

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: LISA: The Painful
Platform: PC
Genre: RPG
Release Date: 12/15/14
Developer: Austin Jorgensen, Dingaling Productions
Publisher: Dingaling Productions
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Austin Jorgensen

Overview

"No. You don't understand. I've been dead for 35 years. Today is the day I live."
-Brad Armstrong

In the world of LISA, the world has experienced an apocalyptic level event known as the white flash. The flash had not only turned the world into a desolate wasteland, but also wiped out the entire global female population. The story takes place in the remnants of the town of Olathe from the perspective of the middle-aged martial arts instructor Brad Armstrong. Brad is a survivor of severe traumatic events, including domestic abuse, the suicide of a loved one, and the mutilation of his adopted son. In order to quell the deep-rooted depression he feels, Brad turns to the popular local drug called Joy. Joy, unfitting of the name, numbs the user's emotions and dulls their memories. Unbeknownst to Brad, is that the very same drug is the source of the horrifying mutants who now hunt down the remaining survivors.

One day, Brad finds a baby lying on the ground. Picking the child up, he vows to protect it and raise it to be healthy, seeing the baby as his second chance. He soon finds out that the child is in fact, a girl and bears the burden of the future of humanity on himself and his three childhood friends who reluctantly agree to keep the girl hidden. One day, his daughter, Buddy, is kidnapped while he is out of the house, and he sets off on a quest to bring her home by any means necessary.

Characters

Major Characters

- **Brad Armstrong** – The player avatar; a stoic shell of a man. From a young age Brad and his sister Lisa were abused at the hands of their father Marty. Shortly

after managing to escape his horrible situation, he finds out his sister has committed suicide, something he feels directly responsible for. As Brad grew into an adult, he built his own martial arts school with the hopes of teaching children how to defend themselves from a young age so as to not end up as he did. Unfortunately for him, this brief period of happiness is also cut short, when his dojo is destroyed and his prized pupil (who he treats like his son) is attacked by another one of his students, a friend of his late sister, Buzzo. After the flash, Brad turned to the addictive drug Joy that had begun circulating in Olathe to quell his depression. Upon discovering Buddy on the ground, Brad sees the universe granting him a second chance, and is determined to ensure that his daughter grows up safe, no matter what. Over the course of the game, Brad begins to morph from a victim of trauma to an abuser himself. He, kills and maims anyone who dares to stand in his way of finding his daughter, slaughtering the entire Rando Army. He even abandons his friends and kills them when confronted on his betrayal. In the end, he succumbs to the Joy, and becomes a mutant himself, wondering if the things he had done up until that point were just. Brad Armstrong is a terrible person who wants to do good.

- **Buddy** – Brad’s adoptive daughter. Being the last known female in existence, she grew up sheltered in Brad’s basement. Because of this her human experiences were limited to Brad and his three childhood friends: Rick, Sticky, and Cheeks. Growing up under the strict watch of Brad and being kept from experiencing the outside world, Buddy grows to resent Brad. This isn’t helped when it is revealed that Brad had also trained her to kill, by kidnapping men from outside and tying them up for her to train with. One day, a group of men find out about Brad’s basement and ransack his house in order to kidnap Buddy. She manages to escape from their clutches shortly after and uses the event as an excuse to rid herself of her abusive father and explore the world herself. The player winds up following the trail of chaos she leaves, having just a few short-lived reunions before she inevitably ends up in the hands of the Rando Army, who are revealed to legitimately want to help her. In the DLC LISA: The Joyful, Buddy is the player character. The player experiences firsthand as she too becomes just as stoic and violent as her father, vowing to become the strongest warlord in existence.
- **Rando Armstrong** – The game’s secondary antagonist. One of Olathe’s strongest warriors and leader of the Rando Army. Rando is a polite, soft-spoken person who is about as much of a pacifist as one can be in the world of LISA. Rando wears a black cloak with a red skull mask to hide his disfigured face and meek, stuttering voice. Most of his followers follow him out of a sense of blind loyalty to his strength and sheer numbers, while his closer companions follow him for his good nature as friend. As a child Rando was orphaned and used to watch Brad’s martial arts classes from the side before being approached by Brad himself. When Brad offered him a spot in his classes for free, he jumped at the chance and began to master Brad’s signature Armstrong fighting style for himself. As a result of his kindness, Rando began to see Brad as a father, although these feelings were not reciprocated. One day, another student of Brad’s, Buzzo, came looking for the man with the intention of killing him but instead confronted by Rando. Rando suffered a brutal defeat at the hands of his peer and had his face horribly

