Kingdom Hearts II
by Alexa Ray Corriea

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To Raymond and Jake,
my lights in the darkness.

And to Christilynn,
the Sora to my Riku,
my forever friend.

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PRELUDE

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE GOOD?

I used to think that it meant helping everyone, no matter how busy or broken you were. That it meant complete and total selflessness, and always being ready to be a hero. No matter where you were, no matter who needed you, you had to be ready.

So many people don't worry about being good—they just worry about *being*. Our world is a weird one, filled with joy and love but also immeasurable pain and strife. We bless our friends and curse our enemies, picking sides in petty wars and trying to make sense of it all by firmly delineating what is black and what is white. But this world is often far grayer than we are willing to see. I spent my childhood idolizing fictional heroes who fought for good no matter what, going head-to-head with bad guys who I knew—just *knew*—were firmly in evil's palm.

But maybe that's not it at all. Maybe no one is entirely bad. Maybe being good is just so incredibly hard that

some can't find the strength to do it. Maybe others are quietly good and we just don't notice. And maybe others think they're doing good based on what they believe is right, and to everyone else their wrongdoing couldn't be more clear.

The heroes I worshipped as a child are not the heroes I worship now, and the places I find them have changed. Real-world heroes come in many forms. Some are constantly in action, always the shoulder to cry on or the safe guide home. Others spring into action when the situation goes to hell, and then quietly resume their everyday lives.

Being a hero is tiring. Do you want to do right so badly you're willing to break a few hearts? Do you value virtue more than friendship? More than love? What do you do when these good things are at odds with each other? And how much heroism is too much? Giving up too much of yourself for others can be just as detrimental as being utterly selfish. Fatigue feeds into resentment, and resentment into negativity so deep it's difficult to settle your state of mind.

I used to be terrified of that darkness—the darkness that comes with suddenly realizing the world may not be worth saving. I would lay awake at night thinking about it, the cold sensation of… something, some negative feeling, some roiling desire to turn my back on

everything, everyone. I'd imagine that coldness creeping over my heart, turning it black.

I used to think that once this darkness took hold of someone, that was it. And so I spent my hours and days shining brightly, giving my all to everyone who asked (and some who didn't) because I didn't want to give that darkness any room, any opportunity. If I succumbed once, that would be it.

But that's not true. You can come back from darkness. And the deepest darkness can always be flooded by light once again.

There is always someone out there telling us we are too bad, or too broken, to be of use. That we're too selfish to help anyone, that we're too incomplete to achieve anything. Telling us that we're nobody. That we're too heartless. But I believe that no matter how broken and empty we may feel, no one is beyond redemption. If they want it.

I don't really know what it means to be good. I can try to be, though.

KH PROLOGUE 1.5 REMIX

IT'S DIFFICULT FOR ME TO EXPLAIN Kingdom Hearts to other people. Not because I can't—I can babble endlessly about its convoluted lore, until the point where someone once actually silently walked away from me—but because the plot sounds like someone's fever dream. And maybe it is a fever dream, a fantastic madness born from the brain of lauded designer Tetsuya Nomura while he lay stewing in his creative juices in the brief interval between his work on *Final Fantasy VIII* and *Parasite Eve II*. I've been told that when I talk about Kingdom Hearts, I make absolutely no sense. But all I'm doing is rehashing what I've absorbed through countless hours of fighting Heartless and watching Goofy squander all my Hi-Potions.

Kingdom Hearts is a difficult franchise to craft a one-sentence pitch around. It's Disney and Final Fantasy garbage mashed together with a bunch of weird nonsense. It's a baby's bedtime story about teenagers running amok without parental authority in a world

filled with cuddly evil creatures, and sometimes guys with giant swords and great hair come to hang out. It's the video game equivalent of a fantasy young adult novel, but also Mickey Mouse is there.

Kingdom Hearts embraces this mashup of seemingly incongruous elements with gusto. Parts of the series are so cheesy that it's hard not to question what the designers were thinking. They had to know that even the most die-hard Kingdom Hearts fans would roll their eyes in moments like when Donald and Goofy must beat up computer viruses in the world of *Tron*, or when physiological laws allow characters to lose and regain physical bodies as easily as changing from one shirt to another. But this goofiness, and the sincerity with which it is presented, is what makes Kingdom Hearts so enjoyable.

The story of how the first *Kingdom Hearts* game came to be is common knowledge among aforementioned die-hard fans, and began popping up in the games press shortly after publication of *Kingdom Hearts II*. But here is how it was told to me, by director Tetsuya Nomura himself: Disney Interactive Japan and Square Enix once shared an office building in Tokyo, and one day Shinji Hashimoto—currently the executive producer at Square Enix—happened to get into the elevator with a member of Disney's executive team. Both expressed the desire to work together. And Nomura, ever the Disney fan,

mentioned he'd love to work on a Disney video game. In an instant, a series was born that would span nine full games and six remastered editions (and counting), and would capture the hearts of millions.

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The first game of the series, published in 2002 for the PlayStation 2, introduces a trio of young people with connected destinies that lead them across various worlds featured in Disney films. Sora, a human teenager on an Earth-like world and the wielder of a legendary weapon called a Keyblade, chases his friends Riku (who has become an agent for forces of evil) and Kairi (who is secretly a princess and is kidnapped by said evil forces) through the Disney environments found in *Alice in Wonderland*, *Pinocchio*, and *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Sora's constant companions are Donald Duck and Goofy, two of the Walt Disney Company's oldest and most popular characters. For the purpose of *Kingdom Hearts*, they hail from another world—another realm—somewhere in the same universe as Sora and Riku, where Mickey Mouse presides over the entire cosmos as its benevolent king.

After falling through a portal of swirling darkness and landing in the strange and unpopulated world of Traverse Town, Sora meets Donald and Goofy, and the

three take a vow of companionship that ends up carrying them through the entire series. Their relationship undergoes some major trials in this first game, including fighting against Sora's former best friend Riku and having to rescue various Disney princesses from the clutches of Maleficent, the evil queen from the 1959 animated film *Sleeping Beauty*. About halfway through the game, just as Sora finally rescues Kairi, he makes a sacrifice that separates his heart from his body. Briefly, he becomes a violence-driven, shadowy creature called a Heartless—only to regain his human form at Kairi's intervention.

After another series of trials involving Disney characters and more of the Heartless creatures, Sora finally confronts Riku—whom he literally beats some sense into. At the end of the first game, trapped in the dark and featureless space between worlds, Sora and Riku seal a door leading to the darkest parts of our universe. Kairi is returned to the islands they call home, Riku is locked away in the impenetrable and dangerous darkness, and Sora is again set adrift with Donald and Goofy by his side, and resumes his search through many more worlds for a way to reunite his friends.

Mechanically, *Kingdom Hearts* is your standard Japanese role-playing game, but with real-time action combat instead of the turn-based combat of most Final Fantasy games. As Sora, you use a silly spaceship called

a Gummi Ship to fly from world to world. There you walk around the landscapes of these different worlds, exploring for clues and interesting items while solving various fetch and escort quests for its inhabitants. Everyone in the worlds of Kingdom Hearts—whether they are from *Beauty and the Beast*'s Hollow Bastion, *Aladdin*'s Agrabah, or *Tarzan*'s Deep Jungle—seems to have problems they are incapable of solving. And that's where Sora and his magical Keyblade come in, using brute force and fearless optimism to save the day again and again. Once these smaller quests have been solved, Sora must face a final boss—or series of bosses—which are often challenging, multi-segmented fights that require careful strategy to complete. Once a world has been "beaten," with all bosses defeated and quests completed, Sora can then move on to the next world. And each world that is beaten brings him closer to the final confrontation with *Kingdom Hearts*'s big bad, a mad scientist known as Ansem.

The first *Kingdom Hearts* ends with Ansem *mostly* defeated, but it won't be until several games later that we learn of Ansem's true nature. Ansem is the ghostly spirit of a (kind of) living man called Xemnas, and should Xemnas and Ansem reunite to form one being they will revert to their true form—that of a very cranky man called Xehanort, who is the ultimate big bad of the entire series. Kingdom Hearts deals in some shady and

nonsensical methods of body-snatching and separating people into multiple bodies with similar personalities but different powers.

In 2004, Square Enix published *Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories* for the Game Boy Advance. The real-time combat system was replaced with a card battling system in which players built a deck of cards to queue up attacks on the battlefield. The narrative of the game is a little less complex than that of the first *Kingdom Hearts*: Sora and Riku—unaware of each other's presence—fight their way through a building called Castle Oblivion, taking down Heartless and encountering the members of the mysterious and enigmatic Organization XIII for the first time. Organization XIII's motives are unclear, but they both help and hinder the two boys at every turn, as Sora and Riku struggle to make sense of the situation. At the end of *Chain of Memories*, Sora is put into a long sleep to recover a part of him that is lost— though what that is we don't learn until *Kingdom Hearts II*, published in 2005.

Kingdom Hearts II opens on Roxas, a young boy with a connection to Sora—he is, in fact, the piece of Sora that is missing. We find out he is actually Sora's Nobody—a new being born from Sora's heart having left his body in the original *Kingdom Hearts*. This is one of the series's weirder rules of body-and-soul physics, where spirits can swap bodies or co-reside in a single

body with little fuss—so technically Roxas *is* Sora but doesn't know it yet. Roxas eventually merges once again with Sora, and with Donald and Goofy at his side, Sora sets out once more to find Riku and Kairi. At every turn Sora runs up against members of Organization XIII, which turns out to be a group of Nobodies, beings born when their bodies have become separated from their hearts). Their leader, Xemnas, wants to summon Kingdom Hearts—a mysterious untouchable realm that grants knowledge and power—by stealing and collecting the hearts of innocents. It's up to Sora and his friends to stop Xemnas, taking down the rest of Organization XIII along the way.

Got it memorized? All of it?

Much is either unexplained or inexplicable in the Kingdom Hearts games, but this isn't a design flaw as much as it is the intention of series creator Tetsuya Nomura. In an interview published in the *Kingdom Hearts II Ultimania* strategy guide, Nomura explains that he wanted parts of his series to be vague, to present opportunities for fans to discuss and speculate.

"When we were kids, we always thought that, 'there's not enough given to imagine from this,' when reading manga, watching anime, or playing games," he writes in *Ultimania*, noting how media can often be too descriptive, spoiling any room for speculation by overtly spelling out every little twist and detail for its

audience. "And I thought that was strange. Whether it's game, anime, or manga, there should be a place where you can speculate things. I feel that way, so I wanted to make a game that gives space for your imagination. That's why I don't like revealing everything and saying, 'This is the answer.' Just like when I was a kid, I want to make something that allows people to let loose their imagination."

For Nomura's team, the story comes before everything else. In a July 2011 interview with Japanese magazine *Famitsu*, Nomura stated that he intentionally tries to make the plot unpredictable. "While I'm writing out the plot, if things seem that you can predict the outcome on your own, then I think of a different, unexpected development," he said.

The intentional vagueness of some plot twists is also because Nomura writes the whole story himself, only giving staff enough information to flesh out individual scenarios. "I ask the staff to flesh out things for the scenarios, [and] even with that I make the final supervisions," he said. "Since I'm the only one who knows the whole story and the developments that take place afterward, I have a hard time figuring out how much to tell the staff about."

As the Kingdom Hearts series continues and its timeline has grown increasingly complicated, so have its naming conventions. The latest release as of this

writing—an HD compilation of the two latest Kingdom Hearts games and one CGI movie summarizing a third—is entitled *Kingdom Hearts HD 2.8 Final Chapter Prologue*. The newest of the individual games in the collection is called *Kingdom Hearts 0.2: Birth by Sleep - A Fragmentary Passage*. Not only do the names get more convoluted, but they begin to sound less like games and more like software updates. The extended Kingdom Hearts universe can feel like a lot, especially to newcomers wondering where to begin.

But Nomura goes on to say in his interview that he was initially planning to create a simpler story. But while he was still developing the first game, Hironobu Sakaguchi—veteran game designer and the creator of the Final Fantasy franchise—told him that if he wanted to compete in the Japanese role-playing game market, he had to make something intricate.

"[He said]: 'If you don't make it more complex like with Final Fantasy, you won't be able to compete.' So accordingly, I decided to develop the story in a way that fans could imagine on their own the remaining story how they like," Nomura explained.

So most of what you see when you play a Kingdom Hearts game is Nomura's brainchild. This keeper of the keys loves leaving just enough unsaid to keep fans wildly guessing.

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My own connection to Kingdom Hearts is deep. When I was five, my little brother Raymond came into the world. He was born with achondroplasia, a form of dwarfism that nearly crippled him. My parents went through a circus of doctors, one of whom told my parents he wouldn't live to be ten years old, and many of whom told my parents nothing could be done. In response, my fearless, loving, ever-determined parents looked for other doctors, doctors who wouldn't give up on my brother. They eventually found a specialist several states away from our cozy home in the New England woods. They would be gone for long weeks at a time with little Raymond, leaving me at home with my grandparents while they carried my baby brother up and down the coast for procedures.

Raymond was a small baby—I have memories of him underfoot in the kitchen, playing on the floor with his toys or crawling into the cabinets and making little hideaways among the dry goods. He was always laughing, always babbling, in spite of the intense pain he must have been in. When he was two, they put him in a back brace to straighten out his curving spine, and he spent much of the next year on the couch as his back realigned. A few years later, he underwent several surgeries in which they put metal rods in his

legs, hoping to straighten and lengthen the bones there. He had tubes put in his ears because he had a hard time hearing. I would spread blankets on the floor and line them with toys and we would roll around and play together, and while I couldn't imagine being in his shoes, because I loved this brave little baby I would have traded my life for his in a heartbeat. I couldn't find the words to express this to my parents… but I knew that I was ready to fight anyone and anything that tried to harm my baby brother.

When I was ten and Raymond was five—he was in the thick of treatments—the youngest Corriea was born. Jake was unexpected, but my parents reveled in having three kids at three different stages of life. When mom was off dealing with Raymond, I would take care of Jake. I would come home from school and she would loudly proclaim, "Who wants a baby?" And there he'd be, on my bedroom floor rolling around his blanket, or in his tiny carrier, his fat little face staring up at me with wide, curious eyes.

And when Raymond was almost ten, the struggle was suddenly over. No more surgeries—he was going to be okay. He was ready to lead a long and healthy life. He was free.

Suddenly there we were, the three of us, all five years apart, and we didn't know what to do with each other. Raymond had been in and out of our home for so long,

and it had been me and Jake most of the time. I didn't know what kind of sister to be, and Raymond didn't know what kind of brother to be. Jake was too young to even think about these things.

Then in 2002, when I was fourteen, my mother bought us a copy of *Kingdom Hearts* "because it had Disney characters on it and it looked fine," meaning that it didn't appear to have guns in it.

I booted up the game in our home's basement play-room and, after watching me play for a few hours, my brothers became curious. They asked many questions about what was happening on the screen, and to my delight and pride five-year-old Jake even asked for a turn with the controller. *Kingdom Hearts* became a daily ritual for us. Raymond was the last to get home from school, and by the time he arrived, Jake and I would already have the game ready to go.

As we played, we talked about Sora's decision to embark on the journey. We mourned his friendship with Riku and we booed Ansem's presence at every turn. We talked about what we would do in Sora's shoes—were we brave enough to take on such dastardly villains with such high stakes? And wasn't Sora just the greatest, most selfless hero ever?

When the game ended, we all cried, watching Riku shut himself behind the large white door to the dark realm and watching Sora float away into the

surrounding blackness. We talked about how the game made us realize we would always be okay if we had each other's backs. My mother remembers the three of us drifting up from the basement and sitting for a long time in my brothers' shared room, talking about the people we wanted to become and rubbing our teary eyes. And because of that experience, we are inseparable to this day.

The Kingdom Hearts series has hit me hard, pulled emotional chords I didn't know I had. This high fantasy (with techno-thriller and kiddie cartoon elements thrown in for good measure) has a place in my heart that nothing else can fill.

