STEAMGIFTS COMMUNITY'S
DIGITAL GAMING MAGAZINE

SGM 2.0



NEWS

Fresh News from the Gaming World

REVIEWS

The Talos Principle
Gotham Knights
A Story About my Uncle

...and more!

EXTRA

Screenshot of the Month
Notable Releases
Movie Review
Hot On-Sales
Interviewing a Dev

#13

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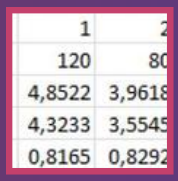
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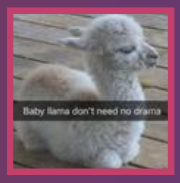
REVIEWERS


Sir Packet Lossalot



ExcelElmira

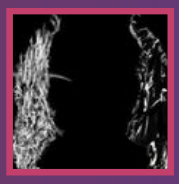

Hodexii



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Chocolate Van Candy


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MyrXIII

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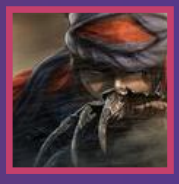

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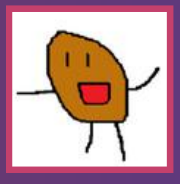
DESIGNERS


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SPECIAL

Hello, everyone! Thanks again for tuning into another issue of SGM!

Unfortunately, we have some concerning news to share. If you haven't noticed, we haven't been able to release issues as readily as in the past and aren't living up to the "monthly" portion of our SGM name. This is partially due to the design process being a major hurdle for us. We have mentioned in the past that we need more help on the designing front, and while some individuals have graciously decided to help, we are still a small team working hard but often struggling to keep up with the demands of magazine production. Balancing busy personal lives with our passion project has become increasingly challenging, and it's resulted in delays and a significant backlog of completed reviews waiting to be fully designed and published.

Due to these factors, the future of the magazine is a shaky one. If we aren't able to continue designing the pages for full issues, we won't completely dissolve, as we still want to retain the community this group has built. This is why, even if this issue may be the final one, we won't dissolve the group. Instead, we would rather focus more on Steam Group reviews, which will allow us to continue creating content in a more manageable, streamlined way. Additionally, for those who are still passionate about magazine design, we plan to maintain a showcase for your work so that creativity and collaboration can continue to thrive.

That being said, we are still in need of more designers to help us get issues out faster and more efficiently. If anyone is interested or knows someone who might be, please reach out! Your contributions could be crucial to keeping the magazine alive!

Despite the challenges we've faced, we are committed to keeping the magazine running as long as it's feasible. If you have any questions, feel free to contact myself or any of the other staff members.

- VinroyIsViral

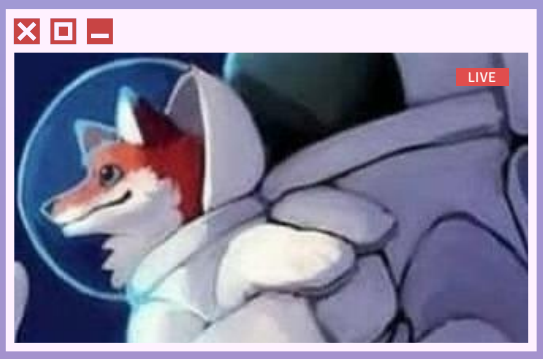




WE WANT YOU!

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NEWS TIME!



Ahoy, there! This is jbondguy007 communicating to you from exoplanetary system G4-M3Rs, via the Intergalactical Network Tele-Entertainment Radio NET communication system (I.N.T.E.R. NET), bringing you news from across the galaxy!

As much as I would like to have brought you this news live, time flows differently here... every second elapsed on Earth is 5.6 seconds here in system G4-M3Rs! I had to use the Time-Interrupted Message Expedient (T.I.M.E.) machine to send this news of the past, from the future... back to you! Due to temporal distortion, this news could arrive a bit late on your end. With that said, I'm sure you'll be able to enjoy them nevertheless.

Without further ado, enjoy the read!

- jbondguy007, blasting away into the next system!

ALIEN ISOLATION SEQUEL CONFIRMED IN EARLY DEVELOPMENT



Just in time for spooky season and in celebration of Alien: Isolation's 10 years anniversary, Creative Director Al Hope, alongside the game's publisher SEGA, have now officially confirmed that a sequel to the critically acclaimed survival horror game Alien: Isolation is currently in early development.

No other news have been shared yet, but fans of the 2014 masterpiece (personal bias, perhaps... but it's such a great game!) can rejoice in the fact that we can look forward to, once again, hide in terror as the alien hisses and stomps around the locker in which you are desperately holding your breath for dear life. Might want to re-evaluate that hiding spot.

Source: SEGA Newsletter

HALO: A NEW DAWN ANNOUNCED, STUDIO DITCHES PROPRIETARY ENGINE FOR UNREAL ENGINE 5

Halo developer studio 343 Industries are rebranding to "Halo Studios" as they announced the upcoming release of the latest installment in the Halo Franchise - Halo: A New Dawn.
The studio has revealed that they are ditching their proprietary in-house engine "Slipspace" which was used to develop Halo: Infinite, instead opting for Unreal Engine 5 which is expected to allow the studio to focus more on developing the game itself rather than also deal with the workload that comes with developing your own engine as well. An announcement trailer was released, showcasing a glimpse at what we can expect in terms of graphics with the switch to Unreal Engine.

Source: www.halowaypoint.com

RUSSIA BANS THE USAGE OF DISCORD

In a shocking (well, not that shocking) turn of events, Discord has been added to the list of services banned in Russia.

An ongoing dispute between Russian officials and Discord in which the country's communications regulators requested the deletion of approximately 1,000 pieces of content on Discord and Google which were deemed illegal, and which resulted in the platform being fined 3.5 million roubles ($37,493 USD) in early October, appears to have finally come to a head with Russia adding Discord to their list of platforms that are blocked from access within the country. This change is expected to affect up to 30 to 40 million Russian Discord accounts.



Source: www.vice.com

NINTENDO SUES PALWORLD DEVELOPER POCKETPAIR

We all knew it was just a matter of time, but after months of silence from Nintendo, many were starting to think that the gaming industry giant had turned a blind eye on the similarities between Nintendo's Pokémon, and Pocketpair's Palworld. However, it appears that Nintendo was simply taking their time preparing a solid case against Pocketpair, as Nintendo officially takes legal actions against them.

Unexpectedly, rather than copyright claims for what fans (and non-fans) of the game have observed to be a blatant case of "sure, you can copy my homework, just change it up a bit so it doesn't look too obvious", Nintendo launched a lawsuit for what they allege to be "infringement of multiple patent rights". At this time, Palworld developer Pocketpair made a statement disclosing that they are unaware which patents that they are accused of infringing, but that they will investigate further.



Source: www.ign.com

RED DEAD REDEMPTION AND UNDEAD NIGHTMARE COMING TO PC OCTOBER 29TH

After years of Red Dead Redemption fans begging Rockstar Games to release Red Dead Redemption on PC, the wait is finally coming to an end! The PC release will be modernized for today's PC gaming standards, offering 4k resolution, compatibility for up to 144hz refresh rate, ultrawide display support, HDR, upscaling, full keyboard and mouse controls support, and more.



Source: www.rockstargames.com

STARFIELD - SHATTERED SPACE EXPANSION FAILS TO IMPRESS

In yet another Bethesda failure, the Starfield Shattered Space expansion release was lackluster, with an overall Steam rating of "Mostly Negative" at a meer 30% positive reviews. Players critisized the lack of content for the steep price tag, simply adding a new planet and questline to discover, but no further improvements to the overall state of the base game.



Source: www.pcgamesn.com

Interview with AploveStudio, developer of SOLACE INC.

Hello, Chocolate here once again! Today joining us in the SGM interview is Aplove. As someone who loves playing Ludum Dare submissions, I was already familiar with some of today's developer's games, and it was a pleasant surprise to see those same submissions in Steam as part of a free collection.

But enough about that - this isn't about me, it is about Aplove. So, without further ado...

Could you introduce yourself to our lovely readers?

Hello! I am Aplove, and I've been doing solo game development for a few years now, which includes games like Solace Inc, Project Malice, Roseblight, and a few other smaller games!

What made you make Solace Inc. in the first place?

Solace Inc is a spin-off of Project Malice, it features a lot of the same characters from that game as well as taking some of the same gameplay but in a more simplified, bite-sized version of it. Around a year ago, I was kind of itching to make a survivors-like game, so I decided to whip up the original version of the game in about a week or so. Afterwards, I decided to continue to expand upon it, eventually evolving it into what it is now. I kind of feel like I "accidentally" made this game, in a way.

Are there any pitfalls or annoyances which you've come across in games of this genre that you really wanted to avoid or even solve in your game?

As far as specifics go, there aren't a whole lot of things that I wanted differently, one thing I definitely wanted to avoid was making something that's too convoluted story-wise since I kind of have a history of making convoluted plots and lore in my games, so I tried to keep the missions fairly simple and the story elements essentially optional to avoid that. I also wanted to give the player more control over how they played the game, such as allowing them to finish missions whenever they want instead of having a strict time limit.

How did you approach playtesting? Did it lead to any evolution of your game?

For playtesting, I generally just ask random people that I know to play what I make so I can get feedback and improve what I need to, and I typically do private playtests prior to game releases or major updates just to make sure that everything is ironed out as much as possible.

How did you approach designing the game's characters? Were they inspired by anything in particular?



A majority of the characters in the game are characters that appear in my previous games, as well as cameos of other people's original characters or their own games. Most of the characters that are original to Solace Inc are mostly just random character designs that I've sketched over time and decided to add into the game just for the hell of it. A good chunk of the characters designs were actually created from Inktober prompts, as well as inside jokes that just popped out of nowhere from certain friend groups/communities that I was showing the game to at the time.

What was an unexpected or interesting problem you had while making this game?

Something that I didn't expect to run into when working on this game was the game's dialogue. After it was released on Steam I received some criticism about the game's dialogue being kinda strange or "cringe" (i.e. being unnecessarily horny), so I decided to go back and rewrite a good portion of the earlier dialogues so it was a lot more palatable for the average player. I personally didn't think the dialogue was that bad, but it was a decision I went through. I definitely have been and will continue to be mindful of how I write dialogue going forward.

How did you balance creativity with technical or time constraints while developing the game? Was there anything significant you had to cut?

In contrast to some of my previous projects, Solace Inc didn't necessarily have many constraints since I was fairly aware of what I was capable of making, but here is some cut content like certain characters, enemies, missions, dialogue, or features that didn't feel like it belonged in the game. I was toying with the idea of adding in a custom level creator (where players can make their own missions and upload them to the steam workshop) but decided against it.

Did any games, or media in general, inspire you/influence your work? If so, which?

The most obvious inspiration for this game is Vampire Survivors, and I did take some inspiration from other roguelikes such as Enter The Gungeon, as well as a little bit of inspiration from Clash Royale (which I have a love/hate relationship with).

Was there any player feedback that made you change your mind on some design choices?

Aside from the dialogue as mentioned earlier, I've also made multiple changes to certain recruits to make some less overpowered and others less useless, as well as making changes to some missions to make them more enjoyable.

During development, what was the biggest problem you ran into? In fact, what are some of the biggest struggles you've had?

Solace Inc didn't have any major development problems and mostly just had a bunch of relatively smaller problems. I think the biggest might've been implementing the custom intern creator, since it involved making a lot of sprite sheets and making sure that everything worked alright with the Steam workshop.

What's an average day of game development like for you?

I don't do game development every day, but when I do I typically work between 2-8 hours depending on what needs to be done, and usually that ramps up if I set a deadline to have everything completed by. At a minimum I try to have something major finished every few days or so.

How much does your final game resemble your initial idea of the game? And how did you go about iterating on ideas until you reached the final product?

The core gameplay loop has hardly changed, but it has evolved waaaayyy beyond what I initially envisioned. If you'd like to try out the original version of the game I made in a week and compare it to the current game, you can try out Solace Inc Classic on my Newgrounds page.

How did you decide on the scope of the game? Were any hard constraints present, and if so, which ones? Time, money, release date, etc



It's a passion project, so thankfully I didn't have many issues in regards to time or money, although working with a publisher/a patreon to make the game in a more timely fashion with more polish and content definitely would have been nice.

What's your favorite part of game development? Programming, art, etc

Art is the one aspect that I dislike the least, I'm not particularly skilled at programming or music so I mostly just see those as necessary skills to create a finished product.

What's an important lesson you've learned during the development of the game that you'll carry forward into future projects?

Do NOT add over 250 playable characters to your game.

When was the last time a design element of a game felt truly fresh or ingenious and really took you by surprise?

I almost never feel that way towards my own creations, when I play other games though I'll occasionally find something that I really like and will write it down for later.

What are your favorite and least favorite trends in gaming today?

My favorite and least favorite trends are essentially the same thing, which is the overall shift away from bland, generic AAA games made by large corporations that everyone has already played a dozen times and towards weird, quirky indie games made by some dude in his parent's basement. We need shorter games with worse graphics made by people who are paid more to work less.

Any advice for developers trying to make a game?



Just make games. It's way easier said than done, but my best advice is to just download a game engine, find a tutorial on YouTube, and get to work. It'll take time, diligence, patience, and maybe some blood sacrifices to the gamedev gods, but you'll get there eventually. Just don't start out making your dream project, and slowly work your way upwards.

Our eagle-eyed readers might notice that a number of your games include sexual content, how do you decide on designing and implementing them?

The “sex dlc” add-ons you’ll find for some of my games are completely optional and practically add very little to the game itself, they're mostly there in case anyone wants to add a dash of freakiness to their experience. A problem that I have with adult games is that they're just not that fun to play and are able to get away with poor game design because of sex appeal, so to help with that I’ve just been making normal games that are fun to play and then creating a free add-on that introduces sexual content.

Also, why do you add it?

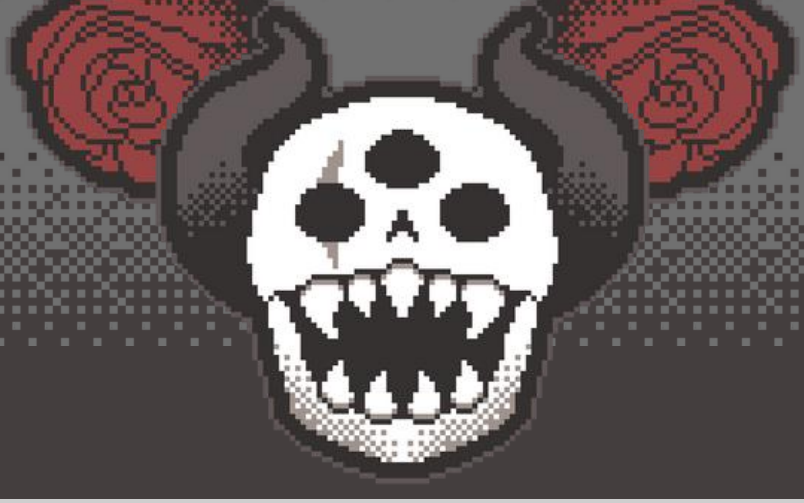
Mostly for the hell of it, I make them for myself and just have it be available for anyone if they're interested. I’ll admit, some of the content can get kind of weird, so it might not be for everyone.

What’s the favorite project you worked on?

For my long term projects I’d say it’s a tie between Project Malice and Solace Inc, both of those were pretty experimental games and I learned a lot through making them. For my smaller games I’d say Terato Tamer, Citri Plays Noirwood, and WELD are some of my favorites.

The AploVVare Collection includes several games you have worked on as well as an earlier build of Solace Inc. Is there a specific game among them which you’d recommend for first time players?





Terato Tamer, Citri Plays Noirwood, Hellfire Pizza, and WELD are good places to start, they're definitely some of my favorites from the collection.

Since Solace Inc. includes characters from several different games you made, where do you suggest our readers begin if they want to see more from those characters?

Technically you should start with Buckler 2, but that game kind of sucks so I wouldn't recommend it. I'd suggest starting with Roseblight, then Project Malice, then going from bottom to top in the AploVVare Collection.

You've worked on many games and tried many different genres, what's the genre you feel you're good at?

I wouldn't say I'm good at making them but I naturally gravitate towards making roguelikes, they're pretty easy to make and provide a lot of replayability.

And which genre do you like the most?

Probably anything that vaguely resembles a Bullet Hell, I love playing and making games that just have a bunch of projectiles flying around everywhere. I also enjoy making more story-driven games with unique characters and interesting dialogue.

What genre or game you'd like to work on but haven't had the chance yet?

I've made it a personal goal to make at least one game for every genre that exists; at some point I'd like to make a cooking game, a typing game, a city building game, a sokoban-esque puzzle game, and something that has a battle pass in it.

Is there any character you like the most? If so, which one, and why?

Oof... uhh... damn there's so many to choose from... I think the characters that I've consistently enjoyed over the years are Blayk & Nite from Roseblight, they're probably my most complex characters and have gone through the most character development. Recently Carissa & Aqua from Solace Inc have been my pseudo-mascots, I like drawing them and having them interact with other characters.

What can we expect to see in the recently announced Solace Inc. 2?

Solace Inc 2 is pretty early in development so I can't say for certain what to expect, my current plan is for it to be a third person co-op shooter similar to something like Deep Rock Galactic, with some class/hero shooter elements like from TF2 or Overwatch, and it might have some PvP elements at some point.

Will you keep working on Solace Inc. while developing its sequel?

I might put out an update to promote the demo for Solace Inc 2 when it releases. I'm mostly done with Solace Inc 1 at this point but I may include some more missions/recruits/minibosses in the future!

How do you keep coming up with ideas for missions to add to Solace Inc.? It seems like you avoid repeating structures.

After the first four missions I definitely wanted to spice up the missions by introducing a new element that didn't make it seem like I was just copy-pasting the new levels. Some of the ideas I took from other games like the payload mission, which was inspired by TF2, or the card game mission which is literally just a reference to Inscryption. Some of the missions were suggestions from people who played the game like the mythril mining mission which is from someone joking that Jordan would send her employees to the coal mines.



What are your favorite missions? Which do you like the least?

My personal favorite mission is Endless, it doesn't do anything super wacky, the environment and enemies change every time you play it, and it's the only one that has a leaderboard so you can see how far you made it compared to everyone else. My least favorite missions are probably the ones that can get pretty tedious and don't benefit that much from experimentation, like the Christmas one. I think some people didn't like some of the non-violent missions like the shopping mall mission or the golf mission, but I personally really enjoyed them because of how different they are from the rest of the game.

What missions were the hardest to implement?

Any of the ones that completely change the genre, especially the platforming missions. For those I had to add in things like changing how the camera is centered, adding in collisions for one-way platforms, and changing how recruits move around while also not breaking the rest of the missions.

The coffee room convos are a fun, nice addition that allow us to get to know the characters better. How did you come up with this feature? Will you add more convos in the future?

Dialogue that appears in between levels or runs is something I've done in previous games, I wanted to include that in Solace Inc but I didn't want it to interfere with the gameplay so I just had it be an extra tab on the main menu that's entirely optional. I might add some more dialogue in the future in order to explore certain characters or clear up any story inconsistencies between Solace Inc 1 and 2.

Do you have any characters that haven't showed up in Solace yet? If so, wanna talk about them?

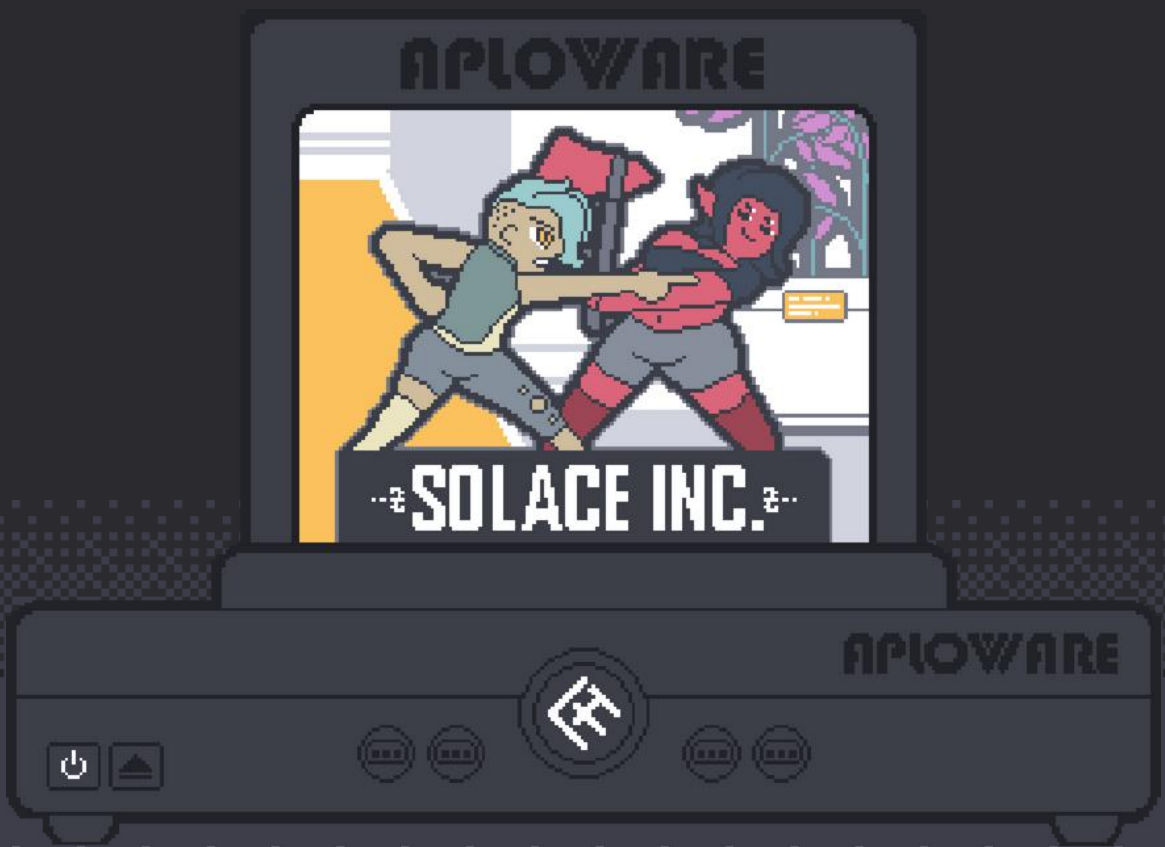
There are some characters from my previous games that haven't shown up, mostly because I didn't think they would be an interesting addition or because I forgot that they exist. There are a few scrapped cameo characters that didn't make the cut because I wasn't able to get permission, or the creator of one character asked me to replace them with another.