- disfigured with Buzzo's buzzsaw as punishment. In *LISA: The Joyful*, Rando is the only party member apart from Buddy the player gets. He spends the game trying to convince Buddy that her warpath will inevitably lead to the deaths of everyone but ultimately dies regretting his inability to mend his sister's pain.
- **Buzzo** – The game's primary antagonist. Buzzo is a man partially responsible for the white flash, being the assistant of the scientist who created the flash. He is also directly responsible for circulating the dangerous, mutant drug Joy, within Olathe, with the intention of turning its citizens into powerful violent flesh abominations. Buzzo appears three times during the game, every time forcing Brad to make either a selfish or selfless decision that will affect the player for the rest of the game. He threatens to trade the lives of the player's party members, for Brad's own arms, and items. Buzzo is a truly malicious character, delighting in the suffering of Brad, at one point force-feeding Brad Joy to ensure that he becomes a mutant himself. Before the flash, Buzzo was in love with Brad's younger sister Lisa, and blamed Brad for her eventual death, vowing to make him suffer for not protecting her. He joined Brad's martial arts class with the intention of killing him when he was vulnerable, but instead settled for disfiguring Rando, seeing how he was close to Brad. In *LISA: the Joyful*, Buzzo comes to regret the decisions he's made, realizing how evil he was in life, and sacrifices himself for Buddy's sake.
 - **Lisa** – Brad's late sister and protagonist of the prequel game *LISA: The First*. Like Brad, Lisa is a victim of abuse suffered at the hands of Marty Armstrong. In life, Lisa often retreated into her mind to escape the torment of her daily life, but couldn't even find solace there as visions of her father followed her everywhere she went. She met Buzzo and used his feelings for her to manipulate him into doing things to maintain a small sense of control over her life, such as mutilating small animals. She is also the one who gave Buzzo the nickname he lives by in the post-apocalypse (inspired by the use of his buzzsaw). She asks Buzzo one day to mutilate herself in hopes of disfiguring her form enough to deter Marty from assaulting her, but when he refuses, she becomes distraught. Eventually, Lisa hung herself, an event Brad blames himself for due to his absence. In the game, the player never directly encounters Lisa, however her presence looms over Olathe. She's shown every time the player boots up the game, hanging from her noose on the title screen. Throughout the game, Brad also experiences hallucinations of her who affirm his deepest fears and regrets.

Minor Characters

- **Martin Armstrong** – The abusive father of Brad and Lisa Armstrong. Once a happy father of two, it is heavily implied that Marty's wife died shortly after giving birth to Lisa. As a result, he turned to alcohol and became a violent, incestuous rapist toward his children who both feared and resented him. After the flash, Marty found himself secluded on an island. He made his home in a cave on the island and wound up encountering Buddy who he found drowning outside in the coastline of his new home. Looking after Buddy, Martin seemed like a different person, completely changed by the events of the flash. When Brad

encounters him for the final time after the apocalypse, he apologizes for the things he's done but is ultimately killed at the hands of his now adult son.

- **Terry Hintz** – The first party member Brad recruits. Terry Hintz is a fun-loving goofball who can't fight so much as he can bring his opponents to tears with delicately crafted insults. He exists to balance out Brad's serious, stoic nature but is ultimately an optional character who can be abandoned right at the start of the game. At pretty much any point, in fact, Terry (as well as any other party member) can die permanently, be kidnapped, or leave the player's party. As a result, none of the party members influence the story too drastically, however, Terry specifically has a few special interactions with Brad if kept along in Brad's party. He has also placed "helpful" tips on posters all around Olathe, giving himself the title "Hint Lord" for his gracious sacrifice. His story (as well as any other of the player's party members) ends at the hands of Brad right before the final confrontation with Rando.

Breakdown

Themes

LISA: The Painful is an RPG about pain (it's in the title). It reflects this through the state of the world, where most people who are still alive have been twisted into disturbed, perverted husks of their past selves. It reflects pain through its desire to throw the player off guard and to hit them with hard decisions that have lasting effects on the rest of the journey. Ultimately, however, LISA: The Painful is an RPG about trauma and the vicious cycle its characters find themselves succumbing to.

