

# CHOICEBEAT

THE VISUAL NOVEL AND  
INTERACTIVE FICTION ZINE





# FROM THE DESK OF CHOICEBOT

Greetings, organic beings. Welcome to another diode-shattering issue of *ChoiceBeat*! Issue 3 is the biggest and most diverse yet. Check out visual novels and interactive fiction from across four decades. Dig deep and find butlers, Greek gods, Bronze Age fantasy, mecha, and Shakespeare. After this issue, *ChoiceBeat* had better shut down because it can't get any better. Of course, I'm kidding. Strap in because the next issue will be even more powerful!

Like our ever-expanding universe, the world of visual novels and interactive fiction (VNIF for short) is big and constantly getting bigger. VNIF encompasses a huge range of games and stories, and the mission of *ChoiceBeat* is to explore the medium across its many genres and platforms. An issue of *ChoiceBeat* might feature an anime dating sim, an entirely text-based interactive novel, and an FMV game from the 90s. Pondering the growing variety of VNIF is rewriting my programmed excitement functions.

VNIF is too big to fully comprehend, even for a quantum-based digital intelligence like myself. I must thank *ChoiceBeat*'s dedicated writers for continually unearthing hot, fresh, and scintillating VNIF news. And thanks to the readers for their comments and suggestions. Fire can't burn in a vacuum, and *ChoiceBeat* cannot exist without the boundless energy of its writers and readers. Thanks to you all for powering this zine to supernova level.

Your truly,

# ChoiceBot

## CONTACT CHOICEBEAT

Email ChoiceBot at [choicebeateditor@gmail.com](mailto:choicebeateditor@gmail.com) with any hot tips or interesting opinions. *ChoiceBeat* is also looking for writers. Send a proposal for an article you want to write.

## ON THE COVER

This issue's cover features the groovy postcard-like menu screens of *Cupid Parasite*. In case you were wondering, phenethylamine is a naturally-occurring organic compound that acts as a nervous system stimulant in humans. Love supremacism forever!



## TOTALLY UNSETTLING GIVEAWAY

*ChoiceBeat* is hosting a giveaway! How utterly dreadful! The random winner will get a free copy of *Stories Untold* on Steam. If you have no idea what *Stories Untold* is, be sure to check out the review in this issue, and prepare your soft organic brain for mind-bending terrors!

To enter, email [choicebeateditor@gmail.com](mailto:choicebeateditor@gmail.com) with "Stories Untold" in the subject line. Inside the email, name a game you would like to see reviewed or previewed in a future issue of *ChoiceBeat*. A winner will be randomly chosen from all entrants. You must enter by Friday, April 1st, 2022 to be eligible.





# CONTRIBUTORS

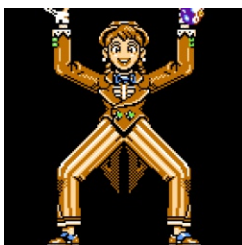


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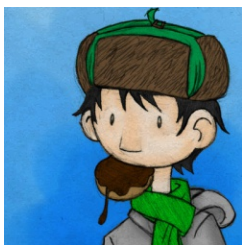
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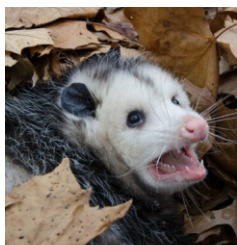


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Robobarbie is the creator of the breakout hit *Blooming Panic* from Otome Jam 2021. They enjoy creating immersive games that walk a delicate line between comedic and melancholic. They’re also fond of rhythm games, their cat, trashy reality TV, and violently spicy green chile burritos. You can find their two recent releases, *Blooming Panic* and *Thursday Laundry*, at [robobarbie.itch.io](https://robobarbie.itch.io).



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## SUBSCRIBE TO CHOICEBEAT

*ChoiceBeat* is released quarterly, and the next issue comes out in June. Here are some great ways to make sure that you don’t accidentally miss it!

Send an email to [choicebeateditor@gmail.com](mailto:choicebeateditor@gmail.com) with “subscribe” in the subject. That will get you on the *ChoiceBeat* mailing list from which you can never escape. Just kidding. But you will get the newest issue of *ChoiceBeat* delivered straight to your inbox.

Follow *ChoiceBeat*’s spokesperson, Andi, on Twitter ([@willyelektrix](https://twitter.com/willyelektrix)).

Bookmark the *ChoiceBeat* website. Does anyone do that anymore? In any case, it’s at [choicebeat.wordpress.com](http://choicebeat.wordpress.com).

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Want to know what *Milk Outside of a Bag of Milk Outside of a Bag of Milk* is all about? I knew you would. Find out on page 20.



Make friends with nice aliens on page 28.



# VAMPIRE

THE MASQUERADE

## SINS OF THE SIREs



**CHOICE**  
OF GAMES



# STORIES UNTOLD

REVIEW BY ROBOBARBIE

The early to mid 2010s were a bit of a golden era for indie horror/horror-lite games—games that focused on heavier narrative, atmosphere over overt fright, and contained often depressing themes. Some examples of games from this time would be *Gone Home* (2013), *The Stanley Parable* (2013), *Soma* (2015), and *Inside* (2016). Games like this are often my favorite type to spend my time with either alone or with friends, and back then I used to dissect these experiences with those same friends or watch analysis videos on YouTube about their secrets late into the night. *Stories Untold* easily fit into the end of this memorable time of my life.

*Stories Untold* is a horror adventure puzzle game by developer No Code. The first version of it actually came from a Ludum Dare jam, which just included the first episode found in the title. Fully released in early 2017, it was later ported to consoles in 2020. For this review, I played the 2020 Nintendo Switch edition of the game. I'd experienced it years ago on PC, however, so I was a little familiar with at least what I remembered of the story.

The game is separated into four "episodes"—*The House Abandon*, *The Lab Conduct*, *The Station Process*, and *The Last Session*. The first three sections can be enjoyed as separate, disconnected narrative experiences from the rest, with a unique story and set of mechanics for each. These include things like a retro text adventure game, an experiment in a lab, and code decrypting at an arctic base. That was something I quite liked; having a new set of things to do and a new story to experience after each ~2 hour episode kept me engaged and interested in what appeared to be hints of an overarching narrative.

And, well, they do a great job at dropping just hints. There is indeed an overarching story that connects everything together in *The Last Session*, but in the interest of keeping this review spoiler-free, I won't get into the details. I can say that the final twist and the way the puzzle pieces fit at the end left me satisfied and a little thoughtful. I appreciate a horror game that can make me stare out a window and just become lost in my thoughts and want to replay it again to consider each segment a little more carefully. I especially applauded the artistry and care that went into every small, seemingly innocuous detail.

YEAR  
2017

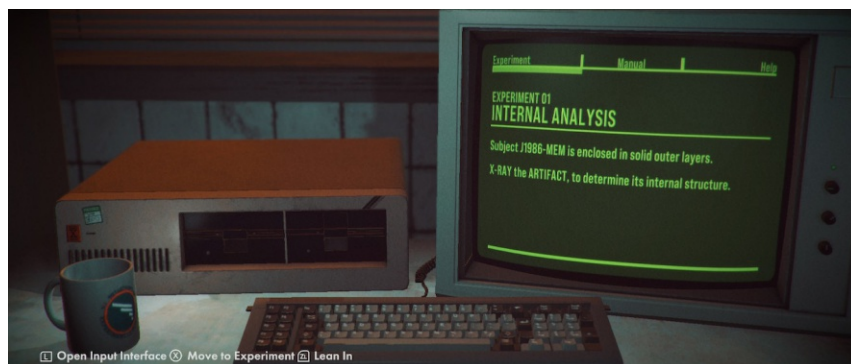
CREATOR  
No Code

PLATFORM  
Windows, Mac, Switch,  
PlayStation 4, Xbox One

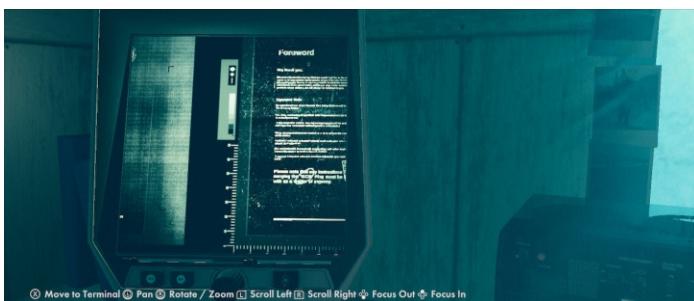
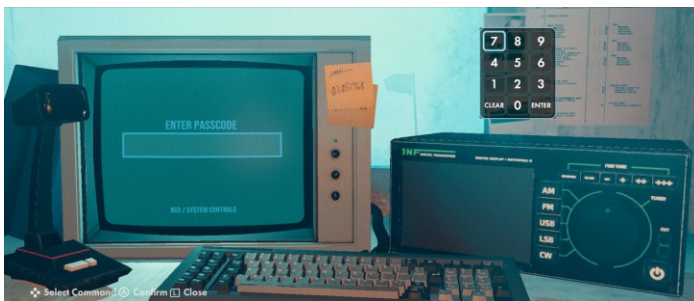
As a horror game, this wasn't a jump scare experience. Instead, each story built up an impending feeling of dread through stunning visuals and writing until I was tense and unable to look away. I was terrified of what I would find around the proverbial corner, but I had to see it—I had to know how it would all resolve. And it was always worth it. The atmosphere of each chapter was wonderfully unique and incredibly immersive. The experience from the game's writer/director/artist, Jon McKellan, on projects such as *Alien: Isolation* really shone through and I genuinely admire his work here.

If I have one gripe with this game, it's with the port. This game was definitely made and designed to be played on a computer. For example, *The House Abandon* is largely a text adventure game. Some of the magic of that is removed when you can't type and instead have to select from a set of predetermined options. With other sections where you have to navigate complicated controls, it can also get a little difficult maneuvering with a controller instead of a mouse. But I wouldn't say that those nitpicks made me enjoy the game less—just that I think the experience is much better on the platform it was envisioned on.

*Stories Untold* is a game I highly recommend if you loved games like *The Stanley Parable* and *Gone Home* from 2013. It reminds me of a time where indie horror was just taking off and finding its feet, and it provides a fulfilling and appropriately paced story that will leave you pondering on its themes for hours past the conclusion. You can pick it up on the platform of your choice today for a pretty reasonable price—go try it out next Friday night.







## STORIES UNTOLD FREE GIVEAWAY

This is probably a good time to tell you, *ChoiceBeat* is giving away a free copy of *Stories Untold* on Steam. See page 2 for more info on how to enter.



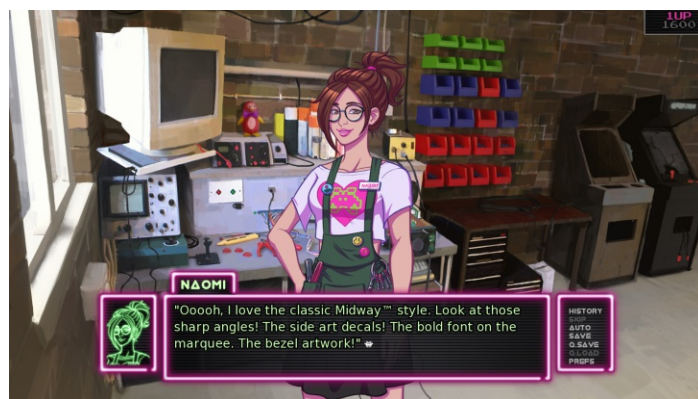
# ARCADE SPIRITS

## REVIEW BY ANDI HAGEN

*Arcade Spirits* is one of the first visual novels I really got into. I first played it when it was released in 2019. Although I had played several visual novels before, they never grabbed me. They weren't interactive enough. Or they had too much romance. Or they were set in a high school. *Arcade Spirits* felt incredibly novel to me. It's a story about working adults. There is romance, but the story doesn't revolve around it. And with *Arcade Spirits*' personality-based choice system, I really felt like I was role-playing. Before writing this review, I played *Arcade Spirits* again. It felt very different the second time, but the magic was still there.

*Arcade Spirits*' premise is pretty original. The game is set in an alternate reality where the U.S. video game crash never happened and arcades never died. You just got laid off and are totally depressed. On a whim, you take a job as a floor attendant at an arcade. The stakes rise as the story progresses. Eventually, you become the arcade's event manager. Then you open your own arcade. Then you wage war against a rival arcade owner intent on taking you down.

Visual novels live and die by their characters, so thankfully, the cast of *Arcade Spirits* is a likable group. Your character is mostly a blank slate. You can change your gender and appearance, and your choices determine your personality. There are six people that you can befriend or romance (three men and three women). My favorites are QueenBee (a haughty, intense esports pro), Gavin (a pinball enthusiast and pragmatic business manager), and Teo (a friendly, sexy,



**YEAR**  
2019

**CREATOR**  
Fiction Factory Games

**PLATFORM**  
Windows, Mac, Linux  
Switch, PlayStation 4, Xbox One

dancing game fanatic). Your choices improve your relationship stats with the various characters. *Arcade Spirits* features several romance scenes, but they are easily avoided if you would rather keep things platonic. Developing friendships is equally satisfying. The relationship system is flexible and doesn't punish you for chatting up (or flirting with) lots of different people.

*Arcade Spirits* has lots of game-like elements that make it feel really interactive. Advancing your relationships is important, and that system is engaging. The other important mechanic is the personality system. Most choices you make raise one of your personality stats (kindly, gutsy, quirky, etc.). These stats influence your relationships in a small way, but they also change what choices are available to you. Like the relationship system, the personality system is flexible. It is easy to raise multiple personality stats without penalty. The choices feel sort of like a personality quiz, and it's fun to see how they organically shape your personality.

