



BAG

BACK ALLEY GAMES

The future of SomaSim

Inside the restructuring of a beloved
Chicago indie game studio after over
10 years of simulation supremacy

Peak, politics, and
penguins with sticks

Making friendslop as a form of protest

Should Souls players
have to git gud?

Everything Next Fest

backalley@indiecitygames.org

Back Alley Games is lovingly slapped together by three gay people:

Sebastian Galvez, editor-in-chief

Jonah Lillioja, layout editor

Danny Myerscough, managing editor

IN THIS ISSUE:

NOW PLAYING: REVIEWS FROM THE BACK ALLEY

itch.io round up - Back Alley editors	1
Next Fest round up - Back Alley editors	3
Detective Instinct: Farewell, My Beloved - Sebastian Galvez	5
Fallout 4 Settlement Builder - Jesse Boruff	7
Creature Kitchen - D. Myerscough	9
MIO: Memories in Orbit - Chris Impicicche	11

DEV LOGS

Coraroc - a streamlined platformer by solo dev Coral Feather	33
--	----

PEAK ALL THE WAY DOWN 17

Why making and playing friendstop just may save us all by D. Myerscough

A NEW OLD WAY TO PLAY MUSIC 19

How cartridge albums add good friction to modern music consumption by Amelia Zollner

BLEEDING TREES AND BALLET 23

Disempowering societal expectations and finding meaning through play by Jonah Lillioja

A GAME ENGINE TAROT READING 27

GIT BUSY "GUD'ING OR GET BUSY DYING OVER AND OVER 29

Accessibility in the FromSoft Souls series and beyond by Jesse Boruff

THE LEGACY OF SOMASIM 35

The highs, lows, and hopeful future for Chicago simulation legends by D.

FIGHTING FASCISM THROUGH PLAY 43

Developers and gamers finding ways to combat immigration injustice by Jonah White

DISPATCH FROM A DISTANT ALLEYWAY 46

Onstage couple's therapy: Catharsis and breakup songs by D. Myerscough

ARTIST'S ALLEY 13, 15, 25, 51

Francisco del Valle - Death, dark, and the beyond

GAME CORNER 50

"3 18 15 19 19 14 21 13 2 5 18" by Bobby Lockhart



SPRING ITCH.IO ROUNDUP

By Seb Galvez

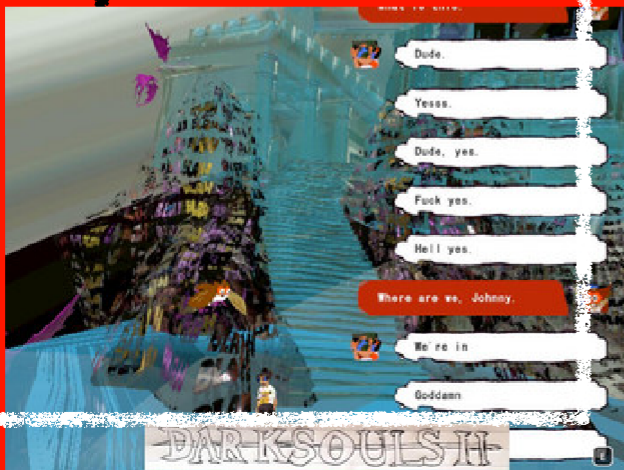
RUIN: Chapter 0

A lost Commodore 64 masterpiece weaving RPG and point-and-click narrative tools into a surrealist piece of sci-fi fantasy. The jagged edges are deliberate and the obtuseness is the point. Saying that OFFICIAL ELECTRIC's other games are any less stylish would be a lie. Go play *RUIN*, then go check out the rest of their stuff.



Who is Johnny Sixgun?

Enter the mind of the world's biggest Hooters fan. I first came across *Who is Johnny Sixgun?* as part of the always stellar Indieocalypse and was instantly very upset that I had not myself put out something like it. Simultaneously frenetic and intentional, this one is impossible to classify and requires you to experience it for yourself. It's a self-described "shitpost epic adventure" you won't soon forget.

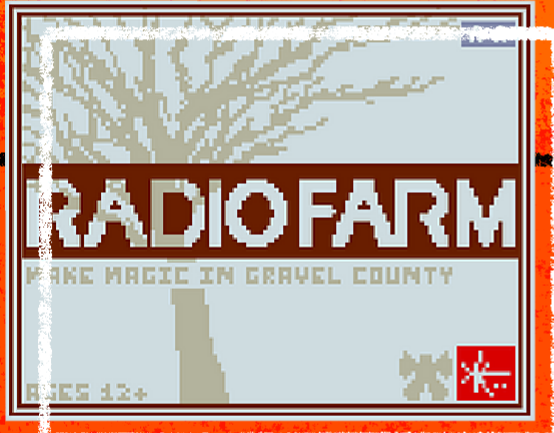
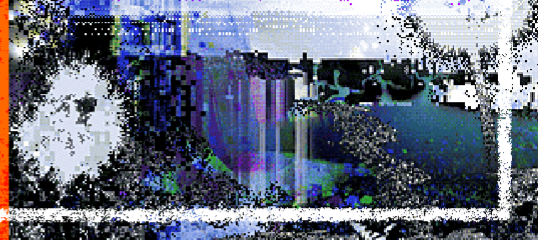




she danced in the wind like a holographic dream before she died

Natalie Lawhead returns with another piece of what is best described as digital, experiential poetry (see: *A Butterfly* and *BlueSuburbia*). Lawhead's work remains as raw, honest, and emotional as ever, pulling at both deeply intimate personal threads and more widespread modern anxiety. Some of the finest work you'll find in the vein of games as an art form. You owe it to yourself to experience it.

she danced in the wind like a holographic dream before the world died



RADIO FARM

Short, textured, and at times tedious – I mean that as a compliment, too many games are afraid of tedium as a mechanism – *RADIO FARM* is a great example of how much can be conveyed through visual minimalism. You can practically feel the cold and isolation in all eight pixels of your character's sprite. Pair it with Sam Toeman's Patreon post regarding the game's development for a great look at his personal process.

today and every day, i become a chinese new year bonsai

Chinese emo simulator go brrrrrrr



Article images from the relevant itch.io pages

EVERYTHING

Feywood Wanderers:

A grid-based roguelike for the uninitiated
(and worn-out veterans)

Feywood Wanderers takes a typically obtuse and high-barrier to entry genre and distills it down to a more digestible version of a grid-hopping roguelike more than say, the crunchy ascii graphics of *Angband*. Don't get me wrong, it's no less lethal, but quality of life features such as a stash, meta-progression, and a simplified stat and class system heavily lower the barrier to entry. Also, instead of being a white guy with brown hair and a sword, you can class change to an orc, which makes you a green guy with brown hair and a sword *and* tusks.



Developer: Vicente Miranda
Projected release date: Q2 2026

Lucha Chess:

Dinosaurs killed my wrestling rock band

Developed by solo developer Jorge TV., *Lucha Chess* takes the autochess formula we've all come to know and covers it in a coat of luchador paint straight out of "Mucha Lucha" and "El Tigre." Like any good wrestling media, the characters here are more like well-muscled superheroes than athletes – one spider themed character quite literally has six arms. While gameplay isn't the most innovative in an increasingly saturated genre, the art is a blast and the stat system makes for a more relaxed, less crunchy version of autochess. If I'd encountered it at the height of the browser game era it would have only hastened my current autobattler addiction.



Developer: Jorge TV
Projected release date: 2026

ShantyTown:

Calming yet chaotic diorama builder

ShantyTown takes the same calming, simulation-builder approach as projects like *Townscaper*, but introduces puzzle elements that elevate the gameplay past mere pastime.

Stacking buildings on top of each other to fill an abandoned subway pipe or surround a lighthouse may seem trivial, and it is, but getting it *just right* isn't. When you add in each building's upgrade requirements — light, utility, and decoration — the limited space of each level, and pure unadulterated aesthetics, you get a vaguely puzzling experience that expertly emulates real world locales like Kowloon City or Slab City.

Take this one at your own pace, take in the atmosphere, then take a picture and send it to me. I'll definitely be jealous.



Developer: Erik Rempen
Projected release date: Apr. 16, 2026

Bag of Dreams:

Roguelites finally get the girly game treatment

Not that roguelite deckbuilders aren't a dime a dozen in any given Next Fest (or just, every yearly indie release slate since *Slay the Spire*), but *Bag of Dreams* feels sufficiently different to warrant talking about. Rather than the standard side view combat of the genre, it focuses on a mix of meter management and board control. A bit unintuitive at first – if only due to its distinct rule system – but once it clicks, it's great. Add to that the "girly game" look that is not only very underserved in the modern games scene but essentially nonexistent in roguelites, and *Bag of Dreams* makes for a great spin on what has become a very tired, oversaturated genre.



Developer: Two Trick Pony
Projected release date: Mar. 24, 2026z



NEXT FEST 2026

Developer: Chris D
Projected release date: Mar. 9, 2026

Labyrinth Trailblazer:

Lowpolyian Odyssey

It's a shame that out of all the old school dungeon crawlers in existence, the *Etrian Odyssey* series for the Nintendo DS seems to have left a comparatively shallower mark than its contemporaries. *Labyrinth Trailblazer* is an exception to the lethal, dungeon-crawling blobber formula, instead featuring playful, anime-inspired sprites and a straightforward JRPG combat system. The game currently has some rough edges, but that's also part of the charm. For those looking for a change from either the blobber or roguelite RPG formulas, this demo provides a great alternative and an homage to an oft-overlooked DS series.



Developer: Evil Rap:or
Projected release date: 2026

Far Far West:

A shooter with cowboys, robots, potential

With a planned release later this year, the *Far Far West* demo comes complete with a few diverse builds and fantastically fun co-op arena levels. There's some great humor in the writing and the core gameplay loop is solid, but I found myself frustrated at multiple points. First was when trying to use a gamepad, which Steam swore to me was "mostly supported." If that means that there's a 2-3 second latency on the right stick — necessary for every shooter I've ever played — then I agree. Further, I don't think it's quite balanced for solo play. I was able to kill the arena boss, but making it out alive was another story.

If you're comfortable playing on mouse and keyboard, enjoy robot cowboys, or are willing to wait until functioning controller support is added, check this one out. It's skeleton-shooting, sarsaparilla-swinging fun with friends.



Developer: Secret Plan Games
Projected release date: Coming Soon

Flock Around:

Flock Around: Frantically whispering about ducks

Many friendslop games released in the past year lean heavily on the inherent humor of gamer-gamer relationships for most of their appeal. If you don't have friends to take control of the other low poly models in a given environment, it's hard to see the appeal over other, more complete solo experiences.

Flock Around is no different, but it is novel in that it takes the genre staples: proximity chat, cooperative work toward a goal, ridiculous writing, and applies them to the most old man-ass activity on the planet. Birding. We spent over an hour standing on each others heads and frantically whispering (loud talking in proximity chat, predictably, scares away the birds) every time a brightly colored bird fresh out of MS Paint appeared on our screens. It was fantastic.



Developer: Odd Dreams Digital
Projected release date: May 8, 2026

Everything is Crab:

Simple, addictive evolution roguelike

Listen, as a kid that spent way too much time playing the first stage of *Spore*, this game was made for me. If you too like dashing, eating, and adding more parts to a little blob, you're in luck, because *Everything is Crab* delivers.

Your build, such that it is, is determined by new parts and abilities gained every so often as you eat your way through the world around you. Choose between options such as "beak," "chonky," or "antlers." Once your abomination has leveled up enough, denoted by a progress bar at the top of the screen, bosses appear. The first is a cow crab. You should get this demo.





Developer: Armonica LLC
 Release date: Nov. 26, 2025
 Platform: PC



DETECTIVE INSTINCT

Farewell, My Beloved

Detective Instinct title art (Photo: Armonica LLC on Steam)

A true, flawed send-up to the DS era of visual novels

By Sebastian Galvez

It's not uncommon to see "nostalgia" or "retro influence" used to handwave lackluster graphics in indies. PS1 has been well-trod as a reference point for low-poly games with muddy textures, completely ignoring the intensely beautiful and detail-oriented work of real games for the system, such as *Breath of Fire IV*.

By contrast, it is the Nintendo DS' influence that is felt on all levels in *Detective Instinct: Farewell, My Beloved*, from the carefully pre-rendered and blurred 3D backgrounds to the larger than average text size – something that is worth praising in itself. Too many story-based games out there have font sizes that require the player to squint at a monitor, let alone a TV.

The sketchy pencil strokes in the game's flashbacks and its luxurious title card are a bit too on the nose to *not* be an homage to *Hotel Dusk: Room 15*, maybe the most lauded mystery game on the DS, and the train setting bears more than passing resemblance to the 1997 PC adventure game *The Last Express*. It is in every way a love letter to the Nintendo DS, point-and-click adventures, and classic TV detectives. It is a game that grounds itself in nostalgia, both for better and worse.

Detective Instinct opens immediately on a murder, after which our player surrogate is shortly implicated during a hotel stay in definitely-not-West Berlin. The murder victim in question turns out to be an immigrant (from definitely-not-East Berlin), introducing the theme of how arbitrary borders shape human lives, a constant presence in the rest of the game. It's a shame that in a game with such strong police presence, the story fails to fully commit to making any political statement, often coming close before reverting to maintain the status quo.

Some players might bemoan the lack of more eccentric characters like those of the Ace Attorney series, but this

would be a disservice to what *Detective Instinct* actually is: an episode of an 80s procedural mystery show in which America's nosiest and most oblivious pair of college students disrupt an otherwise quiet train. It is in the same vein as any episode of "Columbo" or "Murder She Wrote," albeit with less memorable protagonists than J.B Fletcher or the titular detective.

This isn't to say that the game's characters are without merit. There are more than a few charming interactions with its cast of potential suspects, with my personal favorite being two errant golfers.

The problem is that the game seems to oscillate too much between the urge to be a serious, politically charged mystery and the comfortable territory of a simple, lighthearted romp through a beat-by-beat procedural.

Perhaps what stands out most in *Detective Instinct*, apart from the absolutely stunning visuals, is the more ephemeral parts of its structure. Things that would feel out of place in a modern game's quality of life but are true to the quirks and clunks of the system *Detective Instinct* seeks to evoke. The way menus are navigated, at times obtuse and others overly simple, places an emphasis on nostalgia of not just content, but form. It is in this particular area that *Detective Instinct* succeeds and truly stands out.

Despite many games making a claim to evoke nostalgia, the uniform layout of modern controls inevitably seeps its way into them. By contrast, in *Detective Instinct*, you begin to feel the controls as if you were playing them on the Nintendo DS (a now over twenty-year-old system, for those keeping count). Even on a keyboard, it becomes easy to envision the navigation being done with a small D-pad and two buttons, with the game's notepad relegated to the lower screen.

Detective Instinct banner art (Photo: Armonica LLC on Steam)



The menus, though true to the era, are clunky. Dialogue options will send you back to a root menu, forcing you to click through multiple times, and direction for where to go next can be confusing. Choices don't shape direction, with any deduction on the player's part being a matter of course in the story. More than once I found myself rotating through options, attempting to find the unspecified choice the game wanted me to make in order to progress to the next scene.

Detective Instinct's greatest flaw is that it never seems to fully trust the player, forcing you through multiple reviews of simplistic information and choices that have no real fail state or alternative story outcome. As a mystery game, the player is never

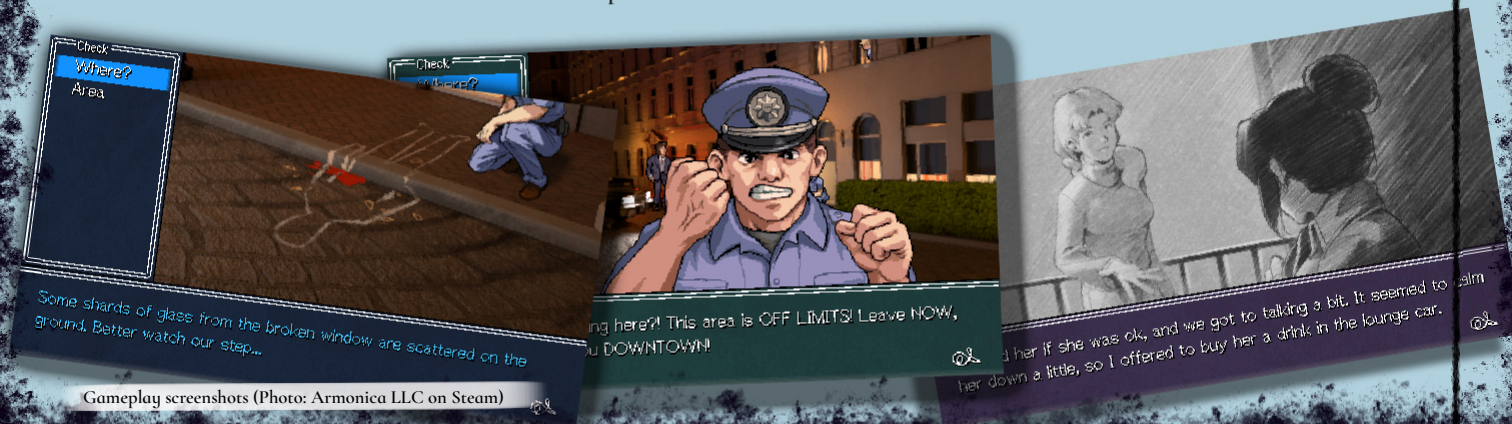
truly asked to solve anything. The result is more that of a kinetic novel with additional menus rather than any true mystery where the player pieces together evidence, makes deductions, or performs risky accusations.

