

BACK ALLEY GAMES #014



THE MIDWEST'S PREMIER INDEPENDENT GAMES MAGAZINE

PHASEBOUND: A HERO'S JOURNEY

By Back Alley Editorial Team



Phasebound: A Hero's Journey Cover Art
(c/o Struggled Seas Studios)





Nick Nobel (c/o Struggled Seas Studios)

Open on GDC 2023, where four recent graduates met and realized they were in the same boat: looking for a job in an industry where layoffs are perhaps too common. Realizing they could set off together, they formed Struggled Seas Studios, added a few more team members, and the rest was history.

Sean Smolen, the team's resident world artist, met the Indie City Games board at M+DEV 2024 and had such a good time that he wrote in to discuss his upcoming PS2-inspired puzzle game, *Phasebound: A Hero's Journey*.

Phasebound is what Smolen said is an open world action-adventure puzzle game "filled to the brim with side quests, customization options, relationship building, and so much more."

Players will take on the role of Nick Nobel, a young hero that gains an ability called "permeation," or simply the ability to phase through walls, floors, and ceilings around him. This is necessary both to solve the game's puzzles and escape the spirit-filled cave system Nick and his sister Fey have fallen into.



Enemy concept art
(c/o Struggled Seas Studios)



These caves are *Phasebound*'s main setting, featuring many spirits that will either help the siblings or hinder them, seemingly intent on keeping them lost forever.

"It's up to the player to learn and utilize permeation to solve puzzles and fight corrupted spirits in [the] strange and unorthodox world," Smolen said.

This project may seem ambitious for a team of six recent graduates, and it is. Smolen acknowledges that the team has less than a decade of experience between them and has had to scale down the project multiple times.

"That's not inherently a bad thing, though," Smolen said. "Because of that, we have refined *Phasebound* to only have the most important aspects and be as pure to the genre as possible."

The genre in question, according to Smolen, is

PS2-era action games in the vein of *Sly Cooper* (Sucker Punch Productions) and *Jak and Daxter* (Naughty Dog). However, the storytelling devices in *Phasebound* are much more modern than their inspirations, with a focus on relationships.

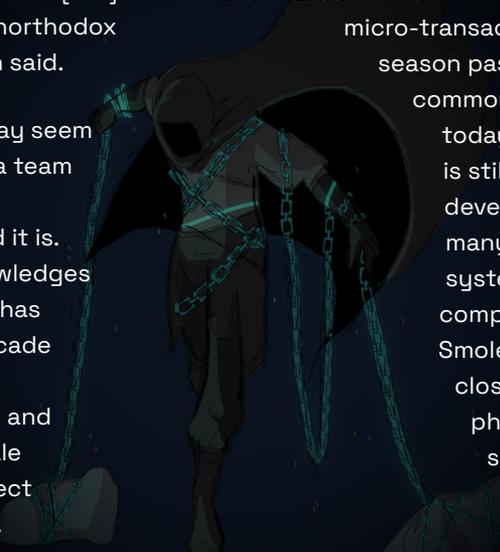
Smolen said the team wants to offer an experience with a "hint of nostalgia for those tired of the endless stream of micro-transactions and

season passes" that are

common in games today. The game is still early in development, but many of the game's systems are completed and Smolen said they are close to the QA phase. Like many small developers, he cites time as the biggest hurdle

Struggled Seas Studios has had to overcome.

"We are all so passionate about this project, but it's done in our free time," Smolen said. "Finding time to make a game between work, family, friends, and all the other responsibilities of life can be difficult."

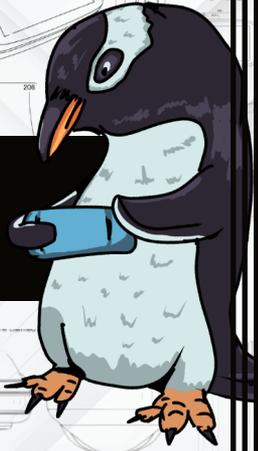


Above: Corrupted spirit concept art (c/o Struggled Seas Studios)

Alleged Nintendo Switch 2 patents (Via Reddit user Sqwerks)

OVERTHINKING AND ANALYZING

A monthly column by Jesse Boruff



THE WORLD'S SUPPLY OF NINTENDIUM HAS BEEN EXHAUSTED

Working at a game store in the mid-2010s, a coworker of mine, in reference to the Wii U, remarked Nintendo was “all out of Nintendium.”

That specific moment played back in my head as I opened up my phone at nine in the morning, navigated to Nintendo’s YouTube page, and prepared to watch the Nintendo Switch 2 reveal.

The chat was madness; constant cries of “Silksong” and “Deltarune” whizzed past

the screen. Everyone was there to catch a glimpse of the next big Nintendo console and the killer app that would say, “you can’t NOT buy a Switch 2.”

What I was looking for was a bit different, however. I was looking for the playful soul of the company, hoping and praying that it remained intact. I wanted to see the next innovation they had up their sleeves — as long as it wasn’t a repeat of the Wii U.

What I got was \$90 *Mario Kart* and the nagging thought that, maybe, just maybe, Nintendo has run out of Nintendium.

DEV LOG: TOSS UP TOWER

By Back Alley Editorial Team

One of the Super Indie City Konsole's most beloved platformers is *Toss Up Tower*, lovingly restored by Harrison Kratz. The original code, written by an unknown developer during the period before the konsole's launch, was incomplete and lacked accompanying art assets.

Besides the code, the only portions of the package that Kratz was able to recover from SICK fan forums included concept art of a wizard, blurry scans of planning documents, some marketing materials, and the phrase "Bring crystal ball to top of castle tower."

Some members of the community believe these documents made their way to England, where Interactive Studios would use them as inspiration for *Glover*.

Because of the lack of art and sound assets, Kratz had to build those aspects from the ground up. He said that his focus was to end up with a simple game presented cohesively in one scene.

The final project bears this out, taking place in a continuously scrolling wizard's tower populated with slimes, birds, and the player-controlled orb attempting, usually vainly, to climb toward its master.

"I took reference from more modern games that are notorious for being difficult," Kratz said. "I personally am a fan of games where you are tasked with overcoming seemingly unfair situations."

Kratz said he was drawn to the unfinished project because of its difficulty, which was obvious from the first time he launched it.

"*Toss Up Tower* is really difficult, and that was my intent going in [to the restoration], and I don't try to hide that," he said.

That kind of difficulty is common in late 20th century games and serves to pad short runtimes that result from hardware limitations and limited developer resources.

"I was in a similar situation [to those developers], since while I worked on *Toss Up Tower*, I have been a full-time student preparing my senior game project," Kratz said.

Title screen assets
(c/o Harrison Kratz)





Unreleased *Toss Up Tower* promotional poster
(c/o Harrison Kratz)

He was looking for a fun project that he could complete between his other work, heard about the SICK through Indie City Games, and decided to take on the project in an effort to understand why he personally enjoys unfairly difficult games so much.

Kratz found that despite the toll that seemingly unfair games can take on players, they have the unique ability to bring people together. He recalled an instance

where his colleagues huddled around a laptop playing an early build of his *Toss Up Tower* restoration, commiserating on their failures and celebrating their successes.

“They were taking turns making attempts, cheering when someone passed a puzzle and smack talking when they died. That is what I needed to remind me that I do have fun making games,” Kratz said.

(SECRET)

SOCIETY PAGES

This April, Indie City Games held a showcase that served as the culmination of their months of work restoring the Super Indie City Konsole, a nearly forgotten piece of Chicago video gaming history.

What follows are the restorations, original games, and other projects based on the recollections of SICK players and the obsessive documenting of the online SICK fan forum, without which this event would not have been possible.



Slides of the SICK bootup animation (c/o Indie City Games)

AUTHOR: VAAASM
 PLATFORM: SICK & PC
 RELEASE: 04/21/2025



Trash Dungeon title screen, starring rabid raccoon Mike (c/o vaaasm)

TRASH DUNGEON – BEST OVERALL

Trash Dungeon also placed first in SICKNESS, Sound, Visuals, and Engagement.

Originally intended to be part of the post-launch rollout for the SICK, *Trash Dungeon* was canceled due to a raccoon infestation and subsequent rabies outbreak that struck Chicago in 1994.

However, the game was completely finished before the outbreak forced its cancellation. A demo of it has floated around fan forums and underground gaming circles ever since, with a reputation for being brutally difficult and visually stunning.

Indie studio vaaasm has spent years painstakingly restoring that demo, stepping in for the anonymous developers to make *Trash Dungeon* playable for the first time in full.

About the project, vaaasm said: “Making it certainly had its challenges, especially the random level generation and enemy pathfinding. [But] I was really pleased with the result. You can open it up, shoot things in it for a bit, get as far as you can, and die

horribly. Then you can put it down or keep obsessing over it. I just like to shoot things.”

Vaaasm even has plans to revisit the project and add more content at a later date. They want a game players can play endlessly, slowly unlocking all the treasures the dungeon they’re trapped in has to offer.

In *Trash Dungeon*, players control Mike the rabid raccoon. Mike must kill to stay alive. Luckily, he has a gun to help him with that. Rack up massive combos to progress through the trash dungeon and kill anything in your way in this addictive twin stick shooter.

What players are saying:

“Great fun! Juice was off the charts.”

— City Wizard Games

“How is this so polished, I am flabbergasted. I’m glad that I have a bad gun to fall back to when I run out of ammo, which is often. The visuals and audio are impeccable.” — Simon

“This goes so hard. Like everyone else said, the juice is off the charts, and the frenetic pace is just perfect!”

— Binary Clone

“This is some of the SICKest shit I’ve ever played. The challenge level? Excellent. The juice? Overflowing. The sounds? Bit-crushed and freakin crushing it.”

— Trainspotter

“YOU HAVE RABIES”

— twaldorf

“This is a fire game. I love twin sticks so this was right up my alley and you nailed the juicy chaotic nature of the genre!”

— Sonk

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BOSSGAME

The Final Boss Is My Heart

A WIN FOR
LESBIANS



BOSSGAME fanart (c/o MarshMelody on Steam, using assets by Lilycore Games)

THE STATE OF GAYMES IN 2025

AN INCOMPLETE HISTORY OF THE PROMINENCE OF QUEER ARTISTS IN THE GAMES SPACE

By Sebastian Galvez

To be blunt about it, indie games are pretty fucking gay. However gay you think they are, make it gayer. Trust me.

Queer art has a tendency of finding its way into subculture and mediums off the beaten path, a side effect of creators often being pushed out of mainstream

spaces and seeking both community and expression through less traditional means. It's why queerness is so pronounced within punk and goth subcultures, zines, and comics.

So it is, of course, entirely natural that this would also go for indie games. Certain genres of game tend to be stereotyped as more traditionally queer. Visual novels are often frontrunners on this list, especially given their commonalities with NSFW games.

It's undeniable that many queer artists have been highly influential in this space, for example: Christine Love's *Ladykiller in a Bind* (2016).



Aevee Bee and Max Schwartz's *We Know the Devil* (2015) and *Heaven Will be Mine* (2018) may fly under the radar but have both heavily influenced the narrative games space.