And while the original *Kingdom Hearts* is the game that got me and my brothers hooked, many fans (myself included) will tell you that *Kingdom Hearts II* is even better—and the best game in the series so far. The mechanics introduced in the first game have been honed and refined, making for more epic boss battles and tighter, more sweat-inducing, close-quarters fights. The worlds you visit—from movies like *Tron*, *Mulan*, and *Pirates of the Caribbean*—are cooler and better-suited for action, than, say, *Alice in Wonderland*. And after playing *Kingdom Hearts II*, the first *Kingdom Hearts* feels more like a prologue than a first chapter. Now that character introductions are out of the way, as are the most foundational details for how the game

universe works, *Kingdom Hearts II* can move smoothly forward with its story.

But there's more to these games than just a sweet story about people trying to find each other and save the world with the help of Disney characters. Let's explore the secret stuff hiding just below the surface.

SIX DAYS LATER: AN EXERCISE IN FUTILITY WITH A BOY NAMED ROXAS

THE OPENING HOURS OF *KINGDOM HEARTS II* are among the most tedious and aggravating hours in all of video game history.

I say this not because the pacing is choppy (although it is), or because the opening fails to set the stage for the rest of the game. *Kingdom Hearts II* actually does an excellent job of introducing a character and concepts that you might dismiss on first glance but that come back to bite you later on. The reason the opening is disastrous is that it is so purposefully boring that it has dissuaded many players from progressing further. It's a barrier to entry so high that it's sometimes the only memory people have of the game.

Kingdom Hearts II opens with Roxas trying to make the most of his last week of summer vacation with his three equally vapid friends. They live in a small city called

Twilight Town, a maze of brown walls and stained glass seemingly in the middle of nowhere, where it is always (surprise!) twilight. After eating entirely too much sea salt ice cream, the friends decide that a last-minute trip to the beach is in order. We are dropped into the game knowing nothing about Roxas and given no reason to care about him. Despite the novelty of seeing the world from a new character's perspective, Roxas is no match for the boisterous, hyperactive Sora.

Whenever I bring up *Kingdom Hearts II* with others, their first response is almost always about those first hours.

"I didn't get past the third day with Roxas," says one friend.

"After finishing the Roxas stuff I was just so disinterested," another tells me.

"That game is so stupid," goes the most dramatic response I got. "It made me do menial chores for the first dozen-or-whatever hours, and by the time I got to the good stuff I didn't give a shit anymore."

The effort you put into Roxas also offers little advantage in the rest of the game. Leveling up Roxas and getting to know his attacks doesn't matter—you will never use him again. You've completed little more than a glorified tutorial, and since this game is already a sequel, only newbies need a tutorial.

To many of us, the opening hours of *Kingdom Hearts II* felt at first like a personal betrayal. Here we are, primed for a sequel to *Kingdom Hearts*, and yet the first half-dozen hours are filled with shallow drama among characters we don't know or care about. There is little trace of the series's DNA in this opening, save the presence of a few Final Fantasy characters acting like cartoonish versions of themselves. Where the hell is Sora? Those first four hours—six if you're a completionist—are tiresome enough to make you put the game down and walk away.

This kind of frustration, however, doesn't seem to have been the developers' intention at all. In an interview with *Famitsu* in 2006, less than a year after the game's initial release in Japan, Tetsuya Nomura called Roxas's introduction the key to sparking emotion in players. Nomura also referred to Roxas as a main character, despite that you never control him again after the game's prologue. "Looking at people who have played the game," Nomura said, "there are many opinions saying, 'I pity him,' and, 'It was sad.' It was a very short time out of the whole game so I thought [Roxas's story] was very well-done."

Our time with Roxas often feels like a waste of our time and energy. But the developers are much too clever to give you six hours of chores with a character you have no emotional stake in and then send you on your way

without a later payoff. And it's a big enough payoff that I'm willing to forgive these painful opening hours.

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Kingdom Hearts II opens on a clear day in Twilight Town. Everything is covered in a golden wash of dusky light as you jog down alleys between flat brown buildings on your way to different quest points. Your first combat encounter is with the neighborhood bully—a two-dimensional, sassy teenaged version of *Final Fantasy VIII*'s Seifer, and the second is against a sinuous, eyeless creature called a Dusk. Both encounters end in a stalemate. The game lets you whack at your opponent for a few seconds but then pulls you out of combat before you can actually defeat them. Even in those first few minutes, *Kingdom Hearts II* lets you know loud and clear who is in control. None of your actions here actually matter. The satisfaction of first blood won't come until much later.

After all this, you're treated to a lengthy cutscene recapping the events of *Kingdom Hearts* and *Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories*—both of which *Kingdom Hearts II* heavily assumes you've played already—in which Sora first met Organization XIII and learned about Nobodies. The montage focuses on Sora's actions and is several minutes long. But it's more than just a

recap. Each time one of these montages plays, it ends with a voice stating, "Restoration at…" followed by a number percentage. At the end of *Chain of Memories*, Sora's mind is literally destroyed, and these percentages and flashbacks indicate his memory returning to him. But it's also the game's way of reminding you, "Remember this guy? Hang in there, the good stuff is coming." It begs you to stick around, to hang out with Roxas just a little bit longer while Sora gets his act together.

And so you head into day two with Roxas. This is when your friends—the guy's guy Hayner, super nerd Pence, and token girl Olette—decide to go to the beach. You have to take the train to get there, and you don't have enough money for tickets or snacks once you arrive. So you set out to complete odd jobs around town for "munny," Kingdom Hearts's in-game currency.

This worst part of *Kingdom Hearts II* is this series of part-time job quests. It's even worse than later in the game, in *The Little Mermaid*'s world of Atlantica, where there are no Heartless to fight and your sole problem is distracting Ariel from her desire to get laid by hosting a concert. It's worse even than dealing with the bullshit tasks you're assigned when you reach The Hundred Acre Wood, pulling Winnie the Pooh's dumb head out of a honey pot. The odd jobs presented to Roxas range from believable to ridiculous, and even when they

seem simple, some unforeseeable wrinkles make them unbearable.

One such job asks you to deliver letters to Twilight Town inhabitants while riding a skateboard. The less time it takes you to deliver all four letters, the more munny you'll make. What you aren't told up front is that the fourth letter must be delivered to a seagull flying in circles beneath an archway in one corner of the map. To figure this out, you need to time a jump off a nearby railing and sail through the air in the seagull's direction. Who is sending this seagull a letter? Who taught it to read? This is a Kingdom Hearts joint. No explanations necessary.

Other jobs are much more tedious and aggravating, like the one where you use a foam baseball bat—your weapon of choice before you get that sweet Keyblade— to whack a cart full of luggage up a hill. Said cart moves downhill at a crawl, but hitting it at the wrong time will cause it to slide faster. You have to knock the cart into the air and then hit it again in order to cover any significant distance with it. Why you can't just pull the cart up the hill with your bare hands is a mystery.

Another chore asks you to hang posters around town. There are designated rectangles on the walls showing where you can put these posters, and you have to put up as many as you can as quickly as you can. Sadly, slapping a poster on a wall isn't as simple as it sounds. As

Roxas approaches a point where a poster may go, he has to spin around in midair before dramatically slamming the poster in place and then falling gracefully to the ground. These animated flourishes take about two seconds to complete. Why, when time is of the essence, are we artfully pirouetting around over and over again? The action is just one more way the game reminds you that everything you are doing is an exercise in futility.

The smattering of oddball chore options feel as though developers strove to include the most tiresome, strange actions they could think of. You can pick and choose which to complete, but you have to do at least one if you want to earn munny. Juggling a single beach ball with your foam bat to entertain a crowd of people. Using the same bat to exterminate hordes of bees. Using said bat again to break apart and clear away scrap metal. You inserted a disc into your PS2 hoping to play a role-playing game, and what you found was a lesson about the meaninglessness of your existence that reminds you at every turn of the precious time you are wasting.

Mercifully, the game lets you complete each chore as many times as you want, giving you a chance to better your score and earn more munny. During my first playthrough, I knew I had to get a certain amount of munny for tickets, so I completed chores until I had that amount. This took me a little over an hour, and I was careful to make a little extra just in case something

happened along the way. The second time I played through Roxas's segments, I only completed each chore once—and when I went to meet my friends, they had magically made up the rest of the cash. No matter how much work you do, no matter how good you may get at batting away garbage or poster-slapping, it doesn't matter at all. Just like the rest of Roxas's sham of a life.

And before you can head to the beach, someone in a mysterious coat steals all your munny. Roxas's friends act like it was all his fault, and you end another day utterly defeated.

Then, at the beginning of your third day, the game makes a quick 180-degree turn from boredom to action. After Roxas and his friends debate what to do with their dwindling free time, Roxas faces off against a creepy Dusk. Then he finds himself in the Dive to the Heart, the strange dark world that Sora visits in the beginning of the first *Kingdom Hearts*. Everything around Roxas is dark, except for the raised dais on which he stands depicting a scene rendered in stained glass. The image is that of Sora, eyes closed and holding his Keyblade, surrounded by the faces of his friends—Riku, Kairi, Donald, and Goofy—with his hometown of Destiny Islands in the background. Roxas fights more Dusks across several of these colorful pillars, ending in the game's first boss battle against a giant gray eyeless creature called the Twilight Thorn.

This sudden tonal shift is artfully placed. You're not expecting it, and because you've been lulled so deeply into a state of boredom, the fight stretches your nerves tight as a bowstring. But at the end of this stressful boss fight, things once again crumble into monotony.

This is especially difficult to stomach on your first playthrough because *Kingdom Hearts II* gives you no indication that your time with Roxas is winding down, simply indicating that another day with Roxas has started. A taste of real combat against the kind of enemies Kingdom Hearts is known for has been thrown in your face and then yanked away just as quickly as you are again assigned a series of menial tasks to complete.

When you're not playing around with Roxas, these early hours of *Kingdom Hearts II* include brief cutscenes of three mysterious figures monitoring him from afar. One, wrapped head to toe in red, is simply known as DiZ. With the help of a young blonde girl named Naminé, DiZ created the Twilight Town, a computer simulation meant to keep Roxas calm, happy, or at the very least busy. This context makes Roxas easier to understand yet harder to swallow. Roxas himself is a problem for DiZ, and to prevent Roxas from taking action on his own, DiZ has brainwashed him and plugged him into his own version of the Matrix. Roxas's friends aren't real, his home isn't real, and his memories aren't real.

We begin to see the computer program tear at the seams. People freeze up and stop mid-motion, or objects and buildings exhibit odd behavior. Roxas notices these things and yet no one else around him does, a burden that causes Roxas to mentally unravel. His mental breakdowns become more violent, and he shouts his friends' names into the sky in an effort to ground himself.

Roxas, emotionally untethered, is at his low point. The game has beaten him with false imprisonment and piles of lies, while it has beaten you with menial chores and unchallenging fights with foam bats.

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On the fourth day, Roxas takes part in a swordsmanship tournament that has no purpose other than to give Roxas an external conflict to match his internal one. This tournament is literally called The Struggle. In the tournament, participants wield those same foam baseball bats and use them to beat bubbles out of one another. Opponents must collect each other's bubbles while holding onto their own, and the one who retains the most at the end of each timed round advances to the next.

The biggest problem Roxas has during The Struggle isn't his quest for first place. It's the tension between

him and his friend Hayner, who feels that Roxas has been a bad friend. Roxas didn't even remember that he'd promised to enter The Struggle with Hayner until the day before, when Roxas suggested they try again to go the beach the following day. Hayner takes this slight very personally, and during The Struggle remains overdramatically frigid towards Roxas.

Hayner is easily beaten, but the next opponent, Vivi—the brooding little black mage from *Final Fantasy IX*—presents more of a challenge. After Roxas beats Vivi, the action around Roxas freezes—the crowd stops mid-cheer, mouths agape, and all sound abruptly cuts away. Roxas is left in the ring, wildly spinning around trying to discern what's wrong. And then you have to fight Axel.

We'll encounter Axel again, but for now we are meant to see him only as that charismatic guy following us around. He chides Roxas, asking him if he remembers anything—about what exactly, neither Roxas nor we know. Axel acts as though he's known Roxas for a long time, addressing him in the cheeky way that only a close friend whom you allow to make fun of you can. He doesn't give Roxas a chance to explain and Axel whips out his weapons—dual chakrams ringed in fire—before Roxas finally breaks.

"What's going on?" he shouts.

A beat later, the Keyblade appears in Axel's hand, and Axel says, "Number thirteen. Roxas. The Keyblade's chosen one."

You earn nothing for defeating Axel in combat. This is the first time Roxas faces a piece of reality, a connection to his true identity. But he does not choose to face it, he's forced to—and initially tries to deny it by throwing away his Keyblade.

Axel leaves, the world unfreezes, and The Struggle again proceeds as normal. Roxas wins the tournament, collects his trophy, and moves on.

At this point, we are led to believe that Roxas is a VIP in the Kingdom Hearts universe. An individual so powerful, so dangerous, perhaps, that he has to be trapped in perpetual distraction by a computer simulation. Is he the new Keyblade wielder now that Sora is out of commission? Or will he work alongside Sora once he returns? Roxas meanwhile assumes that these weird time distortions are hallucinations, and attempts to carry on as normal with his friends. You'd be forgiven for thinking this is when *Kingdom Hearts II* finally gets down to business, when we finally should start to care more about Roxas and take a second stab at investing ourselves in his fate.

But it's not. In a sadistically timed "gotcha" moment, *Kingdom Hearts II* goes right back to making you do menial tasks. This time, on day five, it's to search out the

"Seven Wonders of Twilight Town." Using a rudimentary map that barely tells you if you're going down the right street, you must seek out seven places within the city that features ghosts, anomalies, or other weird happenings. These include balls flying out a solid wall, dozens of Vivi doppelgangers crawling in the sewers, a shadowy Roxas clone hiding behind a waterfall, and a bag of garbage that moves around on a hilltop. As Roxas encounters each one, a short minigame triggers, after which you, the player, come to realize these "anomalies" are actually DiZ's simulation breaking down. The last of these encounters, in which you ride the bouncing trash bag like a bucking bronco, just ends with you discovering there was a dog in it. Odd.

Sending us back to tedious tasks undoes the momentum of the Axel encounter. Day five is when the wait becomes uncomfortable, as the game further drags out our time with Roxas. It's apparently important that we spend enough time with Roxas to learn his complexities, but in five in-game days we've learned little other than that he's not who he thinks he is and that he's possibly dangerous. But we don't learn any of this by delivering letters to seagulls or riding hopping trash bags. All we have to operate on that is the fact that he's a Keyblade wielder— nothing else matters. We are supposed to appreciate his love for his friends and his peaceful life, but in the time we've spent with him, the

game's mundane padding actually gets in the way of our caring about him.

On day six, the simulation continues to crumble as Roxas further questions if something is wrong with him. He fights off more Dusks and other similarly creepy enemies, and again faces Axel. This time, Axel asks Roxas if he remembers who he is and what his mission is. Roxas at first fakes remembering Axel and their relationship, but a slip of the tongue reveals his charade.

Axel is someone who has answers, but Roxas doesn't want to deal with him. The familiarity with which Axel addresses Roxas pushes Roxas away. And because Axel isn't the validation Roxas wants, Roxas runs away from him—the same way we tend to shy away from the people who say what we don't want to hear. Axel offers the truth Roxas craves, but the truth in this case is not comforting. And comfort is what Roxas seeks, as he again shouts the names of his three friends to ground himself—though his loud attempts to return to normalcy come off as melodrama. Axel will continue to play the part of Roxas's external validation throughout *Kingdom Hearts II*, a role he will also play later for Sora.

After the second encounter with Axel, Roxas is summoned to the Old Mansion hidden away behind the town. It is here that we have our first meaningful encounter with DiZ's associate Naminé—or with any

woman in the game at all, frankly—and she reveals that she is also kept under lock and key by DiZ and that she has summoned Roxas to her side. Both Naminé and Roxas are being confined by someone who wants to control their power.

Inside the mansion, Roxas finally remembers who he is, or was: a member of Organization XIII—a "bad group," he calls it. But Naminé reveals the situation to be perhaps not as black and white as that. She also says that Roxas is a Nobody, the word for a being that is only "half a person." We later learn that Naminé is a Nobody herself, a haunting copy of Sora and Riku's lost friend Kairi.