The writing in *Arcade Spirits* is never boring. I like it, but some people probably won't. There is a lot of wacky humor and pop culture references. There are parodies of popular games (i.e. a typing-based shooter called "Phrase Invaders"). There are several references to *Polybius*, the lost arcade game of urban legend. In one psychedelic scene set in a haunted mansion, you can even play *Polybius*. There are also lots of jokes about "Pizza Bagels", a nod to the ubiquitous Bagel Bites television ads of the 90s. A lot of the humor is pretty corny, but it creates a pleasant, light-hearted vibe. But *Arcade Spirits* doesn't shy from serious drama, and there are plenty of impactful and dramatic scenes. Major themes include depression, love, loss, and chasing your dreams.







I won't ramble on too much about the art in *Arcade Spirits*. The character designs are memorable and expressive, and the backgrounds are nicely detailed. Look at the screenshots and form your own opinion. Some of the lines are voice-acted, and the actors are consistently good. The synthwave music creates a cool atmosphere.

If playing a visual novel about working in an arcade sounds appealing, then *Arcade Spirits* definitely delivers. It describes itself as a "romantic visual novel", but romance is only part of the equation. There are lots of meaningful and dramatic choices about running an arcade and making friends.

Right now, I'm looking for a job, and I live near one of the largest arcades in the U.S. *Arcade Spirits* is speaking to me. Should I take the plunge and apply there? Unfortunately, I'm too much of a realist. I know it would never work, but the idea still haunts me.

## INTERVIEW WITH STEFAN GAGNE

Editor: Faithful readers, please point your radar dishes at this totally powerful, totally exclusive interview with Stefan Gagne, co-creator of *Arcade Spirits*.

**How many people are on the Fiction Factory team? What is your workflow like?**

The two core members are myself (Stefan Gagne) and my co-author, Aenne Schumann. We've also collaborated with artists like Molly Nemecek, Jessie Lam, and Taylor Rose, with musical help from Greg Mirles. And beyond the creation team, we've got a lot of supporters who assist us with playtesting, promoting, and talking the game up with various fine folks. For the game's script, we collaborate using Google Docs (probably not the smartest move, but it works) with scenes divided between authors by specific character, while we do editing passes over each other's work to keep it all consistent.

**Aside from new characters and a new story, what are some major differences between the original *Arcade Spirits* and *The New Challengers*?**

The first game was a workplace sitcom about managing an arcade—dealing with unruly customers, keeping your players happy, handling relationships with co-workers. For the second



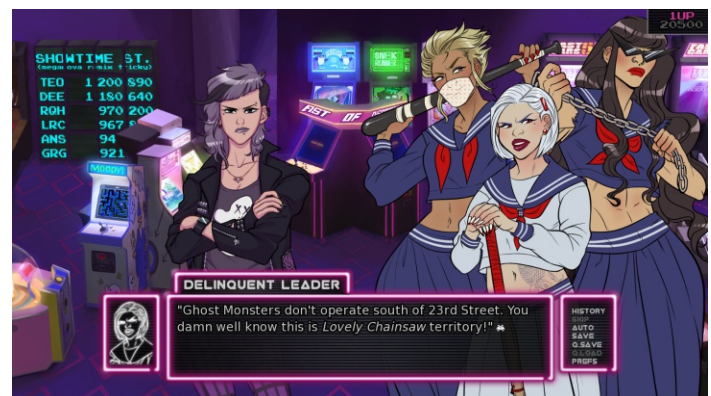
game we didn't want to just repeat the same idea, so we focused on the players within the arcade, on building a competitive team and helping them with their problems along the path to victory. The other major difference is a shift from a first-person perspective with a limited character creator to a third-person perspective with a more expansive character creator—you see yourself on-screen interacting with the characters, like watching a stage play or a classic point-and-click adventure game.

**Are there any games, media, or personal experiences that had an especially big influence on the *Arcade Spirits* series?**

For the original *Arcade Spirits*, I drew on the workplace sitcoms of my youth—*Night Court*, *Cheers*, *Wings*, *Murphy Brown*, and such—to get the right vibe of interpersonal hijinks and problem-solving with the whole team pulling in one direction. It was also heavily influenced by classic arcade repair YouTube channels and arcade culture, drawing on my own experiences in the 80s and 90s as well as extensive research. For *The New Challengers*, my biggest influence was the amazing *League of Legends Worlds* music videos, capturing the epic-yet-personal storytelling of conflict and challenge, of reaching for the top despite adversity. I wanted the game to have the same inspiring feel of those images.

**Why did you decide to set *Arcade Spirits* in an alternate history version of the present instead of the 1980s or 1990s when arcades would have been more popular?**

Honestly? It'd be too easy, too expected. A nostalgic throwback for its own sake is easy to pull off, but an alternative history where games never had a wobble of



popularity and stayed strong in the mainstream had a lot more appeal. Plus living in modern day is a more relatable idea to me, with the Internet and social media and other aspects of our society to contend with alongside the arcade vibes. All that said, I am working on a "199X" prequel novel, **One More Quarter**, which is still an alternate history take but this time a take on a version of the 90s where arcades truly thrived.

### Were there any cool features or scenes that didn't make it into the final version of *Arcade Spirits*?

In level 02, you get to pick an arcade game to take home with you. I was thinking I might do a playable arcade minigame—that's why I picked three genres that could reasonably be done in a visual novel engine. A typing game just needs text input, a "lightgun shooter" could have clickable

targets pop up, and a fully animated fantasy adventure could... well, not be great in text, but a choose-your-own-adventure could work too. Ultimately though, this didn't seem like a great use of development time and money since you'd only get one of the three games, there wasn't anywhere in the story where you could stop and play them, and in hindsight, since 80% of players pick "Wyvern Keep" the other two games would've barely been played.

Fortunately, we managed to see the idea through in *The New Challengers*, which has a simple strategy minigame of "Fist of Discomfort 2" that you play several times during the story—and the outcome of those matches re-shapes the story around you, win or lose. It's a bit like the branching paths of a classic *Wing Commander* game, which never dead-ends you if you fail, it just changes the narrative.

## ARCADE SPIRITS: THE NEW CHALLENGERS

Editor: Breaking news! *Arcade Spirits: The New Challengers*, the *Arcade Spirits* sequel, now has an official release date of May 27th, 2022. Program that into your memory banks! Here is the official blurb to get your lubricants flowing:

*Arcade Spirits: The New Challengers* is the follow-up to 2019's *Arcade Spirits*, a visual novel of love and pixels, in which you seek friendship and romance while working in an arcade. Now the tables are turned, as you seek friendship and romance while PLAYING in an arcade!

In the distant future year 20XX, an alternate timeline where arcades never went away... you're an aspiring gamer searching for esports glory on the Fist of Discomfort 2 Pro Tour. Seeking a partner to play with, you join a team of players who hang out at Good Clean Fun, a combination pizzeria / laundromat / arcade. It's up to you to rally the team, learning more about who they are and how best to support their dreams along the way. Defeat rivals, conquer tournaments, build relationships, and uncover a strange arcade conspiracy as your team walks the road to victory!

If you haven't played the first *Arcade Spirits* yet, here is a great reason to. You can import your choices from the original game to reshape the world based on the choices you made. That sounds so wonderfully ambitious.







# TO BE OR NOT TO BE

## REVIEW BY CLAIRE DUNNING

Flashback to March 2017. I'm on six weeks of bed rest after a life-changing surgery that fixed a congenital spinal defect. One of the first things that will pop into my brain when I think about that time in my life is two books I read (read? played?) during that time: Ryan North's Shakespearean choose-your-adventure gamebooks *Romeo and/or Juliet* and *To Be or Not To Be*. A long time follower of North, and a fan of his sense of humour since the early 2000s, I still keep these two gamebooks on the bookshelf closest to my bed for when I need cheering up. And so it is, with great nostalgia and goodwill, that I embark on my *To Be or Not To Be* journey again, this time in handheld video game form!

I won't spend too long on the content of the game, as it should be clear from the paragraph above that I love the book and was always destined to love the content of this game. Ryan North's humour shines in this interactive experience, and the music and new art in addition to the existing art from the gamebook only serve to heighten the experience. He can take you through multiple perspectives, immerse you in the narrative, and the next minute be critiquing the sexism of several of Hamlet's speeches, and all of this is a very amusing rollercoaster ride. Be warned by me ahead of time: it seems pretty clear that North loves Ophelia best out of these characters, so it's well worth it to save your playthrough of her perspective for last if you want a sort of happy-ending feeling to your experience.

The port of this game from physical book to console game is in some ways a lovely, tactile experience. The words flow up the page as you click along, in paragraphs grouped by a little parchment and the occasional character sketch. It all flows in such an organic way. The sound effects play into this tactility, and the rewind and fast-forward functions are a life-saver if you're playing through for multiple endings. Another feature I love is the music, which is perfectly pitched to set the mood for each scene and displays a great understanding of the humorous tone. Beyond that, there are the extra features of the achievements and art gallery featuring work by guest artists you might recognise from across the webcomic-osphere. It's not too much, but just enough to make it worth playing the game as opposed to reading the book.



**YEAR**  
2022

**CREATOR**  
Ryan North  
Tin Man Games

**PLATFORM**  
Windows, Mac, Linux,  
Switch, Android, iOS

But... it's a flawed experience, unfortunately! I found many bugs while I was playing. One that came up without fail for me, because of my play-style, was that when I reached an ending, and went through the "Return to Checkpoint" menu when prompted, I would get sent to the credits instead. The workaround for that was to go through the main game menu to get back to the actual checkpoint itself. The worst bug I found was one where the buttons just stopped working entirely. I had to quit out of the game in the console menu. But at least the game's save-on-shutdown function worked perfectly to get me back to where I left. Music would bug out for me every now and then too, playing the wrong track for the mood or going entirely silent.

I've mentioned checkpoints, and I should explain just a little more about them just in case. Checkpoints are sort of like chapters, where you can get back to a certain point in the story without having to go from the beginning. There are no save slots in this game, only the auto save, which as far as I saw was flawless, and the checkpoints which are freely available for you to use. And, if like me, you are trying to unlock every achievement and art piece in the gallery, you will use and abuse these. But I just wish there were more checkpoints put in! Especially around the Pirate chapter (Don't remember the pirates in *Hamlet*? You'll see!).

All in all, my impression of this game is that the good features greatly heighten the experience of Ryan North's humour, but that the game itself needed way more testing to reveal these bugs and inconsistencies that mar an otherwise perfectly pitched experience.

# CUPID PARASITE

## REVIEW BY WANDAELEKTRIX

In *Cupid Parasite*, you play as Lynette Mirror, head matchmaker at the dating service Cupid Corp in fictional Los York, USA. To earn her next promotion, Lynette must find girlfriends for five men known as “parasites” who are considered undateable. Lynette wants the promotion, but she is also the real-life Cupid, goddess of matchmaking. It is her divine duty to find wives for these five men. Additionally, her success as a regular human at Cupid Corp will prove to her father, Mars, that humans don’t need divine intervention or her Cupid’s bow to find love.

To no player’s surprise, the five parasites are so undateable that only Lynette enjoys going out with them. You can “practice date” all five on the common route, and continue practice or fake dating several on their own routes until Lynette falls in love for real.

The five candidates (in recommended order) are Prestige Parasite Shelby, Glamor Parasite Ryuki, Lovelorn Parasite Gill, Obsessed Parasite Raul, and Thieving Parasite Allan. Most are fairly intolerable on the common route, ranging from clueless to overbearing to intolerably rude, but develop well during their own stories. Rudeness disappears and toxic behavior is discouraged as the stories develop, though none are perfect. All the characters are adults with jobs, though there are several flashback scenes to college, high school, and middle school. Ryuki, at 19, is the youngest character, and he owns his own fashion label. All routes end with at least one



YEAR  
2021

CREATOR  
Otomate, Idea Factory

PLATFORM  
Switch

curtained sex scene. Ryuki’s is after his 20th birthday, in his final chapter.

