

STEAMGIFTS COMMUNITY'S
DIGITAL GAMING MAGAZINE

SGM
2.0

CLAIR OBSCUR

EXPEDITION

33

NEWS

Fresh News from the
Gaming World

REVIEWS

Clair Obscur: Expedition 33
Cyberpunk 2077
Subnautica
And much more!

EXTRA

Screenshot of the Month
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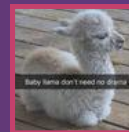
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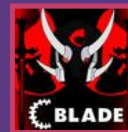
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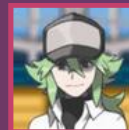
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PsychoApeMan



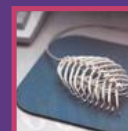
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Sir Packet Lossalot



SunnySideUp



Thexder



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EDITORS



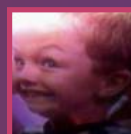
VinroylsViral



Orbs



Vini



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RayOfLight

DESIGNERS



VinroylsViral



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Alina de la Fere



La Volpe



ChocolateVC



SunnySideUp



Alpha2749



Lexbya

Hey everyone,

It's hard to believe this is our final issue. When we started SGM back in early 2023, we never imagined how far this little project would take us or how much passion and creativity would go into every page. What began as a small idea grew into something truly memorable, thanks to all of you who read, contributed, designed, edited, or just cheered us on from the sidelines.

This last issue took time, care, and plenty of late nights to bring together, but we're incredibly proud to share it with you. It's bittersweet to say goodbye, but more than anything, we feel gratitude: for the experiences, the collaborations, and the friendships formed along the way. Every review written, every layout designed, and every message of support reminded us why we loved doing this.

While this chapter comes to a close, our shared love for games, creativity, and community will keep going strong. Thank you for walking this road with us! It's been an unforgettable journey.

-Vin



On a Tuesday night in January 2023, I created an SG thread with a vote poll asking whether people were interested in the idea of a digital gaming magazine focused on reviewing Steam games won by SG users through organized group giveaways. Casual or hardcore gamers, experienced or beginner reviewers, sharing their thoughts on new or old games, big AAA titles, true classics, hidden indie gems, or even complete disasters, it truly didn't matter to me. My goal was simple: to make everyone feel included. I wanted this project to bring people together, no matter their background or experience, and, as a gamer at heart, give every game a chance to be seen, felt, and appreciated.

I'm writing this now because the poll ultimately ended with 51% of voters in favor of creating SGM. It was incredibly close, with 37 votes for and 36 against. But if I'm being completely honest, I think I would have gone ahead with the plan anyway. Thirty-seven people showing interest in a passion project is not something to take lightly.

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Of course, at the time, I only had a vague sense of the project's scale and duration. I knew it would be challenging, but I never imagined just how demanding it would become. And the drama, oh... the drama.

Everything, from organizing giveaway events to managing a Discord server and a Steam group to creating the magazine itself, required hundreds of hours of volunteer work each month from a small team of incredibly passionate people who truly cared. There were ups and downs, moments of doubt and moments of excitement, but we kept going. And somehow, the rest just became history.



The SGM team I assembled in the magazine's early days was truly something special, and I would honestly consider it something I'll always be deeply proud of if I were to write a future CV. I felt like I had a "specialist" by my side in every area I needed, and that made everything feel possible. Of course, I could never downplay the tremendous contributions of those who joined later. Without them, the magazine's lifespan would have been cut short after I stepped down and passed the torch to Vin.

Thanks to everyone who contributed to its creation, improvement, and maintenance, the project lived on far longer than I ever dreamed it would.

As much as it hurts to say, all things eventually come to an end. This may be my last message for SGM, and with that in mind, I want to finish on a positive note. I encourage everyone to follow their dreams and not give up on their ideas. I never earned anything financially from this, but that was never the goal. Through this magazine, I gained friendships, valuable experience, and, most importantly, a sense of purpose, a reason to get up in the morning even on the hard days, even when life wasn't all sunshine and rainbows.

Follow your dreams, make friends along the way, and believe in yourself.

-AtomicBlonde



Hey everyone,

So, we made it to our last issue.

I joined this project late. I wasn't here from the beginning, I did not see the birth of this magazine. I am, however, here to see its end. I joined on the last months of 2023, and I have loved this magazine fervently since. It feels surreal to say goodbye.

But I'm in a different place compared to where I was back then. I don't even browse SG anymore! I have grown and made friends these past two years and a half, and hopefully, brought a smile to at least one of you.

This issue is late because of me - I wanted to give us one last chance, and could not cope with the work it brought with it. I apologize for that. But we made it, somehow, and this last issue is here to share all the work our team did in its last months.

Thank you for reading.

-Chocolate



Proud to have been part of such an effort. Not only was I able to play incredible games that I hardly would have had access otherwise, it also allowed me to become a better writer with all the feedback I got from the editors, and it enabled me to talk to devs responsible for some of my favorite games (kudos to SodaRaptor). Eternal gratitude to the team that started it, kept it alive, and allowed the project to rest when it's time was due.

-Fernandopa

It has been a pleasure to be part of this amazing community project, making a silly Discord bot, writing the news section including the silly spacefox adventures (that only few probably read lol), and overall participating in a project that was bigger than any of us ever anticipated. Ride high, game on, and... see you, space cowboy. -jbondguy007

Que tengas mucha suerte
En tu camino
Me hubiera gustado
Haber estado contigo

-Thexder

So long and thanks for all the fish.

-Zelrune

The SGM project was a very ambitious project and I'm amazed at the extraordinary content the creative team was able to make. Getting a chance to write reviews was an interesting challenge. But most of all it wasn't really about the games anymore after a while, but getting to know the people on the discord channel and having some fun. I'm glad I was able to take a small part in this crazy experiment, and I genuinely wish everyone all the best for the future.

-Fallen Kal

SGM has been an incredible project to be a part of. It's allowed me to play and review some great games, as you would imagine, but the unexpected and much more significant part is the community that built up around it. It's been a delight and a real privilege to be part of a team with so many wonderful people, connecting in a deeper way than in all of my years on Steamgifts, and forming some friendships which will endure long beyond the end of SGM. I'm so grateful to the many people whose hard work went into the magazine, and also for all of the readers who encouraged us along the way. Thanks a lot, folks! It's been awesome.

-PsychoApeMan

This was an amazing journey. I loved playing, reviewing and reading. Thank you for these awesome years! Best Regards, Sir Myr the 13th.

I'm really glad for the chance to be part of this gaming community. I never thought I was going to be able to write gaming reviews... and then see it done and published, wow! I loved it. Thanks to everyone who was part of this project, who helped me and made me laugh, and I wish you all a bright future ahead.

I will say goodbye with a strange sentence, to mildly infuriate (again) the editors with my broken English: I feel gratefulness of all the people that helped me along the way, hope that our paths get crossed again! -Faloperito

It has been an amazing project I'm glad I got to participate. One could say it was my childhood dream of working in a videogame magazine fulfilled. I hope the best to all of you from those who worked with us to the readers!!! o/ Lexbya

I read all the SGM issues,
and all i got was
this lousy final message

-damianea103

I really enjoyed getting to be a part of SGM. It was fun working and laughing with everyone behind the scenes. Thank you to the folks who made it happen, especially the ones who did the really difficult parts.

Thank you to the folks who read it.

-sweetcuppincakes

Being part of SGM has been an amazing experience, from the community, to the review process, and even communicating directly with developers. It has all been extremely fun and eye-opening. What I value most about the entire experience, however, are the genuine connections I've made with people.

It has been an honor to be part of this prestigious community, and I thank the community and all the staff members for providing us with the many issues of SGM we were able to receive.

-CBlade

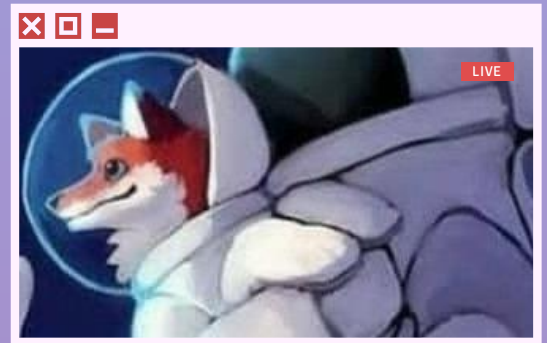




THANK YOU
FOR
READING!

NEWS TIME!

Ahoy, gamers! jbondguy007 Spacefox Extraordinaire here, communicating to you via the Intergalactical Network Tele-Entertainment Radio NETWORK communication system (I.N.T.E.R. NET)!



Last I sent out any communications, I had joined a revolutionary band of misfits called the "Indies" to fight against evil corpo "Triple-A Mining"! It's been a chaotic few months, but I'm happy to announce that the revolution has won - long live the revolution!

As the dust settled, I was cheered and celebrated as a turning point in the revolution, some even crowning me a saviour of sort... and I was awarded not only a large, beautiful plot of land on nearby planet "Earth VII"... but also was granted title of Planetary Protector! It looked as if my life as a bounty hunter was coming to an end, but even more-so after I confessed to the love of my life, a fierce yet gentle Spacefox gal with whom I fought alongside in the revolution. Love really can bloom on the battlefield!

Anyways, I've settled down on this lovely little planet to live a quiet, easy, peaceful life... for now. It is with a heavy heart that I must announce that I will no longer scour the galaxies in search of the latest news, and therefore, this will probably be my last I.N.T.E.R. NET communication to you, my dear gamers, readers, and above all else... friends.

It's been a great time. Thank you for tuning in every once in a while to hear me yap about my silly little adventures, and to learn about the latest gaming news. Best wishes to you all in your journey to thrive, find happiness, and live life at the fullest!

jbondguy007, Spacefox Extraordinaire, gaming news provider, signing off for the last time!

HIGHGUARD SHUTS DOWN ONE MONTH AFTER RELEASE

Remember Concord? And XDefiant? No? Then you'll likely forget about Highguard. It's just yet another competitive hero shooter that flopped miserably within a month of release, quoting, "we have not been able to build a sustainable player base to support the game long term." The game released on January 26th, and the servers officially shut down on March 12th.

This follows a trend of competitive hero shooter failures in the past months, and should be a warning shot to both game studios and gamers alike - for developers, maybe the hero shooter market isn't the best investment right now. For gamers, maybe consider waiting it out before jumping on the hype-train for the latest hero shooter - paying full price for a game to play for only a month must really hurt the wallet.

NVIDIA'S DLSS 5 GARNERS CRITICISM AS A GLORIFIED AI FILTER



Nvidia recently unveiled DLSS 5, showcased as their latest advancements in graphics technology. DLSS 5 would allow the latest graphics cards to -in addition to rendering game graphics- also apply additional lighting, texture and shading through a neural network-powered process that would run alongside the classic rendering techniques.

While the technology is being boasted by Nvidia to be grounded and to work hand in hand with the game graphics, gamers and critics have openly denounced Nvidia for glorifying what appears to more closely resemble an AI filter that applies over the game graphics, which has raised eyebrows due to its usage causing visual art direction to be overwritten by the interpretation of the AI on what the game should look like, including changing the shape and defining characteristic of game characters - more often than not, causing characters to lose their charm, and triggering the uncanny valley effect in many.

Source: various, forbes.com

TWO GAMES, ONE TITLE: PIECE BY PIECE

What do you do when you happen to release a game just around the same time as another developer does, and by pure coincidence, they have the same title? Threaten legal action to the developers? Launch a lawsuit? Take it to social media for a mud-slinging war?



Those may be the answers you expect from bigger game studios and publishers, but for indie game developers Neon Polygons and Gamkat, after both releasing their game titled 'Piece by Piece' within a couple days from one another, the answer was simple - amicable conversation, and a collaborating to release the games in a Steam Piece by Piece Double Bundle. This bundle offers customers to get both games at a 10% discount, and it made for a wholesome story that gives some positive publicity for both games!

Source: dexerto.com

TANGY TD: ANOTHER WIN FOR INDIE GAMES BY SOLO GAME DEVELOPER CAKEZ77



If there's anything I love more than indie games success stories, it's indie games success stories that are made extra wholesome through the support of amazing gaming communities - and the success of one solo indie game developer and streamer 'Cakez77' fits the bill!

The solo indie game developer known under the pseudonym 'Cakez77' has recently release their tower defense game, Tangy TD, a project five years in the making. After only the first day of release, the game had earned \$30,000 in sales, causing Cakez77 to have an emotional reaction with his wife while on stream. In the following week, the clip went viral which brought more attention to the developer and the game in question, and gamers gathered in support of the developer by purchasing the game - as of last update from the developer, the game has now earned \$300,000 in profits.

Source: gamesradar.com

Interview with **Starmage** , Dev of **RAVE HEART**



Could you introduce yourself to our lovely readers?



Hello! I am Starmage, I'm a game developer/artist from the Philippines. I have been making RPG games with RPG maker since 2016, and I haven't been able to stop since then. I've been a lover of the JRPG genre ever since I was a child playing on the PS1 console.

What made you make a JRPG game set in space in the first place?



So I had a fun idea back then, I loved FFX so much, and I had just recently played the Mass Effect trilogy during that time. And I was like, what if I make a Final Fantasy-like game, but in space? So I took my inspiration from FFX and mixed it with some of my Mass Effect influence. That's how this space opera came to be! A Sci-fi Turn-based JRPG with political intrigue and alien races and factions in a power struggle to decide the fate of the Galaxy of Xerxes.

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?



The common pitfalls and annoyances I have with this genre is usually some RPG games have very slow-paced combat, and I wanted to avoid this in my game that's why "fast-paced turn-based battles" is always a feature I put in my games lol. That's why I loved FFX because its gameplay is very fast-paced, compared to like FF9 where it takes forever for people to take their turns.

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



I playtest my games A LOT. Because I'm very OCD and I want to check every nook and cranny in my game and make sure there are no bugs and things are in place. So yes, I am quite proud to say it evolves my game into a bugless polish, only because I would be overthinking all night if I hadn't fixed a bug or hadn't checked everything

How did you come up with the idea for your game?



As I mentioned before, it was a fun idea of "Final Fantasy, but in space". And I was looking through some character asset packs at that time, and I was already forming ideas in my head of who was gonna be who based on that asset pack, so I was like, "You know what? I should write this down, maybe I can turn it into a game" and then the rest was history.

What was the inspiration for the game's story?



I had lots of inspiration, mainly FFX with Yuna's pilgrimage along with her friends, Grandia with its adventurous and larger than life themes, Mass Effect with its themes of otherworldly threats, etc. I had also been watching Game of Thrones during that time, so I took inspiration from it with how the political drama of Rave Heart unfolded.

What was your character inspiration? How did you decide how they would look/act?



Ellemine's journey with her friends to defeat the Count Vorakia sort of mirrors Yuna's pilgrimage to defeat Sin. The love story between Ellemine and Chad also reflects Yuna and Tidus in a way. Klein was first supposed to be a silent protagonist, but then I decided he was gonna be a fleshed-out character of his own, and I took inspirations from Cloud from FF7 and Lightning from FFI3 for his personality. A lot of them just came out of my imagination as I was looking at the character art asset packs used during that time, and I just had a feel of who or what they were going to be in the game.

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



The code. Coding has always been my greatest weakness in game developing, because I get overwhelmed with all the numbers and stuff so easily. So, I've had a couple of game-breaking errors during the development phase that I've had troubles with. Thankfully, the RM community was always ready to help.

What emotions or experiences did you want players to feel as they progress through the game?



I wanted players to feel the very same feeling I have when playing my favourite JRPGs. It's the feeling of being completely immersed and captured in a world that feels alive to them. To feel like they're part of the game's story and that they're interacting with a world that changes based on their progression. I wanted the game to evoke the emotions of love for such an experience.

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



I didn't really have many time constraints, thankfully, as I developed to my own timeline, in fact the game had a 2-year hiatus before I was finally able to complete it.

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



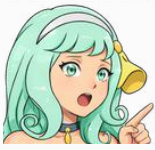
Yes, a lot. FF series, Grandia series, Game of thrones, Mass Effect trilogy, and I think even XCOM inspired and influenced this game as well.

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



My favourite trend in gaming today is how people are still appreciative of 2D pixel-based games despite all the highly rendered realistic games available in this day and age. My least favourite trend is how Square Enix don't want to do turn-based in their main line FF titles anymore. Whyyyy???

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



Yes, a ton! I've had tons of playtesters and let's players give Rave Heart feedback and suggestions that shaped the game today. Lots of QoL stuff, and lots of story/writing feedback that helped me make the stories make sense. My writing back then was admittedly very amateur, and before it got public play testing, Rave Heart's story had lots of flaws to it, especially with how royalty was handled, etc.

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



Last time I felt that was when I played games like Darkest Dungeons and Star Renegades, both have fun turn-based battles mixed with roguelike, and I wish to do something like that someday. The difficulty level had a satisfaction to it once you beat it. And the variety of character roles and designs was super fun to experience.

During development, what was the biggest problem you ran into?



Code, code, and code! Lol! Code is my weakest spot, so I always need help when it comes to that, especially when I run into game-breaking bugs and errors. Also had big problems with some of my early writings, thankfully had people in the RM community give feedback and suggestions on how I could improve them.

Was there any element that you eventually decided you had to cut, but you found it hard to let go of?



Yes, it was the ATB system. Because the script/code I used for that in the engine just wasn't compatible with many of the core scripts/codes I used like the Yanfly ones. So I had to cut that one out, even though I loved ATB. But the current CTB is still a good replacement for me.

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



Well, when I'm free or when I'm done doing daily errands, it usually consists of me opening the engine and staring at the screen for a long time, until I finally decide to work on it lol. But usually, it's listening to lovely music in the background while I work on the game, or pause development and watch youtube videos from time to time.

How big is your dev team, and how do you balance specialised roles with generalist roles? E.g. a software engineer just coding game tools and systems vs. a software engineer weighing in on art or design topics.



Well, currently and at the time of Rave Heart's completion, I'm a solo dev who utilises assets and plugins that are either free or bought. So most of my effort comes in actually making the game, writing the story, and working on gameplay balance and how to make it fun.

RAVE HEART



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First Impressions

The JRPG genre has always been one ruled by whimsically gripping stories, loveably bewitching characters, and vivid settings.

Within the genre, gameplay innovation has been slow to come by, and over the years, many a few have tried to put a twist on the beloved formula and fallen short, with a lucky few standing out as cult classics.

Rave Heart does not try to take a twist on the genre but ties a knot and shoots the rope into space!

With characters like an Elven empathic princess, a bodyguard tormented by visions of his past, and a gunslinging catgirl that meows, Rave Heart differentiates itself within the genre with its unique brand of quirky modern dialog, space-faring setting and intergalactic mix of unique misfit characters akin to Guardians of the Galaxy.

At its roots, Rave Heart is a 2D turn-based role-playing game created by Philippines-based developer Starmage RPG Studios, created using the infamous RPG Maker. Rave Heart diverts from its high-fantasy adventure JRPG predecessors by being notably set in space, inside spaceships, and in modern urban environments.

Story

Rave Heart is a cutscene-heavy game set in a modern sci-fi setting, telling the story of a space opera filled with politics, drama, and quirky, light-hearted modern pop culture references among the various races in the game's different sectors of space.

The story is centered around Klein Cryoz, a trained "Cipher" and bodyguard to the Elven Princess Ellemine Rave.

After an intergalactic war ravaged the galaxy of Xerxes, Princess Ellemine Rave is now set to marry Chad Zephyr, with their union hoping to ease ongoing galactic struggles between the humanoid Errans of House Rave in Sector 4 and the lizard-like Draconians of Sector 1. Not all is as it seems, as the Draconian Count Vorakia has sinister plans beneath the shroud of a peaceful union.

As the story unfolds, you meet various vibrant characters, each with a story to tell that ends up being some of the funniest and emotionally gripping parts of the game.

While exploring Xerxes with your party of misfits, snippets of Klein's repressed dark past also slowly surface, tormenting him and clouding the judgment of his duty.



Gameplay

The gameplay of Rave Heart is always welcomed, giving brief moments of exploration and calculated action from the game's countless world-building cutscenes.

Rave Heart uses a party system of up to six members in addition to turn-based "rock-paper-scissors" style combat centered around Physical, Ether, and Tech.

Party members rank up at a reasonable pace, unlocking different abilities that give room for experimentation and well-paced learning.

I found myself happy with the spawn rate of natural world encounters and enjoyed them for the prospect of ranking up and learning new abilities.

Bosses were dynamic and fun, a good balancing act using your knowledge of the Physical, Ether, and Tech system, your abilities, and your party's order of attack to prioritise targets and the optimal time to use an ability for extra value.

Controls

The Controls are, unfortunately, Rave Heart's biggest drawback and barrier to entry.

Rave Heart does not include controller support, which would have made the game a lot easier to play.

The game is painfully hard to play on 60% compact keyboards and requires twice the key inputs to play vs. full-sized keyboards, which really slows down the experience.

It would be highly suggested that you purchase the game only if you have a full-sized keyboard or patience on your side.



Art Style

Rave Heart adopts a 2D-pixel art style reminiscent of 90's era 16-bit SNES JRPG games like Chrono Trigger, Illusion of Gaia, and Final Fantasy.

Being made in RPG Maker, some of the graphical elements feel familiar, yet the custom assets used and amazing backdrops in fights make the game uniquely its own and lend well to the modern sci-fi space setting.

The modest anime animation style of the characters blends well into the UI and sprites of gameplay, coming across as more realistic and emotive rather than chibi.

The colour palette fits the game and setting well, aside from a few moments of glaringly contrasting arrows demanding your attention, not allowing you to ever get lost in space.

Conclusion

Rave Heart is a contemporary love letter to classic 90's 16-bit JRPG games, a passion project uniting classic tropes with a modern setting and futuristic story.

With its unique space-faring setting, quirky characters, and even quirrier dialog amid a tense intergalactic space opera, Rave Heart does what it sets out to do despite its lack of graphical settings and limiting controller options.

The story, setting, and outlandishly unexpected quirky characters truly carry this game and make it an enjoyable play for fans of the genre, RPG Maker games, and newcomers alike.

BabyOilonICE



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



the good

- Well-written story and dialogue
- Vibrant and interesting characters
- Simple to learn, rewarding to master combat
- Beautiful combat backdrops

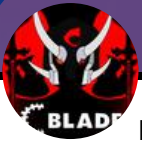
the bad

- Extremely limited control options
- No graphical options
- Forced 4:3 aspect ratio with black bars or windowed modes only

Let this Rave Heart take you on an epic journey beyond the beat!



AETHERMANCER

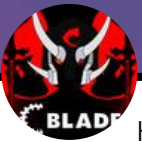


Please introduce yourself, and let our lovely readers know a little about your background, as well as what your role is on Aethermancer.



Hello everyone, I'm Anton, or Ntonisthier, the game design lead on Aethermancer. I worked with Sersch on Monster Sanctuary, our previous game. We're brothers.

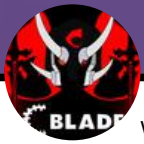
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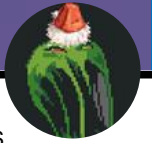
How did the team come up with the idea for the game mechanics and story, and which came first?



The first thing was that we wanted to make a game that's a mix between a Roguelite and monster taming. A lot of the elements of Aethermancer's story and world came from that. With a Roguelite game, it felt natural to incorporate elements like death and rebirth. There are a few mechanics where it was more like the mechanics were inspired by the lore, like the Worthiness mechanic. But overall, we tend to focus on ideas for fun game mechanics first and having the story fit those game mechanics. Oftentimes we also had to adjust mechanics based on our playtesting experience, even if it broke the lore a bit. Having good gameplay is just too important to compromise on that.



Were there any games or other media that inspired or influenced the project?



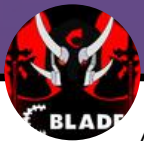
There were a lot of influences. There's this niche game called Azure Dreams that was released on the PS1, which me and Sersch played a lot when we were younger. It was essentially already a mix between Roguelite and monster taming. The gameplay is really different from Aethermancer though, but it gave us confidence that a game like this could work well. The actual gameplay was inspired by a lot of different games with turn-based combat, like old-school JRPGs. I'd also mention some of the recent Roguelite games that we played a lot before making Aethermancer, like Dead Cells, Slay the Spire, or Darkest Dungeon. For the overworld visuals, I wanna mention CrossCode. For the art direction of the monsters, we referenced Breath of Fire and Ragnarok Online among other sources.



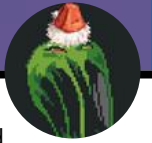
How much does the early access release resemble the team's initial idea, and how did you all iterate on ideas until reaching the early access version?



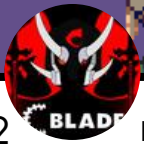
The overall game went through a lot of major changes, especially the combat gameplay. We just kept iterating on the combat until we actually felt it was fun and had enough potential for the whole game to be built around it. It took a lot of time and we had to change a lot of things, which is quite risky to do, but it was definitely worth it in the end. It's tough to explain how we did it exactly. You need to have a good sense of whether the gameplay you have so far is actually fun or not, and whether changing it in certain ways will make it more fun. What definitely helps is if you try to have something playable as soon as possible. Playing it can help give you a lot of new ideas. Especially with a big team where everyone is eager to chime in with ideas and feedback.