My criticisms here shouldn't be mistaken for lack of fun. I genuinely enjoyed my time with the game, finding myself settling into an easy flow. It gave me nostalgia for a game I've never played. *Detective Instinct* is not a new *Ace Attorney*, and that's okay. It doesn't need to be. It is something entirely different but equally important to our shared experiences in the medium.

It's a piece of art less interested in

chasing the immediate imagery of mainline series installments instead choosing to replicate the rough edges of a platform and the design tendencies that make up the character of a specific era of game development. *Detective Instinct* is that one game you played in the backseat of a car on a long trip, or under the covers at night when you should be sleeping.

It's well worth your time, especially if you've ever pulled a random game off the shelf on a whim and ended up with an experience that stuck with you, rough edges and all. It's the game that you assume is a ubiquitous experience for everyone who played the platform, only to find out it wasn't.



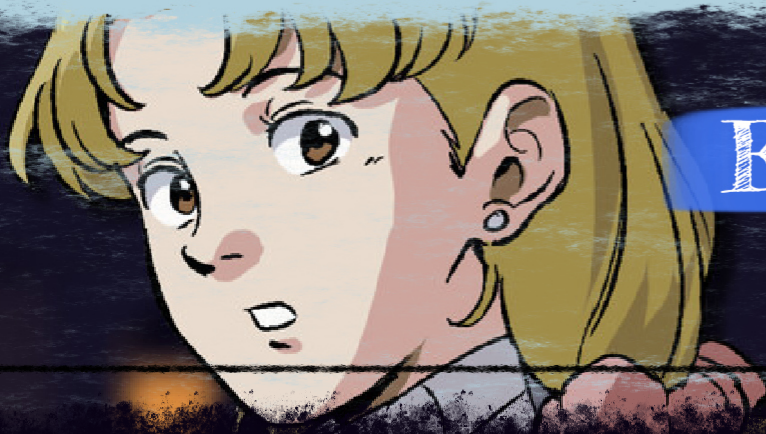
Gameplay screenshots (Photo: Armonica LLC on Steam)

Clunky yet faithful to its DS-era inspirations, *Detective Instinct: Farewell, My Beloved* is full of beautiful tableaus and charming characters yet falls flat when it comes to player choice and menu design.

Atmosphere:
9.5/10

Story:
7/10

Gameplay:
6.5/10



Final Rating:

7.7



FALLOUT 4'S SETTLEMENT BUILDER

HP

Or how I learned to stop worrying and love the crash report screen

By Jesse Boruff

Sometimes I enjoy things that are bad.

Zelda CD-i cutscenes. The Johnny Depp remake of “Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory.” *Fallout 4* base building.

Maybe it shouldn't have been one, but I was pleasantly surprised to discover the settlement building community for *Fallout* was quite robust. These folks, like myself, have been inextricably drawn to the janky base building that the fourth mainline entry in the series offers. And while much of my maligning comes from a place of fondness, I would still describe the base building, at its base, to be... Well, bad.

Not for lack of trying though, as like a lot of Bethesda games, the fans end up running the ball into the end zone on ideas the development team got maybe halfway there. Like in the case of the Place Anywhere mod. Without it, the perimeter fence I built around Sanctuary doesn't clip into place, instead turning frustratingly red to indicate it can't be placed because it's within two mere feet of another structure. My suspension of disbelief won't allow perfect Raider-sized holes in my perimeter fence that said assailants can poke their pipe guns into and shoot my settlers. With the mod, the fences clip into each other and create a perfect wall.

Tricks and glitches are the names of the base building game. Well, some of

the names. Many avid settlement

builders are familiar with the pillar glitch, where players craft a structure they'd like to freely place in the world, then attach a specific pillar object to it. From there, the game allows the player to grab the entire build, including the pillars, for placement practically anywhere. You'll find this trick used by numerous members of the (surprisingly large) YouTube settlement building community.

They're very passionate and do things with *Fallout 4*'s build system that blow my mind. Many techniques have to be learned, and luckily, the community is very welcoming and ready to teach. The compiled knowledge of the community is based around several common exploits, like clipping vendor counters into other objects to create immersive storefronts and placing sleeping bags atop couches and tables to make slapdash beds. Something about this system lights up player creativity for some reason, and I'm not immune; I've logged about 100 hours rebuilding Sanctuary alone.

There are folks that have built versions of Sanctuary with crammed streets, packed with item vendors and NPCs bustling about. I've seen The Castle converted into a veritable fortress that makes Diamond City look like Riverwood from *Skyrim*. There are jaw-dropping Brotherhood Boston Airport conversions that fill me with envy. As undeniably

impressive as it all is, though, it bears mentioning that this system, out of the box, as Bethesda has shipped it, is almost completely inadequate at allowing the player to build an immersive settlement. Without bending, breaking, or completely modifying the system, you can't do what you want. And believe you me, I've freaking broken it.

My current build of Sanctuary is a bit... Uh... Massive? Numerous skyscrapers line the streets, electrical lines webbing across the surface of each building like vines. When standing on the dilapidated bridge that crosses over into the city, the game stutters, having a hard time loading in the structures.

Directly to your left upon entry is a large apartment building built atop two of the homes in Sanctuary. My vision for this building was to create a room for each companion, decking it out in designs that fit their personalities. The build limit, however, had other, much more nefarious plans.

You see, another one of those handy tips that the community teaches to new builders is how to increase the build limit. Most common is the build limit exploit, utilizing how the game counts any dropped item in the settlement as being a part of the



Developer: Bethesda Game Studios
Release date: Nov. 10, 2015
Platform: PC, Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo

settlement. When those items are removed in any way, like dismantling or stowing them, you get some of your build limit back. One could drop their entire inventory of guns, go into build mode, send the items back to the workbench storage, and continue to do this to lower their build limit gauge. This can be done indefinitely.

Incredibly handy, no? A finger on the monkey's paw curls.

Some of you probably know where this inevitably leads. One day, I discovered that when placing items in the first-floor office of my apartment building, the game just stopped. No

crash report. No popup. Just "Rocket 69" continuing to play alongside wilderness ambience and generator chugging sounds. In fact, my interface froze and I couldn't do anything until I reset the system.

Not discouraged quite yet, as I'd of course encountered a fair number of crashes at this point, I instead started work on the other side of the settlement. This time on a hospital. As I placed the first conduit on the building to give it power, connecting wire to conduit, it crashed again. From there, I attempted to begin three or four new projects in a desperate and pathetic cycle of crash, reboot, crash, reboot, unable to go

more than 5 maddening minutes without a problem.

Exhausted and defeated, that save has laid dormant now for a good while. At its final count, I had hit 100 hours of work on Sanctuary.

It was hubris, I know, and I'm ready to accept my part in my own downfall. However, Bethesda must accept that they need to give the settlements enough storage space to hold more than a single chair and a dresser. Or maybe, the engine kept crashing when they tried and they gave up, defeated like me.

Addicting but prone to infinite crashes, *Fallout 4*'s settlement builder acts as a testament to the community's resilience and the ingenuity of modders. If you're a masochist or just enjoy exploiting Bethesda games for pure aesthetic value, this one's for you.

Atmosphere:
8.5/10

Story:
5/10

Gameplay:
5.5/10

Final Rating:

6.3

The author's 100-hour Sanctuary build (Images by Jesse Boruff)



CREATURE KITCHEN



Creature Kitchen title art (Photo: The Rat Zone on Steam)

Cooking Mama meets cryptids in this creepy-cozy cooking sim

By D. Myerscough

As a lifelong American, I often feel a near-primordial urge to drive into the woods until I find an unoccupied cabin or cottage. I would set up there and live out the rest of my mortal moments, living off the land and befriending various forest critters like deer and tree-dwelling octopuses. Playing *Creature Kitchen* sated that urge. For now.

Beginning a little like a creepypasta flash game from the early 2010s, flashlight, dark forest, and all, the game soon opens up into a charmingly retro cooking sim. Between burning eggs and chopping carrots, players can sprint through the woods, scaring off every creature in a ten-mile radius and taking Polaroid pictures of them as they run off.

Heart, humor, and horror are balanced expertly with stupid simple cooking mechanics and delightful Dreamcast-era graphics. In short, this game cultivates a *vibe*.

One of the first things I did in my playthrough was throw the first mushroom I could see into the river, never to be seen again. As it floated out of reach, I followed it, finding an empty jar the tutorial informed me could be filled with fireflies.

This is related to a later puzzle, but I had stumbled into the solution mere

moments after launching the game for the first time. As a certified intellectual, it pains me to write this, but I *love* easy puzzles.

Creature Kitchen is full of easy puzzles. Not overly easy, as I found myself stuck at one or two points, especially toward the end of my time in the cottage, but easy enough not to make progression frustrating.

Instead, progression is both intuitive and satisfying. Filling out one critter's page in the album leads directly to the next, and if you get stuck, the hints on each page are quick to get you back on track.

Before I could start filling the album out, though, I had to turn on the power. After opening the breaker box and solving another puzzle, I received my first recipe card and the ability to stick a fork into an outlet. You know, for science.

That's another great thing about this game. It encourages play.

Between the exploration required to find new ingredients and creatures, the game also doesn't require the use of recipe cards. Instead, players can throw ingredients willy nilly into their oven, creating mistake after mistake until they brute force their way into an actual recipe.

Ingredients can be found all over the kitchen, around the cottage, and once picked up, in the pantry or fridge. The pantry is never-ending and comes complete with its own Eldritch entity that is fond of spaghetti, while the fridge rotates its stock every time you open and close the door.

Once you have the necessary ingredients, between one and four, they can be placed in "the void of creation," or the oven, which combines them all using some sort of ancient magic. Is stir-fry traditionally cooked in the oven? No. Is this game operating using standard rules of reality as we understand them? Also no.

Speaking of the oven, it constitutes one of the four cooking mechanics in the



game. Each is simplified to its basest components – the pan fries eggs and meat, the mixer produces new combined ingredients, the knife chops things – but provides enough diversity to keep gameplay from getting too stale.

For me, the steepest learning curve was the pan. Controlled via the motion of a control stick or mouse, the pan jerks wildly when the slightest pressure is applied to it, and launching ingredients out of the pan with a poorly timed flip is far too frequent an experience. Authentic to early 2000s gaming, sure, but frustrating all the same.

Also in the cottage is a small radio. This radio is perhaps the thing I will remember most from *Creature Kitchen*, as I feel it best demonstrates the amount of care the developers put

into this game. The radio is unnecessary and easily-missable. I didn't turn it on until two hours into my playthrough, content to enjoy the atmospheric background music, but once I did, I never turned it off.

There are three channels. The first is fantastically curated music from several artists, complete with an announcer between songs. Wonderful, but not exactly for me. The third is a traditional numbers station in the "Welcome to Night Vale" style, again including an announcer who is calling numbers just for the hell of it. But the second station, oh boy, I loved the second station.

It's all commercials.

Bespoke commercials.

I have to give the developers so much

credit for taking the time to write and record joke advertisements for their cooking game. That kind of attention to detail should be rewarded and replicated whenever possible, and it's the kind of thing that turns a regular indie game into one that sticks with a player.

Finally, the story. I won't spoil anything, but I very much enjoyed the ending. Over my playthrough I came to love the little critters I was spending time feeding, so when the game commended my compassion toward them, I teared up a little.

Given the fact this game can be 100% completed in less than four hours, it's well worth your time. Come for the cooking, stay for the inclusion of an advertisement for the Season 1 DVD box set of "China Beach."

The devil is truly in the details in *Creature Kitchen*, a charmingly retro experience with streamlined, sometimes-frustrating gameplay. The Rat Zone have crafted a game that balances heart, humor, and horror expertly, making for a short yet fulfilling experience.

Gameplay:
7.5/10

Atmosphere:
9.5/10

Story:
7/10

Final Rating:

8.0

Developer: The Rat Zone
Release Date: Feb 6, 2026
Platform: Windows

Gameplay screenshots (Photo: The Rat Zone on Steam)



MIO

MEMORIES IN ORBIT

GETTING LOST IN MEMORIES AND
BUOYED BY HOPE... IN SPACE

By Chris Impiciche

Developer: Douze DixiEmes
Release Date: Jan 20, 2026
Platform: Windows

Mio's title art (Photo: Douze DixiEmes on Steam)



I am lost in a crumbling ship stuck in the stars. We are all dying. I have to save the ship.

MIO: Memories In Orbit is a game about hope lost, about the moment in the journey where the crush of the world wins and you curl up and wait for the end. About a tiny robot. About a little spark of hope?

I loved this game.

I hated this game.

The beginning is brilliant. A steady drip-feed of upgrades and unlocks, satisfying fights, and paths discovered. A shopkeeper, upgrade modules, checkpoints, fast travel.

I reached the flow state of a good *Metroidvania* in a hurry, hopping around the gorgeous decay of *The Vessel* in my search to find and fix the Pearls of the ship: *The Breath*, *The Blood*, *The Eye*, *The Hand*, and *The Spine*. Only *The Heart* still beats, though she is dying. A slow choral dirge plays out over galactic synths. Lush environments roll past my little robot, and I am filled with determination. Hope.

My progress stutters as the map opens up. I am backtracking, warping between Keepers. Searching for the next movement upgrade, a way to unlock the next shortcut, or the next floor of an elevator. The Shopkeeper is low on stock, and I on currency: Nacre droplets from the machines gone feral and Old Cores from long dead units. I begin to see the slope of this climb. The way is treacherous, but I am determined. Getting stronger. I can still save my friends.

I've finally reached the third Pearl. He was scared, ashamed, confused. "Please, don't look at me." I feel haggard and worn. The battles are no longer about reaction or improvisation so much as memorization and precision.

I return to the shop to find the shopkeeper missing, taken by *The Hand*. I cannot spend my growing hoard of treasure now. How will I become stronger without his upgrades? It's been ages since I stumbled on a module that made me feel stronger, longer since I've increased my capacity to equip more than a few. Surely if I defeat *The Hand*, I will find my friend, right?

I descend into the dark.

The Hand was the hardest fight yet. Three phases, where mostly perfect dodge timing was required to defeat her cruel puppet. The shopkeeper is still missing. My health ticks away in violent whiteouts as I watch my small robot stagger and struggle to reboot. A pip of health blinks out permanently. I'd just increased past three and I am back where I started.

More of the ship's adorable robot NPCs have permanently fallen, become "unrecoverable," as *The Heart* shudders. The ship is becoming more treacherous; I am growing weaker instead of stronger.

I am desperate. I Google how to rescue the shopkeeper, shocked at how well hidden he is. I would not have found him on my own.

The Hand was a cake walk. The Last Embedders are brutal and efficient.

I die in seconds.

I've scrapped together some mods to improve my health, but they cut me down in what feels like three hits. The runback is easy but agonizingly slow compared to the single moment it takes the pair to eviscerate my frame. Maybe if I watch someone else fight it, I will discover some timing or strategy I am missing.

The player I watch weaves through the air somehow, barely missing most attacks, parrying the rest. Then the floor crumbles and he must win without touching the ground.

Nope. Nope nope nope.

I abandon the Embedders and stalk off to confirm my suspicions about the final story boss. My sister is tough; I will have to memorize her movements and parry her grab. I take a break and wander the ship a little, maybe I can find another upgrade among the dwindling unexplored areas of the ship.

The screen goes white. Again, I permanently lose a health pip. I am down to two naturally, three or four if I max out my precious equipment budget on defense. That will mean less points toward the offensive skills, some of which I have still never used, as I've never had the budget to swap them out for the more consistent alternatives.

My hope falters. Is the game worth finishing, or will I bow out like I did near the end of other *Soulslikes*?