How do you choose who joins Solace as a cameo recruit, and how is their skillset built? (Our readers might recognize Turnip Boy, who featured in a past issue, among others).

Cameo characters are from people who have either asked me to put their character in the game or from people who I have asked if I could put them in the game, and the main attributes I look for are a good or interesting character design and abilities that introduce something relatively new to the table. Cameo character abilities are based off of the character's own abilities, some of which translate a lot better than others. I try to be as accurate to the source material as possible for cameos, although they aren't 100% accurate (for example Turnip Boy's size is inaccurate, I believe he's canonically like 7 feet tall).

Is there anything you'd like to tell our readers?

If you haven't played Solace Inc, please do!! If you have, tell your friends to play it!!!



SOLACE INC.

Solace Incorporated is a time-travelling mercenary company. We take virtually any kind of job, from extermination to spaceship battles, including raiding and rescue. The jobs might be dangerous and the workplace insane, but everyone is welcome to join when needed and leave when ready to do so. There's the break room, where we have the strangest conversations, and sometimes the boss will invite everyone out on some wild outing she has thought of. There might be some undesirables who follow us around, and those Chrono Corp goons might try to steal our jobs every now and then, but you are guaranteed to have fun with us!

Location: Steam Gifts Magazine Headquarters
Type: Review

Hey rookie, welcome to Solace Inc. Your job today isn't what we usually do, but then again, we don't really have a specific type of job we specialize in.

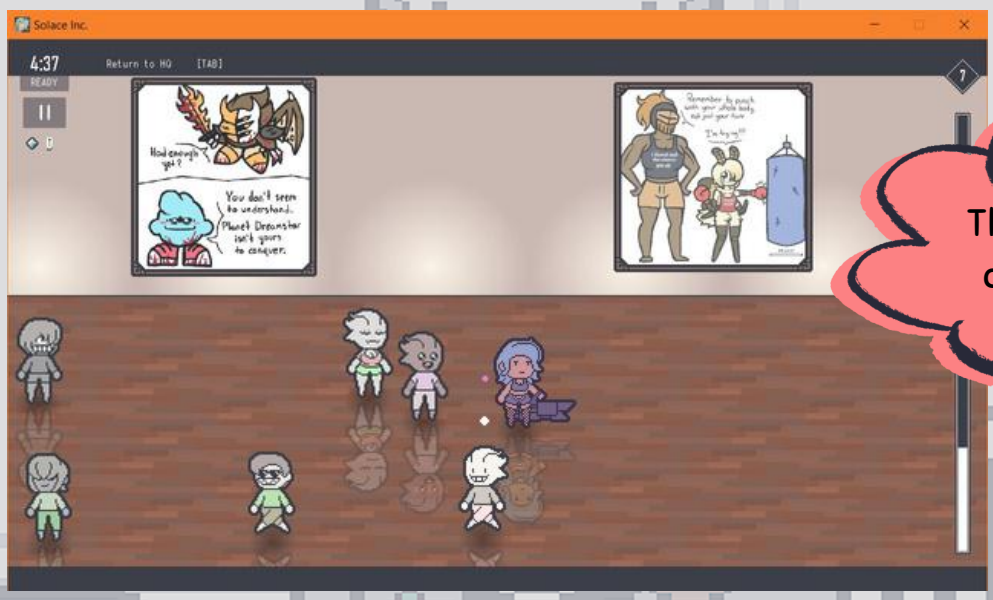
You don't seem too combat-inclined, so here's what you're gonna work on: we have been contacted by a friend of mine called Paige. She says the magazine she works for as a mascot, SGM, needs a review of this one game. Here's the catch: the game is also called Solace Inc. She thought it was funny, so she contacted me. Cheeky little catgirl.

Go off, do us proud or something.



I first played Solace Inc as one of the games in Aplove's Aplovvare Collection, which offers several small games Aplove made, mostly for game jams. Said collection is available on Steam for free, so when I stumbled upon it, I instantly started playing it. And among the games present in it, a smaller version of Solace Inc was by far my favorite. Thus, I couldn't be happier when the chance to play and review the full game presented itself.

As I said at the beginning, Solace Inc is a bullet heaven. But instead of having several weapons to fight off your enemies with, you recruit members from your rooster into battle. Each of them has an active skill, which is usually a way to damage enemies (but sometimes heals allied units or applies status effects), and a passive skill, which can have almost any kind of effect. Other Solace Inc. employees will often go off on their own, but you can always recall 'em and get in a very cute formation. If they run out of HP, no worries! They'll be knocked out for a bit, and come back ready for action... or not, if you add modifiers to the mix. But we will talk about that later.



The boss took us out to a museum, it was fun!

As far as I'm concerned, this would have been enough to make Solace Inc distinguish itself and find its own place in the genre, but the more I played, the clearer it was there were other unique features to find.

Something that truly surprised me while playing Solace Inc is how all the missions are different. I've mentioned several kinds of missions, but there are so many more: kart racing, minigolf... and traditional stages, in which you just walk around and kill a bunch of enemies. However, even then, there are different settings – for example, there's a bunch of missions themed around real-life holidays.

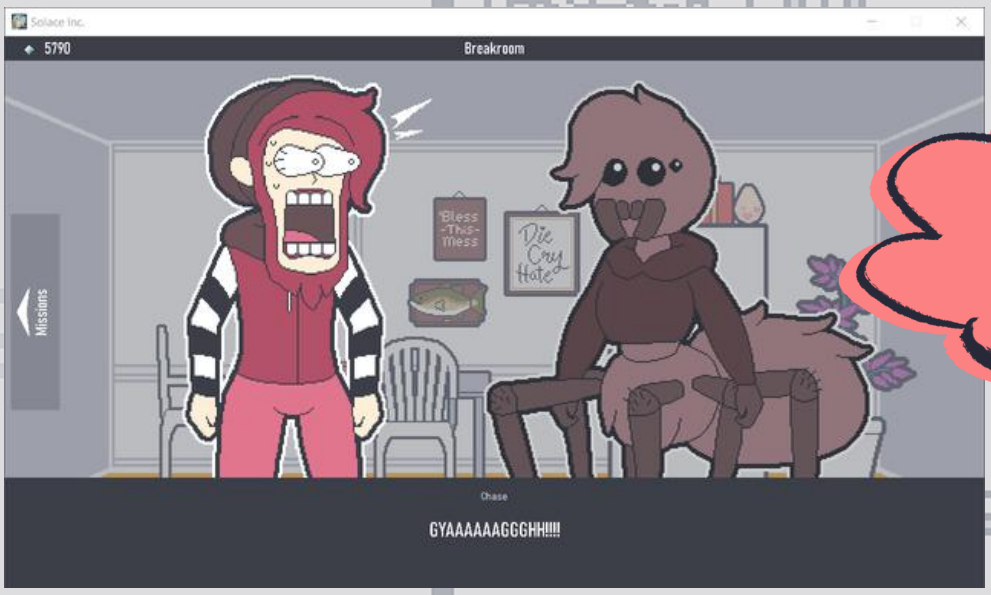
"I swear this is still the same game"



Says the note that came with this picture. Huh.

Also, remember modifiers? They can just increase difficulty, like permadeath or hardcore... but they can also change the gameplay, like the one that lets you recruit people forever but you can't upgrade them, or the one that turns any stage into a go-kart race. There are always new things to try, is what I'm saying.

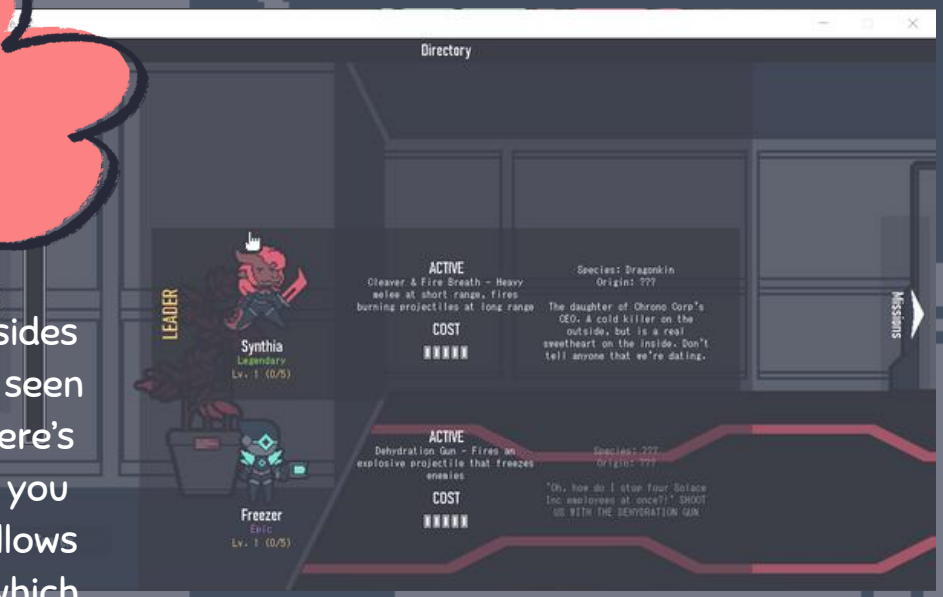
The difficulty increases might be necessary for some missions, tho... it has happened to me that, with the right build, Solace becomes a bit of an infinite idler.



My coworkers are fun!

The art is cute, although a bit basic at times, but you can always understand what's going on. Clarity is of utmost importance when it comes to bullet heavens! Cutscenes have clearer sprites, as well, so we can appreciate the characters in all their glory.

Dating the boss...



Oh, and talking about unique sides of the game... You think you've seen all it has to offer... and then there's Chrono Corp mode: suddenly, you aren't working with the fine fellows of Solace, but with our rivals, which have a completely different gameplay.

There stops being a limit on how many units you can take with you, but they become more generic and die when killed. Also, there are potions and artifacts, and it is basically a second game. It's absolutely bonkers.



Really, what are those guys doing?

There is NSFW content, but it is strictly optional... and, in a way, detrimental to gameplay. Let me explain: in the vanilla version of the game, there are cameo characters, which come from other indies or the internet in general. Some of said cameos are very fun to play with, and if you toggle the NSFW content on, they disappear – some sprites of Solace Inc's characters having sex take their place. Of course, there are other changes: some break room convos are strictly NSFW, risqué art appears in the museum, and some characters suffer wardrobe malfunctions in combat. But you are sacrificing cameos for it, which meant I didn't have the game in NSFW mode most of the time.



GUYS!
I'm still in the middle of the review!

STORY	N/A
GRAPHICS	★★★☆☆
GAMEPLAY	★★★★☆
SOUND	★★★☆☆
FUN METER	★★★★★

Some of the songs go hard, and none of them become bothersome at any point, which is definitely a win in my book.
Honestly, given that, as I said, Aplovvare is free on Steam, my recommendation is to try Solace there. If you like what you see, worry not: all your progress will come with you when you go from the Aplovvare version to the full game. And so much content has been added; it will be a blast!

■ ChocolateVC

the good

- Fun twist on the formula
- Every mission is different
- Fun banter in the break room

the bad

- Activating NSFW content takes cameos away
- Some missions can be broken, and you end up idling



DESTROY ALL HUMANS! 2 REPROBED

INTRODUCTION

Destroy all Humans! 2: Reprobed is an action-adventure video game developed by Black Forest Games and published by THQ Nordic. It's a remake of the original 2006 game, the sequel to the Destroy All Humans! remake and the sixth installment of Destroy All Humans! franchise.

It was only released one and a half years ago and has received good reviews from both fans of the saga and new audiences. If you like sarcastic and humorous video games, shooting games with a lot of adventure, this could be your game.

This game can give you a pleasant, fun and not at all overwhelming experience. Beyond that, don't expect to connect with characters or a narrative, just have fun. Oh, you don't need to have played any previous games in the series.

Are you curious? Keep reading!



STORY

This is one of the least important parts of the game; it is mainly aimed at making us laugh through its jokes, irony, and crazy humor.

The story takes us to the 60s; we are an alien called Crypto who, after events that occurred in the first game, returns to Earth with the aim of taking revenge on humans, specifically the KGB. We will cross cities like San Francisco and travel to Japan, the United Kingdom, Siberia... and even the moon.

This is the story, but what characterizes it is its absurd dialogue, characters, and the ways in which Crypto can kill humans and make decisions. Regarding the dialogues, we have the option to delve deeper into some characters thanks to optional dialogues.

It has a social critique of a very specific time that is revealed to us through incredible cinematics. For those who love cinema, music, social groups, and science fiction, it also shows many references through subtle and not so subtle details.

The story could be improved, and even more so, its secondary missions, which do not contribute anything relevant to the story. They are just another way to improve our weapons, so they could be classified as generic missions.

In short, the story is nothing out of this world, nor does it pretend to be, but it is enough to make us laugh and, in the few moments of seriousness, completely evade us when destroying enemies using weapons like... an anal probe.



GRAPHICS

We must keep in mind that this game has a very low budget, that it is a remake of a PlayStation 2 video game, and emphasize that it uses the Unreal Engine 4.

The settings may not be the most beautiful in the world, despite being made with Unreal Engine 4, but the NPCs such as hippies, police officers, or KGB agents are quite well done.

While it is true that when we walk around the city with Crypto, we can fully immerse ourselves in the game, even more so with powers such as impersonating civilians, but when we control the UFO and have a view from above, the quality of the graphics worsens, and not to mention the areas that we cannot access, which are very poorly detailed.

I think that the game's graphics department are satisfactory, in general, with more detailed areas than others, such as the bosses, which are very visually pleasing.

In general, the textures and many finishes could be improved, but today, we can play it without them ruining the experience.

SOUND

I don't think it's a notable aspect of the game, as there isn't much emphasis on music, just some B-grade tunes between missions.

The music is based on a bit of psychedelic rock, jazz, and lounge, which, to tell the truth, works well in certain places.

On the other hand, the voices of the characters and the NPCs leave a little to be desired; they tend to be somewhat simple, and, together with their humor, they don't quite connect.

The sound effects when we shoot with our weapons or UFO are very satisfying, although, due to some mechanics, they make the whole process somewhat crude.





GAMEPLAY

The gameplay is what the entire game focuses on. Your experience depends completely on this section, and to be honest, it does what it proposes.

To begin with, we have quite a striking selection of abilities. One of these abilities is telekinesis, which is often used to kill our enemies, throw our own enemies into the air, or control the minds of civilians by pretending to be them (especially useful if we want to go unnoticed or avoid the police). We also have the ability to use powers within the UFO, such as laser rays, magnetic magnets, gravity fields, etc.

As we progress through the game, Crypto will unlock new weapons, which will allow us to kill our enemies faster thanks to the game's upgrade system. Each weapon has different sections that we can improve through reward points that the missions will give us depending on how many objectives we have accomplished.

The weapons are quite varied, as we have a disintegration ray, brain shooter, sonic wave cannon, RPG, pistol, and an anal probe... there are some of them that will be especially useful against some enemies.

Customization is also another feature of the game since we can change the appearance of the weapons, the UFO, and Crypto himself.

However, I have to say that the improvement process is quite tedious since to make them, we need to go to the UFO and improve them from there. Not only that, but to even use the UFO, you have to unlock certain areas that are achieved by meeting specific objectives.

The difficulty is poorly adjusted; there are enemies and areas that are quite easy to overcome, while there are also others in which the damage they do to you is enormous, and it will take you several attempts to pass the area.



FINAL THOUGHTS

In conclusion, this game is suitable for both nostalgic fans of the saga and those who have not played its previous installments. It offers very interesting visual and playable improvements.

It is a fairly short game, as it takes about 8-11 hours to complete the main missions. I only recommend this game to those people looking for a simple, fun game to play from time to time.

This game has many things that could be improved in many ways. It has several bugs, rough gameplay with some weapons or objects, a lack of bosses, and inconsistent difficulty. However, thanks to the other good sections of the game, all of these issues are quite easy to ignore.

Overall, it is a game that is totally recommendable if you overlook many aspects.

■ Hodexii

STORY	★★☆☆☆
GRAPHICS	★★★☆☆
GAMEPLAY	★★★☆☆
SOUND	★★★☆☆
FUN METER	★★★☆☆

the good

- Good writing and characters
- Serviceable music
- Varied weapons and abilities

the bad

- Weak side missions
- Inconsistent difficulty
- Lack of boss fights



CALL OF THE SEA



Introduction

"Pardon me, madam, but the island is in sight. We will be lowering the boat in just a minute."

Call of the Sea is a puzzle adventure game developed by Out of the Blue Games and released in 2020.
From the very beginning, the game hooks you with award-winning visuals and a compelling story. You play as Norah, an adventurous woman in search of her lost husband. Your journey takes you to a tropical island filled to the brim with breathtaking views and inventive puzzles.



Story and Narrative

"You never returned. What happened, Harry? Your letters led me to this idyllic, nameless island in the middle of nowhere. What did you find?"

It's the 1930's. You are Norah Everhart. Your husband Harry has disappeared on an unmarked Pacific island, while on an expedition to uncover the cure for your mysterious skin disease. Now you are following in his footsteps, trying to uncover what happened to him and his crew, and what secrets the island is hiding. I don't want to spoil much, but the game bears the "Lovecraftian" tag on Steam ...

The story grips you from the very beginning, and trying to uncover what has happened is what will mostly drive you to finish the game (provided that you care about the story in games at least a little bit).



Examining the photographs left over by Harry's expedition.

At times, I found myself actually saying, "What the fuck?" out loud at the computer as I revealed some of the more surprising twists. I personally felt a bit like when I first played Outer Wilds, though this might be giving Call of the Sea too much credit (the exploration is much more linear).

As this is a video game, Harry's crew tends to leave around many notes describing their everyday thoughts, as well as labeled photos and the occasional audio recording (there are no actual NPCs in the game). The game is full of interactable objects which reveal bits and pieces of the story and lore. It is relatively simple to follow what occurred during their expedition, though I have to admit that the side characters aren't particularly memorable.

Gameplay - Puzzles

"These buttons seem to adjust the amount of energy that goes through the turbine."

The main gameplay of Call of the Sea is good ol' puzzle-solving. Essentially, the entire gameplay loop goes like this:

1. You arrive in an area (e.g., a clearing on the top of a mountain).
2. You walk around the area, inspecting various environmental objects and/or clues left over by Harry's expedition.
3. Your character automatically writes down any important story updates as well as puzzle hints into her journal.
4. With the help of the journal notes, you solve any puzzles in the area, which unlock the way to the next area.
5. Repeat until the game is over.

The puzzles themselves aren't particularly hard (especially with the notes, which often help connect the dots). Sometimes, you need to explore a bit to figure out what you're supposed to be doing, but the journal notes really push you toward the solution.



The "puzzle hints" section of the journal.

Just to give you an idea, here's a made-up example of a puzzle that I could imagine appearing in the game:

There are five bowls that you need to fill with five differently-colored liquids. The bowls are decorated with five different animals. Throughout the wider area, you can find scattered five statues of those animals, each in a different color. The puzzle is to figure out that the colors of the statues tell you which liquid goes into which bowl.

What the puzzles lack in difficulty, they make up for in originality. There are always different patterns to spot, different connections to build and they are always very well integrated into the environment. From manipulating water flow to connecting the (literal) dots in Harry's notes and deciphering patterns in ancient paintings, unique puzzles await at every turn.



One of the loading screens. Spooky area coming up.



Ruins of an ancient civilization.

Gameplay - Walking

"I feel ... quite good I dare say I might even walk a little faster than usual."

While the primary gameplay in Call of the Sea involves solving puzzles, the game lies somewhere between a puzzle game and a walking simulator (which, by definition, doesn't contain much gameplay[1]).

This walking simulator part of the game mostly kicks in during step 2 above. Each area is quite non-linear, and collecting the puzzle hints (and lore snippets) involves a whole lot of walking. Of course, this is a video game, so all areas are closed off on all sides (either by conveniently placed boulders, fallen trees or by immersion-breaking invisible walls).