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

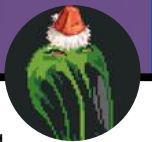


I wouldn't call it a pitfall, but our general vision of the game was to avoid making it feel too game-like or gamified. A lot of Roguelite games tend to just focus on cool gameplay and visuals. For a monster taming game, we feel it's really more about vibes rather than specific gameplay elements. So it was important for us to give the player the feeling of really being in the world of Aethermancer. You need a certain context to make you feel connected with your monsters, to really feel the impact when your monsters get hurt or die.



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How did the team decide on the scope of the game, and balance that against technical and time constraints?



To be honest, the scope was something that we were constantly adjusting throughout development. Especially as we kept making new iterations of the core gameplay to really make sure that the moment-to-moment gameplay is as good as it could be. Having a certain scope is important for a monster taming game. But if you don't hook the players with the core gameplay, it doesn't really matter how many monsters or biomes you have to offer. Since we just formed a big team for Aethermancer and never made a game quite like it before (Monster Sanctuary was pretty different), it was also difficult for us to tell beforehand how much time it would take to develop X monsters, X biomes, X features, etc.

[Read the full interview **HERE!**](#)

AETHERMANCER



Hello, dear readers!

We have something a little different for you today... The fine folks at moi rai games gave us two copies of Aethermancer to check out, so we took the opportunity to see if two heads really are better than one!

This is our first collaborative review, to hopefully give you the benefit of having two perspectives fused together to give you a more rounded picture of what you can expect from the game. Enjoy!



Aethermancer is a fun & challenging roguelike 3v3 monster taming game. When I started playing Aethermancer, I was constantly amazed by the good pixel art style and how well you can set up synergies with the different monster combinations. This charm didn't really fade throughout the experience since the designs hold up, and how you can build your teams keeps on expanding and changing due to the varying monsters and different abilities to choose from when you level up.



The pixel art really is striking and original, and the animations are expressive and dynamic - it's all very evocative and just lovely to look at. As for managing your team and all their synergies, it could easily be overwhelming, but the game helpfully tells you *approximately* how you can expect each action to pan out... Except that these previews don't necessarily take into account all effects currently in play, so you can still easily get caught out! Admittedly, it can be frustrating when you take it at face value and overlook a factor that's going to change the result, but overall, I think it's a good balance that helps players manage a fairly complex system, yet doesn't spell everything out.

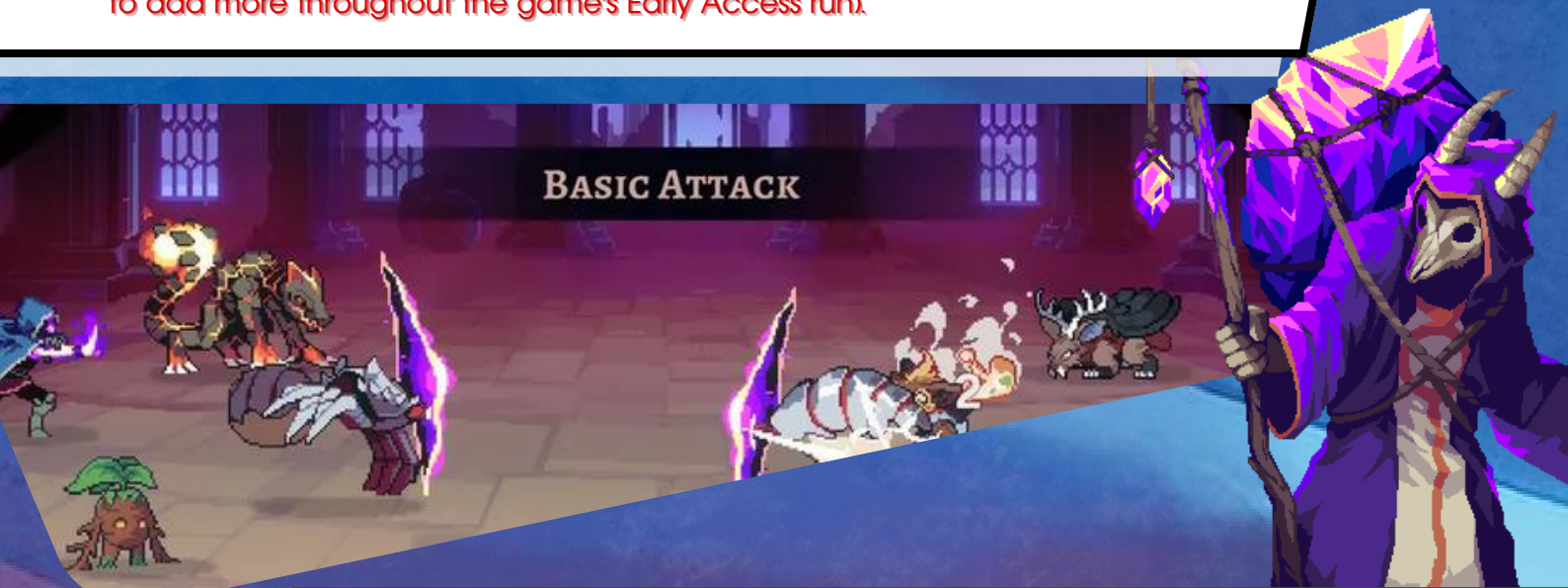
The game doesn't have much when it comes to a story since it's a roguelike, but there's a lot to discover about the world through interactions with the game's many colourful characters. They can be a bit flat sometimes, but they serve the purpose that they've been created for, and slowly liven up the town as you get more and more residents. I was disappointed with how little it seems that they add other than just a presence in the city; a minor buff or unlock would have made the process feel more rewarding.



It's true that there's not much story to speak of, and although the worldbuilding is intriguing, we get little more than a few lines of exposition. The side characters also definitely lean hard towards under-written, but I found the little that is present to be quite effective. You don't hear a lot from them, but none of the NPCs feel generic, and they often hint that they have a story to tell – even if we just get a little more. I really hope this is eventually fleshed out a bit. I also completely agree that it really should feel more meaningful as you find new residents and restore life to the city.

The gameplay consists of you purchasing permanent upgrades, starting a run, defeating enemies, building & maintaining your team to be able to push through all the obstacles to reach the end. Throughout the run, you will encounter recurring characters that can help you or your monsters in various ways, as well as points of interest that will allow you to get a buff at a cost, which might provide a minor improvement or change how you conduct battles overall. You will also expand your character's equipment throughout runs; this can vary from potions to other equipment that applies buffs, debuffs, or does direct damage as required. Your run will ultimately end when you get wiped during a battle, or when you beat the boss at the end of the run (there is currently only one boss available, but there are plans to add more throughout the game's Early Access run).

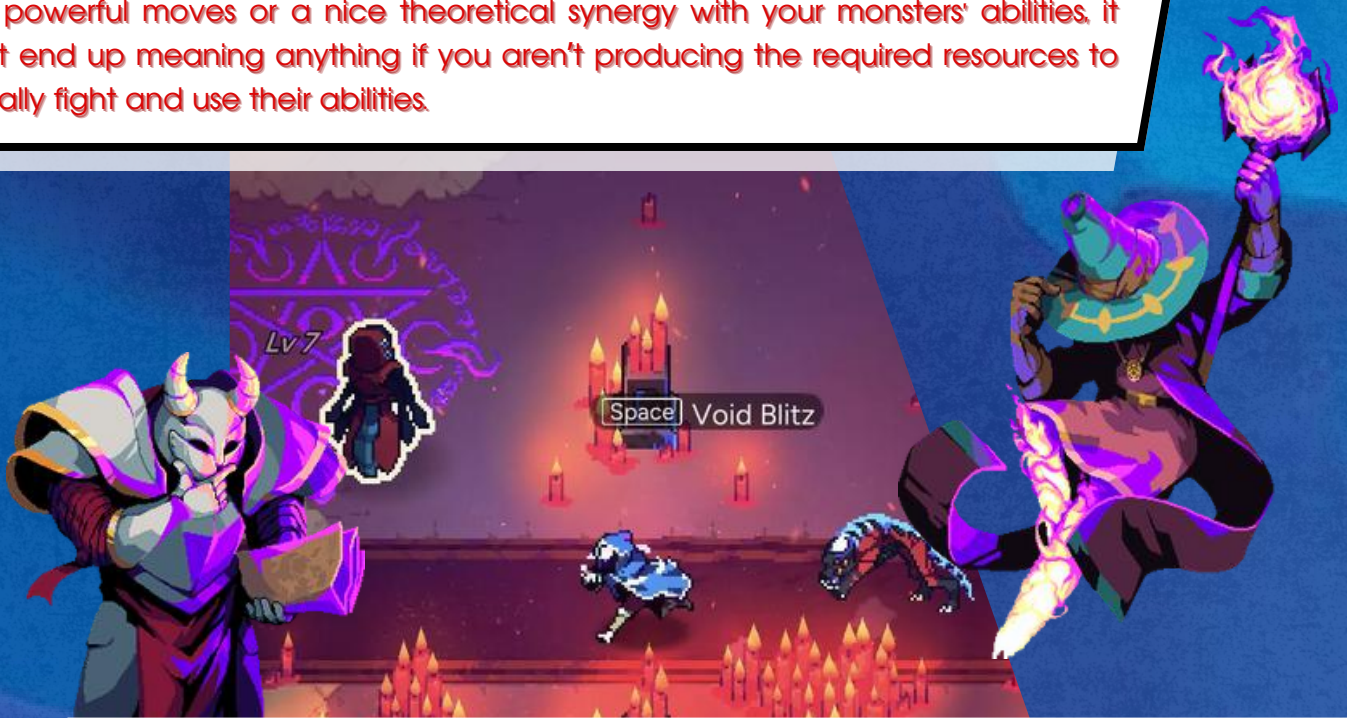
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I almost always thought that the equipment and bonuses the game offered me would make a meaningful difference in my run, and often felt like I had an interesting decision about which options to choose and how best to utilise them. I take that as a sign that, even in the Early Access state, they've done a pretty good job at balancing the equipment and buff systems. The rogue-like permanent upgrades, on the other hand, felt a little underwhelming at times, especially considering how much time you invest in each run, sometimes for relatively minimal progression.

The combat encounters are all 3v3 fights, so you need to be sure to build your team in a way that your monsters can cover each other's weaknesses, have a good synergy with their abilities, and that they can produce enough of the correct elemental resources throughout the fight. As your monsters level up, they get access to new moves, which can provide buffs, debuffs, or focus on doing damage; all the moves rely on burning through your elemental resources, however. When your monsters perform their basic attacks, they will generate specific elemental resources, based on the monster itself, and any abilities or perks that affect their or your overall elemental resource productions. So even if you have very powerful moves or a nice theoretical synergy with your monsters' abilities, it won't end up meaning anything if you aren't producing the required resources to actually fight and use their abilities.

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As a result of that team synergy and ongoing resource management, there's a depth which I can't say I've encountered before in this style of turn-based, monster-taming combat, which I really appreciated. During fights, I didn't feel like I was just going through the motions, as is often the case in the genre, and it really encouraged me to look at different strategies which I might apply. It helps to keep everything fresh, both between separate runs, and also in the many fights you have within each attempt.

While you are exploring the world spaces in your runs, you will swiftly glide across the landscape and be able to teleport around to marked locations. This movement feels amazing and could easily be the core mechanic of a game by itself. As you explore the areas, you will find the aforementioned characters and points of interest along your way, but you will also find treasures and secrets scattered throughout the different locations.

You dart and dash around with an ethereal grace that makes you feel like an otherworldly master hunter, deftly traversing the terrain and in total control as you stalk your prey. It's hugely satisfying, and because you can teleport directly to previously visited points of interest, it eliminates virtually 100% of backtracking, meaning the movement mechanics never lose their shine.

You'll need to manage a few key resources during your run: Gold (to buy equipment and upgrades for the run), Aether Crystals (for permanent upgrades at the base), Flasks (to heal your monsters), Monster Souls (to capture new monsters), and Corruption (this cuts down your monsters' max health, but can be managed through interactions & purchases in a run). Gold is the trickiest to manage since you can invest it into short-term improvements, or hold onto it to try and convert it to Aether Crystals at certain points of interest, which will result in more permanent improvements.

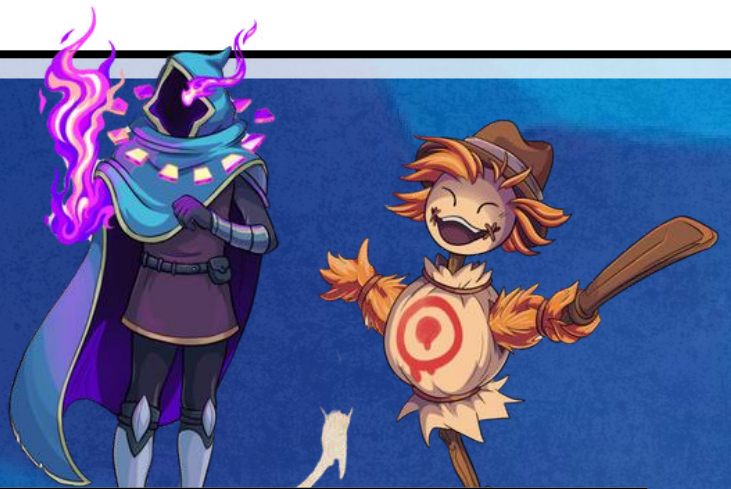
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One minor issue I had was that I felt it took me quite a while to really get a handle on the uses and relative value of these different resources. You are usually asked to make a trade-off between different choices, and I sometimes felt a little frustrated at lacking a solid context to make an informed decision. It's true that there aren't any terrible choices you could make which would accidentally undermine your entire run, so it's by no means a huge problem – but personally, I'd prefer it if the game managed to build up some familiarity more quickly, even if that meant tutorialising a little more.

There is also a nice variety of difficulty settings that allow you to make elements of the game easier or more forgiving. Managing the corruption mechanic was too much for me, and made me rely on buffing and healing more than damage output far too much, so I tweaked that to make it a more pleasant experience for myself.



I went back and forth on the corruption options. At first, I was sure I'd hate it, and if it led to losing a strong creature in the middle of a great run, I'd be infuriated, and surely doomed to complete failure soon after. In practice, the increased peril makes some sense in a roguelike context, where losing is an inevitable, vital part of the cycle – and what's more, fits thematically with the bleak and broken game world... But still, corruption can be brutal, to the extent of honestly even feeling unfair or unreasonable, especially considering how much time you typically invest in a run. When you come to start every fight with your longest-serving (and therefore most built-up) creatures at massively reduced health, it feels like a ticking time bomb, and I ultimately didn't value it as an added layer to the combat. All in all, I'm extremely glad that the options are there to personalise how much this mechanic influences your game.



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I had a lot of fun with my runs that I've failed and completed, and would definitely recommend that roguelike and monster taming enthusiasts give Aethermancer a try. It's quite a few steps above other monster-taming roguelikes.

Even taking into account the points I've mentioned above, I completely agree. I thought it was a fresh and interesting entry into what has become a rather oversaturated niche, and I had a great time with it. If you're a fan who feels like monster-taming games have started to feel a bit stale, this could really reinvigorate your appreciation of the genre.



A roadmap for the game was publicly shared in October, giving people insight into what they have planned for the coming year. The key points that I'm excited about are the new character classes and new bosses coming to the game.

<https://store.steampowered.com/news/app/2288470/view/518601098272965539>

Go check it out!

Cblade and PsychoApeMan

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

the good

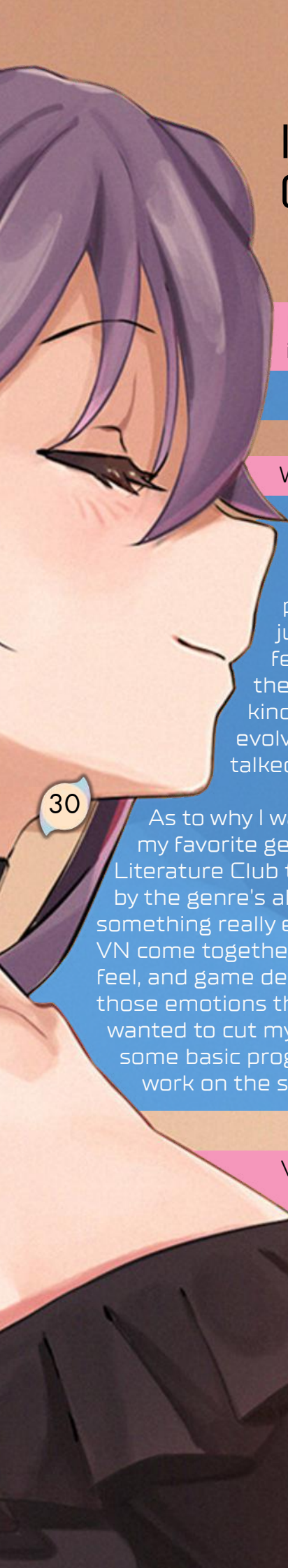
- Cool, gritty monster designs
- Amazing pixel art graphics
- Zippy & smooth movement
- Vast variety of team compositions & synergies
- Can save in the middle of a run

the bad

- The runs can be quite long
- Progression isn't as rewarding & gratifying as other roguelikes

Grit, grace, and monster taming.





Interview with Jacob Cumiskey developer of



Hello, Jacob Cumiskey! I'm Celtic from Steamgifts Magazine, and it's my pleasure to have you as our guest for our project.

Thanks!

What led you to wanting to make a visual novel in the first place?

Well, it was around mid-2018 and I had just finished college. I was considering moving back to my hometown of New Smyrna Beach and didn't know exactly why I wanted to go back. I didn't have a particularly strong attachment to NSB at the time, but there was just something about going back to Florida that felt right. It almost felt completely out of my control, in some ways. That was when I got the idea to make Siren's Call: a game where Florida itself would be this kind of force that pulls people in and never lets them go. The game evolved from that general concept and was fleshed out the more I talked about this idea with my best friend and co-writer, Cory Nungesser.

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As to why I wanted it to be a visual novel specifically, it's mostly because it is just my favorite genre of game. I played Higurashi back in High School and Doki Doki Literature Club the year before I graduated college and had always been impressed by the genre's ability to evoke a sense of dread in the reader. I thought there was something really elegant about the way all the different elements of a good horror VN come together to make the reader feel exactly what the writer wants them to feel, and game developers have so many more tools at their disposal for evoking those emotions than, say, a traditional novelist. I had majored in creative writing and wanted to cut my teeth on something really ambitious. And so, I made myself learn some basic programming, did TONS of research on game development, and got to work on the script.

Very cool! So you've been working on this project for about six years now?

Six years and some change. The grind really never stops. The first two years essentially involved us starting over from scratch because Cory and I bit off way more than we could chew in terms of workload. We were originally gonna give it a lot more JRPG mechanics akin to something like a traditional Persona game. But those mechanics killed the pacing of the story we wanted to tell.

I definitely saw Persona (3 especially) influences in the journal entries. DDLC and Higurashi were both also coming to mind, so I think you did a great job of showing your inspirations.

I tend to make my influences really obvious because I just love these games. Silent Hill 2 was also a big one, namely its influence on Violet and Oliver's dynamic.

Silent Hill 2 I did catch some references to as well. Oliver talked about it as his favorite game and Sunderland showed up for the college name.

A really funny thing about that is that picture is taken directly from my real life college and used as the reference for that background. The Sunderland dorm was actually my dorm freshman year of college!

So it was a coincidence? That's wild! The world works in mysterious ways. Silent Hill 2 is definitely a classic; I'm sure lots of players will enjoy that.

It was too good not to include. Sadly, there were no other Silent Hill fans at my school, so my excitement went on deaf ears. This game and that section of the story was the perfect place for it.

Do you have experience in writing other media (books/movie or play scripts as examples) or did you plan to start with visual novels?

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I had been writing poetry ever since I was six. My mom is a very established and talented poet, so writing was always a part of my family. One of the reasons I was so in love with DDLC when I played it was because I was actually in my high school's Literature/Creative writing club! I even won a few contests/beat our club's version of Monika in a state wide contest at some point. In college, I dabbled in fiction and screenwriting to sort of expand my skill set. The screenwriting really helped when making Siren's Call, as writing for that is essentially like writing a play. Programming a VN, you have to think of stage directions, how the characters are moving around, lighting, all kinds of things playwright would need to consider to set the mood. A lot of that transitioned well into the creative process and it really is what helps make the VN feel so dynamic.

So to clarify, it was similar to play writing? I ask since I've taken both that and movie screenwriting and while I found writing for plays very character-centric, the writing for movies was more barebones.

Indeed. I found it to be more similar to writing a play than a film, though there are elements of both. The screenwriting was essentially a gateway into playwriting which was a gateway towards writing the script for the VN. I had a lot of classmates that had dabbled in both screenwriting and playwriting, so I got kind of the best of both worlds by interacting with them. If I had only taken poetry classes, the game likely wouldn't even exist at this point. Or, if it did, it would be a lot more stiff.

Definitely! So I take it you wrote all of Oliver's poems?

Yes indeedy. Many of those are poems from my personal book of poetry that I altered to fit Oliver's mental state/his relationships with the other characters at the time. Much of the game is based on my own personal experiences, so the game felt like a good home for these poems, even if most of them were written way before the game itself.

Sounds like a good gateway into a question I've been curious about. As the warning at the start of the game says, the story digs deeply into autism and depression as subject matters. Do you have personal experience with these?

So I have autism myself, as does my father. I was non-verbal until around 12 years old and was [I believe] one of the first kids in Volusia County to be diagnosed with Asperger's. My co-writer, Cory, is actually the first truly great friend I ever made, and I didn't meet him until I was around 14. So the two of us are very well versed in autism and what it means to live with it/care about someone who has it. My father was one of the strongest advocates for keeping that aspect of Oliver's character in the story, even if the story is more about learning how to keep moving forward in life than it is about living with autism, so I owe a lot to him. Both me and my wife have had intense depressive episodes throughout our lives, though this is something I don't want to dive too much into, if that's okay.

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Absolutely, no need to get into anything uncomfortable.

[Editorial note from Celtic: Asperger's is no longer used as a term for autism, on account of the individual it is named after being a Nazi who experimented on children. When Jacob was a child, the term would have been used for a formal diagnosis (and I was diagnosed as having Asperger's too when I was young), but it is now severely frowned upon in the autism community.]

Yeah, the game mostly speaks for itself, in that regard. I will say it's more rooted in circumstance more than anything neurological, at least for me.

I'd like to note here that as someone with autism and depression myself (though my experiences were different, as autism has a huge spectrum) that I thought the game did a great job of tackling these subjects.

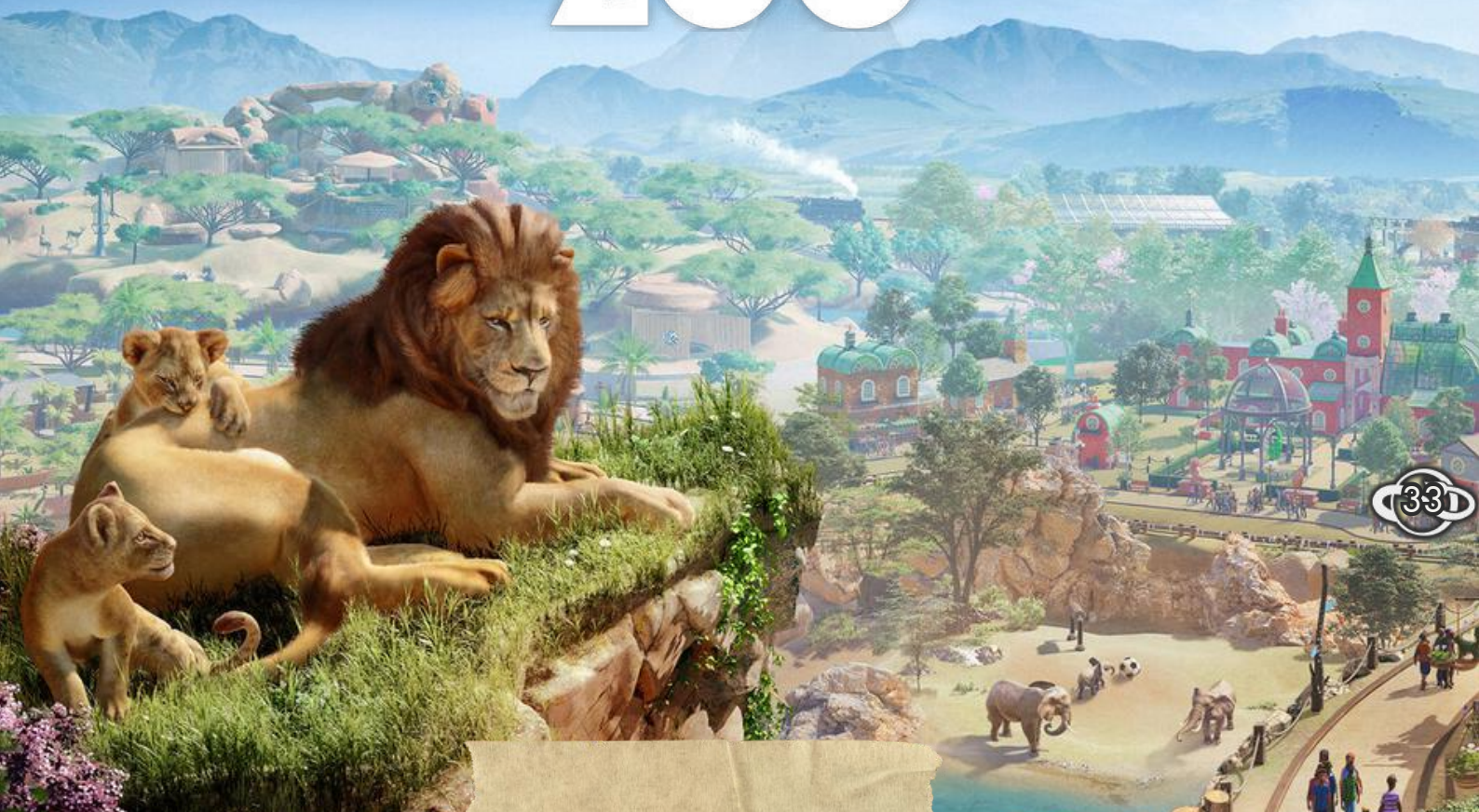
That makes me really happy. It's something I want to see more of in narrative driven games because, while this is just how I view the world, I think it can be either really unique for neurotypicals to experience a story like this and vindicating/cathartic for fellow friends of the spectrum. It also makes for great horror. It's why so many of the scares in this game involve things not going the way they "should": routines being broken, people getting too close to you, things falling apart. It's horror that people on the spectrum experience every day and it already lines up great with Denpa visual novels.