Even before the events of the white flash, Brad Armstrong was a broken man. The player experiences his struggle to look past the guilt of his sister's suicide and to distance himself from his abusive father, but even in adulthood, he carries an inexplicable loneliness with him. This can be seen through the expression he wears throughout the game. Since LISA is an RPG Maker game with a pixel art style, it needs to be careful in how every character is portrayed visually. This includes everything from their face, to their proportions to their clothes, to their very expression. Every character has one visual motif that they keep for the entire game. In Brad's case, he wears a stone-faced expression, his brow covering his eyes with a thick shadow. It is a common saying that one's eyes are a window into their soul, yet, for Brad, there is nothing but darkness.

Over the course of the game, the player slowly begins to see Brad devolve into the monster he tries so hard to avoid becoming, beginning the game in search of his beloved daughter, only for that very same love to drive him to do terrible things. This is not helped by the side effect of the drug Joy, which corrupts the user, slowly causing them to grow manic and violent the longer they take it. Depending on the player's efforts, Brad may become mutilated, or have his friends killed in his stead, but will very much mow down anyone else who dares to stand in the way of his goal. By the end of the game, it's clear to see that Brad has become his father, the cause of his suffering and fear out of a desperation to do what he thought was right at any cost. What's more is that the pain and suffering Brad inflicts on others is directly transferred to Buddy, who doesn't take things any better. It is only in the finale of the the game's expansion where Buddy comes to the realization that she must end cycle of pain herself and begin anew for things to get better, unfortunately long after it is too late.

Presentation

LISA: The Painful, is a 2D RPG Maker game that uses the pivotal rule of 2D platformers that heading right will take you to the end. The player is marching down a linear path from beginning to end with little to nothing stopping the player from just B-lining to the conclusion. The game is, however, distinctly divvied up into a three-act-structure through the form of the crossroads.

At three distinct points in the game, the player comes to one of the game's crossroads. These areas act as hubs that branch out into other linear areas that the player might need to progress. They are never given any explicit indication of which paths they will need to take with all roads presented either as dark tunnels or cracks in the sides of the mountain hub. The game uses this to catch the player off guard in many cases, with abrupt switches in colour schemes and music to emphasize the radically different environment the player is now in.

The game in general is just sort of "strange" for lack of a better term. Sometimes, things will happen completely out of nowhere that may be funny, or disturbing, or weird but that aren't drawn attention to or referenced in any way by the cast of the game. LISA prefers to be wordless when it can, leaving only the sights, and sounds to provide context. A lot of the time, the player can't even inspect many of the oddities for some sort of description like one can do in other RPGs, and, when they can, what the game tells them often provides more questions than answers. For example, there's an optional area where the player explores a dilapidated hotel room full of gore and flesh creatures. Unlike the Joy mutants, these disturbing blobs of melted flesh and hair are passive. If the player attempts to interact with any of them, they simply make a sound and jitter in place. The only time the player can inspect one of these creatures is when they interact with one blocking the stairs in which the game will just vaguely tell the player that "The path is blocked."

The game is also very quick and blunt in how it tells its story. At several points in the game, the player will suddenly enter a new zone only to find that they are experiencing the memory of a much younger Brad Armstrong. The game starts with one of these flashbacks in fact. After standing up for his friends and getting beat up in the process. The player makes their way through the pre-flash town of Olathe towards Brad's house. When the player approaches a house, they try to go inside, but realize the door is locked so they keep walking. The player tries another house, and another one still but, alas they are all locked. The player will limp through the town until they come upon a house in much worse shape than the others, with the windows shattered, garbage thrown on the lawn, and the paint peeling off the boards. Reluctantly, they try to enter this house, and this time are let in. This is an excellent way to build dread in the player without saying a word. They walk in on a man drinking a beer and watching television in the pitch black darkness. He doesn't seem to notice Brad, and the player hopes he does not. The player tries to creep past the man, but flicks on the lights, turns off the TV, and addresses Brad directly.

"Once again.

My son steps into my house.

Beat to shit."

He whips the bottle from his hand across the room, colliding with his sons head, sending staggering backwards.

“ I’m not buyin’ you another shirt!

Worthless shit kid...”