At times, the game gets quite spooky, both in themes and in atmosphere. There are a few genuine jump scares, but I also got goosebumps a few times just by looking at a piece of old expedition equipment under eerie illumination.

Sooner or later, you realize that the walking speed is painfully slow[2], but if you play the game in small doses (e.g. one area per sitting), it never becomes too annoying. Perhaps a faster walking speed would reveal to players just how small the game actually is.



That's how they got here...

[1] I'm sorry, fans of walking simulators, I don't mean anything bad, but you know what I mean, right... ?

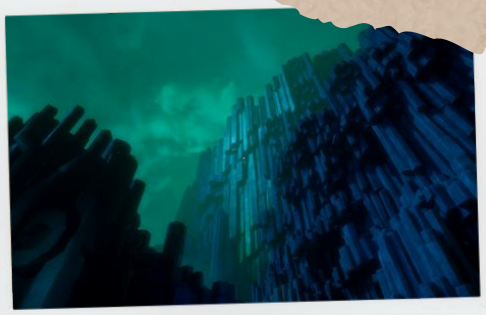
[2] Yes, I found the button to sprint, but it's very slow even with sprinting.

Visuals, Atmosphere, and Immersion

"I can feel the air is denser here in this mangrove swamp."

The slow walking speed allows the player to get immersed in the beautiful environments. Perhaps it's also the reason why I felt so connected to the story. It makes you realize why some people love walking simulators. A 2D point-and-click game could easily contain the same puzzles, but it would never create the same atmosphere.

In filmmaking, there is a phrase "Every frame a painting." Call of the Sea gets very close to that standard. To give you an idea, a reviewer for SGM is required to take at least ten screenshots of the game, but when I reached the end credits, I had 63. You can see many of them all around this text (and a few better ones on the Steam store page).



The path, hidden under the shroud of the night.



Your first stop on the island

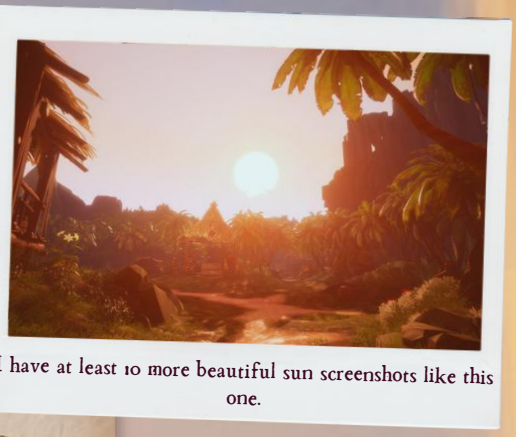
There is an interesting contrast between nature (trees, rivers, rocks), the ancient structures (temples, stairs), and the relatively modern leftovers from Harry's expedition (tents, crates, equipment). The environments are quite varied (as much as makes sense for the setting), providing a very interesting mix of atmospheres as one plays through the game.

Audio

"I like singing so much. Harry and I often sang together."

While there are no NPCs to talk to, the protagonist often talks to herself, typically explaining some background information (that's where the quotes come from). On top of that, some notes from Harry are voice-acted. The voice actress for Norah did an amazing job, conveying a wide range of emotions throughout her journey around the island.

I want to say that the soundtrack is also good, but I genuinely don't remember much of it. I guess that's a good sign... ?



I have at least 10 more beautiful sun screenshots like this one.

Conclusion

"Even today, so many years later, I still doubt whether I did the right thing."

There aren't many games like Call of the Sea. It is much more focused on puzzles than other walking simulators (e.g. Dear Esther) and emphasizes walking, environments, and narrative more than other first-person puzzles (e.g. Portal, Talos Principle). SteamGifts users might be familiar with Tacoma, which Call of the Sea reminds me of the most.

The game will take you between 5-8 hours (based on how thoroughly you explore). There are technically multiple endings, but you probably won't be replaying the game for that. At most, you might hop into one of the individual chapters to collect some of the "Easter Egg" achievements.

Ultimately, I recommend buying Call of the Sea only if you're a fan of walking simulators or if you're intrigued by the visuals. If you're looking for puzzles, you are probably better off getting something more challenging. Alternatively, the game has been bundled several times and appeared frequently on SteamGifts. If you already have it in your Steam library through one of these sources, I recommend that you give it a try.

ExcelElmira



Do you dare to enter? Are you afraid of what you will find within?

STORY	★★★★☆
GRAPHICS	★★★★★
GAMEPLAY	★★★★☆
SOUND	★★★★☆
FUN METER	★★★☆☆

the good

- Captivating story
- Beautiful atmosphere
- Creative puzzles

the bad

- Puzzles may be too easy
- Slow walking speed

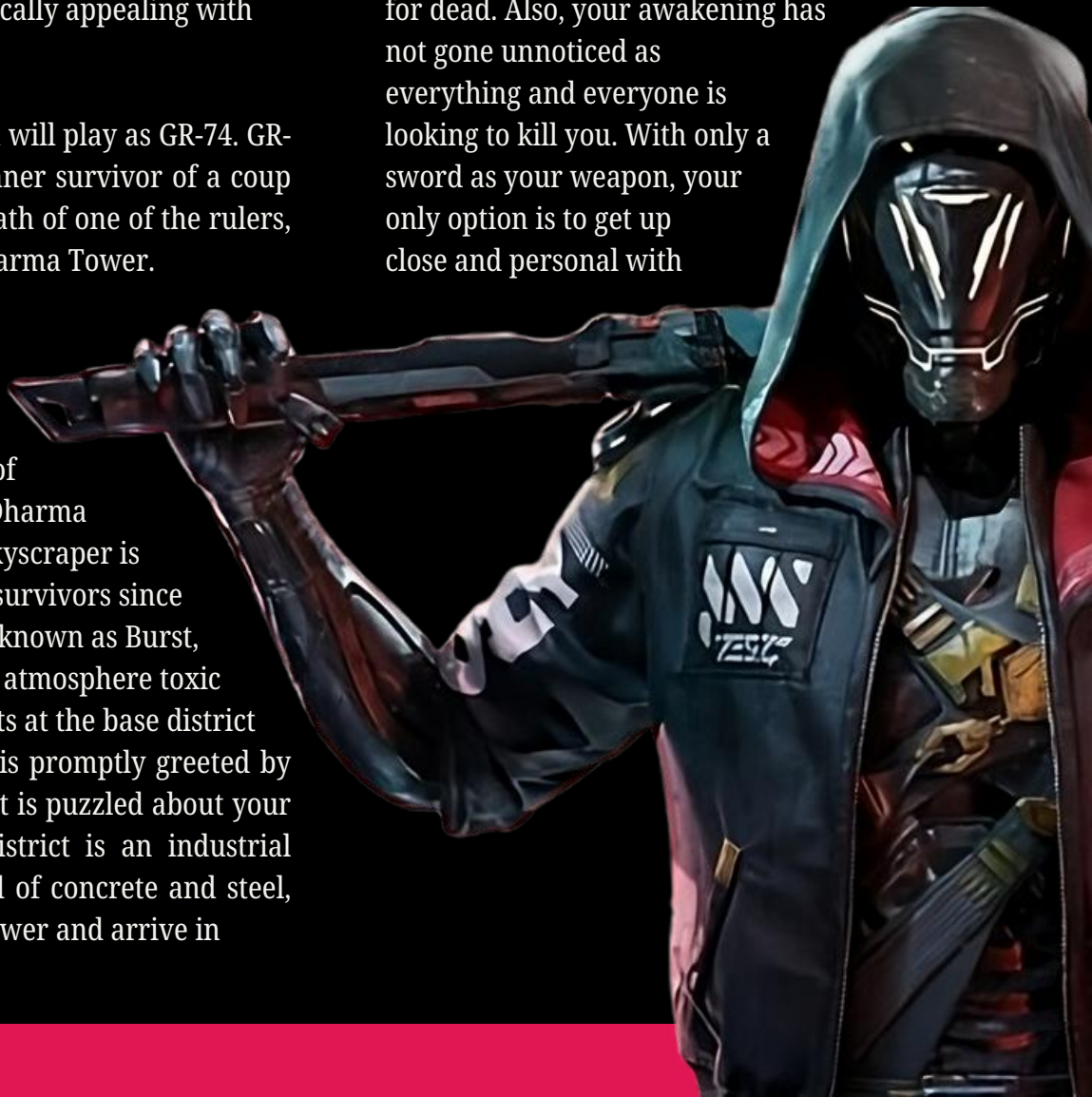
An alluring call to a beautiful adventure. Sea for yourself!

GHOSTRUNNER

The theme of a futuristic dystopian world full of cybernetic augmentations has been explored before in games like Deus Ex. Even today I fondly remember my time playing Deus Ex: Human Revolution. Nevertheless, Ghostrunner delivers an experience that I never encountered before: a 3D first-person platformer with action in the mix with the freedom to wall run and slash your foes in half with a katana. It reminds me of Cyber Hook, but more graphically appealing with an actual story.

In Ghostrunner you will play as GR-74. GR-74 is the sole ghostrunner survivor of a coup that resulted in the death of one of the rulers, the architect of the Dharma Tower. Ghostrunners are cyber-warriors, more machine than men. They are peacemakers with the sole purpose of maintaining order in Dharma Tower. This massive skyscraper is used as shelter by the survivors since the cataclysmic event, known as Burst, that turned the earth's atmosphere toxic for humans. Gr-74 boots at the base district the poorest area, and is promptly greeted by a mysterious voice that is puzzled about your recovery. The base district is an industrial area mainly composed of concrete and steel, but as you climb the tower and arrive in Dharma City, the vibe completely changes. The materials in the city are the same but the neon lights give it a more pleasant vibe; transforming the sterile look from the floors below into something more picturesque.

Ghostrunner looks good, but the game won't give you enough time to stop and smell the roses. You are on a mission to climb the tower to meet the new ruler who left you for dead. Also, your awakening has not gone unnoticed as everything and everyone is looking to kill you. With only a sword as your weapon, your only option is to get up close and personal with



with your enemies. Using every wall as a way to stay mobile, and sensory boost to give you precious time to decide what is the best action to take, you can use dash simultaneously to dodge a bullet or use your grappling hook to get out of the way. You are given a second chance, and that is all you get.

It's not completely unfair though. Your basic abilities can be upgraded. Along the way, the mysterious voice will lead you to terminals where you can unlock special abilities that can offer some respite when you are on a pinch. To activate these terminals you will have to complete puzzles. They are really easy and don't fit the overall hardcore vibe of the game. The gameplay when everything clicks is more akin to a dance with death. The only way to proceed is to have a perfect sequence of actions. The alternative is death.

The problem with perfect in this game is that platforming doesn't work on rails. It can be janky at times. The freedom the game offers you on how you approach your deadly encounters becomes its deadfall. Sometimes when wall-running you are a bit low or a bit high – enough to make you miss the mark. This can lead to some frustration because most of the time when you fail it's instant death.

You will die a lot. But don't let that discourage you. Afterall, you are dancing with death here, and remember you can customize GR-74 abilities to your liking. You have everything you need to clear it. In conclusion, I recommend Ghostrunner as it's a great first-person action platformer.

■ GrowingStrong

STORY	★★★☆☆
GRAPHICS	★★★★☆
GAMEPLAY	★★★★☆
SOUND	★★★★☆
FUN METER	★★★★☆

the good

- Cyberpunk music vibe
- Graphically astonishing for an indie team
- Satisfying combat

the bad

- The platforming can be janky at times
- The second boss is pretty boring (parry galore)

Run like a ghost, jump like a ninja, slice like a cyborg



extend the little wings which fly in this sky highly.

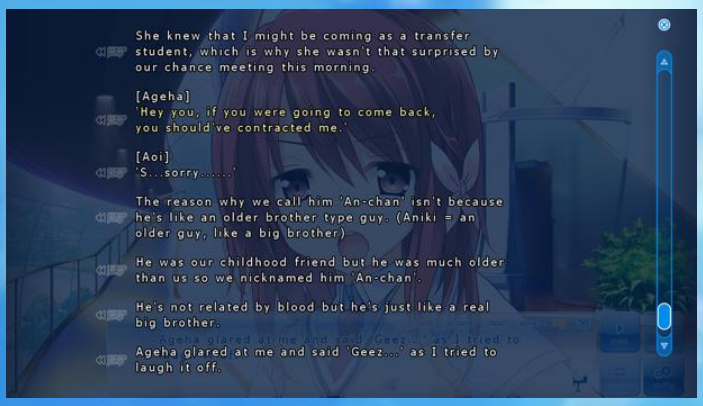
Hello, everyone! I am SGM's local goblin, Chocolate, and I'm here to talk about a long visual novel. It is about loss, gliders, being at high school at 20-something, not ending, a duck, and much more.

So buckle up because we're about to take to the sky, as if...



(as if our heart had wings, that is!)

If My Heart Had Wings (or IMHHW, as I'll call it from now on) is a visual novel that has been available on Steam since 2013. The original Japanese release was in 2012, and there is a key difference between the two: it was an eroge. All sexual content was removed by the official translation, but it can be added through a patch. Said removal is only one of the several criticisms this translation received – it was also berated for rewriting some scenes (one route, in particular, is rife with rewrites) and having a lot of mistakes.



Translation notes in the middle of dialogue. Off to a good start.

However, I didn't know any of this.



Hard to argue with that.

When I decided to review IMHHW, all I knew about it was what a quick look at the Steam store gave me, as well as the fuzzy feeling I might have seen this VN before in the Android store. It had one of those terrible timer systems that would let you see a limited number of lines per day unless you paid money (It turns out my phone would crash in the middle of the opening movie, so... yeah).

After I found out about this situation, I decided to review IMHHW just as it is on Steam – no patching, be it for sex scenes or QoL translation fixes.

I originally wanted to play through all routes and write my review afterward, but that's when I made a horrifying discovery:

IMHHW is very, very long.

The Steam page says, "Total Play Time: 20 to 30 hours." HLTB has 20 hours for main completion (which is code for one route) and 46 for completionism. VNDB lists 47 hours.

It took me almost 60 hours to finish one route.

extend the little wings which fly in this sky highly.

IMHHW's plot starts quite standard: Aoi, our main character, used to do road racing, but after having an accident, he can't race anymore.



My man Aoi hasn`t seen a chicken in his whole life and it shows.

In order to run away from it all, he moves back to his hometown. He will be living here as a dorm mother (taking care of, among others, Kotori, the main heroine bound to a wheelchair) while attending a famous technical school, where he reconnects with Ageha, his childhood friend and now classmate.

Circumstances lead him to discover the Soaring Club, which is on the verge of disbanding. A single member is still there – Amane, the "super repeat student," who should have graduated ages ago. Instead of attending class, she spends most of her time in the garage that serves as the club's base of operations, tinkering with the one element that makes this VN special: a glider.

Both Aoi and Kotori join the club, and later on, so does Ageha.



Kotori has some Extremely Relatable moments.

There are two more main characters, the twins. But it genuinely took me like 25 hours for them to enter the main plot, so...



See these two? Don't get used to it.



Initially, you can only romance Ageha or Kotori. After finishing one route, more options open up, revealing the mysteries one by one.

This is a good time to talk about the translation. In short, it's quite bad.

In detail, there are a lot of typos thrown around, weird explanations (just in the middle of the sentence), some scenes have been rewritten... for example, when Ageha and Kotori start calling each other by their first names. Moenovel, the game's localizers, must have thought that they had some audience who had never watched anime/read manga, because they instead rewrote it into Amane saying *she wished she was on a wheelchair.* Insane.

Midway through the Kotori route, the translation got even worse, which is actually remarkable, since it was already subpar. But suddenly characters changed pronouns, or name, or said one-liners that were completely out of context. Jarring, of course, but also very distracting.



????????

extend the little wings which fly in this sky highly.



Visually, the novel is quite pretty! Characters don't have too many poses, but they do have a lot of facial expressions. There are a bunch of neat backgrounds, and CGs appear every few hours.

Special mention goes to the Chibi CGs - those are always a riot, and just so fun to look at.



yeet

If the visuals are a bit on the standard side, the sound is really, really great: music was never in the way, and there are a few songs I actually grew very fond of. It gets a bit on my nerves since there is a gallery for CGs, but not for the music. Given how much I liked some of the tracks, I really do wish I had a way of listening to them on demand! There were two or three songs that represented what I call "no braincells moments," and they were amazing. One in particular would hype me instantly.

I had to dedicate save files solely to listening to the music, but I wish this wasn't necessary.

The sound effects were fine, and the ones related to the glider in particular were fun to listen to, and always gave the sense of movement that could be expected.

Finally, the voice acting! I really liked some of the voices, especially Kotori's and Ageha's. It did peeve me quite a bit that Aoi wasn't voiced - I guess it is so that people can self-insert, but given that the kid already has a face and a backstory... I dunno. I really wanted to hear his emotions too.

As a note, this might be part of why it took me so long to go through IMHHW: I love voice acting. Whenever I'm playing a game, I'll do so with the original voice acting if available, and always listen to the whole sentence, even if I finished reading earlier.

Characters are what make or break a visual novel, more so if it's a slice of life like this one.

Aoi is chipper and the straight man of the gang. Poor guy has his job cut out for him - taking care of the dorm, buying groceries, making dinner, going to school, working on the glider... but he falls in love with flying, as well as one of the girls. Alas, it was his destiny; nothing could be done.



Aoi, voice of the game, meets Kotori, face of the game, for the first time.

Kotori is great. She's the main heroine for a reason: her circumstances are special and interesting, and it makes you wonder how she ended up in that wheelchair. She's cocky, but has no self-esteem, bossy, but a crybaby. She's a bit of a contradiction. More than anything, she's in love with the sky, and nothing, not even her legs or her family, will make her give up on flying.

Ageha is a lot of fun too, my personal favorite. If I didn't have this review, I would have done her route - but as I said, Kotori is the face of the novel, so it had to be her. A tomboy who grew up into a cute girl, who still teases her friends and is just as much "one of the boys" as ever, what's not to love? Even if you don't romance her, she stays relevant as Aoi's best friend. I'm so happy about that.

Amane is... hard to judge. Considered a genius by everyone else and an idiot by herself. She's a huge eater but will get absorbed in her research and forget "calorie intake" for days. She's the main force behind the first arc of the novel, and while the conflict behind that didn't make sense to me, it is resolved. And then... she vanishes, kind of. After being one of the four main characters, she (finally!) graduates, and leaves the novel after 22 hours or so.



Thank you, Amane. Sounds extremely useful.

The twins, Asa and Yoru, are also hard to judge – for the same reason, or rather the opposite. Until Amane leaves, each of them has exactly one scene, and then they aren't seen again until 20 hours into the novel. They aren't formally introduced until 25 hours or so. Yoru doesn't even join the club.



Japan loves the Colonel.

She does come back and joins the gang again, but even after doing so, her presence is way more faint than before; she's more of a secondary character by then.



That means that almost anything I could say becomes kind of a spoiler, so I'll just announce they are cute and that Yoru's "I'm not even in the club" gag is hilarious and never gets old.

There are a lot of secondaries to round up this tale, so I'll only mention my favorites: An-chan, another childhood friend who was a bit older than the rest of them and is the big brother figure everyone needs in their life, Kanako, who's a bit insane and teases people with gusto, and Ma-bou, yet another childhood friend who has a grudge against Aoi, at least when he remembers about it. He's great and a lot of fun.



An-chan says: Gay Rights.



She said the thing!



No matter what he says, Ma-bou will support us when things get rough.

Of course, I still haven't mentioned the best character in the game, the first person Aoi meets after arriving back at his hometown.



My beloved.

Hatto is the best.

Saying IMHHW has pacing problems is a mistake - no scene feels too out of place. Yes, there is the token fanservice bathroom scene, but given this was originally an eroge, I can't complain to much. Most scenes either portray working on the glider, emotional bonds/growth, or just nice slice of life goodness, and it all feels necessary. And yet...

...it is so, so long.

This should have been several games. The first arc ends after 20-something hours, and it solves the conflict quite satisfactorily. Not perfectly, mind you - which would have been a great sequel hook. A school year has passed. We flew and came close to our objective. But no, it continues.



Personally, I hate these kinds of scenes, but some of you guys may want to see it.

In a sense, it is at this point that the novel actually begins: everything up to now has been the common route.

So, what's the conflict taking place in this first arc?

Amane, as mentioned, is known as the super senpai. She has been here for years - at some point, they mention she was a student at the academy before Aoi *left* town. She strategically fails her courses in order to remain a student.

I feel like part of the problem is me. Maybe I'm not the main audience; maybe I'm too much of an adult. But it just feels insane to me how the game tries to tell me that Amane's graduation is *bad*, that she should be allowed to stay and play with the glider for longer, and that she has made these promises to *adults* who don't care about what she *wants*. And so, I'm supposed to be mad and sad and frustrated about a 20-something-year-old being forced to leave high school. Amane has overstayed her welcome, but she doesn't want her school life to end; she doesn't want to graduate until she has fulfilled her objective. And so, school funds are directed to her one-woman club and its garage, instead of clubs whose members are the actual teenagers attending classes.

I kinda ran outta air there.

Dunno man, it's just... so weird to me.

Anyway, at the end of the year, she graduates, but her objective, which she considers fulfilled, is now the dream of the rest of the club, so here we go again. Another year awaits.