[Read the full interview HERE!](#)





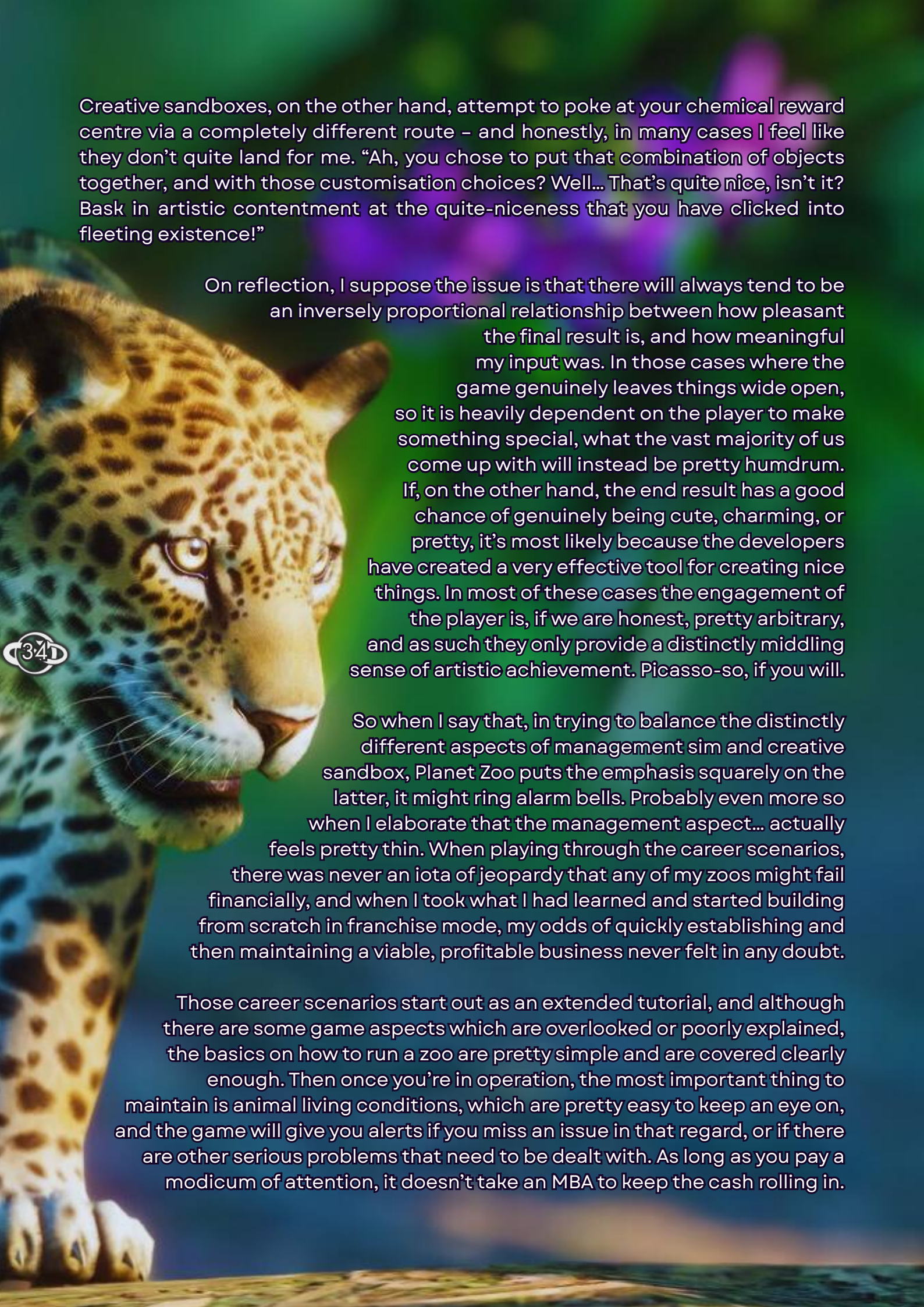
PLANET ZOO[®]



A Field Study: Natural Balance in Hybrid Systems

It strikes me that, on paper, management sims would surely seem to hold extremely limited appeal; “You too can experience the euphoric fun usually reserved for seasoned accounting, administration, and logistics professionals!” But damn it, I love them. I’m a sucker for anything that urges me to devote myself to the noble aim of, say, improving efficiency by 3%. Extensive, meticulous effort, over dozens of hours, to finally be assured that you changed a number to a slightly better number?

Oh, hell yes. Sweet, sweet floods of dopamine. Gimme.



Creative sandboxes, on the other hand, attempt to poke at your chemical reward centre via a completely different route – and honestly, in many cases I feel like they don't quite land for me. "Ah, you chose to put that combination of objects together, and with those customisation choices? Well... That's quite nice, isn't it? Bask in artistic contentment at the quite-niceness that you have clicked into fleeting existence!"

On reflection, I suppose the issue is that there will always tend to be an inversely proportional relationship between how pleasant the final result is, and how meaningful my input was. In those cases where the game genuinely leaves things wide open, so it is heavily dependent on the player to make something special, what the vast majority of us come up with will instead be pretty humdrum. If, on the other hand, the end result has a good chance of genuinely being cute, charming, or pretty, it's most likely because the developers have created a very effective tool for creating nice things. In most of these cases the engagement of the player is, if we are honest, pretty arbitrary, and as such they only provide a distinctly middling sense of artistic achievement. Picasso-so, if you will.

So when I say that, in trying to balance the distinctly different aspects of management sim and creative sandbox, Planet Zoo puts the emphasis squarely on the latter, it might ring alarm bells. Probably even more so when I elaborate that the management aspect... actually feels pretty thin. When playing through the career scenarios, there was never an iota of jeopardy that any of my zoos might fail financially, and when I took what I had learned and started building from scratch in franchise mode, my odds of quickly establishing and then maintaining a viable, profitable business never felt in any doubt.

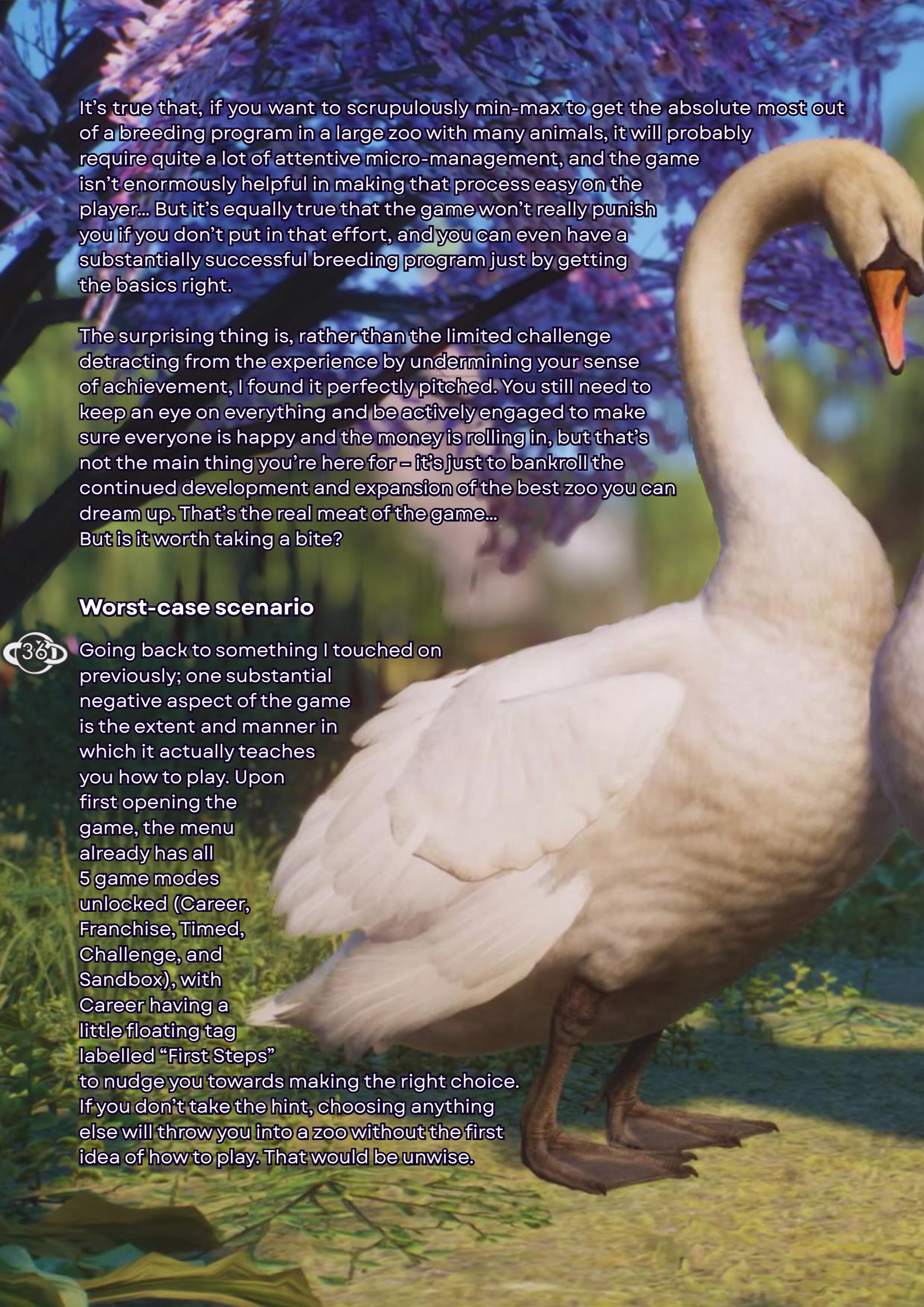
Those career scenarios start out as an extended tutorial, and although there are some game aspects which are overlooked or poorly explained, the basics on how to run a zoo are pretty simple and are covered clearly enough. Then once you're in operation, the most important thing to maintain is animal living conditions, which are pretty easy to keep an eye on, and the game will give you alerts if you miss an issue in that regard, or if there are other serious problems that need to be dealt with. As long as you pay a modicum of attention, it doesn't take an MBA to keep the cash rolling in.

That's not to say you will never have to hustle to deal with problems, especially as they can sometimes snowball if you allow yourself to get distracted. For example: you suddenly learn that one of the keepers hasn't cleaned your peafowl habitat long enough that they are practically beak-deep in pea-guano, so now you have 20 diseased birds on your hands, but while you are frantically trying to get them all to quarantine, protestors arrive to tell everyone what a monster you are, and that's the moment the zoo inspector chooses to stroll in, and he actually isn't impressed by habitats deluged with poop, sick animals, *or* angry hippies, so best of luck with your annual review!



The thing is, you can face a cavalcade of successive mini-catastrophes like that, but as long as you haven't made several fundamentally bad decisions in the layout and operation of your zoo, within 10 minutes everything will be back to rolling along pretty smoothly. The game simply doesn't seem to have been designed with the intention of confronting the player with serious operational challenges (and indeed, if you'd rather not deal with them at all, the sandbox mode allows you to eliminate cash from the equation completely, and even disable pesky facts of nature while you're at it).





It's true that, if you want to scrupulously min-max to get the absolute most out of a breeding program in a large zoo with many animals, it will probably require quite a lot of attentive micro-management, and the game isn't enormously helpful in making that process easy on the player... But it's equally true that the game won't really punish you if you don't put in that effort, and you can even have a substantially successful breeding program just by getting the basics right.

The surprising thing is, rather than the limited challenge detracting from the experience by undermining your sense of achievement, I found it perfectly pitched. You still need to keep an eye on everything and be actively engaged to make sure everyone is happy and the money is rolling in, but that's not the main thing you're here for – it's just to bankroll the continued development and expansion of the best zoo you can dream up. That's the real meat of the game... But is it worth taking a bite?

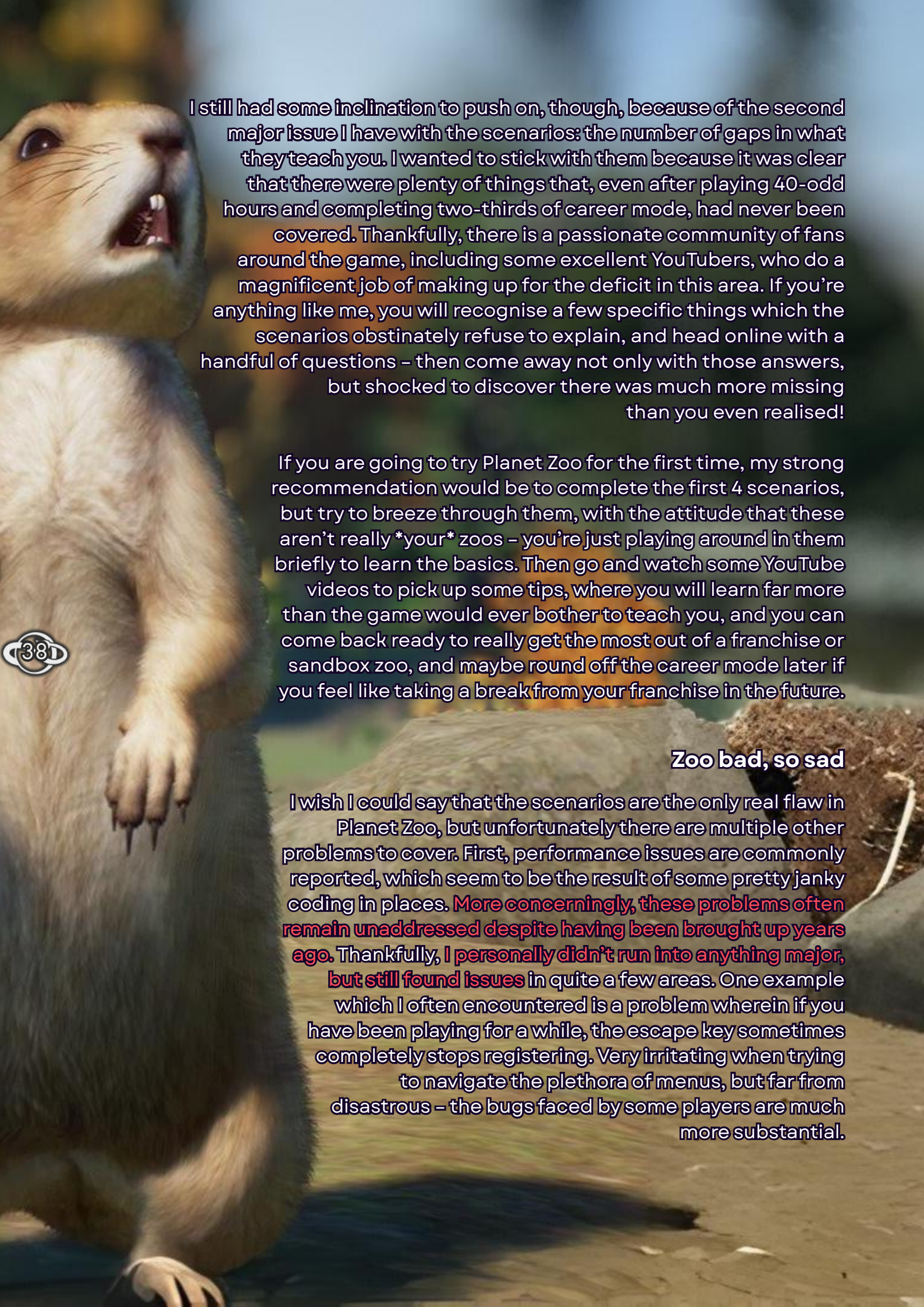
Worst-case scenario

 Going back to something I touched on previously; one substantial negative aspect of the game is the extent and manner in which it actually teaches you how to play. Upon first opening the game, the menu already has all 5 game modes unlocked (Career, Franchise, Timed, Challenge, and Sandbox), with Career having a little floating tag labelled "First Steps" to nudge you towards making the right choice. If you don't take the hint, choosing anything else will throw you into a zoo without the first idea of how to play. That would be unwise.



The career mode is a series of scenarios, each of which takes you to a new zoo and has 3 sets of objectives for you to tackle in sequence for bronze, silver, and gold completion status. During these scenarios, the game walks you through the basics, then gradually introduces you to more game elements and gives you more freedom to experiment, intermittently encouraging you along through a series of voice-acted characters popping up with charming and/or intensely annoying (your experience may vary) personalities.

There are 2 major issues with the career scenarios, the first being that the tutorial side to them feels needlessly drawn out and also excessively restrictive. I can appreciate that gradually unlocking gameplay elements and putting up guardrails to box in players helps to avoid anyone being overwhelmed, but the limitations continue for *so* long, and the introduction of new elements is *so* slow. My original intention was to play through all of career mode before starting a franchise, considering that franchise mode is essentially endless play, but after completing scenario 8, I had to break off out of fear that I would just get sick of the game if I pushed on further.



I still had some inclination to push on, though, because of the second major issue I have with the scenarios: the number of gaps in what they teach you. I wanted to stick with them because it was clear that there were plenty of things that, even after playing 40-odd hours and completing two-thirds of career mode, had never been covered. Thankfully, there is a passionate community of fans around the game, including some excellent YouTubers, who do a magnificent job of making up for the deficit in this area. If you're anything like me, you will recognise a few specific things which the scenarios obstinately refuse to explain, and head online with a handful of questions – then come away not only with those answers, but shocked to discover there was much more missing than you even realised!

If you are going to try Planet Zoo for the first time, my strong recommendation would be to complete the first 4 scenarios, but try to breeze through them, with the attitude that these aren't really **your** zoos – you're just playing around in them briefly to learn the basics. Then go and watch some YouTube videos to pick up some tips, where you will learn far more than the game would ever bother to teach you, and you can come back ready to really get the most out of a franchise or sandbox zoo, and maybe round off the career mode later if you feel like taking a break from your franchise in the future.

Zoo bad, so sad

I wish I could say that the scenarios are the only real flaw in Planet Zoo, but unfortunately there are multiple other problems to cover. First, performance issues are commonly reported, which seem to be the result of some pretty janky coding in places. **More concerningly, these problems often remain unaddressed despite having been brought up years ago.** Thankfully, **I personally didn't run into anything major, but still found issues** in quite a few areas. One example which I often encountered is a problem wherein if you have been playing for a while, the escape key sometimes completely stops registering. Very irritating when trying to navigate the plethora of menus, but far from disastrous – the bugs faced by some players are much more substantial.

Speaking of that plethora of menus, another issue is the often-clunky UI. It is usually necessary to go back and forth, in and out of multiple screens to reference or cross-reference information, and in most cases, it is nowhere near as efficient and user-friendly as it should be. One prime offender in this regard is when looking for information about animals. If looking up detailed stats for the specific animals in your zoo, you need to click through them one by one, because the table which lists all of them together only shows very limited information, and has extremely minimal sorting and filtering options. The particularly infuriating thing about this is that if you *remove* animals from the zoo and put them in your trade centre, it enables a fully-functional sorting and filtering system which makes the process of checking and comparing them infinitely more practical. So, the tool which would be a vast quality-of-life improvement when managing your animals *already exists* in the game, but has been arbitrarily ringfenced to make it hugely less convenient to use. I can't fathom any logic behind this highly frustrating design choice.

In a similarly cumbersome way, if looking for essential information about a species, rather than having everything clearly and concisely laid out in a single screen, you need to click back and forth around multiple pages of multiple menus to find all the different bits and pieces you might need. This point is partly due to the design of the "Zoopedia", the in-game guidebook to all the animals. It is laid out in a visually appealing way, and includes loads of extra information in case you are interested in learning about the animal in question – but the design has clearly favoured aesthetics over functionality, to the detriment of player experience.

As an aside, one of these design details of the Zoopedia which I actually found very endearing was related to creature research: as your zoo develops, it is essential to assign your vets to perform this research, to better understand the animals in your care and therefore meet their needs more effectively. A tangible sign of completing various stages of this research is that you unlock new "fun facts" about the animals – which then pop up in the corresponding page of your Zoopedia. I thought it was a nice little touch... Although they do claim that rhinos are closely related to horses and zebras, which is clearly nonsense.

Have you seen a rhino? That's definitely not a horse.



The final negative points I have to include here are, unfortunately, pretty substantial ones. Given that the biggest selling point of the game – and what the vast majority of your play time will be devoted to – is simply building a zoo, you would really hope that the tools for doing so would work properly. Well, yeah. That would have been nice.

Getting my head around the construction system seemed pretty simple at first (although the reviews make clear that some people bounce off it right from the start). Sometimes I had to wrestle with it, but most of the time it seemed pretty reasonable, and I was sure it was just my fault when things didn't go as intended... But the more I use it, the more I find it remarkable just how many quirks and inconsistencies spring up. You can be on a great run of everything working perfectly smoothly and doing precisely what you need it to, and feel like you've finally mastered the system – then, seemingly out of nowhere, it suddenly starts behaving completely differently. Instead of following the logic you've come to accept, it resolutely refuses to do what you want.

Reassuringly, I've now witnessed several content creators who have *thousands* of hours in the game, hitting a brick wall in the middle of their video and saying, "Oh, it's being weird... Maybe if I try this... Sometimes this works... No? Weeell, we can work around it!" And actually, that expresses in a nutshell how my own growing experience has changed my engagement with the construction system. Yes, it can still sometimes seem confusingly inconsistent and unpredictable, and that can easily be very frustrating. However, persisting with it has seen me build up a little bag of tricks to work around the issues, and just managing to push through that resistance, and getting the game to do what I want, now gives me regular little bursts of satisfaction. It strikes me as ridiculous, but it seems like the struggle itself has become a distinct part of the enjoyment for me. Coming soon: my first YouTube video, "The Dark Souls of Creative Sandbox Sims! (Plus debunking some freaky claims about rhinos!)"



To round off these negative points, it would be impossible not to mention: if the construction system can be said to cheekily throw the occasional spanner in the works, the pathing system just consistently flings hammers in your general direction, and especially any time you have something precise in mind. I will say, I like the fluid and organic feel that it is inclined to produce, and if you just go with the flow and accept what it wants to give you, the end results can be really pleasant. But if you are trying to achieve something specific with your paths (or with the courtyards which they clump together to form *if* you can align them properly), the system can so often be maddeningly temperamental, impractical, and unhelpful.

Countless times, things will refuse to connect (or will connect in ugly, janky, and potentially non-functional ways) just because you are a tiny fraction off where it wants you to be, or there is a 10cm rise in elevation, or you are a little bit too close to a scenery object, or a piece of ground which is perfectly clear and level to the human eye is evidently defiled by a single imperceptible speck and therefore doesn't meet the game's standards...

Some fans will jump to the defence of the pathing, but honestly, I can clearly see how it could have decimated my enjoyment of the game, had I not found the excellent "FreeBuild" mod – which makes some significant improvements to both the construction system and the pathing. Make no mistake, though: even with the mod, the paths can still be just a monumental pain in the arse.