Roxas, who now recognizes himself as part of a villainous group, is quick to condemn himself but never asks Naminé whether she and DiZ are good or bad. Not that he'd get an easy answer. The two of them straddle a gray line, as they act in both self-interest and for the sake of others. DiZ seeks to end Organization XIII while Naminé seems to be pushing Roxas to question his Nobody status.

"I've been running away from the question I really want to ask," Roxas tells Naminé. "What's going to happen to me now?"

Roxas has been running from his future because he doesn't want his past. But would he really be happy

living a lie, in a computer simulation, with fake friends and fake home and no real, meaningful relationships?

"Just tell me that," Roxas pleads. "Nothing else matters anymore."

All this heaviness after half a dozen of hours of menial chores—again, the tone turns on a dime in an intentional emotional shakeup. As Roxas begins to wake up to his past, so too does our gameplay experience. *Pay attention*, the tonal shift seems to say. *Here comes the juicy stuff. We're finally going to show you why we made you do chores for six hours.*

After DiZ and his mysterious assistant—who we later learn is Riku—show up and whisk away Naminé, you learn that Roxas will eventually be able to become a whole person. You can continue to explore the Mansion as Roxas, fighting Dusks and examining Naminé's sketches—most of which show Sora, Donald, and Goofy or environments from the first *Kingdom Hearts*. You eventually make your way down to the basement, where you are once again confronted by Axel.

This time, Roxas is more aware of his identity. Through his conversations with Naminé and his slowly returning memories, Roxas comes to understand that he is a Nobody. More specifically, he is Sora's Nobody, a part of Sora's being that was never supposed to exist in the first place and who must return to Sora's body in order for Sora to wake up.

Roxas acknowledges that he recognizes Axel only to be quickly shut down. It's too late to reconcile, too late for Roxas to return to Organization XIII and pretend he never left, Axel says. For Axel, this is a moment when external validation can't help him—Roxas finally knows, but still doesn't understand.

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After defeating Axel one more time, Roxas makes his way to the depths of the mansion. He finds Goofy, Donald, and finally Sora in suspended animation. In front of the pod containing Sora, Roxas learns from a brief conversation with a digital projection of DiZ that Roxas is a Nobody who "resides in darkness" and cannot move freely about "the realms of light." A being that cannot operate in the light is useless to DiZ. DiZ needs a full-fledged human being (as opposed to a Nobody) to fight off Organization XIII for him.

But Roxas does not want to give up his independent physical and mental existence. Roxas has become progressively more violent and angsty throughout these past several days, and by the time he gets to Sora, he's railing against his fate. Screaming and swinging his Keyblade, he lashes out at DiZ. He proclaims that his heart is his own, and he won't go quietly into that good night, and demonstrates a level of genuine emotion not

yet seen in the game. Roxas's burst of anger is *Kingdom Hearts II*'s first big emotional moment, and it comes just as we are saying goodbye to this poor soul we've been following around for hours.

But as Sora's pod opens, and Roxas gets a look at his face, he resigns himself to his fate: He must give up his physical autonomy and rejoin Sora in his body. It isn't death in the physical sense, but it does mean that Roxas will cease to exist as a separate entity.

And then the title screen finally appears. When the cutscenes finishes, we are in control of Sora. Finally. The real game, the thing we came here for, has actually begun.

Why spend so much time building up Roxas with mundane nonsense only to tear him down and fling him away to make room for Sora? As Roxas makes his journey through the Old Mansion on the final day, he is repeatedly told how meaningless his existence is. Naminé tells him he wasn't supposed to exist. DiZ addresses him as a being less than human and tells him he's worthless. All the agency we built up with running errands and fighting off enemies is ripped away as we are told that Roxas has none. So why spend so much time in a world that isn't real?

Because the mundane things don't matter in the grand scheme of things, and that's what *Kingdom Hearts II* wants you to know. It's a long, boring lesson in futility. You do stupid chores to earn money, only to have that

money stolen. You make decisions to do right by your friends, but it turns out your friends aren't real. They don't like you for you—they like you because they are programmed that way. And you can run from the truth, but someday it will catch up and smack you to the curb.

We spend six in-game days with Roxas because we, the players, are supposed to feel helpless and small. I believe this feeling of helplessness was the developers' goal. In several interviews, Nomura stated that in the absence of Sora, and as the first great emotional touchpoint for *Kingdom Hearts II,* Roxas had to be tragic enough for players to latch onto and commit to the rest of the game.

It was all a slog through tedium for the grand reward of a slap in the face. And this hours-long drag through such uninteresting gameplay was designed to frustrate us, to turn us off, to exasperate us. When we are at our most annoyed, it hands us the moral and kicks into gear. It's jarring, and a little sad, and *Kingdom Hearts II* gives you little time to let the weight of Roxas's sorrowful situation sink in before Sora, Donald, and Goofy are all dogpiling on one another and giggling.

Was this exercise in boredom useful? Is the slog through Roxas's world worth it? I have two different answers for you.

Yes, in that it was the best (and perhaps most efficient) way for you, as a player, to spend time with Roxas.

Simply jumping into the game with Sora and learning about Roxas from flashbacks would erase the sting of Roxas's sacrifice. The kicker here is that even though Roxas is a Nobody, he does have free will—and he uses it to essentially nullify himself, to give up the right to make his own choices and exist as a fully independent being by merging himself with Sora. A simple cutscene wouldn't be enough to convey this, either. We have to exist alongside Roxas, to go through boring daily life with him to understand him and see him as a person before his humanity is unceremoniously stripped away.

Otherwise, no. This opening was a waste of time because the full weight of Roxas's existence isn't even fully explored until another, later game. *Kingdom Hearts: 358/2 Days*—published for Nintendo DS in 2009—is the fifth Kingdom Hearts game and is set chronologically at the same time as *Chain of Memories*, before the events of *Kingdom Hearts II*. So *358/2 Days* occurs between *Kingdom Hearts I* and *II*. It delves into the lives of Roxas and Axel, and offers more information on Organization XIII and Roxas's daily life there—something that honestly would have been helpful to know during Roxas's struggle in *Kingdom Hearts II*. But we don't get this information until far too late, in a game that players might not even play after their frustrations with this one. I argue that it would have been better

to have it sooner rather than later, given the emotional weight it adds to Roxas's tale.

The bottom line is that despite the developers' best intentions, this part of the game is simply not good. The major plot points are mundane, the gameplay is unimaginative, and Roxas's story—though key to the *Kingdom Hearts II* narrative and that of the series at large—could have been told in two hours, not eight. As players, our time with Roxas wasn't worth it. We leave him feeling frustrated, maybe angry, and either ready to start *Kingdom Hearts II*'s real plot or ready to abandon it entirely.

But it's precisely when you care the least that *Kingdom Hearts II* tries to make you care the most—though success here varies depending on the person playing. It's a lengthy lesson about the cost of fooling yourself. Your time with Roxas is abusive, an attempt to thrust empathy upon you with little context, only to reveal abruptly that none of it meant anything anyway—until it does later, in an unexpected way. For better or worse, this is one of best-remembered parts of this game. It's the story of a Nobody becoming what he wanted, someone real, but at the cost of his autonomy. Like many others in the Kingdom Hearts universe do time and time again, Roxas gave up what was comfortable— his shallow facsimile of a life—for something more difficult but ultimately more rewarding.

NOBODIES AND
SOMEBODIES

THERE IS A SCENE IN *KINGDOM HEARTS II* where a group of men in hooded black coats sit on raised white thrones, each one higher than the last to indicate their hierarchical status. They are the remaining members of Organization XIII, those who were not destroyed by Sora during the events of *Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories*. They are discussing what to do with one another, specifically what to do with members gone rogue. As they argue, their voices echoing in the empty chamber, Saix—with his long powdery blue hair that's cut like a mullet on top, and an X-shaped scar covering his whole face—speaks up.

"Do you know what happens to those who lose their true purpose?" he says, his eyes glued to the floor. "They destroy themselves."

The Kingdom Hearts universe puts a lot of emphasis on people who destroy themselves. In the real world, we see people fall to addiction, greed, and self-pity. In

Kingdom Hearts, this destruction is largely referred to as "falling into darkness," abandoning the Realm of Light to serve a purpose that society thinks of as more sinister. The series is glossed with the familiar high-fantasy trope of "pure good versus pure evil," where the sinister and the saintly are constantly at war over the balance of their forces in the universe.

One of *Kingdom Hearts II*'s great contributions to the series is its exploration of the Nobodies and Organization XIII. Roxas encounters the first enemy Nobodies and learns that he himself is one as well during your six-day stay in Twilight Town in the game's opening hours, and a dozen different kinds are introduced later. Similar to the antagonists of the previous *Kingdom Hearts*, the Heartless, Nobodies attack anyone near them and do not speak. The only exceptions to this rule are the members of Organization XIII, a group of Nobodies who have retained full human forms, who communicate as normal humans and act on their own.

Both Heartless and Nobodies are born from the destruction of a person, a literal ripping in half of a sentient being. Only instead of dying, your personality is split into pieces. When a person's heart falls to darkness—that is, when the person gives into the compulsion to do bad—the heart separates from their body and becomes a Heartless. This new being takes on a literally dark form, usually with glowing beady

eyes. The stronger the heart, the more monstrous the Heartless's form will be. Heartless can take on the forms of massive beasts and twisted, possessed versions of objects like toys and even mushrooms. The mindless Heartless act on instinct alone, forever seeking out new hearts to breed more Heartless.

When a person's heart becomes a Heartless, they leave behind a body. If a person's will is weak, the fate of the body is unknown—Kingdom Hearts lore dictates that the body waits in stasis somewhere, beyond the Realms of Light and Darkness. If the person's will is strong, however, their remaining body and soul will become a Nobody.

The use of the term "Nobody" to describe a being—good or bad—without a heart is an intentional choice. (The term "Nobody" in English is used in both the original Japanese and English versions. Also be careful here: a Nobody is a being without a heart, while a Heartless is actually the deformed monster born from a standalone heart that's been separate from its host. Weird!) As Saix's comment about losing yourself if you lose sight of your goals reminds us, aspirations and motivations are a large part of what makes us who we are as a person. All of that comes from your metaphysical heart, and without that heart, you are nothing. Nobody. If you possess no love, the game implies, you're worthless.

The stronger a person's will, the more humanoid the Nobody's form will be. Dusks and Samurais, two types of Nobodies, are bipedal and have distinct limbs. Others like the Creeper seem to have legs and feet at least, but upon hitting them they crumple, dragging their useless bodies on the floor behind them as they crawl around. These different forms are all creepy, and some of the more unsettling Nobodies are ones with only a few vague humanoid characteristics. All members of Organization XIII, as well as Naminé, are special Nobodies with strong wills. Presumably their hearts are off somewhere in the form of Heartless when we meet them in *Kingdom Hearts II*.

After being separated into a Heartless and Nobody, there is only one clear way to become fully human again: Destroy the Heartless first, and then the Nobody. This order is a not-so-subtle nod to Kingdom Hearts's repeated emphasis on prioritizing the heart and emotion over rationality and self-preservation. The heart must be dealt with before the rest can follow. If a heart in a Heartless is destroyed first, a Nobody can continue on just fine, as its heart will eventually return to it. But if a Nobody is destroyed before their Heartless component, they're gone for good.

Nomura discusses the mechanics of Nobodies in another interview printed in *Director's Secret Report XIII*, a thirteen-part interview printed and packaged with a

limited edition of *Kingdom Hearts II* in Japan. "When a Heartless is defeated, essentially, the owner of that heart returns to life somewhere in the Realm [of Light or Darkness] with the body that had once disappeared," he says. However, in the rare case in which a body changes into a Nobody without the vessel it ought to return to, the heart will go into a suspended state.

"When a Nobody is defeated, it's a little complicated," Nomura continues. "If the heart has been released they will return to their original form as mentioned above, but if the heart is still dispossessed by a Heartless, the Nobody will be swallowed by darkness. If their heart, wherever it is in the realm, could be taken back perhaps they could return to their original human form."

You have Nomura to thank for this slightly insane set of body politics, and no one will chastise you if you're confused at this point. The rules of how and why Nobodies exist are one of those pieces of lore that drag Kingdom Hearts into absurdist territory. It's a long and convoluted technical explanation that creates loopholes for body snatching, possession, and weird ghostly beings with teleportation abilities. As if mashing up Mickey Mouse with Sephiroth wasn't crazy enough.

What is most compelling about the heart and body separation is that once the pieces have been separated, the link between them is severed and there is no way

for them to find each other. They also do not seek each other out. A body is literally lost without its heart.

Self-loathing plays a major role in the mission of Organization XIII. A group of people who no longer have their own hearts, they struggle to aid their leader Xemnas in finding new ones by summoning the legendary Kingdom Hearts. Though what Kingdom Hearts itself is made of and why it exists remains unknown to them, they hope it will give them brand new hearts that will make them whole people. What they don't know is that Xemnas is lying to them about this, and that no new heart can restore them to the person they once were.

They can, however, return to the person they were through their behavior. As Axel grows warmer towards Roxas, he is exhibiting emotions that are not forced or fake—and is thus "growing a new heart," or rather allowing himself to show emotions. So while a Nobody can't become someone else, they can regain their sense of self.

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Organization XIII was started by a young man (secretly a Nobody) by the name of Xehanort, who was experimenting with forcefully removing people's hearts. Xehanort studied under the scientist Ansem the Wise,

learning through him the sorcery required to separate people from their hearts.

Xehanort's state of being is the most convoluted piece of lore in the entire Kingdom Hearts franchise, and players don't even learn about it until *Kingdom Hearts: Birth by Sleep*, the sixth game in the series. Nowhere in *Kingdom Hearts II*, or anywhere before *Birth by Sleep*, is his situation explained. Xehanort's physical being is the spirit of an old and powerful man possessing the body of Terra, a young man who was studying to be a Keyblade Master (and not to be confused with the female Terra of *Final Fantasy VI*). This is the body-snatching portion of Kingdom Hearts canon, in which vengeful spirits can take hold of another's body and then pretty much do whatever they want with it.

As Nomura writes in *Director's Secret Report XIII*: "The ultimate goal of the Organization was to obtain a Kingdom Hearts [the physical entity] of the hearts of people [read: composed of hearts stolen from people] and become complete beings, and because Nobodies were a new kind of being beyond all expectations, said to be 'nonexistent beings,' the lack of background knowledge made it necessary for them to collect information relating to their own condition."

Xehanort recruited six others to experiment with him. When Ansem the Wise saw the danger in the research they were conducting, he abandoned them. Xehanort

continued to experiment with his five followers and recording his findings under Ansem the Wise's name. He eventually discovered the nature of the Heartless and opened an ethereal door, breaking down the barriers between the Realm of Darkness and the Realm of Light. Shortly after this, King Mickey arrived—and the presence of this tiny ruler snapped something in Xehanort. He abandoned his body, separating into the Heartless Ansem, Seeker of Darkness, and the Nobody Xemnas. According to Nomura, the formation of Organization XIII proper began at this time, when the remaining five disciplines willingly abandoned their hearts to follow Xemnas.

The origins of the rest of the recruits are equally tragic. Two teenagers break into Ansem the Wise's laboratory as Xehanort is conducting his experiments, and the twisted scientist removes their hearts—creating Axel and Saix. The remaining four—Marluxia, Luxord, Demyx, and Larxene, the Organization's only female member—have unknown origins, but it's safe to assume that they were created in similar, unwilling ways. The final member, Roxas, was created when Sora willingly used his Keyblade to remove his and Kairi's hearts from Sora's body. This untimely separation from their hearts explains the desperation behind the group's quest to obtain new ones and become complete humans once more.

Organization XIII is so committed to the idea that they are not whole people, they even change their names to reflect it. Each member scrambles the letters of their true name and then adds an X. So from the name Braig, we get Xigbar. From Lea, Axel, and so on. In Latin, the word "ex" means "out of," so for Nobodies the X signifies that they are out of their true forms, "out of" heart. An X is also used as a strikethrough, so the Organization members are literally "crossing out" their former names and selves. An X can also signify the presence of something unknown, like the "X-factor," or in simple algebra when we solve for the unknown "x." A Nobody is a resident of the unknown, born somewhere between the Realms of Light and Darkness, and banished from both.