A bittersweet victory. A predictable sacrifice, confirmation of a suspected horror. The music swells. I recall the untouched areas of the ship, the gear I did not find, the boss I did not vanquish. The game holds a vigil for me. I wonder if this is "the bad ending," or if things would be different if I'd found another candle, opened another door. If there was still a way to become stronger. The credits roll. This is my victory.

I do not feel victorious.



ARTIST'S ALLEY

Francisco del Valle Death, dark, and the beyond

Death, dark, and the beyond: a philosophical motto that drives my way of life and by extension my approach to art. I have killed parts of myself, feared my own curiosity, and have seen another side to life I am glad to be acquainted with. Throughout my five years of self-exile from my home in the Arabian Peninsula, I have tossed and turned about the way I want to use my voice in a world much bigger than I could have ever known.

I left home as a bold rejection of the lifestyle in the Arabian Peninsula. My work can be a critique of my Arab heritage, which is not something I could do if I stayed. It often explores

my attraction to the unknown and elevates the darkness as something both taboo under the kind of Islam I was raised with and something to embrace.

A majority of my life, including my tenure in Chicago, has been spent hiding parts of my identity for the safety of myself and others. I now embrace my deprogramming journey, dual Latin-Arab heritage, and theologically confusing upbringing through my art and storytelling. My experience with authoritarianism makes secrecy another feature of a few pieces, from deeper meanings to making puzzles out of the work using color theory.

My experimentation with lighting and contrast deepens these concepts, offering a unique perspective on matters of religion, culture, gender, and the sense of belonging.

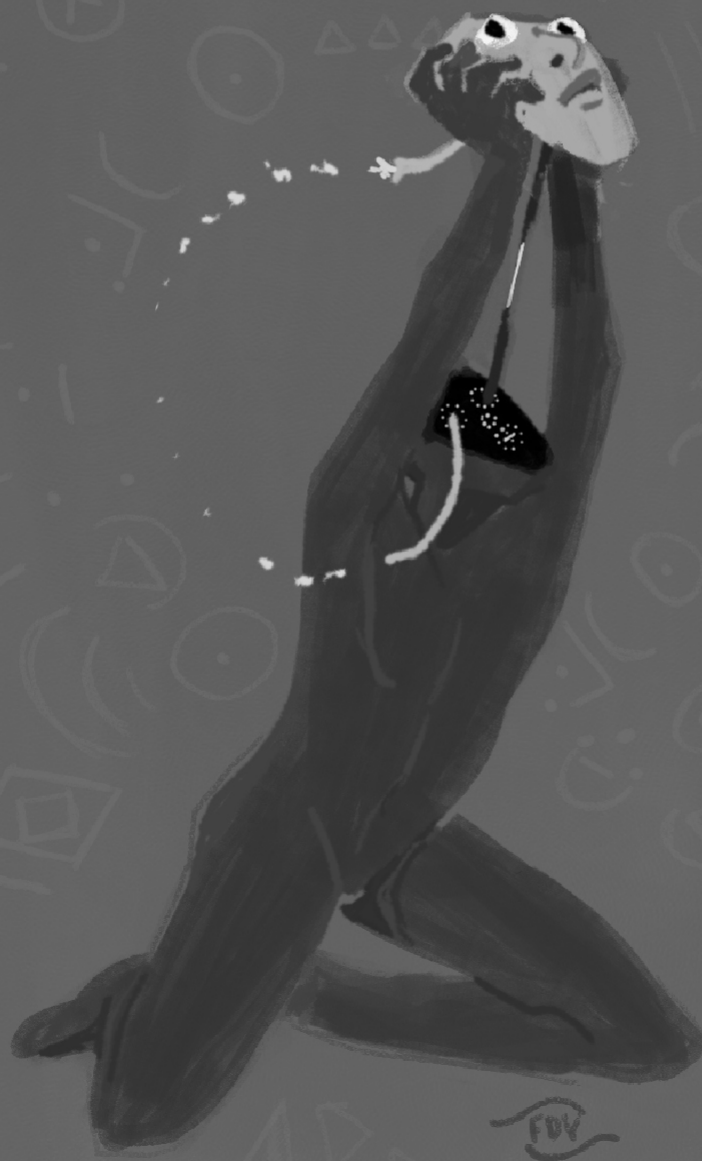


FDV



Cost of Living

Ripping the mask off means freedom, but not without intense and enduring pain through deprogramming. The secretly noisy background patterns can only be viewed when the world is made less colorful.





Abu Bilad

“Abu Bilad” means “father of the country.” It represents authoritarian indoctrination in the Gulf Arab states and the cost that comes with it, the loss of culture, people, and a clean environment. This, for me, is part of my grief at having lost a majority of my life to censorship, racism, and forced silence from my Arab family.



Aquarist 2025



Go

You may perceive a man staring menacingly and pointing in the dark, but what I felt while creating this piece is that no matter how scary or uncomfortable knowledge can be – Go, seek it out, be afraid of the unknown, but go boldly.



IT'S PEAK THE WAY DOWN

Why making and playing friendslop just may save us all

By D. Myerscough

Every upcoming indie game is friendslop. Or at least, that's the impression that certain corners of the internet will give you.

Inverse labeled it the "biggest gaming trend [of] 2025," and many other outlets put out articles either lamenting or defending the genre. That's certainly a lot of hullabaloo for a term that originated in a sarcastic tweet, but in an increasingly bleak industry, any points of light are quick to be noticed.

As much as people were enjoying these games, with some even becoming some of the bestselling projects of the year, others were confused as to their appeal, pointing out their amateurish graphics and simple premises.

One of the lead developers at Aggro Crab, the studio behind "friendslop" title *Peak* and classics like *Going Under* (2020), Nick Kaman, explained as much in an interview with GamesRadar, "There's backlash because sometimes these games forego traditional quality markers like polished graphics or story," but adds that he thinks that "it's mainly just fun to be a hater."

Despite it all, friendslop remains popular. Small developers love making it, players love goofing around in it, and journalists love arguing about whether it means anything at all.

And they're all right to get on board and pay attention, because the unclear meaning of the term doesn't matter, but the way it disrupts the industry does.

If friendslop does have a definition, though, it would be this: A multiplayer game, generally small in scope, that provides a platform for interaction between players.

Think *Peak*, *REPO*, *Lethal Company*, and *RV There Yet?* Each massive hits, each bolstered by its ability to facilitate mildly entertaining stream clips for distribution on TikTok and YouTube.

Perhaps that's too cynical a view, but it can't be ignored that much of the success of these games originates in their popularity amongst Twitch streamers. Whether that be *Among Us* back in 2020 or *Peak* this past year, stream viewers love to see their favorite creators team up to (often poorly) complete simple gameplay tasks.

But this magazine isn't about streaming, it's about indie games. So, why else may these games be successful, and why should small teams keep making them?

Firstly, they're accessible for players and developers alike. These games are small, compact experiences, and so small teams are able to produce them more quickly and effectively than they would a more ambitious project.

In these games, mundane experiences are common and celebrated. For example, *Sledding Game*, Steam's Cozy Quest "Best of the Quest" winner last year, is described as "a game about sledding and hanging out with friends."

The project, created by a solo developer, has cute, simple graphics, a physics engine that seems wrong to anyone experiencing gravity properly, and a



straightforward premise that facilitates interactions between players rather than guiding them toward specific tasks to push a story forward.

Oh, and it has proximity chat.

For anyone who's played *Peak* or any of the other games labeled "friendslop," these traits should be familiar. What once were traits of a single project have now become hallmarks of a new genre, one where the goal can be as simple as "hanging out with friends."

Or what about *Flock Around* and *Stick A Round*, two upcoming (and similarly named) projects with graphics, physics engines, and premises that resemble *Sledding Game*. Each are made by small teams and are centered on a mundane goal that is second to the interactions between players.

In the former, players are bean-shaped birders taking pictures of birds in a park. Each picture earns the player money, and each bird is accompanied by a silly description that adds to the somewhat surreal experience.

Proximity chat is in full effect here too, though the developer demonstrates in one of their social media videos that it actually scares away the birds. A novel (and shockingly realistic) use of the mechanic, to be sure.

In *Stick A Round*, players take control of small, simply rendered animals in a park, tasked with finding the best procedurally generated stick with which to beat the tar out of their friends. In many of the developer's videos on the topic, they focus on the code required to randomly generate these unique sticks, something that comes across as genuinely impressive

and time consuming.

That leads to the next reason these games are good for both players and developers. They're fun. For a developer, the simple scope means that time can be spent perfecting whichever systems drove the creation of the project in the first place, whether that be an engine that generates 600 trillion unique sticks or new descriptions of birds.

Kaman seems to agree, saying "these games aren't trying to be Game of the Year, they focus on delivering a specific experience."

Instead of providing a tightly curated story and specific goals, games like *Peak* and *Stick A Round* are attempting to redefine what video games are by focusing on why people play them in the first place: the desire to have fun.

Traditionally, video games have had very clear and distinct goals, and every action in the game moves the player closer or further from those goals. In *Pac-Man*, players must clear each maze of Pac Dots and avoid ghosts. In *Stardew Valley*, the farmer must make their grandpa proud – a task that may be daunting in the real world, but in this case, the wiki has a guide.

In *Peak*, players are nominally required to climb a mountain, but the fun is more in the ways that players achieve that goal. Many play sessions consist of scouts stealing from each other's backpacks, getting stuck in odd places, and falling to their deaths in ridiculous ways, screaming incoherently through proximity chat as they do.

In other words, players are able to make their own fun.

Finally, the main reason that these

games are successful is that they bring players together. They don't cost half a week's worth of groceries, they aren't overly competitive, and they force people – best friends and online acquaintances alike – into the same lobby, where they have no choice but to communicate with each other.

Instead of yelling at teammates over their choice of superhero or lamenting how an unskilled friend will ruin their ranking, players are instead allowed to just let go and have fun blowing on a bugle or swinging a mug of cocoa around.

That openness to play for its own sake, that spontaneous chaos that can only come from human interaction, those are the things that indie developers should be focusing on right now. The industry at large is in a tailspin, with layoffs and the proliferation of generative AI in games – the truest form of slop.

It's nowhere else but the indie gaming space, and by no one else than a guy with Unity open on a dusty laptop, that the most genuine and fun experiences can be created. As massive tech companies seek to siphon our ideas and market them back to us, as game companies raise their prices more and more for less satisfying products, we must resist in any way we can.

In many ways, it just might be resistance to pick up a game for less than \$10 where you sled, or whack your friends with sticks, or work together to climb a mountain. In those games, the fun is found mostly in the time spent together.

It might be resistance to make a game like that, too. So, because big tech doesn't get it: bring on the friendslop.



Peak scout shenanigans (from Back Alley Games)



A NEW OLD WAY TO PLAY MUSIC

How cartridge albums add good friction to modern music consumption

By Amelia Zollner

(Photo from Destructoid.com)

A few weeks ago, I spent the better part of an evening or so putting around the utility apps on the Nintendo DSi and 2DS I grew up with. Possibly the best thing shared between the two handhelds is the Sound app: an absurd musical playground where a very charming parakeet explains how users can watch visualizers, tinker with voice clips, and turn their favorite songs into nightcore remixes.

I realized that I had installed quite a few songs onto both systems. For the first time in years, I plugged in my headphones and listened. It was like a weird time capsule from a pre-algorithmic era where interactions with music meant something. To put those beloved songs on either system, I had to buy them on iTunes (or download them from a library CD, sorry!), move them onto an SD card, and then put the SD card in my DS. I don't remember doing those things, but going through all that as a young and not particularly persistent kid must have meant that those songs were really important to me — more important than anything in the Spotify era could be.

But connection with music on that level is still possible. I was reminded of this through a weird, budding microtrend: artists and labels releasing video game cartridge albums.

Here's how they work: you pop in a cartridge to your console (most often a GBA or DS) and load up the program, but instead of a game, it contains an album for you to listen to. Some are pretty bare-bones and only have a tracklist, while others include additional features like lyrics, custom animations, and even music videos. Almost all of them, however, are packaged in a case that either riffs on or parodies official releases from the target console.

Cartridge albums have been around for a long time, but I've grown especially fond of them recently thanks to Netlink Records, a relatively new label that just began its foray into the world of DS releases this year. Netlink's latest release was a limited run of dariacore artist xae's incredible album

TO-THE-CORE_153BPM. The album is probably the best possible fit for a DS release: it's packed with a frenetic barrage of samples from console menus as well as games like *Sonic CD*, *Undertale*, and *Overwatch*. Its limited run, of course, sold out before I could grab a copy.

But beyond Netlink, there's an entire underground world of cartridge releases. These mostly come from the electronic music scene, which has proven to be a natural fit for cartridges. In more recent years, however, bands from other genres have bravely ventured into the practice. Regardless of their genre, though, the growing trend of cartridge albums stands as a reminder of the importance of intentionally listening to music.



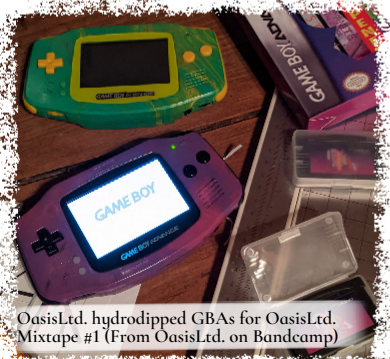
TOO-THE-CORE_153BPM's Netlink DS release (From netlinkrecords on Instagram)

A Brief Trip to Cartridge City

Possibly the most endearing cartridge releases are firmly rooted in video games. The Chicago-based *ch point*, an artist who also makes some really good midwest emo, has released quite a few cover albums made with video game soundfonts. There's an American Football cover album sung by *Animal Crossing's* K.K. Slider, two *RuneScape* cover albums, and a *Stardew Valley*-inspired Pinegrove cover album (that was even released as a mod for the game), to name a few.

My personal favorite is *Alex GBA*, a chiptune cover album of Alex G songs made exclusively with GBA soundfonts. I was lucky enough to end up with a GBA cartridge copy complete with its own *Pokémon Emerald*-inspired case, and it's been on display in my apartment ever since.

There are quite a few other neat cartridge albums that are less thematically bound to their release format, too. Pop band Sherry CD-ROM has put out two really charming GBA albums: *Demo Disc* and *Beach Episode*, the latter of which also received a DS release. A recent post by the band's lead hints that there might be a Sherry CD-ROM N64 port on its way, too.



OasisLtd. hydrodipped GBAs for OasisLtd. Mixtape #1 (From OasisLtd. on Bandcamp)

The cartridge album market has notably been pretty saturated with vaporwave, largely thanks to OasisLtd., a label that's been on hiatus for a while. Before it went on hiatus, the label frequently released albums for the GBA, the PS2, and even the Dreamcast. Most impressively, however, OasisLtd. occasionally bundled entire custom consoles with their albums. These were hydro-dipped to match the album covers, which is kind of ridiculous: you could literally order a



The first Detroit-style pizza album (From Belushi Speed Ball on Bandcamp)

Liminal Cove by Be Careful-themed custom GBA system along with its album cartridge.

In more recent years, artists from outside the electronic scene have branched out into the weird underground of cartridge releases. *ch point's* *Alex GBA* was made possible by Gizzmoix, a German label that's put out a handful of DS cartridge releases, including a King Gizzard & the Lizard Wizard album as well as several screamo and emo projects.

There's also apparently quite a few cartridge releases happening in the metal scene. I'm not a big metal person, but it is pretty cool that the gimmicky metal band Party Cannon is releasing their upcoming album *Subjected To A Partying* on N64, seemingly following in the footsteps of fellow metal band Belushi Speed Ball's releases on the N64 as well as the GBA, SNES, and Sega CD. (Belushi Speed Ball has also released an album on pizza by sealing a slice in resin and attaching a speaker with a play button to it. That's obviously not a console, but it feels impossible to not mention.)

But nobody has been more committed to experimenting with cartridge releases than Remute, a German techno DJ who's seemingly the god of weird music release formats. After he released an album on a floppy disk to widespread publicity, he began what I'm assuming is some twisted mission to release albums on every possible console, computer, and OS: the Commodore C64, the Sega Dreamcast, MS-DOS, and the Atari Jaguar, to name a few.

Okay, So How The Hell Does This Work?

It's admittedly hard to trace the history of physical album releases for game consoles, but it seems like the cartridge album scene kicked off in the late 2010s, likely coinciding with the availability of easier modding tools. It's still gaining steam now, and it seems like artists are finding it especially easy to release albums on DS cartridges after Nintendo finally moved on to a new generation of consoles and stopped policing the DS piracy and modding scenes so heavily.

