Here we are, everyone. The moment you've all been waiting for… Re:coded… ah yeah.

sigh

I seriously don't even know where to begin here. Kingdom Hearts Re:coded is a Nintendo DS remake of the japan exclusive mobile game Kingdom Hearts coded, which takes place after Kingdom Hearts 2 and was converted into a cutscene collection later on. According to co-director Hajime Tabata, Nomura was drunk one night (I am not joking) and came up with the idea of a mobile spinoff that would serve as a "playground" for players? Tabata also said he thought the idea was **terrible** at first? Oh god, am I really about to do this? Is this really happening? Are we about to break down, in great detail, the merits of Kingdom Hearts Re:coded? *sigh* only for this series. Only for you, Nomura, I just love you too much. It's time for a Kingdom Hearts Re:coded Retrospective. I will try my damndest to derive meaning from this video game if it kills me.

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Brief recap as usual: Aqua, Terra, and Ventus are all keyblade wielders in training at the Land of Departure. Aqua becomes a keyblade master, but when mysterious creatures threaten the worlds, Terra and Aqua go to hunt down and eliminate the new threat, followed by Ventus. To make a long story short, Ventus clashes with the dark half of himself extracted by Xehanort to form the ultimate weapon: The X Blade; Terra is possessed by Master Xehanort; and Aqua has to salvage what little she can of these two dumbos, leaving her stranded in the realm of darkness. Terra, now possessed by Xehanort, loses his memory and becomes an apprentice of Ansem, leading to the events of Kingdom Hearts 1. Ventus is in an eternal sleep, his heart fractured and healing inside of Sora, and his body hidden by Aqua in Castle Oblivion, formerly known as the Land of Departure. Oh yeah, also Eraqus died, and Xehanort is evil. Those be the basics.

Kingdom Hearts Re:coded is useless. Absolutely fucking useless. It's a story about Jiminy's Journal: one day a mysterious message appears, and the disney gang try to solve the mystery by inserting a Data version of Sora **inside** the Journal, so that he can go run around in Kingdom Hearts 1 Disney worlds again and battle bug blox. Usually these games have a little more going on that I can dive into. Character development, tragedy, theming, all that good, juicy melodrama. Re:coded is an even more shameless excuse to go through Kingdom Hearts 1 again than Chain of Memories, which at least felt like it was trying for something. Re:coded **is**, however, part of the chronology. It exists to uncover information left by Namine about how Sora needs to go save the Birth By Sleep trio, and other assorted characters. In fact, that's what the bottle at the end of Kingdom Hearts 2 was. It was a message from Mickey telling Sora that he has to go save people, and also that he needs to go take the Mark of Mastery with Riku. That's all the bottle was. For **years** I wondered what was in that damn bottle, and this is all it was. Oi vey.

It's alright, that's fine. It doesn't really matter what was in the bottle at the end of the day, it was just a silly cliffhanger. Look, there's really nothing for me to dig into here, but I guess I'm gonna try. You go to Disney worlds, Data Sora is a new creation, so he doesn't know anyone from the Disney worlds, and they don't know who he is either, so everyone is just meeting for the first time all over again. I don't know how else to describe how nothing this content is. Back when one of my friends was getting into the series for the first time, I was sometimes on a voice call with him while he experienced certain moments in the series for the first time. Since I hadn't actually watched the Re:coded movie before in full, I decided that when he got to that point, we'd sit in a voice call and watch it together. About an hour into the thing, I **fell asleep.** I drifted off somewhere in Alice and Wonderland, and woke up to Roxas beating Sora's ass. That's kinda what playing the game feels like. You wander from Disney world to Disney world, a whole lot of nothing dialogue happens, there are some pointless little interludes here and there. I **guess** Maleficent and Pete are involved, but they aren't even involved with the **real Sora**, so they're just kinda there. Are there any themes to unpack? A bunch of riddles show up in the Journal, maybe they all mean something? No, not really. They're all just different variations of "lol go clean up bugs and save the broken hearts please." It's laughable that this game ends with a fight against Roxas because it completely misses the point of what made that fight so cool in the first place. It was Roxas in a genuine duel with Sora, trying to make his voice heard in whatever way he could, trying to make himself a real person, until he resigned to his fate and let Sora take the reigns. In Re:coded, he's just Namine's bugged up messenger.