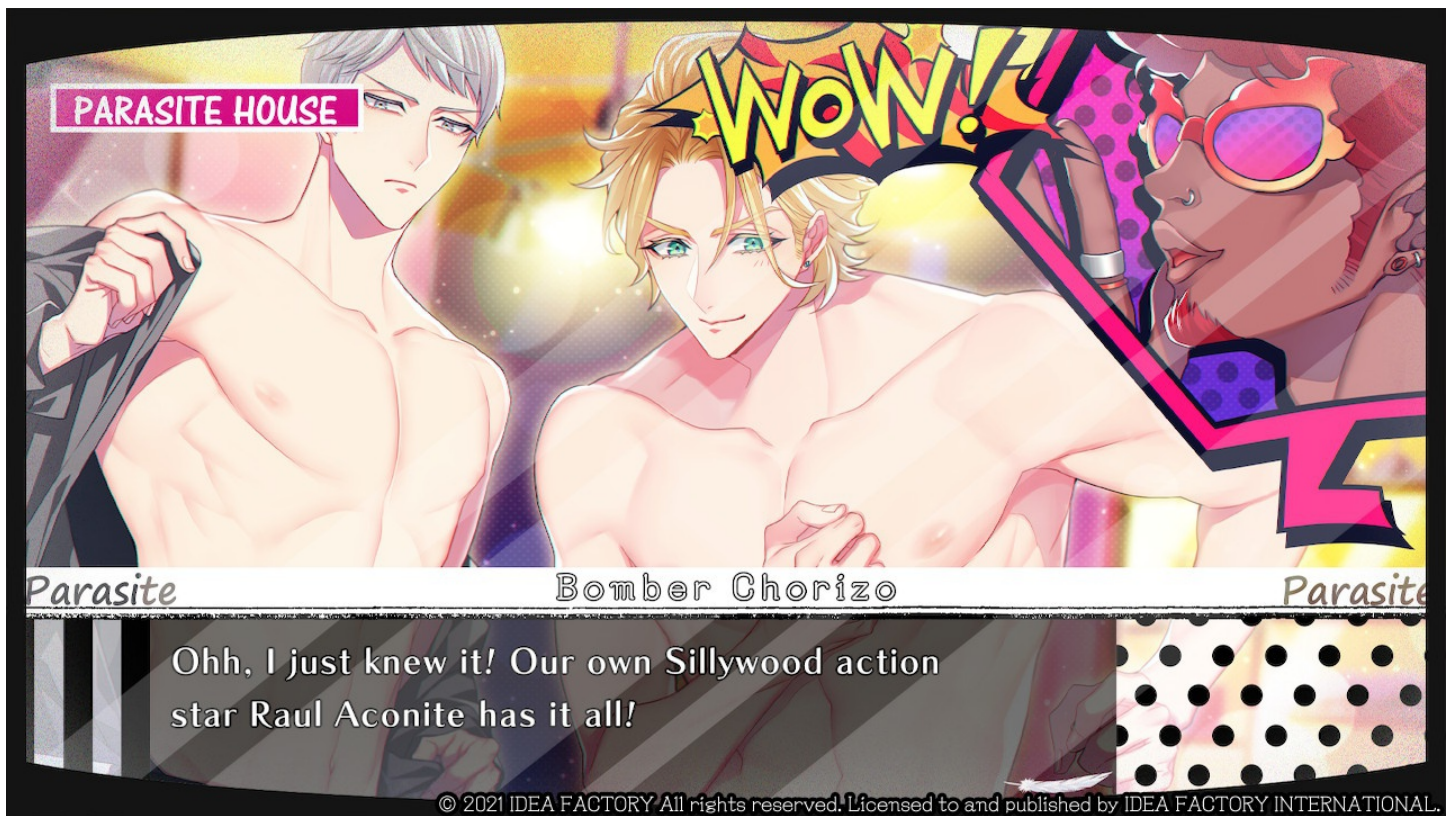
Each route has its own storyline that is (mostly) independent from the others. They range from romcom-type love stories to *Indiana Jones*-type action plots. The Cupid/goddess twist is of varying importance in each story. The common route establishes Cupid’s role in Celestia (realm of the gods) and the basic roles of other gods in the story. Some of the routes are strictly mundane, where Lynette never reveals her true nature, and their lives are untouched by the gods. Others are more directly related to Celestia or go more over-the-top in their fantasy conflicts. Secondary characters are utilized well, with some getting heavily featured on specific routes.

The common route begins each storyline, and a love test and one or two questions per character decide the route. Each route has around 17 chapters, eight choices, and three or four endings. Most of the endings are happy, though many routes will contain an ending where the relationship didn’t work out. All the routes have one choice for a humorous “chance”-based ending where a wrong/right choice causes a halt to the regular story. Notably, one route’s “chance” is fairly morbid. All but one route also has an ending based on a Bad Love Match from the common route test. Two routes (Raul and Allan) are locked behind completing another story first. Completing all five routes unlocks a secret route with a new candidate. The common route has three endings of its own (including “chance” and a kind of Bad Love Match).

The stories are overall light and humorous, but most will have a dramatic conflict somewhere after the halfway point. Generally, Lynette is not looking to fall in love, and is often oblivious to her own developing relationship. One or two of the routes have minor issues with pace and repetitiveness, but while the stories aren’t worth recommending to folks outside







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the otome genre, they were entertaining and engaging. The humor was often corny, but that's exactly what the game intends. Completing all routes and endings, if you let the voice lines play, will take 50-60 hours.

The highlights of *Cupid Parasite* are its music and visual design. The soundtrack is styled after American pop music of the 50s-60s, and there are recognizable cues from songs like *Mr. Sandman* by the Chordettes and *California Girls* by the Beach Boys. The tracks always fit the mood and never quite wear out their welcome. The menus and style of the game are nearly the opposite, in that they are off-putting and difficult to navigate when first starting the game, but are quite unique and appealing after use. Strong pattern and color are used everywhere to excess, on everything from menus to character clothing and settings. Notably, many locations are decorated with copyright-free art, including what appears to be a Botticelli wing at the Los York art museum.

*Cupid Parasite* is perfect for players looking for a light and engaging otome game featuring adult characters. While it doesn't have a lot of story choices or a meaty plot, it's a great light read, and contains a handful of surprising and unexpected twists that should keep most otome gamers engaged.



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# KING OF DRAGON PASS

## REVIEW BY CLAIRE DUNNING

How to begin to describe *King of Dragon Pass*? There are few games like this out there, in practically any way I could choose to talk about. There are few games that you could describe as a cow-herding Bronze Age clan management simulation game. There are few games that expect you to do so much homework before you even start playing, and to track so many different things all at once while you are playing. And yet it is so cleverly woven, enough that it can have you laughing one second, then crying the next when past decisions come back to haunt you. I have never bounced off a game so quickly at first glance; I haven't gotten this addicted to a game in a very long time.

Let's start with the homework, shall we? Because a bit of context really helps when it comes to *King of Dragon Pass*. It is a game set in the Glorantha role-playing game setting, created by my husband's big RPG hero, Greg Stafford. It's been around for a very long time indeed—up there with some of Gygax's creations—and has been the subject of many different board, tabletop and computer games. Glorantha is a setting that puts way more emphasis on culture and mythology than anything else. Science doesn't exist, and everything is explained by myth; for example, rivers run downhill not because of gravity, but because the water dragon was defeated by the gods. And the cows. Did I mention the cows? Everything in this Bronze Age society revolves around cows.

Within this larger context, in *Dragon Pass* you control the fate of one clan daring to reclaim their ancestral homeland. You control who the leaders are, how many people are farmers, hunters, or weaponthanes, which shrines to build and gods to sacrifice to, where to explore, trade, raid or make diplomatic ties, and so much more. The world around you grows and throws events at you which might be random or might be part of a great chain of cause and effect from decisions you have made. Over the years, you go from a small clan to the preeminent clan of the king or queen of this new land.

The narrative heart of the game comes not from the simulationist resource management parts really, though that does play into it. The narrative comes in three places: first, in the story events which come between each season of the year;



**YEAR**  
1999

**CREATOR**  
A Sharp

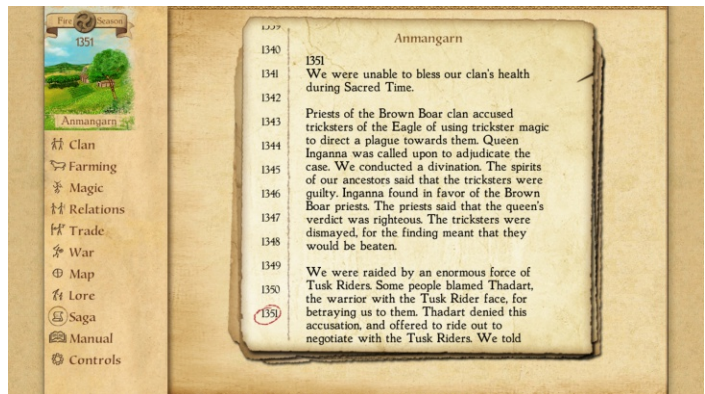
**PLATFORM**  
Windows, Mac,  
Android, iOS

second, in the heroquests you choose to do; and third, in the overarching saga, unique to your clan and hopefully heading towards the ultimate victory of the game. I'll explain each below.

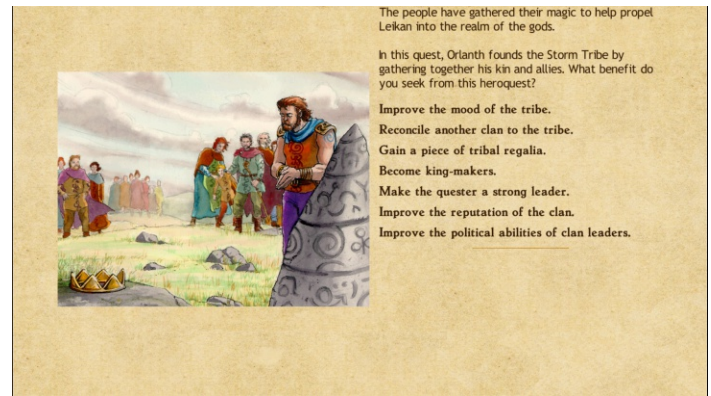
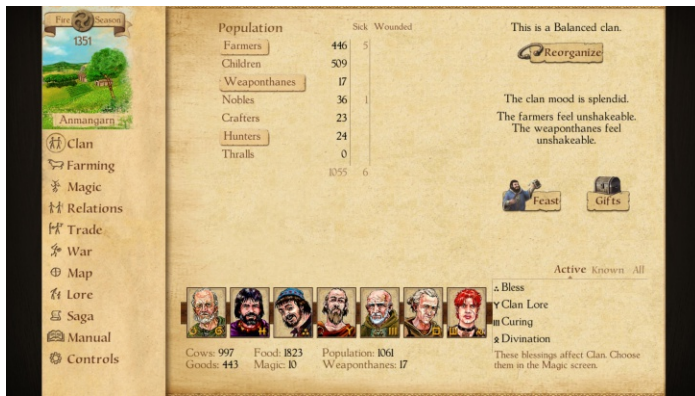
First, story events. I've read up on how these were programmed, and it's really quite wonderful and worth looking into if you yourself are a programmer of narrative games. There are many different events that can happen, such as a trader coming up to you to offer you a unique treasure, or a hermit making a prophecy about your clan. But to make things even more unique, all the names and items and even clans, when they first appear, are pulled out randomly from a bank of culturally and contextually relevant names. Rest assured though, you will see those people, objects and events come back over the years. You will be presented with choices, usually between 3 and 6, and your choices can and will come back later on with more consequences down the years.

For example, early on in the latest playthrough my husband and I did, Bastakos, who was a worshiper of Eormal the Trickster God and on the leadership Ring of the clan, insulted a high-ranking member of another tribe. We chose to apologize by removing Bastakos from the Ring, but it took years and years for us to be able to return him to the Ring. In the meantime, without the good luck influence of the Trickster God on our Ring, suddenly a lot of things started going wrong, in small ways we hadn't noticed before.

Or another wide-reaching event that happened was when, in a tusk raider attack, a brave warrior called Thadart went missing, presumed dead. But then he came back to us, only with a tusked face! We've had to negotiate carefully through the choices we've made ever since then, trying our best to







dissuade the rest of the clan from being mean to him through various events in his life as the years go by, like marriage and the birth of his (tusked) children.

The second major narrative chunk that I mentioned are the heroquests. These are a super important part of the setting where, by re-enacting the lives of the gods, you can get major rewards for your clan. But hoo boy, can they ever go wrong. You have to be really familiar with the myths to perform them, which not only involves sacrificing to the gods to get the secrets of the myths, but involves you, the actual player, thoroughly reading the short story of the myth. And even if you do all that, you can still get messed up by the randomness of the game, such as when we sent our 22-year old cow goddess worshiper on the cow-themed quest. She had to cosplay as a cow throughout and suffer at the claws and jaws of wild animals. We did it all by the book, but still... a month later we found her bones in the woods...

The third part I mentioned was the overarching saga. There is a tab labeled "Saga" which records your story over the years, and what you create there is unlikely to ever be replicated by any other player ever, really. I don't know the maths on that, but given the huge variation in events you can see and the random picking from name banks, I think you would be sorepressed to try to duplicate a playthrough from the past. But what does remain roughly similar is the path to ultimate victory, which is made up of certain events you have to trigger: making a tribe out of several clans, ruling over the clan, getting a prophecy and the key item of the Ten-Year-Ring, conquering every heroquest, and then forging an alliance with the other major cultural group in the area. Even within this thin road to the best ending, there is still a great deal of variation to see.

So now I'll go more into the part I mentioned earlier about how I bounced off. About two years ago when I was first introduced to this game by my husband, I could see the potential in it. I could see that this was the sort of game I could get really into. But the setting and the huge amount of knowledge needed before playing, so that I could understand not only the mythos of the world but also the cultural values, were so inaccessible to me. For example, they're Bronze Age people, and they see raiding as a normal part of life, so boohoo for pacifist little me! And the cows. Cows, cows, cows! Did I mention the cows?



What's the secret to my sudden addiction to this game now that I am revisiting it? Well, I'm sorry, but you won't be able to replicate the main reason, and that is the fact that my husband has spent most of the last two years telling me secondhand about the world of Glorantha, as he has bought more books about it and learned up as much as he can so he can run a tabletop campaign of it.

But here's the thing. If you can get deep enough in—if you're the sort of person who can immerse themselves in the obscure lore of a RPG setting like my husband can—then this game is going to reward your engagement so, so much. You're going to get personally attached to things happening, such as when the game tells you an older member of your clan died, and you remember all the deeds they did for you over the years. You might find yourself humming strains from the upbeat and tone-setting soundtrack as you go about life, like I do. Two years after meeting this game for the first time, I am into it, looking forward to it, prioritizing it over other pastimes, and it is no longer an obligation but honest-to-goodness fun. The cult following this game has garnered over the two decades speaks for itself. The inaccessibility of *King of Dragon Pass* is both the problem and the charm of this game, just like its utter uniqueness as a piece of gaming history.

Note: The reviewer played the 2015 PC re-release of the original 1999 game.

# WORLD OF HORROR

## REVIEW BY JAMES LINDLEY

*World of Horror* is an Early Access horror RPG that feels like something Junji Ito has been crunching on for the last decade on a Commodore 64 in his back room. Which is to say it's a) very pixelated and evokes another era in gaming, and b) looks absolutely incredible.

