

Video Game Report:
Kingdom Hearts: 358/2 Days & Professor Layton and the Diabolical Box

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When I saw the video game analysis assignment on our syllabus for Entertainment Technology Fundamentals, I knew exactly which two games I would play. Two sequels I had been looking forward to for over a year were coming out, one at the end of August and one at the start of October. This would give me ‘permission’ to play these two games without feeling guilty for blowing off my other class work.

The two games I played were *Professor Layton and the Diabolical Box*, the second game in the Professor Layton series, and *Kingdom Hearts: 358/2 Days*, the fourth game in the Kingdom Hearts continuity. Both games were for the Nintendo DS. I found one of the games, *Kingdom Hearts*, very satisfying, while the other, *Professor Layton*, was very disappointing. In the course of my analysis of the two games using Aristotle’s Poetics, as well as Janet Murray’s New Poetics, I will explore why I had this reaction to the two titles.

Plot

Both of the games I played were progression games, where the plot is linear, rather than emergence games, where the player is given a general set of rules for the world and allowed to freely explore and create their own stories. The player’s actions triggered cut scenes and dialogue that gave information to move the overarching narrative forward. There was occasionally some freedom in the order of gaining information, but the plot progression and narrative arc did not have branching paths. I will discuss this more in the section about Agency.

The *Kingdom Hearts* saga is a series of action role-playing games from Square Enix. *Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days* takes place between *Kingdom Hearts (KH)* and *Kingdom Hearts II*, with events overlapping the end of the original *Kingdom Hearts* as well as simultaneously and after the events of *Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories*. The Kingdom Hearts saga spans several platforms, with the two main titles created for Playstation 2, *Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories* on the Gameboy Advanced, and *Kingdom Hearts: 358/2 Days* on the Nintendo DS. As a fan of both Disney and Final Fantasy, another series created by Square Enix whose characters make a cameo in these games, I loved this series. I have played every title all the way through, preordering each to be sure I get it on the day it is released.

In order to understand the events of *Kingdom Hearts: 358/2 Days*, the player must know the events and world of the series. In the original *Kingdom Hearts*, a boy named Sora is separated from his friends when his island home is engulfed by the Heartless, creatures who thrive in darkness. He sets off on a quest to find them along with the Disney characters Donald and Goofy, who are searching for a missing King Mickey. Together they travel through several Disney worlds, fighting Heartless and eventually finding their friends. Unfortunately, they are not able to return together and remain separated at the end of the game. In *Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories*, Sora is lured into Castle Oblivion in his search for another way to bring his friends back together. In this game, we are introduced to Organization XIII, the main antagonists we later meet again in *Kingdom Hearts II*. As Sora goes through the castle, he loses his

memories of his friends and himself. At the end, he is put to sleep for a year as his memories are collected and replaced. In *Kingdom Hearts II*, we are introduced to the idea of Nobodies, people who are created when a person with particularly strong heart gets turned into a Heartless. The members of Organization XIII are all Nobodies, intent on getting their hearts back and becoming complete once again. The game begins with the player as Roxas, Sora's Nobody, who has no idea who Sora is except for dreams about the other character. During the course of this section, we learn that Sora must become reunited with his Nobody in order to become complete and awaken. After about four hours of gameplay, Roxas finds where Sora is being kept and is absorbed back into him. For the rest of the game, the player is Sora, and Roxas is no more.

In *Kingdom Hearts: 358/2 Days* (hereafter referred to as *Kingdom Hearts*), we follow the life of Roxas from just after his creation, through his time with Organization XIII, up to the start of *Kingdom Hearts II*. Over the course of the game, Roxas becomes friends with another Nobody named Axel and a girl named Xion. Xion turns out not to be a Nobody, but a puppet designed from Sora's memories of one of his friends. Her purpose is to sap energy from both Sora and Roxas in order to successfully wield Sora's power to collect hearts, in order to aid Organization XIII's goal of gaining their own hearts. She is unaware of this, and she, Roxas, and Axel become friends. Axel ultimately double crosses the Organization to aid his two friends. As Xion grows stronger, Roxas grows weaker. In the end, Xion sacrifices herself to save Roxas, as well as to aid in the eventual waking of Sora.

In the game, Roxas starts with very little personality or skill. The first few hours of the game are made up of tutorials, as various members of Organization XIII take Roxas out on missions and teach him how to do the tasks that make up the gameplay of the title. As the tutorial proceeds, Roxas starts to have more personality and emotion. The game is divided into days, though at times we are moved forward past many days at once. This plot structure added an urgency to the game, and as a player I was very conscious of what day it was in relation to the 358/2 days of the title. This became particularly relevant at the end.