Queer influence isn't limited to the intimate, narrative side of things either. *M.U.L.E.*, ostensibly the first turn-based multiplayer strategy video game, was published in 1983 and created by Danielle Bunten Berry, a trans woman. Coincidentally, she is noted by Sid Meier as a close friend and colleague of his; the first *Civilization* would launch eight years later in 1991.

Even if none of these are familiar to you, you've undoubtedly at least heard of *Celeste* (2018) and likely *TowerFall* (2013), both primarily credited to Maddy Thorson, a nonbinary developer. *Celeste* itself is often described as a coming out story by Thorson, with them describing it as a means of

processing their own personal journey.

The presence of queerness in games as a subculture extends well beyond the development side as well. Competitive gaming in multiple spheres has long maintained a wide variety of transgender competitors.



Sasha "Scarlett" Hostyn (c/o Jenny Hueston in The New Yorker)

Sasha Hostyn, aka Scarlett, was a prominent figure in the emergence of competitive *Starcraft 2* play. Ricki Ortiz, aka hellokittyricki, entered the competitive fighting game community in the early 2000s and would maintain high tournament rankings until 2017.



Ricki "hellokittyricki" Ortiz at a Street Fighter V Tournament

It goes back as far as competitive gaming's origins. In 1980, Rebecca Heineman, a trans woman, became the first national gaming champion when she secured her place at the top of a national

Space Invaders championship. Heineman would also go on to contribute

OVERTHINKING AND ANALYZING

A monthly column by Jesse Boruff



FIRE EMBLEM: GENEALOGY OF THE HOMO WAR

A LOOK AT THE HISTORY OF FIRE EMBLEM'S QUEER CHARACTERS, FROM CODED TO CANON

The Fire Emblem series is partially responsible for my pansexuality. There's no shortage of queer coded characters, especially in the most recent entry, and there's quite a history to it. A "Genealogy of the Homo War,"¹ if you will.

Sometimes the series really drops the ball, but I think that there's a fair amount of positive and important representation in the series, and it's personally relevant to me as well. When *Fire Emblem Awakening* (2012) came out, I was given the royal blue crest-emblazoned 3DS with the game already preloaded onto it. It was my prized possession for nearly a

decade, and it took a catastrophic accident for me to finally part ways with it.

It was a tearful day, but I made sure to transfer my save to an old ax-headed, non-folding 2DS. There I continued to hammer away at the game, playthrough after playthrough, experimenting with builds and optimizing the child characters with the best skills their parents could pass on to them.

I was enthralled. Particularly with the first person you see in the game: Chrom. His soft face, strong voice, and the kindness he shows to you in the very first cutscene all had

¹ Fire Emblem: Genealogy of the Holy War is the fourth game in the series, released in Japan in 1998.



Chrom, the author's beloved boytoy
(Original image from Fire Emblem CYL)

me fawning. In fact, all of my playthroughs as a female Robin ended with she and Chrom married.

It made me realize certain things about myself. So, when the divisive *Fire Emblem Fates* (2016) games came out and there were actually some gay people in them, I was pretty excited. Little did I know that *Fire Emblem* had been stealthily hinting at gay romance in the series since 1999.

ANCIENT AND QUEER (LIKE SAPPHO)



Marty



Dagdar

(Original Images from Fire Emblem CYL)

Marty and Dagdar are from *Fire Emblem: Thracia 776* (1999), a punishingly hard game without an official English translation. Instead, what we have are quite faithful fan patches from the ever-fantastic FE community.

One translation in particular is where we begin: "Daguda ga aishita otoko"² or "The Man who Dagdar Loved." That's the title of the unit Marty's credit roll card, which is something of a "where are they now" segment that plays for each character that lives to the end of the game.

This has been hotly debated by internet smarties for decades, so to preface my analysis: I am not a linguist, and I don't know Japanese. As such, take this with a grain of salt.

Some insist that the language used, the Japanese word "aishita," is an explicit confirmation of the romance, whilst others will argue that specific term is used to show their deep friendship. However, for a close friend, you at the most would use "daisuki," as "aishita" tends

²This romanization may be somewhat inaccurate, but our resident (and beloved) weeb do their best.

THE DRAGON GODDESS IN YOUR HEAD IS GAY

Speaking of favorite units, we come to *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (2019), which is rife with some of FE's best offerings. This game marked the shift to more "playersexual" characters, so the avatar-romanceable gay characters are all technically bisexual.

That clarification is needed since there are a fair number of supports between units of the same gender in *Three Houses* that end in a romance, implied or otherwise.⁶

But for the player character, Byleth, the game featured a few queer romance options at launch, with more delivered via DLC. The standout supports that I think of when it comes to *Three Houses* are Yuri and Edelgard, two of the house leaders.



Edelgard

(Image Credit: FE Heroes Guide)



Yuri

(Image Credit: FE Heroes Guide)

When the player meets Yuri, he's the head of the underground Ashen Wolves faction, a group of outcast students that made a home for themselves underneath the Garreg Mach Monastery.

While his disposition may lead some to not trust him, in truth, Yuri is simply trying to keep his community safe. However, with mercenaries trying to rip their home, the Abyss, apart, it falls to Byleth and the students at the monastery to assist the Ashen Wolves.

In all of Byleth and Yuri's paired endings, they live out their lives like those old gay couples who never age and live until they're both 99. It's really sweet, the two in every route considered to be immensely accomplished. They are stated to disappear together, both going off to enjoy their old age after stopping the secret

⁶ Ferdinand and Hubert and Dorothea and Petra, to name a couple couples.

A PRIDE MONTH MESSAGE

From us here at Back Alley Games:

The release schedule of this publication makes any sort of timely message difficult, but because of the State of Things, we think it's important to at least try.

Queer people are the lifeblood of many creative fields. They make the games you love. They make this magazine. Hell, you might be one of them.

Many of them, including those that are poor, transgender, and/or people of color, are at significantly higher risk of harm, ostracization, or deportation under the current regime.

But if you've been awake at all in the past year, I don't need to tell you that.

It's now more than ever that we all need to come together, resist this society's attempts to further atomize us, and show direct support to each other.

On the following page there will be a list of organizations both national and local that are worth sending your money to. We promise.

Their work has been and will continue to be instrumental in preventing and mitigating harm, and if you are so inclined and have the spare money, please donate.

If you do, send us proof of a donation of \$10 or more to any of those organizations to backalley@indiecitygames.org, and we'll upgrade a digital edition of July's issue to a physical copy that you can put on your shelf and marvel at.

Our community has always found resilience through joy; through dancing after the demonstrations. Creating art in a society perhaps undeserving of it is the greatest act of rebellion one can take part in. Rebel with us, this month and forever.

I know this issue opened this way, but it bears repeating:

We love you. Stay safe out there.

— Danny, Seb, and Jonah



Brave Space Alliance (BSA)

A Black-led, Trans-led community space on Chicago's South Side that provides housing and food support, among other intensely important programming.



Ruth Ellis Center

A network of four community spaces supporting at-risk LGBTQ+ youth and adults in the Metro Detroit Area. Their mission includes working to end homelessness in a majority-Black city where Black land loss remains a problem.



Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR)

ICIRR has been fighting since the Reagan administration to support Chicago's diverse community of immigrants and refugees. They provide help with food, schooling, and healthcare for refugees and migrants, and are working to protect Chicago's status as a sanctuary city.



Midwest Immigration Bond Fund

With the current regime's insistence on unfettered funding for ICE, the kind of mutual aid that MIBF provides is increasingly important. Formed in 2020, their work has impacted those in Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Kentucky.



Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP)

Providing legal services to transgender, intersex, and gender non-conforming individuals, the SRLP has done crucial work nationwide fighting institutionalized violence, mass incarceration, and more.



Trans Lifeline

Trans Lifeline provides peer support and resources to trans people in need nationwide.



The Trevor Project

The Trevor Project's crisis intervention and suicide prevention work for LGBTQ+ youth has made it a household name.

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DEV LOG: RATS RATS RATS

By Back Alley Editorial Team

Future dystopia has never before been so full of rats.

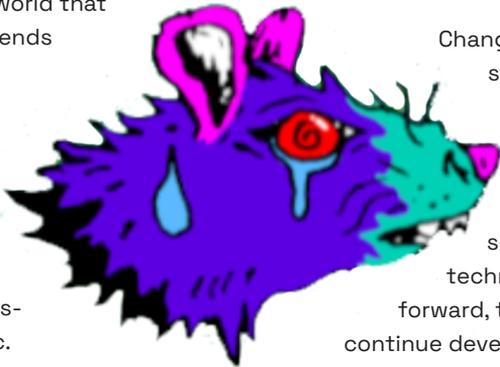
In *Rats Rats Rats*, the second runner-up in the Audience Choice category at this year's AllStars, you're a rat. Don't feel bad, though, everyone else is also a rat.

Programmers Avery Chang and Des Mora have created a world that delights and offends city-dwellers in equal measure, filled with toxic waste, Chicago's ubiquitous "TARGET: RATS" signs, and rad-as-hell guitar music.

The premise is simple: Climb to the top of trash mountain as fast as possible, please the Rat Overlords, and be crowned the new Rat King.

Chang recruited Mora and then pitched their idea to friends and community members for feedback.

The partnership between the developers was borne of Chang's desire to add games to their résumé as well as to work with more people and learn from their processes. For Mora's part, he was trying to help a friend out and meet more people.



Chang is a student studying New Media Arts, which they describe as the cross section of art and technology. Going forward, they hope to continue developing their skills in Unity and Blender as well as to expand to other tools used widely in the games industry.

For this project, Chang focused on 3-D assets and environmental design, creating the rats, the trash mountain, and most of the other visual

aspects of *Rats Rats Rats*.

“Within two weeks, I was able to implement more than six visual scripts that created various power-ups and obstacles,” they said.

Those power-ups include a green glowing can that permanently increases the player’s walk speed while also turning the game screen blue and both music and graphical elements that speed up as the player gets closer to the end zone.

Each of these elements came with their own specific bugs and challenges, but Chang said that working with Mora, who codes professionally, they were able to get the game to a working state fairly quickly.

“I feel super thankful to work with Des,” Chang said. “His ability to learn on the spot within two weeks and create a fully functional leaderboard allowed me to focus on the gameplay and environmental design.”

Mora agreed, saying the pair hit the ground running, but that the leaderboard presented the most challenges during the development process.

“I had never made a game in Unity before,” Mora said. “Coding in such a way where it [the code] needed to be attached to a physical game object takes some time to get used to.”

While developing, Chang also said they never stopped thinking about functionality and how exciting the final gameplay loop would be. The

exact placement of obstacles, their collision, and how much the environment led players to the goal were all factors.