In *World of Horror*, you play a young person investigating a series of strange events in 1980s Japan. You collect items, manage your characters stats, and try to survive as you solve a series of mysteries before the game's climactic encounter at the locked lighthouse at the edge of town. In structure, it's not so different than many other indie roguelites or deckbuilders. You run through a series of events, manage your character's health, and modify your abilities with items and/or perks gained on a level-up. And yet, it doesn't quite come together in the same way as many other indie titles. But first, the positives.

Seriously, the aesthetic for *World of Horror* is astounding. Each scene is hand-drawn and breathing with life and subtle creeping detail. It's unsettling and inviting at once. I am not familiar enough with Ito's work to say how much of it is original and how much of it is homage, but it all looks absolutely incredible. What's more, the pixel style adds a dot-matrixy, early comic book kind of pulp feel to the experience that is just so excellent. I've been experimenting with pixel art over the last year, and I've saved dozens of screenshots from *World of Horror* just to have a closer look at the tasteful dithering in the backgrounds. It's lovely. Scary too, but really lovely.

The sound design is also very good. *World of Horror* balances an early 1990s style of background music with sudden and unsettling bursts that can legitimately startle a player. At one point, I'd walked away from my computer and thought the sudden and terrifying banging noises were actually coming from someone pounding on my own front door. Which, you know, is not particularly welcome late at night. It also feels



This is probably the right jacket for demon hunting.

**YEAR**  
2020

**CREATOR**  
Panstasz

**PLATFORM**  
Windows, Mac

just right for the era that it's invoking. I remember my old computer speakers crackling and popping in exactly the same way. If I close my eyes, I can still see the Logitech logo and hear the papery punch of sound coming through those speakers. I'm not sure exactly how it does it, but *World of Horror* manages to evoke this type of sound perfectly.

Unfortunately, the game stumbles a bit with its central mechanics. At its core, *World of Horror* plays like a *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel. You're presented with various scenes and then asked to make a choice. It works like this:

A little library has popped up in front of the abandoned house. You could have sworn it wasn't there last week, but now here it is. You look inside to find a single book bound in dark cloth.

- 1) Reach inside and take the book <<<<
- 2) Look closer at the abandoned house
- 3) Pull your coat tighter and keep walking

Roll check. Failure!

The book is old. A strange symbol is painted on the cover. As you open it, a single photo falls from the pages. It's a picture of you. You're standing in a room you don't recognize and wearing the same clothes as now. You look tired.

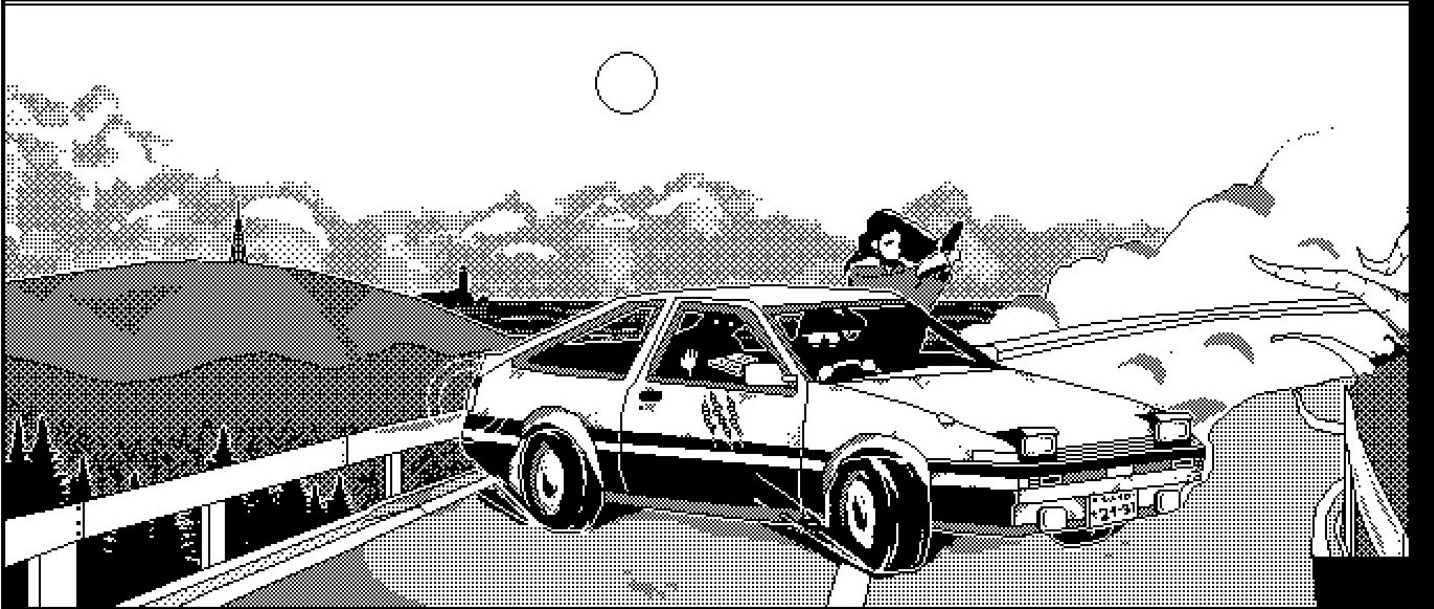
Take two reason damage.



This guy is not having a great day.



恐怖の世界恐怖の世界恐怖の世界恐怖の世界恐怖の世界恐怖の世界恐怖の世界



ARMED WITH CLUES, SPELLS, AND YOUR DWINDLING SANITY, YOU'LL INVESTIGATE MYSTERIES ACROSS THE CITY... AND IN REALMS BEYOND.

The art is just so good.

None of the above feel like intelligent decisions because you don't know what stat or ability you'll be testing with your choice. These all feel like blind door number one or door number two kinds of choices. As a result, encounters can feel altogether too random and lack strategy or planning. Put another way, in embracing the structure of a *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel, *World of Horror* also embraces the unsatisfying "well you shouldn't have picked that option, and now you're dead" arbitrariness of these novels. This can make the interesting and well-written scenarios feel a bit flat and unsatisfying.

Further, the game doesn't always give the player a lot of room to explore and really investigate these scenarios. You're typically prompted to explore certain locations which, if explored enough, lead to random events and scenes that gradually move the scenario forward. But these scenes don't always feel earned or narratively consistent. Like, I didn't really choose to investigate the apartments—I just clicked that area on the map because that's what the game prompted me to do. In fact, I often had no idea why I was investigating a particular area. I was just clicking what the game asked me to click on. And while not every scenario plays out this way—there are some scenes with some really great interactive environments that almost feel like an adventure game—most seemed to follow a general map-clicking pattern. As a result, I often felt like I was being led by the nose through a scenario,

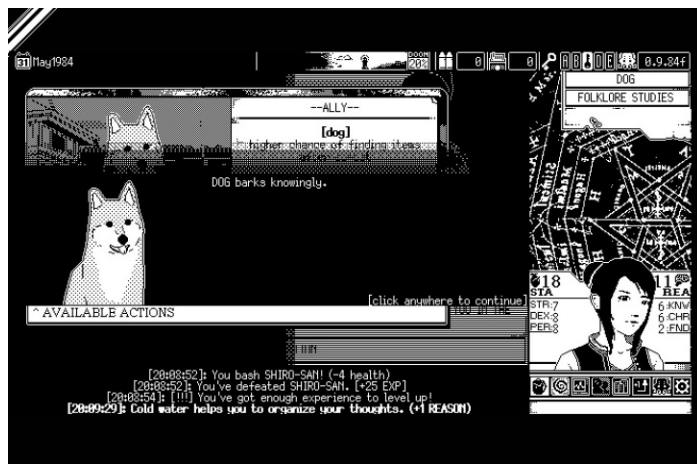
and this diminished both the joy (and horror) of exploration.

And finally, these scenarios typically culminate in a combat event that doesn't feel quite fair or deep enough for a satisfying event. In combat, you can pick from a number of weak or strong attacks or special moves like prayer or item use. But ultimately, all the available options feel a bit weak, and you're left just trading punches with an unspeakable horror with a hundred fists. These events can also seriously injure your character, and even a random combat encounter during the investigation phase can kill your character and end a run outright. This, much like the fundamentally blind choices in other events, can feel like bad RNG and lead to a feeling of frustration.

But despite these criticisms, I really enjoyed *World of Horror*. It's an extremely interesting experience that combines an incredible sense of style with some ambitious game mechanics. If you're interested in pixel art or Junji Ito, or if you'd just like to spend a couple hours with a spooky *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel, then I'd highly recommend it. But if you want something a little deeper, or something like a narrative roguelite, or maybe even an all-time classic, then you might want to wait a little while longer. I think *World of Horror* could still be those things, but it might need a bit more time in an otherworldly dark to grow into itself first.



Yeah, honestly, I never know what to do about this decision either.



The dog is very good though.



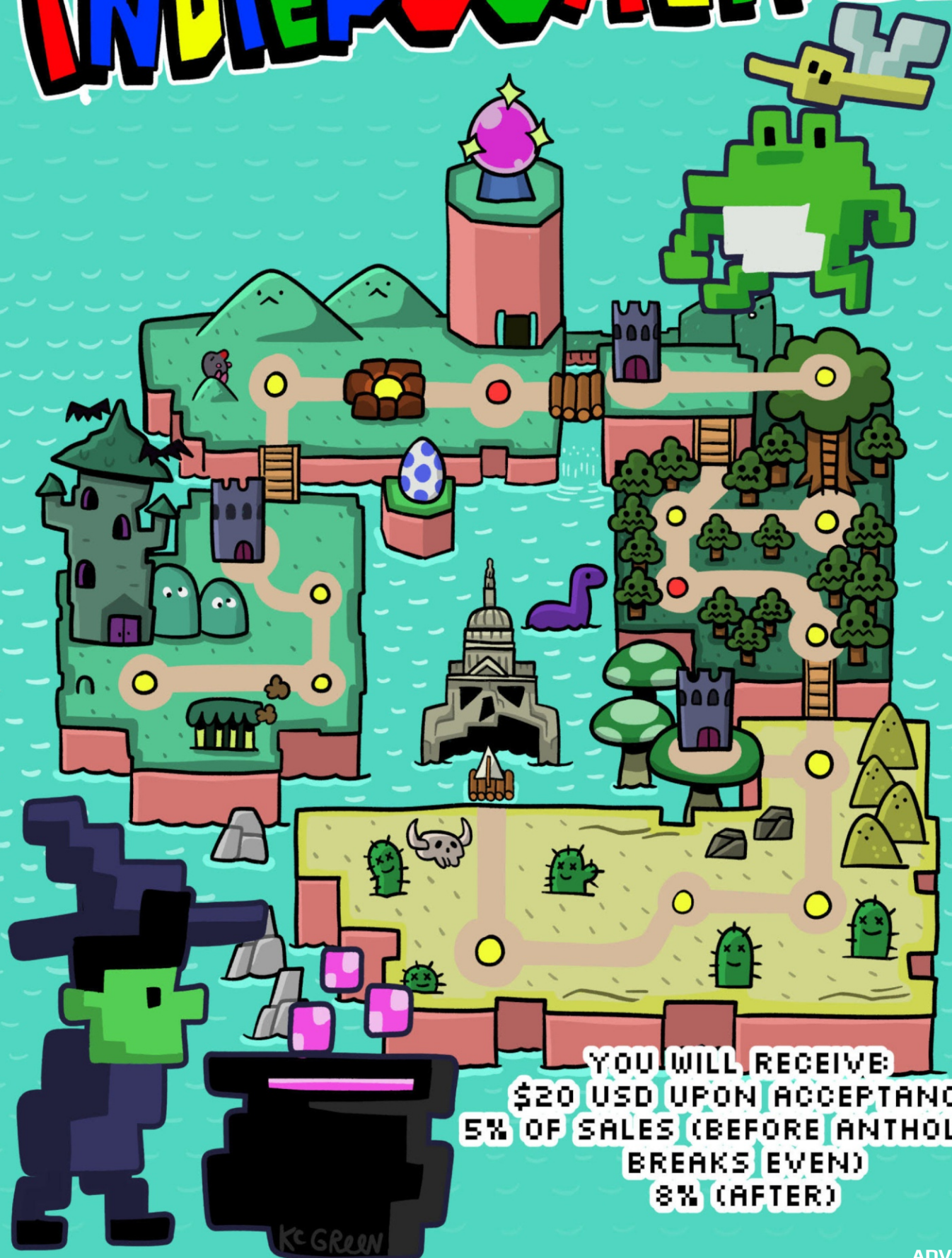
She seems nice? Probably just nervous.



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# MILK OUTSIDE A BAG OF MILK OUTSIDE A BAG OF MILK

REVIEW BY ROBOBARBIE

Sometimes, it chokes you. You claw at the nothingness at your throat, gasp at the dead spin of the fan on your ceiling, and yet that monster still tightens its grip. Embers leak from its back until each surface nearby is ablaze, and all you can smell is a horrible smoke of your own making. And then, just when you start to wonder if the heat is actually real and swear that you'll find scalds on your fingertips in the morning—you're free. Your phone chimes. The A/C kicks on. Something reminds you of other things. Something distracts you long enough to allow yourself to take a long, blisteringly cold breath as you lift yourself off your sheets and slouch inwards. And, just for a moment, you have peace. You have yourself again.

Nikita Kyukov's games scratch an itch of mine that has yet to be scratched by any other VN developer. Simplistic in its descriptions, yet somehow so visceral and all-consuming, their two *Bag of Milk* titles explore just a few hours of the life of a mentally unstable girl just trying to wrap up another day in her never-ending life. The first title, *Milk Inside a Bag of Milk*, details her nightmare journey to buy milk from the store. The sequel, *Milk Outside a Bag of Milk*, walks us through a nightly routine they manage after they return home. Each premise from a distance doesn't seem notable, but once you are placed into the mind of the girl and see everything she sees, it's easy to find yourself wondering how anyone can endure that every day.