Okay, to be charitable: the game is clearly trying to go for the "Sora needs to learn what hurt is" angle, and characters try to drill it into him, but again: **this isn't actually Sora**. When Roxas goes on this emotional diatribe about hurt, and being worthless, blahblah (play cutscene) there's emotional music playing, Sora tries to explain what he's feeling, it's all great. Or at least, it would be great: **if any of these fucking people were real?** And hey, I'm into a good metaphor, so just because the characters aren't real or the events on screen aren't to be taken literally, I'd be okay with that, but if this is supposed to be a metaphor, what the **hell** does it represent? What's the message? Theme? Idea? Anything that it's trying to communicate? Sora learns to "carry the hurt inside him" and the Journal(?) is testing him to see if he's ready? Is that supposed to be a clue to indicate that Sora isn't ready, which will pay off later during his Mark of Mastery exam? What does **hurt** mean? That Sora should be thankful that he has life, even though he's harboring memories and feelings from those that have lost the ability to live theirs? Instead of trying to live life so selfishly, he should be trying to save the people that only **he** can save? Alright, that's all well and good, but again: **THIS ISN'T THE REAL FUCKING SORA.** I think the most plausible meaning you can draw from this, is that Namine was trying to make sure that Sora could **handle** taking on all this hurt, without subjecting him to it directly. Basically, she was trying to see if he was up to the task of saving everyone, hypothetically. You could read him destroying bug blox as him trying to scrub away the bad memories and pave the way toward a good future. It was a Mark of Mastery conducted by Namine to see if he was ready to go be a savior. Okay, that's cool: **and then he goes and does an ACTUAL Mark of Mastery that is conducted to see if he's ready to be a savior, and he has a thing near the end where he learns more about the people that need to be saved, and oh fuck am I really doing this?**

(play keyblade reappearance in Hollow Bastion scene) WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? WHAT ARE YOU FUCKING TALKING ABOUT MICKEY? Alright, so just because Sora isn't real doesn't mean there can't be fun moments here and there. The data recreations of characters are so spot on that you can kind of assume this is how the real characters would also act. We know this already because of the data Twilight Town. There's an idea presented in the second game that the emotions felt by the data Twilight Town somehow traverse into the real Twilight Town, in a very vague sense. It's not entirely unreasonable to imagine that the trials data Sora went through would eventually transfer over to the real Sora. The problem, especially in hindsight, is that those feelings really **don't** transfer in the way you'd expect. In Kingdom Hearts 3, Sora has a line about how he "knows what hurt feels like" but the scene goes out of its way to show that only Donald and Goofy understand what data Sora went through. What Sora says is that he knows hurt because of what happened to him in Kingdom Hearts 1. Which makes sense, he went through a lot in that game. So, perhaps watching Sora go through a trial, even if it isn't the **real** Sora, is still enjoyable because it's the idea that we're watching Sora go through something arduous that's supposed to be entertaining.

Unfortunately, I also think this is a flawed way to look at the story. First of all, anyone that's been following the series for this long already understands that Sora has gone through his own trials in the past. We already understand that he has experienced hurt, so seeing a data version of him go through a trial just because Namine wasn't sure is odd. Secondly, the actual trial doesn't feel as authentic as it did in the first game. Kingdom Hearts 1 Sora was ripped away from his island and his friends. He spent the entire game searching for them, and when you got to Hollow Bastion, Donald and Goofy leaving him behind really hurt. It was one of his lowest points, and also one of his greatest triumphs. After that, I was willing to see any adventure with him through to the end. Re:coded has a few scenes that truly test data Sora, or at least try to. This scene with Donald and Goofy is clearly trying for a similar mood. However, there's something about it that doesn't feel right. The real Sora has already risen past this particular breed of self-doubt, so it's like we're watching him rise past that exact same sense of self-doubt. Maybe this is trying to say that, no matter what, Sora will **always** be the kind of person to rise above those insecurities, and it's the ability to show something like that which convinces Namine that he's ready for upcoming challenges. But even with this view of the story, it leaves **so many** scenes in the latter half ringing hollow. Sora and Riku have some heartfelt conversations, but data Sora just has all the answers. When he's up against Roxas, it doesn't seem like he's shaken in the slightest. It's hard to feel like Sora was put through any kind of test, he just passes with flying colors.

Not to spoil too much, but I find his test in Dream Drop Distance, and its eventual conclusion that would be followed up by Kingdom Hearts 3, a much more meaningful character journey than a few scant cutscenes in Re:coded that don't end up meaning much for our main character. Re:coded simply serves to show us a bunch of stuff we already know, and we really didn't **need** that. I'm about at my wits end here, look: I tried. I really tried. There's nothing here.