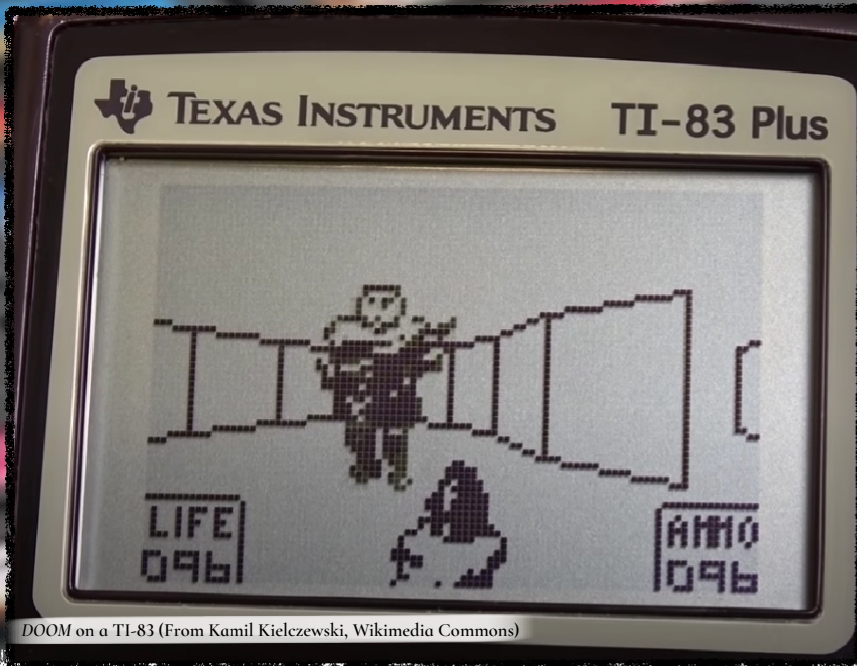
There's a different process for every console. DS releases, arguably the most common, are most often made with flashcards and custom ROMs. Netlink's FAQ amusingly notes that its albums will appear as *Deep Labyrinth*, a game notorious for its role in the homebrew scene, and that "this cannot be changed sadly."

Some of these albums just appear as bare-bones tracklists similar to the UI you'd see on an early iPod. In cases of more modding-oriented artists like Remute, they're bound to the constraints of the cartridge. Remute's SNES album *The Cult Of Remute*, for example, uses the system's sound chip itself to generate the music in real time. In an interview with Bandcamp, the artist described his process as "more like coding than making music."

With newer consoles, artists have more freedom to have fun with the visuals. Sherry CD-ROM's GBA release of *Beach Episode*, for example, features lyrics for all its songs and even a music video. But regardless of how elaborate these releases are, it's always really endearing to see an album played somewhere where it isn't supposed to be.

Good Friction

I've been thinking a lot about the principle of good friction, or the idea of making things intentionally inconvenient to slow users down and allow them to engage meaningfully. This is something I've tried to incorporate in my life more this year. I even got a Brick, one of those pricy little squares that you have to actually walk to and tap your phone on before unlocking social media, to put some artificially positive friction between



DOOM on a TI-83 (From Kamil Kielczewski, Wikimedia Commons)



DOOM on a vape (From Aaron Christopher, PCMag)

myself and social media.

Now that social media is on its way out, there is maybe no process in my life less frictionless than the way I engage with music. As someone who was consistently a member of the 120,000+ Minutes on Spotify Wrapped Club, I found myself listening to music so often that it lost meaning.

And the fact that Spotify's UI is genuinely designed to eliminate any and all friction through algorithmic curation certainly doesn't help. Every time I open it, I'm encouraged to listen to one of several automatically generated mixes (or that horrible AI DJ) based on my listening habits. Clicking on one of those mixes means I'm missing out on more intentional modes of engagement with music: flipping through a crate of records to decide what put on, tuning into a radio station at 1 p.m. to hear my favorite DJ, or curating and downloading a playlist on an iPod to take on a long walk.

It's no coincidence that these more intentional methods are all associated with the past, by the way. Massive tech companies like Spotify want to eliminate intention in favor of convenience, which leads to more frequent usage and profit.

However, near the end of 2025, there was somewhat of a mass exodus from Spotify. After the platform ran ads for ICE recruitment and its CEO donated millions to an AI military startup, quite a few users ditched the platform entirely.

Obviously, fuck Spotify for the above reasons. But stepping away for these reasons has also become a more personal reminder of the fact that it feels so, so good to listen to music intentionally.

To me, cartridge albums are the perfect antidote to the Spotify problem. I'm not positing them as a complete and total replacement for streaming, obviously. There are way

more convenient formats of physical music (team iPod, anyone?) or other, more ethical platforms like Bandcamp, and only a handful of artists have dared to release albums on cartridges so far. But they are the most fun antidote.

There's just something so goofy about wanting to listen to an album on a console it should not run on. It's like how everybody wants to run *DOOM* on fridges and pregnancy tests or whatever. Unlike algorithms, humans are relentlessly curious about breaking the rules. Can we run an album on the Wii? How many years away from the first Nintendo Switch album are we? And when is someone going to finally let me play a sad indie folk album on the DS?

But beyond its novelty, the cartridge album microtrend is unexpectedly prosocial. A lot of these physical releases are made by DIY communities — programmers, graphic designers, visual artists, and musicians — who probably wouldn't team up otherwise. And quite a few of these artists, like *ch point*, often choose to donate all profits.

Similarly, since these cartridges don't need to be mass-produced like vinyl, they allow smaller artists to venture into the world of physical releases without taking on too much of a financial risk. There's also a general culture of uplifting smaller artists in these communities. For example, pre-hiatus *OasisLtd.* stuck to platforming albums by artists who had very few listeners on streaming platforms.

I really don't blame anyone who's still attached to streaming. Convenience is really, really nice sometimes! But introducing little inconveniences like cartridge albums into your life makes media consumption more intentional, ethical, and meaningful. Friction every once in a while is good. And, above all else, popping a cartridge album into a console is a really beautiful reminder of what it felt like to be a 12-year-old going through all the steps of downloading a song you really cared about onto your shiny new DS.



TRADE OFFER

You get:

One (1) packet of seeds

We get:

Hot pictures of your alluring alliums

Seed Packet

In our gloomy corner of the American Midwest, spring hasn't quite sprung yet, but that doesn't mean we can't hasten it along through sheer willpower alone.

Every Back Alley Games subscriber is near and dear to our hearts, which is why we're sending you onions. Please plant them wherever you see fit then send us pictures of what you did (or didn't) manage to grow with them. We just may print them in our next issue. That's right, your beautiful alliums and/or failed patches of dirt will be famous!

Send all pictures to us at backalley@indiecitygames.org with "Onions" in the subject line and whatever message strikes your fancy - though please let us know where you are in the world and what you'd like us to call you.



BLEEDING TREES & BALLET

Disempowering societal expectations and finding meaning through play

By Jonah Lillioja

For years, I have thought about moving to the countryside. Don't get me wrong, I love the city. I love my friends here, the ICG community, Do-Rite Donuts, my swim team, and the lake. I love the walkability, the seasons, the CTA. But there is a force in the city that weighs me down. A force that until recently I had blamed on living in a metropolitan area. A weight I suspect we all feel. I am referring to *the churn* – the hustle and bustle, the work work work – that seems to define much of the American experience.

In my (probably) naive mind, the countryside is somewhat divorced from that churn. It's a fantastical place of nature and play where I could live my ultimate Stardew Valley fantasy. At least that has been my experience of the Australian countryside where much of my extended family lives.

As a chronically part-time and self-employed individual, I do not work a traditional 9-5, but that does not mean I am protected against the churn. Living in the city, I constantly compare myself to my colleagues with more traditional jobs and in that comparison, I never feel like I'm working hard enough. Hell, even independent of that comparison I fear I'm not working hard enough. When your survival is on the line, it's a hard feeling to escape.

In the past I blamed this feeling on urban life, and this year, I decided enough was enough. Why do I have to move to the countryside to find my peace? There must be other ways to escape the churn, other means of withstanding its current. And there are. I found them through developing an intentional relationship with place, one where I play more within my environment.

The first step was to disempower societal expectations of how I should behave. These expectations are artificial rules that make life way more boring and limit my experience in the city. Am I, a fully-grown man, supposed to climb a tree in the park? Maybe not, but it's not hurting anyone and it's really not that serious. Fuck what others are doing or what I feel like I'm supposed to do.

The seed of that disempowering was planted by my swim team. We frequently swim in the lake during the summer, which feels...not

allowed? I'm often a bit embarrassed jumping into the water in my little Speedo amongst the many non-swimmers walking along the lakefront. But every time I get out of the water, I feel so empowered and connected to this place – to the lake, to the city, to the seasons, to all those swimmers before me and to those ahead.

But this idea of connecting to place through play really began to take root early last winter. During a walk through a cemetery, I found a persimmon tree absolutely loaded with ripe fruit. My thoughts went like this:

Is it okay to pick them? Surely, I'm not allowed, they must be for...all the ghosts? That can't be right. What if I just picked one? Surely no one would notice. Oh wow, they're really ripe and – Wow, that's tasty. Okay, maybe just a few more. What if I bring some back? I should probably pick enough to make something, or at least enough to share with my downstairs neighbors.

As I loaded my arms with fresh persimmons and snow began to fall, I thought about how I was in the graveyard, really in this place, engaging with a single tree, giggling as my fingers got sticky with juice and cold in the frost. What a fun way to exist in this place. Sorry to the ghosts my joy may have offended.

I later used the fruit to bake a dessert for my friends and couldn't help but think about how if life were a video game, graveyard-persimmon bread pudding would offer one hell of a stat boost.

Moving into this year, I wanted to tap a maple tree. I have wanted to tap a tree for years. People have drunk the sap of random trees for thousands of years when the days are warm and the nights are cold, but it always felt out of reach to me, like some kind of riddle. But not this year. Not anymore.

During the first warm week of February, some spirit moved through me and inspired me into action, as if yelling: "This is your window! The trees bleed now!"

I grabbed a drill, my spile, and a hammer. I prepared my sap container – a lemonade pitcher wrapped in my old roommate's abandoned macrame string – went outside to a tree I knew was a maple and made my move. I was equal parts thrilled and embarrassed. Here I was, drilling into the trunk of a parkway maple and hammering in a small metal tube all to drink its sweet blood.

No one does this. Surely everyone knows I'm breaking some rule I've never heard of.

But the new me, the one post-disempowerment, is okay with feeling embarrassed and scared. Trying new things will often feel embarrassing and scary, but that's a part of the process. Once I let those feelings move through me, the world of possibility really opened up.

I quickly realized that this level of play wasn't just limited to my natural environment, although it is the one I'm more easily drawn to. Chicago has endless opportunities to explore cultural practices – classes, concerts, stores, clubs, hobby groups, and more.

I started taking ballet classes a few weeks ago. I'm absolutely terrible. I'm one of two guys in the class and I move like a brick. I'm having so much fun.

This month I plan to take a stained glass class and I'm making garden beds out of old wooden pallets to go in my Wrigleyville building's yard.

Besides that, I'm also working on getting access to my roof in the spring for some morning yoga. I need a ladder (and an abundance of caution) but I *know* you can go up there.

Some of these ideas might seem obvious if you're someone who still has their childhood sense of play. For those of us that get swept up in the never-ending current of work, though, we forget. Deadlines creep in, work starts piling up, and we focus on chipping away at the pile of stuff that begs for our attention. But that pile never stops growing. Never.

If you're exhausted or want a break, you need to carve out that space for yourself, because that pile of work isn't going to vouch for you and your innate need to be a human fucking being.

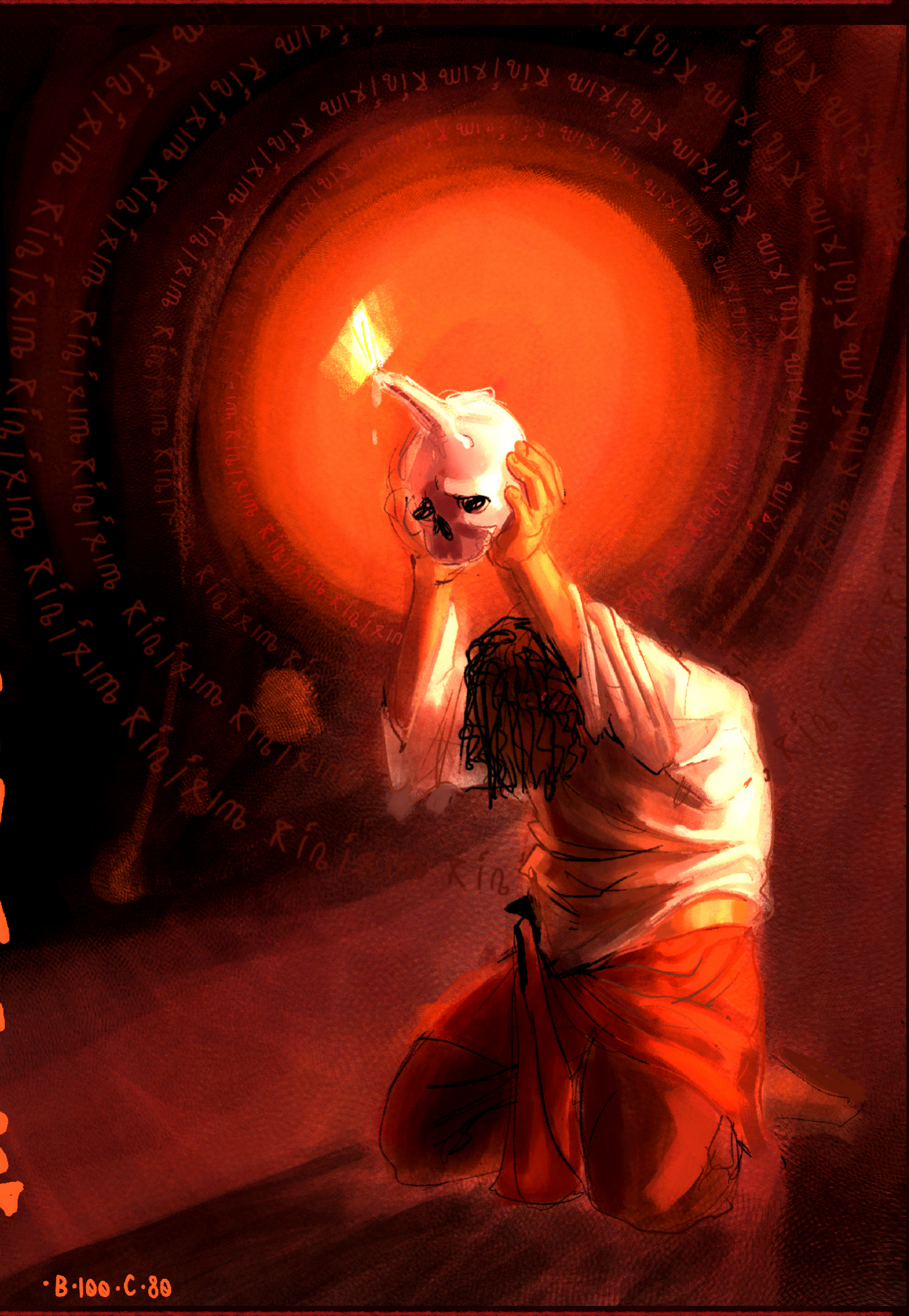
When we sink beneath the surface of jobs, deadlines, and expectations, we start to lose touch with the most human parts of ourselves. But they're never truly out of reach. Even if we have to reach out over and over again, it will always be a joy to rediscover all the ways we can simply exist exactly where we are.





АДЫ-САЛА-АӨЗ-АРА-СЫК

• B-100 • C-80





ABYSSAL COBRA



Proclamation of Faith

A desperate, exhausted and relenting prostration to everything he was taught to avoid; the Occultist finally submits to the desire of seeking out hidden truths. In this, he hasn't rejected Islam but fearfully welcomes an evolution of his understanding of it.

• B-100 • C-80



A GAME ENGINE TAROT READING

Spring is here, and with it comes change. Not just for us — you are reading a brand spanking new magazine, after all — but for you, too. Whether or not those changes are for the better, though, only time will tell.

But if you're impatient, we've got some hints.

Tarot isn't an exact science, but we communed with some local lake spirits and figured out how to do readings for many of the game engines that you, our dear readers, may use to make your projects.

Disclaimer: Back Alley Games is not responsible for any maimings, misfortune, or changes in game engine that may result from these readings.