While recruiting his disciples for Organization XIII, Xehanort explains that Nobodies are sub-human: morally empty clean slates. Despite the group's seemingly neutral goal of reclaiming their hearts, their assistance in Xemnas's plan to build an artificial Kingdom Hearts isn't benign. To summon the realm of Kingdom Hearts, the Organization must gather millions upon millions of stolen hearts and place them together. Gathering hearts will help manifest a new Kingdom Hearts, though what it can do to replace their hearts, they don't know. Xemnas knows that Kingdom Hearts is the key to opening doors to the unknown—which is his ultimate

motive—but the other members aren't all clued in to this. They only know what they have been told, and so they blindly follow Xemnas.

While Sora would probably tell you that Organization XIII is an evil lot, a few words from Naminé at the beginning of *Kingdom Hearts II* teach us to tread carefully with our presumptions. Naminé explains to Roxas that Nobodies like the two of them are "only half a person," and that emptiness and loss of self is what drives them to seek out new hearts. "Bad or good, I don't know," she says of the organization. "They're a group of incomplete people who wish to be whole. To that end, they're desperately searching for something."

No human wants to feel empty or incomplete, and if you look at things from Naminé's standpoint, Organization XIII doesn't seem so horrible. They are more lost than evil. They are told their hearts are gone—all the while unaware that they can grow new ones through allowing themselves to show emotion—and so they behave in an empty manner, following Xemnas and never trusting the emotions they do feel. Demyx teasing Sora, Xigbar joking with him, even Axel's flirtatious nature—the Nobodies assume that all of these emotions are fake, that the Nobodies are merely acting. But we know, as players, that this can't be true.

As we see time and again, Nobodies are more than capable of emotion—and each Nobody's emotional

range is different from the others. Xigbar—called Braig before he lost his heart and joined the Organization—is snarky and aggressive. He is chatty when he encounters our heroes, and makes no effort to hide how strong his alliance is with Xehanort. When he first meets Sora, he taunts him with the intention to make him anxious about the Organization's capabilities. He is cruel and single-minded in his mission to harvest hearts for Xemnas, and briefly appears several times in Sora's path just long enough to summon massive Nobodies to slow him down. After Sora defeats Xigbar in combat towards the end of *Kingdom Hearts II,* he asks him a question: Why does Xigbar keep calling Sora "Roxas?" We, as the player, know that Sora and Roxas are the same person—but Sora doesn't. So Xigbar's final words are as snarky as his personality: "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Axel's behavior is also not so one-dimensional. After Lea loses his heart and becomes Axel, he joins the Organization hoping to at least in some way recover his missing pieces. While with the group he meets Roxas, and the two quickly become best friends. Although in both *Chain of Memories* and *Kingdom Hearts II*, Axel behaves selflessly on many occasions to save Roxas and Sora, we can't say he is operating for the greater good. We already know his behavior is not altruistic—he is saving these boys because Roxas is his best friend, and Roxas is part of Sora.

It appears that being a Nobody is mostly a state of mind.

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The Nobody who most proves his worth despite his lack of a heart is Roxas. After being deemed dangerous and trapped in a simulation to cage him, he develops his own personality—albeit a boring one—and his own emotional attachments. His time spent in the fake Twilight Town is very real, and the emotional outbursts Roxas has upon learning his true nature and fate he must face are also real. If Roxas was as damaged as Xemnas would have us believe, Roxas should not have been able to interact with his digital "friends" the way he did, or become upset at learning the truth about his simulated life. After merging with Sora, as Sora bids goodbye to the inhabitants of the real Twilight Town on which the digital Twilight Town was based, a tear slides down his cheek that he can't explain—that's Roxas, inside of him, crying at leaving the people he thought were his friends. But a Nobody shouldn't be crying, right?

Surprise, this is another secret function of your lengthy, tedious time with Roxas. Once we know he's a Nobody, and Organization XIII tells us Nobodies can't feel emotion, we should immediately be thinking about *Kingdom Hearts II*'s opening hours. "But Nobodies *can*

feel emotions!" we should immediately be thinking. "But Nobodies *can* have hearts!"

Roxas should be the poster child for Nobodies with emotions. But if you spent your time with him annoyed, then this may not be your first thought once you begin to unravel the mystery of the Nobodies. And that's kind of what makes that whole segment with Roxas more beautiful, more powerful: You may have put these opening hours out of your mind so completely that this revelation that Nobodies aren't empty shells really sneaks up on you.

Xemnas claims that the Nobodies have no choice but to destroy worlds and capture hearts in order to regain their sense of self. Before his final confrontation with Sora and Riku, Xemnas monologues at length about the purpose behind his destructive actions.

"You accept darkness, yet choose to live in the light," he says. "So why is it that you loathe us who teeter on the edge of nothing? We who were turned away by both light and dark—never given a choice?"

Nobodies, existing in the gray area between darkness and light, are never given the opportunity to choose an affiliation. Yet here is Xemnas, clearly deciding to walk the path of darkness. Riku responds that they hate Xemnas because he has chosen to "mess up our worlds," throwing the universe into chaos and harming everyone in the way of his goal. Xemnas's response is chilling.

"That may be... however, what other choice might we have had?"

The only other choice for a Nobody is to accept his outcast nature and live the rest of his days waiting to be destroyed, only to vanish into nothingness. This is how Organization XIII's mission boils down into the saddest situation in *Kingdom Hearts II*: If they do not join with their old hearts or grow a new one, they physically cease to exist. Their very existence is a race against time. Nobodies have the potential to grow new hearts, but if they remain empty, they cease to exist.

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Without a heart, without love, without purpose and meaning in your life—you might as well be nothing, and it may compel you to do nefarious things. Being half a human being, empty but alive, is preferable to being nothing, but still the Nobodies struggle endlessly to produce their lost hearts. This, of course, is a motive in and of itself. It's an emotionally-driven motive, though the Nobodies don't treat it as such. Therefore, it's unfair for residents of the Kingdom Hearts universe to treat them as lower-caste citizens, viewing them as subhuman entities worthy of nothing.

Nobodies, the second-class citizens of the Kingdom Hearts world, are actually just normal people, neither

purely good nor purely bad. They behave like regular people with functioning emotions—or as Kingdom Hearts calls it, the metaphysical heart—so what makes them damaged? Nothing except for what they are told. Axel is told that he has no heart, and so he operates believing that—despite his growing affection for Roxas.

The Nobodies of Organization XIII operate under Xemnas's command, and when Xemnas says they are empty shells, they then believe it. Obviously Xemnas tells them to believe this so they don't regrow their hearts. That feeling of being empty—for Nobodies, literally—makes a person vulnerable to influence. Xemnas, then, is an emotionally manipulative leader who takes advantage of loneliness and lack of direction in others to bend them to his will.

The organization is a cult rioting for a second chance at life. And as Sora meets more of them and faces them in combat, as he looks into their eyes and asks them what they want out of their battle, in his infinite well of kindness, realizes these people aren't ghosts, they're just lost. The beauty of the Nobodies is that they can actually become anything they want. In a way, Nobodies are blessed with greater agency and free will than everyone else in the Kingdom Hearts universe, because they have the inner space and capability to become someone new. Maybe someone better.

Nobodies are called Nobodies because they believe themselves to be. But there is always hope. In sadness, we become Nobodies, and we feel we can only become somebodies again when that pain is mended and that void is filled. Nobodies are vulnerable somebodies, just waiting for another heart to help them remember theirs.

RIKU AND REDEMPTION, OR, WHAT DOESN'T KILL YOU

My truest friend in the world played *Kingdom Hearts* and *Kingdom Hearts II* with me, in the basement of my parents' house, on weeknights after school and into the darkest hours of night on weekends. Christilynn and I were inseparable in the little fantasy worlds we built for ourselves, and we dove into Kingdom Hearts with gusto. Riku was her favorite character, and although I never said it, she reminded me of Sora. Always happy, ready to help, taking the bad times with an unwavering smile. She was my strength on days when I couldn't find my own. She still is.

If she was Sora, then I was Riku. A little broody, wildly imaginative, prone to lots of deep thinking and conflicting emotions. I had my darkness—I was anxious, stressed easily, and have always taken on far more responsibilities that I can comfortably juggle. I

got things done, but I always had to remind myself that I volunteered for it.

Riku gets a lot of shit from fans for filling out the "broody pretty boy" trope. But there is a lot more to him beyond the emo-bangs-over-eyes look and abnormally large teenaged muscles. Riku accepts his sins and his bad decisions and turns them into a useful weapon. He is touched by the power of darkness, which can be used for evil but is not inherently so, and through his own means learns to wield that force for the side of good. And I think we can learn from him.

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The first three Kingdom Hearts games—*Kingdom Hearts*, *Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories*, and *Kingdom Hearts II*—focus on Sora, a happy kid who never crumbles under his burden of responsibility to save the universe. In fact, Sora takes on this burden entirely of his own accord. Sora smiles in the face of danger, risking life and limb to help everyone he comes across.

Most of our time with Sora is spent traipsing across various worlds inhabited by the characters of Disney films. In Port Royal, Sora and his companions act out the events of the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* film, wheedling in and out of the conflict with Captain

Barbarossa alongside Jack Sparrow. In the Pride Lands, Sora transforms into a lion to better fight the sinister lion Scar and his cackling hyena subordinates. One of the first worlds Sora encounters in *Kingdom Hearts II* is The Land of Dragons, home of the characters from the animated film *Mulan*, and without hesitation he agrees to help a disguised Mulan fit in with the rough-and-tumble troops fighting the Huns. Right of out of the gate, despite the crazy circumstances before him, Sora is the picture of pure selflessness.

But while Sora may be the protagonist of these early games, the Kingdom Hearts series is actually Riku's story as seen from the eyes of Sora. In games as early as *Chain of Memories*, players get brief moments playing from the perspective of Riku, who is most of the reason Sora is flitting between worlds in the first place. Not only is Riku the more interesting character, but many narrative signs point to him having been chosen by the Keyblade in the first place.

To explain Riku a little more clearly, we need to both back up in the Kingdom Hearts timeline and skip forward to a later game. In *Kingdom Hearts: Birth by Sleep*, a prequel to *Kingdom Hearts* initially published for PlayStation Portable in January 2010, we see Riku and Sora as children. Riku, a five-year-old with the same pensive look on his face as his older self, meets Keyblade wielder (and future vessel for the spirit of

Xehanort) Terra in his home of Destiny Islands. Terra is immediately drawn to Riku as he watches him and Sora sitting on a tree trunk, and wonders aloud if some force guided him to the islands to meet the boy.

As Terra stands on the shoreline watching the sun sink behind the endless ocean, Sora runs by the man without paying him much mind. But Riku stops and asks him if he has come "from the outside world." When Terra asks him why he's so interested in the world beyond the island, Riku tells him that he heard of a kid who left their home world to become stronger. Terra has a brief vision of a young Xehanort standing where Riku is—insinuating that Xehanort is the "kid who left"—and then an image of adult Riku takes his place. The image shifts one more time, returning to the child Riku.

"I wanna be strong one day," Riku tells Terra, eyes fixed on the horizon line. "Like that kid who left. He went to the outside world—I bet he's really strong now. I know it's out there somewhere, the strength that I need."

"Strength for what?" Terra asks, somewhat in awe at the depth of this child's determination.

Riku responds, "To protect the things that matter. You know, like my friends."

Terra kneels before the child, extends his Keyblade, and chants a few lines of ceremony that in the Kingdom

Hearts universe serve to bestow the blade's power. Riku reaches out and wraps his hand around the Keyblade's hilt—his hands are small, his fingers thinner than the hilt itself, and the whole weapon is taller than he is— and he and Terra sit in silence for a moment.

The quiet is broken as Sora calls out to Riku from the docks, and Riku—completely unaware of the burden of fate Terra has placed on his little shoulders—turns away. Terra tells him to keep his new power a secret, and when Sora begs Riku to tell him about it, Riku cheekily refuses.

Riku does not ask for the responsibility of a Keyblade outright, but when offered an opportunity to gain the strength he wants, he takes it. Not out of ambition or out of hunger, but out of selflessness.

In the first *Kingdom Hearts*, despite Riku's backstory with Terra not having been crafted yet, it's clear that Riku's desperation to leave the island and to find a bigger challenge for himself is mounting. The game opens with Sora, Riku, and their gal pal Kairi building a raft so the three of them can sail away on an adventure. As Sora, you collect food supplies and fight with Riku over whose feelings for Kairi are stronger. There's a bit of banter between them as the narrative tries and fails to set up a romantic rivalry between the two.

Riku's need to leave Destiny Islands is so great that, when the darkness comes calling, he follows without

hesitation. As Riku is swallowed by darkness, he tells a horrified Sora that this is his chance to escape and see other worlds. His desire to be strong to protect his friends has been eclipsed by his need to leave. I can sympathize: I grew up in a small town isolated from the more interesting parts of the world, and I was desperate to cut and run when I was old enough to attend college. But this is the moment Riku starts down the slippery slope to becoming one of Kingdom Hearts's secondary villains. And by now it's obvious to the player that he'll be a huge pain in your ass moving forward.

Riku, now out on his own, agrees to help the witch Maleficent of *Sleeping Beauty* fame to do terrible things. She tells him she can help him find Kairi and get stronger, and he believes her, only to fall totally to the darkness. Under her watch Riku becomes possessed by Ansem, Seeker of Darkness, the demonic spirit Sora and friends are fighting against. This Ansem, you will recall, is the Heartless of the young man, Xehanort, who split himself in a lab experiment when he extracted his own heart. This Xehanort was also not what he seems. He was actually the spirit of old Master Xehanort inside the body of Terra, the young man who granted Riku his Keyblade powers. So Ansem, in possession of Riku's body, is the ghost of a spirit who came from a body it was possessing. If this convoluted chain of body possessions sounds absurd, that's because it is.

At the end of *Kingdom Hearts*, Sora saves the day, destroys Ansem, and Riku is revived. Their reunion is brief, as Riku assists Sora and King Mickey in sealing the ethereal door that prevents the Heartless from invading worlds. Sora tries to move it himself, but Riku soon realizes that the only way to close the door is to push from one side and pull from the other. So Riku pulls, selflessly sealing himself in the realm of darkness.

Because he embraced darkness, Riku loses the ability to wield a Keyblade and the burden passes to Sora. Riku doesn't earn his Keyblade until late in *Kingdom Hearts II*, having spent four full games (*Kingdom Hearts*, *Chain of Memories*, *358/2 Days*, and most of *Kingdom Hearts II)* figuring himself out in order to do so.

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In *Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories*, Riku is still battling the influence of Ansem, who isn't quite dead. In *Chain of Memories*, players control Sora as he runs through a mysterious building in the space between worlds known as Castle Oblivion, where we meet Organization XIII and their whackadoo ambitions for the first time. Riku, too, is in the castle, and we see him on a journey parallel to Sora's, though the two never meet and Riku is careful not to run into him. While Sora is looking for answers as to why he's there, Riku is

fighting to prove that he can't be dragged down again by the darkness that once consumed him—that he's been cured.

The tragedy here is that Riku hasn't been cured—he is simply delaying the inevitable. Riku's darkness is like deep depression or crippling anxiety, an unquantifiable pain that exists within him. Riku can either fight it or embrace it, to an end only he can determine.

Riku fights to keep the pieces of Ansem from possessing him with the help of a hologram of King Mickey, who shares his light with Riku in order to strengthen him. "Light" here is also used in an intangible-yet-tangible sense—an actual lightness with an unexplainable physical power to damage and drive away a dark force.

As Riku finally feels himself awash in light, Naminé appears. Naminé—a Nobody who exists in the gray space between good and evil—fulfills the same duty for Riku as she did for Roxas: She tells him a truth he was unable or unwilling to recognize on his own. Naminé tells Riku he is incapable of failing.

"There's no power that can defeat you," she tells him. "Not the light. Not the dark. So don't run from the light—and don't fear the darkness. Because both will make you stronger."

"The darkness inside your heart—it's vast, and it's deep," she continues. "But if you can truly stare into

it and never try to look away, you won't be afraid of anything again."