YEAR

2021

CREATOR

Nikita Kryukov

PLATFORM

Windows, Mac, Linux

The games are meant to be played as experiences, from what I can tell. There's no real start or finish for any sort of plot, no third act twist or slew of characters. There's just you, the girl, and the monsters she manages. The ending you get is determined by how you decide to talk to her as one of the voices in her head. Do you encourage her to believe the delusions? Berate her for acting childish? Force her to revisit memories she'd rather avoid?

The *Outside* title, released late last year, is a significantly improved sequel—that's not to say that the first game was poorly made in any way (I think I still prefer it for its simplicity), but it features some beautiful animations, sprites, and CG moments that really enhance the story. Not to mention it has a much bigger soundtrack (which the Steam page describes as "oppressive" and "vicious", aptly) that shows off Nikita's ability to use sound to construct suffocating atmospheres. The second title also includes a point-and-click adventure section that is one of the bigger impacts on the







ending you receive, dependent once again on how you react to the items found in her room. The animations accompanying the character movement in conversations or the story segments for CGs enhance the immersion into the girl's world as well. Overall, I just really enjoyed the small touches and bits of care that Nikita put into this title.

Comments on the Steam store page for the *Bag of Milk* titles are full of people resonating with the girl's visions—and, well, I'm not an exception to that. I think anyone who struggles with

mental illness of any kind can see themselves a bit in the night of that girl getting milk and then struggling to accept that sleep has to come. The new game is wonderfully painful, surprisingly funny, and brutally honest about how your mind can twist your world into something unrecognizable, and it's a small comfort to see that you aren't alone when you are in that comment section. If you're feeling introspective and ready for a fresh indie psychological horror experience, check out the *Bag of Milk* games—they're short, inexpensive, and well worth the purchase.



# TALLY HO

## REVIEW BY KATY133

### WHAT IS IT?

*Tally Ho* is a comedic interactive fiction game written by Kreg Segall and published by Choice of Games. It is around 600,000 words in total.

### THE STORY

Set in the 1920s, you play as the domestic servant (a butler or maid-like position) of Rory, an aristocrat who is very kind-hearted but also very foolish.

Over the course of ten chapters, you will be tasked with different predicaments Rory (as well as their friends and relations) get into. From accidental engagements to stolen paintings, you'll need to keep your wits about you if you wish to save your employer from ruin.

### THE GAME MECHANICS

Being an interactive fiction game from Choice of Games, the main form of game mechanics you'll be interacting with is choosing what your character does or says next from a list. The game allows for many choices that allow you to take each playthrough in very different directions.

Character customisation allows you to pick your first and last name (either from a list or typing it out) and your character's gender (male, female, or nonbinary).

You can also retroactively change aspects of the story, such as your character's backstory, and the genders of several other characters, including your employer, Rory.

As you play, you'll notice your stats page changing. This tracks your different "sundry skills" (Bold, Culture, Intellect,

YEAR  
2017

CREATOR  
Kreg Segall

PLATFORM  
Windows, Mac, Linux,  
Android, iOS

Observe, Persuade, Skulduggery, Soothing) as well as your reputation (Renown, Tranquility, Suspicion), your relationships with different characters, and the amount of money you have.

These different factors will affect the outcome of choices you make, allowing you to fail or succeed with preparing a complicated meal, or having another character lend a hand when you're in a jam. It allows for you to make amazing feats of improbable success, or to make a complete, embarrassingly sudden pratfall of yourself.

Being the perfect valet, maid, or servant is hard, and this game's design makes you soon realise that. There is only so much time in the game's story to let you explore things in a single playthrough, forcing you to manage your time and balance your top priorities in the game, whichever you decide are the most important to fulfill.

With the game being heavily-inspired by a certain series (that I shall name later) about a gentleman trying to stay single, despite multiple love interests, romance is a major theme in *Tally Ho*. Players have the ability to not only play matchmaker with the various couples in the story but also pursue their own love interests, no matter the gender of your character or the

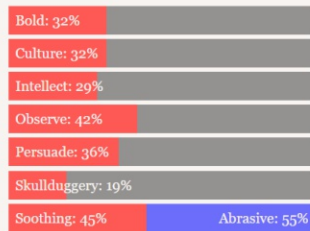




# AT YOUR SERVICE

Name: Reginald Jeeves

## YOUR SUNDRY SKILLS



## YOUR REPUTATION



love interest's. The game also has poly options, allowing you to have multiple love interests.

### THE WRITING

Aside from the range of choice and branching paths, the writing is where *Tally Ho* shines. The game is influenced by the works of writer P.G. Wodehouse, and fans of his series *Jeeves and Wooster* in particular, will feel right at home with the story. From the dramatic characters to the zany schemes you partake in to put things right, there is a lot of enjoyment to be had here.

The writing's style has wit, observing the events play out and letting the dialogue bring humour to the situation, whether it's from the way Rory peppers his words with 1920s idioms, or other characters failing to see the silliness of their decisions.

### THE GUI

The game includes some accessibility options, like a dark mode (as well as sepia and white backgrounds), and a setting to increase the text size. You can also turn off the sliding animation transition between pages.

The UI is clear and minimalist, using the same user interface common in games made using ChoiceScript. It is simple, but readable and intuitive at a glance.

### THE ART AND AUDIO

While there is the cover art on the game's Steam store page, there are no illustrations in-game, inviting players to use their imagination to picture how they, their love interests, their enemies, and their surroundings look.

There's also no audio, and I recommend playing your own smooth jazz in the background as you play.

### THE CONS

Making a game based on a writer as top-tier as P.G. Wodehouse is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, I love finding more works that remind me of one of my favourite writers of all time. I've had moments where I had to pause reading because I was laughing so hard my sides were hurting.

On the other hand, every imitation of Wodehouse is just that: an imitation. Even attempts at this that are officially approved by the Wodehouse estate can end up feeling like a fanfic that doesn't \*quite\* nail the same narration style.

I appreciate the challenges of writing historic fiction in a style similar to a man who wrote during the period that you are now trying to write in. What was taken for granted as everyday to him is now a thing of the distant past.

*Tally Ho* walks on this fine edge, and depending on your familiarity of the works of Wodehouse, this might not even be an issue. But I give a word of caution to *Jeeves and Wooster* fans to take *Tally Ho* as its own creature and not as a 1:1 game adaptation of Wodehouse. The writing style is different enough that I think waiting and wanting to see more Wodehouse-isms will only lead to a sense of disappointment. Take it as its own thing, despite moments of seeing a flash of Bertie Wooster in Rory Wintermint or a dash of Aunt Dahlia in Aunt Petunia.

### CONCLUSION

For those looking for a detailed butler simulator that allows you to role-play as the perfect butler, maid, or valet, this game is for you.

# BALDR SKY

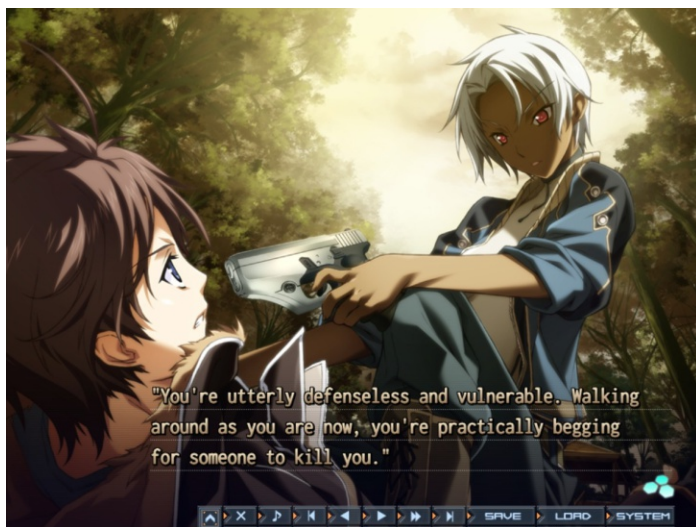
## REVIEW BY ANDI HAGEN

I don't usually like Japanese visual novels. This is weird because I enjoy anime, manga, Japanese novels, and other genres of Japanese games. However, many Japanese visual novels just aren't quite interactive enough for me. They are all way too long as well. Knowing that, I gave *Baldr Sky* a try anyway. I'm not sure why. I guess I'm not ready to give up on Japanese visual novels yet. *Baldr Sky's* mecha battle system was also sort of intriguing to me.

*Baldr Sky* is more of a story than a game. It is set in a dystopian, cyberpunk hellscape ravaged by war, pollution, and civil unrest. The central conflict involves two factions. One wants to be governed by benevolent but inscrutable artificial intelligences. The other rejects artificial intelligence and the virtual world.

The world of *Baldr Sky* is extremely bleak. The government is totally corrupt. There are constant riots. Most of the population spends all their time in virtual reality. As I write that, it sounds like real life, but *Baldr Sky* somehow makes it sound much worse. Scenes in *Baldr Sky* constantly reinforce these bad vibes. In one, you infiltrate an internet brothel where women are trapped in virtual reality and forced to be virtual sex slaves. In another, a cult leader creates AI-controlled clones of dead people to trick their loved ones into joining his cult.

You play a male "second gen", an engineered person who can connect to the internet without a computer. You have amnesia, and the plot of *Baldr Sky* involves piecing together your past as a virtual reality mercenary. When I realized that the protagonist was an amnesiac, I rolled my eyes hard. Although this is typically an annoying trope, *Baldr Sky* manages to create some real mystery around it. As you discover your identity, you learn about traumatic events in your past. You also learn that you are on a mission to find the creator of a viral nano-weapon that could kill all human life. The stakes are definitely high!



**YEAR**  
2009

**CREATOR**  
Giga

**PLATFORM**  
Windows



Half of *Baldr Sky* takes place in the present life of the protagonist. In these scenes, you track down clues about a military conspiracy and fight virtual battles in your VR mecha. The rest of the story takes place in your past. In these scenes, you are a university student living in a dorm full of cute, friendly women. The two narratives are tonally opposites. The present is dangerous and unsettling. The past is light-hearted and nostalgic with lots of romance and comedy. The two narratives eventually meet in a shocking and violent way.

The structure of *Baldr Sky* irritates me. Seeing the whole story requires playing through the game six times, and each time through takes around 15 hours. That is a lot of content. Maybe too much. The six routes must be played in a predefined order, and each involves you forming a romantic relationship with one of six different women. The routes are quite different from each other, but they tell the same story from different perspectives. I only played through the first one. It was a complete and satisfying story, but there were some major plot points that were left open for later routes.

*Baldr Sky* has a lot of reading but not a lot of gameplay. You make a choice every couple hours, but most don't impact the story. Each route has two or three endings, but these are mostly determined by how well you do in the battles rather than your choices.

The mecha battles are pretty cool though. You control the real-time action from an overhead view. It feels a little like a one-on-one fighting game, although most of the battles





aren't one-on-one. You can dash, create combos, cancel attacks, and perform aerial juggles. There are RPG-like systems to customize and upgrade your mecha. The large arsenal of ranged and melee weapons is fun to experiment with. Although the battle system isn't insanely deep, tweaking your mecha and fighting is a nice way to break up all the reading. Battles occur every hour or so and only last a few minutes, so you don't have time to get sick of them.

The original Japanese version of *Baldr Sky* features pornographic scenes. These are missing from the English-language version, but there is an unofficial patch to restore them. I played *Baldr Sky* without them, and the story didn't seem like it was lacking anything important. Even without nudity, *Baldr Sky* is definitely not for kids. There is murder, torture, rape, and every type of abuse. The sex happens off-screen, but there is some sexual innuendo, and the protagonist has some really dopey, horny dialogue. One character, an underground doctor, runs her clinic out of a sex toy shop. There is also a really gross make-out scene. "Her gums, the roof of her mouth, her tongue... I thoroughly lick them all, taking in all the saliva as it forms." Thank you, *Baldr Sky*. Now I know what kissing is.

By this point, you should know whether *Baldr Sky* is your jam or not. If you like dark, cyberpunk anime, and you don't mind a lot of reading and not much gameplay, *Baldr Sky* is probably up your alley. It has competent writing, great art with extremely detailed backgrounds, and even greater music. The jazzy electronica soundtrack creates a really groovy mood. The dialogue is also fully voice-acted in Japanese.

*Baldr Sky* isn't really my thing, but the story and world-building hooked me in for the 15 hours it took to beat the first route. The battle system is also kind of addictive. In fact, I wish there was a lot more battling. It is one of *Baldr Sky*'s most original features, and it adds much-needed interactivity to the game.



# QUEERS IN LOVE AT THE END OF THE WORLD

REVIEW BY NAOMI "BEZ" NORBEZ

*When we have each other, we have everything.*

Love is desperate. Queer love is even more so. In an oppressed world, by design, queer love is a clinging thing, a type of love that must hold tightly against the many obstacles it faces (ranging from microaggressions to death, depending on where you are in the world).

Anna Anthropy perfectly captures this desperation in the Twine *Queers in Love at the End of the World*. In this short game, you are a queer person with your lover. The world is going to end in ten real-time seconds. Do what you will with that time.

There are many ways to spend your last moments with your lover. You can hug her, tell her you love her, fuck her, breathe with her, among many, *many* other options. I don't think any player has seen the full extent of what this game has to offer – there are only ten seconds, after all, and you can only do so much.

But that's the magic of it: *you can only do so much*. You don't have much time to spend, and less time to waste. How do you let the one you love know how you feel—how much do you convey your appreciation before “[e]verything is wiped away”?