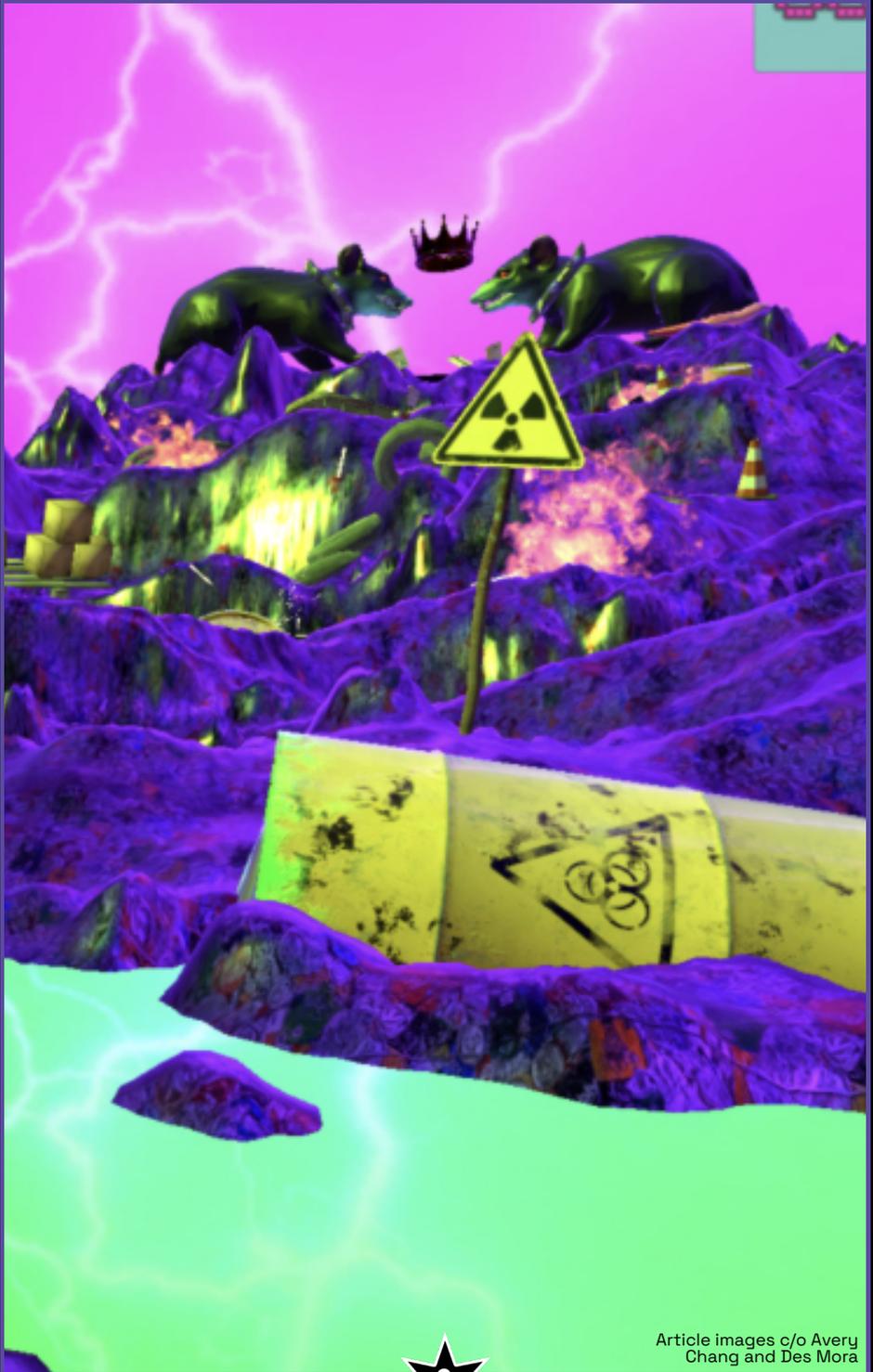
“I spent a lot of time creating simple assets that could be repeated and also altering cc0 assets to create the feel of a toxic waste trash mountain landscape that beckoned the player uphill,” Chang said.

The environment sure does beckon, due in part to Mora’s music. Because of his experience playing in two bands, Chang asked him to take the lead in that area, encouraging him to be as creative as he wanted.

The result is high-energy music that increases in pitch and tempo as the player’s rat gets closer to the end zone. Coupled with Chang’s 3-D rat model that spins in time with the music, the overall player experience is one of a frenetic pace in a dizzying, almost-senseless environment.

So, knowing all that, will you be the next Rat King?





Article images c/o Avery Chang and Des Mora

(SECRET)

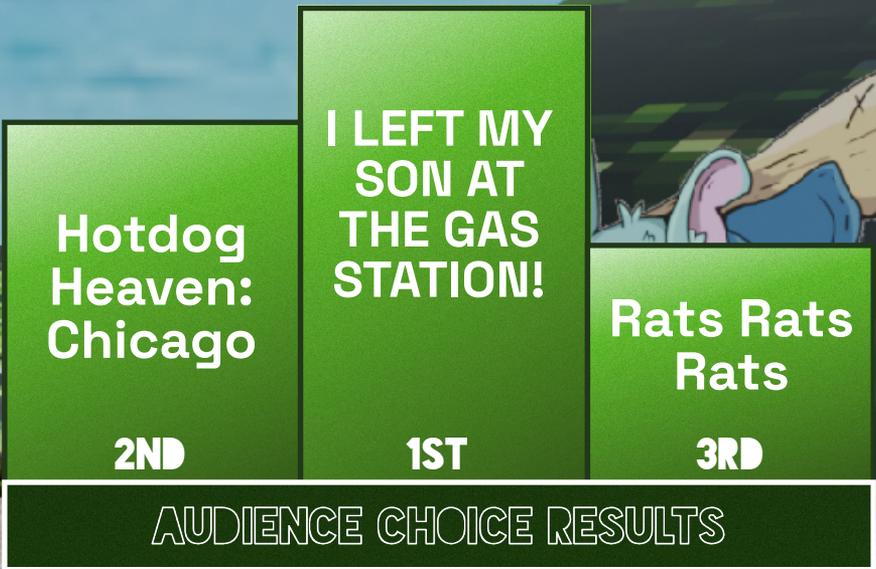
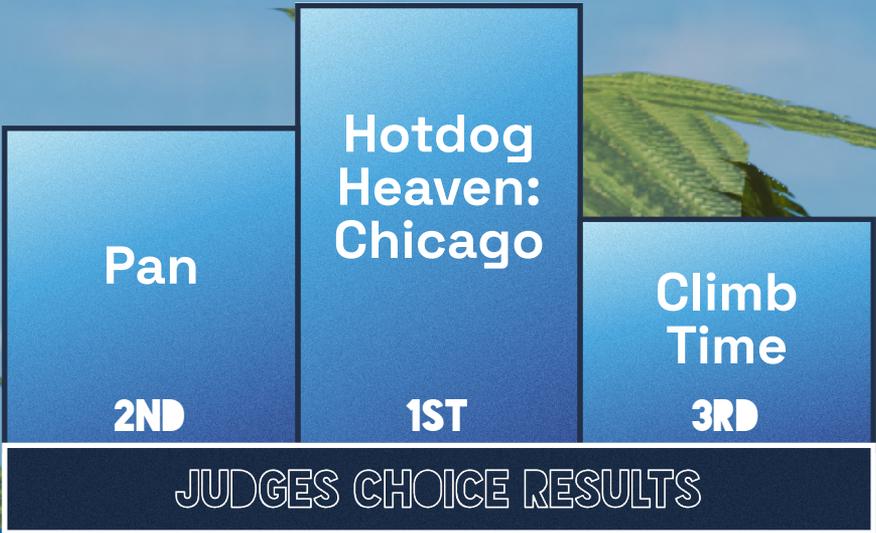
SOCIETY PAGES

ALLSTARS

As has become tradition in our neck of the woods, summer means AllStars. This year, the competitive showcase event was centered around *GOING FAST*, meaning every arcade-style entry had to have a timer and a leaderboard to track best times.

The top 10 entries were given physical space at Night City on July 12 and both a panel of esteemed judges and the game-playing public voted on their favorite entries. Winners received cash prizes and a way to facilitate their own video game obsession (Steam gift cards).

What follows are the best of the best and all the rest from Indie City AllStars 2025.



HOT DOG HEAVEN: CHICAGO



Hot Dog Heaven: Chicago title screen (c/o Crowseeds and friends)

HOTDOG HEAVEN: CHICAGO

— JUDGES CHOICE WINNER —
— AUDIENCE CHOICE RUNNER-UP —

According to programmer Khoi Pham, *Hotdog Heaven: Chicago* is a response to his own experience serving defused bombs to customers in a hot dog stand.

Whether or not that's true, the experience of using a crocheted knife to serve a hot dog to photorealistic Al Capone is unmatched.

Directional inputs appear over ingredients, with players shaking mustard and chopping tomatoes at breakneck speeds to please Popper-designed "Smiling Friends" rejects.

Essentially, players are asked to serve hot dogs. Chopping toppings and providing normal Chicagoans with their "proud

sausages" is the easy part, though.

As the game speeds up, the game's humor gets more chaotic to match it (eyeballs and fingers are normal enough, but I was asked to put a *banana* on a hot dog. The world can't handle that many phallic objects in one bun).

In other words, that's when the bombs appear. Whatever you do, don't forget to add that defused dynamite to the top of the Vienna beef, and if anyone asks for ketchup, you know what to do.

What players are saying:

“mmmmm eyes” -Metroixer

“Loove the art style!! Super cool you were able to get motion controls done in time for the jam.”

-cam p

“this is the most hot dog game i have ever played, congrats” -emma

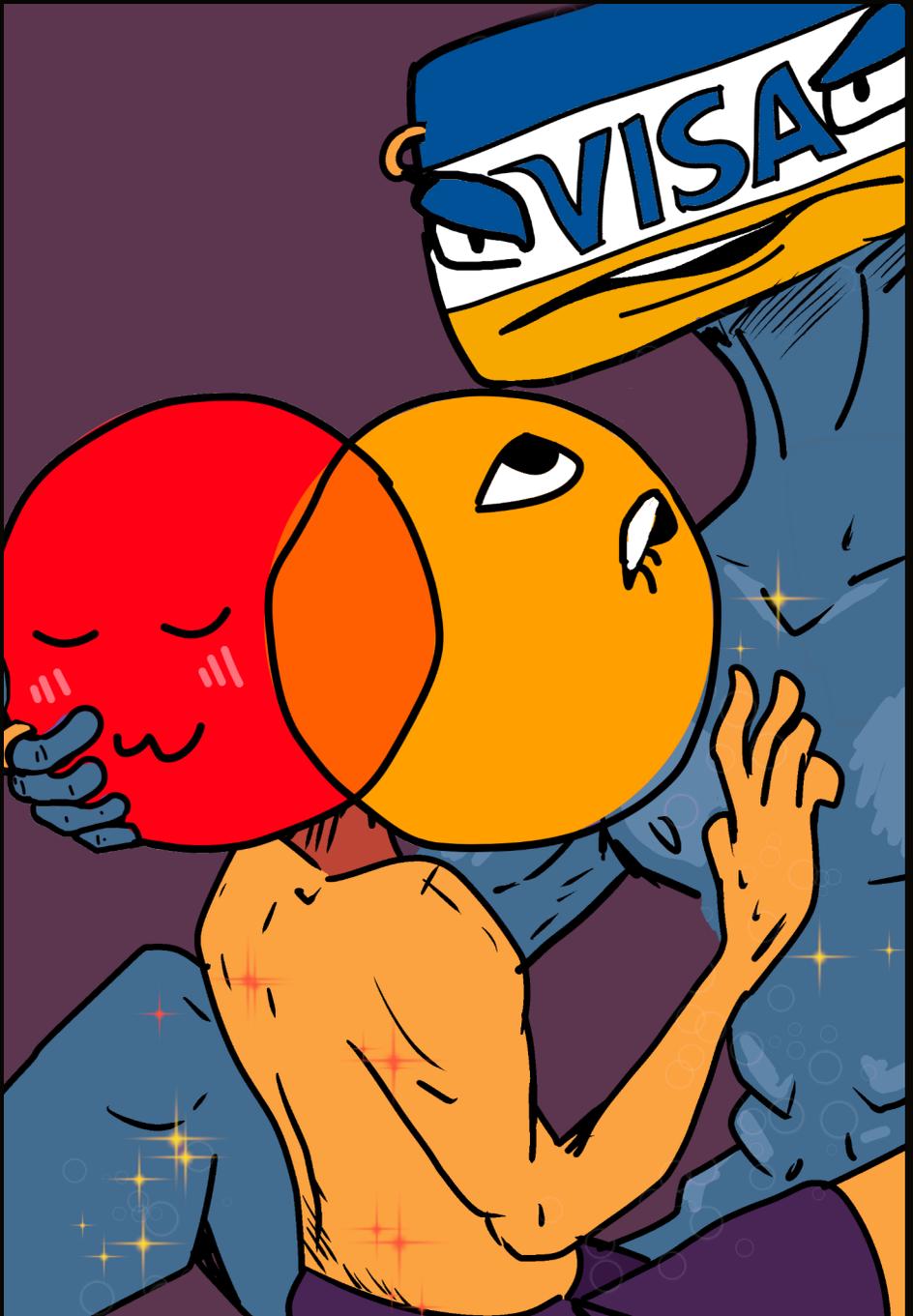
“okay really though this slaps and brings me back to my warioware touched! days when I was a kid.”