All that leaves us are the systems themselves: is it a fun video game? I mean… yeah, I guess it's kinda fun. Re:coded uses the command deck introduced in Birth By Sleep, so you still buy commands, merge them, and juggle around your hand to use them in combat. In an interesting move, it actually kinda expands upon the idea in a way that not even Dream Drop Distance would? Merging is handled a bit more naturally: you put two abilities together, and they turn into a temporary fusion command that will appear on your deck. Through repeated use, these two base commands will level up the same way they did in Birth By Sleep. When they hit max, you can fuse them into the command you've been using to keep it permanently, and then you continue the cycle. See, it used to be a pain to experiment with command melding, since you really never had any idea what you were gonna get unless you were looking at a melding chart. Not to mention that crucial abilities like Once More, Second Chance, and Leaf Bracer were tied behind this system. Re:coded allows you to not only see what your two commands will turn into, it allows you to use the resulting command before you fuse it. Any potential buffs you'd get are not at all required in the same way core abilities would be, so you can rest easy and experiment away to find the commands you like using. It's not lacking in variety, either: you get Triple Magic shots, Zantetsuken, Stun Impact, and some new ones like Judgement Triad, Shock Fall, and Gravity Drop. The latter can only be obtained **through** the conversion system, so experimentation is highly encouraged. It keeps a fairly mundane, DS Kingdom Hearts combat system interesting for quite a while.

Enemy AI, unfortunately, isn't anything remarkable. It's hard to imagine playing something like Kingdom Hearts 2 on a handheld, especially with its quick and aggressive nobody variants. Usually Re:coded will throw you elementals that shoot slow magic attacks your way, or fat bodies interspersed with soldiers. You guard and dodge a lot of simple attacks, along with some platforming reminiscent of the first game. Thankfully, movement in Re:coded doesn't feel as stiff as it was in 358. Platforms are made out of blocks, which makes it a lot easier to position Sora with a D-pad control scheme. Jumps are floaty enough that you're given a fair bit of leeway while exploring hard to reach areas. Usually, though, the game goes out of its way to distract the player from how mundane this core loop could easily become, both through its own progression system, and through its frequent gameplay style shifts.

Re:coded is threaded by a strong core theme: scalability. It makes itself known through every minute detail. Each glitched sector mini-game will give you a side mission to complete, where you can try to get more DP by betting your own. In isolation, these side missions aren't very difficult. Some of them ask you to defeat every enemy, some of them ask you to destroy a certain amount of blox, some of them ask you not to heal yourself. They're fun distractions, right? Until you combine them with your other modifiers. Inside data Sora is a stat matrix, a somewhat evolved version of the ability menu in 358. You have to bridge the gap between various data sectors in order to unlock permanent abilities and other systems. Although it might seem like just another ability window, you have to make the same difficult decisions when placing each chip. Raising magic, health, strength, adding resistances, buffing stats, or simply adding another level onto Sora: you've gotta decide where you're going to place these chips. If placed in between two CPUs, those chips will be overclocked, doubling in value. You've gotta

figure out the best way to consolidate your most powerful chips in a limited amount of space. Do you chuck all your level up chips in there, or add some magic buffs? You can switch out some chips for others, but you can never simply remove them, so although it is possible to switch out chips as you gain new ones, it's very difficult to reorganize your entire stat matrix at will.

Though this is a unique leveling system that gives the player a lot of statistical freedom, there are numerous subsystems that affect the entire data scape in more meaningful ways. Re:coded has a bevy of difficulty modifiers that aren't simply hidden in a menu somewhere. In fact, you don't choose which difficulty you want at the beginning of the game. Instead, you eventually unlock a difficulty toggle inside the stat matrix. You can turn the knob to choose from Beginner, Standard, Proud, and Critical mode. In terms of what they all do, it just seems like they tweak the HP you lose from enemies and decrease the amount you do to them, but for once this isn't as important. Since the actual combat of this game is nothing remarkable, it's gonna be a bit boring at base no matter what difficulty you're on, and enemy health bars are never long enough to reach the insane chip damage of Birth By Sleep's critical mode grind. What's more interesting about this system, is that it's classified as a "cheat" instead of an option. Raising the difficulty will raise your chance of getting items, and will improve your rewards when you're ranked at the end of a world. You get better items and commands for playing on Critical, especially if you're consistently ranked well.