The structure of each day or level is to have a mission to carry out, set by the leader of Organization XIII. After most missions are completed, there is a cut scene that advances the overarching plot of the story. While some missions are straight forward, with no twists in the course of completing the objective, some follow a more traditional interest curve. These are often the required missions, which all players must complete. Often in these levels, once the original objective is completed, a new more difficult challenge will appear.

Professor Layton and the Diabolical Box comes after the original Nintendo DS game, *Professor Layton and the Curious Village*. In the first game, Professor Layton, a professor of archeology, and his assistant Luke, a 12 year old boy, travel to St. Mystere to solve a riddle in a will. The gameplay was made up of exploring the town and solving riddles, which were either hidden in the scene or given by non-player characters. As we enter the village, we are told that the villagers love riddles and puzzles, so the constant barrage of them doesn't feel random. Ultimately we find out that all the villagers are actually steampunk robots, set up to test visitors until a worthy guardian was found for the late Baron's daughter, Flora. In the end, Flora leaves

the village with Professor Layton and Luke. I enjoyed this game, both because I love brain teasers and because the narrative was very satisfying. I did not see the plot twists coming, but they were supported by the setup that had happened in advance.

In the sequel *Professor Layton and the Diabolical Box* (hereafter referred to as *Professor Layton*), Professor Layton is investigating the death of a friend who found the Elysian Box, a box rumored to have a curse on it. He and Luke find a train ticket in the friend's apartment and take it, stopping in a small town along the way before going on to another, more sinister town. In the second town, Professor Layton and Luke finally unravel the mystery of the box and town, a hallucinogenic gas from the mines that makes people see what they imagine. As the player explores the various areas, they find clues to solve intermediate mysteries. Once enough clues are assembled, the player is given a riddle which restates the current mystery and allows the player to select an answer.

The plots of the two titles were the most important factor in my reactions to the two games. *Kingdom Hearts* was a game made for a fan. It relied on the player recognizing the intertextual references to the other games in the series. For example, Axel leaves early in the game to go to Castle Oblivion, to participate in the events of *Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories*. While he never states in this game what happened there, his character has clearly been affected by it. A lot of the politics of Organization XIII would also be confusing without having played the other games, but are satisfying to the fan by not being oversimplified or retold. Several events referenced but not revealed in *Kingdom Hearts II* appear here in full. One of the most pleasing events for me was the sequence at the climax of the game that had been shown in a secret scene at the end of the first *Kingdom Hearts* which the player could only unlock by beating the game and several extra bosses. While I wouldn't recommend this game to a player who didn't know the series, I would wholeheartedly tell anyone who had enjoyed the other games to dive in.

Professor Layton, on the other hand, not only fell short of my expectations, it actively put me off. The first game was carefully plotted so that the gameplay mechanic of solving puzzles didn't feel random. In the sequel, we are given no explanation for why everyone has a riddle on hand and is so eager to ask it to the Professor. The riddles come constantly from players in every section of the game, even ones unrelated to the main storyline. At the end of the first game, Flora leaves with the professor. In the second game, she doesn't appear until over two hours in. I was left wondering why she wasn't with them, without any reference to where she might be. Halfway through, she is kidnapped and replaced with an imposter, and the two main characters never notice the difference. When it is revealed in the end that she has been tied up and left in a barn in the interim village, everyone laughs as though it wasn't a highly dangerous situation for a sixteen year old girl. Finally, the plot, solutions being the result of previous actions and information, was all over the place. One of the bigger interim mysteries was so obvious that I got frustrated with the characters for not catching on sooner. Then later, the conclusion of the game, everything being the result of a hallucinogenic drug, was out of nowhere and felt like a *deus ex machina* solution to the puzzle of the game. The friend from the beginning wasn't even dead, apparently,

even though we saw the body. He just inhaled the gas and ‘believed’ he would die, so he went into a coma. It felt like an insult to my intelligence, when the first *Professor Layton* game left me satisfied that all the pieces came together so well.

Character

The protagonist of this *Kingdom Hearts* game was Roxas, a teenaged boy taken into the mysterious Organization XIII, who have plans for him based on his abilities and his relationship with Sora. I had already played as Roxas for several hours at the opening of *Kingdom Hearts II*. Also, he was Sora’s Nobody, and so was also Sora in a way. I had played as Sora for over 80 hours between the three previous games and feel a very strong affection for him. This made it easy to identify and sympathize with Roxas when the game began. The development of Roxas in the game felt natural and inevitable, as this fit in like a puzzle piece with the other three games. I knew where his character was going to end, but I didn’t know how he would get there. Whereas in *Kingdom Hearts II*, I along with many fans were frustrated by playing a random character when all we wanted was to get back to Sora, in this game I was happy to explore the character of Roxas and delve deeper into the mythology and worldbuilding of the *Kingdom Hearts* universe.