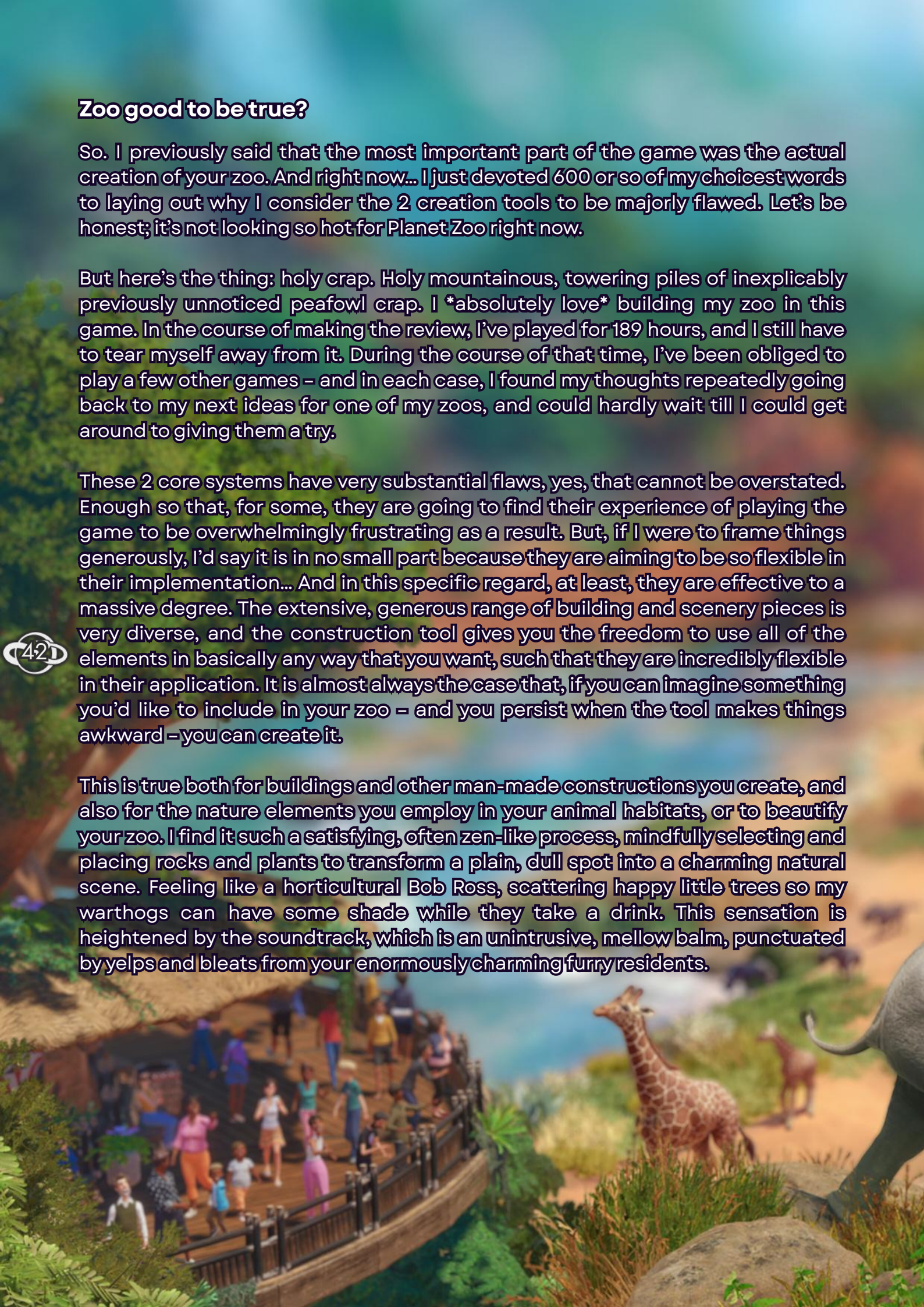
Zoo good to be true?

So. I previously said that the most important part of the game was the actual creation of your zoo. And right now... I just devoted 600 or so of my choicest words to laying out why I consider the 2 creation tools to be majorly flawed. Let's be honest; it's not looking so hot for Planet Zoo right now.

But here's the thing: holy crap. Holy mountainous, towering piles of inexplicably previously unnoticed peafowl crap. I **absolutely love** building my zoo in this game. In the course of making the review, I've played for 189 hours, and I still have to tear myself away from it. During the course of that time, I've been obliged to play a few other games – and in each case, I found my thoughts repeatedly going back to my next ideas for one of my zoos, and could hardly wait till I could get around to giving them a try.

These 2 core systems have very substantial flaws, yes, that cannot be overstated. Enough so that, for some, they are going to find their experience of playing the game to be overwhelmingly frustrating as a result. But, if I were to frame things generously, I'd say it is in no small part because they are aiming to be so flexible in their implementation... And in this specific regard, at least, they are effective to a massive degree. The extensive, generous range of building and scenery pieces is very diverse, and the construction tool gives you the freedom to use all of the elements in basically any way that you want, such that they are incredibly flexible in their application. It is almost always the case that, if you can imagine something you'd like to include in your zoo – and you persist when the tool makes things awkward – you can create it.

This is true both for buildings and other man-made constructions you create, and also for the nature elements you employ in your animal habitats, or to beautify your zoo. I find it such a satisfying, often zen-like process, mindfully selecting and placing rocks and plants to transform a plain, dull spot into a charming natural scene. Feeling like a horticultural Bob Ross, scattering happy little trees so my warthogs can have some shade while they take a drink. This sensation is heightened by the soundtrack, which is an unintrusive, mellow balm, punctuated by yelps and bleats from your enormously charming furry residents.



And that brings me to another key area where the game gets things spectacularly right: the animals themselves. They are divided into “exhibit” animals, which live in automatically decorated, uniform 4m x 4m glass boxes, and “habitat” animals, for which you personally design a complete enclosure to suit their needs. Most of the models look absolutely perfect, and their behaviour often feels wonderfully true to life. In between building or dealing with admin tasks, I frequently find myself taking a moment to watch them run around and interact, happily observing them, much like I would in a real zoo. This realism definitely helps to trick your brain into genuinely caring about making a nice environment for the animals to live in, and into feeling guilty when you screw up and they suffer the consequences. But – will you find your favourite animal featured in the game? Well...



43D

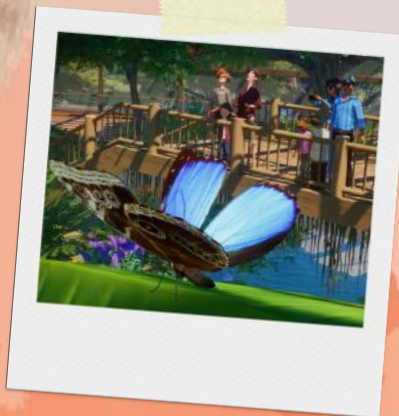


Deliberately Limited Creatures...?

DLC can be a divisive little concept, but I'm sure that many of you, our dearly loved cohort of regular readers, wouldn't object to my dutifully levelled criticism that it is often implemented with depressingly low consideration for the impact it can have on... de loyal customers.

So, when deciding whether Planet Zoo is of interest to you, it is very much worth bearing in mind that its release model is very DLC-heavy: to date, in addition to 1 mini-pack and the soundtrack, there are a whopping 19 DLC packs (and they aren't done with them yet).

As well as introducing new animals to the game, they usually also bring new scenery pieces, and sometimes provide a new, appropriately-themed career scenario.



In total, the DLC packs bring an extra 19 exhibit animals (though 5 of them are just different kinds of butterflies, so maybe it is more accurate to say 15) along with 106 habitat animals. That's a huge addition, considering that the base game has 23 exhibit animals and 54 habitat animals – but do you really need more? Well, on a fundamental level, absolutely not. There is a diverse and interesting selection of animals in the base game, and only a gargantuan zoo could accommodate them all. It would take an enormous amount of playtime before I would be sick of the sight of the lot of them and desperately want some new options, and **feel that** the devs **had** screwed me over by not including more.

That said, in terms of a sense of missing out, there is one element which doesn't really sit right with me. One of the construction items in the game is a walk-through exhibit, and the concept sounded good to me but I couldn't figure out how to use it, so I went online to discover that... you can't. If you only have the base game, at least. It is an object which, unless you have bought one of the 3 DLC packs including a compatible animal, has no purpose beyond the unintentional reminder that you do not own a feature-complete version of the game. I'm very much aware that this different style of exhibit is by no means a wildly game-changing, revolutionary aspect, but it sucks (and makes no sense to me) that my construction items include something which it's simply impossible for me to make use of.



What's more, just because there is a very decent selection of animals included, that doesn't mean you won't feel like there is a hole or two. When I realised that the base game doesn't include penguins, I confess to being a little disappointed. Not only have penguins been present at all of the best zoos I've visited, but they've often been a real highlight for me. I imagine many of us will have fond memories leading us to a deeply held belief that one particular animal or another is just *supposed* to be in a zoo. Maybe in your case it's not the penguin whose absence stings, but the ass, beaver, or dik-dik. Hey, I'm not here to judge.

Then there's the perspective that the premise of Planet Zoo isn't really to build something that is pleasant and adequate, but to make your dream zoo. If you know that your beloved koala is locked behind a paywall, it might be hard for you to be satisfied without including at least a couple of them. The game never conveys the idea that the big goal is just meeting the bare minimum, so you might feel the need to splash out to achieve your bear minimum.

Personally, the extra construction pieces in the DLC are as much of a draw as the animals. I already love the flexibility I have to use all the base game pieces in a whole mix of different ways, so adding hundreds more and exponentially increasing the possible combinations has massive appeal to me. To be clear, I'm completely satisfied with what I'm able to create using the base game elements – but I would seriously love to see what would be possible if I expanded my palette.



One other point to consider is the modding community and the Steam Workshop. There are so many talented and creative people putting up their work, freely available for everyone to use – but in the majority of cases, these pieces include elements from DLC content, and as such are unusable for players who only have the base game. Indeed, it's very common for a single item to include elements from multiple DLCs: the current most popular item in the workshop requires no fewer than 14 of them! **What's more, you are dependent on creators to clearly and accurately identify what DLC is needed – and as someone who has been repeatedly disappointed, I can confirm that content creation skills often do not correlate with content labelling skills. Losing this side of the community multiplies the feeling of missing out.**

So, then: the DLCs are by no means essential, but if it turns out that you love the game, there's a very high possibility that you'll feel compelled to buy at least a couple of them. The base price is \$10/€10 each and on sale they tend to drop to \$4-6/€4-6 (depending on age), and you can generally get them at slightly lower than those sale prices if you're happy to use the grey market. The pricing certainly isn't wildly unreasonable, but I'd say it could stand to be a bit lower – and it does mean that if you end up getting several of them, you can easily end up doubling or tripling the cost of the game.

Animal attraction

The binary of “recommend/not recommend” often does a disservice to the complexities of real experience, but of all the reviews I’ve written, this is easily the one where my final thoughts are most starkly at odds with the prickly nuance of all the caveats.

There are numerous, substantial issues in several areas which could certainly result in you having an extremely frustrating and unpleasant time. Yet, even taking them into account, I have to say that this is the best sim I’ve ever played. If the idea of creating a zoo offers the slightest appeal to you, I truly hope that those flaws do not overwhelm you. If you can get past them, what awaits you manages to genuinely capture the joy of interacting with nature, while providing such a deeply engaging creative experience that I can see myself happily whiling away hour after hour for many years to come. It has immediately planted itself among my most played games on Steam, and I would not be at all surprised if it steadily rose even higher... The other contenders for top spot are starting to look critically endangered.

PsychoApeMan

the good

- Animal appearance and behaviour is pretty much perfect
- If you persevere, construction flexibility allows you to build just about anything you can imagine
- Management tasks offer meaningful and satisfying engagement, but don’t demand too much of your time, effort, or attention
- The game is very pretty and pleasant, and has a laid-back, relaxing vibe
- Only the whole, base game content doesn’t feel stingy or artificially restricted

the bad

- Pathing and courtyard construction is often a frustrating struggle when a specific aim is in mind; arguably the unofficial mod is essential to make it bearable
- Construction tool can be maddening in its unpredictable behaviour
- UI design is poorly thought through in many places, often being clunky and unhelpful
- Career scenario mode makes a drawn-out attempt to teach gameplay, yet still fails to do so well, and feels frustrating and dull as a result
- Extremely DLC-heavy model is questionable, and could easily make players feel they are missing out

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

Let your creativity go wild!



CrossCode

You know, I've never played classic SNES JRPGs like Chrono Trigger, The Legend of Zelda, Secret of Mana, Final Fantasy VI, etc. The reason? I never had a console when I was a child. My preferences leaned more toward adventure games (Monkey Island), strategy games like Red Alert or Warcraft (I still remember being in the shop, debating whether to choose one or the other. Good times), and Western RPGs like Fallout. I don't really have an excuse anymore. Most of those classic JRPGs are available on Steam, and I should get to them soon. But I just don't feel like it. They're supposed to be really good, but there are too many games and too little time. The reason I'm bringing this up is that CrossCode is a strong callback to those classics. But is it worth it? Can it stand alongside those legends? The person who gifted it to me claimed it was a "masterpiece." That's a bold statement. Read on to find out.

48

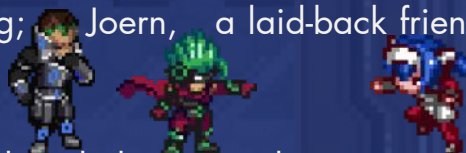
CrossCode is an indie game developed by Radical Fish DANGEN Entertainment, and Mayflower Entertainment. It spent three years in early access, and multiple patches have been added since then, contributing a lot of content. It's nice to see that level of support in games.



In CrossCode, you play as Lea, a blue-haired amnesiac girl (amnesia being one of the most overused tropes in gaming, of course) playing as a Seeker—essentially an explorer—inside an extremely advanced MMO of the future called CrossWorlds. The company, Instatainment, created light constructs called Instant Matter, which allows players to enter the “Playground” with Instant Matter avatars to fight monsters and use Augmented Reality powers. Technology has advanced in CrossCode to the point where all five senses are active inside the game, providing an incredibly immersive experience. Let’s just hope Meta doesn’t catch wind of this, or they might waste another 50 billion on a new Metaverse project. Lea doesn’t remember her name or what happens when she logs off. Sergey Asimov, the person watching over Lea’s gameplay, informs her that she’s in a coma in the real world, and the only time she’s “awake” is while playing the MMO. Lea’s mission is to recover her lost memories, while Asimov assists her, though he has his own motives.



As she plays, Lea meets several other characters. Emilie-Sophie de Belmond, an energetic and enthusiastic player, befriends Lea during the tutorial, and they play together throughout the game. There’s also Toby Tremblay, a science-savvy, nerdy character who gets frustrated when CrossWorlds doesn’t live up to his sense of realism (Emilie teases him often); Lukas, a veteran player who enjoys playful banter and member of the First Scholars, a guild interested in investigating the world of the game; Apollo, a justice-obsessed player who constantly challenges Lea to duels and wears a very particular style of clothing; Joern, a laid-back friend of Apollo, and more.



The characters are well-developed, each with their own distinct personalities and arcs. The story is filled with surprises (at one point, one character is unable to log off, effectively trapped in the game), moments of confusion, shocking revelations about the story, and emotional gut-wrenching plot twists (for a really not too serious game, at one point, one character is being tortured). Still, there is a lot of light-hearted comedy. We are playing an MMO, after all. There is no need to save the world. Lea just wants to know who she is. Asimov wants to find out something. And the rest of the characters are just playing in an MMO. Even the two evil characters are kind of... not very menacing at all. They don’t want to control the human race or wipe out all their memories to have them all happy. They are just focused on their own plans. Not even extremely evil. It’s actually refreshing to see a game with the stakes so low. Still, I was very glad I was along for the ride, playing these characters and following Lea and her friends.



It's interesting that the main character, Lea, is mute. Not mute like in Half-Life, with Freeman, somehow the main character, never saying a thing, and people around him talking a lot and not noticing. But mute, like, she can't talk, because apparently her speech interface with the game is broken. Other characters realize she is mute and try to communicate with her. It makes the interaction interesting. How do you communicate with a mute person in an MMO? Asimov (his name is Sergey, but I prefer calling him Asimov. Sounds cooler) is slowly adding words to her vocabulary during the game. But they are very limited. And for a mute character, it's impressive how she manages to be so charming and have so many interactions with the characters. Multiple times, she wants to express something, but she can't. At one point, she says to her friend, "Wait" pointing at herself. And the characters understand she means she is boasting that she is going to beat the dungeon first and is going to wait for her friend. It also brings numerous emotive moments, like Lea desperately trying to convey what happened when she was kidnapped, unable to explain it, and also other characters being frustrated with her.



The sprite art is REALLY good. It's very visual-novel-like, with their full-blown portraits and the change in their expressions appearing during conversations, while at the same time the smaller avatars also act in the game and have expressions. With just some faces and a few words (like "hi," "sorry," "thanks," "Lea," "wait," "bye", are all the words she says in the whole game. And most of them are added later on in the game.), Lea has to express her emotions, and it works. You feel her strength, her charm, and her feelings thanks to the convincing art. It's no wonder so many characters get drawn to her.

The setting being a multiplayer online role-playing game is interesting. I've never seen it done before. I think only Bandai did something similar with the .hack games, but that was in the PS2 era. There are many moments when multiple players are on the screen at the same time running around. Same way as in MMO's there are always characters everywhere, except in dungeons. There is also a PvP where you have to fight one annoying character that actually grows on you, as he challenges you over and over. There are even raids you can do with your guild. And dungeons, of course. A staple of MMOs.

There are many instances Lea will have to clear a dungeon. Maybe to continue the story or advance one quest to do one of the many side quests that are needed to level up the character. Dungeons are usually "instanced", meaning each character has to do it alone, all of the party simultaneously, both the puzzles and the battles. And in the five main dungeons, Emilie challenges you to see who will finish each of them faster, and sometimes even sends you by private message some friendly banter. The puzzles were so complicated that I lost every single time. Outside the dungeons there are numerous enemies (that respawn) that you can kill.

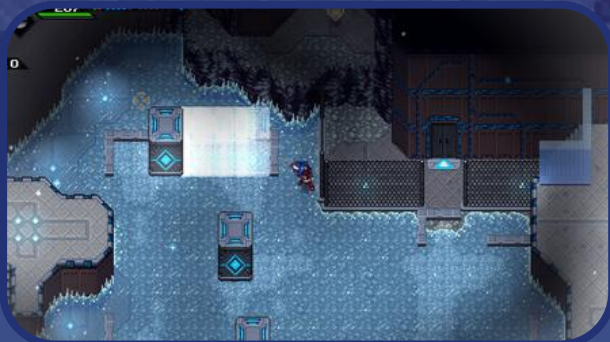


You know, for such a game, there is a surprisingly big amount of lore of the MMO. Crosscode constantly tells you it's just a MMO, not a real game. They even mention that the whole MMO is unfinished, and there is some meta-commentary. But the gameworld is so detailed, and with so much information, so many mysteries, that it LOOKS LIKE a real game. For example the moon the MMO takes place on is called the Shadoon, colonized by ancients before humans arrived, and where the original inhabitants, the Shad, live. There's also the Track, the way the developers of Instatainment created a main quest. If I didn't know in the first place it was a game inside a game, I would think the MMO was real. There is even an encyclopedia, where each chapter of the game's story recorded.

Each character has a different class, based on the gods of Shadoon. There are the powerful, big Quadroguards, the fast Pentafists, the melee-based Tribladers; ranged-spellcasting Hexacasts (ok, the mage); and the jack-of-all-trades Spheromancers. Since Lea herself is a Spheromancer, you can customize her abilities as much as you like. It's so detailed that I would have liked to play as another character-class.



It's an action RPG, and the action is fast-paced and tactical. There are multiple enemies, each of them clearly different. This is not mindless button-smashing. You have to think, and fast. This is not a turn-based game. Action is chaotic and fast. All enemies have unique patterns and weaknesses. For example some enemies have a stronger defense when they start spinning. Others are weak to fire, or to cold, or to wave, or shock. And even in advanced levels, you can easily get killed by low-level enemies if you are not careful. Blocking and dodging are very important. You have to be constantly moving to attack in melee, or to shoot at enemies from afar. The combat is frantic. But I never felt overwhelmed, or tired of the fighting.



You have multiple consumables that you can eat before or during combat to increase stats or to heal yourself. Multiple enemies, with different looks depending on the biome make the game interesting. The bosses are also interesting, with different characteristics. There are some of them that can't be killed normally. You have to guess the way to kill with clues in the environment.

Besides, the action, what you will be doing during the game, which took me about 55 hours, is exploring. There are a lot of maps, and every single map has multiple chests. All of them usually have elements that you need to get new weapons and armor. But to get the chests you need to REALLY watch the maps. There are ways to get to the chests in each area, but you need to think carefully, jump from one place to the other, using switches, moving boxes, sometimes leaving a biome just to enter in another way, etc. At first I didn't know how to get them. It seemed impossible. By the end of the game I was critically analyzing different paths to get to the chests, discarding possibilities like a veteran.

And that's not even the hardest part of the puzzles. Honestly, the puzzle parts of the game were great but exhausting. For example, Lea has bouncing projectiles. But each projectile has different properties according to the skill. I can vaporize pieces of ice or maybe balls that are standing there with fire. Or I can freeze the ball, so I can throw it into a furnace to produce steam. Or I can use wave to push things through walls. Or I can simply use shock to create a ball of electricity of my own and throw it around to try to activate switches and try to open a door. At one point I had to throw a projectile, and follow it around, using all my abilities, heat, ice, wave and shock to open the way for it. It was actually great, but oh, so, so tiring.

To be fair, level design is absolutely stellar, especially puzzles. Although I still can't believe how difficult the puzzles were. Many times I was just staring at the puzzles, having no idea at all how to proceed. But the game does a very good job on taking what it has taught you in the past and applying to later, more complicated puzzles. And the feeling of finally solving a different puzzle or beating a strong enemy is exhilarating.

Since this game is a JRPG, let's discuss the "RPG" part. Experience allows Lea to level up with permanent stats increases in things like defense, strength, and health. Other characters in your party level up on their own. Also experience allows you to earn circuit points. You have five circuit diagrams (Neutral, Hot, Cold, Wave, Shock). Each circuit point can be spent in different pathways you can choose. You can increase mostly strength and go for a mostly-melee character, or focus if you want to fight mostly from afar. Or defense and health-recovery for a tank. With circuit points you can also unlock special moves for battle. Lea gains the ability to switch each element (neutral, Heat, Wave, Cold and Shock), and each element has a circuit diagram for the special abilities and different pathways. So each element basically has its own skill tree. And every time you beat one of the six temples, you earn the ability to totally change the circuit points. The beginning of the game the skill tree is only the neutral circuit diagram. But as you progress through the story, more skill trees appear. It's a good way of making the game more and more complex, adding depth to the combat. You can build Lea to be a melee fighter, a ranged attacker, or a tanky defender, depending on your play style.



Let me tell you a negative: Grinding. I keep reading many Steam reviews that grinding is not necessary. I found that acquiring materials to upgrade weapons and armor did require some grinding, though not excessively. I didn't do any grinding to improve the stats of the character. So it balances out. From what I have seen, the most important part is the equipment, not how many levels you have.

The soundtrack is incredibly good. I had to check who the creator of the exceptional soundtrack was: Deniz Akbulut. It's absolutely charming. It's crazy how the 16-bit era songs can be so addicting. I still remember the first games I played. All songs are very simple, and yet, I still remember them. Each biome, and there are many, has its own music. And with a total of sixty four tracks, the variety is impressive, like background music for multiple places or multiple battle and challenge tracks.

In conclusion, it's an excellent adventure. Between the superb gameplay, a very detailed world, charming characters, very good soundtrack, and hours and hours and hours of content, you will love it.



Quijote3000

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

the good

- A great adventure
- Very good soundtrack
- Charming characters
- Chaotic action

the bad

- Puzzles are good... but prepare for WAR
- Some grinding for materials
- It will leave you exhausted

Glad I came
a-cross this game!



RATSHAKER

Shake, shake it, keep shaking, don't stop shaking, you must keep shaking



55

I expected memes from RATSHAKER; what I received, however, was a walking sim with some horror elements spread throughout. Did I enjoy it? Not really. That doesn't mean I hated it, but it certainly wasn't what I expected (or hoped for).

Shake the rat to build up the RATSHAKER Meter and squeeze the rat to reduce it. However, if you squeeze too much, just like with your lil' fella, you'll kill the rat. You'll need to build up the meter to interact with objects during the game's around one hour of game time.

While shaking and squeezing the rat did make me chuckle for the first few minutes, the novelty of its over-the-top animations and screams quickly wore off. You bet I turned off the sound effects early on! The only other time I chuckled to myself was when I cracked the rat to turn it into a glow stick.

Feel it, taste it, squeeze it.



A mysterious voice guides you as you progress through what appears to be a dark hallucination. The deeper you delve into the house, the wilder the hallucination grows. I cannot explain anything further without spoiling the story but expect blood, crying, and screaming.

For \$4.50 AUD (or \$4.05 on sale), is it worth it? That depends on the individual. For me, however, it wasn't worth it. It can be beaten in under one hour, the mechanics are minimal, and the story does its best to keep you hooked but falls short. It's not bad, but it's not good.

• BAEuro

56



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

the good

- Some may not like the VHS filter, it can be disabled
- Serviceable story

the bad

- Far too dark to be enjoyable
- No mechanics outside of shaking
- Very short

Only if you like shaking.