XI

Unity Nine of Cups, reversed

Lack of inner joy, smugness, dissatisfaction

Your path has been a hard one, and while you may have reached a period where you think you should be fulfilled, something feels like it's missing. This might outwardly appear as smugness or a desire for attention, recognition, and success. Your desires may be never-ending. Stop moving the goal posts and take time to appreciate what you've made and where you are. Don't let insecurity or a lack of confidence keep your sense of accomplishment forever in the future.

Shift your thinking: Find fulfillment within, not in external excess



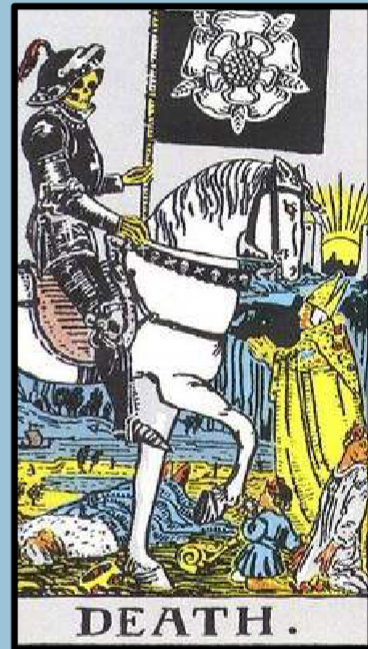
IX

Unreal Nine of Swords, upright

Anxiety, hopelessness, trauma

The suit of swords explores themes of the mind, logic, and intelligence. The Nine of Swords focuses on the destructive side of the mind, the side that turns inward and against itself. You are living in a period of repetition, with negative patterns coming back again and again. Find a way to get out of your mind. Try sharing your problems with someone else who might understand the issue.

Shift your thinking: Be brave and act, despite your anxiety



DEATH.

GameMaker Death, upright

Ending of a cycle, beginnings, change

Death is feared by many because it represents an ending, but it also represents a moment of transition between one world and the next. It is also a card of new beginnings. As much as death destroys, it also creates. Sometimes things must die in order to be reborn.

Shift your thinking: Loss can open the doorway for a new beginning



TTRPG

Eight of Swords, reversed

Self-acceptance, new perspectives, freedom

When reversed, the Eight of Swords suggests freedom from the traps of your own mind. While mental pitfalls like fear and shame may lie all around you, you have found a way out simply by looking up. The light of possibility empowers you to new heights.

Shift your thinking: New truths can guide you to deeper understanding and acceptance

Godot

Six of Wands, upright

Victory, success, public reward

The day belongs to you! You and your achievements are in the spotlight. You have arrived here through hard work, and you deserve to be celebrated. Be careful that your ego does not rest on your laurels, though. There is much more work ahead.

Shift your thinking: Your successes are worth celebrating in moderation

Folk Games

Queen of Pentacles, reversed
Self-centeredness, jealousy, smothering

The Queen reversed is disconnected from her nurturing energy and has become self-absorbed. Usually generous, she feels jealous when others' successes seem greater than hers. Once a sanctuary for others, she's lost the ability to take care of herself and her surroundings. Her focus on the material may manifest negatively, making her greedy.

Shift your thinking: Honor your own needs and compassionately practice self-care

Board & Card Games

Five of Cups, upright
Loss, grief, disappointment

The Five of Cups signals loss in some manner, and you are dealing with all those feelings – regret, disappointment, and grief. In time you will notice that while some cups have spilled, others remain upright and salvageable. Do not hold on to something that must go, for that is the source of all suffering. Accept and work with what you still have to find peace.

Shift your thinking: Disappointments shouldn't make you afraid of dreaming big

Seems like a tough season across the board. We're all dealing with issues of the mind and spirit, and the overwhelming advice here is to let go of expectations. Take a beat to look around, acknowledge, and appreciate where you are, how far you've come, and what you still have to look forward to.

It's okay to mourn where you wanted to be, but don't throw a pity party. Lean on your friends for support and when you're ready, get back on the horse.



**GET BUSY
"GUD"ING
OR GET
BUSY
DYING
OVER
AND
OVER**



[deleted] OP •

Sounds like someone needs to Git Gud



Accessibility in the FromSoftware Souls series and beyond

By Jesse Boruff

Code Vein 2 came out recently to very middling (and sometimes scathing) reviews. Complaints about lack of difficulty, less than engaging story, and an empty open world dominated online conversation. That felt a little confusing, as I enjoyed the short 50 hours I spent with the game. So much so that it became one of the only open world games I'm interested in replaying. The discrepancy between my experience and online chatter had to be interrogated, so I cracked my knuckles and began overthinking and analyzing.

For as long as the series has been a thing, *Dark Souls* and its spiritual successors have led the conversation around difficulty. Whether the conversation is held in bad faith or not, any Soulsborne fanatic will tell you the highest barrier of entry for the series is difficulty, after which you'll likely hear any number of stock community in jokes. More often than not that joke will be "git gud," a meme that originated in the early era of *Souls'* popularity.

It's an interesting phrase that I've interrogated often throughout my adult life. *Dark Souls* came into my life at a time when I needed it, where the game's struggle and darkness felt like what I was experiencing in real life. The pain of my flesh space eased when Smough flattened me with a hammer or a Black Knight shunted me off a narrow walkway with a brisk kick.

Conventional wisdom says that absurd punishment is part of the experience of a Soulslike, is baked into the DNA of the genre. But does it have to be? In playing *Code Vein 2*, an experience that felt worlds more accessible than other Soulslikes, I came to realize that the whole conversation about difficulty is misguided. Instead of talking about whether the difficulty is necessary, we should take a look at the tools given to the player that allow them to tailor the experience in a way that suits them. We need to look at accessibility.

Sliders and sacred rings

For as long as I've been playing the *Souls* games – which is from the very beginning, mind you – there's been community pushback on the idea of developers making the genre easier. These people claim that adding a difficulty slider would completely devastate the experience. And while I disagree with those people, I'm not exactly arguing for one simple slider. Humor me and let's take a detour for a beat.

Bravely Default is a fantastic JRPG from the 3DS era with numerous characters, classes and areas to explore. Besides that stuff, one thing it does spectacularly is the difficulty menu, which contains a set of customizable parameters that adjust every part of the experience. You can adjust random encounters, turning them off or exponentially increasing the rate of them (to a ridiculous degree). You can even increase your experience gain, introducing a multiplier or completely turning it off.

Now, some folks just flat-out dislike turn-based games, and their sometimes-notorious lack of direction does create friction. Yet one thing I've found in numerous contemporary RPGs is the ability for players to

adjust their experience to near-exact specifications. Maybe this domain holds the answers to all Soulslikes' problems.

Many modern RPGs kindly offer massive pallets of accessibility options to adjust and tune the experience, but many of those options in Soulslikes are sparse, and what ones do exist are often diegetically (and cryptically) hidden from players who may need them from the outset of the experience.

FromSoftware is notorious for including almost no accessibility features in their games, but *Dark Souls 2*, the most obtuse and, frankly, unfair game of the trilogy, is weirdly full of almost player-friendly accessibility systems.

That game introduced the Blue Phantom ring, which summons an actual player to your world to help you when you're invaded by another player. It's an incredibly useful tool when the servers are active, softening the PvP for those who dislike or struggle with the system. It's a really great inclusion, yet it's an accessibility feature you have to be given in-game to activate. It also uses a ring slot, a purposefully limiting trade-off. And while, yes, the Blue Phantom ring is so easy to acquire that I believe

Config

Difficulty	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Destination Marker	On
Gain EXP	Yes
Acquire PG	Yes
Gain Job Points	Yes
Difficulty	Normal
Encounter Rate	-50%
Restore Defaults	

Bravely Default difficulty options (Image from GzameUIDatabase)

to display destination markers.

anyone could do it, I've also bore witness to players who approached their 40th hour with the game unaware the crestfallen knight who gives you the ring was even in Majula, the hub town.

Another accessibility feature in *Dark Souls 2* concerns runback. Say you have to keep running to a boss, and you've killed the enemies in the area 10 times. After that tenth run, the foes will stop spawning, making runback much less stressful. It also brought back healing items, something *Dark Souls* restricted to the Estus Flask and to a highly coveted resource called Humanity. Making the game more difficult was a breeze too, with the Bonfire Ascetic increasing the difficulty of enemies in a given area to New Game+ levels.

That's right, if we're going to have this conversation, it has to go both ways. Blue Phantoms could be a menu option or a covenant players could select at player creation, and for my SL1 naked, club run sickos (I love y'all), hard modes like *Demon's Souls* black world tendency wouldn't be locked behind throwing yourself off a cliff 20 times. Accessibility goes in two directions, and that means also giving the hardcore community boss rush modes, the ability to adjust damage multipliers, or the capability to stop receiving souls for enemy kills. Oh, how many speedrun sessions and challenge live streams would have their setup time reduced if these games were just more accessible.

Finally addressing the tourists in the room

Dark Souls 2, being the first entry not helmed by the series director, one Hidetaka Miyazaki, played with a lot of what made the previous two entries into the series so difficult. Miyazaki himself must have appreciated these additions, as many of its accessibility features have made their way into his following titles in some form.

When you look at *what* the team kept through the years, though, it's clear there's been some effort by this dev team to create a more welcoming and fair game for all their players. However, many of those efforts have been contained to a few very narrow categories.

Many of the accessibility tools given to the player in the FromSoftware *Souls* series center around online play, rightfully so. Being invaded can feel completely random and unfair at times, especially when that invader is someone of higher skill. Accessibility tools make the one being invaded feel like they have the upper hand, though they oftentimes do not. However, there are almost no options to make the game's PvE content easier.

Obviously strengthening the player character and outfitting them in the best and most effective arms and armor is the answer. Yet I must point out the obvious: a brand-new player is still going to slam themselves on the rocks for quite some time until they acquire any truly worthwhile gear. Sadly, there isn't a Bonfire Ascetic that works in the opposite direction.

One solution is offered by *Another Crab's Treasure*, a 2024 indie Soulslike, which adopted the RPG approach with menu options allowing the player to don armored shells that make them invulnerable, among other things. You can even give Kril a gun, which both sends him flying and spits out an insta-kill bullet that dispatches anything in the game, including bosses.

Another solution is found in the Code Vein series in partner characters and party members. They constantly accompany the player, watch their back, draw enemy aggression, and often have fun things to say while exploring the world.

Elden Ring almost mimics that system with the spirit summons, a massive list of NPC summons that can help the player out of a jam, though they are oddly restricted to certain areas of the map. They mostly act as fodder, although there are a few summons that can truly pull their own weight alongside the player, such as the Mimic Tear, referred to jokingly by the "git gud" crowd as "*Elden Ring* easy mode."

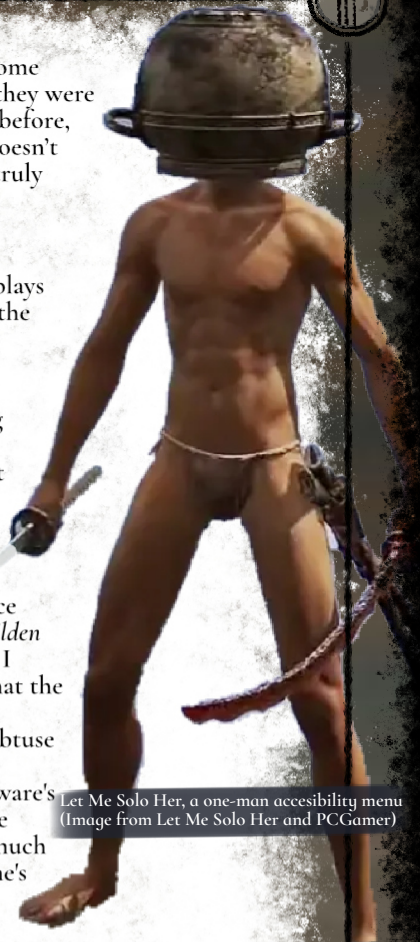
Due to the nature of *Elden Ring* as a more open world experience, it naturally becomes the most accessible entry in the *Souls* series. The ability to leave a boss area to go explore and get stronger alone is a big change. The NPC helpers help too, lowering player tension and acting as the kind of assistance a player needs to build confidence to interface with the game

and overcome obstacles they were unable to before, but that doesn't mean it's truly accessible.

My father regularly plays *Diablo* on the hardest difficulty, which, depending on the build, ain't too bad. Yet I was confused watching him bounce right off *Elden Ring* until I realized that the diegetic, possibly-obtuse nature of FromSoftware's titles made grasping much of the game's concepts and systems an overwhelming prospect for him.

I do realize I'm dragging this conversation out of its muddy, shallow grave yet again seemingly just to beat its corpse with a stick, but I do have an aim here. Truthfully, I struggled for some time contemplating if I even wanted to write this article. At first, I had an admittedly contradictory opinion, believing games should be for everyone while simultaneously gatekeeping *Dark Souls* and its descendants. The fanboy in me felt like people who didn't even like the *Souls* games were coming in and trying to mold the series into something it wasn't. I even began to use the really nasty terms adopted by series purists, including the recently popular (and derogatory) "tourist."

In reality, though, many of these "tourists" really get down with the vibe, the mood, the aesthetic of the FromSoftware games, or at least they would if they had the time, motor skills or patience to enjoy them. Instead of completely writing those people off, the community could welcome them. After all, what's being lost if the barrier to entry was lowered just a little bit?



Let Me Solo Her, a one-man accessibility menu (Image from Let Me Solo Her and PCGamer)



Let me take you on one more detour to a pair of examples that were given to me as the impetus for this article.

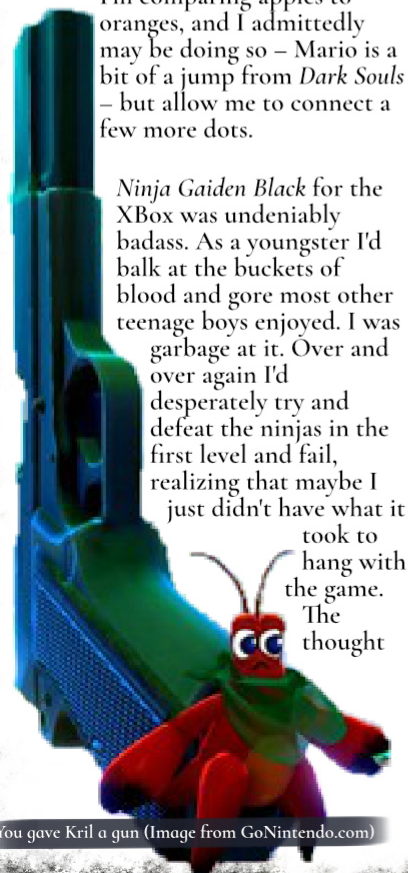
Tarnished Tanuki and Bloodborne Ninja Dogs

Super Mario 3D World was probably my favorite Mario game on the Wii U. My father and I played through the whole thing in a single weekend, and I often fondly look back at how much of a blast that experience was. Another thing I can clearly recall is the challenge. Certain levels were actually quite tricky, and there were times both of us would die enough for a specific and controversial feature to appear: the Golden Tanuki suit.

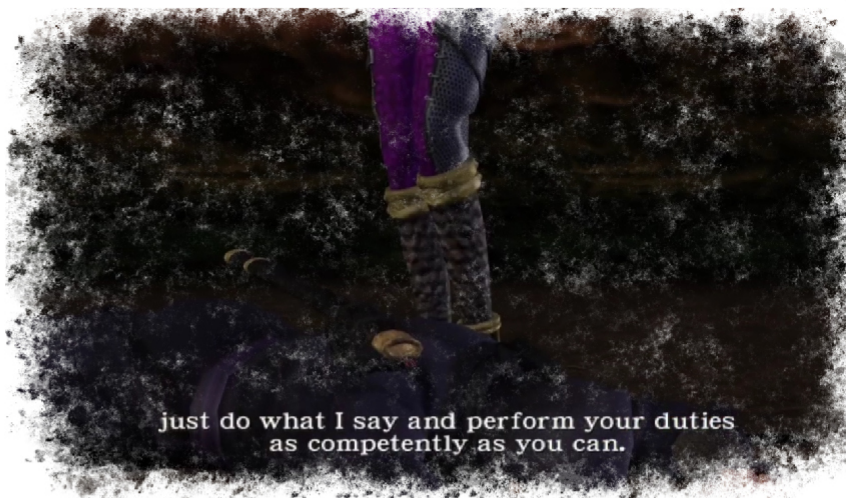
This power-up, which makes players near-invulnerable, would appear at the beginning of levels after the player had lost enough lives. I would be a liar if I said I never tried it out, and it does fill you with a bit of little brother syndrome, almost like you've been handed an unplugged controller while someone effortlessly autopilots their way through all the difficult parts for you. While yes, you are still maneuvering your chosen plumber/princess/mushroom mutant through the level and the levels don't lock, allowing replays, it does still feel like a cheat. This example might seem like

I'm comparing apples to oranges, and I admittedly may be doing so – Mario is a bit of a jump from *Dark Souls* – but allow me to connect a few more dots.