And 30 hours later, the credits roll.



Wow! We finished the g-

And *then* we get another scene, in which there is a FLASHBACK, telling us exactly what happened just after the final scene. And when the flashback ends, the scene just CONTINUES. And then there is PLOT. And then, there is a TIME-SKIP, AND WE GET YET ANOTHER SCENE-

This VN managed to do something no other game had done before: it got so long, it could have ended so many times and just decided not to, so even I started skipping voice lines. I was desperate for it to end.

IMMHW, just like Amane, overstays it's welcome. My biggest gripe is that neither of them acknowledge it's over, their time is up, and they just won't finish.

— ChocolateVC

STORY	★★★☆☆
GRAPHICS	★★★☆☆
GAMEPLAY	N/A
SOUND	★★★★★
FUN METER	★★☆☆☆

the good

- Hatto (and other secondary characters)
- Songs were great
- I now know a lot about gliders

the bad

- It never ends
- Translation was BAD



PD: The novel doesn't add props to the backgrounds, which gives us gems like this one. What pictures, Kotori?!

Soaring high... just to crash.





Broken Age is a point-and-click adventure. For most people, this is all the review they need in order to decide if they want to play the game or not. If you're not one of those people, read on!

Developed under the lead of Tim Schafer (Grim Fandago, Full Throttle), the game was funded through a very successful Kickstarter campaign started in 2012 and released in two acts in 2014 and 2015.

Fundamentally, Broken Age doesn't try to reinvent the wheel. The game is in many ways similar to other point-and-click adventure games (aside from the two mentioned above, frequent SteamGifts users might be familiar with Deponia, Anna's Quest, Edna & Harvey, or Syberia...). To review such a game, one then has to look at the details – how well does the game execute the different parts that make up the point-and-click formula. And that's how this review is structured.

Main Characters

As soon as you start the game, you see a scene split in two parts, with each of our main characters sleeping on one side. On the left, Vella is snoozing under a tree with an idyllic lake village in the background. The right side shows Shay, on a bed in a futuristic spaceship.

Throughout the game these two teenagers both defy their elders in a standard coming-of-age trope. Vella revolts against being sacrificed to an invading monster, while Shay tries to escape the mundane routine enforced on him by his overprotective AI "parents". For most of the game, their stories are completely separate, only coming together near the end. From the player's perspective this works very well, as you are always free to switch to the other character, if you get stuck or wish for a change of scenery. Without spoiling too much, the way that the stories eventually intertwine also works very, very well.



Vella is very brave.

The characters are both pretty like-able, supported by excellent voice acting and detailed animations for all possible interactions. Even when I cannot exactly relate to any of them, their motivation, reactions, and emotions are very well written and voice-acted. I often found myself rooting for Vella as her behavior projects more curiosity, maturity, and ambition, whereas Shay comes off as a bit more annoying / annoyed. But that might just be me and my cringe when playing as a teenage boy.



Setting & Side Characters

Where Broken Age really excels is the world and the characters that fill it. From the first moments of the game, I was stunned by the beautiful hand-drawn art whose quality keeps surprising you throughout the entire game. You may see examples of it on the Steam store page (and in this review), but it just hits different when you're seeing it on full screen and the people move around.



Shay is also brave.

Naturally, the story takes the main characters around many different locations. From various sections of Shay's spaceship, to villages near Vella's hometown, each new place has a very unique "vibe" to it — there's a beach village built with sand, there's a "trophy room" in the spaceship, there's a cozy home of a friendly woodcutter ... The beautiful art already gives the locations enough charm on its own, but then there's also a plethora of unique (quirky) non-playable characters (NPCs) who truly breathe life into the game and provide some interesting "lore" to the locations. Like, for instance in the beach village, women dress like fish if they want to look fancy. And there's also an ambitious sand architect who struggles with the sea destroying his creations. Each of the NPCs is pretty memorable, with a unique personality / backstory, excellent voice acting and occasionally even pretty humorous lines. Some of the NPCs reappear later in the story, allowing us to even see a bit of character arc!!!



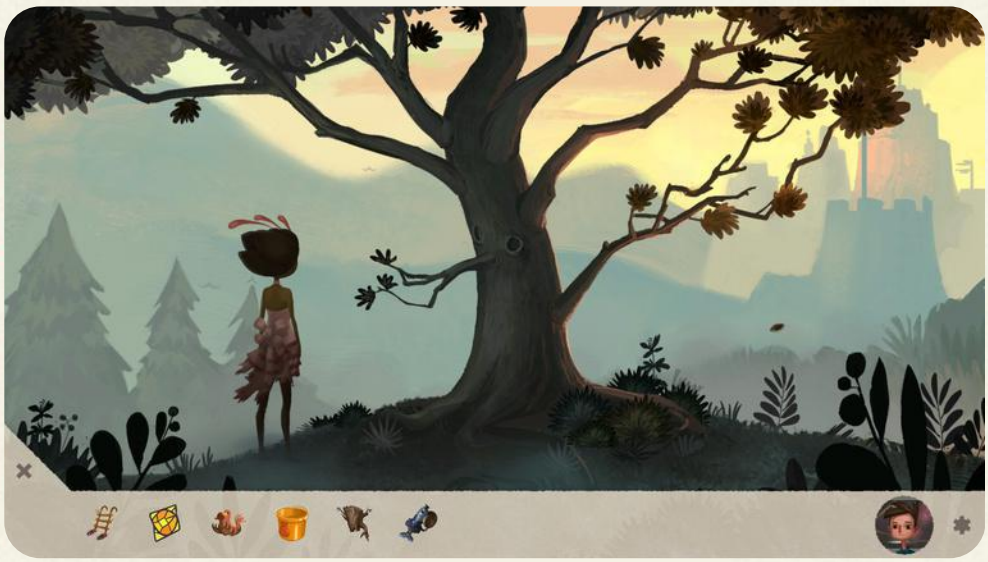
The art in this game is something else...

Until the end, there is no big "lore dump" on the player, so we only learn about the world from interacting with the NPCs and exploration. This feels slightly strange, because the player doesn't even know some basic information about the world (e.g. what world is this even), but we learn many details such as which town is holding elections or what kinds of trees grow around. On the other hand, it feels very immersive and natural to learn about the world this way.

Puzzles

Just like in every proper point-and-click adventure, there are puzzles in Broken Age. The puzzles are pretty creative, mostly logical and there are quite helpful hints naturally embedded in the dialogue (of either the protagonists or the NPCs). Think of something like: "Wow, these coconut shells make a lot of noise" when you know that a few screens away someone is sleeping who you need to wake up.

There are also many funny interactions if you try to use objects incorrectly (e.g. using a shirt on a TV, your character might quip: "It has buttons, but it's not a remote controller."). Some Steam achievements even encourage you to use objects incorrectly to hear many of these lines.



1. The basic UI with the inventory and the button to switch character.

Often you can even see a few steps in advance. Imagine the following (made-up example): You notice that if you find a hammer, you can use the nails and planks in your inventory to build a ladder to reach a golden nugget on top of a very tall rock. Then, use the nugget at a market to buy a banana, so that you can give this banana to a monkey guarding the bridge that you need to cross. And therein lies my only problem with Broken Age. There are a few times in the game when you find yourself in a situation like the one described above, without seemingly ANY way to obtain the hammer. Yep, a few of the puzzles in the later stages of the game are insanely difficult. And it's not the "sudoku" kind of difficulty, it's the "what-am-I-supposed-to-do" kind of difficulty. Looking back, I can see some logic in the solutions, but expect to spend hours banging your head against the wall if you're stubborn (like me) and refuse to use a guide.

I recommend checking a "spoiler-free guide", like e.g. this one: https://www.nicegamehints.com/guide/broken-age/. To be fair, 90% of the puzzles in the game are appropriately difficult and satisfying to solve, but the unfortunate truth is that the players will remember the remaining 10%.



One of the better puzzles involving knots.

Conclusion

Overall, Broken Age is an excellent game. A lover of point-and-click adventures will find that this game has everything one can wish for – a good story, amazing characters, breathtaking art with celebrity voice acting as a cherry on top! Just don't be afraid to check a guide every once in a while if you get too stuck at one of the insane puzzles.

ExcelElmira

STORY	★★★★★
GRAPHICS	★★★★★
GAMEPLAY	★★★☆☆
SOUND	★★★★★
FUN METER	★★★★☆

the good

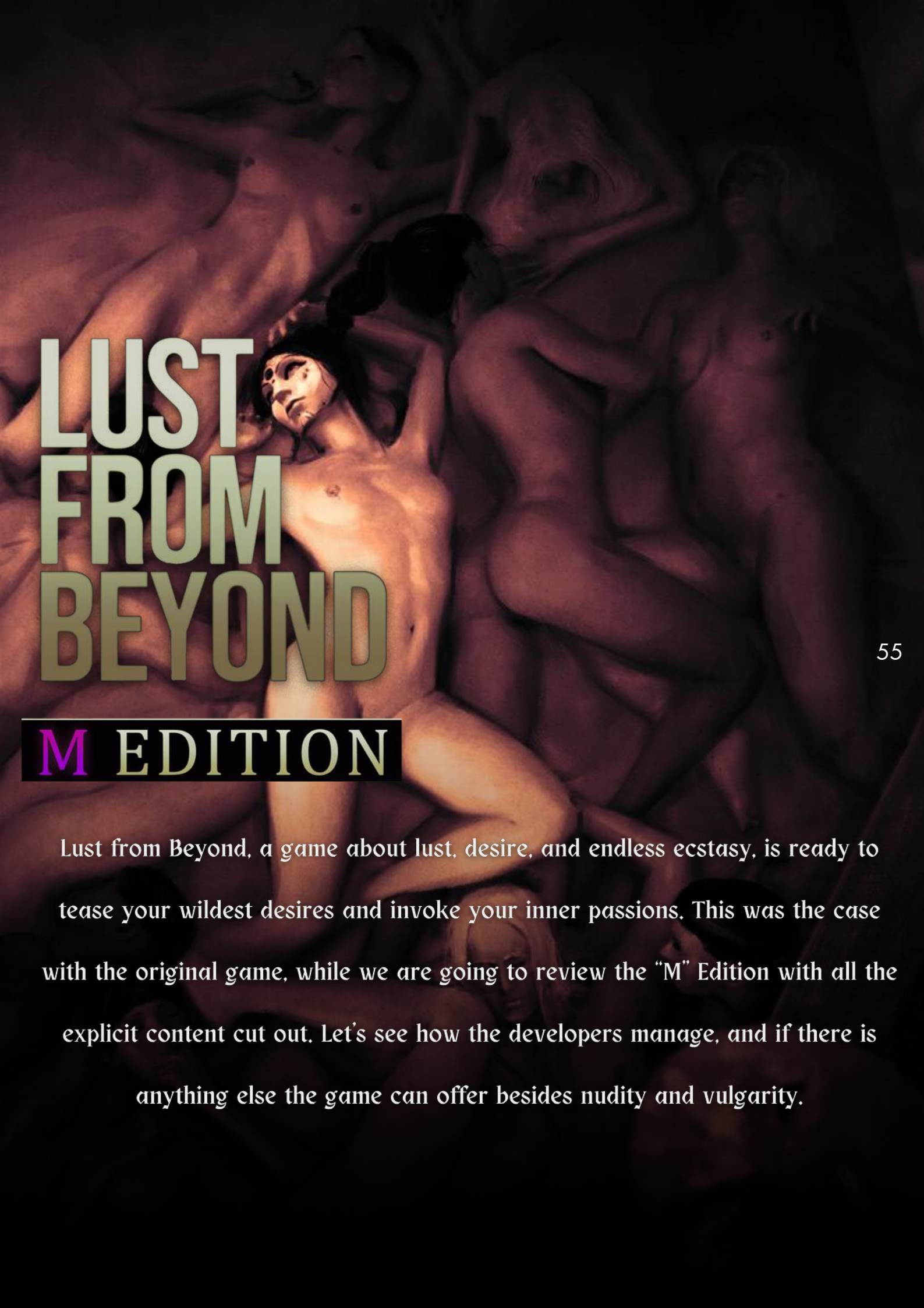
- Beautiful hand-drawn graphics
- Very high-quality voice acting
- Captivating world-building
- Interesting places and characters

the bad

- Some extremely frustrating puzzles

A tale for the ages





Lust from Beyond, a game about lust, desire, and endless ecstasy, is ready to tease your wildest desires and invoke your inner passions. This was the case with the original game, while we are going to review the "M" Edition with all the explicit content cut out. Let's see how the developers manage, and if there is anything else the game can offer besides nudity and vulgarity.

Lust from Beyond was developed by Movie Games and released in 2021. It is a sequel to Lust for Darkness from 2018. The first game had such mixed reviews the developers tried to improve with the sequel. In fact, they were so careful with the game that they released a free Prologue in 2019, an hour and a half worth of gameplay. Players loved that and anticipated the devs would be cooking something grand with the main release. A year later, another freebie was released called Lust from Beyond - Scarlet. It contained no spoilers about the story, but introduced eroticism and occultism to spice up the soup the devs had been making. Another year passes, and the full game is finally released. Truly, the game is average at best, but the nudity being featured was favored among the players. It would be a challenge to rate a game with explicit nudity elements due to the horniness effect it can have on the audience; sex sells after all. Luckily we've got the M Edition, which purposefully cuts the nudity features from the game. This way we can rate the game for what it actually is and not have our judgment clouded by lust.





Fun fact 1 – Developer

Movie Games is a syndicate of smaller companies with a large variety of indie games. They are mainly focused on developing simulation games, hence the walking simulator aspects in Lust from Beyond.

The developers tried to grasp almost every genre applicable to the game and included the nudity which served as honey, both holding the game together and attracting the players. With the honey filtered in the M Edition, Lust from Beyond can hardly stand out among similar games. Lust from Beyond offers the following features:

- Plain story
- Rare jumpscares
- Constant fetch quests
- Cheeky treasure-hunting
- Weak stealth
- Simplistic puzzles
- Walking simulator
- Useless skills system
- Wacky combat
- Boring achievements



Let's go through these game-forming elements and see what actually went wrong and what worked well. The M edition cuts the explicit content from the game, which made some scenes confusing rather than adding anything to the plot. Some minor changes have occurred to props as well. Fleshlight in the drawer becomes a porn tape, nude statues get their open parts covered and sex scenes trimmed of the best parts. It still doesn't make the game family-friendly - you will still find mutilated human bodies and other gore elements, it's a horror game after all.

FUN FACT 2 – M EDITION

WHY DOES THE M VERSION EXIST? THE DEVELOPERS EXPLAIN IT AS TRYING TO OPEN THE GAME TO A BROADER AUDIENCE SINCE ADULT-ONLY GAMES ARE UNAVAILABLE IN MARKETS SUCH AS GERMANY AND CHINA. ULTIMATELY, THE ORIGINAL GAME MARKS 117K COPIES SOLD, WHILE THE M EDITION BARELY CROSSED 8.5K COPIES SOLD. IT ONLY INDICATES THAT THE GAME'S STRONGEST SALES PITCH WAS EXPLICIT CONTENT AND WITHOUT IT THERE ISN'T MUCH INCENTIVE TO PLAY THE GAME.





COMMUNITY-MADE !



While the devs tried to stay relevant in too many aspects of the game at once, it is rather perceived as Mediocrities of All Trades and Masters of None. Apart from the graphics of course, they are amazing as much as Unity can offer. Perhaps the idea behind this was "if one aspect of the game underperforms, we still have 9 more to offer". When it comes to attention to detail, we have to give credit where its due. The devs really put a lot of effort into the rich environments and interactable optional objects found around the levels, similar to the system in Amnesia. The number of details in the environment is insane. It would have been a great side dish to the main course if only the devs did not choose to hide a few key items in the environment necessary to proceed through the level.



Graphically, Unity is not the best engine to produce a constantly pleasant image, but it is capable enough. Visuals are very much Agony and Scorn-like, but with more diverse color palettes. This enabled some of the best visuals, especially in the non-human world in the game with more vibrant colors. Truly the best aspect of the game. Although it's not flawless and it all comes down to Unity game engine. The most noticeable one is the problem with anti-aliasing, the technology used to make image edges smooth. Sometimes it just doesn't do its job and mostly in the human world for some reason. In addition to occasional fps drops in big open environments, the game has an issue in the form of long loading screens.



Now with all the good stuff said about the game, let's get talking about the plot, it's a story-driven game after all. With the nudity gone, this element must carry the game on its back. The devs claimed they were inspired by H.P. Lovecraft and similar genre writers, but honestly that's quite farfetched. You play as Victor Holloway, an antiquarian suffering from visions in the form of nightmares. Victor is a porn addict with sleeping problems who takes medicine to keep his sanity in check.

You've been to many doctors, but none could help you. Together with Ruby, your significant other, you have decided on something more experimental - a Freud-like doctor from out of town. An appointment has been set, but due to unforeseen circumstances you were late and discover yourself in a small town at midnight. It appears that some sort of festivities took place in the town with only dim hints about it found in local newspapers. At some point Victor will find himself rescued by a cult society and taken care of at their mansion where the events happening around him will be explained.

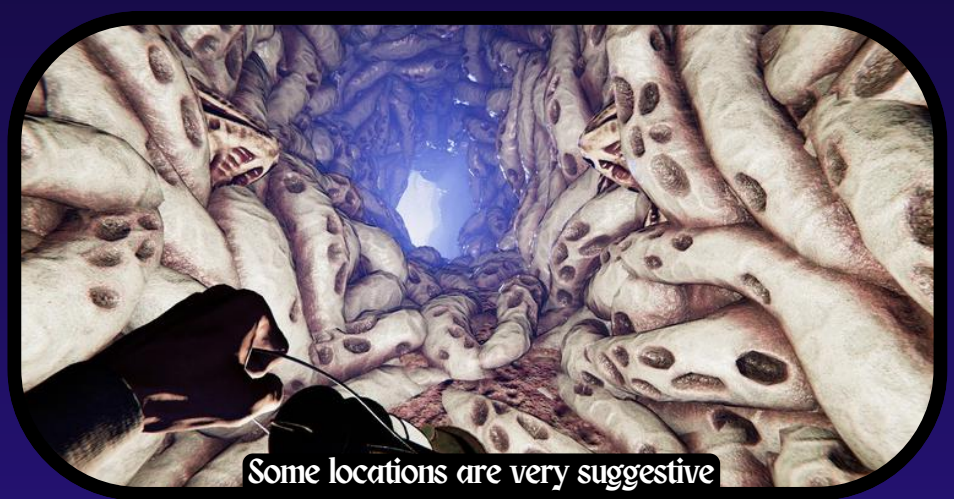


The story falls short in many aspects, including originality and character design. The devs listened to the feedback to the first title, but made Lust from Beyond longer than it needs to be. Dialogue is average, filled with teenage drama during plot-crucial scenes. This makes you roll your eyes and skip the scenes asap. The main character, as well as sometimes NPC's, use profanity and vulgar language in seemingly normal conversations, which makes it feel out of place. Perhaps it would fit more with nudity included and without it - the vulgarity should have been trimmed as well. Along with the profanities the main protagonist makes terrible attempts at jokes in stressful situations.

The story will lead the main character to the different universe, which he prior had visions about. It is an ever-changing world called Lusst'ghaa, which can be entered via portals. It will be up to you to find out the source and purpose of your visions and unravel the secrets hidden in the other world.

The main plot is divided into two parts with the difference of half a year of time. It really breaks the pace of the game and all the creeping horrors and atmosphere is just swept from your shoulders once you see the "Half a year later" message. The 2nd part of the game is very weak plot-wise. You are given a lot of fetch quests in the mansion to stretch your stay in the game. It is especially painful when you're given one such task after another, given the game's movement speed is relatively low. The plot gets much more blank and it feels like it was written in a hurry.

There are a few puzzles in the game, nothing difficult. A few were reskinned and given to the player once more, and some are there to really make you hate the slow pace of the game due to lots of running around required.



Some locations are very suggestive





The safe house is full of positive reinforcement before your journeys

You can learn lore by speaking to characters, reading letters and local newspapers. Additionally, the game offers Books of Secrets, which are side stories that you can learn more about once you get all the pieces of information scattered throughout the game.

The player is offered several choices in the game concerning whether to let a character live or die. These influence whether the player will get a good or bad ending. Generally, the story is long, boring and underdeveloped at times. Now let's see what the devs have brought us in regards to gameplay and mechanics.

First off, we disable head bobbing and motion blur. And perhaps tweak the brightness up since the game is quite dark. With the slow pace the game offers, the constant screen shaking and blurry graphical elements are irritating and might lead to nauseousness. Lust from Beyond offers simplistic combat, you get to aim (even with melee weapons) and hit. That's about it. While combat is offered, the stealth approach is promoted more. And it is trashy. The stealth element is limited to crouching and hiding in closets. Having said that, you would rather slash the enemies and explore the levels in safety. Due to the same reason, you will not hide in lockers most likely.





