed up as "a lot of crap to collect" (Goldstein 2005). To an obsessive completionist like me, this amounts to lots and lots of fun. The Sly games, on the other hand, have a focus on stealth that I don't think is featured in enough games. (One notable exception being the Thief series, which I have played but not nearly enough.) Granted, especially earlier in the series, the stealth elements are generally "limited to merely avoiding laser beams, spotlights, and alarmed floor panels" (Gerstmann 2002), but hopefully this will still be enough to distinguish the Sly series from other platformers I've played.

It's also worth noting that these games have received good reviews. Both my interviewees highly recommended the respective games they had played, and although GAMES magazine doesn't include a numerical score with its game reviews, the review itself was

positive. Online, I looked at IGN and GameSpot, both of which provide a review score, a user rating average, and an average score derived from reviews from other sources. That's a whopping 24 numbers for Psychonauts and the three Sly games, so I won't go through them all, but most fell in the 8-to-9 range, with a few scores above that. The sole exception is GameSpot's review of the original Sly Cooper game, which gave it a still-respectable 7.8 rating (Gerstmann, 2002). Although I don't always agree with game reviews, I will take this preponderance of high scores to be a good sign.

My secondary goal is to explore the possibilities of the single-player game as a social experience. Again, never having owned a console, I have often found myself watching other people play through games. Interestingly, watching can be just as much fun as playing the game oneself. With a group of people in the room, gaming becomes a social activity, where talking and joking with each other is as much of a focus as the game itself. Just because one person's holding the controller doesn't mean that he or she is the only one having fun. I know from personal experience that if one plays a game in a room with the door open, people walking by will probably notice and stop in to watch. My interviewee for Psychonauts reported that with very few exceptions, he always had a group of three or four people watching him play (Kelch, 2007).

Psychonauts and Sly will, I believe, work well as games for an audience. As noted above, both games have a lot of style and visual flair; I watched a game of Psychonauts in progress and the effect was almost hypnotic. Both games also have a focus on story and humor as well as platforming elements, which will hopefully make them more entertaining for the non-players in the room. The Sly Cooper games also have Master Thief Challenges, optional portions of the game that can be replayed to beat a certain time limit; these would actually allow me to give the controller to someone else for a while without missing out on playing through any of the single-player content myself (Gouskos, 2005).

Sound is another aspect of a game that everyone gets to enjoy, and my sources indicate that these games did a good job in that respect as well. My interviewee for Sly Cooper said that the music in the series is good at establishing the mood yet unobtrusive, with some nice touches here and there used to good effect. For instance, he said, "when you start sneaking up on someone you have the very classic 'dum dum dum dum' for each step Sly takes, which is straight out of the cartoons" (Draconis, 2007). He also commented that the voice acting was well-executed. The IGN review of Psychonauts, meanwhile, called the game's musical score "fantastic," and went so far as to say that "there's not a wrong note in the voice-acting" (Goldstein, 2005).

Finally, I will have a chance to compare a standalone game (as far as I can tell, there's no talk of making a Psychonauts 2) with a series that has changed and grown over time. Everything I've read about the Sly series implies that the newer games have kept the charm of the first one while making significant improvements to the gameplay. The second and third games, for instance, abandon the original Sly Cooper's linear structure for a more free-roaming feel, and introduce new playable characters whose unique strengths and weaknesses require different play strategies (Gerstmann, 2004).

In case I haven't made it abundantly clear by now, I'm looking forward immensely to playing these games. There may be more to say on the matter, but I think it's now time to wrap this report up and get to... uh, work? Well, you know what I mean.

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