Ninja Gaiden Black for the Xbox was undeniably badass. As a youngster I'd balk at the buckets of blood and gore most other teenage boys enjoyed. I was garbage at it. Over and over again I'd desperately try and defeat the ninjas in the first level and fail, realizing that maybe I just didn't have what it took to hang with the game. The thought



You gave Krill a gun (Image from GoNintendo.com)



Ninja Gaiden Black's Ninja Dog cutscene (Image from Mr. Riley's Gameroom on YouTube)

crushed me. I loved the aesthetic, the graphics, everything about the game enthralled me. As I continued my seemingly fruitless endeavor, dying once again, instead of the now-familiar "Game Over" screen, I was instead greeted by a hilarious (albeit embarrassing) popup message: "Ninja Dog difficulty Unlocked."

Ninja Gaiden, notorious for its ridiculous difficulty, threw easy mode at me and said: "Alright dude, you obviously can't use the tools we gave you to make things easier, but you still bought the game. We'll throw you a bone." From there it wasn't exactly smooth sailing, the game had tweaked things *just enough* for me to eke out wins, but it was still brutally hard.

I wasn't asking to be held by the hand, but the simple act from the developers of extending a very blatant helping hand to a struggling player made me a lifelong fan of the series. I was even one of the few people that played *Ninja Gaiden 3* at launch.

At the end of the day, it didn't matter whether it was Mario or *Ninja Gaiden*; both games gave me accessibility tools, unobscured by excuses like diegesis or "maintaining a baseline experience for all players," and allowed me to enjoy the game at more enjoyable pace. Besides, what business is it of yours that I used the Golden Tanuki or played on *Ninja Dog*?

To be clear, FromSoftware can make their games however they want. But what would be the harm in their own *Ninja Dog* mode or adjustable enemy damage modifiers? With the dev

studio looking toward a future that includes what I assume is an extraction-Soulslike in *Duskbloods*, I wonder firstly if the game can maintain a player base on a Nintendo platform alone and secondly, if things continue to change for FromSoftware, what does their identity become?

The studio has built up plenty of brand loyalty based on difficulty alone, but that core group of fans tends to be resistant to inevitable changes in format. They would rather cry "git gud" than open their arms to new players that can't or won't rise to the games' challenges. That kind of "hardcore gamers only" mentality makes it so that these fandoms can't meaningfully grow.

Of course, some would ask, why cater to those who aren't interested in meeting the game where it is? The obvious answer is that FromSoftware wants to make more money, but I have a different one: the stories are *good*. These worlds *need* to be seen. Some of the most profound and interesting musings on life, death, and a million other things exist within these titles. The more accessible said titles are, the more players get to experience the unmatched storytelling of the series. From *Demon's Souls* to *Bloodborne* and everything after, I'll eagerly be there, awaiting their next masterpiece. It'd be pretty damn cool if the crowd waiting with me was even bigger than it already is. *Ninja Dogs* included.



Coraroc capsule art on (Photo: Coral Feather on Steam)

DEV LOG: CORAROC

By Coral Feather

Coraroc is an upcoming platformer developed by Coral Feather. With retro graphics and a classically sparse control scheme, this one is for platformer purists. - Back Alley Editors

Coraroc is for those who are looking for a streamlined retro gaming experience. It is primarily a platformer where you've got your run, your jump, and your swing. That's it. They're all you need! The stages do the rest of the work, challenging you to use your limited arsenal in the best way possible to proceed.

I've been using the term "back-to-basics platformer" as my quick description of the game.

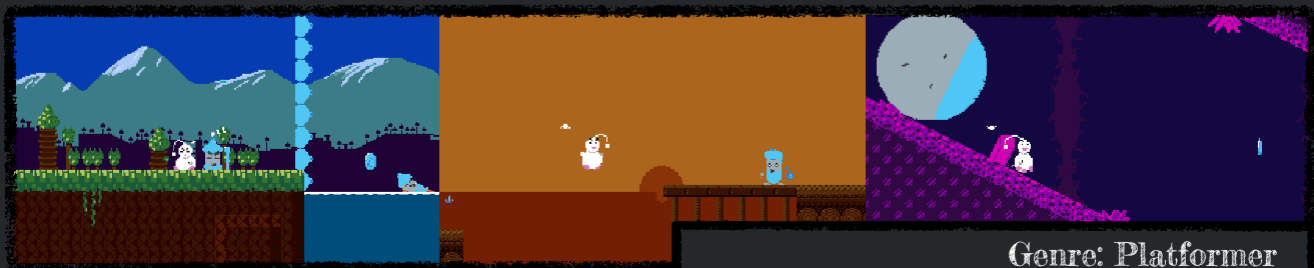
Coraroc started, as many things do, as a stray notebook doodle in summer 2024. I kept doodling him. Coraroc had more moves and powers in the beginning. But as I was setting this all up, I questioned the "why" of it all. Was I including them because I felt they would make the game better, or because I felt obligated to?

This is where the "back-to-basics" platforming philosophy comes in. I guess you can say Coraroc is a reaction to the current trend of platformers. When I start a platformer and I find that I need to keep an eye on a combo or juggle several inputs, I get a little tired.

What Coraroc may lack in moves, I aimed to make up for in personality. Coraroc, of course, is a charismatic fella and no one has ever said a bad word about him. I had a lot of fun designing the enemies, the Pacicaps, and making them as silly, stupid, and pathetic as possible.

It has been nearly two years since I started working on Coraroc. Wow! It would have been shorter had it not been for some life events and unexpected setbacks in getting the game ready for the public – but I am excited to see it through to the end!

Whether Coraroc is a smash hit or lost to the algorithm is beside the point. I have no expectations; I only do what I feel is right. I don't plan to have this be the only story for Coraroc. It can't be. He's been in my head for too long. Help! He is eating out of my fridge.



Coraroc gameplay screenshots(Photo: Coral Feather on Steam)

Genre: Platformer
 Developer: Coral Feather
 Release/Platform: March 12, 2026/PC



THE LEG SOMM

The highs, lows, and
for Chicago summ



IMAGINATION AND HOPEFUL FUTURE SIMULATION LEGENDS

By D. Myerscough



When it comes to independently developed simulation games, a name that comes up often is SomaSim. The Chicago-based studio has been at it for over 10 years, and in the wake of a less-than-satisfying launch, they're looking for a new direction.

The studio's major success began with *Project Highrise*, their second effort. Partially inspired by the founders' time living amongst the skyscrapers of the Chicago Loop, the game garnered a loyal fanbase and positive critical attention.

Matt Viglione, lead designer at SomaSim, said that the response to that game was gratifying, with the team spending the first three months almost entirely on engaging with their new players.

"Those couple of months post-release were a lot of fun," Viglione said. "That time went a long way to building up a lot of goodwill."

That goodwill carried over into the team's next project but stalled out somewhat when they came back for round four. *Rise of Industry 2* is still SomaSim's most recent release, leading both to the studio's restructuring and a split with their longtime publisher, Kasedo Games.

About the development process, release, and aftermath of *Rise of Industry 2*, Viglione was succinct: "The whole thing was fucked."

Projects on the rise

In contrast to the current situation, picturesque beginnings heralded the studio's early success. *1849*, their first offering, is a city manager set during the California gold rush. Partners Viglione and Robert Zubek conceptualized the game while driving back from Thanksgiving at a friend's house in the Sierra Nevadas.

Players are tasked with creating and managing a booming mining town in an isometrically-rendered California that resembles early PC management games like the *Oregon Trail* series. Viglione said that the game was

deliberately retro, an attempt to recapture the kinds of games the two fell in love with as children.

"When you drive up there, you drive through the areas that were major gold mining towns in the 1850s," Viglione said. "I was looking at all this stuff and I'm like; there's a game out there in those hills."

Development began quickly after the pair returned to San Francisco. They funded *1849* themselves, intending to complete the game within a year, more out of necessity than anything else.

"The first game we wanted to make was actually *Project Highrise*, but that was going to take two years to make," Viglione said. "And I looked at our bank account. There wasn't two years of money there."

Before making the transition to indie game development full time, Viglione worked in marketing in Catholic Charities in San Francisco. He has an exacting eye and a cutting sense of humor that leaves the listener never quite sure what he'll say next.

Upon release, the pair was unsure if they would have the runway to make another game but found themselves so inspired after their recent move to Chicago that they gave it a go anyway.

Project Highrise began as a conceptual reboot of *SimTower*, an idea so obvious that Viglione was concerned another team would beat them to it. After completing a majority of the project, SomaSim began speaking to publishers, eventually landing on Kasedo Games, an offshoot of Kalypso Media, the publisher responsible for the *Dungeons* series.

For the publisher, *Project Highrise* was their first major project. For SomaSim, it was a lifeline.

"None of us got paid when we were making *Highrise*," Viglione said. "We were all barely coasting off *1849*, and when that first check from the publisher came for *Project Highrise*, we really needed it."

Because of the precarious financial situation that *Project Highrise* was developed under, Viglione said the team always had the feeling that the project may be their last. That desperation, he said, may be what sold the publisher on the game.

What sold audiences on it, however, was the classic *SimTower* elements combined with an easy to learn, hard to master gameplay loop. After its PC launch, the game would be ported to tablet and mobile devices at the behest of the publisher.

Viglione said the process took a year and required SomaSim to redesign the user interface of *Project Highrise* five times in order to accommodate the play styles and limitations of the different platforms. That harrowing process is not one that he would recommend, but he stands behind the final result.

"At first, I didn't want to do a mobile game," Viglione said. "But I'm a game designer, and as soon as I stopped fighting the problem and started embracing the challenge, things got better."

SomaSim's next offering would be *City of Gangsters*, another management game predicated on the idea of playing as Al Capone's accountant. The game is a mix of a social and physical economy where players have to create social bonds in order to make and spend resources.

"It was sort of this idea of how you had to know a guy or gal to get stuff done during Prohibition," Viglione said. "It's a combination of a physical economy and a social economy and the gameplay occurs at the nexus of those two things. They have to grow together."

This project would not reach the same success as *Project Highrise* but was still able to create more opportunities for growth as a studio and court a devoted fanbase.

Up until this point, SomaSim had been a small team, made up mainly of Viglione, Zubek, and a few artists. Because of that size, the team operated mostly on a revenue share model that linked the hours spent working on the game to the percentage of profit the team member would receive after launch.

"It was my arrival that kind of broke that model," Gabriel Firmo, lead engineer at SomaSim, said.

Toward the end of the development process on *City of Gangsters*, Firmo, a recent Northwestern University graduate and a former student of Zubek's, was brought on as a full-time, salaried employee.

Firmo is an upbeat figure made up of contradictions, with smiling eyes positioned under perpetually furrowed brows. When asked about his history as a developer, he sped past much of his early life and focused instead on a student game he said was an "absolute nightmare," but convinced him that pursuing game development was the right path for him.

The meeting between Viglione and Firmo was one the two treat like an odd stroke of fate, with Viglione calling Firmo "annoying" in one joking breath and arguing over who was most lucky over his hiring at SomaSim in the next.

Once *City of Gangsters* launched, the team created five DLC packs and then moved on to conceptualizing and pitching their next project, originally intended to be a post-Soviet sendup of a city rebuilding game.

"We pitched it to Kasedo and like the next day, they came back with an answer saying they thought it was too grim," Viglione said, rolling his eyes. "They said, why don't you make *Rise of Industry 2* for us?"

Industrial revolution and its pitfalls

In 2015, another management game was being developed by a small team of independent developers: *Rise of Industry*. Alex Mochi, the head of now-defunct Dapper Penguin Studios, said in a YouTube video that he began developing the game with "a couple of nice guys from reddit," before shifting his focus to itch.io and Steam. By the end of the game's life span, he said he had 20 employees on his payroll.

Partway through this process, Mochi signed a deal with Kalypso Media consisting of a \$75,000 advance and a 50/50 revenue split with the publisher until they recovered \$100,000. He described that deal in his video as "fair," but goes on to characterize the relationship between Dapper Penguin and Kalypso (then Kasedo Games) as strained, ultimately calling the deal a bad one.

Speaking to GamesIndustry.biz, Kasedo Games confirmed the details of the deal, but emphasized that it was "a licensing agreement in which the developer committed to secure all development funding and asked for a small advance."

Mochi would go on to claim that after *Rise of Industry* launched in 2019, the support from Kasedo Games evaporated, and that once the publisher had recouped their earnings, they funneled the money from *Rise of Industry* into other games like *Warhammer 40,000: Mechanicus*.

Kasedo Games also disputed those claims.

Once the relationship between Mochi and Kasedo Games surrounding *Rise of Industry* had well and truly broken down, Mochi claimed to have been over \$100,000 in debt, holding his game together with "duct tape and 80 hours a week." Eventually, he decided to sell the IP for *Rise of Industry* to the same publisher he said abandoned it.

In 2021, Mochi and Kasedo Games penned a deal that paid Dapper Penguin \$5,000 for the IP itself, then \$45,000 in advanced sales and royalties for the now four-year-old game. The publisher said in a statement to GamesIndustry.biz that they had not intended to buy the IP until Mochi approached them several times. The developer disputed that claim in a reddit thread, saying "I felt like I was being manipulated by my own publisher so I'd be forced to sell our existing IP."

Mochi would go on to publish another game under the Dapper Penguin name in conjunction with Kasedo Games, called *Recipe for Disaster*, before shuttering the studio and creating several postmortem videos and posts attempting to explain what went wrong.

When all was said and done, Kasedo

Games owned the code, assets, and all other aspects of *Rise of Industry*, setting about to make a sequel that Mochi said in another reddit post lacked "testing, polish, and any real marketing." That sequel, made without his input, several years after he had sold all rights to the IP, was created by a "new dev team," despite the fact he claimed to have pitched "a workable sequel" to Kasedo.

A "new" studio, an old IP

That "new dev team," of course, was SomaSim. They had been working with Kasedo Games for almost eight years by that point and had been handed the *Rise of Industry* IP and funds to create a sequel for the publisher.

Because of the level of investment, the publisher took a completely different approach with the development of this project than they had with SomaSim in the past. Viglione said that Kasedo Games funded a little bit of *City of Gangsters* but generally left the development process to the studio because the studio was self-funding their games.

"The thing that was most fundamentally different about *Rise of Industry 2* is that at the highest level, creative was not being driven by us exclusively," Firmo said. "In some moments, it was being driven really hard by Kasedo."

The increased publisher oversight led to a feeling Firmo described as being the developer of the game, but also not. Besides the initial pitch, Kasedo would, Viglione said, find problems with the game and instead of identifying them, would appear with multiple solutions to problems the development team didn't even know existed.

Another massive change was in scheduling. Both Viglione and Firmo stressed the importance of schedules to SomaSim's past processes, but that Kasedo would often cause the project



to lose large chunks of time by “attacking” the established development schedule.

About his meticulous, schedule-driven development philosophy, Viglione explained:

“When you’re making a game, you have time, cost, and scope. The only thing you can realistically change is scope. If you try to change any of the other ones, you get crunch. So, if it comes to it and the time and the cost do not allow it, it gets cut. And I like cutting.”

He also said that there was still almost no crunch with *Rise of Industry 2* because he refused to engage with the practice. Instead, there were many inscrutable schedule changes.

In one instance, Viglione said that the publisher approached the team nine months into development and asked if that version of the game was representative of the final product. When they were told that it obviously wasn’t because the development schedule spanned two and a half years, they insisted that team members be moved off their current projects in order to make the game ready to show.

“So we move things around and then I tell them that it cost us two months,” Viglione said. “They were like, what do you mean that cost us two months? Because it did.”

According to Viglione, there was a lot of focus on making the project slick, consumer-friendly, and accessible to new players. He said that the head of Kasedo wanted to be able to play and understand the game right away, but that “strangely, he is not a genre player.”

Compounding a development process Viglione and Firmo called weird was the departure of Zubek, who left the studio halfway through the process. In

the wake of that departure, Firmo was promoted to lead engineer in an instance he characterized as “a battlefield promotion.”

Where before Firmo was insulated from a lot of the chaos that meetings with Kasedo Games had become, now he was required to sit in and discuss endless milestones and deliverables that became less and less realistic the closer the launch date became.

“It very quickly became a game of musical chairs that basically no project could survive intact,” he said.

Nick McKay, another software engineer on the project, agreed with this assessment, saying: “The last few months were pretty stressful. The publisher basically went from almost ignoring the project to full micro-management. We were pushing through major features and revisions up until the ship date and past it.”