That's just the beginning, though. There's a Loot cheat which will increase the rate at which you get items at the cost of Sora's HP, which you can adjust by the percentage. Do you want a higher chance for item drops? Or do you want more HP? It's completely up to you, since you can change it at any point. Prize cheat raises the likelihood that you'll get a rare drop, at the cost of making enemies a lot stronger. You can increase the amount of CP received by lowering the amount of EXP you take in, and vice versa. Finally, there's a cheat that tampers with **everyone's** max HP. You can lower the max HP of every enemy to 1, but Sora will also be at 1 HP. Once again, on their own, they don't really mean a whole lot, but when combined: they are **so** fun to play around with. Firstly, it's amazing that I don't feel like I **have** to toggle everything to max. As they're all introduced, you can tweak them to your liking almost as if you're tweaking your damn mouse sensitivity. Critical mode is a nice overall challenge, so I like keeping that on even for tough fights. Then, I like to test out each boss fight to see where I could get away with making the game harder. Cerberus was a real pain in the ass with a hop ton of modifiers on, but tweaking them just a bit made the fight more manageable. Not only are players incentivized to use this system for better rewards, and are punished for lowering the difficulty too much, they can also use it to craft a uniquely fluid difficulty. Past games were extremely rigid in their difficulty selections: you were stuck with whatever the game gave you. Lower attack, HP, whatever. Re:coded is so customizable that you'll arrive at a comfortable difficulty for every single fight. Plus, the option **is** still there for the wackjobs that want to turn everything to the max. Though you're technically punished for playing on Beginner, the beauty of Re:coded is that you can still do things like reduce your maximum HP or make enemies stronger to bring that drop rate back up.

Additionally, there's a ranking system at play. Each Disney world gives you a score, which you increase by defeating enemies, finding secrets, getting rid of bug blox, and by finishing in a short amount of time for a big bonus. You can also revisit worlds after you've completed them so you can try for a higher rank. Though I decided to challenge myself and play everything on Critical Mode, there is certainly a reason why you might play everything on Standard first, and then come back later to perfect your scores on Critical. You're given so much freedom as to how you want to tackle each challenge, based on whether you want better rewards immediately for more satisfying command conversion, or whether you want an easier time so coming back for more of a challenge doesn't feel as brutal. As a fan of arcade-influenced games, and the replayability they encourage, Re:coded is an absolute blast if you can place it in a vacuum. If you can just ignore **everything** going on around these systems, it can be a fun time waster. You're almost always doing something different so you don't have to scrutinize the base combat too much. There are 2D platforming sections, stealth sections, shoot em up sections, turn-based combat sections, it's crazy. The rules are turned on their head every single world. Of course, it runs the risk of alienating players who aren't into those specific styles. I absolutely fucking despised the 2D platforming section: it controlled like garbage, the boss was repetitive, and I just couldn't stand it. But that ended very quickly, and moments later I found myself in a fun shoot em up. These little mini-games break up the pace rather than replace the core systems, which I really appreciate. I can only take a minimalist base combo against braindead enemies for so long. This has created a really interesting speedrun that I love watching. It's fun to see people conquer these challenges who really know what they're doing, and part of me even wants to become one of those people...

Unfortunately, as fun as it can be, it is **extremely** hard for me to reconcile in this series specifically. I don't know if this sounds paradoxical, but I can usually put up with a frustrating set of flawed systems as long as the entry feels like a meaningful chapter in the overarching narrative that I've been following for years. It would be ideal if all of the titles were fun **and** meaningful, but we don't always get that lucky. I've found myself more lenient on flawed games like Birth By Sleep because its character struggles are so profound, there are new Disney Worlds, boss fights, music, ideas: everything is at least new. 358 Days Over 2 is a pain in the ass to actually play, but that ironically ends up strengthening the tragic narrative it presents. Re:coded is a playground of ideas and mechanics that are certainly fun to play around with, and even to master, but it's wrapped in such a boring package. A pointless retread of old ground that borders on being so meaningless that I actually fell asleep. A set of disney worlds we've seen several times already, music we've already heard, bosses we've already seen. It's an extremely solid set of core ideas that unfortunately are probably never going to warrant a replay anytime soon. I guess I'll put it this way: I do play Kingdom Hearts to have fun. There are a lot of mob fights that can feel like filler, but are easy to look past because they offer a similar amount of tools as Re:coded. It's a somewhat simple combat system, for sure, but it's endlessly fun. Yet, the reason I keep coming back to the individual chapters is for moments like Roxas pouring his heart out in a battle against Sora, Aqua desperately trying to keep her fragile friend group maintained despite overwhelming odds, Xion and Roxas fighting to the death at a place they

used to call home. It's a fun, goofy series with a heart of gold. Re:coded is fun, but it'll always lack a heart; a true, helpless Nobody.