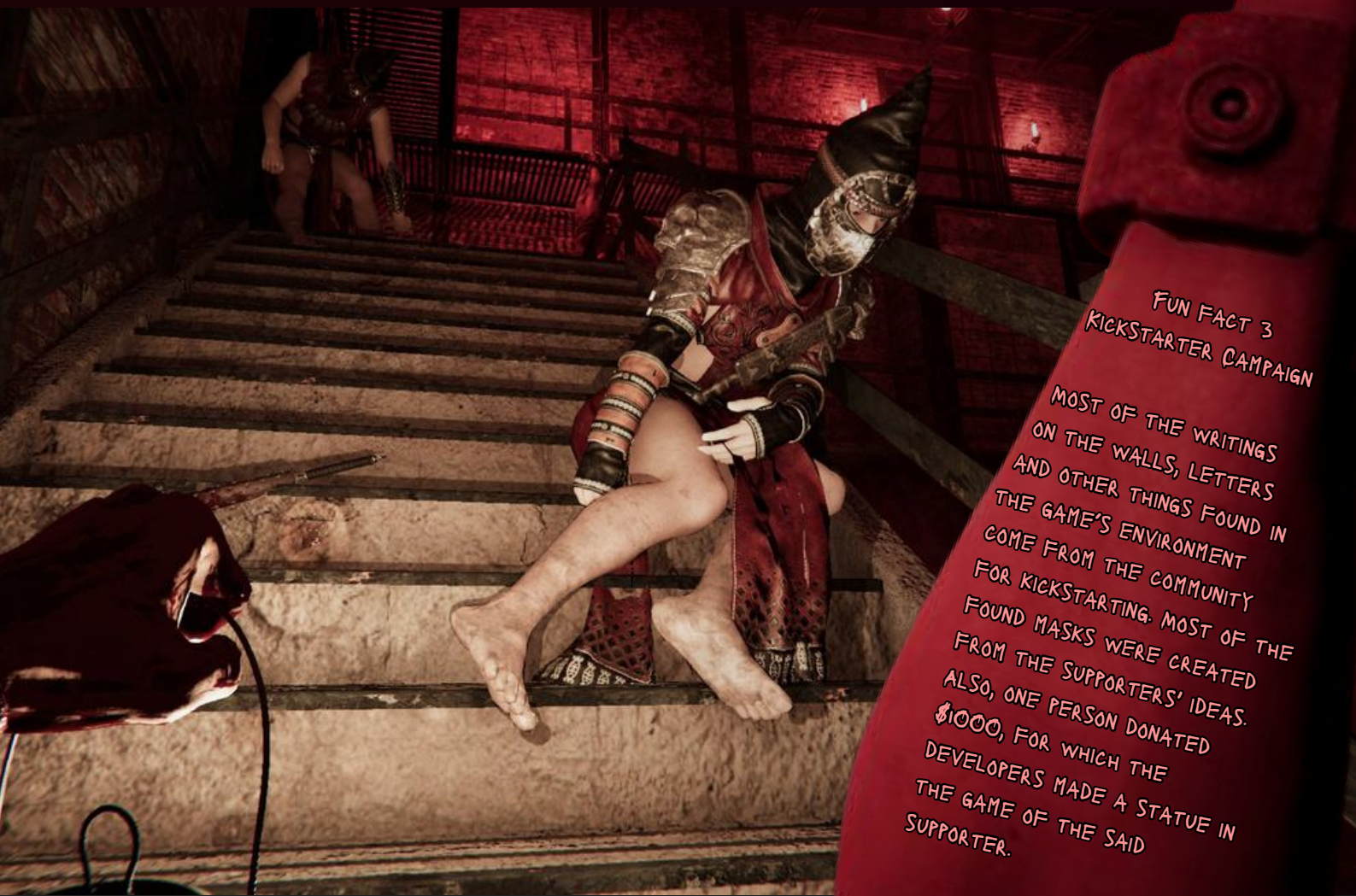


Once you're at the lowest, you will see otherworldly portals with tentacles sticking out. Staring into them for too long will hurt your health points until you die. That's better, but is there more? Yes! If you have a knife in your inventory and your sanity and health points get fully depleted, your death will be much more illustrative.

Losing 1 health point will give the player a slightly red border around their screen, which soon will be annoying if you don't heal up quickly. Luckily, the game is not difficult and there's a lot of healing items in the levels. Having said that, the game also offers stat upgrades, such as more health or sanity points, quicker crouched movement etc. This feature is really out of place and does not fit the game genre, or at least its implementation.

Quick-time events. There are a few in the game, but they are not challenging and do not fit well with the slow pace of Lust from Beyond. Yet another game feature that perhaps nobody asked for.

You stay alive by not losing all your Health and Sanity points. Depleting all your health points makes you die, simple, right? Well, what about the sanity points? Those ones bring some flavor to the gameplay. When your sanity is low, you start having visions, your screen becomes slightly shaken and you can sometimes hear a distant monstrous growl.



FUN FACT 3
KICKSTARTER CAMPAIGN

MOST OF THE WRITINGS ON THE WALLS, LETTERS AND OTHER THINGS FOUND IN THE GAME'S ENVIRONMENT COME FROM THE COMMUNITY FOR KICKSTARTING. MOST OF THE FOUND MASKS WERE CREATED FROM THE SUPPORTERS' IDEAS. ALSO, ONE PERSON DONATED $1000, FOR WHICH THE DEVELOPERS MADE A STATUE IN THE GAME OF THE SAID SUPPORTER.

One of the tags the game is missing on Steam is Walking Simulator. There's just too much walking around the levels involved. Almost every level you will encounter feels like a playground that you will complete several tasks in. Especially when the key items are hidden in different parts of the level. Normally, for horror games it's not a problem, but rather an opportunity to scare the player with jumpscares or with creeping atmosphere. Unfortunately, the game lacks both. There is very little ambient and jumpscares present.

The game will offer a few boss fights, which totally wreck the game's story-driven horror survival approach. The fights are lame, repetitive and plain boring. Also, there are collectibles presented as treasure hunting. As the levels are often vast and open, the player is sometimes offered to find hidden figurines throughout the level, in order to later deposit them and receive some rewards. The earlier mentioned Books of Secrets, the side story collectibles, are also found on the levels.



Constant change in environment is a nice touch



Lusst'ghaa, the other world, will be a treat for your eyes early on since you will not encounter it often in the beginning. Going to that world will make your eyes water at how brilliantly the variety of colors is presented in this game. As you progress, you will get used to the level design and even notice a few sections reused. But the vivid colors will always be an amusement.

As for bugs, there are a few, but nothing game-breaking. The enemies can hit you through walls in certain rare locations if you're being chased. Sometimes crouching during combat will make the enemies be unable to harm you. You can use this to become an evil little gremlin to spice up your gameplay if you will. Sometimes side quests might bug out, like an NPC says that they are giving you the key to get healing herbs from a locked chest, but the key is never really given to you.

At some point you will go undercover and put on a different garment, but when you look down to see your legs, you can still notice that you are still wearing the same trousers.

The enemy's variety is pretty small and not being focused on. It really puts your guard down and meeting a new enemy type might not make you feel threatened. You relax and walk around the new slow enemy, but suddenly it starts breathing louder and charges at you! Sometimes the game can surprise you in a good way.






When it comes to audio, it is mediocre. Sound placement in levels with multiple floors above each other might break and you will hear the sounds coming from the upstairs as if the action is happening right next to you. As mentioned earlier, the ambient sound is alright, but it is rare, especially in Lusst'ghaa. The sound that will always accompany you will be your footsteps, not very atmospheric. Apart from that, some sound effects as in completing a quest are very indie and makes it feel like you're playing Candy Crush.

There is a variety of additional content available. Achievements are meh. Most are story-related and are unmissable, some are rewarded for collecting stuff and some are hidden secrets. As the game was backed on Kickstarter, the devs included a secret room dedicated to the most generous supporters which included masks named after the community members.

The cherry on top of the additional content is Character Inspection. It's available from the main menu and features inspection of the in-game characters with the ability to change their outfits and animations, based on what the player has already encountered in the game. Also, there is a free Goodies pack available on Steam which includes the interviews, wallpapers and other stuff which some fans adore.



You WILL come across questionable stuff

A year ago a sequel to Lust from Beyond was announced called Lust of God, which was licensed to be developed by a different company - Madmind Studio, the developer of Agony. Let's wait and see what they will deliver.

On the ending note I would like to conclude that the game is playable and beautiful visually. While the rest of the game is whacky, there certainly is something to cling to, even in the M edition with all the explicit content reduced. Even though the game constantly talks about lust, desire and endless ecstasy, none of these can be really experienced in the game. Perhaps the non-censored edition lives up to those expectations.

The developers surely tried to put as much variety of content into the game as possible, perhaps quality over quantity would have brought more success. If you're still on the fence about this game, there's a free demo available on Steam. Should you want to compare the M edition with the original title - there's the free Prologue available on Steam as well. Both should give you enough insight to decide on which version suits you best.

■ Sir Packet Lossalot



STORY	★★☆☆☆
GRAPHICS	★★★★☆
GAMEPLAY	★★☆☆☆
SOUND	★★☆☆☆
FUN METER	★★☆☆☆

the good

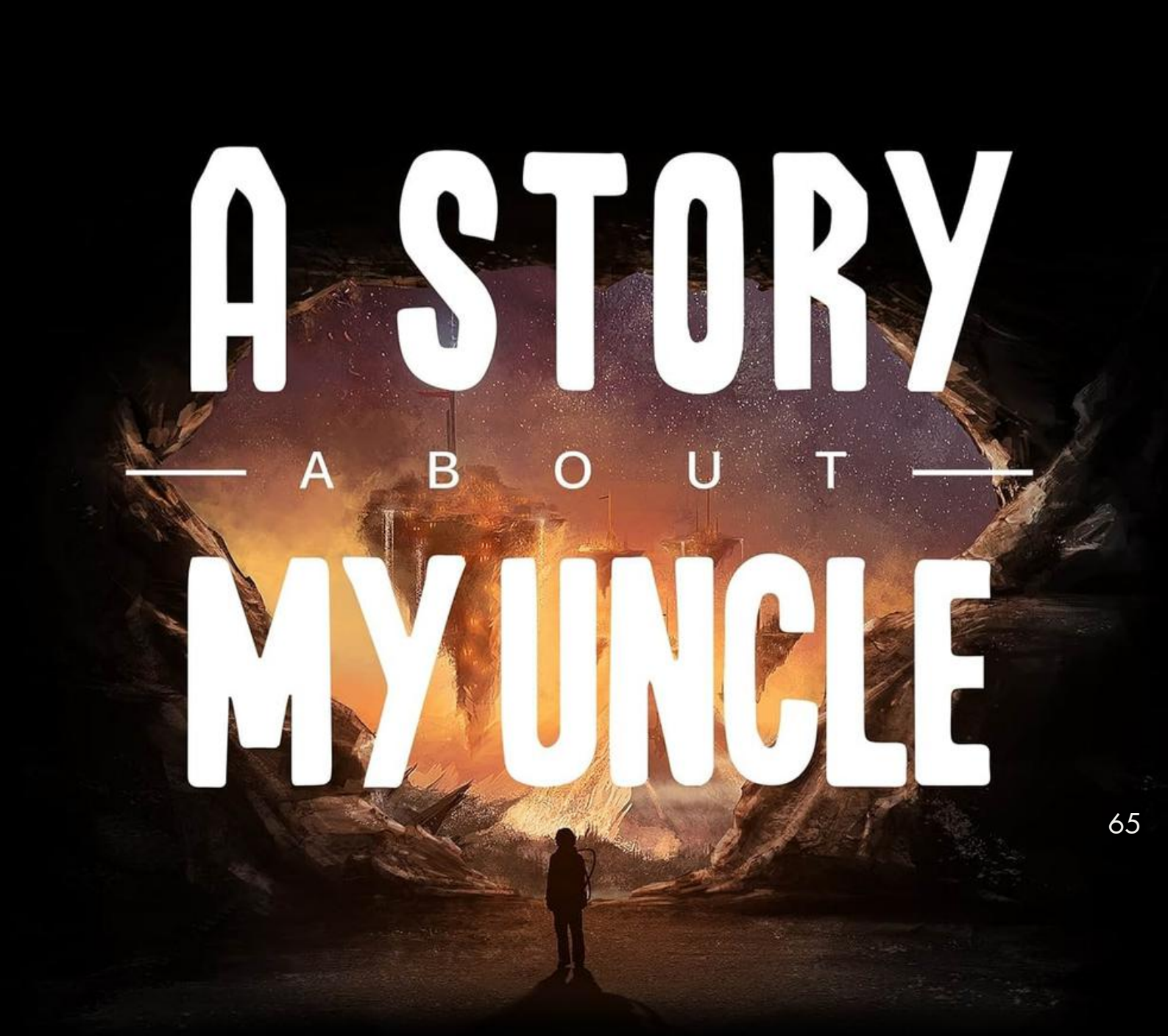
- Stunning color use in graphics
- Impressive details in environment
- Treasure hunting

the bad

- Long, boring story
- Weak gameplay
- Not scary
- Walking simulator

Stabby horny Gremlin simulator





At first glance, this game intrigued me to explore its magical world, meet new and interesting characters, and uncover a strange and unique story. Unfortunately, all I was left with were more frustrations and desires as I strove to complete the game.



Let us begin!

GAMEPLAY & EXPLORATION

A Story About My Uncle is a first-person platformer with a strong focus on exploration and movement. You play as a young boy searching for his missing uncle in a fantastical world filled with floating islands, glowing crystals, and mysterious creatures. The core gameplay revolves around a grappling hook mechanic that allows you to swing through the environment with ease, offering a unique sense of freedom.

The controls are tight and somewhat responsive, making the platforming feel fluid and satisfying if you understand what you're doing. Mastering the grappling hook is essential as you navigate through various obstacles and challenges. The game requires precise timing and a good sense of momentum to traverse the expansive and often vertically oriented levels. Being the difficult game that it is, you will need some time to adjust yourself to the flow of the game.



Second world opening.

The world is designed with exploration in mind, offering multiple paths and secrets to discover. Each area is visually distinct, featuring vibrant colors and imaginative landscapes that draw you deeper into the game’s fantastical setting. You'll encounter various biomes, from lush forests and icy caverns to alien-like environments that push the boundaries of traditional platforming levels.

While the platforming can be challenging at times, it can be rewarding when you master the mechanics and navigate through difficult sections. The game introduces a few new mechanics and obstacles as you progress, but struggles to make the overall experience too different from area to area.

For example, you'll encounter wind currents that boost your jumps, bounce pads that propel you higher, and energy crystals that recharge your grappling hook mid-air, adding layers of complexity to the movement system, but the game seems to shy away from introducing more features and different platforming areas, missing the potential to be an incredible platformer game.



Did I make it or not?

VISUALS & PRESENTATION

The game is not visually impressive, despite having vibrant colors and imaginative environments. Each level is interestingly crafted. The art style perfectly complements the fantastical setting.

The visual design is intriguing, with each area feeling fantastic and out of this world. The levels are crafted to encourage curiosity, with hidden areas and collectibles that reward thorough exploration. The use of light and color enhances the dreamlike atmosphere, making every location feel like a new adventure waiting to be uncovered.



Stray Village

SOUND & VOICE-ACTING

The sound design in A Story About My Uncle is notable for its well-crafted atmosphere, featuring a soundtrack that effectively heightens the sense of adventure and exploration throughout the fantastical landscapes. Each environment is accompanied by ambient sounds that immerse the player deeper into the game's narrative and world.

An important element is paying attention to sound cues as your gauntlet charges up, or using the boosters and understanding you ran out of boost.



Shhh! Don't move!

While the voice acting is serviceable, it leans towards amateurish delivery, occasionally detracting from the otherwise immersive experience. Despite this, the inclusion of full voice acting adds a layer of storytelling that enhances the overall narrative engagement for me.

STORY & WRITING

The narrative is one of the game's weakest points. It follows the journey of a boy searching for his uncle in a magical world, uncovering secrets, and learning about his uncle's past along the way. The writing is heartfelt and touching, but the end does fall short, and it happens very abruptly.

In addition to the core gameplay, the narrative unfolds through environmental storytelling and interactions with the inhabitants of this mystical world. You'll meet various characters who provide insights into your uncle's whereabouts and the history of the land, adding depth to your quest.



Maddie.

CONTROLS & STEAM DECK

When it comes to reviewing games, I make it a point to delve into aspects that often go overlooked, particularly the controls. In A Story About My Uncle, the controls are fairly simple and easy to use. Positioning is essential in the game. As you jump and trust yourself from platform to platform, you'll find yourself often failing to land perfectly on the desired platform. This can cause a lot of frustration at times, making you either waste gauntlet hooks or miss the platform altogether.

The game runs well on the Steam Deck, but I can't fully recommend it since the game focuses a lot on precision and careful planning.

BUGS & GLITCHES

Now, let's discuss the state of this game. Considering the time spent with the game, I can confirm that I've encountered very few bugs and glitches in the game. Most commonly, having hooks not fully triggering, falling to my death, clipping through objects, and failing to land due to positioning, despite looking like I can make that jump 100%.



Almost to the end.



CONCLUSION

A Story About My Uncle is a unique first-person platformer with imaginative world-building and a heartfelt narrative. While the grappling mechanics are innovative and fun, the game is hampered by its short length and occasional frustrating sections. The visual presentation is decent, but not exceptional, and the voice acting leaves much to be desired. The story, though touching, doesn't quite deliver a strong ending. Overall, it offers an okay experience for fans of narrative-driven platformers, but it may not be worth a full-price purchase. Consider picking it up during a sale if you're interested in its unique mechanics and heartfelt story.

■ Vasharal

STORY	★☆☆☆☆
GRAPHICS	★★☆☆☆
GAMEPLAY	★★☆☆☆
SOUND	★★☆☆☆
FUN METER	★★☆☆☆

the good

- Unique grappling mechanics.
- Heartwarming narrative with a touching conclusion.
- Engaging, non-violent gameplay.
- Fairly smooth first-person platforming experience.

the bad

- Some platforming sections can be frustrating.
- Relatively short game length.
- Limited replay value.



IRON HARVEST

1920 +



Introduction

Iron Harvest is a real-time strategy (RTS) game released in 2020. Developed by the German studio King Art Games, the game won some awards at the regional Deutscher Entwicklerpreis.

Iron Harvest takes place in an alternative history universe of 1920+ created by the Polish artist Jakub Różalski.

The game is advertised as "a classic real-time strategy game." If your idea of a classic RTS is something like Warcraft 3, Starcraft, or Age of Empires, then you will be pretty surprised by Iron Harvest. People online liken it to Company of Heroes, but I have never played it, so I can't comment on that.

Narrative and Theme

Welcome to the universe of 1920+, a dieselpunk version of post-WWI Europe with, obviously, MECHS. If my understanding is correct, the lore did indeed begin just as a bunch of paintings, then was expanded to make a board game (Scythe) and then adapted for a video game (Iron Harvest). The paintings are truly gorgeous. In the videogame, you can see some of them as loading screens, but I strongly recommend going to the artist's website and checking them for yourself. www.jrozalski.com

Originally inspired by the Polish-Soviet War of 1919-1921, the lore has since grown to cover various other nations in this alternate history. Iron Harvest depicts Polonia (basically Poland[1]), Saxonia (Germany), Rusviet[2] (Russia), and with DLC, also Usonia (USA).

The story (told through the campaign) depicts the tensions within the countries as well as between the countries. It's not the kind of story that wins writing awards, but it's not bad — at times very cliche, at times pretty dramatic, and at times somewhat dark (it's a war setting, after all). Some characters are very memorable (very "badass," for lack of a better word), and some are pretty forgettable.

[1] Coming from central Europe myself, it's nice to see our brothers the Polish given such strong representation.

[2] When I first saw Rusviet, I thought it was going to be a mix of Russia and Vietnam, which would be an interesting cultural mix, but no it's just Russia (or, rather Russia + Soviet).

Gameplay Mechanics

The main focus of the game is real-time combat. You build mechs and infantry squads (5 soldiers), navigate them through the maps (forests, cities, snowy plains, deserts, etc...) and fight against the enemy.

Unlike in the RTS classics mentioned above, there's almost no base-building, technology, or resource collection in Iron Harvest. You can build two production buildings (barracks for infantry and a workshop for mechs), and each of these can be upgraded once (to produce better infantry/mechs). Resources are collected automatically from iron mines and oil wells captured by your army.



With that out of the way, the combat is really the meat of Iron Harvest, and it's... passable.

The first big thing is that infantry units form squads of five soldiers with a pool of shared hitpoints. It's not possible to control individual units, only the squad as a whole. When you order the squad to go to an area, they tend to position themselves in defensive positions (e.g., behind sandbags) around that area. After a few hours, you get used to this, but if you come to Iron Harvest from Age of Empires or a similar game, you'll struggle to manage your squads for some time.



The mechanics around infantry are relatively interesting. They can take cover inside buildings, capture production sites, build sandbags, equip different weapons to change their abilities (e.g. to become a medic or a machine gunner), salvage destroyed mechs, etc. Unfortunately, the role they play in the game is diminished by the elephant in the room: game balance. Basically, the bigger your mech is, the harder it dominates enemy infantry (and smaller mechs). At times I would even feel bad, marching my medium / large mechs into enemy infantry, stomping through the buildings and destroying their sandbags with a single shot.

There are some armor types (no armor up to heavy) and attack types (based on which armor type they are the most efficient against), but in my experience, these don't make a big difference. For instance, the bazooka infantry is "supposed to be strong against armored mechs," but a full squad of them is merely a road bump for an SHM-69 "Serp" or any of the other larger mechs.