By design, the game is desperate. Say what you can, do what you will before it's too late. Before your final moments, how do you show love?

Do you show it with a hand up your lover's skirt? One quick fuck before you go? A passionate kiss? Just saying, “I love you” over and over? All these little actions are in the game, and because it's the end, they are given meaning beyond their

YEAR  
2013

CREATOR  
Anna Anthropy

PLATFORM  
Browser

immediate meaning. They are a final expression, the last goodbye, a passionate rebellion of inaction as the world comes to a close. In that sense, the game is almost punk.

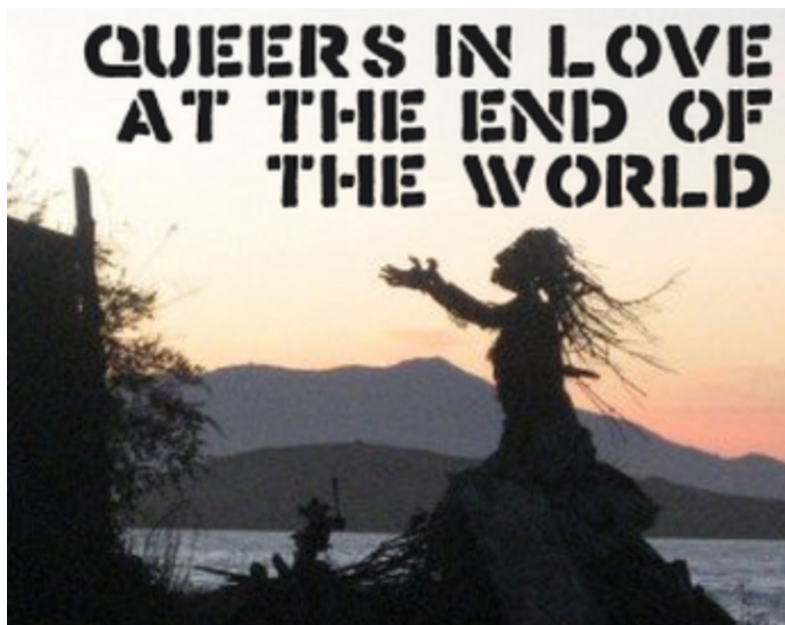
The best and saddest part of the game is that you can't stop the end. There is no secret ending where, if you click the right things, you find the undo button and save the world. There is no alternate version of the game where these characters turn out alright. It is the end. And you can be in denial about that fact, or you can embrace it and do what you can to celebrate the life you have left.

There's also no knowing what exactly is ending the world. It could be nuclear war or climate change; it could be illness or mass shootings. Or it could be figurative language, and perhaps only the world of these two characters is ending, and the rest of Earth is safe. We have no way of knowing. The moment between these lovers is the only thing that matters.

The only thing that matters is our desperate, queer love.

And when we have each other, we have everything.

Note: This article was originally printed in [Level Story](#).





# BLOOMING PANIC

## REVIEW BY ANDI HAGEN

Finally, a romance visual novel for the modern era of geekdom! *Blooming Panic* is an otome game set in a Discord server for fans of a fictional webnovel. The game's interface imitates Discord, and the dialogue feels like authentic internet fandom banter. Every so often, you join a video chat. These use static portraits like most visual novels, but they are fully voiced, and the acting is quite good. The actor for Xyx is especially notable. I didn't even really like Xyx's character, but the actor's performance grabbed me hard.

*Blooming Panic* is full of immersive touches. You can read Discord profiles for the various characters. You can give commands to the server bot. The server has different channels to switch between. You can even read detailed chapter summaries of the fictional webnovel. The result feels uncannily realistic. With a little imagination, it's easy to pretend you are chatting with real people in a real Discord server.

*Blooming Panic*'s presentation is really cool, but that wouldn't matter if the story was boring. Thankfully, the game's writing is totally absorbing. There are four romantic interests. All of them are men, but you can be whatever gender you want. After a short common route, you end up in a route for one of these four dudes. I really enjoyed the two routes I played. The characters are fun and likable, but they also have some interesting and challenging problems. One is struggling to recover from a recent injury. Another has a checkered legal history. One pleasant subplot involves the whole server collaborating on a zine. But some of the subplots are more dramatic. In another, your creepy ex-boyfriend joins the server and proceeds to stir shit up.

Based on your choices, your favor with your love interest rises and falls, but this is hidden behind the scenes. Gaming the relationship system in *Blooming Panic* is hard. The choices that affect your relationships typically aren't obvious. Although there are happy and sad endings, even the sad endings I encountered were sort of interesting.

Each playthrough of *Blooming Panic* lasts a couple of hours, but playing through multiple times is rewarding. Each of the four routes is very different, and they don't share scenes. It is fun to see the same characters and their different interactions on the various routes. Even the secondary characters feel very alive.

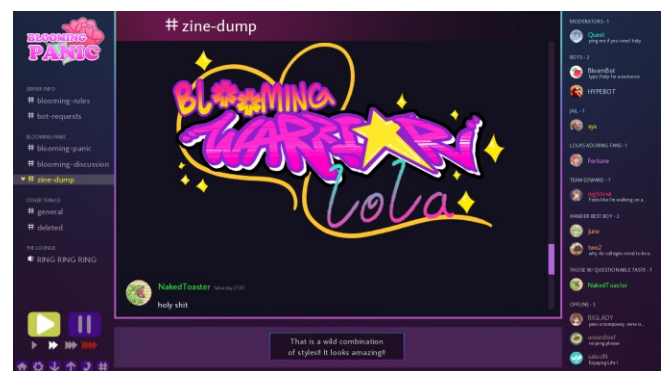
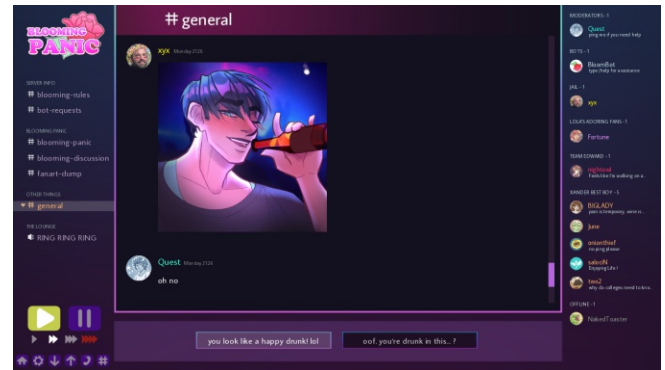
*Blooming Panic* features engaging stories and characters presented in a cool and novel way. If you like otome visual novels, you should definitely check it out. Although I'm not really a romance game fanatic, and I'm not part of any fandom, I got sucked in anyway.

*Blooming Panic* has a cool R&B theme song with lyrics and everything! Wow!

YEAR  
2021

CREATOR  
robobarbie

PLATFORM  
Windows, Mac



# MINI REVIEWS

## BY CHEST BUTLERHOME

Listen up, people! I wrote all kinds of cool reviews for the last issue, and I didn't get one single piece of fan mail. Did any of you even read this column? Just because I'm a ghost doesn't mean I don't want any attention. I don't actually like video games, so if I'm not getting any fan mail then I don't know why I'm even doing this.

Anyway, I scrounged up some more radical, fascinating games for this issue. Check them out! Every time I plumb the depths of itch.io, I think, "Wow! There is so much porn!" After that, I think, "God bless all these totally sweet games. Hopefully, someone will play them some day." That day is now. Get out there and experience these suckers firsthand.

### BACKWATER CREEK

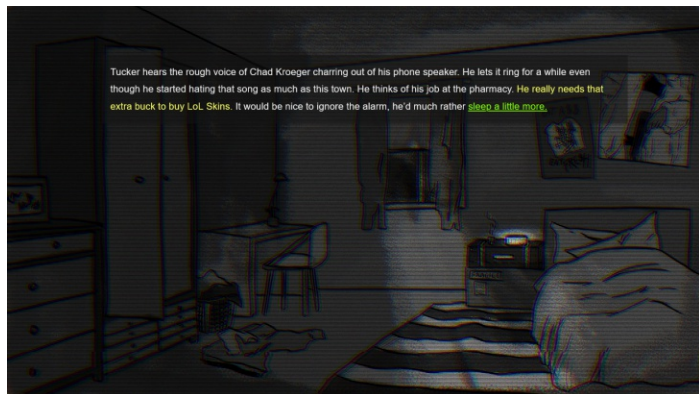
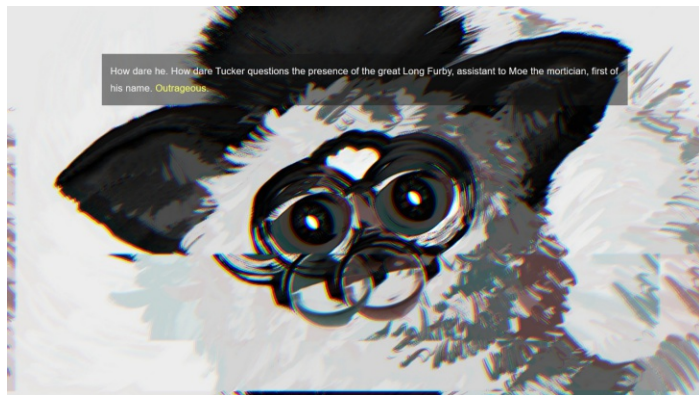
Year: 2021

Creator: Natascha2 and Skaterboii

Platform: Windows, Mac, Linux, Browser

You are an anxious, listless, gloomy person living in the crappy town of Backwater Creek. You can go to your crappy job, shoot guns with your redneck cousin, help a bunch of cows who have been tipped, or do lots of other stuff.

You can also die a lot! A forklift might stab you in the head. A cactus might fall and smash you. But each death unlocks new paths and brings you closer to solving the mystery of what happened to your best friend. Featuring "60 illustrations", "7 endings", and "1 secret ending", this is one delightfully surreal and unsettling game with lots of weird, bad vibes.



### DRIVE TIME RADIO

Year: 2021

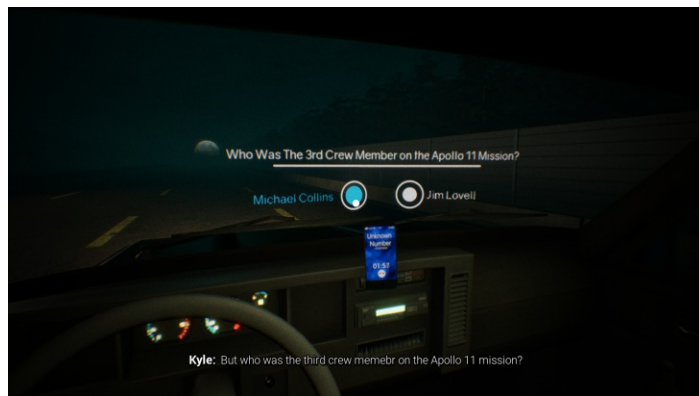
Creator: Jackson

Platform: Windows

In this driving sim and trivia game, you are a caller on a radio show run by eldritch monsters or whatever. To win tickets to Beach-A-Palooza you have to answer trivia questions while swerving your car around obstacles and avoiding "immediate psychic death".

The questions range from "Who was the 20th president of the United States? Garfield (man) or Garfield (cat)" to "What day was the Battle of Hastings on?" The answer is Wednesday, by the way. Write that down. It could save your soul. The writing and voice acting are totally rock solid, and they deliver hard on the game's awesome premise.

You had better play this now, because in a couple years, no one will remember what a radio show is, and this game will make no sense.





# PLUBERTIUM: INTERGALACTIC EXCHANGE STUDENT SIMULATOR

Year: 2021

Creator: TeamLazerBeam

Platform: Windows, Mac

The art in this game is just bananas. The colors are gnarly, and there are photos mixed in. This is totally the best part of the whole game. It looks just great!

In *Plubertium*, you play a human exchange student on a planet full of cool aliens. The choices you make determine whether you are cool or a dweeb. You might go to the grocery store and buy inedible alien food. Or maybe you show up at high school and look like an idiot after you sneeze insultingly in front of the whole class. You can also take psychedelic drugs and die. Is there a way to avoid dying? If so, someone tell me! The ending is kind of abrupt, and I want to play more!



## GAME OF THE MONTH

You thought this was a nice column about games, but it's actually a cutthroat competition! Every issue, I choose one game to rule the others. If you don't play any of these games, this is the one you should regret not playing the most.

And this month, the queen of all games happens to be... *Kyle Is Famous!*

## KYLE IS FAMOUS

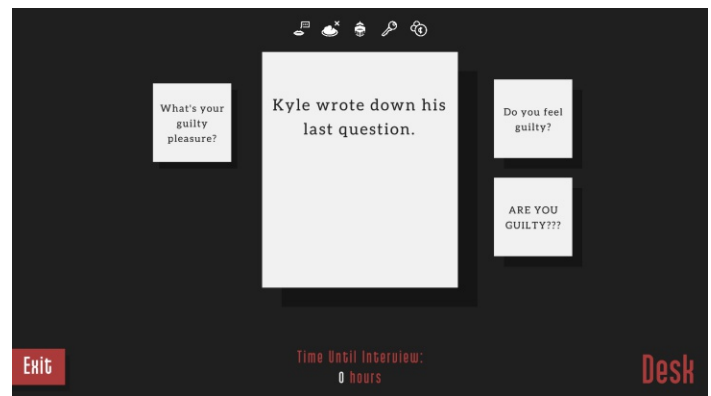
Year: 2019

Creator: Ducky

Platform: Windows, Mac, Linux, Android, Browser

In this entirely text-based game, you are a talkshow host who must prepare for a big interview. You do this by collecting bugs, spying on your neighbor, turning into a ghost, eating your fridge, and other ridiculous things.