SUBNAUTICA

57



The open world survival crafting game set in a beautiful ocean, which lets you explore the shallow underwater with colorful corals housing variety of exotic fishes and more. Ever felt like enjoying the beauties that an ocean can offer? Well, Subnautica will make sure you reconsider your choices and beliefs. Apart from the safe shallows you will be able to delve into the darkness of ocean depths and uncover the dangers that should not be disturbed. However, carbon-based life forms of the ocean won't be your only concern for survival, along your journey you will find something extraordinary, something unthinkable until you've seen it with your eyes - alien technology...

You start on a starship that suffers a major impact and crashes on the nearest planet. You rush to the emergency shuttle moments before another explosion wipes out a huge chunk of the ship. The safety belts strapped across your chest hold you tightly to the shuttle's seat as you continue your descent onto the planet below. The sudden impact knocks you out, only for you to regain your consciousness on the floor of the partially flaming emergency shuttle.

When you put out the fires and emerge from your little life-saving sphere, you notice the distant starship resting on shallow lands of the planet, covered in flames and losing parts of itself every minute. You find yourself in the middle of an ocean, no land in sight, and you must submerge into the vast water surrounding you to find clues.



Life underwater is vivid and colorful. Interestingly enough, you can find useful plants and rocks containing various metals. It appears you can craft the necessary resources for yourself to survive in this environment; you have no other choice. As you manage to build a safe corner for yourself in the form of underwater housing powered by solar panels, you cannot be truly safe while the feeling of being watched by an otherworldly presence accompanies you. Diving deeper into the ocean is the only way to gain clues about what has been happening on this planet. Along your path, you will encounter remains of other survivors' emergency shuttles, as well as debris from the fallen starship. These will serve you as sources of valuable resources, but more importantly, technology.

Although disastrous, all of this makes sense in terms of what you can find underwater after a starship has crash-landed. However, you will find certain artifacts, structures, and markings which confirm your suspicions of not being alone. You will delve into the ocean's depths and uncover the secrets that lie ahead of you, and the journey will be worth it.

Subnautica offers fairly captivating progression with changing biomes as you discover the deeper depths with their own secrets and challenges. The new depths could be considered as stages - you go deeper and discover new resources and technology, which will enable you to craft better equipment that will take you to the new depths.

The game does not pressure the player with timed tasks. There will be events happening in the background, and the player will be able to choose to spectate them, but rarely be part of them. As the storytelling most of the time takes the form of voice recordings and note-reading, progression can feel somewhat repetitive once you get the pattern; however, new types of fish, new threats, and the changing environment will keep the player engaged. In the new environments, you will constantly be wondering...

Can I go down this dark hole?

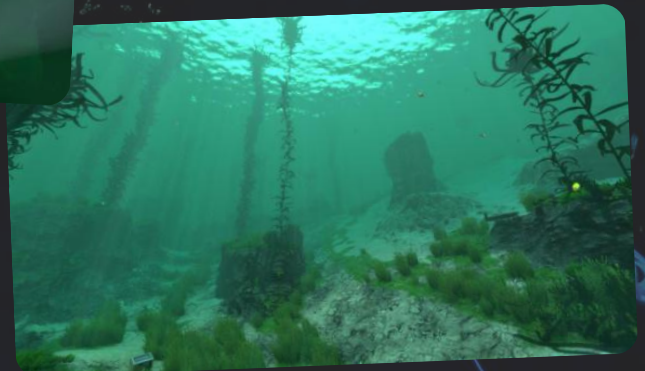
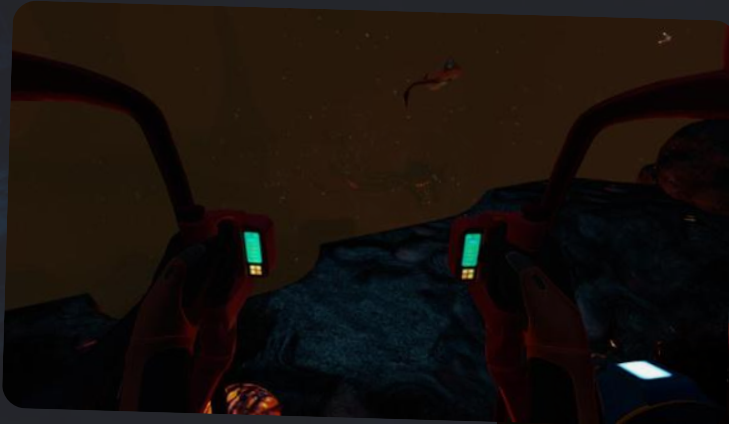
Is this fish hostile?

Will I manage to come back to the surface later?

Kelp Forest

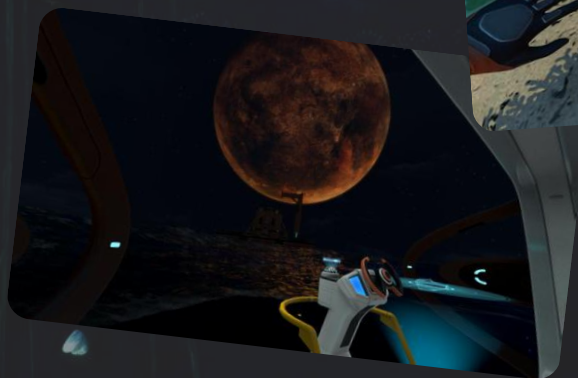


The graphics are great, and the variety of colors in different biomes is very pleasant, but what will multiply your immersion even more is the absolute beauty of the music. It is calm, yet intriguing; it invites you to explore but reminds you of the dangers. The music will always bring back the fond memories of this experience, because it was always with you when you were discovering the Subnautica world.



What happens once you explore the entirety of the world? Well, apart from the dark and scary abyss, of course. At some point, you will be able to leave time capsules for other players. The game has no multiplayer, but it has a small community-driven feature - you can leave up to 6 useful items for other players to find and assist in their journey, along with a picture you have taken in-game and a short note. Players have a chance of finding such time capsules and sharing their own little stories. Shame, though, that the capsules disappear from the world once one player has found them, and there is not much of a constant supply of new time capsules.

To sum up, it's a great immersive game for chill evenings to dive deep into the game with all your senses. A memorable experience and a warm place in your heart is what the game will leave behind, I assure you.



- **Sir Packet Lossalot**

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

the good

- Great atmosphere, legendary soundtrack, Feeling of exploration

the bad

- Gameplay is somewhat repetitive

Build, Explore, and hope you don't become a snack!



CYBERPUNK 2077

Cyberpunk 2077—if you're reading this magazine, you've almost certainly heard of it. The game had a disastrous launch, but people say that it has improved a lot since then. Has it?

I consider myself an open-world RPG enjoyer, but I did not play Cyberpunk 2077 before this review. Why? First, I don't buy games on release (something I can recommend to everyone). But second, I'm a HARDCORE Bethesda fanboy. With hundreds of hours in Skyrim, Morrowind, and Fallout 3 / 4 / NV each, would a cyberpunk-themed RPG even interest someone like me? How does Cyberpunk 2077 stand against these classics?

Let's find out!

WORLDBUILDING & SETTING

The game takes place in a coastal Californian city called Night City (named after its founder Richard Night) and its immediate surroundings. If you like browsing Wiki articles, you can read up on some rich lore from the wider Cyberpunk franchise. But if you're just interested in playing the game, you can safely skip all that.

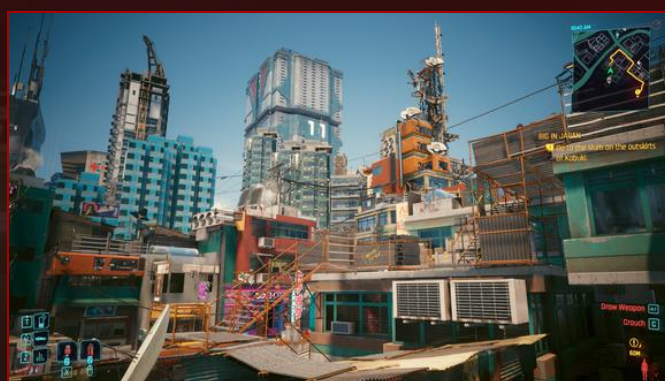
If it wasn't clear from the game title, Night City is the cyberpunk genre come to life. Neon lights. Futuristic cars. Pedestrians with cybernetic arms, legs, and sometimes heads. In the back alleys, one can find gang violence, widespread poverty, and the ruthlessness of those in power (the police and the capitalists). All the while, futuristic techno plays on the car radio. Oh, and there is a lot of sex. Everywhere. In short, the atmosphere is phenomenal.

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IMG_DESC: VIEW OVER DOGTOWN AT NIGHT



IMG_DESC: NIGHT CITY BY DAY... IT ALMOST LOOKS LIKE A NICE PLACE TO LIVE.

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IMMERSION & EXPLORATION

Cyberpunk 2077 does an amazing job of immersing you into the world. One big reason for that is the dialogue. The characters interact a lot with their environment. They sit down on a sofa, drink a beer, break a window glass, smoke a cigar on the backseat of a car that you're driving... which is a big upgrade from Bethesda games or even other open-world RPGs where characters just stand around. It feels like such a small thing, but it makes all the difference. Your character is involved too, with actions incorporated into dialogue choices:

- (Take the drug.) "Hit me."
- (Stand up.) "Let's talk business instead."
- (Shoot the gangster.) "This is for Livvy."

Some of these are even on a timer, putting pressure on you (and requiring you to pay attention).

The protagonist is voiced and doesn't ever say exactly what the dialogue option shows (exactly like in Fallout 4), but it didn't bother me. I guess that's because the meaning of what the character says rarely differs from the selected option. Plus, the VA is phenomenal at expressing a broad range of strong emotions, supporting overall immersion.

Other characters' VA is top-notch too, helping paint their complex personalities. Some NPCs converse in foreign languages (Spanish, Japanese, or Haitian Creole), but fortunately, your cyberware comes with Google Translate-powered subtitles. Technology

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IMMERSION & EXPLORATION (CONT.)

Exploring through Night City feels a bit more like Los Santos from GTA V than Boston from Fallout 4 (and obviously, it's completely different from the icy tundra of Skyrim). You traverse the city by driving cars (or bikes). I found it surprisingly satisfying to sit behind the wheel in first person, turn on the radio, and slowly drive through the city.

If you traverse the city on foot, you'll find that there's a lot more of Night City above (and below) ground level. You'll be jumping from roof to roof, crawling through sewage pipes, and using the elevator an awful lot of the time.

While on the outside most of the city feels a bit same-ish, each interior has a very distinct flavor to it. Luxurious hotels, underground gang-organized casinos, run-down car garages, abandoned apartment blocks, busy sex shops, hidden hacker (netrunner) nests... each interior has its own vibe, its own lighting, its own story. And if you take your time to read people's emails and notepads, there are a lot of stories to find! You might discover an experimental prototype of a new weapon, or you might bump into online reviews of chocolate bars. It's not quite the environmental storytelling of Skyrim and Fallout, but it adds to the immersion nonetheless.

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CYBERPUNK 2077

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IMG_DESC: THE CAPITALIST CLASS LIVES QUITE WELL IN NIGHT CITY.



IMG_DESC: AFTERLIFE AFTER DARK

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STORYTELLING & QUESTS

You assume the role of V, a gun-for-hire doing odd jobs around the city for whoever pays. At character creation, you get to choose one of three life paths (backgrounds) for your character: Nomad / Corpo / Street Kid, but they're quite meaningless, just opening a dialogue option here and there.

One day, a heist job goes wrong, and you end up with your mind being infected by a chip stuck in your head with a former-rockstar-turned-terrorist Johnny Silverhand on it. That kickstarts the main quest of trying to figure out how to get rid of the chip. At first, I wasn't a big fan of Johnny and the main story arc, but he grew on me (perhaps that's by design). I did catch myself tearing up a bit by the final quest.

The main quest chain takes the protagonist around the city, meeting many well-written characters with their well-written side quests. And the quest objectives aren't just "clear the dungeon," which we've grown to accept from Bethesda over the years. Cyberpunk 2077's quests-

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CYBERPUNK 2077

STORYTELLING & QUESTS (CONT.)

-are often much more elaborate. You'll look for spies in a high-profile customer's apartment, chase rogue AI taking over a taxi cab, use drones to scout a mining site, etc...

Many quests have some kind of investigative component to them, whether it's a search for incriminating evidence in someone's office or analyzing a recording of physical abuse to figure out where it took place. It's not particularly difficult, but it adds a nice change of pace.

It varies from quest to quest, but there's typically at least a couple of different ways to progress. Sometimes you can sneak in through a vent. Sometimes you can hack your way into a locked door. Occasionally, there's a dialogue check (referencing your background or your attributes) that allows you to progress. It's not insanely versatile like quests in e.g. Dishonored or Kingdom Come: Deliverance, but I'd say it's on par with Bethesda RPGs. You can expect to be faced with a few player choices, but it's nothing too mind-blowing (e.g., "You discovered that a guy's wife is not who she says she is. Do you tell him or not?").

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IMG_DESC: BAR MEETING W/ JOHNNY & HANAKO



IMG_DESC: PONDERING WITH JUDY

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RPG MECHANICS

Besides V's connection to the main story, the player character is basically a blank slate. The character creation may not allow you to customize details such as your nostril size, but you can freely select your body type (male/female), voice (masculine/feminine), and genitals (vagina/penis, including different sizes, circumcision and pubic hair). It's the year 2077, after all.

Once you hop into the game, you'll find that it has a plethora of different progression systems. There are five different **attributes** (Body, Intelligence, Reflexes, Technical, and Cool). Each attribute has an associated **perk tree** that opens up as you increase the attribute. Each also has an associated **skill** (Solo, Netrunner, Shinobi, Engineer, and Headhunter) which progresses by doing specific actions (e.g., hacking progresses the Netrunner skill). There's a huge variety of **cyberware implants** (e.g., a skin implant to reduce visibility while sneaking), which can be **upgraded**. Your brain implant can hold several **quickhacks** (different ways to hack objects/enemies) and **upgrade** them too. And of course, your firearms can also be **upgraded** and **modded** (e.g., by adding a silencer). And there's one more **secret system**, which I won't describe to avoid spoilers. Somewhat surprisingly, equipment is almost entirely cosmetic, and consumables-

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RPG MECHANICS (CONT.)

-(alcohol/drugs) are pretty unimpactful too.

Naturally, this wealth of systems allows for a huge variety of builds for your character. Shady hacker? Hammer-wielding brute? Sneaky sniper who is also great at throwing many different types of grenades? There are plenty of abilities and combos to live out your badass cyberpunk power fantasy.

One RPG aspect missing in Cyberpunk 2077 is the freedom to do things other than quests (which typically involve combat). In Skyrim, you can gather ingredients, combine them in alchemy, fish, build a house, pickpocket, hunt, and cook food... There are even mods that allow you to run a bakery, and the game is arguably quite fun to play that way, too. But in Cyberpunk 2077, you're kind of locked into being a gun-for-hire, and the player's freedom is restricted to deciding how to approach dialogue choices and combat encounters.

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Cyberpunk 2077

COMBAT & GAMEPLAY

To be fair, the combat in Cyberpunk 2077 is pretty awesome. You have at your disposal all the weapons that you can dream of, from "regular" silenced pistols to tech machine-guns with auto-aim or throwable poisoned katanas... Aside from gunplay, there's also the quickhacks, essentially hacking anything electronic at a distance. You can make a TV flicker to distract guards, reprogram a turret to target the enemies instead of you, hit the brakes on a speeding car, and even set enemies on fire (remember, everyone is augmented with cyberware, which can be hacked to overheat).

Your enemies also have access to a varied arsenal of guns, quickhacks, and cyberware. And sometimes you fight drones or robots, so there's decent variance overall. The boss fights, in particular, are especially interesting, unique, and very memorable. My pet peeve is that often, you're forced into a boss fight that doesn't suit your specific build. You might be a sneaky sniper who completes most areas by crawling through the bushes and methodically taking out enemies from a distance. But for a boss fight, you're thrown in front of a raging sword-swinging beast. Good luck.

At higher difficulties, some of the boss fights expose the reality that out of the hundreds of possible character builds, only a couple of specific ones are optimal. But, fortunately, nothing is stopping you from just lowering the difficulty for a specific fight if you don't care for min-maxing your gunplay (been there, done that).

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Cyberpunk 2077

TECHNICAL PERFORMANCE & BUGS

When *Cyberpunk 2077* launched in December 2020, it was a technical catastrophe. I only heard about it second-hand, so I can't compare my own experience, but it has clearly improved. That is not to say that it's now completely bug-free, but at least it's playable. You'd still encounter plenty of people sitting on invisible chairs, driving invisible cars, not to mention physics glitches. This is quite on par with Bethesda's classics like *Skyrim* or *Fallout 4*.

My gaming laptop was struggling with framerate a bit, but that's the price to pay for games looking as good as *Cyberpunk 2077*.

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IMG_DESC: THE HACKING INTERFACE. LOOKS VERY CYBERPUNK-ISH.



IMG_DESC: SCOUTING AN AREA BY DRONE BEFORE INFILTRATING.

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PHANTOM LIBERTY DLC

The game has one DLC—Phantom Liberty (PL). In short, I would describe it as “More of the same, but in the best possible sense.”

The DLC adds a new district, Dogtown, to Night City, full of content such as vendors, quests, weapons, vehicles, and even some occasional, repeatable “radiant events.” The story of Phantom Liberty has some ties to the rest of the game, but it's not very strong. Fortunately, after completing a short introductory sequence of quests, you can freely move between Dogtown and the rest of Night City, making the DLC feel like a natural extension of the base game. There is not even a loading screen between Dogtown and the other districts (although, you do enter a “border check” with doors closing around you for a moment).

One aspect in which PL clearly stands above the base game is quest design. It was already good in the base game, but it's even improved in the DLC. There are even more paths to your objectives (both literal and figurative). There are more interesting twists, a more intense atmosphere, and more consequential choices, even in the side quests! Plus, there are some clever physics puzzles (those could have been taken directly from *Half-Life 2*) and some much-needed humor—at one point, you become the director of a sex tape.

The only problem is that I started PL roughly halfway through the base game, and when I was done with it, I forgot where I was in the main quest.

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FINAL THOUGHTS

Cyberpunk 2077 will always be remembered next to No Man's Sky as a game that went through an incredible redemption arc. Extremely overhyped marketing, a disastrous launch, and a path of improvements leading to a good product in the end. And damn is Cyberpunk 2077 a good product! I'm sure you'll love it, especially if you're going into it from other open-world RPGs without many expectations.

After the first ~15 hours of playing, I texted a friend, telling him that I'm no longer a hardcore Bethesda fanboy. Cyberpunk 2077 didn't just meet my expectations—it set the bar higher. Tomorrow evening, I'm going to start watching Cyberpunk Edgerunners on Netflix, and I can't wait!

• ExcelElmira

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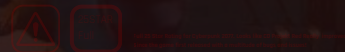
IMG_DESC: COYOTE COJO, YOUR AVERAGE CYBERPUNK BAR.



IMG_DESC: JUST YOUR AVERAGE COZY STREET IN NIGHT CITY.



IMG_DESC: NIGHT CITY BY NIGHT, SPECIFICALLY THE JAPANTOWN DISTRICT..



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

the good

- Atmosphere
- Combat
- Variety of builds
- Dialogue
- Quests

the bad

- Some bosses are hard to beat with some builds
- Attribute checks scale with your level

Johnny Silverhand lives rent-free in my head.



As P!nk once said,
“If God is a DJ, life
is a dance floor”.

WANDERSONG

69





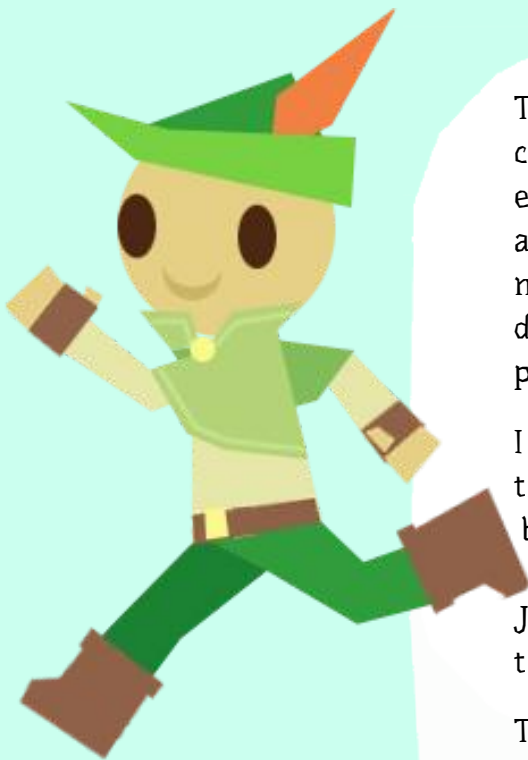
When I first saw Wandersong on Steam, I'll be honest, I underestimated it. The screenshots looked... well, kind of primitive to me. Flat colours, simple shapes, characters that looked like paper cut-outs. I thought it was going to be one of those overly pretentious indie games that tries hard to be "different" instead of actually being a substantive game (looking at you, *Gris*).

But the more I played, the more it all started to make sense. The art isn't a shortcoming ... it's deliberate. It knows its own limits and works within them, almost like the game is in on the joke. The colours pop exactly where they should, the expressions land despite being made of a few lines, and everything fits perfectly with the game's odd but warm personality.

The world is ending.
And your solution?
Sing.



It's absurd. Even the game knows it's absurd. But it doesn't mock the idea. You're not a chosen one. You're not a warrior or even particularly brave. You're just a bard. And when you're told the world is going to end, you decide to do something anyway. You're scared. People dismiss you. They tell you to stop wasting time. But you keep going, because it's not about being 'The Hero'. It's about not giving up when there's still something worth saving, even if it feels impossible.



There's no voice acting, yet somehow the characters feel alive. The expressions are exaggerated just enough to carry their emotions, and the writing carries the rest. It's light, modern, and funny without feeling smug. The dialogue is refreshingly straight to the point, perfect for gamers with shorter attention spans.

I remember one instance where a character was trying to convince someone and went "blah blah blah blah blah, and that's why you should join us." The game's self-aware humour really landed for me. Jokes feel like they come from the characters themselves, not from a writer trying to sound clever.

There's even a funny touch where achievements unlock precisely when an NPC mentions what your rival character did - the game clearly knows what it's doing!



The singing system



Singing is your everything. It's how you move, solve puzzles, and connect with people. The puzzles themselves are innovative and fun - manoeuvring your character using just your voice feels fresh in ways I didn't expect. The game rarely punishes you for doing it 'wrong', because there's no real wrong way... you're encouraged to mess around.

72



Sometimes you're harmonizing with ghosts. Sometimes you're catching wind currents by holding notes in the right direction. Sometimes you're matching melodies with birds in a forest. It's playful, and you're cooperating with everything instead of fighting it.

And here's something I didn't expect... in certain moments, the music actually responds to you. During puzzles or duets, it might swell when you're hitting the right notes, almost like it's quietly cheering you on.

The sound effects and background score work hand in hand with every custom tune and bit of singing by the player - it's seamless integration. And a couple of times, the game even plays back a melody you've made earlier, weaving it into the scene. It's not constant, but when it happens, it feels personal and strangely rewarding.

Later on, you get to free birds and fly around with their help, which was pretty great. Reminded me of the freedom felt in the game 'Journey'.



Boss fights aren't fights at all.

73

You don't really beat anyone in the traditional sense. You don't swing a sword or shoot magic. You sync. You match rhythms, you respond in time, you persuade instead of pummel. The 'real' hero, Audrey, is the one doing the actual fighting, but your journey is about creating harmony... literally. At times during these boss encounters, I found myself genuinely wanting to sing along with the tune - the game draws you in that completely. One boss might be about matching pitch, another about repeating sequences, and another about holding your nerve when the pattern changes. They all feel like conversations instead of conflicts.



However, I did notice one issue: during some sequences where you use the controls to sing, you tend to lose focus on the actual lyrics being sung. The mechanical input demands can pull your attention away from the story being told through the words, which felt like a missed opportunity.



Companions
and
contrasts.

74

What's particularly interesting is getting to play as the anti-hero at certain points - it creates a fascinating dichotomy that adds depth to the story's themes about different approaches to heroism.



And then there's Miriam, a friend who tags along with you in your journey. She starts practically allergic to your singing, yelling for you to stop. But over time, she accepts it ... first because she tolerates you, then because she sees it working, and finally because she starts to believe in it herself. Those shifts in how characters see you are some of the most rewarding moments in the game.

Not every fight needs a sword.



75

It reminded me that sometimes the silly approach is the right one. That the weird, off-key sound you just made is exactly what the world needs most. That trying, even when it feels embarrassing or small... still matters. The game taught me that courage isn't about having all the answers or being immune to doubt; it's about showing up anyway. It's about knowing it's okay to ask for help, just like the bard does throughout his journey!

Wandersong isn't really about just saving the world. It's about the act of trying. And that's what makes it stick. There's no self-congratulating ending where you get to stand above everyone else. The Earth Song isn't your big solo... It's a choir. It belongs to everyone. The world, or rather life indeed, becomes a dance floor! The ending is soft, shared, and understated. It doesn't make you feel like you carried the weight of the world alone. Instead, you feel like someone who showed up, did their part, and helped others do theirs.