The strategy of just throwing big mechs at the enemy and hoping for the best is further underlined by the fact that very few stats about the units are available in-game. You can see units' hit points, their armor type and their attack type. And that's all. No info about attack power, attack speed, or movement speed. That makes it feel like you're not really in control and it makes some encounters feel very unfair (like with the bazookas vs. mechs).



Besides those negatives, there is one layer on which the strategy in Iron Harvest works very well, and that is... "map control," I guess. All units move relatively slowly, so it's impossible to juggle one big army around the entire map. Instead, there are typically multiple fronts on which fighting happens. Plus, it's much easier to defend a position than to assault it (e.g. by building bunkers, deploying artillery-type mechs, surrounding a chokepoint, etc...). This raises the skill ceiling a lot – the best players have perfect awareness of what's happening everywhere around the map and cleverly manage the units to attack where and when the enemy is weak. Oh, and there's a very steep population limit, forcing you to be efficient with your units, rather than just massing a huge army.

Game Modes

Like most RTS games worth your money, Iron Harvest comes with multiple different game modes. There is a single-player campaign (which most of this review is based on), PvP multiplayer, skirmish, and "world map" mode.

The base-game campaign consists of three sets of seven missions each (one set of missions per playable nation). There are also four extra missions added by the Rusviet Revolution DLC and seven more by the Usonia DLC. There's the standard mix of mission types – some infiltration, some capturing strategic points, some defense until reinforcements arrive – likely something you've already played in a different game before. The missions are interleaved with very high quality cinematic cutscenes, developing the story and the characters beyond their interactions in the missions. While there is some variety, the missions tend to be a bit long, and I personally got bored around halfway through the campaign but pushed through for the sake of our readers.



If the campaign is not your cup of tea, you can try the PvP multiplayer mode. Naturally, this is played on symmetric maps with both/all players on the same footing. I did not try multiplayer, but there being only around 100 players online at a time doesn't give me high hopes for it.

What I did try, however, is the skirmish mode – basically the multiplayer mode, but with AI controlling the other player(s). The skirmish matches differ quite significantly from the campaign. As the entirety of the map begins "uncaptured", the first few minutes of a match are focused on staking most of it with your meager starting infantry squads. Your opponent is doing the same, so suddenly, every soldier on the battlefield counts. You can't easily spend resources on upgrading your workshop to produce big mechs without losing a lot of ground. This is very different from the campaign, where the enemy is scripted to give you a lot of breathing room.

Even more so than in the campaign, the main skill needed in skirmish matches is that "map control" mentioned above. Fierce fighting happening on three fronts at once is nothing uncommon, making the matches extremely intense (especially when playing 2v2 or 3v3). To my surprise, I found myself actually playing for fun, being excited about what I was going to play next (a feeling I never felt during the campaign). Now, of course, the AI being AI is pretty good at microing its units around a big map, so I had to struggle to beat even medium-difficulty AI. But it was really satisfying when I finally did.

Next, Iron Harvest also offers a "world map" mode, something very reminiscent of the classic board game Risk. One interesting difference is that instead of relying on (virtual) dice throws to decide the outcomes of battles, they may be resolved by playing a mini-scenario with regular Iron Harvest gameplay. I personally found the mini-scenarios tedious, and overall, this world map mode very boring, but it might be a refreshing change for someone with a lot of hours in the other game modes already.

On top of all the game modes, there are many challenges and achievements to unlock (way more than those on Steam). These grant coins to buy cosmetics in the in-game shop. There's also XP to level up your profile and... of course... a season pass. I have no idea what these live-service shenanigans are doing in a game like Iron Harvest, but at least it's not too invasive.







Audio & Graphics

As soon as I started the game, the settings screen greeted me with the option to turn on the "Native mode," i.e. making all the characters speak their native language (with English subtitles). I loved the same mode in XCOM 2, so it was an absolute no-brainer to turn this option on for Iron Harvest. And, as expected, most[3] of the characters throughout my playthrough spoke either German, Polish, or Russian (all of which I can partially understand, coming from Central Europe). Rather comically, this applies also when characters from different nations talk to each other, which happens quite often in the campaign.

[3]Nicola Tesla spoke English as I guess it was too complicated to get a Serbo-Croatian voice actor

As you can see on the screenshots, the graphics look pretty damn good (for an RTS)! What might not be so easy to see is the great amount of detail in the animations/sprites. Things like soldiers leaving marks in the snow when they move, buildings collapsing brick by brick, mechs falling apart (and soldiers being blown to pieces) are all animated with a lot of detail.



What is not done so well is the contrast and readability. I personally loved playing snow maps because everything is easily visible on them, but some of the maps are set in a forest and/or at night, making it pretty difficult to distinguish the individual units without turning the brightness all the way up and squinting a lot.

Conclusion

In many ways, Iron Harvest is really a mixed bag. Some parts are done extremely well and some very badly. Your mileage will vary a lot based on what you value more in a game.

If you're looking for an interesting campaign, if you're fascinated by the setting, or if you're an RTS veteran looking to try something new, definitely give Iron Harvest a go. The game can be easily found for a couple of bucks on legit sites.

If you're looking for a lively multiplayer scene or think you might be bothered by the design choices/oversights (if you think that, you probably will), then steer clear!

I personally suffered quite a bit getting through the campaign, but once I got a proper hold of how everything works, the game grew on me. I had fun in the skirmish matches, and I suspect I'll be coming to this game again in future years for brief periods of time (as I tend to do with other RTS games). I'm even pretty strongly tempted to buy the Usonia DLC.

ExcelElmira

STORY	★★★★☆
GRAPHICS	★★★★★
GAMEPLAY	★★☆☆☆
SOUND	★★★★☆
FUN METER	★★★★☆

the good

- Unique setting
- Very detailed graphics (both gameplay and cinematics)
- Voice acting
- Variety of modes to play

the bad

- Game balance
- Difficult-to-control squads
- Unnecessary live service components
- Almost no base building or tech tree

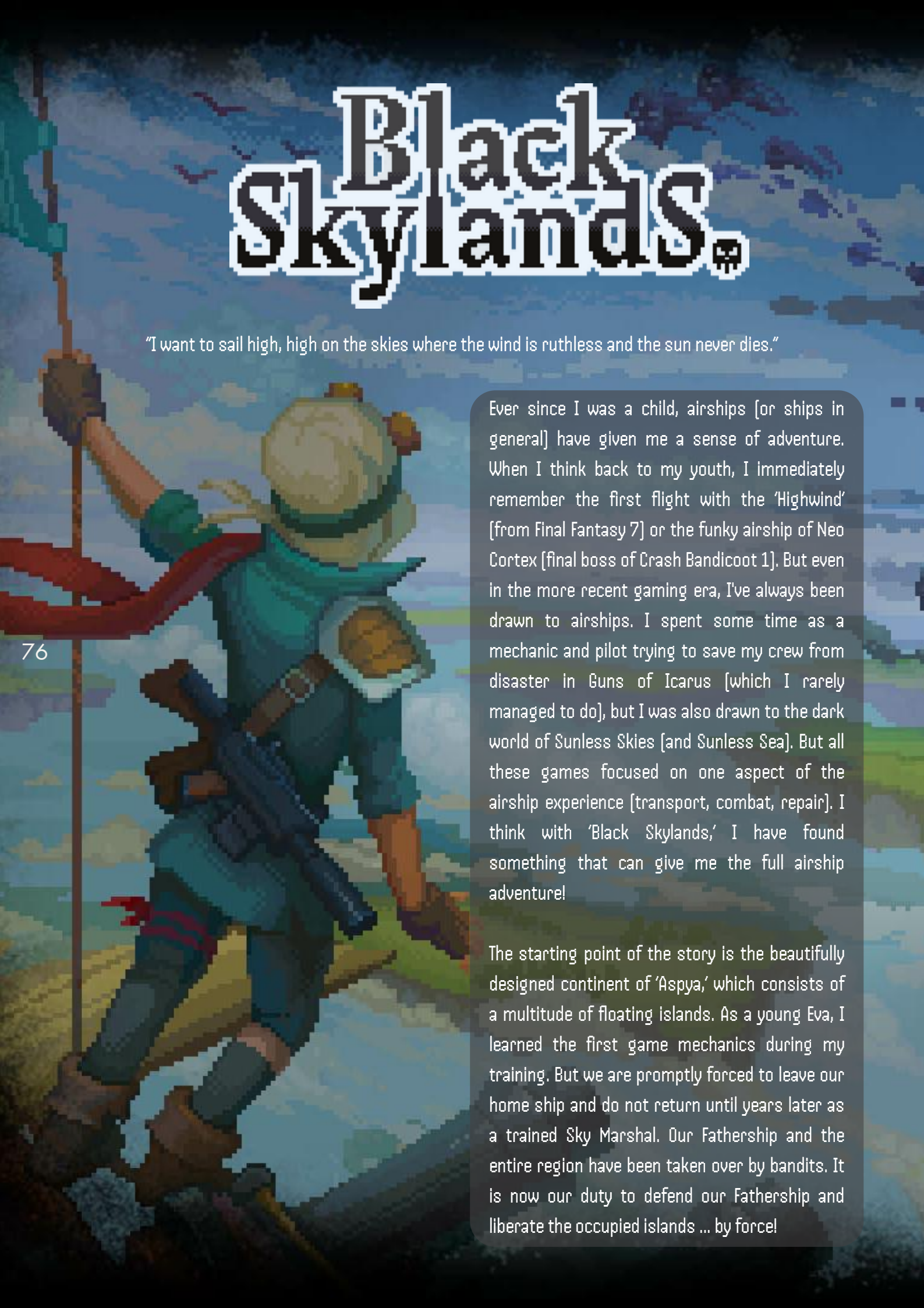
In war's field, iron meets strategy with a twist!





Black Skylands

"I want to sail high, high on the skies where the wind is ruthless and the sun never dies."



Ever since I was a child, airships (or ships in general) have given me a sense of adventure. When I think back to my youth, I immediately remember the first flight with the 'Highwind' (from Final Fantasy 7) or the funky airship of Neo Cortex (final boss of Crash Bandicoot 1). But even in the more recent gaming era, I've always been drawn to airships. I spent some time as a mechanic and pilot trying to save my crew from disaster in Guns of Icarus (which I rarely managed to do), but I was also drawn to the dark world of Sunless Skies (and Sunless Sea). But all these games focused on one aspect of the airship experience (transport, combat, repair). I think with 'Black Skylands,' I have found something that can give me the full airship adventure!

The starting point of the story is the beautifully designed continent of 'Aspya,' which consists of a multitude of floating islands. As a young Eva, I learned the first game mechanics during my training. But we are promptly forced to leave our home ship and do not return until years later as a trained Sky Marshal. Our Fathership and the entire region have been taken over by bandits. It is now our duty to defend our Fathership and liberate the occupied islands ... by force!

What is now revealed in front of us is a steampunk action-adventure top-down shooter from 2023 (Early Access since 2021) by a Russian development studio called 'Hungry Couch Games'.



Getting ready for a night raid

So now it's our job to bring down the bandit clan 'Falcons' and their leaders on the various islands and to fight an even worse mysterious enemy in the south. But Eva can do it all at once. She is a pilot, gunner, on-board mechanic, and one-person infiltration squad all at the same time. How you approach the countless enemies is up to you. Do you let your ship's powerful cannons do the work, or do you throw yourself recklessly into the middle of the battle? What you lack in firepower as a fighter on foot, you make up for with maneuverability. But as the game progresses, your firepower gets stronger and stronger.



Eva the one woman army.

Eva is also a really nimble fighter. Her normal walking speed is fast, but she can also run, make a dodge roll, or pull herself, enemies, or objects with a grappling hook. The combination of dodge rolls and the grappling hook gun is essential for getting around on the islands or to hidden places. In addition to weapon upgrades, resources, and buried treasure chests, there are also upgrades for the health bar to be found.

However, we often shoot the nasty bandits directly from the ship, which feels a bit like cheating because the on-board guns have a longer range than the melee and ranged bandits, so we can clean up without being hit.

There are three currencies in the game:

- Weapon Steel (red)
- Ship Steel (blue)
- Gold.

Red is used for weapon purchases and upgrades, and Blue is for ship upgrades and on-board weapons. Gold, which is occasionally found in treasure chests (the X marks the location), is spent on special weapons such as rocket launchers or miniguns.

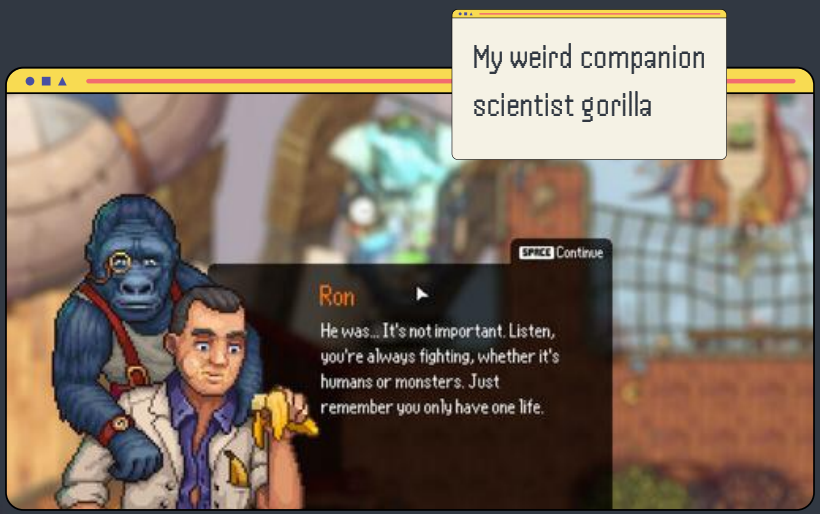
There are about six basic types of weapons in the game: rifle, shotgun, machine gun, SMG, sniper, and revolver. Each gun (except the revolver and special weapons) consists of a scope, barrel, shoulder rest, and magazine. These weapon modifications can be used to change certain weapon characteristics (such as range, fire rate, or reload time) or adapt them to your own fighting style. There are also some special weapons, like a crossbow that behaves differently.

Every gun can be upgraded at our Fathership up to nine times, getting stronger in the progress. But first, we have to unlock this feature by rebuilding and upgrading the associated buildings on our Fathership (=home base). The same goes for our ship.

At the Fathership and several other places, you can also buy furniture to decorate your home base - a feature that I didn't really need as I used all my resources for upgrades.

After we rescue a scientist who has swapped his body with a gorilla, we have access to his research, which we can use as special abilities. To unlock and upgrade these, we collect blue crystals for the scientist, which we obtain by solving rather simple puzzles on the islands. These puzzles are mostly about memorizing a given sequence, interpreting texts correctly, putting objects in the right order, etc. This is fun but not very challenging or innovative.

Enemy types are straightforward: melee fighters, shotgun types, (dual) gunners, snipers, and mortar dudes come in normal and veteran versions, and some are armored and only vulnerable to a certain type of ammunition, for example.



Later in the game, other enemy classes with more special behaviour appear, but these only provide a little variety. To be honest, you don't have to care too much about this, as you just gun down every enemy that approaches you. But there are bosses, too. In the boss fights, you have to change your strategy. Bosses force you to move a lot to avoid their attacks. Healing during the fight must be very well-timed. Every boss has his own arena and attack patterns. The game doesn't recycle bosses for later battles, which is good.



The underlying story and the dialogues are written with great passion, even if some of the storylines seem very familiar. Rarely are we really surprised by the plot. One of the best aspects of the game are the carefully designed character portraits. In general, one of the highlights of the game is its simple but nice pixel art style. Sometimes you are rewarded with nice pixel art cutscenes with simple animations. I would have liked to see many more of these.



As guardians of the law, we strive to liberate the remote islands. But in order to do this, we first have to find and kill every single one of the bandits, some of whom are very scattered. This sometimes leads to us searching the islands several times because we have forgotten a single one somewhere. Fortunately, the last 4-5 outlaws are shown on the map so that we can find them more quickly. Some of the islands can have a more complex structure. This is where lighthouses come in handy, allowing us to see the surroundings and plan where to go. So that we don't have to walk all the way back after completing our mission, we can order our companion moth to take us back to the ship at any time. This helpful moth also brings mod crates and resources back to the ship for us so that we can devote ourselves fully to our missions. As a result, we liberate the island and plant our flag in triumph, and the inhabitants return. These inhabitants often have a gift for us as a reward and occasionally quests, too. From time to time, we find helpful companions who join us on the Fathership and drive the story forward.

Our ship is not only our way of traveling but also our pack mule and our secret weapon. We have to take care of it because, without fuel, we risk getting stranded on the journey. Without ammunition, we fall victim to enemy ships, and without cargo capacity, we can't bring our valuable resources home. So we have to keep an eye on these things at all times and make sure we have full tanks, enough ammunition, and a cargo hold that is as empty as possible after every journey. You can also upgrade and change your ship to be faster, more durable, etc. The upgrades are kept even if you change ships. There is fast travel between fuel stations and home, but I recommend traveling by ship to get the true sky outlaw vibes.



Is this war now?



"Kill the buuuuugs!!!"

In summary, I have to say that I had a lot of fun with this game. After about 25 hours, I fully played through the game, fully upgraded my favorite weapons and ships, and liberated all the islands. I found only one bug where the camera was locked in place after a cutscene, which could be easily solved by fast traveling. I didn't bother too much with the additional optional challenges, as the additional weapons that could be unlocked were simply not necessary for me. But these missions can be an additional test of skill for those who really need it.

MyrXIII

STORY	★★★☆☆
GRAPHICS	★★★☆☆
GAMEPLAY	★★★★☆
SOUND	★★☆☆☆
FUN METER	★★★★☆

the good

- Nice pixel art style
- Airships and sky battles
- Intuitive and nice level design
- Found only one small bug in 25 hours of gameplay

the bad

- More variety in airship battles would have been nice
- Enemies get stuck sometimes
- Endgame could have been more challenging and epic

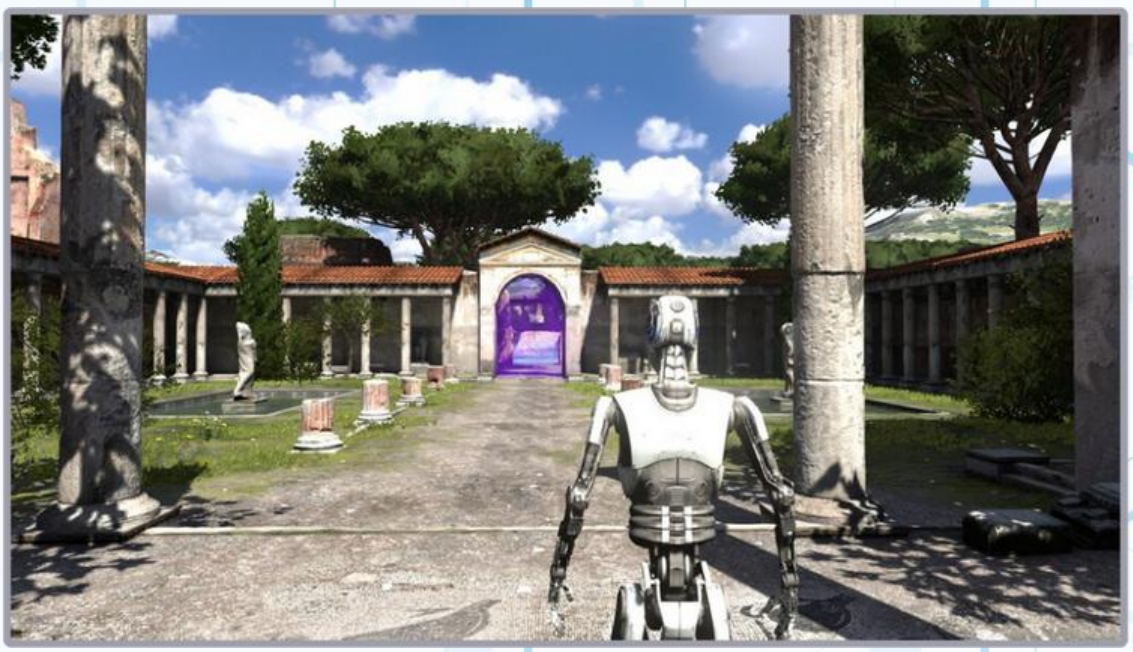
Sail high on the skies



THE T·Λ·L·Θ·S PRINCIPLE

YOU WAKE UP ON A SLAB, SURROUNDED BY WHAT APPEAR TO BE GRECIAN RUINS. AS YOU TAKE YOUR FIRST FEW STEPS, YOU ARE ALMOST IMMEDIATELY GREETED BY AN ENIGMATIC ENTITY, OR AT LEAST ITS VOICE, AS IT INTRODUCES ITSELF TO YOU AS YOUR "MAKER" – ELOHIM. ELOHIM WELCOMES YOU TO HIS "GARDEN" AND INVITES YOU TO SEEK HIM IN HIS TEMPLE, PROVIDED YOU PROVE YOURSELF WORTHY.







Thus begins The Talos Principle, an expertly crafted puzzle game filled with symbolism, deep philosophical underpinnings, and even some light metroidvania elements.

Released almost a decade ago and developed by Croteam, the studio best known for the frenetic Serious Sam series (yes, I was surprised too), the game definitely shows that Croteam can be versatile when they want to.