-Binary Clone

“Loved this! Feels like a mix of fruit ninja with cooking mama.” -Sonk



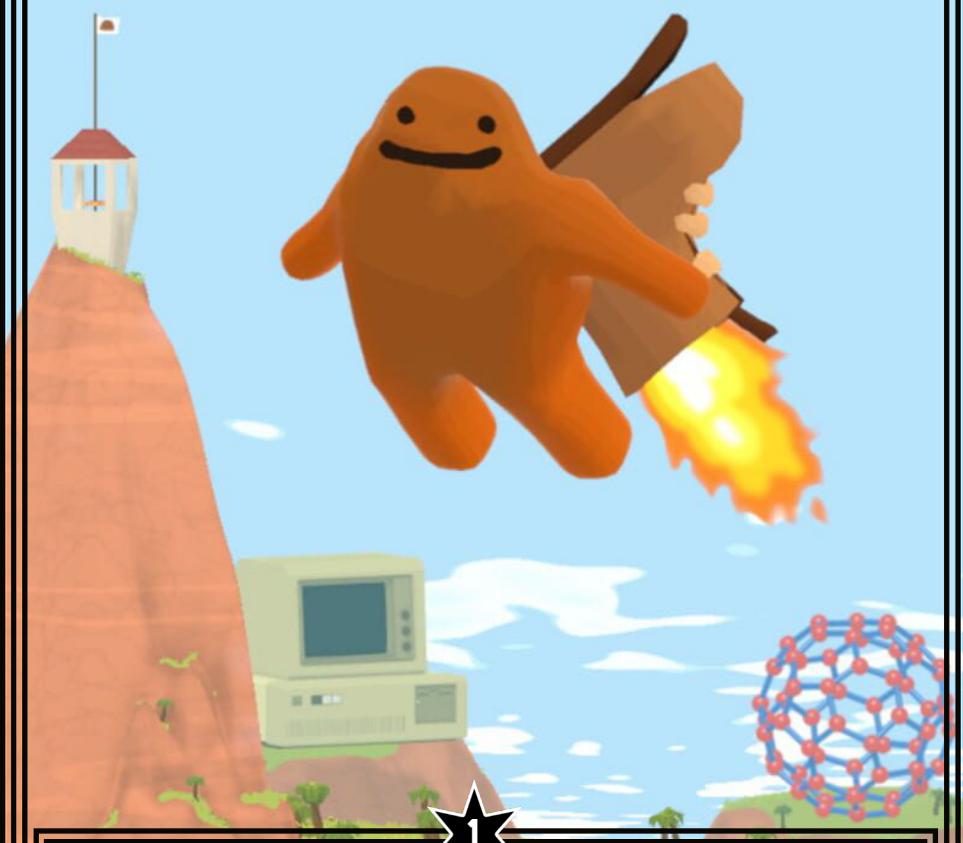
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tall trails

DEV LOG



THINGS NO ONE COMPLAINED ABOUT IN TALL TRAILS (AND SOME THEY DID)

By Brady Soglin

I made an exploration game, *Tall Trails*, and released it recently on Steam.

As the part-time, sole developer of a big game (with help from Dylan Payne on music, Francesca Carletto-Leon with QA, and Greg Wohlwend on the logo), it was very important to me to keep scope as small as possible.

One of the ways I reduced the scope was by accepting the rough edges of the game. I kept certain aspects of the game lo-fi. I did my best to create something “charmingly crude.” This aligns nicely with the limits of my artistic abilities ;)

So, I wanted to catalogue a list of some of the silly, not fully polished things that shipped in the game that no one has complained about so far!

No one complained about these 2D guys

Most of the quest-givers in *Tall Trails* are these little billboard PNG dudes. I love drawing these guys.



No one complained that the game was unbalanced

Tall Trails has many items you can use for traversal, and some of them are way better than others.

At first, I attempted to balance the various items so they came out at roughly the same power level. This was unnecessary and restrictive.

The whole idea that “balanced = good” was something I needed to learn to throw away. In order to be maximally fun, certain items needed to be more powerful than others!

Variety is da spice of life, baby.

There are certainly games where balance is a valuable thing, but not this one!

FEAR AND LUST

PAYMENT PROCESSORS AND HORROR GAMES

Still from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, formerly banned in several countries (c/o Bryanston Distributing Company)



Horror and eroticism often share a fairly blurry line. Body horror, cannibalism, rape revenge, and the incest themes common in Gothic horror are only a few of the many examples of how sex, sensuality, and the disturbing intersect in horror media.

The recent payment processor bullshit that has been circling the internet for years has now hit indie game storefront Itch.io, and horror games are being caught in the crossfire.

I am personally a TTRPG (tabletop role playing game) designer, not a video game dev. There are two major online storefronts for indie tabletops: Drive-Thru RPG and Itch, with Itch being far more popular for weird art games.

Naturally, I greatly prefer to use Itch to host my own offbeat projects. I work mostly in the horror genre, using mechanics to influence players' emotions as well as putting their imaginations to work coming up with their own nightmare fuel.

Earlier this year, I wrapped development and writing on an as-yet-unreleased splatterpunk game, *Swallow*, about consent and cannibalism.

Do you see where I'm going with this?

Swallow is decidedly a NSFW game without being explicitly pornographic. It has a healthy

dose of carnality, exploring how we treat our own and others' boundaries and using cannibalism and gore as an allegory for interpersonal relationships.

It is entirely feasible for vore fetishists to use it as an outlet for their kinks (and more power to them, but that's not why I wrote the game). Under their new guidelines, I will not be able to host *Swallow* on Itch.io.

And that *fucking sucks*.

I am choosing to pursue a traditional publishing route with this game (because, honestly, how the hell am I supposed to market it?), but a lot of designers don't have that luxury. Even going with a publisher, digital copies will be sold, either through my own storefront, the publisher's website, or both.

The new prohibitions from payment processors forbid non-consensual content (real or implied) and coercion, among other banned topics. These payment processors rule over every online storefront, and their reach is only increasing.

Regardless of what website eventually hosts *Swallow*, PayPal and Stripe will refuse to let people buy it under these regulations.

The legal approach to porn has been "I know it when I see it" since Justice Potter Stewart in 1964. Now payment processors are going beyond that already nebulous definition, banning swaths of umbrella-termed content to appease conservative lobbyists.

Horror often examines the dark underbelly of the spectrum of human experiences and emotions. Yes, this includes sex. Not every game about child sexual abuse, rape, or coercion is glorifying those acts.

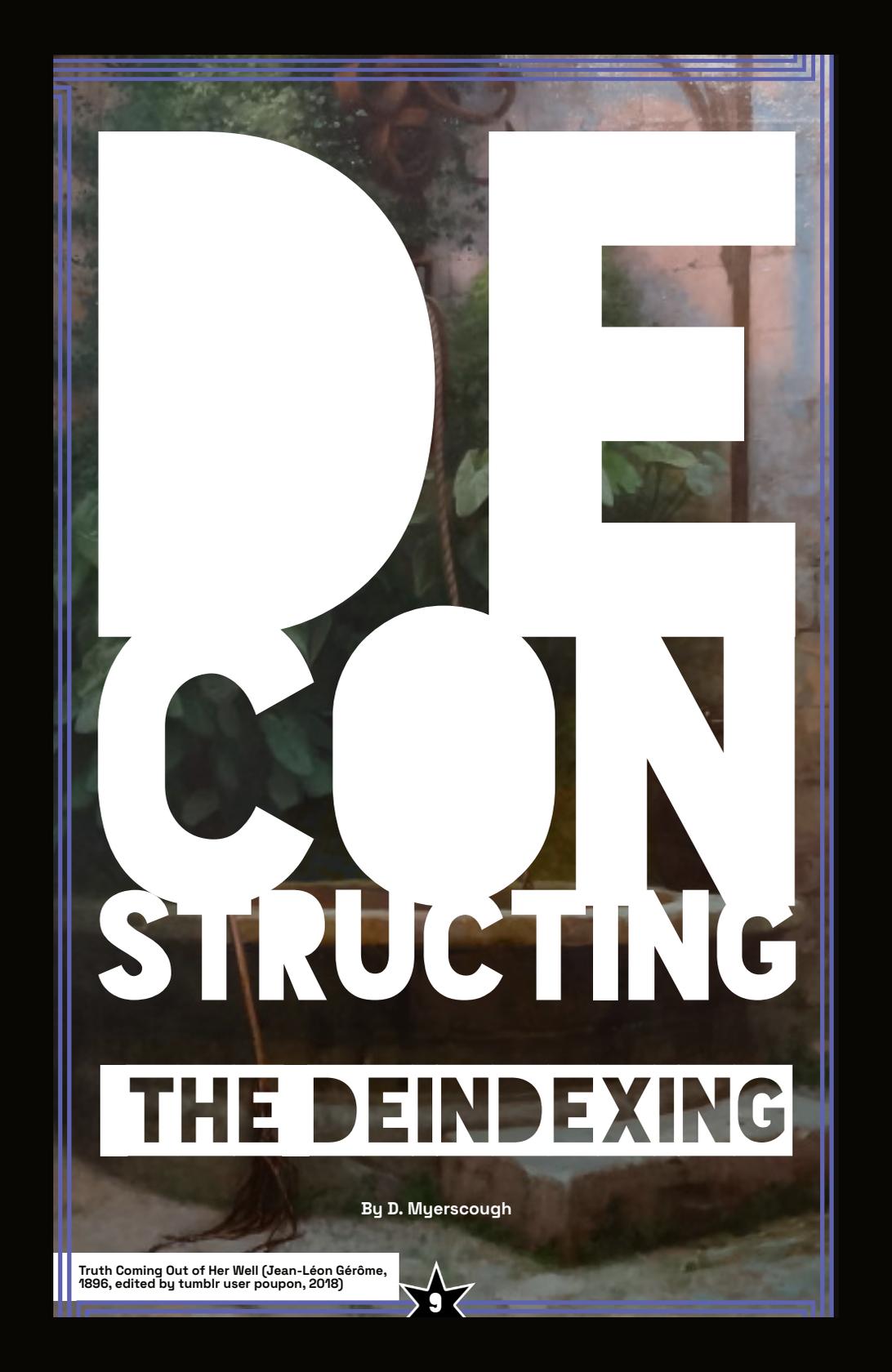
Many of them are made to create empathy for victims in those who have not experienced such abuse. Exploring these themes in a safe environment, such as a game, is often healthy.

