

Review: Hard-hitting 'Life is Strange 2' veers far away from original

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Credit: Square Enix, Feral Interactive (Mac), Feral Interactive (Linux)

"Life is Strange" was never supposed to have a sequel. When Dontnod created the game, the developers imagined it as a standalone project, a one-off. What they didn't anticipate was the success and enormous fan response.

That led Square Enix, the owner of the property, to push for a sequel. That put Dontnod in a predicament.

"We didn't want to do the same game another time," writer Jean-Luc Cano said. That led him, Michel Koch, Raoul Barbet and the rest of the team to look at the DNA of the series. They said that a "Life is Strange"

game is about relatable characters, social themes, everyday problems and a little bit of the supernatural.

That led them to story about Sean and Daniel Diaz, two brothers from Seattle who have their life torn asunder when a small fracas with neighbor escalates into their father being shot by police. The trauma leads the younger Diaz to manifest a telekinetic power and it kills an officer. The siblings escape and end up on the lam with a plan to ultimately go to their father's hometown of Puerto Lobos, Mexico.

That takes the two on a sprawling journey through the West. The siblings run into the dark side of American society, feeling the sting of racism, engaging in the illegal pot farm trade and dealing with religious fanaticism. It's a different game from the original, which was centralized to Arcadia Bay and took place over a week.

"Life is Strange 2" stretches out the tale across different locales in the West and lasts over a year.

"We wanted to showcase a side of society and a side of life you don't normally see," said director Michel Koch. Sean and Daniel "live on the outskirts of society. They'll be homeless. They'll be drifters. We all live in cities and we are all quite privileged."

He said the game shows American life at the fringes. As part of the research, the team at Dontnod traced the route the youths took and talked with the homeless, hitchhikers, pot farm laborers and others who live on the edges of mainstream life. The journey of the game also led the developers to touch on the subjects of racism, a delicate subject at a time when immigrants from south of the border are vilified by the current White House administration.

"Life is Strange 2" can be tough to play sometimes as players put

themselves in the shoes of Sean Diaz. The protagonist faces a gantlet of misfortunes as Diaz is accused of crimes and is attacked because of his looks and heritage. These moments are tough to experience and it should be a way to elicit empathy from players.

For Koch, it's a topic the Paris-based team had to breach and handle with caution. "Making a game takes quite a long time," he said. "We wanted to use four years of our lives to make something meaningful. We have a purpose. We know that the game takes place in the real world. Our world and society is getting intolerant. We see the rise of far-right governments in Europe. There's a lot of things we care about."

In many ways, the sequel is the antithesis of the original. The protagonist doesn't have the ability. Instead, it's the younger Daniel who can move objects with his mind and becomes more powerful as the months move on. He's also young and impressionable. As the teenage Sean, players will have a huge influence on the siblings' development.

Their choices will determine how Daniel will react in important situations. It dovetails with the theme of education in "Life is Strange 2." Players will have to teach Daniel, and the sibling will adopt the morals of the older brother. At the same time, players have to be wary of the power dynamic between the two. It's an unusual one, in which the players have to be fearful of Daniel. He's almost like the Anthony Fremont in the "Twilight Zone" episode called "It's a Good Life," in which a boy has godlike powers and the adults are afraid of his capricious nature. The relationship is a complex one that players don't often see in video games.

Daniel's telekinesis presents a change of pace from the rewind powers of Max Caulfield in the original story. In "Life is Strange," the ability to rewind time let players see how certain scenarios play out and it turns a flaw in the adventure game genre into a strength. On the other hand,

Daniel's ability works differently and his power to move objects both big and small has impacts that aren't always predictable. The rub lies in how Sean should guide his brother in the use of his abilities. If he does it brazenly, it can raise questions and if he rarely uses it, Daniel could miss out on the chance of helping people. As Uncle Ben would say, "With great power comes great responsibility."

"We decided to give the power to Daniel," Koch said. "It pushes players. You would be alone without him. You have to be a substitute father. You have to choose your own happiness or the happy of Daniel."

He said the powers amplify the impact of a player's choice as they go through the journey. That adventure though takes a while to grab players. The slow start of the initial episode is off putting, and "Life is Strange 2" doesn't really take off until the second episode. Fortunately, it maintains most of its momentum despite the sprawling narrative.

Sean and Daniel pinball from one temporary home to another while trying to avoid the law. Players won't have a main villain or a mystery to solve. The closest thing to that is the brothers' mother, Karen. She's mysteriously discussed in the beginning, but players don't really discover her fate until later in the season.

Cano said she was hardest character to write because of the subject she represented: the abandonment of her children.

"What she did was bad," Cano said. "You cannot say it is good or OK, but if a father does that, it's a mistake. He has his own life. It's OK for men to do that. For women to do that, it's terrible." He criticized that double standard and wants players to understand that there are women who don't want to be moms even though society pushes them toward motherhood. The game does a convincing job of offering that perspective and addresses it with compassion.

"Life is Strange 2" is a game that subtly educates players by showing them a slice of life that they may not know exists. It doesn't always teach those lessons deftly and it stumbles a bit in places—the younger brother Daniel is hard to like. That abrasiveness makes it hard to bond with such a pivotal character, but the emotional power of the narrative and that sense of duty players feel nearly helps overcome these flaws. It's a different experience that's not as good as the original, but nevertheless, the campaign has its own moments that will stay with [players](#) long after they finish the [game](#).

"Life is Strange 2"

3 stars out of 4

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC

Rating: Mature

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