And while the initial setup of the game – a mysterious entity asking you to complete puzzles for a prize and an amnesiac-plus-silent protagonist as the player character – may seem familiar to many Portal fans (including myself), The Talos Principle doesn't waste time in quickly establishing its own unique identity which sets it apart from the myriad of Portal-clones (...Portal-lites? …Portal-expies? …Portal-esque puzzle games?).

With the first big difference being what ELOHIM spells out for you if you stray off the main path – that you don't need to finish all the puzzles available in the stage at the moment since you can return to them later whenever you want to.

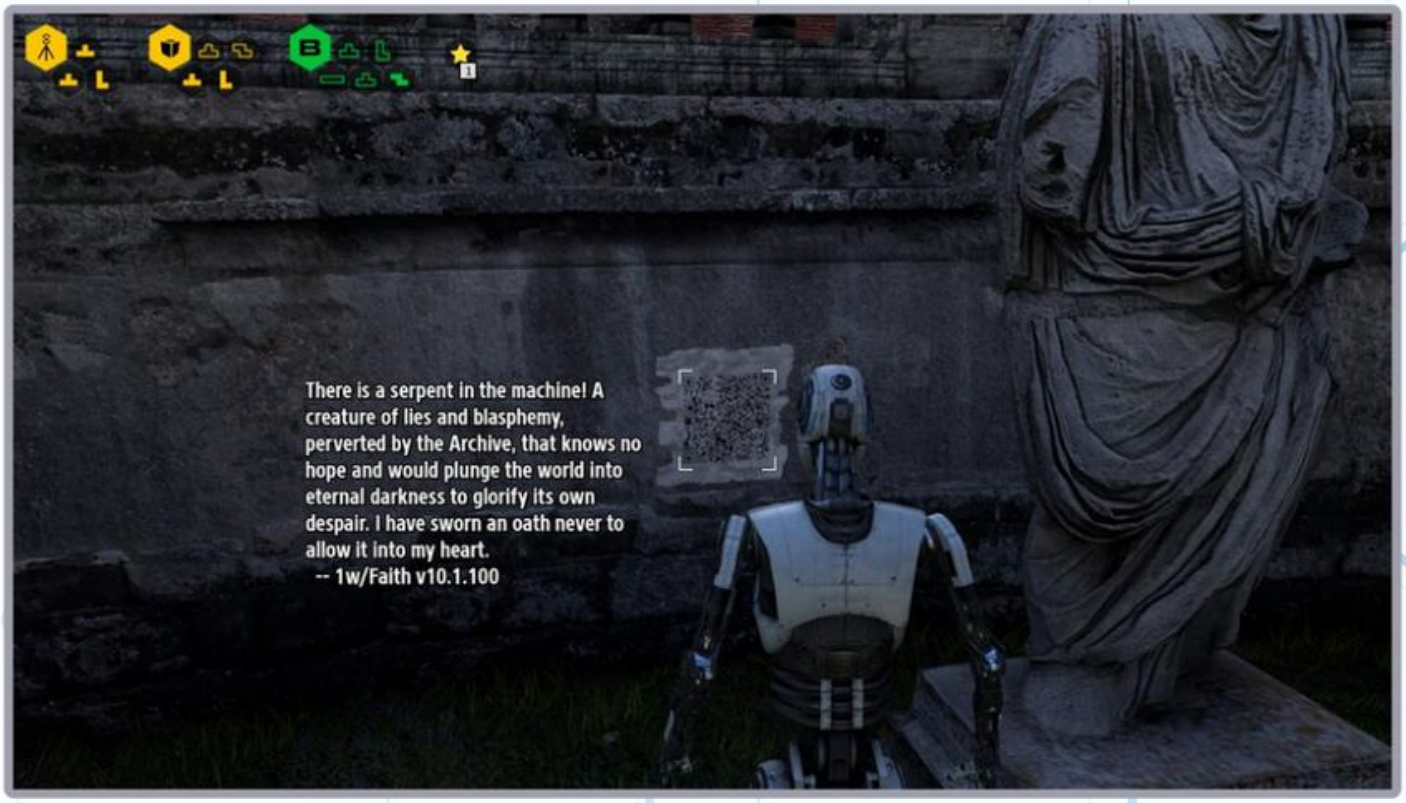
This advice is very much on point since, as I mentioned before, The Talos Principle is a puzzle game with a few metroidvania elements – as you progress, you'll find quite a few puzzles for which you'll need to have access to tools you just don't have yet.

(And just in case, if you are worried about wasting time on such a puzzle or retrying an already solved one, don't be.



In the case of the former, the game is helpful enough to give both a beeping sound as a warning whenever you enter one of these puzzles as well as a visual cue with the locked tool you'll need for the puzzle highlighted in red. While in the latter case, each zone, stage, and hub has a board that displays the puzzles in them, with the ones you have completed being crossed out in black paint.)

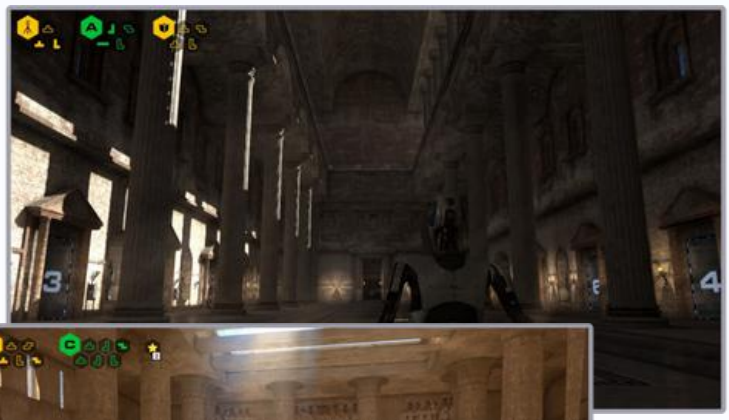
The story starts out simple enough – you can make an educated guess as to what might be happening from just the first few scenes and the first terminal – only for it to begin evolving dramatically as you access more and more terminals, read old emails, music lyrics, and philosophical discussions, listen to recordings left by someone named Alexandra, and read QR codes left by what seem to be others of your kind, all of which gradually shed more and more light on what exactly you are supposed to be, what is happening and why, what led to it all, and most importantly, what your purpose is. And amidst it all, you get to meet the third most important character in the game – Milton, your local, unfriendly archiving assistant (a reference I'm embarrassed to admit took me way too long to pick up even with some obvious foreshadowing)





And while I'm not going to spoil anything else since I feel the game's story is something that is best experienced when you go in blind, it would be remiss of me to not urge whoever plays the gameto take their time to discover all documents, QR codes, and recordings in the game, which serve to elevate what otherwise would have been a decent story to an exceptional one.

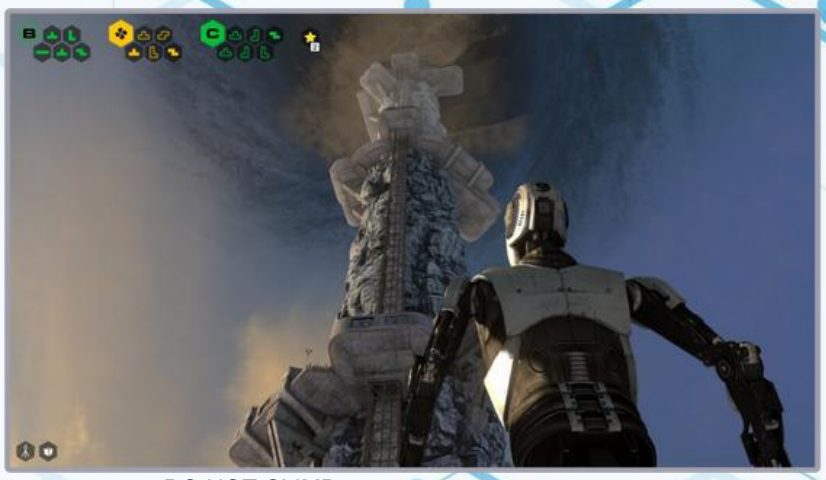
The game itself is structured around three hub-worlds, each containing seven stages, all of which follow the design theme of that specific hub-world – ancient Greek, ancient Egyptian, and medieval English, respectively.











DO NOT CLIMB

Within each stage, you'll find a series of puzzles, each set in distinct zones that are meant to be solved using the tools and objects you find in that specific zone, and each of which contains a single tetromino – to those unfamiliar with the word, they're the building blocks in any tetris game.

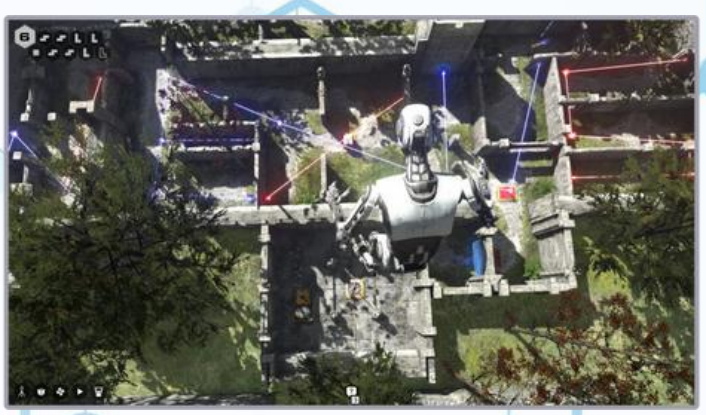
(Oh, and there's also a tower that seemingly goes on forever, situated in the central hub that connects the three previously mentioned hub-worlds, but ELOHIM very clearly warns you from attempting to climb it, so let's not pay any attention to it.)

Your journey begins in the first stage of the first hub-world, and your goal throughout the game is to collect all of the tetrominoes, or as the game/ELOHIM likes to call them, sigils, present across the 21 stages.

These sigils primarily come in three different colors – green, yellow, and red – with each successive color representing a higher level of difficulty. The green ones allow you to unlock the other hub-worlds and are the easiest to solve; the yellow ones allow you to unlock the different tools you will need to solve all the puzzles and present an average challenge; while the red ones, which allow you to unlock the different floors of the tower (you know, the same one that ELOHIM warns you not to climb?) are the hardest, and can be significantly more challenging at times.



EASY



HARD

The sigil puzzles themselves are brilliantly made, starting from simple ones that require basic logic and no forethought to increasingly escalating challenges that become more and more complex the further you go. Yet they never felt obtuse enough to hinder my enjoyment of the game, despite there being no proper tutorial to speak of. You are usually left to your own devices to figure out the mechanics of the different tools – not that it's a bad thing or very difficult, mind you. Most of the tools you use throughout the game are simple enough to understand and use – personally, I only had difficulty understanding how to use the last tool I unlocked in the game. Not to mention, the inclusion of a fast-forward button is something I loved a lot, as it allows one to expedite certain steps in some of the later puzzles to focus more on the solution itself.

On a side note, there are quite a few Easter eggs and a couple of secret stages present in the game for those curious/persistent enough to find them, though some of these can be quite painful to discover.



Exhibit A [I gave up trying to find the remaining pieces for this one.]

As for the music in the game, while I found it suited the ambience of the game perfectly, I personally wasn't the biggest fan of it. Not saying it was bad, just that it wasn't to my personal taste. Or maybe I simply listened to it a bit too much over the course of the game.

The graphics were great. Especially for a puzzle game, I felt it went above and beyond what was expected from it, with some of the sights being incredibly scenic. I feel like with the rest of its strengths, it could have passed muster even with some weaker graphics, but I am glad it is as beautiful as it is.





Aside from the base game, The Talos Principle has one additional story DLC – Road to Gehenna – which continues and concludes the story of some of the other characters you might have come across through reading the different QR codes.

The story of the DLC is set just after the true ending of the main game – placing players in the head/body of Uriel, one of ELOHIM's older messengers and a completely different being, who is tasked with freeing a group of beings who each have been trapped in their own puzzle zones in a sectioned-off portion of the world, which – as you might have guessed already – is called Gehenna.

Cue symbolism.

Jokes aside, the DLC continues the trend of the somber yet strong narrative from the main game, where through the ever present terminals you can uncover the writings, conversations, and personal thoughts of these trapped souls that reveal their lives in Gehenna, as well as their hopes and fears in regards to what Uriel and his task actually mean for them, some of which eerily echo the thoughts and writings that you discover during the main story.

In terms of gameplay, there is no change – no new tools are introduced that are unique to the DLC; however, the complexity of the puzzle challenges definitely increases by quite a margin, even when compared to the red challenges in the base game – with each puzzle making you truly think in order to find its solution. In fact, one could even suggest that they feel fiendish in their difficulty…

Honestly, I have to admit I did not enjoy these challenges as much, especially since I kept unintentionally soft-locking myself every so often and had to reset. The annoying part wasn't the resetting, which I did a lot in the base game too, but how complicated each solution seemed to be, which meant quite a few of these required a significant setup, and a mistake near the end simply meant having to redo all of it. I still had fun, and the satisfaction I got whenever I solved one of these was definitely up there, but it couldn't erase the annoyance I felt before reaching it.

Nonetheless, my experience with The Talos Principle remains an absolute wonder, and I would wholeheartedly recommend this to anyone even slightly interested in the puzzle genre. In my genre list, this now occupies the same place as the Portal series – at the very top of it. And just like Portal, it is a game I would easily recommend to anyone, not just fans of the genre.

STORY	★★★★★
GRAPHICS	★★★★☆
GAMEPLAY	★★★★★
SOUND	★★★☆☆
FUN METER	★★★★★

the good

- The fast-forward button, which is an absolute godsend (heh).
- Really well-designed puzzles.
- A masterfully-told backstory that manages to be both heartbreaking and awe-inspiring.
- The helpful visual indicators.

the bad

- The time limit in the final set of puzzles. A bit of a strange choice.
- The DLC is going to hurt you.



Almostn33t

Leave a human alone with a knotted rope and they will unravel it





Welcome to Gotham

After the brilliance that was the ‘Arkham’ series, I was excited to play Gotham Knights, especially since the focus has shifted from a single player Batman journey to a multiplayer ‘sidekick’ experience. The game opens with an engaging cutscene where you witness the death of Batman, which plunges the city into chaos, setting the story and tone of the game. Now it’s up to the Knights of Gotham to save the city, while at the same time, uncovering the mysteries surrounding the disappearance of Batman.



With four playable characters, you will be able to enjoy the game however you want. My personal favourite was Bat Girl, both because of her combat prowess but also because she could revive herself. While there's plenty of dialogue to enjoy and sidequests to explore, I asked myself, "Is it worth doing"? The answer is: not really.

The gameplay in Gotham Knights is enjoyable, but filled with questionable design choices and a lack of focus. It plays like a mix of the parkour from Assassins Creed, with the instinct and stealth mechanics of Hitman and the load screens of Starfield, with RPG mechanics sprinkled throughout. While I did enjoy the idea of nightly patrols, it felt like there was too much back and forth, and when engaging with all the elements together, this lack of focus delivered an experience that ultimately left me with a sour taste in my mouth.



A Sub Par Experience Awaits

The parkour felt clunky, lacking the fluidity found in Assassins Creed, and if it weren't for the tools at your disposal (such as the grappling hook), I'd have stopped playing early on. This clunkiness extends to interacting with objects, which you need to be in front of (and facing) to open, and to the poor collision detection which immediately halts you in your tracks. Thankfully there is simplified fast travel, so it takes away some of the tedium.



The stealth mechanics were a poor man's version of the Hitman franchise: not only did they feel out of place in a game which focuses on combat, but there were far too many stealth sections which severely slowed down the pace of play. Speaking about the slowed pace of play, let's talk about load screens.

In the era of SSDs, large amounts of loading screens have no reason to belong in a modern game. Not only are there plenty of traditional full screen loading screens, but Gotham Knights is also filled with artificial loading screens looking like games from the early 2000s. Many times, you'd need to hold a key to open doors, playing the same animation which, after the quite literally hundredth time, grows tiresome fast.

My final gripe with the gameplay relates to the puzzle sections. There's a lack of explanation, and logic, leaving me spending less time having fun using the tools at my disposal to overcome enemies and more time scratching my head trying to work out what to do. Particularly, there's an Owl puzzle which is horribly designed, featuring no clues to guide the player, acting as a potential roadblock for some.



Aesthetically Pleasing, like its Predecessors

Gotham Knights does a brilliant job at crafting an aesthetically pleasing city. It's dark, it's grim, and it harbours the characters and lore from the Batman universe perfectly. This extends to its photo mode, which is perfectly implemented, letting you have a lot of freedom compared to others I have used.

Experiencing the unique set pieces was enjoyable, both visually and from a nostalgic perspective. I wish the game focused more on these, as they look beautiful, but lack any unique gameplay elements. The developers dropped the ball here, as the unique set pieces would have been a perfect introduction for unique enemies, gameplay elements, and soundtracks.

The fluidity of animations during combat was the real highlight for me. There's a large variety of animations for each of the four characters, and all are brilliantly animated and mostly appear exactly how I'd imagine they would in the real world. Additionally, the particle effects were effective at improving the richness of the atmosphere without detracting from the gameplay





Is it Fun?

Ultimately, Gotham Knights is a mid tier game. It's a jack of all trades, master of none, in all areas. It incorporates so many elements I've experienced in other games but doesn't improve on any of them. I would go as far as saying each element is worse than the game it is copied from.

While the combat is brilliant, especially with the crafting and loot systems, there's just not enough of it to keep me satisfied. It's far too slow, filled with backtracking, poorly implemented puzzles, and unnecessary stealth sections. Everything shifts the focus away from what makes the game fun, at least for me, which is why I state it as a mid tier game.

Closing Verdict? If you enjoy the combat, you should enjoy Gotham Knights, at least when the game gives you engaging fights. Outside of this, the game most likely isn't worth your time – It's repetitive, slow, and overall, it doesn't provide enough to make me choose it over other similar games.

■ BAE

STORY	★★★☆☆
GRAPHICS	★★★☆☆
GAMEPLAY	★★☆☆☆
SOUND	★★★☆☆
FUN METER	★★☆☆☆

the good

- Animation fluidity is top tier
- Photo mode offers plenty of freedom
- Crafting and loot hunting are enjoyable

the bad

- Bugs
- Poorly implemented stealth sections and puzzles
- Overall pace of play feels far too slow



DON'T KNOW WHAT TO PLAY?

Here are some current sale recomendations!



-90% $9.02



-80% $5.99

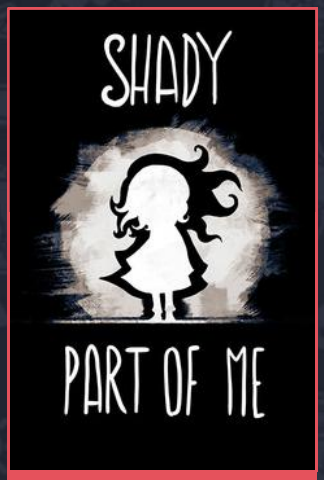


-70% $4.49



-92% $1.19

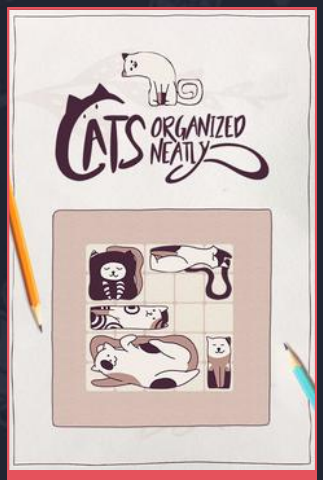
86



-85% $2.24



-92% $1.71

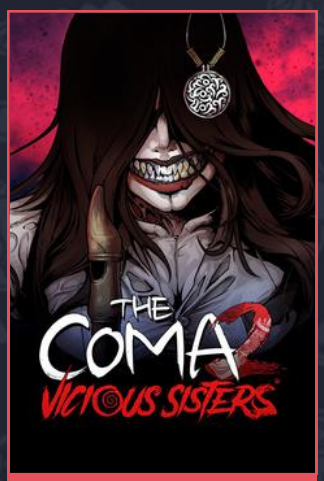


-50% $1.49



-85% $2.99

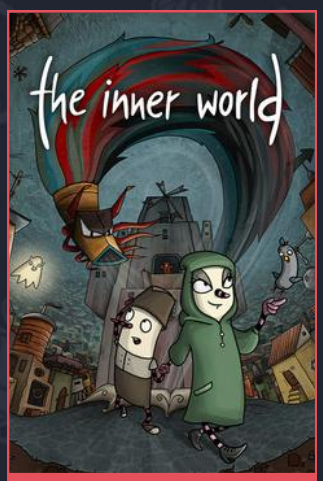
86



-80% $2.99



-85% $1.49



-92% $1.19



-80% $2.59

F2P



Do y'all remember those lil' desktop helpers we used to have? Clippy might be the most memetic, but even after him, there were a bunch of others – my favorites as a kid were the puppy and the wizard guy.

If you're too young to understand what I'm saying, or if you are now filled with nostalgia, worry not.