Features like the sandbox mode, which Firmo said was supposed to be developed closer to launch but was pushed forward at the behest of the publisher, launched in a much worse state than the team ever imagined. Worse were the two Steam Next Fests that the game was slated for, one they were only informed of a week in advance.

Firmo also seemed frustrated by the process of developing the console version of the game, something that was done in three iterations and that the team never planned for.

“Every time we started undergoing console work it would be interrupted by something, and it would not be interrupted by something that was an emergency that we could handle,” he said. “It would be interrupted by a nonnegotiable demand that was top down.”

In addition to all this, Firmo was also forced to leave the country during the development of *Rise of Industry 2*, a situation that resulted from him never attaining permanent legal status in the United States, despite having lived and attended school here for most of his life.

“We had basically timed it all out that I would go back to Brazil for a month around six months before release,” Firmo said. “And then I would come back on my green card, but that green

card failed for reasons of my lawyers not being very good at their jobs and also the U.S. government making the whole immigration process a hellish nightmare.”

While the studio adjusted in order to make it possible for Firmo to work remotely, the time difference and physical distance from the other members of the team put further stress on an already difficult development.

Then he was detained by CBP when attempting to reenter the country on a B-2 Visa, which is explicitly intended for foreign nationals traveling for short-term business reasons. Firmo was mocked by armed agents, kept in a windowless cell at O’Hare airport for hours, and was eventually returned to Brazil without his passport, which was confiscated by CBP and handed to the pilot of the plane.

Firmo was distressed while explaining this, speaking in a near-monotone and avoiding eye contact. He went on:

“They have me sign a document that they do not allow me to read and then they take all my things, my phone, my laptop. They forced me to give them the passwords so they could go through my stuff and they canceled my visa.

They made it so that it is very, very difficult for me to return to the U.S. or get any other visa approved in any other circumstance.”

Firmo let out a humorless laugh after that. “So that was the emotional context of what was going on with me three months before the release of *Rise of Industry 2*.”

With problems like that compounding by the day, Firmo and Viglione were concerned the game wouldn’t arrive on time. The former recounts a meeting where he sat down with Viglione and said that a single additional schedule change would lead to the team missing their planned release date.

Despite it all, on June 3, 2025, *Rise of Industry 2* launched to mixed reviews.

How (not) to market a game in 10 days

“For the past eight months or so, I’ve been postmorteming this in my head every time I can’t sleep or that I’m sitting on the L looking out the window,” Viglione said, looking away and sighing. “I’ve only recently started moving into the acceptance phase of the grieving process.”

Upon release, negative reviews of the game were focused mainly on technical issues like bugs and crashes and the differences between the first and second installments of the series.

About the technical side of things, Firmo laughed a little when he said that the game releasing was “a miracle,” and characterized the fact the game launched in a playable state at all as an “act of divine kindness.”

However, he is not without regrets. While he thinks the game is fun and has played it both on console and PC, there are issues with it that he wishes could have been addressed before launch.

Viglione was terser when he described the launch and the response from fans of the first *Rise of Industry*: “I’m never making a sequel again.”

More specifically, he intends to never touch the IP of another developer, especially one that he describes as having “an antagonistic relationship” with the publisher who owns that IP. Further, Viglione remarked that Kasedo did next to nothing to address their relationship with Mochi and the impact it could have on *Rise of Industry 2*.

“They entirely failed to anticipate what the response would be; and it was entirely expectable,” Viglione said. “I had asked them numerous times what we were doing on this front, and they basically just said to leave that with them.”

According to Viglione, simulation

games are always hard to market, doubly so when the game is a sequel. Kasedo, in his view, did almost nothing to prepare the game for release, a failure that created much of the initial backlash to the project.

He said that while there were many issues and hurt feelings around the release, he was ultimately happy with the game and assumed that the publisher was happy with it as well.

“I can’t really speak to their motives or what their thinking was, but they had a lot of opportunity at every milestone to tell us that this wasn’t the game they wanted or that they wanted to make significant changes,” Viglione said. “We never heard that.”

Firmo agrees that much of the marketing of the game was botched, but that players are responding more to unaddressed problems with the game than anything else.

“As much as I was happy with the game, it does reflect a troubled development cycle, and that comes through to players,” Firmo said.

Viglione pointed to the inertia of Steam reviews, saying that they tend toward negative unless the developer does something to push them in a positive direction. That comes from the experience of marketing *City of Gangsters*, another game that had a lukewarm release but was able to grow a loyal player base through constant updates by the dev team.

“There’s still a lot of chatter in the player Discord,” he said. “Like, a guy in Korea translated the whole game into Korean, and *City of Gangsters* is 650,000 words in full. That was like two weeks ago.”

When player response to *Rise of Industry 2* was lukewarm, Viglione said Kasedo and SomaSim had the opportunity to “kick the engine over,” but that the studio had no bandwidth or money to do the kind of community response the game needed and Kasedo chose not to engage.

“At some point, and I could not tell

you why, it seems they have washed their hands of the thing,” he said.

Many of the choices Kasedo made after the release of *Rise of Industry 2* are confusing to Viglione, something he is not shy about pointing out. He also said that many of the choices will likely remain a mystery because of the departure of an executive at the publisher.

“It’s going to be like the Berumuda Triangle, I think,” he said.

One thing that isn’t a mystery to Viglione, though, is the motivation behind the publisher asking SomaSim to make *Rise of Industry 2*. He said that

the original question posed to the team by Kasedo wasn’t just whether they would like to make *Rise of Industry 2*, but whether they would like to make *Project Highrise 2* or *Rise of Industry 2*.

“Making *Project Highrise 2* would have probably involved relinquishing the IP, which is what they wanted,” Viglione said.

Without ownership of the *Project Highrise* IP, the publisher was stuck marketing a game they weren’t quite sure how to sell. At one point, Viglione said the community management from Kasedo was so bad that he asked one of SomaSim’s 3D artists to do some community outreach and that he “did a better job than Kasedo did.”

Ultimately, Viglione said, Kasedo got what they ordered with *Project Highrise 2*, they just weren’t sure what to do with it.

Out in open water and swimming down

After the difficult development cycle and unsatisfying launch, both Viglione and Firmo were unsure if they even wanted to continue making games.

“After the game came out, we had to go through the layoff process where I





had to lay three people off,” Viglione said. “It was the hardest thing I’ve had to do in a very long time.”

During his time at Catholic Charities, he had participated in a round of layoffs that made for an incredibly difficult two months of work, but he said the summer after the release of *Rise of Industry 2* was worse because he had to lay people off that were his friends and completely change the vision he had of his studio.

“I went through a lot of anger,” he said, eyes poised to make another joke that didn’t come. “I would call Gabriel and walk around the block nine times while I yelled. There are probably people who live in North Center who have seen me walking around in May with headphones on yelling and swearing and muttering under my breath.”

For Firmo, things were similarly emotional. He was back in Brazil permanently and was ready to cut any and all ties to the U.S. after his abuse at the hands of CBP.

“I was like, maybe I should look for something else because working from home is not great for my health and

I was just generally in a mood to cut all my ties to the United States,” Firmo said. “So, I was having conversations in my life about moving on, and when I raised the topic with Matt, he said he was about to invite me to a meeting to pitch me on the next thing.”

That statement confused Firmo, who had assumed that his employment was predicated on being based in the U.S. Viglione, though, had already begun planning the next step for the two of them.

Smiling in his usual wry way, Viglione spoke with complete sincerity to Firmo: “You’re not getting rid of me that easily.”

From that point, the two began planning what they were going to do next, with conversations about how to do things differently. How to do things better.

“Rob, my partner in life as well as in starting the business, told me that I needed to take time off and I should not plan on working until 2026, and I think Gabriel’s brother told him the same thing,” Viglione said. “We mostly ignored them.”

Starting in Nov. 2025, Firmo and Viglione began brainstorming what they called “basic, cool ideas for games.” Each time they started to iterate on an idea, they decided to make that game. The process repeated four times.

At the beginning, Firmo was concerned that the differences in sensibilities between him and Viglione would lead to friction, but was pleasantly surprised to find they were excited about a lot of the same things.

“When he approached me about being on the creative end and working in an equal partnership, I was pretty shocked,” Firmo said. “Before, I had just been helping him execute his vision, but what I have been really excited and hopeful about is that the process went way easier than expected.”

Viglione agreed, saying that their focus in this new era of SomaSim has been pushing the boundaries of what game design could be. The pair have been “mushing things up” and coupling simulation strategy with innovative processes from other media. Essentially, they are trying to move as far away from the development of *Rise of Industry 2* as possible.

“It’s been exciting to do, because with *Rise of Industry 2*, it wasn’t real game design,” Viglione said. “We’ve been getting back to thinking about core mechanics and base principles again. It’s been fun.”

Core mechanics are not the only thing the two have been trying to get back to. Viglione said that one of the things he’s trying to recreate is the unsure, desperate feeling he had during the development of *Project Highrise*.

“I know it kind of sounds strange, but I want to get back to that ‘I don’t know if we’re going to make another game again’ feeling,” Viglione said. “That was what *Project Highrise* was, and that’s sort of the vibe I’m looking to get back to.”

That desire to get back to scrappier indie development is felt by Firmo as well, who said that he really wants to push SomaSim’s sensibilities and land somewhere weirder and more hybrid.

“We want to really explore the space and evolve the genre,” he said. “I think people in our niche will be happy, but I think we’re also out in open water and swimming down and figuring out what there still is to discover.”

When asked whether the pair would consider working with a publisher again, they both laughed and spoke haltingly about economic realities and the troubles of doing your own PR. Finally, Viglione made a definitive statement:

“If I can find a partner that doesn’t make me feel gross and that is willing to jump in with us in the way that an artist or other contributor would, then yeah, it’s something that I would consider. But it’s going to be on our terms, not theirs.”



JAMS TO WATCH OUT FOR

RPG MAKER THEMED GAME JAM ANNUAL EDITION: MAR. 12 – NOV. 17, 2026

Hosted by RPG Maker Themed Game Jam, Beregon, BroodyGaming

Entries must be made in RPG Maker or must be top-down style JRPGs if produced in another engine.

Themes:

Heir to the Throne: The royal heir is a disappointment to many. When a crisis shakes the realm, their carefree life is turned upside down.

Knight of the Realm: A champion with no equal, this knight serves the people with utmost zeal. It's up to you to tell the saga of the greatest Knight of the Realm in your game!

Seeking Absolution: Every so often, a hero falls, often as a result of doing something truly despicable. Now's the time to make a game with a redemption story, as your game's protagonist will be Seeking Absolution!

MYSTERY GAME JAM: APRIL 4 – MAY 5, 2026

Hosted by Mystery Gamedev

Celebrating the anniversary of Edgar Allan Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue"

Theme to be revealed before the jam starts

VIDEOTOME JAM 3 – "SPECTATOR": APRIL 4 – APRIL 19, 2026

Hosted by Freya, creator of Videotome

Entries must use one of the Videotome engines

Theme: Spectator, including outsider, witness, voyeur, bystander, watching, stalking, haunting

SCREAMOLOGY: APRIL 23 – APRIL 30, 2026

Hosted by Scream Zone, a collective of horror devs

Theme to be revealed before the jam starts



FIGHTING FASCISM THROUGH PLAY

Developers and gamers finding ways to combat immigration injustice

By Jonah White

Anti-ICE protestors in downtown Chicago, June 10, 2025 (Photo by Mateo Zapata for The TRiiBE)



You don't need me to tell you that things are bad. By the time you are reading this, "bad" probably refers to something completely different than it did a month ago. Right now, the bad I'm referring to is "Operation Metro Surge," ICE's assault on Minneapolis that started in December.

You know the stats. Two protesters executed in the middle of the street, at least six deaths in ICE custody out of public view, and thousands of people illegally arrested and thrown into detention centers. A majority of them innocent. Many of them U.S. citizens.

Things suck. You know that. If you're like me, you probably feel pretty helpless.

My experience is that when I am not working a day job, I am running games, playing games, designing games, writing about games, thinking about games. Games are a major part of my life and community, and it can be hard to feel good about that when there is so much real horror happening in the world.

But in the midst of all this horror, I have found encouragement in how the communities I participate in have responded. Not content to sit back and shake their heads in dismay, many players have stepped up in the last few months to do what they can to fight against fascism and support our communities, and they have been doing it all through the thing they know how to do best: play.

How players are fighting ICE

For people outside of Minnesota, knowing how to help can be difficult. There is a human instinct to do something tangible in the face of adversity. While demonstrations and protests are helpful, they can only do so much for the immediate needs of the people affected by state violence. In these cases, the best thing that you can do as an individual is to support the people and organizations on the front lines monetarily.

Fortunately, gaming culture has developed quite a few tools for raising money for charitable causes over the past few decades. The following are just a few.

Charity streams

Twitch and YouTube have proven reliable tools in generating money for worthy causes. Games Done Quick is one high-profile example of the practice, but the beauty of these platforms is that anyone can set up a charity stream regardless of audience size.

For example, on Jan. 30, media outlets Giant Bomb and the Minnesota-based MinnMax teamed up for an eight-hour livestream that raised over \$282,117 for Volunteers Enlisted to Assist People, ensuring that affected citizens have access to healthy food.

Meanwhile in Chicago, the Tabletop RPG community pitched in as well, with at least two charity streams giving their support to Minnesota. On Jan. 31, the Chicago Role Players' Guild livestreamed a 24-hour actual play marathon of Daggerheart, the recent tabletop RPG from Darrington Press. The Guild raised \$1,950 for the Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota and the North Side Housing Homeless Shelter.

Later, on Feb. 21, Dungeons & Dragons: The Twenty-Sided Tavern actor Diego F. Salinas invited friends and fellow cast members to stream a D&D one-shot. They raised \$2,030 for the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services, an organization that gives legal representation to immigrants across the country.

Just a handful of streams like these can ease the burden of communities affected by ICE and provide a fun and engaging way for communities to pool their resources for the good of others.

Charitable bundles

Game bundles are another popular method of fundraising in the gaming community, with possibly the best-known method being the itch.io bundle. Itch.io, a popular website for indie game designers to share their work, has allowed creators to bundle their works for years. An excellent way to provide discounts on bulk purchases, the feature eventually became an effective way to raise money for charitable causes.

The best-known example of a charitable itch.io bundle is likely the

2020 Bundle for Racial Justice and Equality, created in response to the murder of George Floyd, which offered over 1,700 games, tools, and assets from nearly 1,400 independent creators for a minimum of \$10. The bundle eventually raised over \$8 million for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund as well as the Community Bail Fund.

Since then, itch.io has played host to numerous charitable bundles supporting everything from trans rights to hospitals in Ukraine.

In February, itch.io began hosting the No ICE in Minnesota bundle, featuring 1,439 games from over 650 creators for a minimum of \$10. At the time of writing, the bundle has made over \$576,000 for the Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota, with plenty of time for that number to go even higher.

Fundraising events

In case you haven't noticed by now, there are many ways to raise funds, and few of them require you to bear the burden alone. In fact, some fundraising can be done without a large commitment.

Take StartPlaying, a website that connects tabletop RPG players with professional game masters. They waived their regular platform fee for charitable games run in the month of February. Anyone who chose to could run a game and donate 100% of the profits to the Immigrant Rapid Response Fund. Simply by playing games, players and game masters were able to raise \$25,000, with StartPlaying adding their own \$3,000 to the fund.

Even small press designers are contributing in their own way. The team behind Coyote & Crow, the Native American-led sci-fi RPG, was crowdfunding their latest expansion while Operation Metro Surge was underway. Rather than take drastic action, they simply added a stretch goal to their existing campaign, promising to donate at least \$1,000 to a Minnesota charity if the campaign reached a certain level of success.

Local action

The above examples were all about how the gaming community has



\$250,462

Giving Activity

- Atiz Bawany gave \$25.00
1 hour ago
- Anonymous
1 hour ago

DONATE HERE - BIT.LY/ICEOUTMINNEAPOLIS

The exact moment Giant Bomb and MinnMax raised \$250,000 (Photo from Giant Bomb on YouTube)

supported Minnesota at this time, but Minneapolis was not the first city to be targeted by ICE, and it won't be the last. Chicago saw its own brutal raids last year, and the threat of ICE returning is ever-present. While the need in Minnesota is immediate, there is value in supporting your local community, and there is no single area that needs support.

For a few more examples, near the end of February I attended Extra Life Chicago. The convention featured a little of everything: Street Fighter 6 and Mario Kart tournaments, Magic: The Gathering tutorials, miniature painting, passionate fan artists and small businesses exhibiting at booths, and local TTRPG group Rough Magic running D&D for curious players. The event raised \$60,000 for Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, supporting health care in the city.