In this moment, Riku accepts both the bad and the good in himself. The darkness left in Riku's heart by his stint as a villain in the first *Kingdom Hearts* can never be undone. But that doesn't mean he can't harness that pain to become stronger.

Riku spends all of *Chain of Memories* wrestling with the knowledge that something dark and dangerous lies inside him. But he also knows that because of this struggle, he can overcome both light and dark. Early in the franchise, Kingdom Hearts establishes that the powers of light and dark cannot exist without one another. They are complimentary and contrary, and bring balance to both the physical world and to people's own hearts. The idea is treated similarly to the Chinese ideas of yin and yang, with one always in the shadow of the other.

Riku learns something that is difficult for many to accept: You don't have to be perfect. You don't have to be saintly, and a few bad or selfish choices don't make you evil. You are not weak for feeling doubt or thinking dark thoughts. You are only bad if you let that darkness harm others.

At the end of *Chain of Memories*, Naminé gives Riku a way out of his struggle. She will put a lock on his heart that will seal away Ansem along with Riku's memories

of ever having had the darkness inside him. He will go back to the way he was, a boy without worry, without this other piece of him hanging over his head.

Riku refuses. And when Naminé says she hoped he would refuse, she comments that she wants him to fight that darkness because he's "the one who can."

Sora may be the one with the Keyblade, but it's Riku who has suffered, struggled, fallen, and has gotten back up, and is now on a journey to discover his potential and accept who he is. Sora, on the other hand, has remained static in demeanor and conviction up to this point. Sora is unchanging. Riku is always growing.

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When we meet up with Riku again in *Kingdom Hearts II*, he is doing exactly what he said he would do: fighting the darkness. He has let Ansem's power take over, so much so that his body has morphed into that of Ansem. Wearing Ansem's visage, Riku floats through *Kingdom Hearts II* like a ghost, assisting Sora from the sidelines while carefully hiding his identity. Riku wants to help, he just doesn't want to be found until he has sorted out his own problems.

At the beginning of the game, Riku helps DiZ and Naminé contain Roxas in his simulated prison. But once Roxas reunites with Sora and Sora is awakened,

Riku leaves without a word. He briefly visits King Mickey, and when Mickey asks Riku why he won't go to Sora, Riku openly begs the king to not reveal his whereabouts. Mickey doesn't seem to understand why Riku would not want to reunite with his friend after so long apart, but Riku is adamant. Meanwhile, Sora is madly searching for Riku. And yet Riku does not want to be seen because he cannot bear for Sora to see him the way he is.

Riku instead works behind the scenes to help his estranged friend. When Axel attempts to kidnap Kairi, Riku opens a dark portal that transports her to safety in the real Twilight Town. In *Mulan*'s Realm of Dragons, Riku appears ahead of Sora to warn the Emperor of China of the impending Heartless invasion. Because Sora does not recognize him with the black coat covering his face, the two skirmish briefly. It's only when Sora recognizes Riku's sword that Sora begins to suspect Riku's identity.

For the rest of the game, Sora hears rumors from the inhabitants of other worlds of a man in a black coat running around. This is all we hear of Riku until the climactic final encounter with the most powerful members of Organization XIII. Riku does not allow Sora to approach him again until the end of the game, when Kairi blows Riku's cover and reunites the pair just before the final battle.

Riku's path through this game is familiar to any of us who have had friends go through dark times. Riku does not want to be seen by others, so he shuts himself away, hiding himself behind a literal mask so as not to be seen while he struggles. It's always the people we love the most that we tend to push away during these times. We don't want to be seen as weak or incapable, and so we put up a steely resolve and carry on.

Much like Sora, Riku travels from world to world fighting Xemnas and Organization XIII, often trying to set things right before his friend even arrives. However, this journey is also how he stalls his reunion with Sora. As he tells Kairi when they are reunited at the end of *Kingdom Hearts II*, he didn't want Sora to see him like that, wearing the face of an enemy and not in total control of himself. Riku wants to master his powers in a way that guarantees that he will be able to protect his friends without accidentally hurting anyone.

Riku eventually earns his own Keyblade, a black and red one called Way to the Dawn. The name as well as the design—demonic bat wings and angelic wings entwine on the hilt and end of the blade—reflect Riku's nature as a being of both light and darkness. Dawn is the time of day when the dark of night rolls back to make way for the light, reflecting Riku's choice to take "the middle road" between his two extreme powers. By the end of *Kingdom Hearts II*, Riku is in perfect balance, and has

made peace with his darkness in a way that allows him to use it freely without fear. And as an amazing treat, he joins your party just long enough to assist Sora in the final series of boss battles.

Like King Mickey says before the final confrontation with Xemnas: "The world's made of light *and* darkness. You can't have one without the other, 'cause darkness is half of everything. Sorta makes ya wonder why we are scared of the dark…" It may be scary because we can't see through it and it's unpredictable, but we don't hate the darkness. And like Riku adds right after Mickey: We fear the darkness "because of who's lurking inside it."

Although we aren't playing as Riku, *Kingdom Hearts II* feels a lot more like his story than it does Sora's. Sora remains pristine and unyielding throughout his journey, learning facts but not growing. He undergoes no personal change, and is seen by all others as someone pure. After falling from grace and being possessed by Ansem, Riku struggles to come to terms with his darkness and the burden of responsibility that comes with it. Riku returns to the world not necessarily a better person, but a wiser one.

Riku, more than any other character in *Kingdom Hearts II*, inspires hope. As the final song plays, Sora and Riku wash up on the shores of Destiny Island, where all of their friends are waiting for their return. Riku and King Mickey share a hug, and for the first

time in the series we see a genuine smile on Riku's face. While Sora simply shows good deeds are good, Riku teaches us a more important lesson—that even if you commit bad deeds, there is always room to accept your faults and try to make it better.

Against impossible odds, Riku wins by accepting defeat. In ceasing his struggle against his darkness, he emerges victorious. By accepting what has broken him, his brokenness becomes his greatest strength. Riku shows how we learn from mistakes, and that failure should not be treated as the end. It's a lesson—maybe the greatest lesson—video games have always been trying to teach us: Failure is how we learn.

GONE GIRL

The Kingdom Hearts universe is dominated by men.

Before the release of *Kingdom Hearts: 358/2 Days* in 2009, Keyblade wielders were all men. The game introduced Xion, the first playable female protagonist in the franchise, which was seven years old and five sequels deep at the time. Towards the end of *Kingdom Hearts II*, Riku hands Kairi a Keyblade and she assists in beating back the enemy. But even then, she is only fighting for a moment. In 2010's *Birth by Sleep*, the franchise introduced Aqua, a female Keyblade Master. She and Xion are the only female heroes in the series who sees significant combat.

There are many women in the series—they're just not the heroes. Maleficent, the evil witch from *Sleeping Beauty*, is the secondary antagonist of *Kingdom Hearts* and the tertiary one of *Kingdom Hearts II*. She does not work with Ansem or Xemnas, but rather parallel to them, assisting in the spread of darkness across all worlds. We meet a dozen women from Disney's canon,

including Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid* herself Ariel, Mulan from the movie of the same name, and even actress Kiera Knightley's Elizabeth Swann from *Pirates of the Caribbean*. We even see Minnie Mouse, Mickey's queen, dutifully waiting with Donald's wife Daisy in Disney Castle as the war rages on. Women from the Final Fantasy series make many appearances as well, including a child version of Selphie and Seifer's lackey Fujin from *Final Fantasy VIII*, as well as Tifa, Aerith, and Yuffie of *Final Fantasy VII* fame—all living in Hollow Bastion. None of these women do enough to make a significant impact on the story. They are all part of Sora's back-up retinue, fighting for him but never with him on a level playing field.

In *Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories* and *358/2 Days*, we briefly meet two women who are forgotten as soon as their respective games end. *Chain of Memories* features the only true female member of Organization XIII, the flirtatious Larxene. She is killed by Sora on his journey through Castle Oblivion. In *358/2 Days*—the events of which are chronologically parallel to *Chain of Memories*—it's Xion, who, upon being defeated by Roxas, is wiped from everyone's memory as a plot device to explain why no one talks about her in chronologically later games. When the events of *Kingdom Hearts II* begin, everyone has already forgotten she ever existed.

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The only two women of any importance in *Kingdom Hearts II* are Kairi and her Nobody, Naminé. Both find themselves damseled repeatedly throughout the game, shunted from one male captor to subplot designed to get them from point A to point B with minimal attention. *Kingdom Hearts II* portrays Kairi as little more than an object, while Naminé takes on a role of a healer and guide. Both women sacrifice their own safety to help the men who need them. They can be called brave, but their deeds are in reaction to those around them.

At the end of the first *Kingdom Hearts*, Sora and Riku abandon her for adventure. She remains on Destiny Islands. Due to Naminé's tampering with memories in *Chain of Memories*, Kairi vaguely remembers who Sora is, but not his name. When she does remember his name—thanks to some fancy telepathic work from Naminé and Roxas—she writes him a message in a bottle and sends it out to sea. This happens early in *Kingdom Hearts II*, during the six in-game days you complete as Roxas.

Later, Kairi is standing on the same beach where she set her bottle free when Axel appears and says he plans to kidnap her. Riku, watching nearby from the shadows, opens a portal through which Kairi escapes to Twilight Town. She befriends Roxas's old pals and explains she is

a friend of Sora's, and they offer her shelter. Axel locates her and is successful in his second kidnapping attempt, but he is intercepted by Saix. Saix takes Kairi to The World That Never Was—Xemnas's home world—to lure in Sora.

We don't see Kairi again until we're closing in on the endgame—30 hours if you are only playing the main storyline, 40 if you're into sidequests, or upwards of 60 if you're a completionist. Naminé sneaks into Xemnas's prison in The World That Never Was and frees Kairi, reuniting her with Riku. Riku has taken on the appearance of Ansem, Seeker of Darkness, having embraced the dark power in his heart, and Kairi recognizes Riku and accepts him as he is. Riku hands Kairi a Keyblade and tells her to fight. When Kairi reveals Riku to Sora, this ends her role in the game.

Kairi changes hands five times—from the Twilight Town gang, to Axel, to Saix, to Naminé, to Riku and Sora. She is left in others' care one more time. As Sora and Riku confront Xemnas, she stays behind with Donald and Goofy. Her only onscreen appearances feature her running away or being captured, with only one brief instance of her engaging in combat, getting in a few quick hits with a Keyblade. And when Donald compliments her prowess, she responds by flipping her hair and giggling.

In the previous *Kingdom Hearts*, Kairi served as the impetus for Sora and Riku to clash. After her kidnapping, the boys bicker at every meeting over who is going to protect Kairi. Riku and Sora fight over her vigorously, and not once does anyone ask her opinion on the matter. After she is revived, she is left in Hollow Bastion while the boys go fight. *Kingdom Hearts II* sees her in an even lower status, her role as damsel already completed. Now she is moved from place to place, floating along according to no one's specific needs. She is the obligatory female companion until she suddenly needs to be the catalyst for Sora and Riku's reunion.

While Kairi is considered a main character of the Kingdom Hearts games, she is presented as more of a tertiary one. She appears in Sora and Riku's memories, yet she has no agency of her own—it's worth wondering why these two boys are fighting so hard over someone with such a watered-down personality in the first place. She's sweet and blank, devoid of any resolve we can safely call strength or bravery. Instead she follows, runs, and is held captive. Not once does she take it upon herself to do half the work of her male peers. Kairi exists to be damseled, a reward for the men in combat.

Post-*Kingdom Hearts II* games retcon her character, building her up into someone a little more important, but her lack of credentials is abundantly clear by the end of *Kingdom Hearts II*. Her role as a woman without

power, a symbol of comfort, is sealed when she speaks the game's final words, welcoming Sora back: "You're home."

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Naminé, meanwhile, has a lot more on her plate, and pursues her goals aggressively.

Naminé comes into existence when Sora stabs himself with the Keyblade in the first *Kingdom Hearts*. Since Kairi's heart was mysteriously hiding within Sora, Naminé has a deep connection to both of them. Naminé also already has more value than Kairi because of this connection. Because she was half-created by Sora, she can manipulate his memories as well as others' memories of him. She is the only Nobody with this ability, and she flexes her power freely throughout *Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories* and *Kingdom Hearts II*. She is so powerful, in fact, that she erases everyone's memories of Sora, in addition to completely dismantling and then rebuilding Sora's mind. She also tells Riku at the end of *Chain of Memories* that she can lock away the darkness in his heart—which should be no small feat, considering how powerful Ansem's presence is within Riku.

Naminé is an improvement on Kairi, the typical, tropey leading lady who fails the Bechdel Test as soon as she opens her mouth. Naminé doesn't pass the test

either, but she at least takes action of her own accord. In the same way Riku is the more complex and interesting protagonist than Sora, Naminé is the more interesting version of Kairi due to her courageous exercising of her free will.

You first meet Naminé during your six days as Roxas. She empathizes with Roxas's situation because she too is confined by people trying to control her power. Just as DiZ distracts Roxas with false memories of friendship in a simulated town, he keeps Naminé under lock and key, busily repairing Sora's memory. Naminé interrupts the simulation, freezing everything but Roxas, and introduces herself to him, dropping cryptic hints that all is not well.

It is when she lures him to the Old Mansion so she may speak with him face to face that Naminé first steps into her role as a guide and healer. She reveals Roxas's condition as a Nobody and offers him counsel, stating that Organization XIII isn't necessarily bad and preparing him for what will be his inevitable re-merging with Sora. She does this of her own volition, out of remorse for taking part in his capture.

This angers DiZ, who passes Naminé off to Riku and asks him to dispose of her. Riku refuses and instead passes her off to Axel. As with Kairi, "ownership" of Naminé rapidly changes in the first hours of *Kingdom Hearts II*. She is passively handed around by men

who have no idea what to do with her. When we see Naminé later in the game, she is not with Axel, so we can assume Axel simply let her go. This is opposite of Kairi's situation, where the men around her see value in "owning" her and therefore fight to possess her. Naminé instead is unwanted and thought unimportant, though her power has been instrumental to the plot. She is discounted by the men around her, but she chooses to value herself despite this.

There's something to be said about the Nobody—the literal counterpart—of the blandest, most uninteresting character in the series becoming the one woman who makes the most difference. Perhaps Naminé's actions in light of Kairi's lameness are a commentary on agency—that we all have it, and we just have to take a deep breath and make our choices. Neither Kairi nor Naminé ever seems to show genuine fear, but it is only Naminé who puts her desires into action. In a way, we can imagine Naminé as the woman Kairi might secretly want to be. Naminé risks her own well-being and DiZ's anger to contact Roxas in the Twilight Town simulation, and reveals to Roxas his Nobody status and his link to Sora. She speaks to him against DiZ and Riku's orders, and even as Riku pulls her away, she shouts to Roxas, comforting him and promising a better future.

Naminé's final acts of *Kingdom Hearts II*, like Kairi's, involve reunions. Naminé frees Kairi from her prison

in The World That Never Was and introduces her to Riku in Ansem's form. In doing this, however, she also participates in the repeated shuffling around of Kairi, becoming another person who is temporarily responsible for her. The great reunion of Sora and Riku in *Kingdom Hearts II* the product of two women being shuffled around.

After the events of *Kingdom Hearts II*, Naminé merges with Kairi and we do not see Naminé again, while Kairi remains a distant figure and is not present in sequels. They fulfilled their roles. They're no longer needed. For how vibrantly the game presents its male friendships, it's disappointing that *Kingdom Hearts II*'s universe is such a boy's club.

But with the release of *Birth by Sleep* and the introduction of Aqua, this changed.

Aqua is a lead character and a formidable fighter with powerful weapons and spells. When Aqua runs from world to world like Kairi and Naminé, she does so of her own free will, not under the ownership of another. She is searching to find and redeem her lost friends, Ventus and Terra, and in the end sacrifices herself to ensure their survival. Aqua is also the only woman to be dubbed a Keyblade Master.