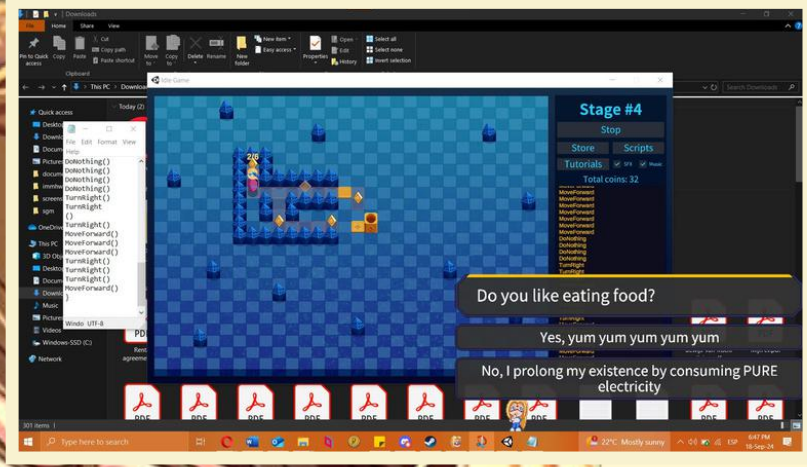
"But Chocolate!" I hear you cry, heartbroken. "You've now made me think of those lil' guys and about how they will never grace my current desktop!"

Ok, you're right, that sucks. In fact, I've now made myself sad.



But! Here's the good news!

Outcore can fill that useless-desktop-helper-shaped hole in your heart. Here, I present to you Lumi, a friendly gal who is lost on our computer. Sure, she won't help you find your files (but to be fair neither did the desktop helpers, even if they were supposed to), but she has a lot of things to talk about with you. She doesn't really remember much about herself, though... which is why you should help her find the parts of herself that are lost in your computer and help her go through her memories. Said memories are played mostly as platforming sections. As I am terrible at platformers, I had... quite some trouble with them, but if I could do them, so can you!





Outcore also has other genres sprinkled in, including a paint section and an idle game that you code with JavaScript. But the best part of this little experience is the story – it may not be the most revolutionary tale out there, but it is way better than it has any right to be.

Played half on your desktop and half on its own world, Outcore is a cute, funny, and touching game. Some jokes might be a bit dated, but you can tell Doctor Shinobi (the person behind the game) put a lot of passion and love in the world Lumi and her friends live in.

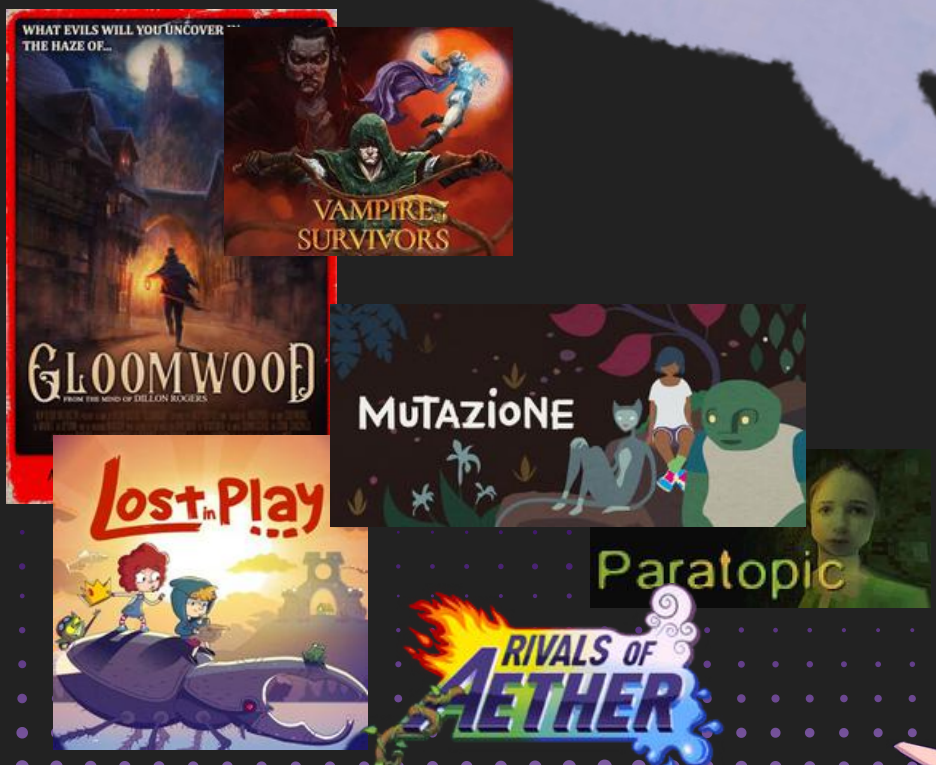
I fully recommend Outcore. Helping Lumi get her memories back is a short adventure (approx. 4-6 hours, depending on how much you play the idle game and how good you're at platforming), and it is completely free.



ChocolateVC

SGM LEADERBOARDS

Hello, lovely readers!
This issue includes the return and revamp of the leaderboard...s?!
That's right, plural! We now have a leaderboard for reviewers and one for designers, since we think design is a big factor in whether a review gets voted in the SG thread. The top of both leaderboards shall get various prizes after 10 issues (or on our last issue, if we don't make it that far!), with our contributors offering some of the games pictured below!
On the next page you can see the current standings after issues #11 and #12. This is the sum of SG thread and discord votes! If you feel like your opinion differs, hop on the Discord server and cast your votes there - they have more weight!





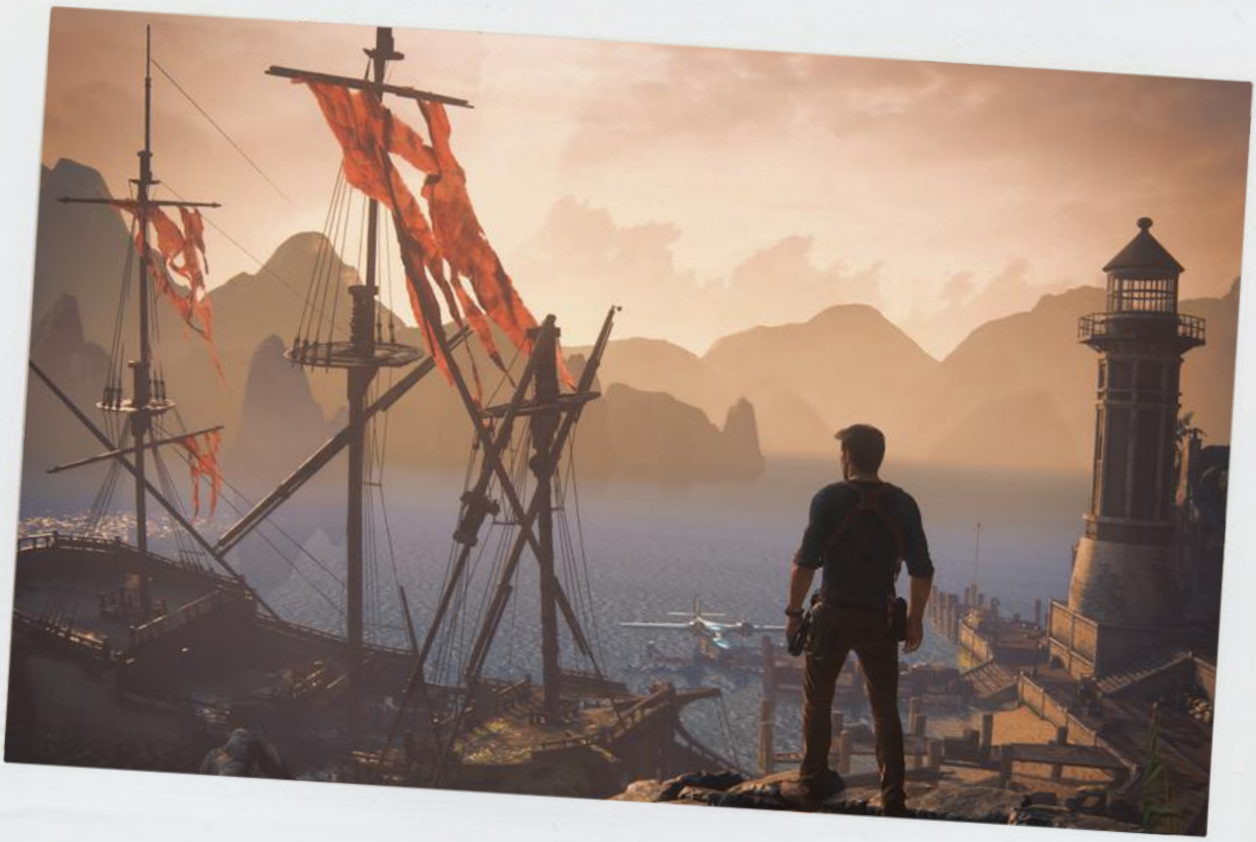
SGM REVIEWERS LEADERBOARD

1	fernandopa	49 PTS	7	PsychoApeMan	9 PTS	13	GrowingStrong	5 PTS
2	Chocolate Van Candy	38 PTS	8	Lexbya	9 PTS	14	Fallen Kal	4 PTS
3	Abubis	26 PTS	9	jahas10	8 PTS	15	Faloperito	3 PTS
4	Sir Packet Lossalot	18 PTS	10	ManlyMeatMan	8 PTS	16	Thexder	3 PTS
5	xurc	14 PTS	11	quijote3000	8 PTS	17	kiiroichi	3 PTS
6	Celtic7Guardian	10 PTS	12	BAEuro	6 PTS	18	FSpectro	2 PTS

SGM DESIGNERS LEADERBOARD

1	La Volpe	34 PTS	5	Sir Packet Lossalot	22 PTS
2	Chocolate Van Candy	33 PTS	6	kiiroichi	17 PTS
3	VinroyIsViral	27 PTS	7	AtomicBlonde	10 PTS
4	Lexbya	22 PTS			

Screenshot of the month



UNCHARTED: Legacy of Thieves Collection

oleksyuk

Honorable mentions



MrPerry
MulletMadJack



fernandopa
Red Dead Redemption 2



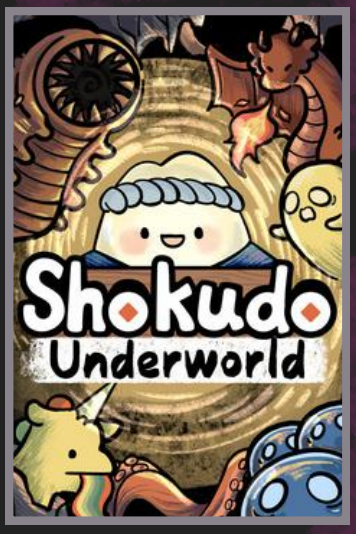
kiiroichi
Lies of P

Notable Releases of September



RELEASE DATE: SEPTEMBER 28, 2024

Summer vacation is finally here, and the next few weeks promise to be anything but uneventful! Natsu has just 30 days to acclimate to life in the countryside, help the locals face their demons, find that special someone...
Have a blast fishing, catching bugs, taking in the sights, and collecting other bits and bobs as you go around talking to the locals and learning their stories.



RELEASE DATE: SEPTEMBER 15, 2024

Run your own sushi shokudo in a mysterious underworld. Satisfy the appetite of your customers, collect suspicious ingredients from bizarre fantastical creatures, and realize your dream of creating ... the legendary Chawanmushi!



RELEASE DATE: SEPTEMBER 23, 2024

Tiny Glade is a small diorama builder where you doodle whimsical castles, cozy cottages & romantic ruins. Explore gridless building chemistry as the game adorns your glades with procedural detail. No management, combat or goals: just kick back and turn forgotten meadows into lovable dioramas.



RELEASE DATE: SEPTEMBER 12, 2024

Embark on a journey across vast landscapes in Caravan SandWitch, a captivating narrative-driven exploration adventure.

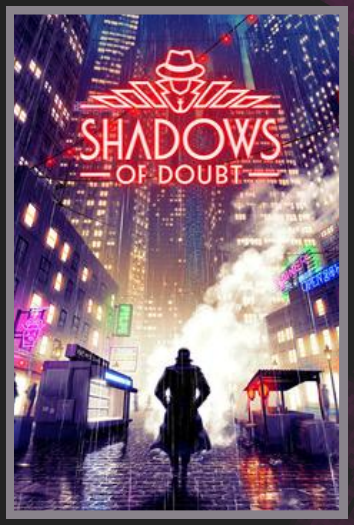
If you enjoy exploring desolated places, want to meet a lovable cast or just enjoy chilling while driving a caravan this game is for you!



RELEASE DATE: SEPTEMBER 17, 2024

From the well-known Devolver Digital, publishers of games such as Cult of the Lamb, Katana Zero, Inscription, and many more, they bring again a new experience for you to enjoy.

Meet a bunch of storybook characters who discover a three-dimensional world outside the pages of their book and must jump between 2D & 3D realms to save their friends in this charming action-adventure.



RELEASE DATE: SEPTEMBER 26, 2024

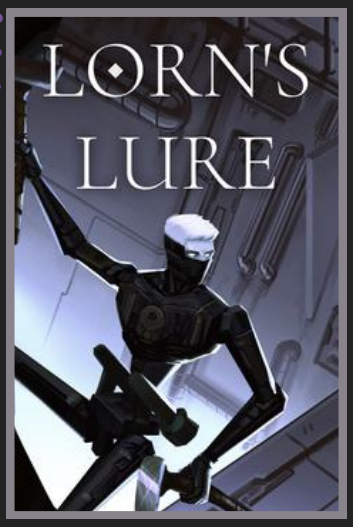
An immersive sandbox detective stealth game set in a fully simulated sci-fi noir city of crime and corruption. Think like a private investigator and take on jobs to earn cash on your path to catching a serial killer. If you don't catch them - they will kill again...

Mystery and murder stories lovers will have a blast with this immersive sandbox.



RELEASE DATE: AUGUST 23, 2024

The long-awaited Sony's new IP finally arrive at our hands. Enjoy this brand new hero sho-... Wait? What? What do you mean it already closed?! But it came out like last week!



RELEASE DATE: SEPTEMBER 20, 2024

An android is led through a vast structure by a glitch in his visual system. Lorn's Lure is an atmospheric narrative first-person platformer with novel climb-anything mechanics and modernized retro 3D graphics.

If you like megaestructures this game is for you!



RELEASE DATE: SEPTEMBER 6, 2024

The game revolves around the two main characters, "Cat" and "Buttered Toast". You'll need to use the interactions between them to solve various puzzles at each game level.
It features more than 200 puzzles and 40 cats.
Toast always falls with the butter side downwards and cats always fall on their feet. What would happen if I drop a buttered cat?



RELEASE DATE: SEPTEMBER 19, 2024

Acclaimed sequel to the award-winning God of War (2018) by Santa Monica Studios, now in PC after 2 years of exclusivity on PS.

In this game Kratos and Atreus must journey to each of the Nine Realms in search of answers where they will visit breathtaking landscapes and fight fearsome enemies.



RELEASE DATE: SEPTEMBER 20, 2024

Develop, expand, and advance your city in a society survival game set 30 years after an apocalyptic blizzard ravaged Earth. In Frostpunk 2, you face not only the perils of never-ending winter, but also the powerful factions that watch your every step inside the Council Hall.

Sequel to the well received original Frostpunk.

ALICIA VIKANDER IS LARA CROFT
TOMB RAIDER

Tomb Raider (2018)

Tomb Raider (2018) is the reboot of Lara Croft movies, the same as happened with the videogame franchise in 2013. The very first movie adaptations had relative success but were shelved soon after just a couple of movies. With the perfect cast of Angelina Jolie for Lara back in the day, the movie franchise was set for great achievements. However, Angelina refused to make a third movie after the second one's flop. Without a clear successor for Angelina Jolie and no strong source material to reenact, there was no movie in the franchise for another 15 years.

Since Tomb Raider got a new breath with the franchise reboot Tomb Raider (2013) and its sequel Rise of the Tomb Raider (2015), filmmakers naturally became interested in making a movie again. This time, Lara Croft's cast went to Alicia Vikander.

The new image of Lara Croft was met positively since the actress was athletic and could do some of her stunts. The director of the movie, Roar Uthaug, has paid a lot of attention to detail in order to make the movie as close to the source material as possible. Of course, we're not talking about a reenacting of the videogame's story, but rather the details that make Lara Croft distinguishable.

The movie is action-packed, filled with dynamic storytelling and good dialogue, although it's not persistent throughout the movie. For some reason, there is a strong distinction between the first and second halves of the movie. The first is great entertainment for the viewer – an interesting story, good dialogue, and great visuals. Unfortunately, the second half felt as if the screenplay was not finished at that point, and the director had to improvise. The fight scenes would be the worst part, giving viewers five cuts in two seconds of an action scene; it just makes you want to skip it and move on to the story. Unfortunately, there's more – in the movie, Lara Croft wins most of the time, not because of her strength, agility, or wit, but simply because she's lucky. Luckily for the viewers, this tendency gets paced down closer to the end of the movie, however plot holes will be taking over at that point.



The movie starts with Lara struggling to meet her financial needs as she refuses to take over her father‘s heritage. She holds a grudge against him because he left for an adventure and never came back. At this point, Lara‘s father has been gone for several years. However, Lara uncovers new details of his final destination and sets course to find out what happened to him.

The beginning of the movie sets the storytelling on a great course, which might appear suspicious for a videogame adaptation, since, usually, the story suffers the most.

Nonetheless, the great visuals and the director‘s position on staying true to the icon of Lara Croft are very enjoyable. The viewers will see the iconic bow and outfits from the game franchise‘s reboot, which is very appealing.

The movie ends on promises of continuation of the story using the “tip of the iceberg“ tactic, making the fans strive for more. Positive box office indicated the film crew did a good job on set and the movie was enjoyed not only by gamers, but also by people who simply wanted to see a good adventure movie with a female protagonist.

Given the positive results, a sequel was initially in development with Alicia Vikander set to return but was canceled in 2022 after the company‘s rights to the Tomb Raider series expired. The actress then stepped down from the role.

Perhaps it‘s for the best. The first movie adaptation of the game series was set to a great start, but the second movie had flopped. Today, the pressure would be much higher to avoid the filmmaking legacy. I‘d say let‘s keep it as it is and enjoy a good videogame adaptation that we‘ve got. That is until the game franchise gets another reboot and strikes an interest in another director with his screenwriter buddies.

Score: 70/100

■ Sir Packet Lossalot









Alicia Vikander



Walton Goggins



Dominic West

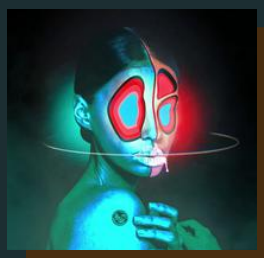


Emily Carey



Daniel Wu

SGM's Playlist



damianeal03



Chocolate



La Volpe



CelticTguardian



kiiroichi



VinroyIsViral



adaml224



schmoan



jbondguy007



numaya



Zelrune



PsychoApeMan



oleksyuk



Faloperito



AtomicBlonde

CREDITS AND THANKS!

And that's all we've got for this issue! We definitely couldn't have done it without the help of our wonderful team, our very generous contributors, our patient editors, our creative designers and in general of all the people who collaborated on the creation of this magazine. And so, we want to extend our thanks to:

OUR CONTRIBUTORS, because without them we wouldn't have games to review in the first place:

-AtomicBlonde, for giving us Ghostrunner and Gotham Knights
-kiiroichi, for giving us Black Skylands
-adam1224, for giving us The Talos Principle
-PsychoApeMan, for giving us A Story About My Uncle and Broken Age
-Celtic7Guardian, for giving us Call of the Sea, If My Heart Had Wings, and Lust From Beyond
-SlickWally for giving us Iron Harvest
-Sir Packet Lossalot, for giving us In Sound Mind
-Chocolate Van Candy, for giving us Destroy All Humans! 2 - Reprobed

OUR EDITORS, who made the magazine easier to read for all of us:

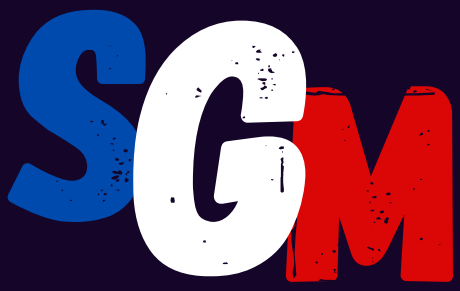
-VinroyIsViral, for editing Destroy All Humans! 2 - Reprobed, Iron Harvest, Black Skylands, If My Heart Had Wings, Call of the Sea, Solace Inc., and Outcore
-RayOfLight, for editing The Talos Principle and A Story About My Uncle
-Orbs, for editing Lust From Beyond and Gotham Knights
-sweetcuppincakes, for editing Broken Age and Ghostrunner

OUR DESIGNERS, who worked overtime for a pretty mag:

-Chocolate Van Candy, for designing the reviews of If My Heart Had Wings, Broken Age, Black Skylands, A Story About My Uncle, Solace Inc., Outcore, and other "extra" sections
-Lexbya, for designing the review of Iron Harvest
-Sir Packet Lossalot, for designing the reviews of Lust from Beyond and Gotham Knights
-AtomicBlonde, for designing the review of The Talos Principle
-La Volpe, for designing the reviews of Destroy all Humans! 2 - Reprobed, Call of the Sea, the interwiew with AploveStudio, and other "extra" sections
-kiiroichi, for designing the review of Ghostrunner and other "extra" sections

Thanks for reading!

And Happy Halloween!


SGM