I started with a P!nk quote, so let me end with another one she got right and resonates with me:

76

"But just because it burns doesn't mean you're gonna die. You've got to get up and try and try and try!"

• SunnySideUp

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

the good

- Singing mechanics feel well integrated
- Boss fights are musical interactions rather than combat
- Ending feels meaningful and satisfying
- Anti-hero gameplay adds an interesting perspective
- Crisp dialogues with humor that doesn't try too hard

the bad

- Art looks primitive initially (though it grows on you)
- Lose focus on lyrics during control sequences

Feel free to sing along!



AD INFINITUM

My friends. It has often been said that I love history. I would like to put those rumors to rest.

Gentlemen, I love history.
Gentlemen, I... love history.
Gentlemen. I... SO LOVE HISTORY.

I love revolutions.
I love empires.
I love the rise and fall of civilizations.
I love discovery, and I love catastrophe.

I love sieges. I love treaties.
I love coronations and executions.
I love parchment and ruins.
I love the dusty echo of forgotten ages.

In the sands of Egypt, in the forests of Germania, in the streets of Rome, in the storming of the Bastille, in the trenches of the Somme, in the rubble of Berlin—I cherish every moment etched into the fabric of time.

I adore the clash of ideals, the birth of nations, the screams of manifestos, the silence of fallen cities...

My heart races at the thought of crumbling marble, of burning libraries, of last stands and first words.

Gentlemen, I do not simply study history. I breathe it.

And I ask you—do you too crave it?

Do you long to remember what others forget?

Do you wish to dive into the depths of war's past and emerge changed?

Then let it be a memory.

Let it be knowledge.

Let it be history!



"I wish the people who talk about glory could see what we do here with the rats, the gas, and the corpses."

–Anonymous British soldier (letter home)

I decided to review a game based on World War I. Simply because I love history. Give me any history game—an RTS, a civilization game, a game set in the tercios era, in WWII, in the Roman Empire—and I will eat it up.

WWI was so brutal that, at the time, it was called the Great War, the Last War—because no one believed humanity could endure another such conflict (oh, sweet summer children).

WWI changed forever the way we think about war. Governments and citizens alike on both sides believed it would be a brief, glorious campaign. "Let's go. In and out. Twenty-minute adventure." But technology had outpaced the feeble human body. New weapons, tools, tanks, things no human had seen before, like poison gas (chlorine, phosgene, mustard gas), flamethrowers, used to clear enemy trenches, brought suffocation, immolation, and unspeakable suffering.

78

The war lasted far longer than anybody was expecting. It obliterated millions. Over 20 million people died. And even the war's end only planted the seeds for the next global catastrophe.

"It was the war of the blind. They led millions of men to the shambles without knowing why."

–Philip Gibbs: British war correspondent

Ad Infinitum is made by German developer Hekate, who worked on the game for about a decade. That kind of development cycle could mean it languished in development hell or was a true passion project. It turns out to be the latter. What's compelling is that the game isn't focused on action, but rather the lingering psychological and familial trauma of war. It asks: What happens when war doesn't just end lives, but shatters the people who return?

I played it in German. The reason was that it's a very German game, set in a deeply German environment. Playing it in another language would feel like watching Yakuza in English dub. I know many people who do it, but I just can't understand why, if you have subtitles in your language.

The game opens in the trenches. I was a German soldier, stuck in the trenches we have come to associate with WWI. I received the order of general attack. So I picked up my weapon and rushed to fight, traversing the trenches to fight the enemy. I went blind into the game on purpose, trying to get the same previous information as all of you for this review. Maybe the game was a usual Call of Duty-like, more brutal than usual, WWI instead of the usual modern setting, but still just an FPS. I would valiantly rush against the enemy with my Mauser 98, killing a thousand enemies, stopping for five seconds to heal after getting hurt every time, and winning the war all by myself.

Then artillery struck, and I was just a broken body thrown into barbed wire, watching my destroyed stumps where hands were before. Nope, not Call of Duty.

You wake up in a mansion.



"The war, the awful war, grinding, killing, destroying youth by the thousands."
—General Sir Ian Hamilton: British commander at Gallipoli

The game is not interested in being an action game or winning battles. The horror is psychological, not explosive. It's about showing the brutality of the war through horror set pieces. And at its heart is a broken family, destroyed not just by war but by legacy, guilt, and grief.

The main character in the game is Paul von Smith (talk about a typical German last name), the youngest scion of an aristocratic German family.

The mansion is grand, cold, and haunted—not by ghosts, but by memories. You find diaries, letters, and rooms soaked in an oppressive atmosphere. No one in the house wants to see each other. Doors slam. Footsteps echo. Cries pierce the silence.



Lemme break
it down!!

80

First, the mother. A French woman married to a German industrialist. The woman suffered, being apart from her home country, her home language. And yet, she appeared to have been happy, once. Now she is dealing with extreme grief, hiding from her youngest son, and making a séance trying to find out the fate of the oldest one, praying for the youngest to disappear, so the eldest can come back. Her grief is suffocating.

There were multiple puzzles to solve to get around the house. This is the part that some people may find boring, and honestly, they're not especially inspired, but the atmosphere carries them. The saving grace is the manor; the way it surrounds you, becoming another character, making you understand the family. Objects trigger memories, some tender, some horrific. It's a living monument to a family that was falling apart even before war accelerated its decay.

The séance worked. You're thrust back into the trenches; to soldiers that hate the guts of their lieutenant that doesn't give a shit about them, who just cares about the war and glory (that is you, by the way).

"All the horrors of all the ages were brought together... the wounded died between the lines; the dead were piled high..."

–Winston Churchill: British statesman (in a letter during WWI)



Other than an officer you find blinded by the horrors, the battlefield is devoid of human enemies. Instead, you navigate around grotesque, blind monsters. These are not just horror tropes. They represent the sins of war. The blind ones don't see or care that a church was full of refugees. There's no combat-only evasion. While some chase sequences are tense, most encounters are more atmospheric than challenging. There are still letters, reports, and notes to be found that show the brutal situation of the war. 81

To be honest, there is not much stealth needed in the whole game. Be a little careful, and you will easily get through. The game is extremely linear, anyway, so it's not possible to get lost.

You are chased by a superbly designed monster. The developers managed to create monsters that resembled the family members you are trying to find, but twisted into a nightmare—the first monster, a broken figure of vengeance, unmistakably maternal. However, again, escaping the monster is not that hard. And the boss section against the monster is EXTREMELY easy. It has a set radius around a tree where it can pursue you. If you just get away, even just one step, the monster stops chasing you and starts strolling away. I can't see how anybody could even die once. After you activate three gramophones (the mother loved music), the monster falls.

After each monster, you return to the mansion, now opened up further, and each new section reveals another family member. You start to piece together the full story. The mansion is designed beautifully, like a labyrinth. The more I investigate, the more puzzles I solve, and the more notes I find about the von Smith family.

"The graveyards are full of young patriots."

–Charles de Gaulle: French officer (later president)

The father is also a broken figure. The son of a general, a war hero of the Franco-Prussian War, and of German colonial wars, he is actually a respected businessman and an inventor. And yet, he is a cripple as he was born with a broken leg. The only time his father showed him pride for his existence was when he managed to hunt an animal in Africa. The grandfather never really loved his child or his eldest grandchild. The only one he loved was his youngest grandchild, because he wanted him to become a soldier and continue the glorious legacy of the von Smith family. He built the mansion near the German officer's academy, only because of that. He even put in his will that his family would never change the living room, with dead trophies hung all over it. And also that the youngest doesn't admire his father, the cripple, but the family war hero.

82



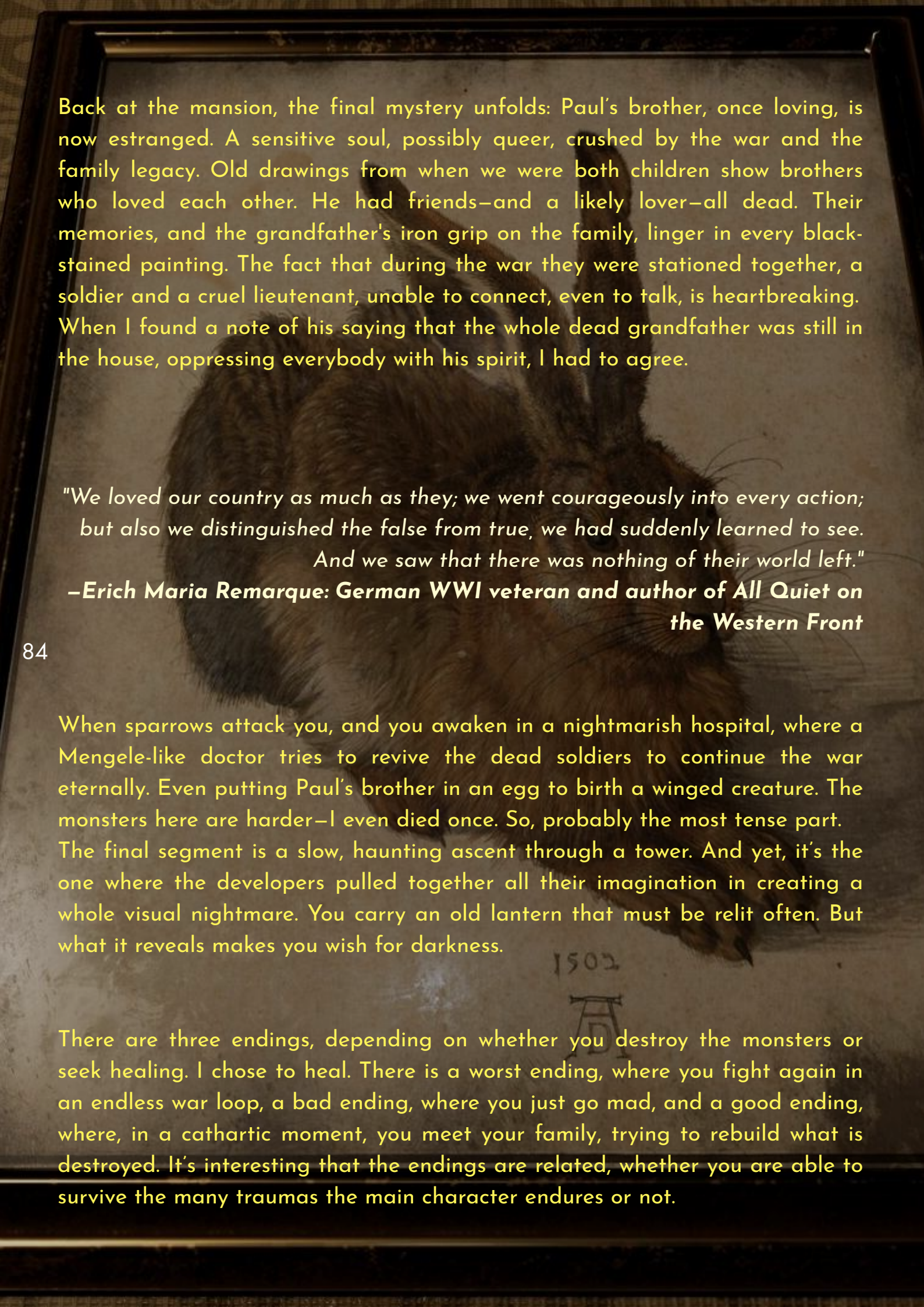
The father, a pushy figure unable to break from the past, desperate to be worthy, tried to help the war effort by creating a gas that could kill thousands of people and even have the ability to even dissolve iron. He is a man trapped under the weight of legacy, unlovable to his own father, unloved by his sons.

I was sent into the nightmare of WWI again. Using a gas mask to avoid the venom the father created, I was faced with a monster made of fire. But the gameplay was again a walking simulator, with a little bit of stealth. Nothing compared to another game like Amnesia: The bunker, another game created with a WWI setting. Finally, in a factory to create tons of the gas to kill as many people as possible, I was faced with another superbly designed monster: a steel-and-bone creature. All monsters are brilliantly designed. All of which are easy to defeat.

"Only the shell-shocked, the maimed, the blinded, the prematurely aged, and the dead know what war is."

—Vera Brittain: British nurse and writer





Back at the mansion, the final mystery unfolds: Paul's brother, once loving, is now estranged. A sensitive soul, possibly queer, crushed by the war and the family legacy. Old drawings from when we were both children show brothers who loved each other. He had friends—and a likely lover—all dead. Their memories, and the grandfather's iron grip on the family, linger in every black-stained painting. The fact that during the war they were stationed together, a soldier and a cruel lieutenant, unable to connect, even to talk, is heartbreaking. When I found a note of his saying that the whole dead grandfather was still in the house, oppressing everybody with his spirit, I had to agree.

"We loved our country as much as they; we went courageously into every action; but also we distinguished the false from true, we had suddenly learned to see.

And we saw that there was nothing of their world left."

—Erich Maria Remarque: German WWI veteran and author of *All Quiet on the Western Front*

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When sparrows attack you, and you awaken in a nightmarish hospital, where a Mengele-like doctor tries to revive the dead soldiers to continue the war eternally. Even putting Paul's brother in an egg to birth a winged creature. The monsters here are harder—I even died once. So, probably the most tense part. The final segment is a slow, haunting ascent through a tower. And yet, it's the one where the developers pulled together all their imagination in creating a whole visual nightmare. You carry an old lantern that must be relit often. But what it reveals makes you wish for darkness.

There are three endings, depending on whether you destroy the monsters or seek healing. I chose to heal. There is a worst ending, where you fight again in an endless war loop, a bad ending, where you just go mad, and a good ending, where, in a cathartic moment, you meet your family, trying to rebuild what is destroyed. It's interesting that the endings are related, whether you are able to survive the many traumas the main character endures or not.

"War: a massacre of people who don't know each other for the profit of people who know each other but don't massacre each other."

—Paul Valéry: French poet and philosopher

The horror here isn't jump scares. It's the horror of memory. Of legacy. Of trauma. The family was broken long before the war, and the war simply gave it the final push into ruin. Whether you choose to rebuild or not is up to you.

Historically, the game is grounded. Uniforms and weapons feel authentic. Trench names like "Berlin Avenue," "To the Crater," and "Suicide Camp" lend painful realism.

The voice acting is stellar. Whether you hear the cruel and indifferent grandfather, the mother who is slowly going crazy, or the voice of the brother, full of despair, there is nothing to fault the German VA. The sound design is eerie and immersive. Walking through the manor or traversing the ruins of a WWI would be better for your heart if they weren't there. The musical scores are very good. Brilliant, I should say. Emotional, powerful, and perfectly timed.

The developers didn't make a perfect game. The gameplay can feel light, the puzzles forgettable, and the horror mechanics simplistic. But what they did make is something rare: a terrifying, emotional, unforgettable journey into the psychological wounds of World War I. 85

*"In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row..."*

—John McCrae: Canadian soldier and poet

• Quijote3000

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

the good

- Bosses are very well-designed
- Brilliant writing
- Puzzles are well done
- Interesting narrative
- Superb atmosphere

the bad

- Bosses are too easy
- Stealth sections are too simple
- There is almost no dialogue
- Gameplay is shallow
- You discover everything through the notes you have to find

The echoes of history carry on.



DEADZONE

R O G U E

Deadzone: Rogue is a single/multiplayer rogue-lite FPS. You wake up on a mysterious spaceship with little idea of where or even who you are, and try to make your way through the hordes of hostile androids and biomechanical hybrids. The combat is fast-paced, the later sectors can be quite challenging, and the game offers plenty of gear and abilities to power yourself up.

The game entered early access in late April 2025, but the finished portions are already very polished and fun to play.



Gameplay

Before we get to the big guns and the baddies, I'd like to talk about the most unique aspect of the game for me. Every time you enter a new sector (i.e., a level), you start in stealth mode by default (Figure 1), and you won't be detected until you make your first attack. This means you can take your time to safely scout the entire map and form an attack plan based on valuable information, such as enemy positions, explosive barrels, cover, and chokepoints. Enemies will also show up as red dots on the mini-map, making it easier for you to plan your route as well as be more aware of your surroundings once the battle has begun.

I'm a fan of the simple weapon system: you can carry four weapons, primary, secondary, melee, and grenade. Every weapon already has one of the four designations, which means you can't, say, use a weapon belonging to the primary category as your secondary. All the guns are satisfying to use, and each weapon type has its unique feel (recoil, reloading speed, etc.). My favorite is, as always, a good ol' shotgun: tiny magazine and slow reload speed, but hits like a truck, especially when things get close and personal. That said, sometimes you just can't beat a well-rounded and reliable assault rifle. My one complaint about the weapons would be the lack of more powerful weapons. It doesn't have to be an over-the-top BFG, but a grenade/rocket launcher as a secondary would be a fine addition.

87



Figure 1: Scouting the map while in stealth mode.

Figure 2: An overview of my weapon loadout at the Fabricator, where you can spend scraps to purchase new items or upgrade existing ones.



The weapons mainly deal damage in two ways: the upfront damage of your firepower, and the elemental effects associated with your weapon, which have a chance to proc with each hit. For example, a weapon with the Lightning elemental affix can trigger chain lightning that damages all nearby enemies. You can also reroll the affix of a weapon and further enhance elemental damage with the perks you pick (more on this later). The developers also clearly made sure to balance the proc chance, as weapons with lower fire rates have much higher base proc chances.

Figure 3: The Upgrade Console available in your base. You can use it to purchase tons of incremental upgrades that help you better survive and deal damage.

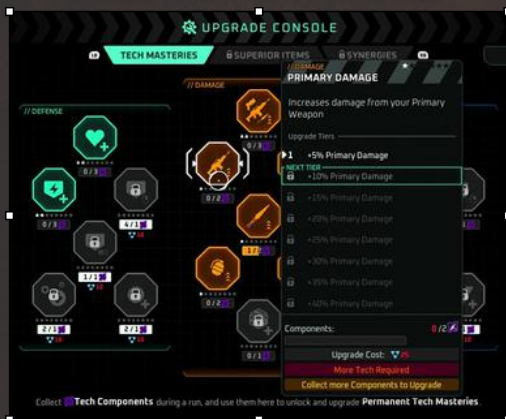


Figure 4: My favorite perks are the ones that create and upgrade little helper robots. Aww, just look at them!

In terms of enemies, the game does a solid job of mixing and matching a sizeable variety of them to keep the battlefield dynamic and engaging. Early sectors feature basic units such as gunners and melee brutes, and in later sectors, you'll run into more interesting foes such as units that fire proximity mines around you to spice up the arena, and an agile and fast-shooting mech that wields a huge shield to protect itself from your shots. The enemy variety means you need to prioritize certain enemies over others, and you also need different tactics to deal with each type, making the combat really fun and engaging. Every ten sectors, there is also a boss encounter where you can expect a much tougher (but still fair) fight.

Story and Atmosphere

The game doesn't have a linear storyline that unfolds as you make meta progress (like the way Hades does), but instead features procedurally generated pieces of lore documents in the levels that you can find during your runs. This works pretty well with the protagonist, who wakes up in this spaceship with no memories and has to gradually piece everything together. The sound design and music also do a good job of creating the mysterious atmosphere of being trapped on a hostile spaceship.

xurc



Figure 5: It's always a bad sign to run into a pile of human corpses when trapped on a mysterious spaceship.

89

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

the good

- Unique blend of strategic planning and fast-paced combat
- Satisfying shooter experience
- Many build possibilities and permanent upgrades to unlock

the bad

- Level generation isn't interesting enough

Locked, loaded,
& lost in space.





PINBALL BREEZE

90 No ball puns, I promise

Ah, pinball... the grand-grand-granddaddy of video games. If you think about it, it is really weird that video games simulate the “kick-ball-up, hit-targets-for-points” mechanics, considering they are in place only because of the severe limitations of technology centuries ago. *Nuts.*

And yes, centuries – Wikipedia tells me that alpha versions of pinball tables are from the 1600s or 1700s, depending what you consider to be “alpha” (if you include billiard tables, you go back to the 1400s). Spring launchers come into play in the 1800s, electricity joins in the 1930s, flippers in 1947. Wikipedia *rocks.*

But you want to know if this particular pinball game is good, right? I played only a few computer pinball games – Epic, Dreams, Fantasies in the 90s, Rollers of the Realm, Yoku’s Island Express (does it count?). Compared to those, Pinball Breeze is... well, very different, and often brilliant. A family game, and a *jewel.*

(One thing I can attesticle to: no ads. Yes, *gone ads.*)

Enough punball – there are 3 sets of tables, for a total of 10 tables. As I tell you about the game, I will show you a little of each set.

It all started with Billiards

On one hand, this is a pure pinball game – no story, no cute postmen, you are here just to get high scores bouncing a ball around. The first set of tables seems to reinforce the idea that this is classic, traditional pinball: behold the “Billiards Room”.

It looks a bit sparse, yes? No big elevated ramps or tunnels, no backglass with flashy dot-matrix displays... Actually, many tenets of pinball are missing from the game – there are no jackpots, no way to get extra balls that I’ve found (and you are always limited to 3 balls), no multi-ball modes. Do note on the screen’s left side a few “cards” – they indicate missions you can accomplish (hit this target n times, hit all those 5 lights, etc.). This brings to the table (er...) a nice sense of progression (nearly all good pinball tables have some version of this). Note also that some cards are under that last one – that means new targets will appear once that particular mission is accomplished. And that is one of the ways I find this game brilliant: many targets, once hit, do NOT come back up; some missions, when done, make completely new targets just pop up somewhere else. This makes the table gradually change as you play, which gives welcome variety.

Another very unique feature: when you start a table, you are given the choice of modifying it slightly by placing a few elements – a couple of bumpers, sometimes a few extra flippers. You can place them at nearly any empty space (but not directly above the drain). I found most tables perfectly playable without these extra features, but it is nice to have a little puzzle in the proceedings.

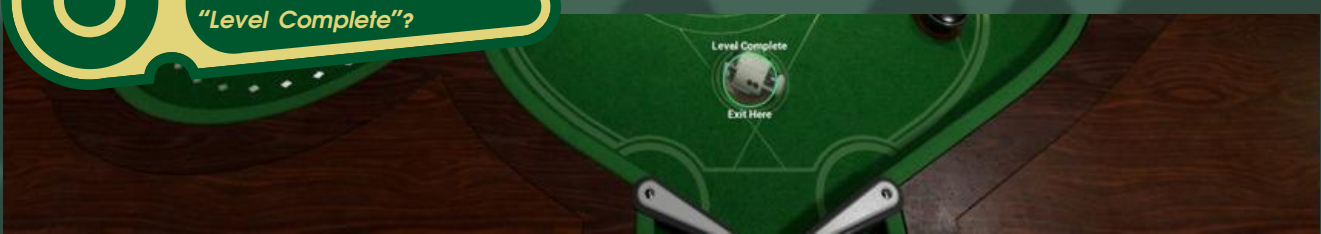


These extra elements do not score points when hit, so you get nothing by creating an enclosed space and letting the ball bounce around indefinitely (yes, I tried). In one level, I actually managed to create an enclosed space with a scoring element inside, but the devs seemingly predicted that too – hitting the same target repeatedly diminished its score at every hit, until you end up getting no new points from it.

By the way, there is a fun tilt mechanic – press this or that

button, and you can nudge the ball to the left or to the right quite a bit. There is a very short cooldown on this ability, but no penalties (you know that physical pinball tables would shut down the flippers if you tilted them too hard, right?), so this can give you lots of extra control. Out of the 10 tables, I would say about 7 were extremely well designed: lanes were in logical places that seemed to “attract” the ball, a few targets were a bit harder to hit, but all were perfectly doable, even without placing extra elements or using the tilt much. So you keep scoring points, completing missions, and once the missions are done... Hey, look, what is that right above the drain? That’s right – there is a final target that, when hit, ends the level. Wait, isn’t the main goal of pinball to keep playing, scoring more and more and more? My take: it is actually nice to get a sense of closure (and an achievement) when “completing” a table.

What do you mean
“Level Complete”?



Longboards and Leaderboards

The second set of tables is “Tranquil Shores” (a beach theme). Take a look at the first one:

That is when you start to realize this is not all classic pinball. They really went crazy with the Unreal Engine: the water looks like from a Crytek game, the ball (which now looks like a rock) scatters sand all over the place as it rolls... It is gorgeous, and it might bring your machine to its knees if you try to see it all in the highest graphics settings. This time, as you hit targets, the sun slowly sets, torches ignite to give that luau ambiance, and the ball starts to look like hot lava, lighting up its surroundings with a red glow.



Have you ever seen a pinball game with a day/night cycle?

Hit those longboards, end the level and you get to see the leaderboards. It is pretty standard stuff – Friends, Around You, Top Global. First I thought “not fair, those folks are playing with different layouts than me”. And then I realized – click on someone’s name on the leaderboard, and you can play the table with their layout with one single click! Brilliant! You can steal someone else’s hours of element placing hard work, then beat them at their own game!



Planetary rings and technical things

The last theme is “celestial clockwork”, and the designs are really alien – for example, this table has drains and flippers on the sides:



Somehow, this actually works – the accelerators on the bottom rush the ball to the sides towards the drains, where you bounce it. You shamefully lose the ability to hold the ball to plan your shots, but the elements at your disposal include gravity wells and repulsors which you activate at will, so there is some control if you place them right. There is even a huge sun, which shrinks when hit, becomes a white dwarf, then... well, I will let you guess what it ends up as. It is barely pinball anymore, but it is still a lot of fun.