Tone

The main story of LISA is dark, depressing and strange. It’s about watching one man’s descent into madness over the course of ten hours as he desperately clings to a shallow lie he keeps telling himself. The game gives the player no uncertainty of how this story will end up, with its use of the chekhov's gun narrative device through the drug Joy. Even still, it makes a large effort to humanize its villainous protagonist which only ensures that the game live up to its subtitle of “The Painful RPG” when witnessing the pain Brad ends up causing to those who care for him. It even hurts after playing through the game fully understanding that all the bloodshed and death that lead to this has been in vain.

That said, this is a game where the player can scale a rope for two minutes, only to find a giant statue of a middle finger pointed directly towards the screen, and then force them to climb back down all the way. This is a game where there is a cult of people who worship a strange Ronald McDonald ripoff who throws fast food down a mountain for them when asked. To put it lightly, this game is weird, and crude, and sad, and hilarious, and genius. The player’s first party member and one of the mandatory party members the player unlocks is Terry Hintz, a playable character who can’t deal damage. His attacks are virtually useless, in fact, being unable to fell even a stray dog. That said, he has the ability to debuff enemies with one of the game’s devastating list of effects like making them angry or bringing them to tears. Every party member in LISA fights with a unique set of moves and playstyles which complement their character. There’s a talking lawyer fish named Harvey who throws legal documents at enemies, confusing them and giving them paper cuts, who also carries a gun on him for emergencies. One of the greatest scholars of our time, Nern is another obtainable party member. His ability is reminiscing about his old mundane life through several essay long lectures that bore his opponents to sleep or boost his allies’ stats.

This clear divide between the silly filling of the game and the serious and dark main plot manage to perfectly balance LISA out from being too much of either thing. The game understands that its not a story with subject matter that everyone can handle but it also understands that it can use its genuinely genius wit to pillow a bit of the impact of the more jagged edges.

Strongest Element

The presentation of LISA: The Painful is perfect. It is so quick and blunt with its delivery, and this is reflected everywhere in the game from the tone of the story flipping between very dark and serious and goofy nonsense humor, to the fact that there are no load screens or screen transitions. When a player enters a doorway or cave entrance, they are within that new area within the next frame. The games uses this a few times to startle a player with a suddenly very important encounter or dangerous fight. One minute, they’re exploring a new area largely uninterrupted until they find themselves surrounded by men with guns who force you to player a few rounds of “competitive Russian Roulette” or else they all die. One time, the game even jumps the player on the way back

from an area, where they either pay all their dirty magazines to a gang (LISA's form of currency), or the fight the gang in a really difficult boss fight. The game also uses this for its multiple hallucinatory sequences, where the player suddenly finds themselves living through one of Brad's memories as a slightly younger version of himself. No character ever comments on events like this, the game respects the player enough to just pick up on what's happening. The world of LISA is fast, brutal, and unforgiving. It wants the player on their toes for what might be around every corner and it does this masterfully through its abrupt delivery and lack of any load screens.

Unsuccessful Element

Ultimately, I feel as though this may be a bit of a nitpick, but I wish the player's party members had more of a role in the story. That said, I understand why the choice to have the party members not influence the narrative was made, as the main selling point of the game was its brutality. The game simply wouldn't have had nearly the buzz around it that it did if there was no the risk of losing your party members at any point. Additionally, writing a coherent narrative where any combination of the 30 potential party members could all influence the narrative in some way would have been a herculean task, one much too big for one developer on a passion project.

That said, maybe having the first three characters the player has to recruit be permanent additions would be a good idea. The player could have a party of Brad, Terry Hintz, Nern, and the local drunk, Olan with them at all times and would have the ability to swap them out for any of the other unlockable party members like you can in the retail game. That way, the game would still have that level of imposing dread around the corner, and could still threaten the lives of your other comrades while fleshing out the chemistry between Brad and the first three allies.

A lot of these characters are really unique and fun, and it would only make the forced decision at the end to kill them be even more impactful. I believe this is an argument Austin Jorgensen himself even agreed with, as in the epilogue DLC expansion LISA: The Joyful, the player only has two party members for the whole game, Buddy and Rando. Rando even dies permanently around the halfway point due to story related events, and I would argue this doesn't take away from the "anything can happen at any moment" vibe LISA: The Painful is trying to achieve.

