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Review Schizophrenia: Alice – Madness Returns



Preface

Since I strongly endorse you buying the game as a measure to “vote” for diversity in AAA games, I’ll start off with the bad parts and end on the high notes. Oh and the bad parts will be quite a long laundry list. But stay with me and find out why you must play it.

In alice – madness returns there is wide gap of quality between the incredibly imaginative creative direction and the bafflingly uninspired game design.

Platforming

Let’s begin with the most dominant aspect of the gameplay. Third person platforming is always a tricky issue and often packed with frustrating moments. Alice in fact has one of the most playable platforming I have played in a long time. Though this has nothing to do with controls or serviceable camera work.

Instead of polishing the platforming until it’s tight, they decided to go with a massive workaround. You know double jumps right? How about a quadruple jump with additional gliding? They give you four chances of correcting your jump to minimize frustration.

Tight jumping controls would allow for tight platforming gameplay. Precise jumping and timing along with clever level design and traps is what keeps Super Mario Bros popular since 1985. Alice – Madness Returns’ platforming loses its novelty right in the first chapter. The obstacles are slow moving, predictable and massively lack variety.

After a short while the non-challenging platforming becomes more of a drag and you will wish, that the game would just let you walk or call you a taxi.

Combat

I don't want to repeat too much from my last post, where I already hit on Alice's combat gameplay. But many enemies rely on specific defenses, which you easily can learn how to crack. Once you understand what the specific weakness of the enemy in question is, you can take him out with very little effort, especially once you've upgraded your weapons.

This means every enemy creature is only interesting as long as you are searching for the way to beat him, which by necessity you will discover at first encounter. Sometimes special combinations of enemies force you to use special combinations of these kill methods, but that is as deep as the combat system goes.

Combat quickly becomes a redundant chore with little to no highlights, once fresh enemies are figured out and turned into old jokes.



Puzzles

Within the whole campaign there were exactly 2 situations where i was like "Hm, how do I do that?" And then it only took two tries to solve the situation. What may qualify as puzzles in other games dumbs down to waypoints in Alice. Switches are just places in the level you have to reach before you are allowed to go to the exit, that's it. There are some pressure plates, which are switches with a time limit and targets to shoot which are just switches in unreachable places. And finally there are some seesaw platforms, you have to tangle with.

Then sometimes those things are invisible and need to be revealed by shrinking yourself (yeah, I don't know how that's connected either.). But don't expect to find anything with your "shrink-vision", you don't already have encountered a hundred times in the game anyway.

No need to wake up your brain to play this game, your thumbs will do perfectly okay without it.

Mini Games

This is the most telling aspect of the game play. Being complete inept in creating core mechanics, enemies, items or level designs, which would allow for varied gameplay they threw a hail mary pass and added casual mini games. Very casual mini games. A bit of shuffle puzzles for beginners, a bit of guitar hero for 6 year olds, a bit of side-scroll shmup for the Crazy Chicken generation and some 2D platforming for all of those, who are intimidated by Limbo. Realizing how weak and out of place those Flash games are, the designers from Spicy Horse showed mercy and allow the player to skip.

Production Value

Textures are badly tiled, muddy, load and unload before your eyes, have stretch marks and there is nothing resembling what we are used to get from the Unreal engine. Environments, while stylish, are lifeless and feel blatantly artificial. NPCs are weird automated puppets with short animation cycles, reminiscent of background characters from 16bit fighting games. Character animations in dialog sequences are atrocious. Undirected flailing of arms, weird head nodding, aimless eye rolling and over all stiff movement make for a very very poor animation package. The emotions of characters are complete unreadable and the emotionless voice acting kills any empathy for any character.

Love For Alice?

Well, I went into so much detail about the shortcomings of the gameplay, so you get an understanding of what massive downers the creative direction is able to offset. Now why do I still recommend this game? Because of the unique and intense experience Alice finally was. As unimpressive the gameplay was, I couldn't stop playing. Alice – Madness Returns is one hell of a gripping immersive experience. The environments are rich in beautiful artistic expression and metaphoric imagery.



Art director Ken Wong said “When we can make the player feel they’re doing something wrong, we know we’ve gotten the design right” (quoted from the art book). And they succeeded. Alice mind is falling apart because of violence and you as the player are not only exploring this mental valley of pain, you are also contributing to the suffering yourself. The heroine will be doing wrong things, but in this twisted space, who can tell the difference.

Alice – Madness Returns knows how to push your buttons. Instead of entertaining gore and frontal brutality, it forces you to decipher the broken pieces of something that once was whole and good. Chapter for chapter the impressive imagery, level vignettes, cut scenes and littered audio files form become one intense bit of interactive storytelling. The closer we get to the final conclusion of death, abuse and terror the more disturbing the imagery gets and the more we realize that there is only one way to get some peace, a closure, a Finish the game!

What begins as a matter of style ala tim burton, slowly becomes more of a marilyn manson, passes ed gein and finally drifts into a visual psychogram of jeffrey dahmer. you will be disturbed.

If you want games to be something special, want campaigns to be worth remembering and want to experience something truly personal, you have to play Alice – Madness Returns. The gameplay will bore you, the production value annoy you, but the immersive experience will enrich you. And you should pay a solid price for it. Don't just go rental on this one. Alice – Madness Returns is a type of game the industry needs. I don't want the calculating suits of EA to regret pumping money into a project like this.

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6 THOUGHTS ON “REVIEW SCHIZOPHRENIA: ALICE – MADNESS RETURNS”



Jessica

on **July 23, 2011 at 5:29 am** said:

I played the original 11 yrs ago..(I believe it was 11 yrs ago?) and it was on my desk top. I couldn't wait to get this game because I remember how the 'story' got my attention. I really liked this game, and yes the mechanics are not as high as lets say 'Portal' (another game I LOVE) but the story and the scenery was well worth it. I was actually grateful for the easy to identify weaknesses in the enemy, playing on nightmare is hard enough without having to try to figure out a complex 'death' for each enemy. I don't have anything neg. to say except yes it would be nice to have better puzzles. I didn't miss any. To get them all on the first try was annoying. I wanted a challenge. The option to skip (which my son used every time) was a downfall too. The original you had to solve the puzzle to proceed.



Ma,ăö,ă†ra

on **July 21, 2011 at 4:36 pm** said:

Perhaps another useless comment, as I'm only in chapter 2 (also), and I already totally agree with you. The bad voice acting makes me specially sad while watching cut scenes, and gameplay gets annoying every once in a while for being, all in all, repetitions of the same thing.

Although I can't stop playing it. Well then, there must be something really good in here – or just really disturbing. Great review, Anjin!



Anjin Anhut

on **July 21, 2011 at 11:17 pm** said:

Thanks for the kind feedback. and hold on....

The final chapters are really something special and the game finishes strong.



Sverja

on **July 17, 2011 at 4:46 pm** said:

I liked the 2D platforming, it wasn't very hard but fun, mainly because it was a nice variation from the boring 3D platforming. I think it wouldn't be so much fun if they had make those passages as long as the 3D chapters.



kor

on **July 16, 2011 at 8:00 am** said:

Useless comment stating that I completely agree with everything you just said (so far)

Haven't had a chance to finish it yet (I'm in chapter 2 atm)



Anjin Anhut
on **July 17, 2011 at 2:55 pm** said:

Useless, but appreciated. :)