In *Professor Layton*, the protagonists are Professor Layton and Luke. Professor Layton is a professor of archeology with a penchant for solving puzzles. Luke is his assistant, though we are never given an explanation for why a 12 year old boy would be an assistant to an archeology professor. The two never really seem to have a strong stake in the conflict, other than curiosity and desire to find out what happened to an old friend. Due to the gameplay conventions, which I will discuss later, I never really identified with a character to the point that I felt I *was* either of them.

Theme

The entire *Kingdom Hearts* saga has a theme of friendship, inner strength, and the importance of memories. In each game, the importance of friendship is brought up again and again, whether between Sora and his missing friends or Sora and his new companions. When Sora is turned into a Heartless in the first game – the moment that Roxas is created – he is able to transform back because of the love of his friends. In *Kingdom Hearts: 358/2 Days*, Roxas struggles to understand his growing friendship with Xion and Axel because of his lack of a heart. Even without a heart, though, he learns to love his friends as strongly as Sora ever did. Xion must choose between saving herself or saving her friends, deciding to sacrifice herself to save Roxas and eventually Sora. When she dies, Roxas initially forgets her due to the circumstances of her creation, but their connection is strong enough that he remembers. This is an echo of similar events in both the original *Kingdom Hearts* and *KH: Chain of Memories*. Both Roxas and Xion are willing to give up themselves for the sake of their friends, which both eventually do in the end.

In *Professor Layton*, there is a similar theme of the strength of memories, though in this game it shows the darker flip side to valuing memories too much. In the end of the game, it is revealed that the town has been kept in stasis by the Baron, who lost his love due to his obsession with the mines. Due to the hallucinogenic gas, everyone in town believes things are exactly the way they were, and the Baron refuses to believe his wife is gone forever. In the end, the Baron's granddaughter arrives to reveal what actually happened to his wife. She had been pregnant when she left, and never stopped loving him until the day she died. The Baron's granddaughter convinces him to accept the past and let go of it, so that he can get to know his remaining family.

Diction

In both games, the characters mostly communicate through text cards placed at the bottom of the screen. Occasionally these pieces of text are punctuated by a sound, a laugh or a scoff, though the rest of the line is silent. Both games have spoken dialogue during important cut scenes, pre-rendered instead of being done in engine.

In *Kingdom Hearts*, the dialogue is illustrated by an image of the character which tells us what tone they are using for the dialogue next to it. The model's faces are unanimated and never change, so the smaller images let us know if they are happy, angry, determined, sad, or indifferent. The dialogue takes place in front of the 3D models who are often acting at the same time. I found I would often forget to look at the image to the right to see how the character's dialogue was inflected, because I was watching the 3D character moving.

Kingdom Hearts took advantage of the dialogue for some indirect control of the players. Occasionally when you spoke to the other members of Organization XIII, they would challenge or question you about tasks, such as opening treasure boxes or completing bonuses. Once you did what they had asked, they gave you a reward. To me, it came across as a nice, subtle way to be sure the player knew they were able to do things like fill the bonus gauge or synthesize weapons and magic.

In *Professor Layton*, the dialogue sections are more like comic panels, with dialogue in bubbles pointing to the correct character. The images of the characters on screen do not move from their given pose.



(Professor Layton, from eurogamer.net)
(This is one screenshot)



(Kingdom Hearts, from ign.com)
(This is from two separate scenes)

Music

Every level of *Kingdom Hearts* has at least two music tracks, one when no enemies are around and one once enemies appear. The enemy music had a beat faster than the human heartbeat, which gave the player a sense of urgency and alertness. The non-enemy music was more sedate, and suggested that it would be a good time to look around and explore. Both music tracks were related to each other and the world they were in, for example a variation on music from the film *Aladdin* when in the Agrabah level. It was a nice cue to have when playing, because there were times the enemy would appear behind you in the 3D space. Some levels didn't play the calm music at all, instead playing the more frantic music even before the enemy came out. These levels often had a bigger boss to defeat and were more challenging, and it was nice to have an aural hint about what was coming up.