Highlight

I think the most impactful moment of the game has to be when Brad encounters Martin Armstrong as an adult. Throughout the game, the player is forced to make difficult decisions, ones that will permanently affect the player for the duration of the game. Will the player lose Brad's arm, or the life of a party member? Will the player lose their entire party or hurt Buddy? Will the player lose their potential second arm, or all of their items? Who will be sacrificed up to play Russian roulette for the rest of the group? Even smaller, optional changes have this intense decision making. Does the player sleep and risk something bad happening, does the player use a valuable firebomb to kill an enemy, should the player fight that enemy at all, will the player take joy? This moment is no different as they are given yet another decision; Do they murder Martin Armstrong?

The immediate thought in most players' minds is mostly like that vengeance would be more than justified after the damage Marty has caused Brad and his sister. He's even indirectly responsible for the events of the white flash, through his corruption of Lisa, which leads to her manipulation of Buzzo, and, by extension, Buzzo's own path of vengeance against Brad.

The player knows firsthand how much of a terrible person Martin is, doubly so if they played the prequel story, which was entirely about Martin's abuse. There are multiple sections of the game where the player can encounter spider enemies with Martin's head. This is a man who has done irreparable damage to a character player's have just spent the last nine or so hours growing to know and care about. But then you consider that he just saved Buddy's life in Brad's absence. He's even taking care of her to a degree. He regards his son warmly and with regret, apologizing for his actions. Martin is even the first character to point out the dangers of joy and its widespread addiction, something even Brad himself is struggling with. Most importantly, Buddy seems to take Martin's side as well, begging Brad not to hurt him. Maybe he is a different person after all?

Regardless of the player's choice, Brad will kill Marty. Whether it's a result of the joy sending him into a violent rage, or his undying hatred for his father, the player will fight Marty in a very long-winded fight. When Buddy tries to stand in between the fight, the Brad will begin to hurt Buddy with his attacks as collateral. Even after the fight ends, and Martin dies, Brad will continue to brutalize him until there is nothing left. This is the moment where Brad Armstrong passes the tipping point and becomes an absolute monster. Even if the player agrees with Brad's desire for vengeance, or that all the violence up to this point might have been justified, the game make it absolutely impossible to justify Brad's actions in this moment. The character that player have grown to empathize with, is now one with the darkness inside of himself.

Critical Reception

None of the reviews or articles chosen for this submission give numerical scores to the game as most reviewers agree that LISA: The Painful is a great game, but one that isn't suited for everyone, and so it's difficult to apply a number to the experience this game offers, since it will depend so heavily based on the type of person playing it and how much they can get from its message.

Hardcore Gamer – Lee Cooper: Within his interview with the game's creator, Austin Jorgensen, Lee Cooper. He refers to the game as "a combination one would describe as powerful, determined and beautiful; in the craziest, most absurdly fascinating way possible, of course." He touches upon the uniqueness of the game's characters and the attention to detail given to each one, with nearly every enemy and npc having a unique design. Lee Cooper also dissects the game's main inspirations, being the manga series Fist of the North Star through its desolate sandy apocalyptic setting with masculine men fighting among the wastes, but also the story choices given to the player in TellTales The Walking Dead game. Cooper and Jorgensen discuss the soul behind the game, and how there was a clear passion and love for the medium through its narrative and writing and how it aims to recapture the feeling of Jorgensen's experience playing Earthbound for the first time as a child. While this is ultimately an interview with the creator, the journalist behind article isn't shy about showering it with praise any chance he gets.

Destructoid – Ray Porecca: Porecca’s review of the themes of LISA are glowing. He praises how the game structures its world and characters around its bleak, perverse nature, casting aside the standard morality of good or evil associated with so many other games. All of the choices in the game lead to harm either directly or indirectly and the game offers no shortage of it during the experience. Ray gushes about how the game manages to ensnare you into the thought process of these characters by the difficult, harmful choices being forced upon you unavoidably. He also loves the uniqueness of the cast, from the player’s party to the NPCs, with every character having a motivation or goal they all strive for, but none placed above the others. The review ends with the chilling statement “LISA, however, uses its world and ugly society to show that people’s guttural desire for pain and willingness to pervert their humanity leads to a world where there truly is no right or wrong.”

