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Primordia

"Lines like 'You have 99 problems and a glitch ain't one of them' challenged how much I could endure..."

Video games have a long tradition of sidekicks: Mario and Luigi; Link and Navi; Jak and Daxter; Gordon Freeman and Alyx Vance; Layton and Luke. Enter Horatio Nullbuilt v.5 and his sidekick Crispin, built by Horatio himself. Equipped with a mag-lev unit and a sarcasm subroutine, Crispin has an artillery of quips, witticisms, jeers, and puns for every situation that helps temper Horatio's stoicism. He's also useful for solving puzzles and offering hints to the novice adventure gamer still groping for clues in the wasteland. Crispin is thus the perfect sidekick... but not in Primordia. In any other game, he might have seen success, but in Primordia, he is incongruous and distracting, and your enjoyment of the game will hinge upon your tolerance for his antics.

Horatio and Crispin live in a harsh, post-apocalyptic world in which humans play an uncertain role. To some of the robot populace, Man is God: the first Builder, who built His children in His image. To others, humans are a weakness best forgotten: an imperfect prototype and a dangerous source of superstition. Horatio is a believer, and when his power core is stolen by a pugnacious hostile, he undertakes a journey to reclaim his property. He leaves the wasteland and enters the fallen city of Metropol, which is governed by a despot with murky ambitions. Horatio and Crispin witness the disintegration of society and question the nature of existence as their small quest to recover a power core becomes, as quests are wont to do, much larger.

A playthrough of Primordia catalyzes thoughts on theology, justice, identity, and the meaning of existence. Wormwood Studios cleverly uses the metaphor of robots to explore the human condition. Although not a novel idea, its implementation is effective and relatively new for video games. Horatio even attempts his own solution to the problem of evil - one of the greatest puzzles of them all. Memorable



Kyle E. Miller
12/05/2012

Scorecard

Graphics:	90%
Sound:	85%
Gameplay:	85%
Control:	80%
Story:	80%
Overall:	80%

Pros:

Phenomenal art style, great music, thoughtful story, complex ending sequence.

Cons:

Overly brief, Crispin the sidekick.

Bottom Line:

A striking and unique adventure with an annoying sidekick.

About Our Grading Scale

Game Stats

Platform:	PC
Reviewed On:	PC
Publisher:	Wadjet Eye Games
Developer:	Wormwood Studios
Genre:	Graphic Adventure
Format:	Digital
Release:	12/05/2012

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NPCs (the pious Ever-Faithful Leobuilt is probably my favorite) populate the environments, and the villainous tyrant of Metropol provides both a compelling, challenging adversary and a portrait of the destructive power of egomania. The broken-hearted setting is ever-interesting as well, and learning more about it became one of my central aims.

Primordia asks difficult questions and maintains a heady atmosphere with its gorgeous backdrops and music, and for these reasons, Crispin feels inappropriate and unbecoming. Crispin is an inexhaustible source of comic relief and a constant disruption of the melancholy tone of Primordia's tortured, fractured world. Just when a sense of sorrow settles in, some bad pun or poorly delivered joke breaks that immersion, as if the developers were afraid to let the game work its magic; as if that would be too much for some. He might not have been such a detraction had his dialogue been better crafted, but it contrasts with the game's otherwise tight and sometimes even profound script. His japes and comments are oddly bland and generic: so much less imaginative than everything else. They're also encumbered by pop culture references. Lines like "You have 99 problems and a glitch ain't one of them" challenged how much I could endure, and at times the humor spiraled out of control like the end of a bad JRPG, and I felt like I was witnessing some ridiculous farce. Controlled, occasional humor can give life to a game like this, but Crispin's constant antics made me cringe time and again. If you can tolerate or even celebrate his tomfoolery, raise that 80% overall score at least five points. For me, Crispin threatens to spoil an otherwise great experience.

Although Primordia's basic gameplay heavily reflects the genre's origins, the puzzles are logical more often than not, and there are a few exciting changes to the formula. Player choice makes an appearance in a few puzzles as well as the conclusion, and this is a trend I hope to see capitalized on in future adventure games. There are no Witcher 2-esque storyline branches, but even small differences in outcome affect the way one experiences the story. In one instance, I effectively terminated a robot I needed to pressure for information. I reloaded and merely trapped him the second time around. Both paths allowed me to progress, but the former came with a sense of failure while the second made me feel intelligent and accomplished.

Most puzzles involve the familiar elements of combining objects and using them on the environment or on NPCs, but even these are often enjoyable. Indeed, Primordia has a couple of my favorite graphic adventure puzzles, but I won't spoil the surprises with unnecessary details. Toward the end, there are a few too many fetch puzzles and locked door riddles - frustrating because you might have missed an item in the cluttered scenery - and Crispin's cheeky acknowledgement of this doesn't make it acceptable. There's also a word puzzle and one that wouldn't be out of place in a Professor Layton title, however, as well as a computer that allows one to research the Metropol by typing in various topic names, some of which are completely optional. Primordia's quick travel function and automatic note-taker are the sort of welcome extras necessary to the advancement of the genre.

The conclusion deserves a special mention for two reasons. First, what initially appears to be a final, binary decision is actually an incredibly open-ended scenario with at least five different endings. The differences are vast, and each ending isn't merely a version of one of the two obvious choices. So subtle is this sequence that some players might not even notice the other options. Unfortunately, the conclusion comes far too soon. Primordia feels like one-half or two-thirds of a game, and the ending cutscenes are rather curt. Of all the endings I viewed, only one was truly satisfying, and all were quite dark. Primordia seems to be missing its third act, and one is abruptly and jarringly torn from this world of automatons.

And what a fabulous world it is, brought to (half)life by stunning pre-rendered backgrounds and moody music. The art design, full of fanciful arabesques, tantalizing junk piles, and a rusty color palette, wouldn't be out of place in a graphic novel. The sprites aren't the best part, and they animate a little too woodenly at times, but the backgrounds transcend their

Screen Shots



Stunning environments.



Yeah, he looks cute, but that's just what he wants you to think.



Images like this speak for themselves.



I wish Crispin was as likeable as some of the other characters.

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Random Encounter
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Podcast

pixelly nature and have swiftly become some of my favorite environmental art pieces. The soundtrack perfectly complements the atmosphere created by the art, and some of the tracks simply ooze mood. My favorite must be the song that plays inside Horatio's ship: an ode to loneliness. The voice acting is surprisingly competent for an indie title as well, and I enjoyed the varied cast of robot voices, some mangled by audio filters and effects. Logan Cunningham, of Bastion fame, voices Horatio with skill, even if the performance isn't quite as memorable as his debut. Crispin's delivery is probably the worst, which only aggravates the sidekick predicament.

Wadjet Games is quietly building a revolution by publishing these hyperpixelated science fiction graphic adventures lovingly crafted by indie devs like Wormwood Studios. Although outwardly agents of nostalgia, games like Primordia are really the harbingers of a new style of adventures full of thought provoking concepts, logical puzzles, and player choices. Although having a sidekick like Crispin corrodes Primordia's otherwise beautiful presentation, there are nevertheless fun puzzles, memorable conversations, and new thoughts to be had.

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