As Professor Layton doesn't have fighting scenes, there weren't many musical transitions in the same scene. However, the music was still very pleasant to listen to. I believe a lot of effort was put into the music, because there is an unlockable area where you can just listen to the tracks. I know I enjoyed the music a lot, and kept headphones on for most of the time I played even though the audio didn't give any immediate cues related to the gameplay.

Spectacle

These two games went for very different aesthetics. *Professor Layton* mostly used flat, static 2D images, both for the characters and the environment. The style of the characters was very cartoonish, with some characters who had unrealistic and inhuman proportions and faces. I did not understand the game designer's choice to have a large portion of the game set on a train. Whereas the first game had a huge village you could explore, with new areas opening up to you as the game progressed, the sequel had large sections where you could only go up and back down a train. There were no alternate routes or areas to explore until I got to the village, about six hours into the game. Within the train, every section besides the dining cart was the exact same, leading to boredom. Aside from that level, I really liked the look of the game. In three cut scenes during the game, there were pre-rendered 3D movies. I felt they did a very good job at translating their look into a 3D world so that it didn't feel unnatural and strange.

Kingdom Hearts, however, had one of the most dynamic environments I have seen in a Nintendo DS game. The game designers had brought in the models of the space from the previous Playstation games, taking out some side areas the player could enter in the larger games, but leaving the areas you could access the same. This contributed to my love of the game, because I was able to once again explore areas I knew well, instead of having spaces that felt different but were *supposed* to be the same. Some missions may have been tedious or confusing if I hadn't already known the layout of the area. However, I did know it, so it gave me an additional satisfaction in recalling facts from the previous games and having them help me in the current one.

Immersion

I definitely found it easy to become immersed in the world of *Kingdom Hearts*. This title was a natural extension of the games that came before it. As I've discussed previously, the consistency of entire saga has made me feel satisfied as a fan, as though I've been rewarded for the time, attention, and affection I have put into the series. *Kingdom Hearts: 358/2 Days* not only took place within the *Kingdom Hearts* universe, it also built upon it, adding to the fullness of the world. Small details such as having the same environment models really helped with this a lot. I have a mental image of what the *Kingdom Hearts* world looks like and feels like, and the designers have done a remarkable job at keeping the worlds consistent while still adding on to them. *Kingdom Hearts* also managed the flow of the game well. Though one or two missions stood out as being too easy or too difficult, for the most part I felt like the difficulty was even with my skill and where my character's level was.

In *Professor Layton*, it was more difficult to suspend disbelief. Where *Kingdom Hearts* could carry me through periods of confusion through the "creative belief" and the suspension of disbelief, in *Professor Layton* it just took me out of the game. As I discussed previously, there were times I was taken out of the game world because I couldn't believe the characters hadn't

caught on to a previous puzzle, then again when nobody cared about Flora missing, and once again when the final revelation and resolution to the large mystery made no sense within or outside the story. *Professor Layton* also had some trouble with flow. I felt that the puzzles didn't as a whole get more difficult over the course of the game, though there were some that were in a series. There were also more frustrating puzzles than appeared in the first game, where the solution is not what the original puzzle is asking but a trick answer. For example, in one the player is challenged to block the smell bothering a man. The solution is to plug the man's nostrils instead of the jars of garlic, however the man doesn't look like he can be interacted with.

Both games had a similar method of helping the player keep track of the plot of the game, which is a nice addition to games you may only play briefly and over a long period of time. They had the main character keeping a journal, which made it easy to go back and be reminded of the events and the order they happened in. When creating a complicated plot, it is a good idea to have a method of reviewing what has happened. Both games also reiterate within the level what your goal is, on the less used screen of the Nintendo DS (top for *Professor Layton*, bottom for *Kingdom Hearts*).

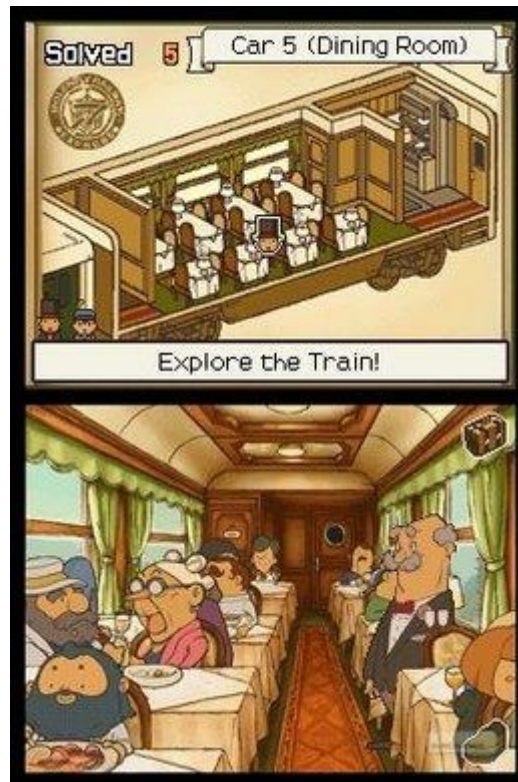
Agency & Navigation

Looking back on the games, I don't feel either had much agency. Agency is not just activity, it is having the activity influence the world and the outcome of the game. These games both had a story to tell, and that story was unchanged based on a player's performance. If the player didn't do well enough, the plot would stall until the task was completed.