Guardian Acorn – Annie Gallagher: Annie Gallagher describes LISA: The Painful as “Crushing, Depressing, and Brilliant” in the title of her review. She gives the game praise for managing to stand out among the sea of other “Earthbound-inspired” games, dealing with dark subject matter with little hope of mainstream appeal. She gives the game credit for being a game where simply “[being] a real American isn’t good enough.” The subtitle of “The Painful RPG” is telling through how it meshes the dark story with the diegetic choices the player has to make. Gallagher concludes her review of the game with her final thoughts of “I initially did not like this game but It did grow to be one of my favorites the more I played it.”

Youtube – Hbomberguy: Hbomberguy begins his review describing the LISA series as hard to talk about with its “Excellent examples of great writing, or perfect comedic timing.” But contrasts it to its contemporaries with its gruesome content and uncomfortable material. The game is “too good about focusing on what it wants to be about” to the point where it’s impossible to ignore the themes and subject matter being presented to the player. He says its hard to recommend to someone unless you think know them really well, yet despite this, he absolutely loves the series. Like the other reviews discussed, he gives special mention to the choices the game forces onto the player and how they have huge impacts on the gameplay. He describes how LISA is possibly the best example of using “Ludo Narrative” in a game he’s experienced, explaining that often times he found himself at odds with his instincts telling him simply to “reload a save and try again” because that would mean losing a lot of progress and that things may go even worse the next attempt.

Lessons

Tragedy and Comedy are two sides of the same coin – Despite the extremely serious story and main cast of the LISA games, a large chunk of LISA: The Painful is dedicated solely to comedy. Almost all of Brad’s party members are taken entirely as jokes. Right after the player’s first intense encounter with Buzzo, where they lose either a party member or one of Brad’s arms, a random dude in aviators and a leather jacket gives you the keys to his motorcycle and instructs you to plow down as many pedestrians as possible for bonus experience points. LISA: The Painful probably won’t make you laugh with every joke, but it’s sure to catch you off guard at least a few times. Despite this mishmash, the game’s tone never feels inconsistent. Most of the humor is there to balance

out the dark depressing events of the main story and helps to both soften the blow and emphasize the darker moments through contrast.

Use diegesis – LISA: The Painful is a turn-based RPG first and foremost. The game works with this to add emphasis to the narrative. When Brad loses an arm, he becomes physically weaker in battle and the inputs for his special moves change to reflect this. Similarly, when he's under the effects of joy withdrawal he's all but useless in combat, almost encouraging the player to succumb to Brad's drug addiction. Using Joy in game is big as well, as it provides a rare full heal to any party member and causes all their moves to deal devastating critical damage for a time, showing the player firsthand why Joy is such an addicting drug, even if it turns you into a giant flesh monster. This goes for the party members too, as all their fighting styles and abilities reflect their design and personality in game (like the aforementioned Terry Hintz and how he uses his words to debuff enemies).

Take advantage of choice – LISA: The Painful will have players contemplating over choices for the entirety of its runtime. Is it safe to rest at a campfire, when should I dip into my sparse selection of items, which party members should I have in my party, what should I do if someone dies or gets kidnapped or leaves, should I take Joy? While many of these choices are binary, their effects on the overall experience have a butterfly effect over the rest of the game. This is reflected in the larger choices like an arm for a party member. Often times, decision making doesn't come easy as the player isn't asked "what is the right choice," but rather, "what choice will get me to the next area alive." To really drive home this point, some of the choices in the latter half of the game lean into the player's more naive side. In one instance the player has a chance to ask Buzzo, the game's main antagonist, why's he tormenting Brad after giving him an ultimatum of potentially losing Brad's other arm, or all of his items. The end of the game is fast approaching and any person playing the game should understand that LISA doesn't offer easy out by this point. By selecting this option, Buzzo will opt to take both Brad's other arm and the rest of the player's items as punishment. The game also uses Ludo narrative in its choices, by maintaining that uncertainty that "things could always be worse" and dispersing save points far apart from each other to discourage players from simply reloading a save and trying again.

Be open minded – Austin Jorgensen is a rare example of a developer who fully supports their community. LISA: The painful is a popular game made in an openly available game engine that anyone can easily learn. Austin has made his support for fangames and other fan-based projects public. In a few instances, he has even confirmed the canonicity of two fangames, those being LISA: The Pointless, and LISA: The Hopeful, both of which have sequels in the works. Lovingly fostering a dedicated community and fanning the flames of the talented individuals dedicated enough to spend their own talent to contribute to Dingaling's universe is what separates LISA from other series. Even if Austin Jorgensen never makes another LISA game in his life, the series will live on and thrive through the works of its fans.