93



Technicalities: you can use the mouse to navigate menus and place elements, and keyboard for the flippers and tilts. I saw no way of remapping the keys, but the standard uses the Shift keys (or A+D) which were just fine. I tried a controller as well, and it felt great too. The audio is seriously good, with relaxing tunes which justify the “breeze” in the title, and great sound effects – the pleasant sound of a billiards ball getting into a pocket, a satisfying “woosh” when torches are lit, and so on. Also, you can choose between two views: high angle or low angle (of course, the second one lets you see more of the table at once).

If I had to mention something bad about the game, I would say that 2 or 3 tables completely suck – drains are too large and gameplay is too random to be pleasant (or maybe I did not use tilt as much as I should... but when the leaderboards indicate that ZERO players completed those tables...). The menus are a bit underwhelming, and I found a few cosmetic bugs when navigating them, but nothing serious at all.



Last Ball?

In short, I really enjoyed (nearly) all my time with Pinball Breeze, and every time I went back to the game to get a screenshot for this review, I felt like playing just one more round. Yes, a few tables suck, and some people might complain that a few others do not feel like classic pinball at all, but I myself had a lot of fun, and found the whole affair very creative (even when failing). Unless you are a completionist (those few tables suck balls), if there is a chance you enjoy pinball, I really recommend it.

94

TIME TO FINISH PLAYED: 7h30min.



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

the good

- Most tables well designed, some VERY creatively
- Puzzle elements provide variety
- Great graphics and sound

the bad

- A few tables are insufferably hard and unfun
- Menus could use a bit more work

A ballsy entry to the pinball genre.



THE REWINDER

山海旅人

Hello, and welcome. As usual in my reviews, my personal experiences define my opinions of the game, so it is best to know a bit about me in order to fully follow the flow of the review.

I love learning about topics I know nothing about. This includes ancient myths, especially those that are rooted far from my own.

I also love mysteries, be it murder mysteries or a more benign kind.

95

I love puzzles. Puzzle games with and without plot elements, jigsaw puzzles, Sudoku, nonograms, and many other brain wreckers bring me joy.

I love pixel art. I feel awe when I see how much can be expressed with so little, and every time a model remake or remaster or whatever turns beautiful pixel art into “HD,” I die a little.

I love time-travel and/or time-manipulation plots. Bringing another dimension to storylines gives writers even more to work with and allows them to craft wonders.

So, given all of the above, it will surprise no one when I say I was very interested in The Rewinder.

My name is Chocolate Van Candy, local SGM goblin, and I loved this story.

The Rewinder is a game revolving around Chinese mythology. It starts by explaining who the rewinders are – long ago, four children were chosen to support the underworld with its soul management. To do so, they were given the ability to, under specific circumstances, see and interact with the last moments of mortal souls in the earthen plane.

Those children are long gone, but their descendants inherit both the ability and the mission it is needed for.

We take control of Qi Yun, the last of such descendants. He grew up in the underworld, and does not feel too attached to our plane nor its inhabitants. He is, however, attached to gold – which is why, when a new job with a hefty reward rolls around, he answers the call.

96

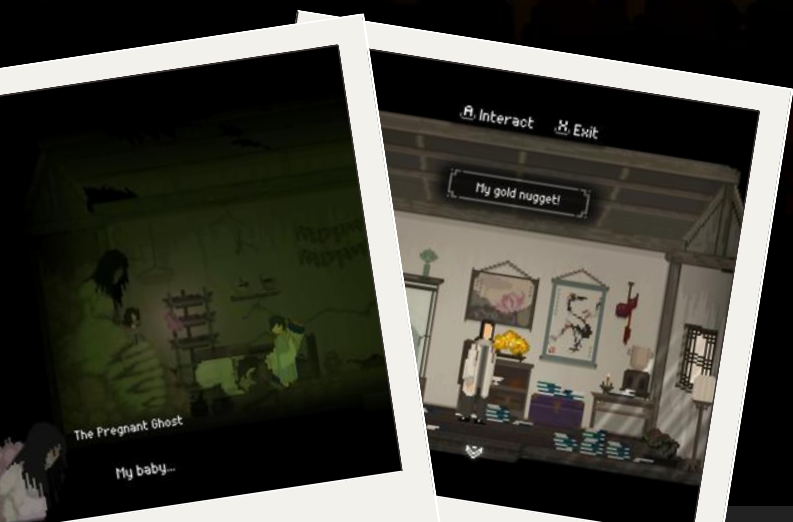
This is the introduction to the game, before we get to the job itself: a little village, the souls of which are having trouble entering the reincarnation cycle. To find out what's happening – and, more importantly, to fix it – Yun begins his investigation with the aid of Light (his guardian/magic scroll), looking for objects which the deceased villagers treasured, and making use of the memory shards inside to rewind the last moments before their deaths. By doing this, a greater plot slowly begins to unwind...



There are two kinds of puzzles in the game: the usual puzzle fare, solved either by racking your brains in front of a bunch of pixels, or by doing the classic “Use object A in place B”, and the rewindings. Let's focus on the latter, since it is the more special part.

When you rewind a person's death, your soul travels to just a few moments before their death. You can't interact with anything on a material level, but you can influence people – when they face a decision, you might give them a push so that their actions change and, with them, the course of history.

It reminds me of Ghost Trick, a classic DS game, and if you know me, you know I have no praise as high as that. They vary in difficulty, with the extra puzzle you get through collectibles (which, by the way, had a wonderful hinting system) being the easiest, but there is no shortage of red herrings, so no random guessing will save you. It does have a checkpoint system, however, so feel free to fool around to see how the characters react and witness some banter.



The pixel art in *The Rewinder* is a bit of a mixed bag. Don't get me wrong, it is always very pretty! But a very important aspect that must be taken into account when using pixels is, in my opinion, clarity – and a lot of the visuals in this game need some getting used to before you can read them easily. The biggest issue for me was the villagers, whose sprites did not have a lot of individuality.

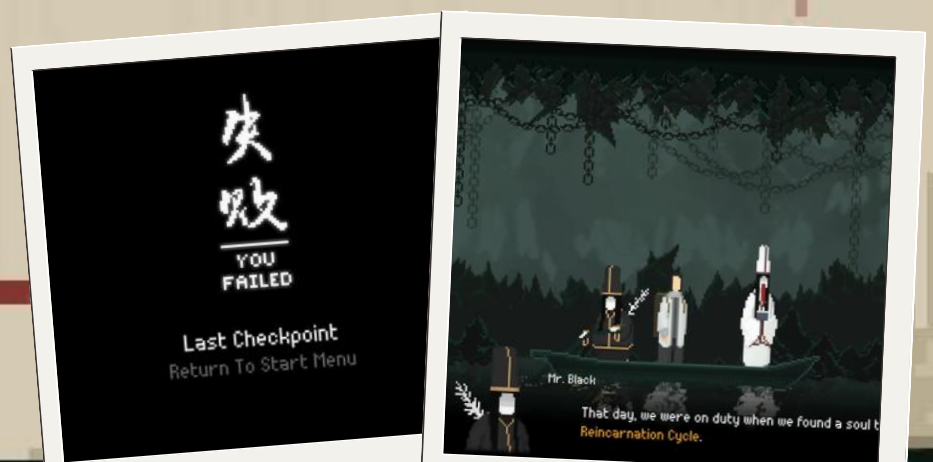
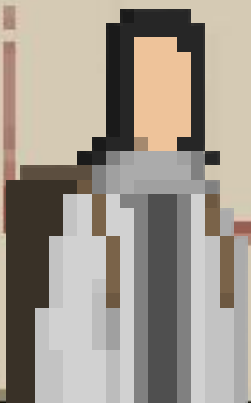
On the other hand, however, anything from the Gallery was a joy to look at. Something I loved about this part was how much of Yun's personality comes through – both the log and the gallery are written by him, and they are a blast to read.

Puzzle interfaces are another visual high point – way more detailed than the overworld, and except for a specific puzzle about spinning a rope, they all showcased very satisfying interactions.

But where *The Rewinder* shines the most is in its plot, centered around a mystery from the past investigated throughout the present, and its characters. Yun and Light meet a lot of characters, both alive and passed, and are even joined by some of them. The more we learn about them in the present, the more we can help them in the past, and the more we solve in the past, the more we can interact with them in the present. It is a very satisfying loop!

And of course, the time manipulation shenanigans are at their best with a certain twist. I won't spoil it, but the twist in *The Rewinder* was both unexpected and carefully foreshadowed. I felt something was off, but I couldn't have guessed all of what was happening under the surface.

This isn't to say this game is perfect. Apart from the aforementioned rope-spinning puzzle, there was a quick-time event sequence that took me way longer than what I'd like to admit, and might have made me drop the game if it wasn't so close to the end. Furthermore, the English felt a bit awkward at times, especially when it came to the topics related to folklore. I assume this is due to localization, and it was understandable at the end of the day, but it might make the game less enticing for someone who has trouble with English or dislikes this sort of situation.



For me, however, The Rewinder was fun, gripping, and very pretty. It made it feel like I learned a lot, both about the village and real-life folklore, and had me invested all the way.

ChocolateVC

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

the good

- Beautiful pixel art
- Great story with an amazing twist
- Occasional voicing at times were welcome

the bad

- Quick-time event section was a drag
- Sometimes there is a lack of clarity regarding pixels

Rewinding fate,
pixel by pixel...





THANK YOU
FOR
READING!

CLAIR OBSCUR

EXPEDITION

100



ON



PROLOGUE

Commencer, c'est imposer une forme au chaos.

To begin is to introduce order into chaos.



102

Quand les dernières notes musicales émouvantes du jeu ont cessé de résonner dans mon esprit, et quand j'ai arrêté de penser de manière obsessionnelle à ces fins, ambiguës, tragiques, qui te forcent à réfléchir, j'ai poussé un soupir....

Errr, sorry, sorry. I got distracted. As I was saying, when the last emotional notes from the game faded in my head, and when I obsessively stopped dwelling on those ambiguous, tragic endings that make you think, I sighed.

It was the end of a process that had started exactly on June 9, 2024. That day, for some reason, I decided to watch the Xbox Games Showcase. I've always

enjoyed watching CGI trailers, while gameplay trailers have never really convinced me.

It was a disaster. I didn't like a single trailer I saw. Bad, bad, terrible, not interested, boring, I was falling asleep, bad, boring... I was desperate. Then I saw a trailer that seemed... different.



The first thing I noticed was the art. I saw the Eiffel Tower—destroyed? No. Different. Like it was made of sand, slowly falling but never quite collapsing, as if gravity was taking a break. There were ruins of buildings suspended in the air, not falling, and between two half-fallen columns, a giant monolith with the number 34, while a terrified voice said that the peintresse was going to paint again. You could see a giant woman, the peintresse, change the number to 33, and every person of that age would vanish. It was beautiful, dreamlike.

The music grabbed you from the very first moment—sad, intense, unforgettable. The trailer showed brief moments of a character in different scenes, all with incredibly imaginative graphics. The music was the second thing I noticed—a variety of instruments that hit you hard. You couldn't stop listening. The voice insisted that Expedition 33 would try to stop the peintresse. And if they died, they would open the path for the next...

It's one of the best trailers I've ever seen.

I started researching the developers. The story of Sandfall Interactive is fascinating. Guillaume Broche, an exhausted Ubisoft employee, began working on a small project inspired by his childhood games, especially the Final Fantasy series. He sent out requests for help to a group of developers he knew, and also posted on Reddit looking for voice actors for a demo. Lorien Testard, the composer, was discovered by Broche through a post on a French indie game forum where he shared a track from his SoundCloud page. Maxson-Francombe, the game's art director, was found and recruited from ArtStation by Broche. Svedberg-Yen, one of the voice actors who stumbled upon Broche's Reddit post and was chosen for the original demo, became the game's lead writer.

From these small beginnings comes the game with some of the highest Metacritic scores. Not that Metacritic always means much, mind you. Here, it's well deserved.



STORY

Raconter, c'est ressusciter.
To narrate is to resurrect.



104

The beginning of the game is fantastic. One of the best introductions I've ever seen, and with more emotional weight than many entire games.

I'm going to tell you about my first impressions. There will be spoilers, but only of the introduction.

It starts with the main character, Gustave, dressed in Belle Époque clothing, throwing a stone uselessly at a giant monolith thousands of kilometers away and picking up a rose... Meanwhile, there's a giant Eiffel Tower about to collapse. And Gustave ignores it, just as he ignores all those buildings floating in the air... He starts talking with Maelle, his...

Friend? Sister? who encourages him to say goodbye to Sophie, who will soon have her 'gommage.' You don't know what that is. Gustave follows her, and suddenly he starts to—fly?! And Gustave flies with her. And if we're in the Belle Époque, why does Gustave have a mechanical arm that seems modern even by today's standards?

Shortly after, Maelle encourages Gustave to have a fight to calm down before seeing Sophie and... she pulls out a sword out of nowhere, while Gustave pulls out a pistol and a sword, and the fight begins. Is this a society of mages? Why is nobody telling me anything? You know those characters who only exist to dump all the world-building info at once and break

immersion, or those notes scattered on the floor that oddly tell you tons of important info? There's none of that here. And good. It's refreshing not to be spoon-fed everything right away. Though I'd really like to know why there are literally mountains floating above me. And one virtue of the game is that absolutely all the answers eventually come. And in a way you don't expect.

After the fight, Gustave finally reaches Sophie. She's being given flowers. Gustave does the same. There's a strange melancholy in the air. They greet each other. You can feel the mutual affection they have. And they walk together toward the pier to witness the 'gommage.' As they walk, I discover things. Gustave and Sophie were lovers, maybe engaged. They broke up because she didn't want to have children in a world she saw as having no future because of the peintresse. Bit by bit, I started understanding more.

The Cataclysm happened 67 years ago. The city of Lumiere was literally "ripped" from its place and turned into an island in the south. Despite the damage, many of its inhabitants survived and sent search and rescue teams to the continent.

Along with the Cataclysm came the Monolith. A massive structure where a huge female figure awakens on the same day each year and starts painting a number in a countdown. 99, 98, 97... Every year, one less. Initially, the people of Lumiere didn't know what it meant, but the oldest people in the city began to disappear, and they understood the number represented an age. When the painter — "la peintresse" — marked a number on the Monolith, all people older than that age would dissolve in a rain of red petals.





Eventually, Lumiere began sending expeditions to the continent to try to stop la peintresse and the fatal annual event called 'gommage' ('the erasure'). Expeditions made up of those starting their last year of life, trying to defeat the Painter and end the yearly curse shaking Lumiere. Every year, a new expedition sets out, but none have returned.

After 67 failed years, this year the painter is going to paint the number 33 on the monolith. And Sophie is 33 years old...

You meet many people on the way to the pier. People who accept death. People who panic. Others who are angry at a family member because, rather than

accepting their last year of life, they left on an expedition, trying to avoid the inevitable. How to face grief and sorrow is a central theme of the game.

As they walk, the mutual love and affection between them is clear.

Finally, they arrive at the pier. And Sophie, who thought she had accepted death, panics, while la peintresse awakens, erases the number 34, and paints 33. Everyone at the pier, including Sophie, dissolves into a sea of flowers. And Gustave, who seemed to have accepted his death, falls to the ground surrounded by pain.

The next day, a new expedition sets out—those who are 32 years old—a suicide mission to try to stop la peintresse. They all accept it's almost certain they will fail, just like all the previous expeditions. But they are willing to die for those who will come after. There are only two mottos: "When one falls, we continue" and "Tomorrow is Inevitable."

And here I'll stop. Although the hook is fascinating—a giant painter erasing people—the ending of the introduction left me speechless.

Then came the end of Act I, which left me even more speechless.

And then the end of Act II, which was something I had never seen before.

And so on until Act III. Again and again, the game offers revelations that redefine everything you've experienced.

I shouldn't spoil it. These are works that you need to live through to understand. But it's a story that managed to grip me by the neck and never let go.

But what does Clair Obscur really mean? It comes from French and corresponds to the Italian chiaroscuro, a pictorial style that highlights the contrast between light and shadow. That difference between light and shadow is a constant in the game. A duality present in the story—a world marked by life and death, the light of hope facing the shadow of fate. That combination of beauty and darkness, hope and tragedy, is the key to the story. Also in the characters.



CHARACTERS

Chaque homme est l'auteur de sa propre vie.

Every man is the author of his own life.



108

I liked that the protagonists aren't young chosen ones from a prophecy. They are adults, with lives marked by loss and pain. They carry palpable emotional scars. They argue among themselves. Sometimes they act selfishly. Should they try to rescue a lost expedition member? Is it a trap? Or a duty? What's the right path? They make mistakes. They doubt. They have debates where both sides have their point and some truth. They have a burning need for redemption. But it's not all pain. There are many lighthearted conversations in the camp where you get to know them. As Maelle said, "Everyone in Lumiere is an orphan." The game dives deep into grief, memory, and the coping mechanisms people use to face pain.

The entire narrative, from the characters' names to the beings you face, is filled with symbolism.

And it's how Sandfall captured the microexpressions during these talks and tense moments that makes you emotionally connect with the characters. You feel the tension, the fear, the guilt. Very few games in history have achieved that. Unreal Engine 5 has been heavily criticized for performance issues. But at least in this game, I think Sandfall worked magic. I'm not talking about generic gestures. There are expressions so subtle and natural that it feels like watching real people. Lune's eyes glow with pure fire when she wants to move forward. Sciel's

calm, relaxed expression. Gustave's tendency to look away when his past is mentioned, Maelle's nervousness and escapism... It's not just the wonderful script and believable dialogues. The characters' expressions bring them to life. That, combined with voices that work perfectly—for example, Maelle's voice by Adeline Chetail and Gustave's by Alexandre Gillet.

And despite many painful moments, I liked how there are also moments of comfort and love. These are people in their last year of life, on a suicide mission, trying to make their deaths mean something. But there are still moments of love, life, and seeking emotions in others. There's a character who's lived alone so long that seeing them seek warmth from others is deeply sad. Even facing certain death, those small moments of hope—even joy—that companions share add new layers to the characters. It's beautiful and melancholic at the same time.

Besides the human characters, there are others in the game that appear and captivate you. My favourite is an adorable character named Esquie. Not only is Esquie the most powerful character in the game, but he also loves giving hugs, is affectionate, and lets you travel the world map faster. As the story progresses, Esquie's abilities evolve and even allow you to fly through the air. My heart fills with joy when Esquie lets out a childlike scream and flies all over the stage. Remember the typical Final Fantasy moments when you finally can fly and suddenly the whole map opens up? Well, like that but bigger, because you can go up and down, not just sideways.

Gustave works really well as the main protagonist. He's brave, but not impulsive. He tries to hide the deep trauma he has and masks the pain that broke him with a positive attitude. He has an interesting dynamic with the rest of his companions. His father/brother relationship with Maelle, his strong friendship with Sciel, his constant clashes with the wise Lune... Just like in the Baldur's Gate 3 camp, there are many camp scenes in Expedition 33. And it's a pleasure to enjoy them. They aren't superfluous moments but serve to learn about this dangerous yet fascinating world, and above all, about the characters. They're not just exposition scenes. They're adult conversations between very different people, exposing their lives. The different layers of their lives. I know that, like other excellent games, I'll remember the names of Expedition 33's characters forever.



GRAPHICS

L'art n'est pas ce que vous voyez, mais ce que vous faites voir aux autres.

Art is not what you see, but what you make others see.



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You don't need to play the game to enjoy the art. Just watching videos on YouTube lets you appreciate the enormous amount of drawing work. I believe the art team only got one order: "Do whatever you want, but make it wild."

Everyone is beautiful. Whether you're in one of the many environments or walking through the surprisingly vast map, the level of detail in every scene, in every visual aspect of the game, is what you'd expect from a team of hundreds of people spending years perfecting every detail—not a small team of thirty. And it's not just random environments; the art works to highlight the importance of the game's themes.

Sometimes it's worth simply getting lost in the environments just to admire the high-quality graphics. Especially in a game like this that rewards exploration. For example, Flying Waters, an area full of flying sea creatures. With pleasant background music, I sometimes just walked around staring at the landscape. Or the Forgotten Battlefield, full of corpses, great battles between the expedition members and the local monsters. And I can't forget Frozen Station, with its crystalline landscapes. Or Alice's Tower, with its impossibly designed, always-under-construction structures. And how could I forget the Sand Palace, with its creatures dancing around?



There's an impressive amount of detail everywhere, from the imposing nature of the enemies—especially the bosses—to the designs of every location. There are also optional activities like visiting Gestral merchants (a race that lives in the world), or completing side tasks or almost-fun missions like beach games. With these, you can earn things like camp music, cosmetic items for characters, or even clothes—yes, including swimsuits. You can even do the final fight in swimwear, and the final boss will also appear in swimwear.

111



MUSIC

La musique commence là où la parole est impuissante à exprimer.

Music begins where words are powerless to express.



112

There are many games where, when I write a review, I mostly focus on things that caught my attention, like characters, story, and graphics. But I have to make an effort to remember the music.

That doesn't happen here. This is one of the best video game soundtracks I've ever heard. The compositions don't just accompany; they transform every moment into something sublime. More than once, I've caught myself with Expedition 33's music ringing in my head.

At one moment, I'm enjoying an orchestral track that makes me lose myself in the environment, and the next, a wonderful hybrid classical/modern rhythm keeps me on edge during a boss battle.

What's surprising is that every selection fits perfectly with the game's atmosphere. The developers know when to use that soundtrack, when to add tension, and above all, when to silence the music to build suspense.



FRANCE

La France, c'est la poésie du monde devenue peuple.

France is the poetry of the world made flesh.



113

The creators of Expedition 33 had a clear intention not just to create a fantasy world, but to directly relate it to France. Lumiere, a name taken from the French inventor of cinema, is a twisted version of Paris where the action begins. It even has a twisted version of the Eiffel Tower. Playing in English, you hear characters using French words like gommage, peintresse, and especially “merde.” The first real enemy you see is a mime. One of the special outfits is the French beret, striped shirts, the iconic baguette, etc. The clothes the characters wear outside combat are based on the Belle Époque era, the French version.

I want to highlight that the Belle Époque was a time when positivism (faith in science) and scientism (the belief that science explains everything) were extremely popular. This is reflected in the active attitude of the expedition members. It's a society facing total extinction. But the society hasn't collapsed; it's still there, forming and fighting for tomorrow. As they say in the game, if one dies, the others continue. And if all die, at least they will have prepared the way for the next expedition.

This is probably the most French game I've ever played in my life. That's why I decided to play it with the French voices. It makes sense to me. I don't understand Japanese either, but games like Persona or Yakuza, which are deeply rooted in Japan, I play in Japanese.



INNOVATIONS

Tout ce qu'un homme est capable d'imaginer, d'autres hommes seront capables de le réaliser.
Everything that one man is capable of imagining, other men are capable of making real.



114

FPS games have existed since Wolfenstein 3D, but it wasn't until the arrival of a masterpiece like Half-Life that innovations emerged that are now widespread today. I wonder if the same will happen with Expedition 33 and RPGs. There are a number of innovations I'd never seen before, and now I can't live without them.

For example, the innovative combat system I already mentioned. Another innovation: when I play an RPG and the character has very little health left, I only know because I'm watching the health bar somewhere. Visually, they look the same. No wounds show. They don't seem tired. In Expedition 33, it's different. I see

Maele, for instance, the young teenager, after some brutal fight, and I physically suffer. Her entire body is covered in dirt and blood. I hope it's not too much of hers. Her body looks like a map of pain. Her lips, cracked and dry, with a dark tone from clotted blood. Her face, swollen and bruised, shows cuts that let thin threads of blood slide down her skin. One eye half-closed from inflammation, the other glassy, caught between confusion and the pride of still being conscious. Her hair, once bright red, is sticky and tangled, splattered with sweat and dried blood. Her shoulders seem to sag heavily, as if every muscle is on the brink of collapse, and every step she tries to take feels like defying gravity.

Another innovation is the UI. Have you ever watched the gameplay of any game? You see the minimap, the health bar, maybe some active skills, maybe your current location or your objective, etc. And although those are necessary in games, they break immersion. That's why photo mode in those games always removes all annoying elements first. There is absolutely none of that in Expedition 33. When you're fighting, of course, your health appears. But when you're exploring, there's nothing on screen to bother you, and you can focus on enjoying the stunning graphics.

So how do you navigate? The developers put on their thinking caps given that limitation. On one hand, subtle visual cues indicate the right path, and often it's better to stray from the right path because the game rewards exploration.

But those cues are very subtle. They're not obvious—you have to go with the flow. On the other hand, there are marks like flags from previous expeditions where you can heal, or climbing aids left by expeditions that struggled to clear the way for those who come next. Those marks seem to be real signs left by earlier expeditions, integrated into the world's narrative and design. Instead of just being visual guides without explanation, they're justified as real signals within the game universe, reinforcing the idea that you're moving through a world with history and traces of past characters.