Within that, however, I do feel that there was agency in terms of how deeply I wanted to go into the games. Both games had side games and extra challenges which were unnecessary to the main plot, but rewarded the player in other ways. In *Professor Layton*, the reward was extra unlockable puzzles at the end of the game. In *Kingdom Hearts*, it was a synthesis and shop system, which allowed the player to create stronger weapons and new magics.

The games used very different methods of spatial navigation. Roxas is able to move in all directions in the 3D environment, as well as jumping onto objects and ledges. The movement feels very free, with few restrictions. Like most RPGs, in *Kingdom Hearts* the camera is set behind the character as he goes through the world. This keeps the player at a distance from the character he is controlling, unlike in a first person shooter where you see through the character's eyes. It creates an interesting dichotomy where I felt like I both was and wasn't Roxas. I was controlling him in the gameplay portions, which felt natural, yet I didn't feel frustrated when he would act in a way I wouldn't have during cut scenes. *Kingdom Hearts* struck a good balance between the two modes.

In *Professor Layton*, the player sees a screen and taps around with her stylus until she find a puzzle, a piece of information, or a hint coin. When a player finds a puzzle, sometimes Professor Layton answers and sometimes Luke does. For most of the gameplay, however, you do not see either character. Below is a typical screen:



from eurogamer.net

The player will then tap on the characters and objects with her stylus in an attempt to find information, puzzles, or hint coins. Once satisfied that the room has been explored, the player will move on to the next section. Because of this navigation convention, I never felt like I *was* one of the characters. I was more of a godlike or guiding character. Perhaps if I had felt more connected to a character, I would be more willing to go with the “creative belief” of the world instead of constantly getting jarred out of it.

Kingdom Hearts had an aspect of temporal navigation as well. At any point in the game, the player was able to go back and repeat missions again, cut scenes and all. They were organized by day and mission within the “Holo-missions” option in the options menu. Additionally, the player could decide to play the mission again in “Challenge Mode,” where additional constraints are placed on the player for additional rewards, or “Unity Mode,” where the player can choose to play with another character from the game besides Roxas.

Transformation

In *Kingdom Hearts*, I definitely felt like I was “enacting” the story. As I said above, I identified with Roxas enough that I felt like I was him, but also with the distance to follow and appreciate his narrative arc, knowing his tragic end of being absorbed back into Sora and never

seen again. The narrative in *Kingdom Hearts: 358/2 Days* was very moving. I did tear up when Xion came to say goodbye to Roxas before sacrificing herself by letting herself fade away.

Kingdom Hearts also allowed for several aspects of transformation within the game. The player is able to go back and play with a variety of characters, both from Organization XIII and from the original game. Each player has different strengths and weaknesses, which makes each level feel new again. Also, the player can rearrange the magic and weapons they take into a given world based on the strengths of the Heartless she will encounter. I found there were some levels I had to replay because I didn't bring in enough cure magics, or I had a lot of fire magic with fire-related Heartless, which cured instead of hurt them. The challenge mission mode is also another transformation, as each has alternate goals and restrictions on them that makes the level feel different. For example, a level might need to be completed with no attack magic, or at a lower level, or without jumping.

I felt there was less transformative options in *Professor Layton*, but I may have felt differently if I wasn't a completist. In the first game, I didn't realize until I finished it that I would get extra puzzles for solving minigames and finding all the hidden puzzles. That made me go back through and essentially play again to find what I had missed. When I played the sequel, I expected this and had already solved the minigames and hidden puzzles before I finished the game for the first time. In this case, I don't have any desire to go back and finish it now that I am done.

Ultimately I enjoyed both games. While *Professor Layton* frustrated me, I still felt there were some great puzzles and I played it through to the end. With *Kingdom Hearts*, I finished the game not only wanting to replay it, but the entire *Kingdom Hearts* saga. To me, that is the best sign of a great game, when I finish it and immediately want to play it again.