Budget and Scope are no excuse for bad writing – As stated above, LISA: The Painful, was created by one developer, within RPG Maker VX Ace. RPG Maker is often an engine looked down upon for its enforced limitations on a developer as well as its tagline of "Simple Enough for a Child. Powerful Enough for a Developer." Despite this, LISA: The Painful manages to deliver its deep and mature themes of trauma and abuse

through the RPG Maker engine and the game's simple pixel art visuals better than most AAA titles. As touched upon in the highlight section, the game uses a limitation of the engine to its advantage, that being the smash cuts between screen transitions to deliver quick explosions of information to the player. There are many times where the player turns a corner only to be ambushed by a gang or hallucination and doesn't have time to react. The game does this a lot, but also not often enough so that the player knows when to expect it. This builds a layer of tension and danger to the town of Olathe and reinforces Brad's desire to bring Buddy home where he can protect her.

Trauma is a vicious cycle – All of the central characters in the LISA games are victims of some sort of traumatic experience. With Lisa, it's the sexual and domestic abuse suffered at the hands of her father. For Brad, it's the domestic abuse, and loss of a loved one that makes him turn to a destructive drug and it's his trauma that also drives him to become a psychopathic murderer under the veil of doing the right thing. For Buddy, it's the suffocation of being kept inside, the fact that her father was a drug addict, being forced to murder another human, and living as the only female in a world of endless freaks and perverts that drives her into becoming a violent killer. From Martin to Lisa to Brad to Buddy, even Buzzo as well, this trauma is carried down throughout the Armstrong family, eating its members from the inside out. The only important character to survive in the end is Buddy, and only if the player takes the Joy vaccine in the finale. Even then, it's far too late to make right of what was. Rando is dead and his army is to. There's hardly anyone left in Olathe at all in this point, it's just Buddy in the wasteland.

Unreliable Narration – Many events in LISA: The Painful aren't explicitly shown. Lots of things the player learns about happen off screen and are implied through dialogue or scene framing. The game also uses this as a narrative trick to fool the player into fitting firmly into the shoes of Brad himself. Throughout the game, it's a bit unclear why Buddy would be so adamant to avoid Brad. There's never any implication that he has abused her, and he truly does seem to treat her like his own daughter. The player sees him attempting to quit taking Joy for her sake, digging out the basement to provide a safe bunker for her to live, playing with her, hanging up her drawings and let her put makeup on him and his friends. Brad even gives her a mask to wear so she can go outside occasionally after seeing her distraught at his overprotection. Even by the end of the game, and the monster in Brad is revealed, it's still a bit unclear why it got to this point to begin with. Why was Buddy so afraid of Brad? In a world of freaks like LISA, Brad should look like a saint. It's only in LISA: The Joyful, does the player get answers. Buddy's memories of Brad are far grimmer. While Brad remembers all the times he loved and cared for her, she remembered the time he kidnapped a man and tied him up in the basement, forcing Buddy to kill him in order to learn how to defend herself. She remembered how he relied on Joy to keep himself emotionally stable. She remembered all the times he didn't let her go outside. The player learns that she didn't weasel her way out of her kidnapping, she used the experience of her first kill in order to kill again, and again, and again. By the time the player gets control of her in LISA: The Joyful, she has a body count of dozens and suddenly all this violence makes sense.

Summation

I feel that LISA: The Painful has stood the test of time, predating the massive wave of "Earthbound inspired RPGs" that have hit the market in recent years. I feel even

then, LISA remains able to stand above the crowd through its distinctly adult themes and genius writing. It touches upon difficult themes many games dare not approach, while not being afraid to throw in some absolutely bizarre absurdist humor in for good measure. It wears its crude, ugly, world and characters like a badge of honor and that alone make it worth talking about, even before taking into consideration is legitimately amazing quality. Despite its very humble scope, being made in RPG maker and using very simple sprite work and animation, it manages to create some absolutely gripping set pieces and cutscenes with the tools provided, rivaling even something like The Last of Us in memorable set pieces, a game which released a year prior from an classic AAA studio, and deals with the similar plot of a grizzled man and his adopted daughter exploring a post-apocalyptic wasteland. LISA: The Painful is truly a game that deserves to be remembered, even now eight years later.

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