The world is not a soft and wholesome place, and our games should not be limited to cozy vibes and feel-good storylines. Commercial censorship despises the grotesque.

Art that pushes the boundaries of comfort and acceptability has a storied history of being labeled degenerate and banned from "polite society." But so-called degeneracy has always been present in artistic expression, has always been important, healthy, and normal.

Sex and art are inextricable. Sex and horror are inextricable.

And I refuse to flatten my art to appease corporations who would never appreciate it anyway.

The background is a painting of a woman in a well, with large white text overlaid. The text reads 'DECONSTRUCTING THE DEINDEXING'.

DECONSTRUCTING THE DEINDEXING

THE DEINDEXING

By D. Myerscough

Truth Coming Out of Her Well (Jean-Léon Gérôme, 1896, edited by tumblr user poupon, 2018)



Gamers, we have a sitchuation on our hands.

On July 24, Itch.io unlisted all NSFW and adult content on their site in response to “scrutiny from [their] payment processors.” To say the response was overwhelming would be an understatement.

Creators and consumers alike felt betrayed and took to the internet, attacking Itch, the supposed culprits MasterCard and Visa, and a nonprofit called out by name in Itch’s first statement on the matter.

Then Itch reversed course. An Aug. 1 statement from the site’s administrator announcing the reindexing of free adult NSFW content included excerpts from their conversations with Stripe and the statement that Stripe “hopes to be able to support adult content in the future.”

And with that, the situation at hand has come to a rather unsatisfying end, though many questions still remain.

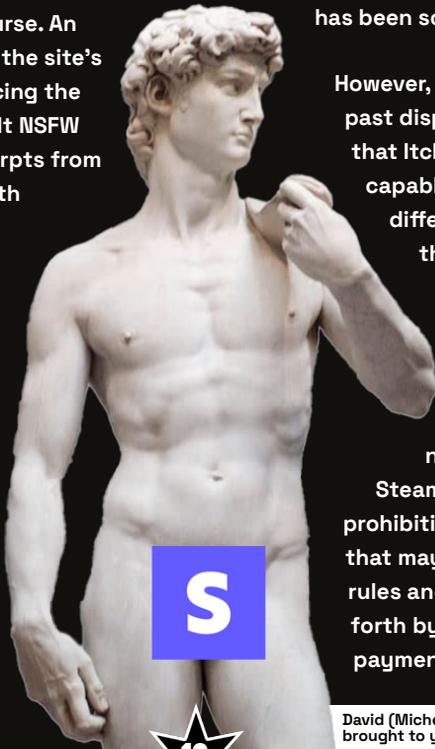
Perhaps most relevant is whether Itch.io has truly turned its back on the creators of adult content. Many critics online are certain they have. Others, like game design professor and developer Anna Anthropy, disagree.

“I think it’s wrong to say that Itch has betrayed adult and queer creators,” Anthropy said. “But I also understand that people who make adult content and sex games are very used to having platforms that they lose access to. This is not a new process.”

She also pointed out that many online felt that Itch was immune to this pressure and would act differently when challenged. That level of community trust goes a long way in the effort to understand why the reaction to this situation has been so large.

However, a look to the past dispels any notion that Itch was even capable of acting differently than their peers.

Just a week before Itch’s crackdown, Valve added a new clause to Steam’s guidelines prohibiting “content that may violate the rules and standards set forth by Steam’s payment processors



David (Michelangelo, 1501-1504, brought to you by Stripe)

This popularity-based loophole is borne out even in the case of Stripe, one of the payment processors at the root of the Itch crackdown. After a similar controversy in 2021, the processor continued to work with OnlyFans, a haven for independent sex workers, despite Stripe's own terms of service restricting any sort of adult content.

For politicians like Kyle, however, the crackdown on adult content is less about money and is instead one more link in the chain of internet censorship that began in conservative activist spaces and has culminated in global laws.

Australia recently reclassified content that is considered "commercial" and "professional" to include free online content, meaning that content can now be rated and restricted by the government's Classification Board.

In the UK, the Online Safety Act of 2023 went into effect this July, creating a surge

in demand for VPNs across its population and alarming free speech activists.

The kinds of age verification these laws require claim to be narrowly tailored toward violence and pornography, but journalist Taylor Lorenz reported in *The Guardian* that they actually have much more far-reaching consequences that amount to censorship.

"Tech companies find it easier and cheaper to simply remove mass amounts of information than have something slip through and be deemed non-compliant," she wrote.

Anthropy, whose Itch.io storefront is currently age-restricted in the UK, agreed.



Maddalena Penitente
(Artemisia Gentileschi, 1612-1620, curated by Visa)

“I have not experienced the internet as a British person,” she said. “But it seems pretty likely to me that their current censorship is going to deny a lot of young queer kids access to community and resources they don’t otherwise have.”

That’s not to mention the United States, which began its own journey of censorship with the death of net neutrality in 2017 and continued with legislation like SESTA/FOSTA (the creator of the Tumblr nipple ban, for those in the know) and the attempted passing of age verification laws in 11 states.

This legislation is increasingly common and shockingly popular, with many Democrat politicians and those claiming to be leftists supporting these restrictions in the name of protecting children from exploitation.

According to Anthropy, though, that mindset is an inherently conservative one.

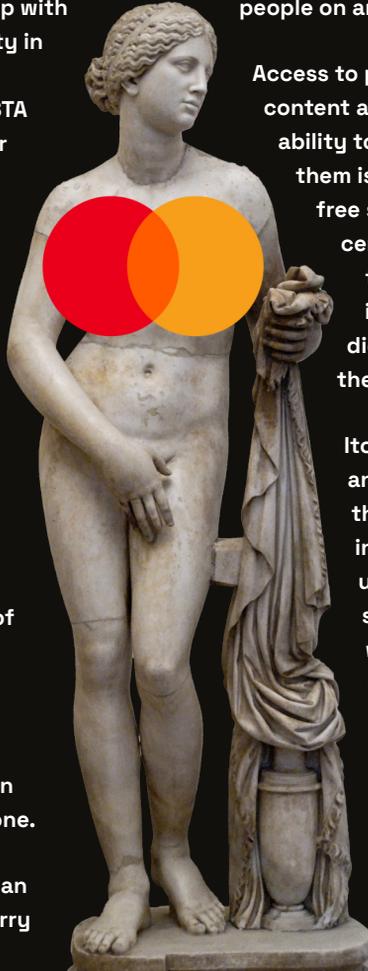
“If payment processors can force platforms not to carry content at the behest of

some Christian Nationalist group, then they can define what counts as pornography in such a way that it includes queer content that isn’t pornographic,” she said.

However, she added that people should not protect porn just because it is a “trojan horse that the right is using to get at wholesome queer content.” Instead, pornographic games should be considered art whether or not they resonate with people on an individual level.

Access to pornographic content and their creators’ ability to make a wage from them is a simple matter of free speech and censorship. This is true for Itch, who, it can be argued, did not censor their platform.

Itch never removed any content from their site as a whole, instead removing users’ ability to search for and find works creators have marked as “containing sensitive content” and tagged with categories such as “porn,” “fetish,” or “eroge.”



Aphrodite of Knios (Praxiteles, 4 c. BCE, sponsored by MasterCard)

OVERTHINKING AND ANALYZING

A bimonthly column by Jesse Boruff



GET IN THE ROBOT, READER

Repainted Gundam gashapon head
(c/o Lyk Repaint)

HOW MECHA AS A GENRE IS OVERLOOKED AND WHY YOU SHOULD GIVE IT A TRY

Recently in my internet travels, an angry forum user labeled me braindead because I like Gundam and giant robots, which irked me.

Not because someone was mean to me online, that shit happens all the time. No, I was irked because Gundam doesn't deserve to be called braindead.

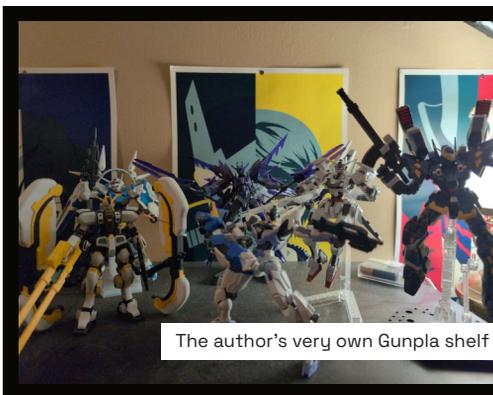
All my life I've been infatuated with the idea of giant robots. The term more than likely makes you think about Transformers, Gundam or any of the Power Rangers' Megazords. Or maybe it makes you think of the "super fighting robot" subgenre, with entries like the *Mazinger* series where the robot brandishes a giant claymore to do battle with aliens and other bots.

The mecha genre can get dark, as is expected of stories about giant war machines. In Gundam's case, these dark themes often consist of using said war machines to convey an anti-war message.

Which, considering the time its creator was born and grew up in, that tracks.

In 1941, in the shadow of WWII, Yoshiyuki Tomino was born in Japan. His creativity and vision led him to draft *Mobile Suit Gundam* throughout the '70s.

His original draft was much different from the series we got – it allegedly involved a revolutionary alien lesbian princess? – but the themes seemingly remained consistent; an overt anti-war sentiment delivered by stylish and powerful Gundam mechs.



The author's very own Gunpla shelf

More accomplished writers than I (like Fred Patten) have made the observation that the inception of the mecha genre likely comes from the cultural trauma of WWII and its nuclear outcome. Knowing that, it's not much of a shock that the genre isn't as prominent in the West as it is in Japan.

invaders. You'll meet numerous pilots that will ally themselves with you and others that will turn their powerful Armored Cores against you.

Eventually you'll meet one of the game's bosses, sometimes an enemy AC, and sometimes not, with unbelievable capabilities you'll feel overwhelmed by. During these fights, I found myself eventually reaching a flow state, and the battle turned into a dance of death as my foe and I deftly dodged and countered each other.

When it comes to high-speed mecha battles, AC6 is nearly unmatched.