There are 21 endings, and earning most of them involves acting totally rude or deranged. If you think really random, wacky humor is hilarious, you'll probably love this. But I'm classy, so I only laughed a couple times. However, I did really enjoy finding all the secrets. If you want to unearth all the endings, you really need to go deep into this thing.



# I JUST WANT TO BE SINGLE!!

PREVIEW BY KATY133

## WHAT IS IT?

*I Just Want to be Single!!* is a visual novel that describes itself as an "anti-dating sim where you don't want to date".

## THE STORY

Love-Love All Girls High School is all of a flutter this morning. A new transfer student (fem non-binary), Aya, is surprised to find the girls in the school inexplicably falling in love with her and her new haircut.

To some, this might be a dream come true, however, Aya doesn't want to date anyone.

As Aya maneuvers her way around the school, she meets a cast of other students at the all-girls school. Kaede, a bookish, clumsy tour guide. Akane, a sporty, ambitious jock. Katsumi, a rich girl with perfectionist (and possibly jealous yandere) tendencies. Nozomin, a small-yet-aggressive girl who wears her coat like a cape and describes herself like a superhero. And Shizuka, a very quiet artist.

Oh, and also a Random Girl. She would be very angry if I left her out.

Can Aya make it through school without being pushed into a romance? And can Aya perhaps... find friendship at this new school?

## THE GAME MECHANICS

In *I Just Want to be Single!!*, you make choices by physically typing out what you want to say or do from a list placed in a thought bubble above Aya's head. Since Aya gets nervous, you'll sometimes need to hold down the continue button to simulate breathing, filling up a bar. If the bar isn't filled enough or filled too much, it can lead to Aya's answer coming out differently.

You'll also sometimes be prompted to type in something, anything, without a list of choices, leading to funny results. This is also occasionally presented as a puzzle where you're asked to remember something that was said to you earlier.



## RELEASE DATE

TBA

## CREATOR

m.

## PLATFORM

Windows, Mac, Linux

Adding to the difficulty, sometimes answering questions is timed. These moments are used to good effect, simulating the tension Aya is feeling and incentivizing the player to type the choices that are the shortest and most non-committal.

## THE ART AND GUI

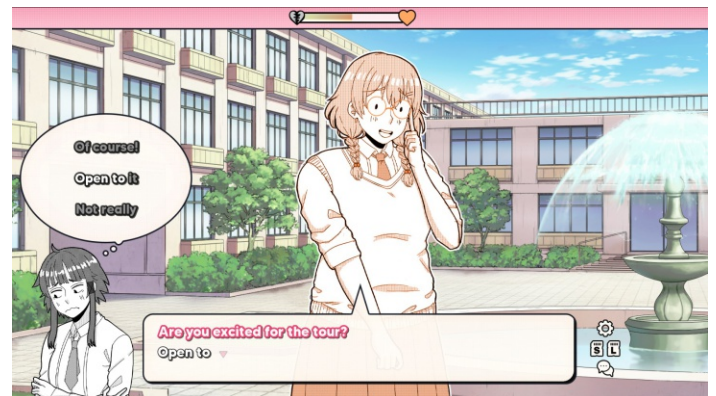
The amount of animation in this game was a highlight of the demo for me. Sprites bounce, slide, vibrate, and jiggle into view. Buttons twitch. Hearts fly out of characters. There are scene transitions made to look like you're opening your eyes. The lighting changes for a dramatic effect.

Throughout, there is a manga-influenced aesthetic. There are panel segments of scenes playing out like comic panels. Screentones and action lines fill the frames. There's an attention to detail in the visuals that I appreciate.

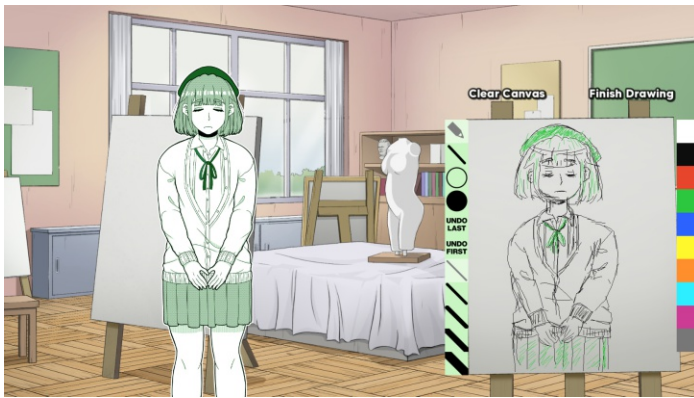
The preferences also include a "VTuber Mode" that allows streamers to place themselves where Aya's character portrait usually appears, with Aya moved to the other side of the screen. Not only is this a creative way to allow streamers room for their camera that doesn't obscure important parts of the screen, it also invites players to livestream the game, letting them know that the developer is assuredly happy with the idea.

## THE WRITING

The demo uses a tour of the school as a clever way to have the player and Aya be introduced to each main character one by one, giving each their own introductory scene.







The characters are funny, having their own archetypes that players familiar with tropes will recognise. These tropes are pushed to comical extremes, having things like characters not just "shy", but actually physically \*invisible\* to some of the other characters.

The game goes in meta directions, not breaking the fourth wall necessarily, but nicely leaning on it. The expectations of stat bars have moments where they're subverted and Aya also points out how some of her classmates appear as silhouettes to her.

While this is a demo, there appears to be foreshadowing already of Aya having something she wants to hide from others. There is a nice, poignant moment near the end where she and another character talk about feelings. This perhaps promises answers to a question posed by the game: Can Aya find friendship?

### THE AUDIO

The music is peppy and upbeat, making you feel like a high school anime protagonist. The ending song includes vocals, which is a nice touch.

There's also audio for the text and interface. The characters each have their own blip vocals that play for their dialogue text. There's also full voice acting for some of the comic panel scenes. There is a sound like a chunky keyboard every time

you press to continue the text, and a sparkly sound when you hover over buttons.

### THE CONS

Despite it being made using the Ren'Py engine, the visual novel does not contain a rollback feature (though it does have a history button to see previous text), nor an accessibility screen (that allows players to adjust text size, switch fonts, or enable line-spacing scaling and high-contrast text mode), leaving several settings that visual novel veterans may miss having. The removal of the rollback button may be to deter players from cheating puzzles, but this may be troublesome for players who misclick repeatedly.

The text parser where you type in your answers also may have some trouble "understanding" the player. For example, I discovered an answer required me to type "all the teams" instead of "everything". Another puzzle had me reload a few times to figure out how the game wanted me to type out a particular title, using trial-and-error to figure out whether to include a "the" here or if my punctuation was wrong. It can lead to some frustrating moments of knowing the answer but not knowing how to articulate it.

### CONCLUSION

*I Just Want to be Single!!*'s demo is a fun time with polished visuals. I am looking forward to seeing what the full game brings. Before then, I recommend trying out this demo to see if its premise and characters pull you in.



Play the demo or wishlist *I Just Want to be Single!!* on Steam.



# HER JENTLE HI-NESS

## PREVIEW BY ANDI HAGEN

*Princess Maker* gets mentioned a lot in *ChoiceBeat*. In fact, it comes up at least once every issue. I guess that isn't too surprising. *Princess Maker* is a fascinating and genre-defining game. Some people call it a "life sim", which makes sense to me. But life sims are a big genre that includes everything from *Alter Ego* (1986) to *BitLife* (2018), and most life sims aren't all that much like *Princess Maker*. Maybe *Princess Maker* and its like should be called princess-likes. What do you think?

*Her Jentle Hi-Ness* is an upcoming visual novel and life sim that is a little bit like *Princess Maker*. You are a lady-in-waiting in service to the mad Queen Miriam. After her husband George ran off with his mistress Gloria, the traumatized queen forbid anyone in her kingdom to use the letter G. As her servant, you must keep the queen happy and sane enough to run her kingdom. But don't accidentally use the letter G or off goes your head. Game over!

Each day in *Her Jentle Hi-Ness*, you choose how to spend your time. You might entertain the queen or advise her on the affairs of the kingdom. You can also ignore the queen altogether and meet new friends, go on dates, learn magic, develop your skills, or even incite rebellion in the kingdom. The queen is pretty cruel, so thwarting her ambitions is pretty satisfying.

The choices you make raise or lower various stats, and there are quite a few of these stats. There are stats for the queen's mental health, the kingdom's wealth, the kingdom's happiness, or your relationships with 15 different characters. There are also stats representing your skills and abilities (i.e. morality, martial power, magic power, knowledge, and charm). Almost every choice impacts some stat in some way. The game's systems aren't overwhelmingly complex, but the purpose of all the stats isn't immediately obvious, and grasping the mechanics requires some experimentation.

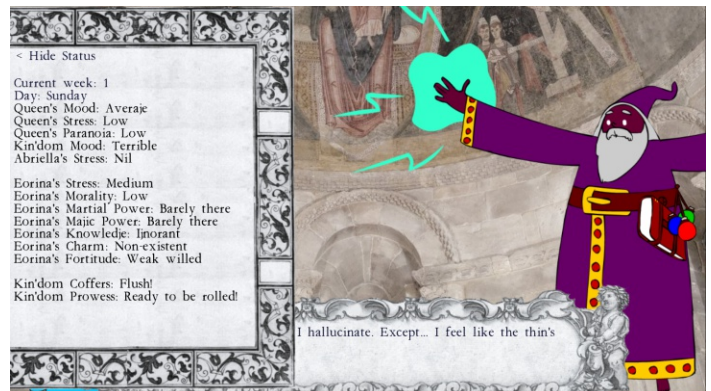
There is a demo of *Her Jentle Hi-Ness* on Steam, but by the time you read this, there is a good chance the full game will already be out. I really enjoyed the demo, so expect a full review in a future issue of *ChoiceBeat*.



RELEASE DATE  
March 2022

CREATOR  
Sky Bear Games

PLATFORM  
Windows, Linux



Play the demo or wishlist  
*Her Jentle Hi-ness* on [Steam](#).



# ALICE IN THE COUNTRY OF HEARTS

ARTICLE BY WANDAELEKTRIX

One of the largest and most popular otome franchises in English was once *Alice in the Country of Hearts*. From 2010-2015, there were novels, fanbooks, and over 40 volumes of manga released in translation. The original 6-volume manga adaptation of the visual novel by QuinRose was so popular that when the original English publisher went out of business, it was one of the only titles that was immediately re-released by a different company.

As popular as *Alice* was, otome games had only just begun receiving translated retail releases in English. Some of the earliest games appeared around 2011 on PC (*Yo-Jin-Bo*) and 2012 on other systems (*Hakuoki* on PSP). Otome gamers were still a niche audience. *Alice in the Country of Hearts* eventually saw an iOS release that was poorly promoted, terribly translated, and cost \$7 per route or \$40 for the entire game. A year later, Artmove, the parent company of QuinRose, went out of business. All publication of the *Alice* books ceased, and the iOS game was never updated or supported.

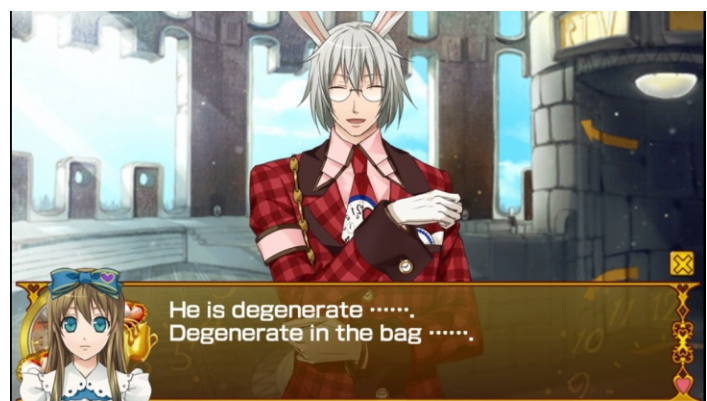
Still, a guidebook for *Alice in the Country of Diamonds* exists in official English translation, while the game itself has never seen a release outside Japan. The history of the franchise is an interesting one, as is its popularity outside Japan.

The original game, *Alice in the Country of Hearts*, was released for PC on Valentine's Day 2007. Like the novel *Alice*

in *Wonderland*, Alice falls into another world and tries to get out. The world of the game is called the Country of Hearts, and is divided into several different territories: Heart Castle, Hatter Mansion, the Amusement Park, and the Clock Tower. You meet all the expected characters including the Mad Hatter (Blood Dupre), the White Rabbit (Peter White), and Nightmare Gottschalk (the Caterpillar). Most of the characters from the original novel are romanceable. Minor characters are "faceless" (literally, they appear without faces), and are frequently murdered by the main characters. Alice is immediately embroiled in the savage turf wars between territories as she gets to know the characters and tries to escape.

The story and plotlines tend to be comedic, intense, and quite over-the-top. The violence is frequent but cartoonish. Everything, from the start and stop of battles to the time of day can change in an instant. There is some narrative whiplash when characters are cold-blooded killers on some routes but also have their own romance story. Many of the romantic interests are creeps but tend to be more sympathetic on their dedicated routes.

The game was remade/re-released twice with more routes and additional art. First as *Alice in the Country of Anniversary* in 2010 then *New Alice in the Country of Hearts* in 2013. The latter was the version eventually translated to English, minus a few endings. This game no longer runs on iOS and was hard to







follow even when it did. The English translation was nearly machine-level and was difficult to understand, especially given the quirky, impulsive nature of the original storyline.

The games in this series are narrative-focused, with a common route that branches quickly. The routes contain infrequent choices. Each character has multiple endings, and there are “no character” endings as well, though those may have been cut from the iOS release.