In January, Level Eater Adventures ran their annual fundraising event for the Public Media Institute in Bridgeport. Seven tables played in a massive D&D game where the success of individual tables contributed to the overall success of the fictional town of Portsbridge and real-life money could be spent on in-game and out-of-game items to contribute to the fundraiser. All of the money raised went towards supporting local art and radio, giving citizens a way to make their voices heard.

A call to action

These are just a few examples of how people have supported Minnesota and their local communities in the fight against fascism.

I am sure you know the usual advice for making your voice heard. Call your senators, join a protest, vote. But what I want to encourage you to do right now is spread the word! Don't be silent. Talk with your neighbors, share opportunities to connect and be informed. When a fundraising event or charitable opportunity appears, share the news far and wide. Share it in a Discord, share it on social media, put a poster in your local coffee shop. The gaming community is large, it spans the globe, and there are pockets of community everywhere. It's easy to overlook good news when it is buried in a barrage of terribleness, so it is doubly important that we keep each other informed.

We are not powerless. Our passions, our hobbies, are not merely an escape. We can do good when we leverage our strengths as a community to a better end.

My last piece of advice is to find a community where you can form connections and discuss the things happening in the world. Indie City Games is a great choice for in-person and online discussions. If you're into tabletop games, check out the Chicago Tabletop Gaming Association, which hosts frequent meetup events and a Discord for players and GMs to connect and chat. There's also Storygames Chicago's Discord server, Save Point meetings at Is/Was Brewing, and countless local game stores and meetups you can join.

Stay safe, stay strong, and fuck fascism.

itch.io's "No ICE in Minnesota" bundle as of March 12, 2026 (Photo from itch.io)



ONSTAGE
COUPLE'S
THERAPY:
CATHARSIS AND
BREAKUP SONGS

By D. Myerscough

Veruca Salt, 1995 (From Veruca Salt on Facebook)



Below every YouTube upload of the May 1997 performance of Fleetwood Mac's "Silver Springs," there are endless comments discussing the stage behavior of one Stephanie Nicks and her ex-everything, Lindsey Buckingham.

Some cheer her for "cursing his entire life." Others point out that they both look "heartbroken and crushed" by the then 20-year-old dissolution of their relationship. Still more posit theories about reconciliation and joke that Mick Fleetwood appears to be high or otherwise drumming through the absolute massacre occurring downstage of him.

And from certain angles, I can see all of their points. Nicks does glare daggers at Buckingham, especially as she sings about his inability to "get away from the sound of the woman who love[d] him," and Fleetwood is absolutely blissed out on the power of percussion (though not more than usual).

Some see Nicks as angry, seconds away from pouncing on her ex and stabbing him with her boot, and others as heartbroken, reminiscing on the failings of her long-ago romance with the co-worker standing next to her. There is no consensus as to whether these feelings are contradictory, whether they are mutually exclusive, or whether Buckingham Nicks will ever reconcile like that.

What Stevie really feels doesn't matter, though. Only our perception does.

Aristotle coined the term catharsis in the book "Poetics," describing it as the purging of negative emotions through the viewing of tragic art. He is thought to have created the term to discuss how interaction with the arts can create a more morally upright populace.

After all, the term is linked to the Greek medical theory of "katharsis,"



The hatred and heartbreak of Buckingham/Nicks, 1997 (From Fleetwood Mac on YouTube)

or purging, often of an illness. When an audience is forced to confront tragedy, they experience the same negative feelings as the tragic hero and thus are purged of those same feelings in their real lives once they leave the theater.

Once purged, those former audience members would be rational and less prone to outbursts of negative emotions such as fear, pity, and anger. Tragedies, then, are the path to a better world.

On that last point, I am willing to agree, though I would like to present a more charitable interpretation of Aristotle's concept of catharsis.

Fear, pity, and other emotions aroused by tragic or horrific art are deeply human and thus cannot be fully repressed. However, experiencing them in an environment that carries no real stakes – a safe space, if you will – allows us to examine the feelings enough to learn from them.

Few audience members that have seen a production of "Oedipus Rex" would want to be the titular king, but most are able to take their feelings of pity, horror, or disgust at his tale and apply them to the (hopefully less incestuous) events of their own life.

This displacement of feeling is why great art has the ability to resonate with so many people and may go far toward explaining why so many are sure that Stevie Nicks felt a certain way about Lindsey Buckingham in May 1997.

In fact, breakup songs are one of the best vessels for exploring the feeling of catharsis, even more so when the subject of that heartbreak (or ire, or ambivalence) is sharing the stage with the author.

The concept even works for stage relationships that have broken down entirely. Besides Fleetwood Mac, who were constantly breaking and making up, another '70s band may hold the title for "most incestuous," namely Heart.

Led by the Wilson sisters – Ann as lead songwriter and vocalist, Nancy as rhythm guitarist – and supported by the Fisher brothers – Roger on lead guitar and Mike, ex-drummer and manager – the band is perhaps most famous for "Barracuda," an aggressive, driving rock song about a persistent creep.

Ann dated Mike and Nancy dated Roger. The highs were high, with Ann penning all-time banger "Magic Man" about Mike, but the lows were lower.

According to the Wilson sisters, the band unanimously voted to kick Roger out of Heart following their 1978 album *Dog & Butterfly* and his breakup with Nancy, and Mike was quick to follow, either stepping down as manager shortly before or shortly after the release of follow-up record *Bébé le Strange*, aka my favorite Heart album.

The band released *Bébé le Strange* on Valentine's Day, 1980 as a bit of what Ann describes in her memoir as "gallows humor."

On that record is the song "Break," which is both an SEO nightmare and a fantastic example of the new hardened direction of Heart under the full control of the Wilsons, devoid of the softer, folk elements of previous records.

Ann sings that "there ain't no more magic, man," and declares that she has



Heart with the Fishers and Heart without, 1977 and 1980 (Photos from Epic Records)

“no more respect for the big man” over Nancy’s lightning-fast strumming.

That indictment is even damning when read as plain text.

When confronted with the raw power and anger of a voice like Ann Wilson, one can’t help but feel pity for the poor soul she’s talking to. Catharsis in this case, then, is taking on the pain of Mike Fisher and every other man stupid enough to piss off a woman.

Another YouTube commenter puts it best under the song’s music video, saying “This song’s like being beat up for three minutes. GOOD STUFF.”

The audience chooses to take the vicarious beating as a way to atone for all the harm they’ve caused and all the harm they’ve yet to cause. Being beat up by Ann Wilson is “good stuff” because it reminds us that when we choose to hurt others, they can always hit back.

Another case brings us, as all things do, to Olympia, Washington. My beloved Sleater-Kinney is another band that features a powerful voice and a wickedly talented guitarist that once dated each other.

Corin Tucker and Carrie Brownstein were, until right before the release of their third album, secretly dating each other. The lead single of that album, “One More Hour,” is an absolute odyssey of a song. From Tucker’s wailing lament and Brownstein’s monotone placations to newcomer Janet Weiss’s steadfast percussion – literally drumming her way through an emotional minefield.

The song is about Tucker and Brownstein’s breakup, if you hadn’t already guessed.

I’ve listened to this song more than any other I’ve mentioned so far. I’ve mimicked Brownstein’s vocals, whiny and nasally; I’ve screamed Tucker’s parts to myself in the car; I’ve thought about the nuances of love, relationships, breakups and continuing to make art with a person despite it all.

It’s a powerful song.

But the best moment is early in the song, between the first chorus and

second verse. The chorus ends with Brownstein alone, declaring that she “never wanted to let [the relationship] go,” then Tucker begins again, asking a seemingly rhetorical question: “If you could talk, what would you say?” An odd thing to say to a person who just finished speaking.

This is the best moment of the song not because it’s a little bewildering, but because it reveals the heart of the whole thing. Carrie Brownstein and Corin Tucker are not bitter exes. They are not separated by time, distance, or ambivalence. Their creative partnership is the force that has and will continue to sustain their lives and careers.

If Tucker wants to know what Brownstein has to say about anything, she can *just ask*. But does the answer matter?

No. Any answer that either could give would not change the way the other is feeling. The feelings aren’t rational; they’re from a much deeper and harder to access part of the human psyche. Sometimes, there are no clean breaks. Sometimes a person is so important to you that you can’t let them go, even if that makes the hurt worse.

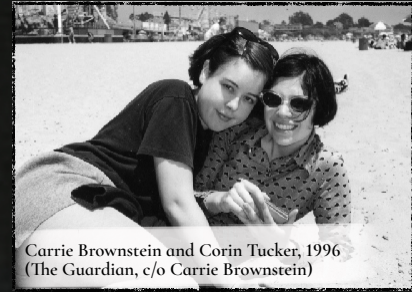
According to Brownstein, almost every song on *Dig Me Out* is about her, and while the two may have broken up almost 30 years ago, they haven’t subjected the band to the same fate.

Instead of letting a breakup album force them to grow apart, Tucker and Brownstein let it be the thing that made them grow together.

Catharsis, then, is found in experiencing pain, then letting it lie. The pain isn’t a conversation, it can’t be placated, and the only solution sometimes is to put it all out there, messy and inexplicable, and then move forward.

Finally, I return us home to Chicago for a look at underrated alternative rock heroes, Veruca Salt. Made up mainly of guitarist-vocalists Nina Gordon, a dour blonde, and Louise Post, a smirking brunette, the band produced a few fantastic records in the 1990s before splitting up.

Post got the band’s trademark, Gordon got material for a solo record that is mostly about the breakdown of



Carrie Brownstein and Corin Tucker, 1996
(The Guardian, c/o Carrie Brownstein)



Carrie Brownstein and Corin Tucker, 2019
(Image by Jonny Cournoyer)

her personal relationship with Post.

In an effort to avoid a lawsuit, I will say that the two were very close friends. Songwriting partners and studio mates. Post described them in 2015 as “mirrors” and called Gordon her “inspiration.”

Once the two split, an explosive event they still refuse to talk about, Gordon put out a mellow, singer-songwriter album, *Tonight and the Rest of My Life*. The guitars are still there, to be sure, but it’s bouncier. More Mazzy Star than The Breeders.

Post, always the Seether, aimed for a more hard rock sound. She seemed a little angrier, a little more broken up over the whole thing.

The most interesting part of the split, though (besides the mysterious circumstances), is the song “Black and Blonde.” Before 2015, it was just the closing track to Gordon’s first solo record.

Beginning dreamy and bittersweet, it quickly gives way to abrupt, distorted guitars more indicative of Post’s influence. Gordon demands that “somebody tell [her] what the hell is going on” after claiming that *someone* had beat her “black and blonde.”

In the chorus, there are calls for someone to “save the little child,” and much talk of drowning, then the outro reintroduces longer, gentler guitar melodies interspersed with lyrics about hearing the ocean.





Nina Gordon, 1994 (From Veruca Salt on Facebook)



Louise Post, 1995 (From Veruca Salt on Facebook)

By the end, the listener is left with the feeling that Gordon has made it through the turbulent, “oh god I’m drowning” portion of the breakup and has made it to the shore. Then Veruca Salt got the band back together.

After marriages, children, and seeing Mazzy Star perform at Coachella, the two were ready to give it another try. The resulting album, *Ghost Notes*, is a personal favorite, though it wasn’t particularly well received.

The second track on *Ghost Notes* is, once again, “Black and Blonde,” though it’s gone through some significant changes since the last time we heard it.

In rewriting the song, the two have made it more overt, the lyrical changes acting alone to alter the

entire meaning of the original composition, which remains mostly unchanged.

The intro is the same, with the addition of Post on that distorted guitar, slamming into the song as if she’d like us to remember that it’s about her. Gone are most mentions of the “little child,” though, replaced with someone listening to confessions over the phone and a repeated refrain where the two women demand the other “take it like a blonde.”

Gordon also gets meaner than that. She “spells it out” for Post, saying outright that she’s the “greatest fucking thing that ever happened to [her].” There are hints about the breakup, too. After almost lamenting their relationship being over, the vitriol kicks back in, with audibly angry lines about a hidden “so-and-so” that may have gotten between them.

In the new outro, Gordon begins what could be called a lullaby, bringing back the missing child – a stand-in for Post in this version – just to apologize for her part in the drama and to say that she forgives her.

This is almost pathological.

It’s one of my favorite things in music.

Making changes to art like this *only* when in the presence of the subject of that art is the best example of the kind of catharsis I’ve been talking about for the last 2000-odd words.

When separate from the cause of their pain, a person may become

introspective and self-obsessed, curling in on themselves rather than lashing out. However, put the other person in the room with them and they explode, releasing all the pent-up frustration and anger that’s been festering during their time apart.

17 years, though not the longest amount of time we’ve seen, sure is a lot of time to let things fester. After the breakup, Post and Gordon didn’t speak again in person until they met back up to discuss recording *Ghost Notes*. No wonder “Black and Blonde” became so vitriolic.

Pain is multi-faceted and deeply personal. When artists take that pain and make it into a product, they open their own hearts up for an audience to interpret, to speculate on, and to graft their own experiences onto. That process can be deeply invasive, but it’s also the nexus point of all great art.

Catharsis is sympathy pain made real. It’s what connects us to artists and to each other. It’s how we make sense of ourselves, of art, and of the world, and that’s more important than who’s dating who and whether two rock stars still hate each other.

What a beautiful – and poetic – thing. It’s the thing robots will never replicate, and it’s something that Aristotle understood deeply, despite critics calling him deeply unpoetic.

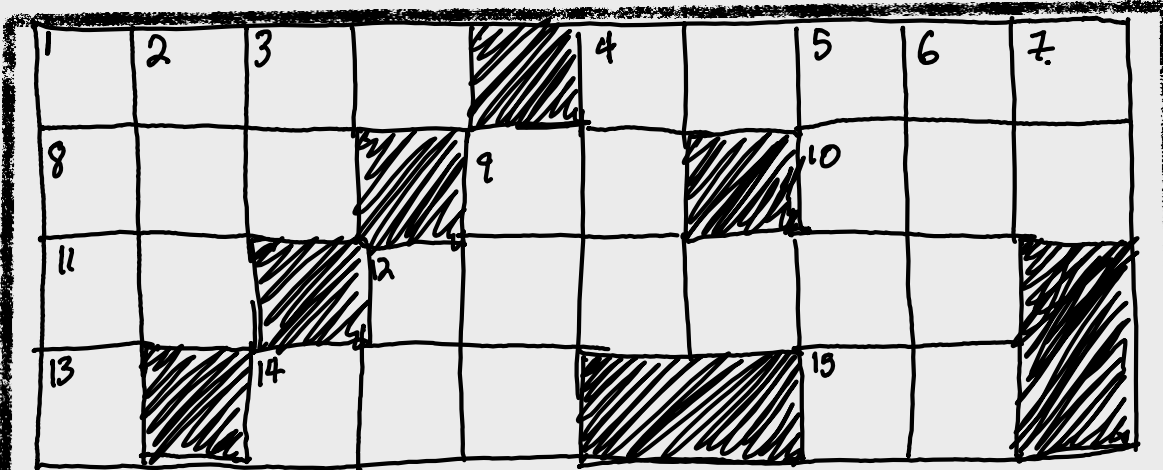
Anyway, if Stevie Nicks is a witch and if she *did* curse Lindsey Buckingham, it would have been in 1976, not 1997, and any ill-fortune that has befallen him since is surely a result of that original magic.



Nina Gordon and Louise Post, 2015 (From Veruca Salt on Facebook)



"3 18 15 19 19 14 21 13 2 5 18"
by Bobby Lockhart



Across

- 1: Elite in numerals
- 4: Beverly Hills
- 8: Emergency
- 9: The answer to everything
- 10: Bond
- 11: LXII
- 12: Minutes in a "Rent" year
- 13: German "no"
- 14: Full %
- 15: "Stranger Things" main character

Down

- 1: Summer of Love
- 2: Chicago area
- 3: 1 billion seconds in years (round down)
- 4: Working with Dolly
- 5: A Space Odyssey
- 6: Arabian Nights
- 7: Chill British music duo
- 9: Weed
- 12: Cops

Game directions:

Color in the primes to see the number you've been waiting for this whole time.

19	9	23	10	27
55	43	59	25	77
99	21	71	37	32
42	18	13	12	11

In case you're stuck: Each crossword answer should be expressed in numbers, not letters



Body and Soul

The Occultist is not afraid of the unholy matrimony between him and the cosmic beast he's made a pact with. For me, it's a celebration of the way occult philosophy has expanded my religious framework.



ABYSSAL AQUARIST



Spring 2026 ISSN: 3067-3429