Mecha is one of the most flexible genres through which

to tell a story. From its inception as a cultural tool to series like *Sakura Wars* where the battles take a back seat to the dating sim elements, mecha can wear many hats.

Both inside and outside the gaming sphere, you can find pretty much any narrative you can think of within the genre. Romance, battle Shonen, drama, thrillers; much like those genres, mecha is a vehicle that can be used to deliver any kind of theme or message a creator desires.

Your mecha can be magical, technological, metaphysical, it doesn't matter. It's a malleable genre capable of doing practically anything. So, if you were ever hesitant to "get in the robot" as Gendo Ikari would say, let this be your excuse to give it a try.

Even if it's not any of the games I mentioned above, I promise there's a mecha game out there for you.



Get in the fucking robot, reader.

BACK ALLEY GAMES #019



THE MIDWEST'S PREMIER INDEPENDENT GAMES MAGAZINE



(Logo c/o Can't Get Enough Games)

By Back Alley Editorial Team

Developer: Can't Get Enough Games

Platform: Steam

Release Date: TBA

Ah, the switchboard. One of history's most important and unsung political tools.

If legend is to be believed, total nuclear annihilation was narrowly avoided by a single telephone operator routing international calls.

That may not be strictly true, but in *Cold Calling*, Can't Get Enough Games' upcoming tower defense puzzle game, it could be.

Players physically manipulate the wires on a switchboard to manage simultaneous phone calls, all while Cold War political drama is taking place in visual novel-like narrative segments.

The switchboard may be hectic, but luckily a benevolent force has provided your hapless operator with gadgets to help – though the true utility of a pirate cannon on a switchboard is anyone's guess.

Thom Cote, the project's programmer, writer, and composer, has been working on this project alongside his team for seven years.

"I've been working on *Cold Calling* alongside my entire professional career," Cote said. "It and other games I've worked on with that group [Can't Get Enough] are my most creatively fulfilling work."

Cold Calling's standard play area (c/o Can't Get Enough Games)

High praise for a game that began as a way to keep in touch with friends after graduating from college, but this project more than lives up to it.

Each member of the remote, five-person team has made steady progress since work began. Their work is all on an unpaid basis and the game has no stated deadline, factors that Cote said have led to massive scope creep and the sheer length of the development cycle.

“The biggest challenge is just the sheer amount of free time it eats up,” he said. “But being so close to finishing such a large, story-rich game is something we’re very proud of.”

And that story really is worth writing (or calling) home about. Inspired by “Dr Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb,” the satire is sharp and well-presented.

Cold Calling is a wonderful example of how hindsight can help, rather than hinder, political satire. While McCarthy may not be running rampant with his army of nondescript men in black today, his legacy looms long in global politics.

Being able to point and laugh at the ridiculous political maneuvering of politicians past is not only fun, but necessary.



https://store.steampowered.com/app/2627660/Cold_Calling/

COLD CALLING



Some devious dignitaries
(c/o Can't Get Enough Games)



DEV LOG:

By Back Alley Editorial Team

DOCK KING

Developer: City Wizard Games

Platform: Steam

Release Date: TBA



(Logo c/o City Wizard Games)

Cozy life simulation games have gained massive popularity since the early 2000s, with series like *Animal Crossing* and titles like *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016) taking over the gaming world. In a post-lockdown world, escapism is popular. Go figure.

However, the appeal of kind neighbors and mist-cloaked forests is lost entirely on Keith Thomas, developer of *Dock King*.

A life simulation game set in a pirate-infested town in Madagascar, *Dock King* is anything but cozy. Players will



Some of Madagascar's dock dwellers (c/o City Wizard Games)

party RPG” where the player would level up keg stand and beer pong skills.

That game would never be finished. Neither would *Delaygram*, a social satire game inspired by his own disillusionment with social media.

Each unfinished project takes much from Thomas’ own life at the time they were conceived, a concept he said he has never felt comfortable with.

“I always feel a bit awkward including too much of myself in a game,” he said. “It’s something that I’m actively trying to get over.”

Getting over that fear isn’t linear, but it has led Thomas to an interesting place with *Dock King*.

“One thing that impacted me a lot in real life was my father’s death about five years ago,” he said. “I don’t

think I will explicitly add this to the game, but it has guided me toward a concept I will include: growing up.”

He plans to incorporate the idea of growth in a positive way, using it as a way to bolster the game’s central premise of building up a community.

That premise also happens to be central in Thomas’ real life and relationship to the ICG community.

“The entire community has given me tremendous motivation and hope and all of the other good feelings,” he said. “I’m proud that a community like this has sprung up from my home.”

WISHLIST



DOCK KING

https://store.steampowered.com/app/2014160/Dock_King/

MAN ABOUT TOWN

A bimonthly column by Jonah White



CIGS LIGHTS UP, CRASHES SERVERS

If there was one takeaway from CIGS this year, it was that there is a growing appetite for independent video games in the Midwest. Like a katamari rolling through the cosmos, CIGS continues to get bigger as it rolls along.

After filling the humble Vault Gallerie to bursting last year, Indie City Games

decided to host this year's showcase at the larger Hairpin Arts Center. Despite the extra floor space, the showfloor still struggled to contain the crowds of people that filed in and out of the exhibit across nine hours.

It was not just the crowds

There were even presenters from beyond the boundaries of Chicago. Representatives from STLGameDev, the St. Louis-based dev community, came to show off some of their games, many of which they plan to install in an arcade cabinet in the future.

HARD TALKS FOR HARD DEVELOPMENT

For the Very Important Gamers in the room, CIGS held a series of four seminars related to game design and running a successful game studio.

Jamie Danielle of Rookery Interactive was scheduled to give a fifth talk about forming a company, but the event was unfortunately canceled due to illness.

In the first seminar, game designer Bobby Lockhart shared a sneak peak of his upcoming book “The Game Designer’s Workbook,” featuring over 50 game design exercises that teach valuable skills for games both analog and digital.

Exercises will include narrative and level design challenges, breakdowns of design concepts, and cross-training exercises that bring in skills from other disciplines. All exercises can be done with pencil and paper, which Lockhart showed off by having participants create their own word search and sokoban block-pushing puzzles during the seminar.

Pre-orders for Bobby Lockhart’s book are available now at: gamedesignersworkbook.com.

The second seminar featured Ryan Wiemeyer sharing some tips and tricks for using ink, the scripting language developed by inkle, the studio behind popular narrative games *80 Days* (2014), *Overboard!* (2021), and *Heaven’s Vault* (2019).



(Photo: Jonah White)

Not content to knock back drinks and talk shop, Indie City Gamers set up a full-fledged tournament of one of the games showcased at CIGS: the PSX-skinned mecha-battler *Drift Shell*. The game was run on multiple PC stations and participants were paired off to battle it out in a one-on-one fight.

Despite being in development and giving little explanation about the controls and available loadouts, gamers were quick to pick up the controls and duke it out, reveling in the frantic low-fi action.

THE KATAMARI BALL KEEPS A'ROLLIN

The Midwest gaming scene is growing. Over 500 gamers attended this year's showcase, double last year's attendance.

The success of their Kickstarter campaign means that ICG will be growing internally at the same time they're growing the showcase, and with devs from all over the Midwest coming

together to share their work, the network of gamers is growing too.

The future looks to be filled with more: more space, more networking opportunities, more collaboration, more artists and artisans from more industries, more seminars, and more games.

I am already excited to see what the next CIGS looks like and what the community will be able to produce in the coming year.

Check out more
by Jonah White

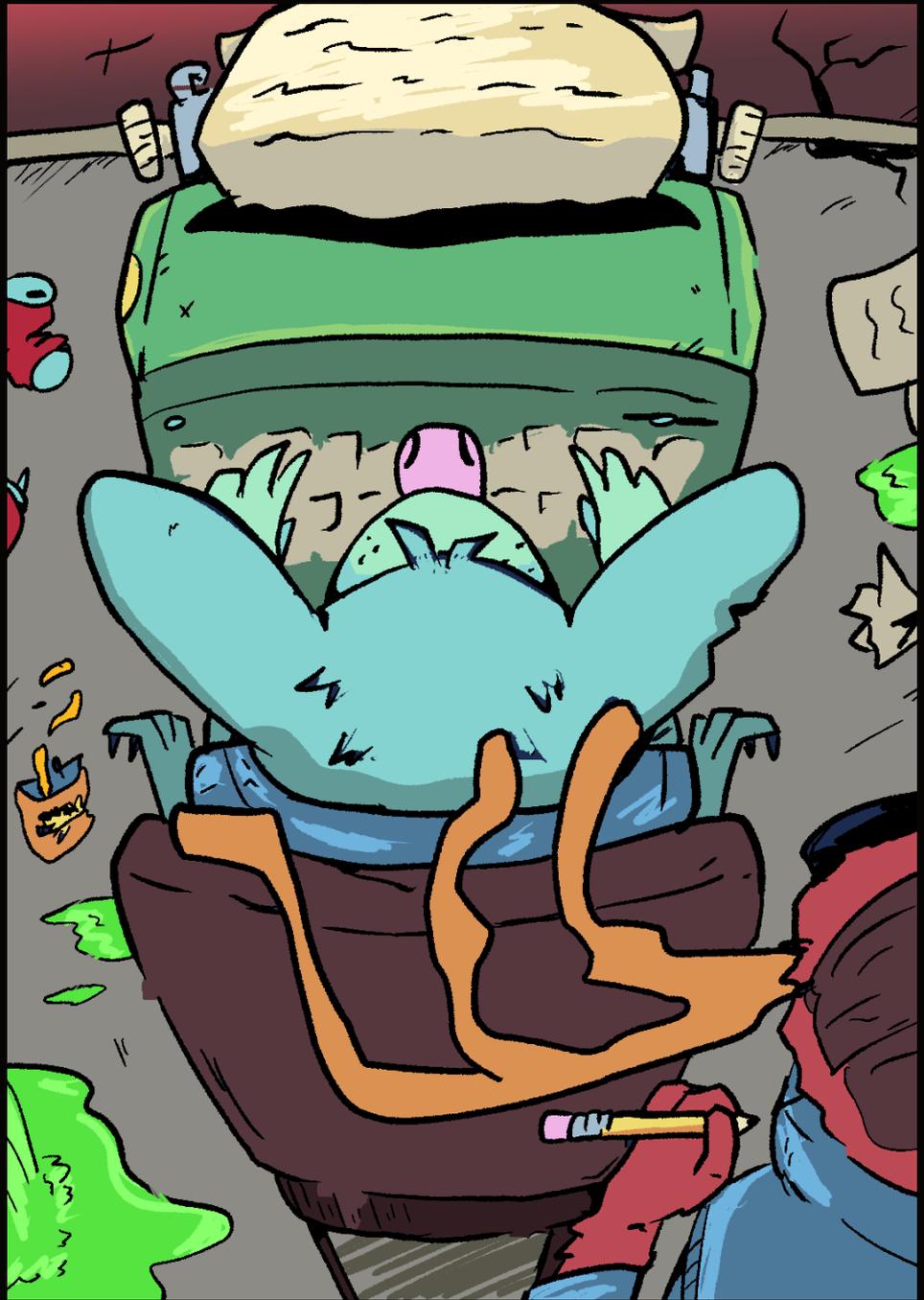


<https://jonahwhite.carrd.co/>



(Photo: Jonah White)

BACK ALLEY GAMES #021



THE MIDWEST'S PREMIER INDEPENDENT GAMES MAGAZINE

REQUIEM

Developer: Justin Herrick
Platform: Itch.io
Release Date: Oct. 25, 2025

By Back Alley Editorial Team

From *Castlevania* to *Resident Evil*, the horror genre is full of gothic castles, incomprehensible living horrors, and cryptic notes. So many notes.