Also, unlike other RPGs, saving is limited—you only have three save slots. But that, like everything in the game, fits the developers' philosophy: Can't reload? No problem. Keep going. Tomorrow is inevitable.



COMBAT

Mon centre cède, ma droite recule, situation excellente, j'attaque.
My center gives way, my right retreats, excellent situation, I attack.



116

Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 innovates once again, combining turn-based combat for player characters with real-time combat for enemies. Something very original, I'd never seen before. At heart, it's a traditional turn-based system similar to what you'd experience in Final Fantasy, from which the influences are clear.

When it's the player's turn, you can choose to aim with a ranged weapon, use an item (for example, to attack), perform a basic attack, or select a skill. Ninety per cent of the time, you'll be using a skill. You can perform different combos, assisted by other characters, which again adds a strategic component.

As characters take their turns using an Action Points (AP) system, we then reach the enemy's turn, where combat shifts from turn-based to real-time. During this real-time phase, you can dodge attacks or block and counterattack. The dodge window is quite generous—safer. But blocking not only grants an action point for a successful block, it allows you to unleash a devastating counterattack. Of course, you can't counterattack if you're dead from all the hits you've taken. Decide: high risk with high reward, or play it safe. Constant strategic decisions.

Interwoven in combat is a QTE system that enables satisfying combos to deal extra damage to your enemies. Do you try



to complete the QTE partially to inflict some damage? Or do you try to do it perfectly, to deal much more damage, risking failure and dealing less? Higher reward means higher risk, once again. Decisions. Strategy.

Then it gets even more complex with special attacks you can perform, and even the possibility of jumping and counterattacking.

Technically, given the dodge and block system, it's possible to finish a fight without taking a single hit. I suppose YouTube will soon be full of people beating the game without getting hit once. But I see that as difficult. Despite

audio and visual cues and the game not being excessively hard, there are many enemies, each with different attack patterns, and many, especially bosses, with special moves and complex, tight movement windows.

Also, characters don't just stand still. They jump, perform attacks, hit, and counterattack. There are lots of objects on screen during combat. And the game never seems to slow down.



The combat's continuous strategic component, combined with the need to pay attention to dodges or blocks, plus the variety of enemies, makes both the first fight and fight number 500 feel fresh, and when you take down an enemy, you get that satisfying feeling.

But there's more. Each character has unique traits that make them special. Gustave, for example, can charge his mechanical arm to unleash a devastating

attack eventually. Maelle has different stances to alternate between, improving attack, defense, or something else.

Am I done? Not yet. There's another element: pictos, abilities gained in battle or exploration. Each character can equip three at a time. But after four battles, like in Final Fantasy IX, a character using a picto can unlock it for the whole group to use through lumina points earned during the game. There's no theoretical limit to



lumina, so by the end of the game, you can build incredibly powerful teams. Also, characters level up constantly, increasing their skill points.

What's interesting is that since you can create very different characters, it's not like other RPGs with fixed healer, DPS, tank roles. Each character can have a different build, and you can make completely different teams. With 193 pictos, the number of viable builds tends

toward infinity. Want a team that gains more points blocking? One with a character who hits hard but dies easily, but grants many points when revived? Go ahead.

And one thing that caught my attention is the huge disagreement on forums about which build is best. There's not even a consensus on the best weapon, since you can make different combos and strategies with each weapon.



THE ENDING

Ce n'est pas la fin, mais c'est peut-être la fin du commencement.

It is not the end, but perhaps the end of the beginning.



120

Now, let's talk about the ending. And I know what you're thinking. "Are you going to spoil it? Do you know about the scientist in Antarctica who killed a colleague because he spoiled the books he was reading? Totally justified. He should have been tortured first." No, don't worry. I won't spoil anything. Although right now, I have the urgent urge to grab anyone who's read it and talk about the ending. But I want to explain.





Unlike other RPGs where different endings usually depend on complex narrative choices, accumulated throughout the game—like whether you kill or spare someone, leading to one ending or another—do you want to see both in the same playthrough? HA! Here, the two endings revolve around a choice at the story's ultimate climax. There are no hidden conditions, no secret requirements (I'm looking at you, *Bloodborne*—you need three of these things, only four exist in the whole game, and two can be lost...). Once you get past the final stretch of the campaign and defeat the final boss, you just have to decide whose side you're on at the pivotal moment. As a narrative and gameplay decision, that's appreciated.

It's worth noting that if you explore a bit—and you should, doing side missions because the place is so beautiful—the final boss itself isn't especially difficult in gameplay terms. It's mostly an emotional culmination to conclude the characters' journey, who have suffered so much and deserve to rest, one way or another. And it's not an easy decision. In any Expedition 33 forum, everyone agrees the game is amazing. But once you start talking about which ending is “correct,” you'll see knives flying.

Why? Without spoilers, each choice represents a different perspective on grief and how people decide to remember and move on. The whole story—maybe all stories in the world—are about grief.

CONCLUSION

Le secret de la réussite est de savoir quand finir.
The secret of success is knowing when to finish.



122

Do you know what I want to do now, after writing this whole review, which I hope you like? Return to the game. I want to take Esquie and the entire Expedition 33 back to the world of Lumiere. I want to hear Esquie scream with joy as he flies. I want to listen again to the game's music, reflecting the characters' intensity, and see the world's beauty.

Let me say it simply. This is one of the games of the decade. It's not just the game of the year. It's a game people will still be talking about twenty years from now. Go ahead and enjoy it. If games are art, this is a masterpiece of the art world. This game is a canvas begging for you to enjoy it.

Quijote3000



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

the good

- Graphics are otherworldly
- Exciting combat
- Brilliant writing
- Superb music
- Haunting endings, asking hard questions and not giving answers

the bad

- Any other game I play from now on will be lacking
- After hearing so much French, I long for baguettes and discussing philosophy in a Paris coffee shop

Let this be the only game in my Steam library.





As a kid who grew up in the 90's, my first video game system was a Game Boy. I've always had a soft spot for games that pay homage to said system, and Phantom Feline is a great example. This game has the graphics, the sounds, and the overall aesthetic of a Game Boy game. The sprite work is great, the color palettes are varied while staying true to the time period, and I love the chip tune music. It being a freebie on Steam makes that all the sweeter. That alone was enough to interest me, but even for players not particularly interested in retro games, it's fun enough to recommend for its own merits.

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Phantom Feline is essentially a puzzle game where your character, Shady the Ghost Cat, is trying to get through a total of 32 levels. Shady is unable to jump, probably due to an unfortunate lack of legs. This, thankfully, is not enough to keep the little guy down, for Shady can turn into a shadow wherever there are copious amounts of light. Being a shadow allows them to crawl along walls. With that freedom of movement, hazards are avoidable, and you can position yourself for pushing boxes. A lot of the puzzle elements involve shoving crates onto buttons and making sure they go on the correct conveyor belts. There are also grates that can be passed through due to being a spirit, which let Shady access other level portions and lend themselves to small mazes. Near the end of the game are mirrors that you have to properly position to reflect the lights, adding a final layer to the puzzle mechanics.

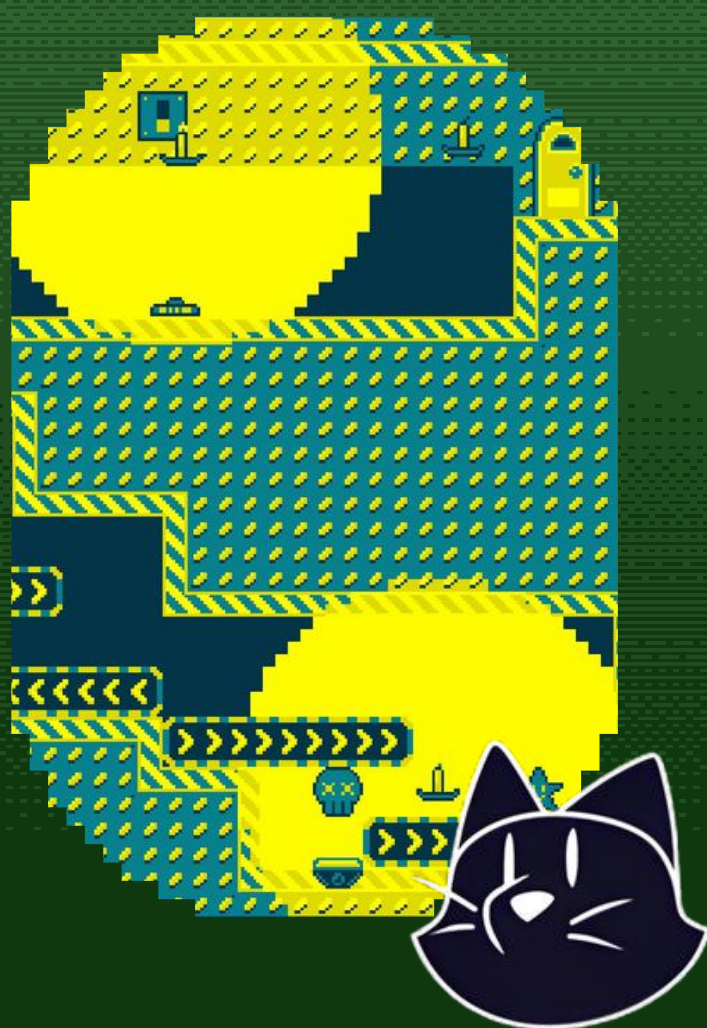
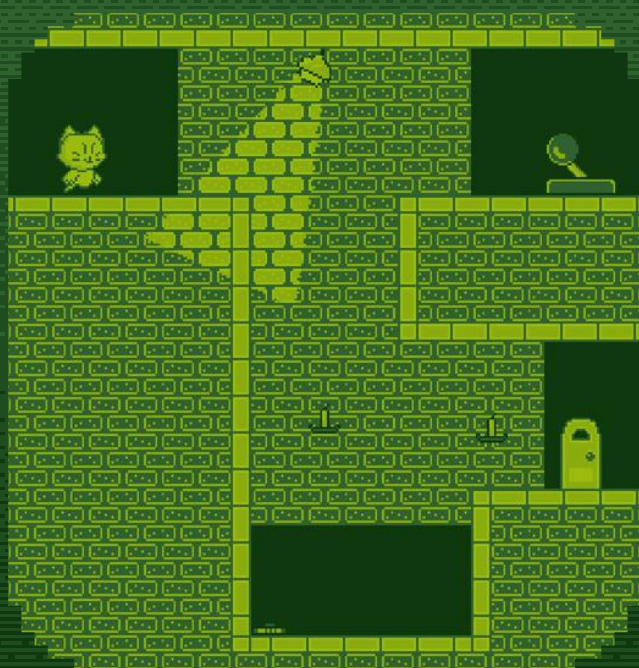


Simply finishing the 32 levels is not difficult, though you might get a bit tripped up here and there. For those who want a relaxing experience, finishing the game normally qualifies. However, once you beat the game, three extra modes are unlocked: Ectoplasm, Lights Out, and Spectral Shuffle. Ectoplasm gives a time limit to each level, Lights Out makes it impossible to see unless you have strong light sources, and Spectral Shuffle adds a small twist that varies by each level. In addition, you can earn achievements by speedrunning four groupings of eight levels each. This gives players who want more difficulty a decent challenge.

With Phantom Feline being a short game to beat and not costing even a penny, I highly recommend giving it a try. It's a cute game with a touch of spooky elements that make it a charming experience. The dev did a great job with its retro nature, something that I enjoyed for nostalgia. I feel it would also be a good introduction to the newer generation for what older games were like.

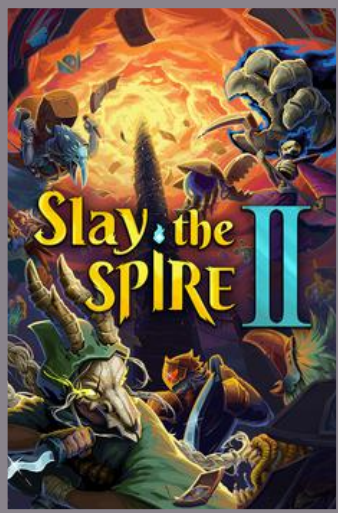
Celtic7Guardian

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LATEST NOTABLE RELEASES

With Vin, your host!



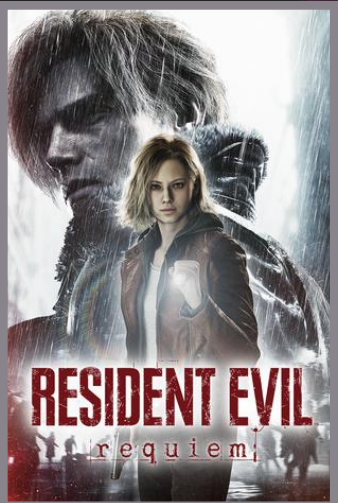
RELEASE DATE: MAR 5, 2026

The iconic roguelike deckbuilder returns. Craft a unique deck, encounter bizarre creatures, and discover relics of immense power in Slay the Spire 2!



RELEASE DATE: MAR 19, 2026

Crimson Desert is an open-world action-adventure set on the continent of Pywel. Join Kliff on his journey to rebuild the Greymane faction and to save the land from a looming threat. From vast wilderness and cities to ruins and the mysterious Abyss, forge your path through battles and discovery.



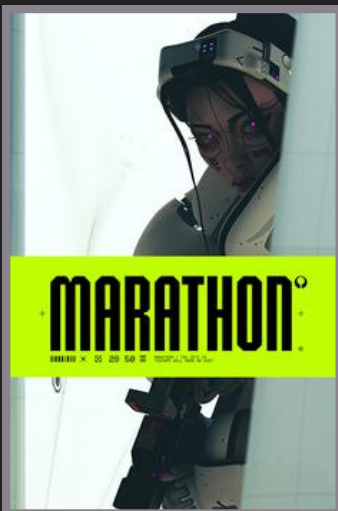
RELEASE DATE: FEB 26, 2026

Requiem for the dead. Nightmare for the living. Prepare to escape death in a heart-stopping experience that will chill you to your core. Resident Evil Requiem is pricey, but people are loving it!



RELEASE DATE: MAR 31, 2026

A coin-pushing dopamine machine. RACCOIN is a roguelike deckbuilder where you combine special coins with powerful items to trigger wildly satisfying combos. Stack shiny towers, spin the lucky wheel, and shake the machine until all the coins drop.



RELEASE DATE: MAR 5, 2026

Scavenge the lost colony of Tau Ceti IV as a bio-cybernetic Runner in a PvPvE survival extraction FPS from the creators of Halo and Destiny.



RELEASE DATE: JAN 6, 2026

StarRupture is a first-person open world base-building game with advanced combat and tons of exploration. Play alone or in a group on this sublime and ever-changing planet, extract and manage resources, create your complex industrial system and fight off hordes of alien monsters.



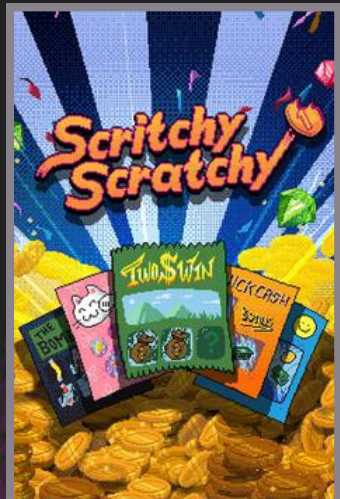
RELEASE DATE: MAR 19, 2026

In Death Stranding 2: On the Beach, Sam – with companions by his side – sets out on a new journey to save humanity from extinction. Join them as they traverse a world beset by otherworldly enemies, obstacles and a haunting question: should we have connected?



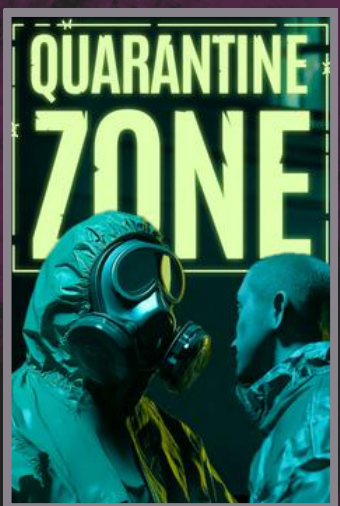
RELEASE DATE: FEB 10, 2026

In Mewgenics, you'll build the ultimate cat army through tactical breeding and send them into deep, challenging turn-based adventures. Draft abilities, collect items, and manipulate genetics across generations in this roguelike tactics game from the creators of The Binding of Isaac and The End is Nigh.



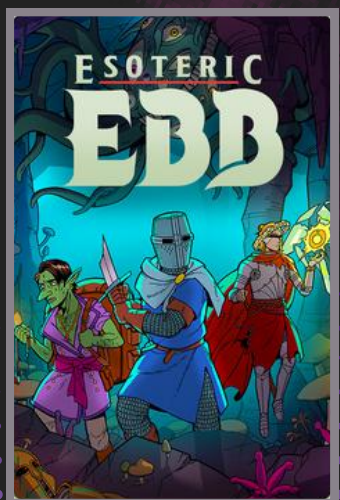
RELEASE DATE: MAR 18, 2026

Scratchy Scratchy is a super-satisfying scratch card incremental game. Buy stacks of scratch-offs, unlock auto-scratching, and chase massive jackpots. Will you play it safe or go all-in?



RELEASE DATE: JAN 12, 2026

Command the checkpoint in a collapsing city. Screen survivors, manage scarce resources, and hold back the undead. Every choice matters and one mistake could unleash the plague beyond your walls.



RELEASE DATE: MAR 3, 2026

Esoteric Ebb is a single-player CRPG inspired by the freedom of tabletop adventures. Unravel a political conspiracy with your goblin sidekick. Roll dice in tense encounters. Become a cleric of legends or completely ruin the campaign.

SGM LEADERBOARDS

ITS OVER. THANK YOU FOR EVERYTHING.

- CHOCOLATEVC

Hello, lovely readers!

As mentioned last issue, here are the leaderboards.

As a reminder, 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 the votes for this issue are in, with our contributors offering some of the games pictured below!

On the next page, you can see the current standings after the last issue. 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!



Paratopic



SGM REVIEWERS LEADERBOARD

1	Chocolate Van Candy	104 PTS	11	BAEuro	25 PTS	21	Celtic7Guardian	15 PTS
2	fernandopa	78 PTS	12	xurc	23 PTS	22	CBlade	11 PTS
3	MyrXIII	50 PTS	13	sweetcuppincakes	23 PTS	23	jahas10	8 PTS
4	quijote3000	40 PTS	14	VinroyIsViral	22 PTS	24	GrowingStrong	7 PTS
5	Sir Packet Lossalot	39 PTS	15	Almostn33t	22 PTS	25	AiKirika	7 PTS
6	PsychoApeMan	35 PTS	16	ManlyMeatMan	21 PTS	26	SunnySideUp	7 PTS
7	Excel.Elmira	35 PTS	17	kiiroichi	20 PTS	27	Hodexii	4 PTS
8	Thexder	29 PTS	18	Fallen Kal	20 PTS	28	Alpha2749	4 PTS
9	Abubis	26 PTS	19	Lexbya	18 PTS	29	Vasharal	3 PTS
10	Faloperito	25 PTS	20	Ditherdino	18 PTS	30	FSpectro	2 PTS

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SGM DESIGNERS LEADERBOARD

1	Chocolate Van Candy	191 PTS	6	Sir Packet Lossalot	35 PTS	10	Alpha2749	9 PTS
2	La Volpe	123 PTS	7	AtomicBlonde	27 PTS	11	nutsaku	5 PTS
3	VinroyIsViral	117 PTS	8	desdope	18 PTS	12	moothu	4 PTS
4	kiiroichi	90 PTS	9	Alina de la Fere	13 PTS	13	adam1224	2 PTS
5	Lexbya	52 PTS						

AVATAR

FIRE AND ASH

Avatar: Fire & Ash is the third film in the Avatar saga, directed and written by James Cameron. Unlike previous movie reviews in the magazine, we are flipping this one upside-down and instead talking about a movie that has inspired several games throughout the years. Most recently, this has manifested as the 2023 game Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora, which has also had a new DLC pack, 'From the Ashes', released along with the movie.

Fire & Ash tries not to stray too far from the previous entries in the series, keeping the story revolving around the same fundamental concepts, which, on occasion, feels almost detrimental to the movie. But it continues to innovate with the aesthetic and filmmaking to deliver a beautiful, vibrant world. While a solid entry into the Avatar saga, the film fails to deliver anything truly new to the series. So if you're looking for something groundbreaking, you're likely to be left wanting more.

The story picks up directly after the second movie, Avatar: The Way of Water, following Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) and his family on the run from the RDA. The RDA's mission has now also escalated from mining minerals to making Pandora livable for humanity, as Earth is nearing collapse. Once again, Jake finds himself hunted by Colonel Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang), who still has a vendetta against him for turning on him, and eventually leading to his demise all those years ago. Along with being forced into hiding, the family is also faced with dangers beyond the RDA, with their survival depending on already fragile alliances with the clans harboring them, and their own strained relationships within the family.

For the first time in the series, a native Na'vi clan becomes one of the primary antagonists. These are Na'vi who have given up on Eywa, choosing instead to worship flame. This ideology drives them to raid and pillage rival tribes, leaving ashes in their wake.

The acting and (e-)motion capture are fantastic. The film draws you fully into its world, allowing you to connect with each character on an emotional level. You can feel Jake's ongoing struggle to lead while keeping his family safe. You can feel Neytiri's grief, fury, and pain. You can see Quaritch's determination, keeping him a constant threat to the Sullys. The children in the family, namely Kiri, Lo'ak, and Tuk, also begin to grow as characters. Rather than existing as side characters, the younger Sullys are given space to develop their own identities and beliefs. Kiri's quiet introspection and spiritual sensitivity continue to set her apart, hinting at a deeper connection to Pandora. Lo'ak's journey is shaped by impulsiveness due to his desire to prove himself, which often places him at odds with Jake. Even Tuk, as the youngest character, still has to bear the weight of growing up in a world of conflict.





Sam
Worthington



Zoe
Saldana



Sigourney
Weaver



Stephen
Lang



Oona
Chaplin

The worldbuilding and aesthetics are also beautiful. We get the opportunity to see more of Pandora than ever before, from the forests and mountains to the beautiful blue seas. Of course, as the name of the movie implies, we are also shown some of the fire-scarred, barren lands and deserts, which birthed the Na'Vi antagonists mentioned before. The movie still contains that original Avatar magic, which has kept us coming back. The visual effects (VFX) are sublime, with much of the movie being full computer-generated imagery (CGI). The VFX is of such high quality that you simply don't notice it, and at times, it looks like James Cameron really went to Pandora with a film crew. Most importantly, the CGI conveys the aforementioned emotion beautifully. Simon Franglen also returns as the film's composer, delivering music that riffs off the previous Avatar themes and makes the movie hit with a much harder impact. The sound design makes up a very large portion of the magic that Pandora provides.

The film's pacing and structure ultimately prove to be its weakest elements. At three hours and seventeen minutes run-time, it is the longest film in the Avatar saga (so far). The narrative does follow the arcs of its many characters through to completion, but it frequently feels as though the story is circling familiar ground rather than innovating and doing something new. Several major beats repeat throughout the film, occasionally echoing moments from the second film so closely that they begin to feel redundant. With some confrontations and escapes unfolding in patterns we have already learned.

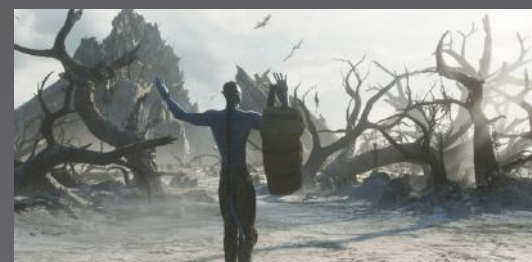
Emotionally, the film is very effective, with pacing adjusting as appropriate for its quieter moments. Kiri's story development is engaging, and the relationship between Spider and the rest of the Sullys adds tension, especially as Jake and Neytiri are forced to consider how far they are willing to go to protect their family. However, this is all undercut by a sense of déjà vu, with certain story beats feeling way too similar to the previous film.

In conclusion, Avatar: Fire and Ash is a beautiful cinematic experience, which I would recommend as a must-watch for fans of the series. The story is visceral and pulls you in with emotional arcs that carry genuine weight. However, the pacing and extended runtime, combined with the repetition of slightly too-familiar story beats and confrontations, can at times create the sense that the film is trying too hard not to stray from its origins. All things considered, if you are a fan of the series and want the cinema experience, give it a watch in cinemas. Otherwise, maybe wait for a digital release, so you can enjoy the experience at your own pace (with your own interludes), from the comfort of your own home.

Score: 71/100

Alpha2749

131



SGM's Playlist



zelune



Funnyduck



Alina de la Fere



imminiman



damianeal03



Celtic7Guardian



fernandopa



schmoan



abubis



jbondguy007



La Volpe



PsychoApeMan



Faloperito



Chocolate

Screenshot of the month issue



schmoan
The Forever Winter

Honorable mentions



DokkN22
Mad Max



Alina de la Fere
Control



Zelrune
Expedition 33

✦ CREDITS AND THANKS! ✦

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SGM