It's odd that Kingdom Hearts has few original female characters because its source materials are rich with strong examples. Final Fantasy, with which Kingdom

Hearts is closely linked, includes 25 years of games featuring women chasing their own destinies. In *Final Fantasy X,* Yuna embarks on a pilgrimage to sacrifice her life and bring peace to her world. In *Final Fantasy VII*, Aerith also gives her life in service to the greater good. *Final Fantasy IX*'s Princess Garnet goes to war for her country, and even forgives her mother for trying to kill her in the spirit of bringing peace. Celes in *Final Fantasy VI*, following complete destruction of the planet, sweats and bleeds as she travels the globe rounding up her lost companions so they can literally kill God. There is no shortage of empowered women who find their strength in sources other than the men around them. Disney, too, is replete with strong women in films like *Mulan*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and more recently *Tangled* and *Frozen*.

It's likely that the story of Kingdom Hearts was male-centric for so long because the story Nomura is telling is that of the two boys at the game's center. That doesn't make it less disappointing, though. *Kingdom Hearts II* is a relic of its time, an era of the franchise when the cast was still relatively small and its problems not so grand. In the end, this is Sora and Riku's story and there is no room for anyone else.

BAD ROMANCES AND
RAD BROMANCES

When I played *Kingdom Hearts II* for the first time, one moment stuck with me above all else.

Before the final string of boss battles, after reuniting with Kairi—a brief hug and the murmured words "this is real"—Sora prepares to continue his trek through The World That Never Was to find Xemnas. Ansem, tall and ominous in his black coat, watches this exchange from a dozen feet away. Silently, he turns and begins to walk away, only for Kairi to run after him and demand, "Riku, don't go."

At this point in the game, the player knows that Riku has taken on the visual appearance of Ansem, the main antagonist of the first *Kingdom Hearts*. After being possessed by Ansem, Riku retained part of his darkness, and leading up to this moment has been learning how to harness that power without becoming evil. Sora spends every free moment he has in *Kingdom Hearts II* looking for Riku, inquiring with everyone he meets

about his whereabouts and lamenting his absence. Riku, meanwhile, has been dodging Sora, afraid to appear before him wearing Ansem's face.

But the moment Kairi speaks Riku's name, Sora's face twists, displaying a confusion and pain we haven't seen before. Kairi beckons Sora forward and takes his hand, placing it on Riku-Ansem's.

A slow, almost mournful song plays in the background as Sora closes his eyes, and looks past Ansem's guise to Riku, the friend he has so desperately searching for. Taking Riku's hand in both of his, Sora falls to his knees.

"It's Riku. Riku's here!" he cries, weeping and visibly shaking. "I looked for you! I looked everywhere for you!"

The scene reminds me of a moment earlier in *Kingdom Hearts II*, where Saix kidnaps Kairi. Saix calls Kairi "the fire that feeds Sora's anger," assuming that harming the girl will rankle Sora, leaving him emotionally vulnerable. This statement is wildly incorrect: Sora's fervor for Riku far outweighs his fervor for Kairi—or for anyone else in the game. Riku is Sora's fire.

Sora and Riku's reunion is the big emotional payoff of *Kingdom Hearts II*, while meeting up with Kairi doesn't even get a fraction of this attention. That's because there is no traditional romance in Kingdom Hearts. Rather, we get a picture of intimacy between two young men,

two best friends. It's exceedingly rare that any kind of media portrays non-romantic love between two boys so deeply—too often this kind of bond is dismissed as sexual or nothing at all—but Kingdom Hearts excels at painting that picture.

As Kingdom Hearts's main storywriter, Tetsuya Nomura seems keen on positive portrayals of male intimacy. He worked on the main premise of *Final Fantasy VII*, which featured a handful of close and complicated relationships between male characters. Cloud's relationships with Zack and Sephiroth—two former brothers in arms—color our experience in his shoes. In *Final Fantasy VIII*, the rivalry between Seifer and Squall is borderline flirtatious, with Seifer's antagonism towards Squall nearing obsessive. These male relationships would continue to play a role in future Final Fantasy games even without Nomura's involvement—the camaraderie between Braska, Auron, and Jecht in *Final Fantasy X*, for instance, or the budding mutual reliance and respect between Snow and Hope in *Final Fantasy XIII*.

But in *Kingdom Hearts II* we see this love in its purest form, as we watch Sora break down in relief and joy over Riku's return.

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The relationship between Sora and Riku is not the only intimate male friendship featured prominently in *Kingdom Hearts II*. There is also the bond between Axel and Roxas.

When *Kingdom Hearts II* begins, Roxas has already left Organization XIII and is trapped in DiZ's Twilight Town simulation with no memory of his status as a Nobody. Through flashbacks, we learn that Roxas had grown unhappy during his time with Organization XIII, and upon learning about his connection to Sora, decided to search for and meet him. Axel is aware of Roxas's plans to leave and does not alert the Organization to Roxas's departure—the others view his leaving as a betrayal.

Throughout *Kingdom Hearts II*, we see the same flashback a handful of times: Roxas walking away from Axel and saying, "No one would miss me."

"That's not true!" Axel shouts behind him, then drops his voice and murmurs, "I would."

After encountering a brainwashed Roxas in Twilight Town, he is saddened to hear that his friend does not remember him. He becomes increasingly upset when Roxas continues not to cooperate with him, and in Roxas's second fight with him it feels as though his anger is turned more on himself than on his former comrade. When we watch Roxas's flashbacks of Axel pleading with him not to leave the Organization, we hear the

sorrow in the latter's voice as he says he'll miss Roxas. Counter to everything the Organization has been led to believe, Roxas inspires true emotion in Axel: friendship, sorrow, understanding, compassion, love.

If Nobodies can regrow their hearts, then surely it must be love—the most powerful emotion—that jumpstarts their reconstruction. Roxas is the driving force behind Axel and influences his every decision, even when Roxas no longer exists as a separate, complete human being.

When Roxas is reabsorbed by Sora, this does not deter Axel from trying to see him again. Spurred by the desire to see his friend once more, Axel attempts to kidnap Kairi and use her to lure Sora to him. Then, so he says, he will separate Sora into a Heartless and Nobody once more, thus reincarnating Roxas and allowing him to again be his own free being. This plan goes awry, however, and Axel eventually gives up his plans to harm Sora.

Instead, Axel moves from attacking Sora to protecting him. If he can't bring Roxas back, he settles for the closest thing: standing by the human Roxas is a part of. Axel takes up this duty with a fierceness not present in the rest of his actions. While he calmly accepts responsibility for Naminé from DiZ and goes about his kidnapping business, he approaches the task of protecting Sora with fervor. He wouldn't have done

this if Roxas were not in the picture—Axel makes it clear he's not into Sora's plans or his duty to stop Xemnas from summoning Kingdom Hearts. Axel's behavior shows that he sees his self-worth only within the context of his friendship with Roxas. Without Roxas, Axel does not value himself or his own existence, as evidenced by his readiness to sacrifice himself to save Sora.

As Sora, Donald, Goofy, and Axel travel in the Corridors of Darkness—the spaces through which you move between worlds—they are attacked on their way to The World That Never Was. The number of Nobodies that descend on the group is so overwhelming that Sora can't beat them back. To save Sora and clear a path for the trio to escape, Axel uses up his life energy in one final attack that destroys all of the enemies.

Axel's final sacrifice takes place over a long cutscene in which we watch Sora kneel over Axel's prone body, trying to figure out some way to stop his destruction. With his dying breath Axel tells Sora how much Roxas meant to him. "I wanted to see Roxas," Axel rasps. "He was the only one I liked. He made me feel like I had a heart. It's kind of funny. You make me feel the same...."

We see Axel one more time in *Kingdom Hearts II*, in some sort of afterlife, or dream space, sitting on top of the Twilight Town Clock Tower with Roxas. Axel knows this is the last time he'll ever see Roxas as Roxas, and as he says goodbye he sheds a single tear. This is the only

time we see Axel cry, and the second time any of the characters original to Kingdom Hearts cry in the game.

Sora crying for Riku, Axel crying for Roxas. The boys are the only ones who cry because their vulnerability is tied up with their dependence on each other. These are the believable relationships. These are the characters whose relationships players are never supposed to doubt. The emotion is raw and crystal clear in both of these scenes. We never see this level of emotion in Sora's reunion with Kairi. It just isn't there.

Axel defies his status as a Nobody and his duty as a member of Organization XIII to ensure Roxas goes free. His new heart is born from his love for his friend, as is his determination to protect Sora. Part of what makes Roxas and Axel's relationship so beautiful is this outright rejection of their Nobody nature—they feel for each other and they let each other know it.

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Throughout most of *Kingdom Hearts II*, Sora and Riku are not as free to express their affection. Still, every interaction between Sora and Riku illustrates just how well the two know each other, and it's this instinctual knowledge of one another's behavior that keeps them dancing around each other for most of *Kingdom Hearts II.*

Which is why the game's ham-fisted implications of a romantic love triangle between Riku, Sora, and Kairi are so unconvincing. While the narrative wants you to believe these two are destined to become lovers, any implied Sora/Kairi mutual affection comes off simply as friends bound together by happy childhood memories. Riku and Sora spend all of the first *Kingdom Hearts* looking for this girl, but at the start of *Kingdom Hearts II* it's clear they are more invested in one another.

Kingdom Hearts II begins with Kairi on Destiny Islands without Sora and Riku. Despite Sora's promise during the ending events of the first Kingdom Hearts that he would find her again, he has still not returned home or even bothered to contact Kairi. Instead, his search for Riku led him to Castle Oblivion and the events of *Chain of Memories*, which resulted in Naminé dismantling his memories and wiping memories of Sora from everyone he knew. So as Kairi walks home from school with Selphie, she's nagged by memories of a missing childhood friend whose name she can't remember. Selphie prompts her, asking if she means Riku—but no, Kairi says. It's not Riku. It's someone else.

Meanwhile, that someone else is hopping from world to world looking for Riku, taking no time to stop by Destiny Islands to let Kairi know he's okay. Everywhere he stops on his journey, he asks the same question: *Has anyone seen Riku?* Why not ask for directions back home

to Kairi? Despite the game's flashbacks and shoddily shoehorned-in visions of Kairi, she's just not Sora's priority.

Sora's constant search for Riku makes it clear that this is the relationship we need to be paying attention to. If there is supposed to be romantic love between Sora and Kairi, it's not present in the writing. Their reunion is brief, and their conversation is clipped and bland. Kairi tells Sora she came looking for him because he never came home, and Sora's reaction lets us know that he knows he screwed up. Sora apologizes to Kairi, and even as she hugs him, his response to her presence is anemic compared to the complete emotional breakdown he has when Riku is revealed.

Even after Riku's abominable behavior, and even as he spends a majority of *Kingdom Hearts II* desperately avoiding Sora, his friend is still overcome to the point of tears when they meet. Sora does not rebuke Riku, he simply asks him why he has been avoiding him.

Earlier in the game, there is a scene in The Land of Dragons in which Riku appears, cloaked and hooded in the same black trench as the Organization XIII members, and corners Sora alone on a snowy mountain. Sora, mistaking Riku for one of them because of his clothing, engages him in combat. Riku uses the sword he used in the first Kingdom Hearts, a red and purple blade called Soul Eater, and Sora immediately recognizes it. After

Riku runs away, a bewildered Sora asks himself if that really was Riku, and why he would have attacked him. Despite all this, Sora is later relieved to learn that yes, Riku is in fact alive, and brushes away his transgression.

Sora is a benevolent guy throughout these games, but it's not like him to give a free pass to his opponents. But even after confirming it was Riku who attacked him, Sora seems to let it go. And despite the atrocities committed at Riku's hand in the first *Kingdom Hearts*, Sora still sets out in *Kingdom Hearts II* passionately searching for the lost Riku. He is the only ones who gets Sora's all-encompassing forgiveness.

After their tearful reunion, the pair even fight together. The final boss sequence of *Kingdom Hearts II* could have easily pitted Sora solo against Xemnas. Instead, Sora teams up with Riku, and the two pursue the villain across four separate stages. As you play, you guide the pair on a small spaceship of sorts on the heels of a massive mechanical dragon. Once the dragon is defeated, the two face off against Xemnas, who wears a suit of armor and sits on a throne, throwing buildings at them. During these segments of the fight, you execute combo attacks that see Sora and Riku team up to deal more powerful blows. In one such combo, Sora grabs chunks of a floating building while Riku surfs on these pieces and then slams them into Xemnas.

In the final stage of the battle, Sora and Riku square off against Xemnas face-to-face in a moderately small bubble of space. One of Xemnas's most common attacks involves grabbing Sora with an electrical field and holding him in place while he slowly drains the boy's health. During these segments, players are given full control over Riku as he makes his way across the battlefield to rescue his friend. "Rescue" is even the word used for the command you must input to free Sora.

It's one thing to have these boys tell each other how they feel; it's quite another to see them act it out in a climactic battle sequence. It establishes the two of them as a team for later Kingdom Hearts games such as 2012's *Kingdom Hearts: Dream Drop Distance*, which allows you to switch between Sora and Riku as you play. The team-up is also cathartic for the player. After Sora spends so much time lamenting Riku's absence and his emotional outburst when he finds him, it's poignant to watch the two of them in combat together, side by side for the first time in the game.

The team-up offers an insight into the dynamics of their friendship. Giving Riku more of the heavy lifting in their combo attacks—breaking the buildings and hurling them at Xemnas as well as having to rescue Sora from the electrical attack—sets him up as the more protective of the two. Sora is active while Riku is reactive, and in the same way he spends all of the game

trying to avoid Sora, he spends the final battle allowing Sora to set up powerful attacks for Riku to execute. And by having Sora be incapacitated and requiring rescue says something about how the developers want players to view their relationship. In the end, Sora will always need Riku. Riku's presence makes Sora more confident, makes him stronger and more sure of himself. We see more of this feeling in *Dream Drop Distance*, where Sora fails his mission and needs Riku to bail him out, but the first seeds sprout in *Kingdom Hearts II*.

Setting the boys up as partners in the final boss fight—literally your final act as a player—telegraphs to us that the game is about Sora and Riku's friendship. You can't tell either boy's story without the other. Their friendship, Sora's desire to find Riku, and Riku's desire to protect Sora by only helping him from the shadows, is what drives the story forward and what lays down the game's emotional foundation.

Following the final battle, as they sit on the edge of oblivion, Sora and Riku confess their feelings to each other. This climactic scene isn't Sora and Kairi confessing their love, nor does it involve her in any way. We see her again in the very last scene welcoming Sora back to Destiny Islands, but the sweetness of her homecoming words is outshined by this exchange between the boys on a dark beach. They've won the fight, and they don't know if they'll be able to return home. And so, in their

relief, exhaustion, and anxiety, they lean into each other for support.

While Riku and Sora are not *in* love, the boys' friendship is one of the deepest and most moving relationships of any kind that I've seen in a video game. And part of why it works is *because* it's not a romance. Without sexual tension or expressed desire of any kind, these relationships appear as the deepest forms of male intimacy: mutual dependence, connectedness, and respect.

Riku says he is jealous of Sora because he always follows his heart. Sora says he has his "share of problems too," and one of them is wanting to be more like Riku.

"Well, there is one advantage to being me," Riku teases. "Something you could never imitate." When Sora prods him what it is, Riku says, "Having you for a friend."

"Then I guess I'm okay the way I am," Sora responds. "I've got something you could never imitate too."

Kingdom Hearts II is the tale of these broken bonds becoming whole and being used as power against the creeping darkness. As Sora says in the first *Kingdom Hearts*, "My friends are my power." *Kingdom Hearts II* proves that for Sora and Riku, this will always be the case.

LONG LIVE THE KING

THERE IS NO CHARACTER MORE SPECIAL to the Walt Disney Company and its followers than Mickey Mouse. Created in 1928, Mickey is the company's mascot and the most recognizable cartoon character in the world. The three layered circles that form the silhouette of his head and ears are an unmistakable icon. He is the face of all things Disney, an everyman with many flaws and an adventurous, kind heart. It's no wonder Kingdom Hearts's creator made Mickey king of the universe.