Requiem, the latest effort from solo developer Justin Herrick, is no exception. Players are taken on an atmospheric walk through an eerie castle, beginning in a snowy courtyard and concluding in a darkened hallway with a fall into the void.

The aim is to uncover the story of “M” and “L,” told through eight diary entries. The writing is well done, revealing enough to prop up the atmosphere without truly giving anything away.

“For this project, the goal was to make something that had a vibe,” Herrick said. “I wanted people [to feel] immersed in a creepy atmosphere, compelled to move forward but nervous about what was around them.”

What is around the player, besides the cold stone walls, is floating eyes. Their squinting gaze is certainly off putting, and the contrast of their 2D shape with the 3D environment is jarring in a way that supports the

Lovecraftian-inspired horror of the game.

Besides Lovecraft, Herrick also cites *Bloodborne* and the *Amnesia* games as inspiration for this project. He called *Requiem* a prologue and said that he may expand it into a fuller project in the future.

“I’ve been doing hobby game development for a long time and would love to bring a full game to market next year,” he said.

Herrick’s game development experience has mostly been in the context of game jams, a format he prefers because of the ways that a restrictive time frame can alter scope and design philosophy.

“The time frame is essential for forcing a particular scope and focus among participants,” he said. “I find [game jams] immensely helpful as practice and as a way to see what may work as a full game.”

This applies to *Requiem* as well. Because of the time frame, Herrick chose to prioritize what he calls the “vibe” of the project, forcing the gameplay to fit the story, instead of the other way

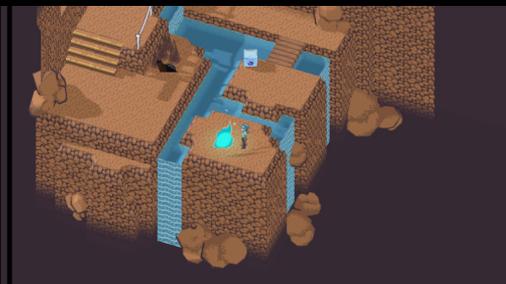


Eyes, ever-squinting at you (c/o Justin Herrick)





Sudden Soul's greatest enemy (c/o Croc Byte)



Sudden Soul's isometric overworld (c/o Croc Byte)



In-progress battle interface (c/o Croc Byte)



In-game artwork (c/o Croc Byte)

Nikodile's passion is clear, with him citing inspirations across all eras of gaming and as diverse as his own childhood imagination. He said that the goal has always been to make something that feels familiar yet new.

With modern-feeling character art and retro, low-poly 3D environments, the project evokes its inspirations handily, while still maintaining the marks of each of its team members. Nikodile said that this is intentional, as he believes that games as a medium are uniquely shaped by each person who works on a project.

"One thing I enjoy about video games is that they're not just one person's vision," he said. "They are experiences that are affected by every hand that have touched them, even if it was for a small bit."

The humbling experience of being a small part of a whole, whether that be on a moderately-sized team like Croc Byte or in the larger gaming space, is something that inspires Nikodile to keep developing. Though *Sudden Soul* isn't out yet, it's definitely one to watch.



https://store.steampowered.com/app/3109460/Sudden_Soul/

FROM THE EDITORS:

THE BEST 5 THINGS WE PLAYED ON ITCH.IO THIS YEAR



MONSTERS OF MICAN

By Blankitt Productions

For those that still have whimsy in their hearts, sink a few hours (or 10, we won't judge) into this maximalist dungeon crawler. It's almost deceptively fun, and the dev's asset usage is both insane and inspired.

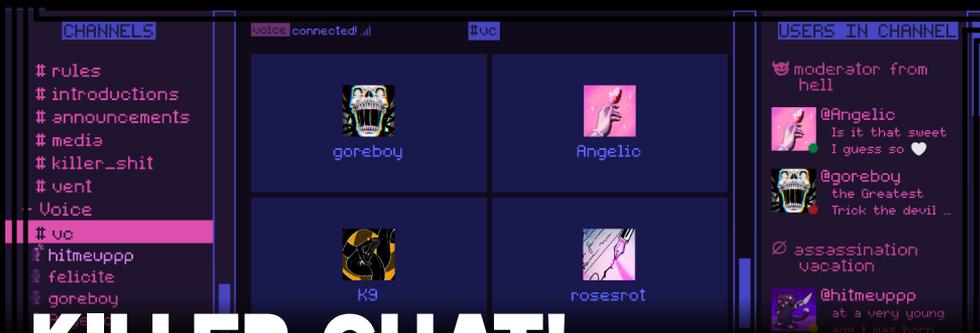


ICHOROUS

By Monster Crate

If one were to distill a soulslike into its basest components, the product would be this game. Beautiful visuals, fun yet frustrating bosses, and enough roguelike elements to make multiple playthroughs entertaining.





KILLER CHAT!

By rosesrot

Tinder and Hinge got you down? Try dating some hot serial killers. Halfway between a chatsim and a visual novel, this game takes an absurd premise and manages to make it incredibly charming.



MANY NIGHTS A WHISPER

By Deconstructeam

From the team behind The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood and The Red Strings Club, this game is another masterful example of the ways in which video games can deliver shortform narratives.



MAGIC GEAR

By Róger Goulart

Metal Gear (and a bit of Mega Man) goes magical girl in this retro-inspired Metroidvania platformer.



DEV LOG:

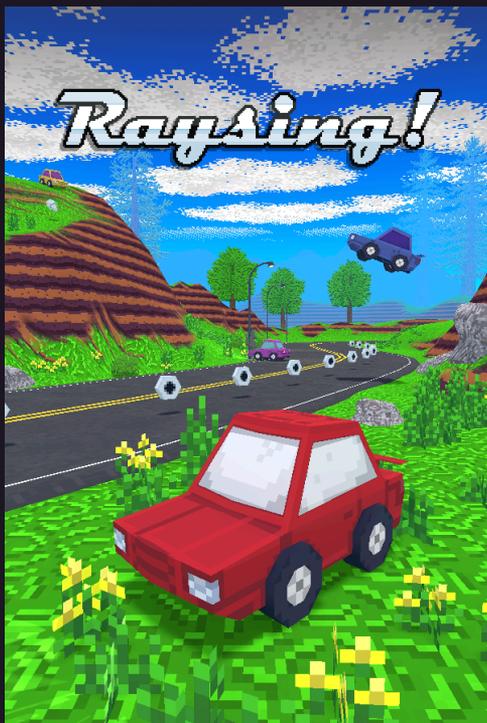
RAYSING!

By Back Alley Editorial Team

Developer: Prismapunch LLC

Platform: itch.io

Release Date: TBA



Raysing! cover (c/o Prismapunch LLC)

In *Raysing!*, you're a car. Your friends are cars, too. There are no humans on this island. Have fun exploring.

Made by a three-man team calling themselves Prismapunch LLC, this project is intended as a multiplayer game with no goal other than atmospheric exploration with friends. Player cars can collect nuts and bolts, race each other, or work collaboratively to find new items.

According to programmer Alex Dimitrijevic, the game is intended as an exploration of the ways that people find fun in multiplayer games by avoiding the "real" game.



Development screenshot (c/o Prismapunch LLC)



Development screenshot (c/o Prismapunch LLC)

“Those calm nights where you stop playing a game, where you’re just driving around a map talking about life with your friends,” Dimitrijevic said. “That’s what we wanted to capture with this game.”

The team has been working on this project for about a year in Godot, mostly because of how easily their art style slots into the engine. However, the team’s biggest challenge is the multiplayer aspect of their project.

According to Dimitrijevic, there are many frameworks in Godot to simplify multiplayer processes, but they have yet to find one that is a good fit, especially given how important multiplayer functionality is to their ideas.

The multiplayer-first ethos of the team also extends to their game making philosophy, with Dimitrijevic adding that making something with friends is the most fun part of game development.

Besides having fun, the team at Prismapunch is aiming for a full release.

“We are full steam ahead, and even if it’s not a hit, we are making something that we can be proud of,” Dimitrijevic said.

Keep up with the team at:

<https://biome.prismapunch.net/games>

DUMPSTER FIRE TAKES

The hottest takes by the community
fresh from #dumpster-fire-takes in the Discord

@Seren: I don't care if the acting in Street Fighter sucks as long as the fight choreo is good. Street Fighter movie should be campy and fun, the worst thing it could be is boring

@Seb: My final dumpster fire take of the year: The only valid esports are Counter Strike and fighting games. Everything else is just marketing.

@Scrumbo: A lot of people think a game's price shouldn't be factored in to one's "rating" of a game but tbh? I think it's a fair thing to factor in (to an extent). I don't think price is grounds to tank your overall rating of a game or anything but I think it's a little silly to completely disregard, as it's the first barrier to entry for more games. Ldk about y'all but I'm not exactly super flush with cash or anything, so when I buy a game I wanna know I'm getting my money's worth, but "getting your money's worth" isn't an objective thing. Some people may be content with a \$15 game that's short and story rich but another may want a game that's longer/offers more replayability. Like most things it's a bit of a case by case basis but I think at the very least I like to know about how much one can get out any individual game given the price before I make my purchases in most instances

@Corey H: I think this is especially important to keep in mind with DLC too. DLC is one of those things where what you get for what you pay can vary MASSIVELY from game to game. Like 5 bucks for a single skin in Fortnite, how do people put up with that?

@Kyle L: including with free DLCs like you see more from indies

@Renny: Price absolutely matters and sets the bar for quality and scale imo. It's the reason Mario Kart World races as such a threadbare experience despite being a super polished and deliberate piece of media.

@sunshine!: I think people are often too stingy with buying indie games. It's normal to spend \$10 on a movie ticket (often much more) for two hours, but many people resist buying a \$10 indie game with their friends if they think they'd only play it once or twice. I think Steam sale culture worsens this by devaluing all games and creating a race for the bottom where you only want to buy games on sale

@Andi: I've heard some people suggest that PC games are expensive now (\$70 plus DLCs), however I think they have never been cheaper... as long as you don't need to play the newest AAA games the moment they come out. I feel bad buying so much on sale, but Steam culture really incentivizes it with big sales every few months. It's a constant struggle with my conscience.

All posts in #dumpster-fire-takes are subject to being printed at the editor's discretion. Minor edits may be made. Anonymous posts welcome, but we'll credit your discord handle unless you tell us otherwise.

OVERTHINKING AND ANALYZING

A bimonthly column by Jesse Boruff



HALFWAY BETWEEN POKEMON AND SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI

(Header image art by Suzuhito Yasuda for Media.Vision)

As I'm sure plenty are aware, *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* decidedly swept this year's Game Awards, what with its impeccable voice cast, unbelievable music, and interesting parry- and dodge-based combat. It is a true passion project brought to life by people who believed wholeheartedly in the vision.