In the Kingdom Hearts franchise, King Mickey is often referred to as "the King," despite there being plenty of royal families scattered through the Disney-themed worlds. He resides in Disney Castle with his wife, Queen Minnie, ruling wisely and benevolently over the adjacent Disney Town. It isn't explicitly stated what his domain includes, but given his prominent placement in Kingdom Hearts canon, it seems as though he is indeed ruler of all worlds. And at the first sign of disaster, he is

on the frontlines, willfully putting himself in danger to ensure the safety of his subjects.

When development began on the series, Mickey was only slated to make a cameo at the end of the first *Kingdom Hearts*. As Sora and Riku try to shut the door to the darkness and prevent more Heartless from escaping, Mickey appears wielding a Keyblade. He urges Riku and Sora to never give up hope, because where there is darkness, Sora knows "without a doubt that deep down there will always be a light!" This would have been his only appearance in the series had Disney declined to let Square Enix show him more often.

In the *Kingdom Hearts II Ultimania* guidebook, Nomura explained that many "hurdles" had to be cleared before a Kingdom Hearts sequel could be greenlit. "Like our wish to give Mickey more spotlight," he explained. "We had to wait until Disney allowed that and once it was settled, then we could finally talk about *Kingdom Hearts II*'s development."

This isn't surprising. Mickey isn't just a cuddly little mascot—he is also the face of one of the most powerful corporations in the world. The Walt Disney Company has a tentacle in all aspects of the entertainment world: TV, movies, music, radio, theme parks, and so, so much merch. Disney is in the business of making money. But looking into Mickey's cartoony little eyes, you can't help but feel like Disney truly loves its audience—loves

you. Mickey makes Disney feel sweeter, safer, and more approachable. It's hard to look at Mickey Mouse and feel anything other than trust—and for that reason alone, it makes sense for Nomura to make him the benevolent, safeguarding warrior-king of the universe.

In an interview with PlayStation.com during the 2005 Electronic Entertainment Expo, Nomura explained that Mickey's involvement in the series was never going to be as simple as a cameo, or even as a sidekick like Donald and Goofy. Mickey's status in the Disney canon, his prominence and belovedness, meant he had to be something greater.

"Obviously, King Mickey is going to be one special character," Nomura said. "Within the Disney world, he can't be treated the same as everyone else. Even though Sora travels with Donald and Goofy throughout the Kingdom Hearts universe, and they may seem special because they're simply just travelling with him, King Mickey is going to have his own obvious reason why he is here in this universe.

"So, he won't be taken the same way as Donald and Goofy, nor as the characters in the individual worlds. There's going to be some sort of special hook, not only as to how he makes his appearance, but also as to where he is positioned within the storyline."

Mickey's earliest significant involvement in the chronological events of Kingdom Hearts's canon begins

in 2010's *Kingdom Hearts: Birth by Sleep*. He is studying under Master Yen Sid—the severe, bearded sorcerer from the film *Fantasia*—in a similar manner to his tutelage in the film's "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" scene. Mickey studies to be a Keyblade Master, and eventually passes, earning his own special weapon with a silver hilt and gold blade. According to various interviews with Nomura, Mickey is also special because he can use Keyblades made in both the Realm of Light and the Realm of Darkness, giving him access to both powers similar to those of Riku—although we never see Mickey use the dark power.

In the first *Kingdom Hearts*, Mickey leaves the castle to search for the source of the Heartless, leaving a note for Donald Duck and Goofy—his court mage and chief knight, respectively—to protect whomever wields a Keyblade. During *Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories*, Mickey gives Riku advice and assistance as the boy battles the dark presence of Ansem within him.

Mickey's role as king of all is not just in name. *Kingdom Hearts II* portrays him as a warrior-ruler held in the highest respect, treating his screen time with dramatic touches. At the end of the first *Kingdom Hearts*, we see his silhouette triumphantly raise his Keyblade and exclaim that all will be well. His first appearance in *Kingdom Hearts II* is in Twilight Town, just as Sora, Donald, and Goofy are overwhelmed by

Nobodies. Mickey, hooded and cloaked in black, drops in out of nowhere, swatting away a Nobody with each hit. The music cuts out, the camera focuses on Mickey's Keyblade, and then cuts to our trio of heroes—all on the ground, mouths agape, staring at Mickey as though they've seen a ghost.

"Your Majesty…?" Donald ventures.

Mickey shushes Donald and tells the group they have to leave Twilight Town. Then Mickey runs away. Not once does Mickey show his face. And although the player knows exactly who the little hooded figure is, his hiddenness serves to shroud his appearance in mystery. It is exciting to catch a glimpse of Mickey, who has been physically absent from Sora's storyline but a benevolent force working behind the scenes to protect him.

Later in the game, we get a better glimpse at the king himself when a horde of Heartless attacks Hollow Bastion. A massive rock hurtles through the air and Goofy pushes Mickey out of the way just in time—Goofy takes the rock square in the face and falls limp. Donald and Sora shake him and shout at him, but he does not respond.

Standing several yards away, we hear Mickey ask into the silence, "Goofy?" When his friend remains motionless, the mouse tightens his hand into a shaking fist and says quietly, "They'll pay for this."

The battle music kicks in, and Mickey whips off his black coat. He wears a red and yellow one-piece jumper similar to Sora's outfit, adorned with buckles and pouches. His brow furrows into a furious V shape and his Keyblade appears before Mickey charges ahead. There's vengeance in his eyes as he runs away, and he cuts a powerful figure that overshadows his small stature with his Keyblade over his shoulder.

When Disney allowed Square Enix to throw Mickey into the heat of battle, the developer went all out. It's Mickey who uncovers the intentions of Organization XIII and who several times helps Sora in dismantling Xemnas's plans. There are also several boss battles where—in the case that Sora, Donald, and Goofy are all defeated—Mickey becomes a playable character. Even when Mickey is not on screen, his presence is a current running constantly under all events, as his continuous encouragement of Sora and friends drives them onward on their fight against Xemnas.

The King Mickey we meet in *Kingdom Hearts II* is a wise ruler unwilling to sit idly by as people suffer. As he sets out to combat evil himself, Mickey takes whatever means necessary, and tirelessly moves forward to find a way to bring Xehanort down. A king doesn't have to do any of this. No one ever says it is his duty to take all evil to task. But Mickey does, setting his actions on par with

legendary warrior-kings found in medieval and fantasy literature.

And none more than the legend of King Arthur.

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Early Welsh and Breton tales handed down through oral tradition spoke of Arthur as a peerless warrior who protected the island of Britain from invading armies and supernatural threats.

The first widely accepted written text discussing a King Arthur was Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, an imaginative work created in the late 1130s that took many creative liberties on the Arthur of oral tradition. Here, Arthur is spun as a warrior of justice, combating men and demons that threaten the well-being of Britain and its subjects. King Arthur is a force to be reckoned with, the most pious and protective of Britain's kings and a model for all heroes who came after. It wasn't until French writer Chrétien de Troyes in the twelfth century that narrative trappings like Sir Lancelot, his cuckolding, and the Holy Grail quest appeared in the King Arthur tales. Subsequent writers further adopted these newer stories until they became the fanciful staples of that century's Arthur romance genre.

The Mickey of *Kingdom Hearts II* carries on both the oral tradition of the early Arthurian warrior-king and the later tradition of some of the more outlandish stories of the Knights of the Round Table. Mickey chooses to be at the frontlines of battle rather than hand the responsibility to someone else. Like Arthur, he asks nothing of his subjects that he would not himself undertake. After all, if Sora and Riku—children at the start of the series—can take up a weapon and tackle the darkness creeping into the worlds, why can't their king?

The less obvious line from Arthur to King Mickey is that both heroes take the fight beyond their own planes of existence. For Arthur it was Annwn, the name for the Otherworld (or Underworld) in old Welsh tradition. For Mickey, this other world is both the Realm of Light and the Realm of Darkness. Mickey's power is light, frequently manifesting as a bright ball of white light on the end of his Keyblade. Mickey uses this light power to help Riku control the darkness in his heart, and to beat back the Heartless long enough to allow Sora to seal the door to darkness.

Mickey is the King of the Kingdom Hearts franchise because, as the Walt Disney Company's golden child, any other position would be beneath him. He couldn't function the same role as Donald and Goofy, trotting after Sora as dutiful companions, because Mickey is not a companion—he is a leader. It would seem strange to

have the most recognizable cartoon superstar on the planet following the orders of a boy just hitting puberty.

It makes sense that Mickey was chosen as the ruler of these worlds, rather than, say, Yen Sid or some cartoonish video game version of Walt Disney himself. Mickey, as he is incarnated in Kingdom Hearts, is in his purest form: selfless, smart, determined, powerful. Who else but Mickey could be king?

A KID'S GAME?

When I tell people how much I enjoy Kingdom Hearts, I am most commonly met with the question: "Aren't those kids' games?" There's no way an adult woman in her right mind could be invested so deeply into something as silly as a Disney game.

And yet those same people would probably agree that we are living in a golden age of entertainment that are equally moving to both kids and adults. Just look at Pixar—movies about toys coming to life, emotions controlled by tiny gremlins in your head, and sentient cars have been some of the most emotionally insightful and rich films of the past few decades. Yes, Kingdom Hearts has been marketed as Disney meets Final Fantasy, but it's not that simple.

Walt Disney Pictures is and always will be a studio built on fluffy dreams, with good feelings and positive messaging dripping from every film and cartoon. Disney's light, feel-good stories always end in a celebration of triumph for our good guys and a sound

trouncing for the bad ones. Things are a little more black and white in the Disney universe, and you can usually tell who is going to turn on whom and who is just plain old-fashioned evil.

This fluffiness is also present in Kingdom Hearts. There is a lot of empty banter between Sora, Donald, and Goofy, with a lot of silly back-and-forth and more than one over-exaggerated facial expression. Sora will often react to bad news by slumping his entire body forward, hanging his head with a loud and heavy sigh. Donald and Goofy are constantly scrambling around, behaving as the semi-incompetent sidekicks the old Mickey Mouse cartoons built them up to be. Even Mickey Mouse is his usual self, cheerful and optimistic, in the face of utter chaos.

Every Disney character you encounter behaves the same way they would in their own film or property. When you visit Port Royale, Johnny Depp's Jack Sparrow is there waiting for you, with his sass and snark cranked up to the highest level. The sentient objects like Lumiere and Cogsworth in Beast's Castle are in the throes of the same cutesy comedy they carried out in *Beauty and the Beast*. Hades of *Hercules* fame rules the Underworld with an iron fist and a smart mouth, throwing jokes and attacks alike.

Some elements of gameplay are so deeply embedded with that familiar Disney campiness that it's sometimes

hard to get out of that kid's game mentality. For example, your Gummi Ship's engineers are none other than Chip and Dale, the tireless little chipmunks. These two chirp at you as you build your ship and frequently warn about the trials you will face while flying. Your ship also looks like it was built from kids' building blocks, cobbled together with an assortment of multicolored and aesthetically mismatched cubes. This is so silly, and yet it is an accepted part of the universe—it's just hard to swallow sometimes in light of the heavier stuff.

Elements from the Final Fantasy series serve to balance this lightness with some weight, but not by much. The "darkest" use of the series's characters in *Kingdom Hearts II* is Sephiroth of *Final Fantasy VII* as an optional boss, along with a subplot about Cloud's desperate struggle to defeat him once and for all. Even this story is dripping with camp, as Cloud battles his inner demons with much verbal exposition and Tifa stamps around dramatically hoping he'll snap out of it—a hyperbolic version of how the pair behaved in the CGI film *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*, which debuted in Japan just three months prior to *Kingdom Hearts II*.

In Kingdom Hearts, Final Fantasy characters often do not carry as much weight as they do in their source material. Seifer and Squall of *Final Fantasy VIII* are both in *Kingdom Hearts II*, though they don't interact. Seifer

is a fourteen-year-old version of himself, complete with punk attitude and an ugly beanie. He is flanked by his two lackeys from *VIII*, Rajin and Fujin, both of them also young versions of their original characters. They behave like a street gang, terrorizing Roxas and his friends in Twilight Town. Seifer, like Cloud, is a version of himself on personality steroids, with his antagonistic demeanor and crudeness towards his rivals cranked up to eleven. Meanwhile Squall from *Final Fantasy VIII*—going by the name of Leon—is alternately moping and skipping around Hollow Bastion assisting with the town's rebuilding project, displaying such quick and varied mood swings it's a wonder he doesn't have whiplash.

But the collision of the Disney and Final Fantasy worlds also allows for some really cool things to happen. One great example—and one my personal favorite elements of *Kingdom Hearts II*—is the presence of *Final Fantasy X*'s Auron in the Underworld. Near the end of *Final Fantasy X*, the player learns that your best friend and mentor Auron has actually been a ghost the entire time you've known him, having been killed defending a friend a decade earlier. In *Kingdom Hearts II*, we meet Auron in the Underworld from *Hercules*, serving as an underling to the snarky Hades. Auron befriends Sora and company during their trials, offering advice and an extra sword in the heat of battle. This is such

a clever and fitting detail: Auron, who in his original game is constantly trying to atone for what he sees as his sins, ends up in the only real Hell known to the Disney cinematic universe. It's the Final Fantasy/Disney mashup at its finest.

Meanwhile, characters who are new to Kingdom Hearts are designed to look and behave more akin to Final Fantasy characters than Disney characters. Kingdom Hearts originals like Sora, Riku, and the members of Organization XIII are types of spin-off Final Fantasy characters, individuals who would be at home in a Final Fantasy game more than a Disney property. This has given Kingdom Hearts' cast a slightly more mature feel than if they had been ripped straight from the bubblegum sweetness or hyperbolic villainy that defines most major Disney characters.

But when thinking about tone, I don't think we can directly compare Kingdom Hearts to either Final Fantasy or Disney. Kingdom Hearts exists in a space in between the two, overwhelmed by neither light Disney camp nor soul-crushing Final Fantasy melodrama. Kingdom Hearts is multi-layered and messy, and different fans coming at it from either the Disney or Final Fantasy camps take away varying things from it. For some, the games offer a chance to explore the fantastical worlds of childhood favorite movies. For others, it's an unpredictable, slightly trippy RPG thrill ride.

Kingdom Hearts deals with some heavy themes, but they are all more inward-facing when compared to the tone of modern Final Fantasy titles. After the 2001 release of *Final Fantasy X*, Final Fantasy games are more high fantasy epics focused on drama and action than intense character studies (with, I feel, the exception of *Final Fantasy XV*, but that is not a story for this book). There is more moral meat in the pre-*Final Fantasy X* era of Final Fantasy, sometimes referred to as the series's golden age. Kingdom Hearts' relationship to its parent franchise is thematically closer to Final Fantasy's past than its current form.

In the original *Kingdom Hearts*, we meet characters who lose their way or lose themselves. *Kingdom Hearts II* picks up the torch and carries these themes to full term.

Final Fantasy's middle years—*Final Fantasy VII*, *VIII*, *IX*, and *X*—feature stories of the little guy fighting against a big bad and peppered with ideas about selflessness, the meaning of existence, and allowing yourself to rely on others. The games that followed are more about having a cool story: *Final Fantasy XII* riffs on the little-guys-outwitting-big-guys plot of the original Star Wars trilogy—but with chocobos. *Final Fantasy XIII* is a trilogy about a dying world with frivolous gods who enforce even more frivolous rules. Neither received acclaim and adoration on par with that of previous

entries in the series, and none are remembered as fondly or placed on such a high pedestal as *Final Fantasy VII*.

Perhaps this is why the characters of *Final Fantasy VII*—the second Final Fantasy game for which Tetsuya Nomura worked on the story—have such prominent roles in the Kingdom Hearts games. *Final Fantasy VII* has two overarching stories. In the first plot, underground fighters seek to overthrow a megacorporation that is destroying the planet to advance civilization. In the second, the alien entity Jenova controls everything behind the scenes, manipulating the life of the planet and seeking to possess and destroy all. Both plots explore a man-versus-nature theme in which ordinary people must fight against something organic, something present in the very ground they tread upon. By the end of the game, protagonist Cloud and antagonist Sephiroth are less pure good or pure evil and more two sides of the same coin. Both have been deceived and are fighting for what they believe will heal their wounds.

The story of *Final Fantasy VIII*, also penned with the help of Nomura, is about prepubescent teenagers being groomed for war and dealing with the deep conflict between leaving childhood for adulthood. What happens when we are forced to grow up too fast? Why do worry so much about the future as we grow older, and why do we cling so tightly to our simpler past? It's a

coming of age tale for Squall and his companions framed in the time-honored "save the world" story framework.

Unlike the Final Fantasy games, Kingdom Hearts is less about fighting to save the world and more about fighting to save the people you love. Sora is eager to fight for good wherever he can, but his primary motivation is his search for Riku. Xemnas fights not to destroy, but to repair, hoping that breaking loose the floodgates of darkness will restore him and make him a complete human being—casualties be damned. In both cases, heroism and villainy are the products of characters' more personal goals.

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Not only is Kingdom Hearts's tone darker than any Disney property and more convoluted than most Final Fantasy titles, it is also mechanically more difficult than either franchise would prepare you for. For a game about hitting cutely drawn Disney-esque creatures with a giant key, things can get pretty challenging. Enemy difficulty is usually a notch above what feels fair, and often smaller, weaker enemies make up for their lameness by appearing in seemingly unconquerable droves—like the Battle of 1000 Heartless in Hollow Bastion, which is exactly what you'd think it is.

Kingdom Hearts II's bigger boss fights also feel overly difficult. While most lower Nobodies can be dispatched with some quick button-mashing, bigger bosses require more finesse and quicker reflexes. Major bosses have several health bars to punch through, totaling over 1,000 health points for Sora to knock down. The most difficult encounter in the game is the optional battle with Sephiroth: His whopping 3,000 health points can take more than half an hour to whittle down—and that's if you get the hang of his attack patterns.

Like most dungeon baddies in the Legend of Zelda games, Kingdom Hearts's bosses telegraph their assaults with either a motion or a noise. Since the bosses do not perform their attacks in a memorizable order, you have to learn what sort of behavior signals each attack. For example, Sora fights Demyx of Organization XIII twice in *Kingdom Hearts II*. When he shouts, "Dance, water, dance!" doppelgangers made of water will appear that must be destroyed before you can get close to him again. "Come on, kick to the beat!" summons a series of geysers that you'll need to avoid. Most bosses give you at least a few seconds warning via an audio or visual cue—like a shrinking stage in Xigbar's case—that a new attack is coming.

But that doesn't make them easy. The difficulty of some of these bosses borders on absurd. Some attacks must be combatted with Reaction Commands, in which

Sora manipulates the attack to his advantage. You can shoot balls of light back at your opponents, chipping away at their health with their own weapon. Others can be avoided completely by using Glide or Jump abilities, sending Sora spinning and dodging through the air out of harm's way. Other attacks can't be avoided at all and you simply have to throw up your guard ability and take them, praying it doesn't whip all your health points away with it.

Many boss attacks can knock you out before you even get a chance to find your bearings. In the Pride Lands, *The Lion King* world, the malignant Scar moves quickly and can chain a combo on you before you can even blink. He forces you to waste a lot of magic on your partner Simba's special attack and healing yourself when you get caught in its wake. In Agrabah, Jafar in his genie form can only take damage while riding the Magic Carpet through the air, which eliminates Sora's ability to dodge roll or use any of his special attacks. Instead, you are forced to wildly circle the boss to avoid attacks, waiting for a small window of opportunity to hit him.

Organization XIII's members present even more challenges, with battles broken down into three or four different segments in which you must decipher and thwart a new attack pattern. The battle against Luxord requires you to complete a mini-game with his magical

deck of cards just to reach him. Xigbar can snipe you from a distance, and as his health gets lower he will continuously shoot you in a way that feels more like spamming than strategy. Xaldin hits hard and teleports around the arena, making it nearly impossible for you to recover or deal any significant damage unless you have a high-powered weapon.

Sometimes it feels like you are doing nothing but fighting bosses. *Kingdom Hearts II* includes around 40 boss fights in the main storyline. Every world Sora visits has a boss, sometimes two, and each Organization member fights you at least once. You fight Axel and Demyx twice, and Xemnas you fight in five stages at the game's finale. You are constantly being tested, constantly preparing for the next big guy to cross your path.

But these powerful beings you run up against are all part of the grander scheme. That it's you, as Sora, against the most powerful evil forces in the universe. Like the Disney properties depicted in the game, the world of Kingdom Hearts is one of sincere—and often severe—moral clarity, in which right is always right and wrong is always wrong, and darkness and light inhabit the same space but are forever in violent conflict.

But the characters in Kingdom Hearts, like in nearly every Disney property, choose their good or evil affiliation freely, acting of their own free will. It's a simple, binary choice played out in endless permutations. Xehanort

choosing power above all else spawns the darkest of the dark, and those attracted to that power—Organization XIII—commit atrocities in his name just to help him achieve his goals. Riku is coerced to fight for the dark at first and then bounces back to the light, two choices he makes of his own accord. Sora always chooses good, no matter what, and even in the darkest hours reaffirms his choice.

Disney and Final Fantasy resonate with adults and children alike, and this surface-level satisfaction is, for some, enough. But for players seeking depth, there are mature themes and complex morals to chew on—and a greater difficulty than just hitting Disney characters with a stick. The level of complexity and challenge make the game dark enough to deter it from turning into a playable bedtime story. The series borrows from Disney's darker side and implements some truly sweat-inducing gameplay challenges, nothing your average five-year-old will have an easy time besting. Kingdom Hearts is built on the foundation of these two franchises, yet the experience the series delivers is all its own.

WHAT THE HELL IS KINGDOM HEARTS ANYWAY?

Nobody seems to agree on what Kingdom Hearts is.

It's a dangerous, strange thing that characters in these games can't stop talking about, but that no one can actually define. It drives people to madness. The good guys try to protect it by preventing the bad guys from finding it, and yet the good guys don't want to find it themselves. It's discussed as a realm, an object, a vessel of light or darkness that holds the key to attaining great power. Whatever Kingdom Hearts truly is, players are teased with glimpses of it early in the series.

In *Kingdom Hearts*, Ansem, Seeker of Darkness, calls upon Kingdom Hearts to "lead [him] into everlasting darkness." Ansem—remember, who is Xehanort's Heartless—is convinced that Kingdom Hearts is made up of darkness, and that this darkness is absolute and all-powerful. Sora exclaims that Kingdom Hearts is not darkness, but everlasting light. When Sora opens

the Door to Darkness, Ansem is bathed in light as Sora exclaims that "Kingdom Hearts is light."

However, when Sora and Riku are struggling to close the Door once more, we see a glimpse of what's past it: a world bathed in shadow, stuffed with roiling hordes of Heartless, everything cloaked in black. We get our first brief glimpse of King Mickey here, and it is only as a silhouette—it is too dark for us to see him. The game ends with Sora and Riku closing the door to the realm and restoring all worlds that have been destroyed.

*Kingdom Hearts: Birth by Slee*p reveals that Kingdom Hearts can be seen in the sky over the Keyblade Graveyard, physically behaving similar to a moon and in the shape of a giant heart. Kingdom Hearts is almost always obscured by clouds, and its presence watching over the Keyblade Graveyard suggests that the graveyard itself is very close to Kingdom Hearts, possibly located somewhere within the realm of darkness.

We see *a* Kingdom Hearts in *Kingdom Hearts II*— but it's not the real thing. It is an artificial version, built by Xemnas from the hearts taken from Heartless slain by Organization XIII. This artificial Kingdom Hearts floats above The World That Never Was, the realm of the Nobodies and home of the Organization. This world is overrun with Nobodies and Heartless due to its close proximity to the dark realm housing Kingdom Hearts, making it the most dangerous of all worlds Sora and his

team encounter. Sora and Riku follow Xemnas into the light of Xemnas's own artificial Kingdom Hearts, where the final sequence of boss battles takes place.

By the end of *Kingdom Hearts II*, we have come to understand that Kingdom Hearts is many things—a destination, an aspiration, a container of immeasurable power. It is the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden, something to be admired and respected but too powerful to be touched or tampered with. It is the heart of the universe from which all worlds are born and around which everything turns, like a sun at the center of a solar system.

So if Kingdom Hearts is a world, a moon, an object, a source of light, a source of darkness, and people can go inside of it *and* replicate it—what exactly is it?

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"'Kingdom Hearts [games] always have something like 'a person's heart' and 'connection of hearts' as its theme," says Tetsuya Nomura in an interview published in the *Kingdom Hearts II Ultimania* guidebook. "Like the strength of an invisible 'heart' or what's the most important thing to you, that's what I was thinking while drawing the story."

If we take Nomura's words at face value, then all we can really know is that Kingdom Hearts reflects the light or darkness of its user. The light that escaped Kingdom Hearts at the end of the first game was there because Sora willed it there, not because it necessarily lives there.

We get our clearest look at what the real Kingdom Hearts is through Xemnas's artificial Kingdom Hearts. Xemnas's knockoff version is made of the metaphysical hearts of people, but as Xehanort, he thinks the real Kingdom Hearts is a "heart of worlds," the big piece of the universe that houses all the other little pieces.

Each of the worlds in the Kingdom Hearts games have their own "hearts," the metaphysical cores that represent the identities of those world and the people in them. These hearts are discovered by Sora along his journey, and clearing each world of danger results in the manifestation of giant keyholes in the sky. Sora locks these keyholes with his Keyblade, and neither Heartless nor Nobodies can do any more damage to a world once it is "locked." Being "locked" not only means that a world will retain its purity, but that its characters will remain true to their world's story and morals. They will go back to their original state of being—before the Heartless, before the Nobodies, before ever meeting Sora and his friends.

But even though most of these worlds are the stuff of Disney films, no one world is home to strictly good or strictly bad characters, and all must learn to coexist to keep the balance of light and dark in check. No one heart is purely evil, and so the Kingdom Hearts that rests at the center of them all can't be purely evil either. But nor is it purely good. Instead, the real Kingdom Hearts reflects the heart of whomever is using it. In effect, it is

pure unadulterated power: an all-purpose weapon, an emotional Death Star with the power to protect or destroy.

In *Kingdom Hearts II*, we learn that Xemnas wants the power and knowledge of Kingdom Hearts because he wants to flood the worlds with darkness. The balance between light and dark is tipping in favor of the light, and he wishes to remedy this. This imbalance in favor of the light is because all worlds are essentially Disney properties, and in Disney stories the good guys always win. Princesses get their princes, and villains are cast away or killed.

In the final act of *Kingdom Hearts II*, Xemnas has had enough of this goody-goody nonsense. He pleads with Sora before their final battle, asking him why he and his friends shun Nobodies and creatures born in darkness. Xemnas is looking for acceptance from someone, anyone, maybe the whole universe, and feels he can only attain it if all worlds embrace that same darkness from which he was born. It's not him that needs to change. It's the universe.

But light and darkness cannot exist without the other. You can't have shadows without light, and you can't have light without darkness. The line between these, however, gets more and more blurred with each subsequent game. As Riku shows us, the best of intentions can lead to darkness, and sometimes from darkness can come the greatest good.

When Sora says Kingdom Hearts is light at the end of the first game, he is right. When Xemnas tells everyone in

Kingdom Hearts II that his Kingdom Hearts will flood the world with darkness, he is also right. It is a thing of pure, pliable power that adapts itself to the will of that who would use it—be it for love or hate, good or evil. It's a chaotic neutral, with the potential to turn into something much deadlier. Or more wonderful. Kingdom Hearts bends its affiliation to those who seek to find and use it, and when it is not directly under someone's control it remains neutral, maintaining the balance of light and dark.

It is both good and evil because neither can exist without the other—much in the same way a good story can't exist without good guys and bad guys, especially in the Disney universe. What's a good Disney film without a villain fighting for power? Xehanort is a true villain to the core, grappling for control of Kingdom Hearts and taking down anyone who opposes him. But every villain has his place, and Xehanort's is at the very top of the baddie hierarchy. His cohorts, however, stray from complete loyalty and some like Axel even question his motives. *Kingdom Hearts II* presents him and Organization XIII as existing in the gray area of morality and goodness, a group of beings struggling to feel whole again and apply meaning to their existence. It is in this gray area that Kingdom Hearts will remain until someone succeeds in bending it to their will. Until then, it remains a thing between the light and dark, a world full of shadows but not pitch black.

Kingdom Hearts inspires others to struggle for its sake, and in the process these characters lose and find themselves and their friends, changing and growing—though not always for the better. It's an ideal to strive towards, the thing that provokes characters to claim their agency and make choices. Kingdom Hearts itself means nothing at all, but it's the meaning characters ascribe to it that matters.

In the end, Kingdom Hearts may simply be a glorious MacGuffin—an object that exists to motivate the main characters and move the plot forward. It is the Holy Grail, the Maltese Falcon, the glowing briefcase. But whereas many MacGuffins in books, movies, and games often distract us with how arbitrarily they are shoehorned into a narrative, the presence of Kingdom Hearts fits perfectly with the world of mystery Nomura has built. No one within the Kingdom Hearts universe can say with complete certainly what it is—and that's because it's not meant to be something perfectly tangible and explainable. It's the perfect expression of Nomura's goal to "make something that allows people to let loose their imagination." Kingdom Hearts is something that players and in-game characters alike can project their dreams onto. If we never completely find out what it is, our imaginations will forever be coming up with our own answers. And I think that's the point.

CODA

I STILL THINK ABOUT WALKING THROUGH the World That Never Was. Tall, gray, empty buildings crammed together, smooth dark roads, all bathed in midnight. It's where I go in my mind's eye when I feel lost, when I'm drowning in "what ifs" and "could haves" and questioning myself. I go there because it is peaceful—with nothing else to tug at my attention, I can simply exist. My own world is filled with conflict, heartbreak, and anxiety. In the World That Never Was, I don't have to be anything.

I can't definitively say what it means to be good. Maybe I'm like a Nobody, a being without concrete moral affiliation that does what it can to survive, constantly searching for what I need to be whole. I've wronged people, though it was never intentional—or so I tell myself. The loop of self-doubt turns endlessly.

When I played *Kingdom Hearts II* for the first time, I asked myself if I was good. And as I think about it, many years later and well into adulthood, I ask myself again.

But I know now that being good is not a state you are born into. We are all Nobodies, clean slates with a world of potential inside of us. It's not something you inherit—you don't enter the world a white knight or a pure princess untouched by darkness and ill intentions. Being good is something you choose to be. And we can slip and fall into the darkness so easily. But we can also come back from it.

We can try to be like Sora, bouncing between worlds, helping everyone who asks. That is pure selflessness, something I don't think I have, and something I doubt most people have. But it's also true that Sora's efforts often go beyond altruistic straight to self-sabotage, as his humanitarian instincts constantly delay his search for his lost friends. Sora chooses to be good, through and through, and like Mickey Mouse, king of the universe, his benevolence is all-encompassing.

But Riku, although tainted, is still good. Having gone to hell and back, he makes the decision to fight for what he believes is right. He wants to protect those he loves and those who are weaker, seeking out strength to deliver justice. Riku knows his limits, and knows that even if he fails himself, he won't fail the people he loves.

We are fallible, fragile creatures. We have that darkness within us, but we also have the light—all of us. We won't always *be* a hero. But trying to be one is enough.

NOTES

Most of the interviews with Tetsuya Nomura quotes in this book were originally conducted in Japanese and have made their way onto the internet through various sources. All the interviews from publications (online and print) quoted in this book came from the treasure trove of translated works over on KHInsider.com. The lovely staff at the site have collected, translated, and compiled a seemingly endless amount of material from Kingdom Hearts production staff and Square Enix spanning the launch of the first *Kingdom Hearts* up to more recent titles.

KHInsider is also where I found a more reliable translation of the material found in the *Kingdom Hearts II Ultimania*, a Japanese-only game strategy guide packed with extra developer commentary from Nomura and company. Many explanations of mechanics and character developed quoted in this book came from this specific text.

For the study of Mickey Mouse and King Arthur I used the January 2012 edition of Chrétien de Troyes's *Four Arthurian Romances* published by SMK Books, as well as the

Medieval Academy of America's 2013 edition of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae,* edited by Jacob Hammer.

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Thank you, everyone. May you always walk the road to dawn.

SPECIAL THANKS

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