That being said, what if I told you there was another game that came out this year with an amazing art style, fantastic VO, and a gameplay loop that is as addictive as it is intuitive. Coming out after years spent in development hell, *Digimon Story*:

Time Stranger released in October of this year to very little fanfare. Oh, and it's my pick for game of the year.

Boot up your Digivices and dive into the digital world with me, and I'll tell you why.

ROOKIE STAGE: A BRIEF HISTORY

The *Digimon Story* series has been a long-running one. The first I can remember playing were *Digimon World Dawn and Dusk* (2007) on the original DS, which mimicked the Pokémon dual-version strategy. I remember them fondly as cool little games with plenty of recruitable Digimon to mess around with, but not much else.

A bit after that, we saw the release of *Digimon Story: Cyber Sleuth* and its sequel. I

positioned right next to monsters like Plutomon. It's hilarious to see cute little Gatomon standing next to a massive creature like Wendigomon, who, if you watched the '90s Digimon anime as a kid, you'll cringe at the sight of.

The story also caught me by surprise, becoming a sprawling, time-spanning epic. Your companions have some very interesting storylines and developments, too, with my favorite being Aegiomon. I often found myself wondering what could even happen next, and not once did I skip a cutscene.

MEGA STAGE: WHY YOU SHOULD PICK THIS ONE UP

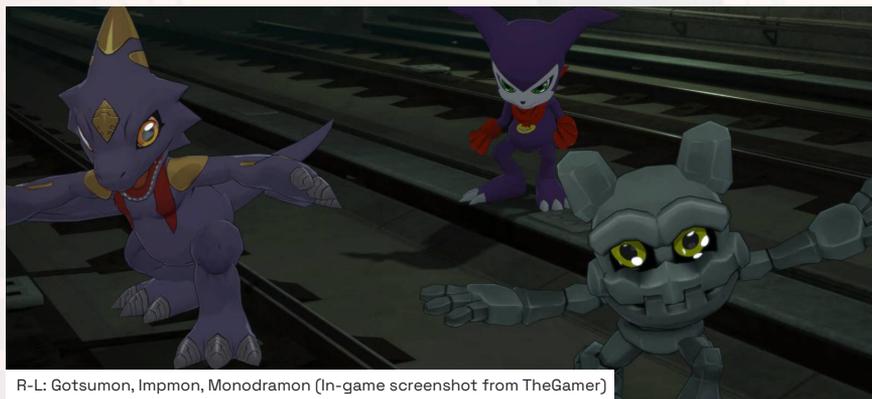
The vision of this game left me flabbergasted. Everything in it is either in service of the story or of the player's overall experience. You may never be expecting to cry over a giant pink snail dinosaur and their little blue fish friend's Romeo and Juliet situation, but it just might happen if you play this game. Hell, the theme of the game might as well be "tragedy and recovery," as numerous Digimon have surprisingly well thought out personal stories.

Not only did *Time Stranger* help me reconnect with a franchise that I quite enjoyed as a youngin', it also got me to pick up more games

in the franchise. I've given *Cyber Sleuth* (2015) and *Hacker's Memory* (2017) another chance, and I've gotten farther than I've ever been before in those games.

It's a testament to the director of this game that even through an eight-year stretch of development hell, they were able to release an impeccable piece of work that really struck a chord with me. When I return to the digital world of *Time Stranger*, I plan on running it back on the hardest difficulty with all my beefed up Digimon, something I never do. It goes to show just how badly I want to stay there and never leave, I suppose!

If you were on the fence, the game has seen a few sales since release, and it will only get cheaper as time goes on. So, if you're not like me and are good with your money, you'll have ample opportunity to pick the game up. Heck, I paid 70 bucks for it, and I would still say my money was very well spent.



R-L: Gotsumon, Impmon, Monodramon (In-game screenshot from TheGamer)

DISPATCH FROM A DISTANT ALLEYWAY

A column by
D. Myerscough



FUCK SPOTIFY, I'LL WRAP IT MYSELF

After each successful year, contemplation becomes commonplace. Those without the usual urge to reflect suddenly turn their attention inward, to celebrating accomplishments and extending gratitude to those around them. I am no different.

After 12 months and several thousand words slammed disjointedly into Google Docs and onto paper, I'd suppose this magazine deserves the same treatment. I've enjoyed writing about the work many of you do, and your responses have been consistently kind and encouraging.

Though many of you didn't (or perhaps still don't) know that the words you're reading are generally mine, you took them in all the same – and in certain cases, repeated them back to me, attributed to a certain Australian.

That being said, I'd like to celebrate one of the most impressive and long-lasting relationships of my adult life – with you all, if that wasn't clear enough – by opening a door into my inner world.

This is not a privilege I'll extend often, lest I lose my air of detached, oddly-charming cynicism, but anniversaries should be celebrated. Without further preamble, here's my confession:

I don't play that many video games.

I can hear the protests now. I'm aware that this is a magazine about video games. Life is often inexplicable like that.

If I had my own wicked way with this magazine, I would be writing about niche internet drama, odd court cases, and music every month. Perhaps I still will. Maybe I am right now.

That's right, I've conned you all into reading another column about music. I'm an obsessive consumer of the stuff. I never do anything in silence if I can help it, and I think it's always worth talking about. In fact, I can link many of my blunders, milestones, and emotional journeys this year to the albums I was spinning (either figuratively or literally) as they happened.

So, because Spotify lies - I've become convinced of this, both because of their links to weapons manufacturing and the fact I obsessively track my own listening stats - I'll wrap it myself.

HEAD CHEERLEADER - POM POM SQUAD: BEST SONG TO BREAK DOWN TO

Many of you have likely already guessed that my brain is not exactly wired in a typical fashion. Whose is, these days? The current world is overwhelming, and at the risk of sounding like a maladjusted loser, hard to get through at all. Sometimes I require constant, repetitive noise to decompress with during a commute or a good session of lying face down on a hard surface.

Because of that, what I like to call my "yearly breakdown song" is incredibly important to me.

This song changes from year to year. In 2022, it was the acoustic version of "Linger" from The Cranberries' 2017 record, Something Else. Turns out, a five-minute song listened to three times allows for a 15-minute breakdown. Who knew!

This year, it was "Head Cheerleader. I've been attempting (and failing) to fix my self-esteem issues for the whole year, something my therapist has consistently recommended I do. In some ways, this may be an extension of the uncertain and transitive nature of a senior year. In others, it may be that I've just grown bored of hating myself.

As someone who is really trying to place more faith in myself, here's to trying to choose the things we really want.

CELEBRITY SKIN - HOLE, STRANGEST PLACES - ABRA MOORE: ALBUM RECOMMENDATIONS THAT MAY HAVE GOTTEN ME GHOSTED

You'll never know if that's a joke or not.

After waxing poetic about my own self-esteem issues and my attempts to fix them, this section is going to be remarkably self-deprecating. You're welcome.

As a terminally agoraphobic editor and student, I don't often find the time or inclination to leave my cave. However, I managed to make a few outings this summer and strike out spectacularly when attempting to hit on someone at a party.

Shocking, I know. I just seem so charismatic on paper.

The story is both incredibly entertaining and would irreparably damage your respect for me, should you still have any, so I'll spare you the details, one of which includes a wildly popular free-to-play online team game.

Instead, you can take away this: Strangest Places is a fantastic record that's worth a listen for even the biggest Lilith Fair skeptic. "Four Leaf Clover" and the title track are great gateway standouts, but you won't regret a full listen, trust me.

Additionally, if you haven't listened to a Hole record yet, what are you doing? Put aside all the bad shit you've heard about Courtney Love and free yourself. If nothing else, she is both incredibly funny and capable of singing absolute bangers. There's a reason I call her the modern-day Oracle at Delphi; her music – and occasionally her opinions – are worth the pilgrimage.

HURRICANE DRUNK – FLORENCE + THE MACHINE: MY SONG OF THE WINTER SEMESTER

Enough said. Kids, don't get a journalism degree. Waste \$40,000 on literally anything else.

SUZANNE VEGA – SUZANNE VEGA: THE RECORD I SPUN THE MOST AT HOME

For a \$5 bargain bin find, my partially scratched LP of Suzanne Vega's self-titled 1985 record has

seen over 100 spins during my time with it. In fact, I often put it on when I write this very magazine.

In many ways, this album is the soundtrack of my year. I tend to use music as a way to avoid my own thoughts wandering – perhaps an unhealthy habit, but I'm willing to move on if you are – so it shouldn't be surprising that the sparse, thoughtful pieces on this record are often my first choice of accompaniment.

If you only know her from "Tom's Diner," please give this record a shot. The sequence of "The Queen And The Soldier" into "Knight Moves" is one of my favorites in music.

Honorable mention to the record I listened to most often in my beloved (and generally broken) truck: Dig Me Out by Sleater-Kinney. Sorry to both Jonah and Liz, who were forced to listen to it on repeat this fall.

THE CLEARING – WOLF ALICE: THE RECORD THAT DISAPPOINTED ME MOST THIS YEAR

I've been a Wolf Alice fan since 2018. Perhaps a bit late for the day ones, but my English heritage manifests in a long ass surname and an undying love for Liverpool FC rather than the ability to keep up with music trends from across the pond.

Mea culpa, and all that.

Finding them when I did, I was only able to experience the release of their third record, “Blue Weekend,” in 2021 and man, did it rock my world. From vocalist Ellie Rowsell’s growly singing to the guys behind her fucking shredding on their guitars, it’s fantastic indie rock.

Songs like “Formidable Cool” and “Play the Greatest Hits” still regularly find themselves in my playlists, extending my love affair with the band to an impressive (but not unmatched) eight years. On top of that, The Clearing’s lead single “Bloom Baby Bloom” was a fun (if out of character) little retro romp.

So, given the fact I’d been waiting for it for four years, why was this album such a miss for me?

It’s not the abnormal piano (at least I don’t think), and it’s not the often-juvenile rhyme schemes. It just feels like the band has been neutered.

All the delightfully noisy rough edges have been worn away, leaving a core of heavily produced, somewhat banal sentiment I assume I won’t often be revisiting.

That said, I’m still hoping to see Ellie and the guys in another 3-5 years for another go. Let’s hope it’s a bit more potent than this one.

MINNEAPOLIS – THAT DOG., NANCY DREW – TUSCADERO: SONGS I ANNOYED MY FAMILY AND CO- WORKERS WITH

It seems odd to end this column full of music recommendations with a statement like this, but my taste in music is bad.

Many songs that are jarring, sonically confusing, and full of off-key singing are my favorites. Maybe it’s because they take away the pressure for me to sing on key. Maybe they just scratch a part of my brain that more technically sound pieces do not.

The world may never truly know, and I’m not even sure if I can fully recommend these songs or the bands that made them. But if you’re brave, maybe you’ll also upset your boss by coming in the door singing about a bar called the Jabber Jaw.

Thank you for allowing me the chance to speak to and with you this year. I hope you’ll stick around to see what we do in the future. Who knows, maybe I’ll have more music recommendations for you next year.



Danny’s personal writing can be found at
<https://dannywriterghost.boo/>