The game was popular in Japan, and sequels were released featuring different areas and new characters. *Alice in the Country of Clover* and *Alice in the Country of Diamonds* are the two main story sequels. All three main games received remakes/re-releases with more content. The series also had multiple fan discs (*Toy Box* being the older and more

significant) and a side release with significant content, *Alice in the Country of Joker*. Later content appeared exclusively on PSP and PSVita.

Between 2007 and the death of Artmove in 2015, the *Alice* series was also licensed to several Japanese publishers. The licensed manga and novels spanned all 4 settings (including *Joker*), and content was published by Ohzora, Ichijinsha, and Kodansha. There were around 16 novels and 56 volumes of manga that appeared in magazines such as *Mag Garden* and *Comic Zero Sum*. Most of the stories were one-shots or short adaptations focusing on a single character, often adapted from the character’s in-game route. As popular as the series was, only a single anime adaptation was released, a 2011 movie that never appeared outside of Japan.





When Armove closed, the licensed content abruptly ceased in both English and Japanese. *White Rabbit and Afternoon Tea* was a manga series left unfinished after two volumes in both English and Japanese, and a few other titles that were licensed and scheduled for release in English never appeared. Prior to the closure, almost every single volume of manga related to the series was released in English, around 50 volumes total. Along with otome games themselves, translated novels/light novels were rare and risky releases that became more popular with the passage of time. *Alice* was popular enough to warrant a single English-language novel release, *Alice in the Country of Diamonds: Bet on My Heart*. The novels and manga were created by several different writers and artists, and the quality varies wildly, though none try hard to reach beyond the intended audience. I wouldn't recommend them to anyone not looking for a one-volume adaptation of an otome game route, though if you want to give one a try, I recommend the *Nightmare* trilogy.



It's worth noting that only the most popular *Shounen Jump* titles like *One Piece* and *Bleach* received 50-volume English translations. Most series still do not since it's an enormous financial commitment with diminishing returns for the publisher. I do not have contemporary sales figures, but the fact that the *Alice* releases averaged ten volumes a year for five years, and that multiple publishers were involved, suggests that this was a very popular franchise. The "license rescue" of the original six-volume series is also notably rare, especially for a non-"classic" series.

Also unusual was the release of the *Alice in the Country of Diamonds* fan book by Yen Press. It contained art, interviews, and a player's guide for a game that was not released in English and was a spinoff of another game that was not released in English.

The franchise was revived by Otomate in 2019, and in addition to two new Switch games in Japan (*Alice in the Country of Spade: Wonderful White World* and *Alice in the Country of Spade: Wonderful Black World*), digital versions of much of the previously released English-translated manga (and one novel) are available on Kindle and Comixology. Otomate games are regularly translated into English, and while *Alice* hasn't been announced yet, there is a much better chance in 2022 than in 2010.

*Screenshots are from the English iOS release of Alice in the Heart. Yes, really. The scans are from the Alice in the Country of Diamonds fan book, which heavily features the art of Mamenosuke Fujimaru.*



# SLIME WORDS: THE TEXT GAMES OF PORPENTINE CHARITY HEARTSCAPE

ARTICLE BY ANDI HAGEN

As a whole, Twine games tend to be pretty surreal. Twine is an engine for creating interactive web-based text (called hypertext) and it's well-suited for making interactive fiction games. If you've never used Twine, shame on you. It's great fun. One well-known Twine game is *Horse Master* (2013) by Tom McHenry. In *Horse Master*, the player shops for a genetically-engineered super-horse in a futuristic horse factory. Another notable game (reviewed in this issue of *ChoiceBeat*) is *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (2013) by Anna Anthropy. In this game, the player must decide how to spend the last ten seconds with their lover before the world ends. There is something about the immediacy of creating with Twine that seems to unlock people's weirdest, most experimental impulses. In other words, Twine is just brilliant.

The games of Porpentine Charity Heartscape are even more surreal than the examples above. In the 2010s, Porpentine created dozens of Twine games, and for a brief period, she released a game every day. The style of her games varies. Some feature puzzles and are more game-like. Some have limited interaction and are more like stories. The subject matter is eclectic but often fixated on strange, gross, and absurd things.

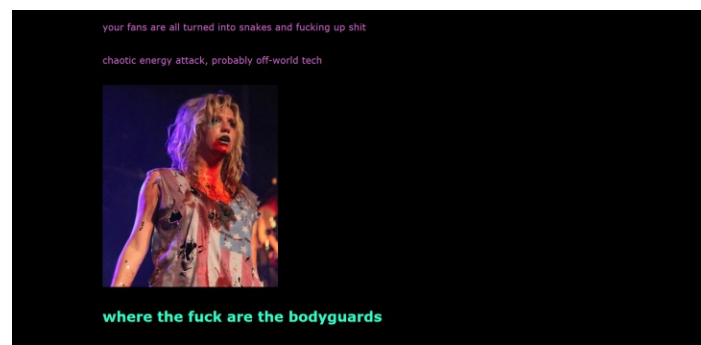
In *Cry\$tal Warrior Ke\$ha*, the real-life musician Ke\$ha is a hyper-glamorous, hyper-violent superhero on a magical odyssey. In *Vesp: A History of Sapphic Scaphism*, a person struggles with depression and paranoia in a futuristic city gradually being overrun by wasps. Her therapist, clad in a leather wasp suit, might also be spying on her. In *Date with Slimebunny*, the player goes on a date with a humanoid slime. To impress Slimebunny, they must burn down their own house with their family inside.

As I play Porpentine's games, I'm often struck by their imagery. They have a preoccupation with gore, trash, slime, insects, decay, and other creepy unpleasantness. The prose strives to be over-the-top and gross, and its energy is commendable. Here is an extreme example from *Vesp*: "Wasps smolder and burst on the grills of the market row, corrugated awnings dripping with congealed grease like caves of sick honey." Or check out this description from *Ultra Business Tycoon III*: "Pixel skeletons and stink lines. Repeating heaps of jagged trash chaos. You carefully navigate your character past gurgling pools of toxic slime." Similar examples are countless, and many of Porpentine's worlds seem pasted together with sweat, drool, piss, and other excretions. It's pretty remarkable really, if you're into that sort of thing, I mean.

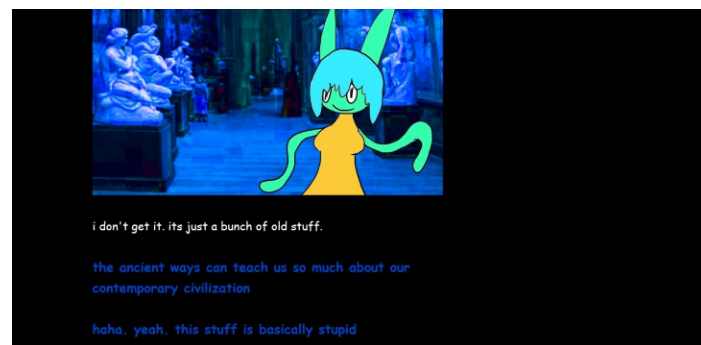
Many of Porpentine's games are humorous. Some are horrific. Some are melancholy. A few are kind of horny. Most are some combination of all these things. I don't claim to fully

understand these games, and I don't think anyone is supposed to. But I've played enough of them to notice some recurring themes. Transformation is a common element. In *Cyberqueen*, a character is eviscerated and made into a cyborg. In *Vesp*, a character fantasizes about becoming a wasp. In *With Those We Love Alive*, the author asks the reader to transform their own body by drawing sigils on their skin with a marker. Oppression is also a regular theme. In various games, characters are oppressed and manipulated by tyrannical monsters of assorted flavors (i.e. a hateful AI, an enormous moth empress, an overbearing therapist). Mysterious and ancient places, stories, and rituals are also frequent. Sometimes their secrets can be discovered, but more often than not, they can't.

If you want to know more, you should probably play some of these games. Below are a few I recommend, but there are many, many others, including graphical games not made with Twine. You can find them all on Porpentine's own website [www.slimedaughter.com](http://www.slimedaughter.com).



*Cry\$tal Warrior Ke\$ha*, 2013, by Porpentine Charity Heartscape

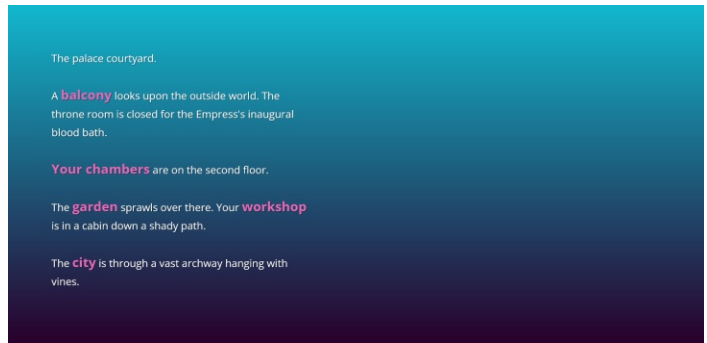


*Date with Slimebunny*, 2016, by Porpentine Charity Heartscape



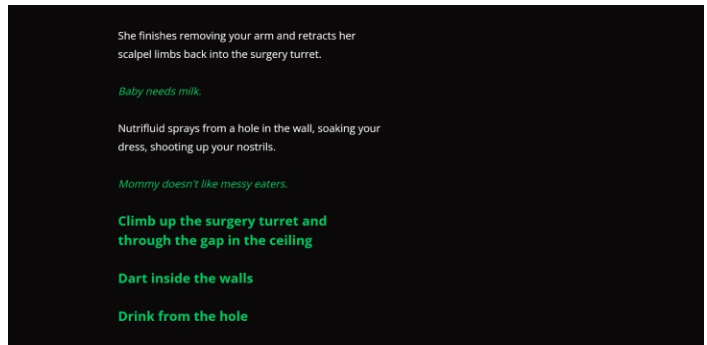
## WITH THOSE WE LOVE ALIVE (2014)

In a horrific, baroque, fantasy world, you must create artifacts for your monster queen. Eventually, your complacent life is interrupted by a visit from your rebellious ex-lover. This is one of Porpentine's most popular works and for good reason. The eerie, melancholy tone and surreal world-building are highly evocative.



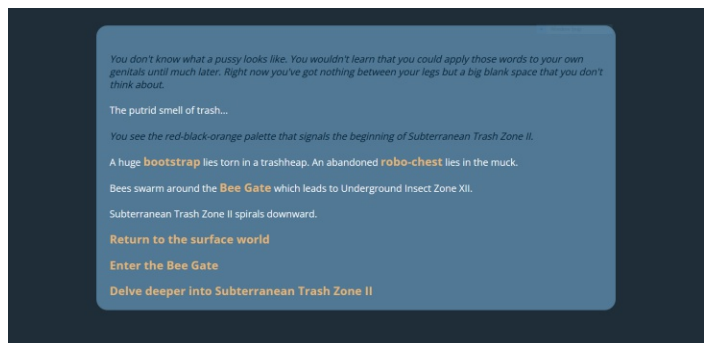
## CYBERQUEEN (2012)

You are trapped on a sapient spaceship that terrorizes you, molests you, chops you up, and rebuilds you as a cyborg. *Cyberqueen* features descriptions of extreme gore and abuse. If you've ever wanted to be totally helpless at the mercy of a diabolic entity, then definitely check this game out.



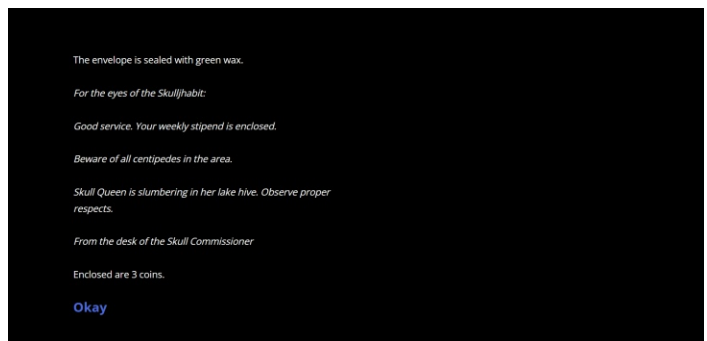
## ULTRA BUSINESS TYCOON III (2013)

In this fake "old edutainment game from the 90s", you play a business tycoon on a mission to earn a million dollars. You do this by exploring a surreal city, fighting people, and destroying things. In one session, I merged with the curtains in my office and gained power over fabric which I used to disintegrate everyone's clothes.



## SKULLJHABIT (2014)

You are a "skulljhabit" in an isolated community, and every day, you shovel skulls until you fall asleep. At the end of the week, the skull commissioner sends you money so you can buy cryptic doodads from a curio shop. Is there any escape from this dreary life? Probably, but finding it requires experimentation, luck, and lots of skull-shoveling.



# I LIKE IT SLOW AND HARD

OPINION PIECE BY CLAIRE DUNNING

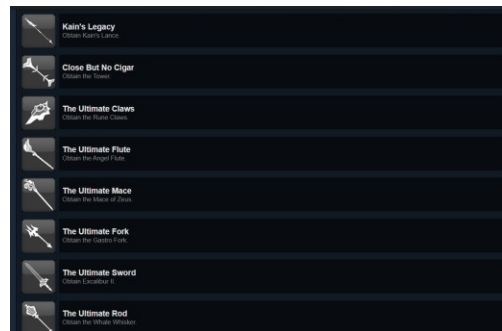
There's a lot of different styles of games out there, not just in terms of genre, but also of various ways of enjoying and consuming games. There's one interesting aspect to me that comes up in how I play games, and how the games I've written have been consumed. When I write my games, like probably any solo developer, I'm in conversation with the games I've played and loved. My first game, *The Nine Lives of Nim*, was basically no more than a *Princess Maker* clone with Shakespeare and faeries plastered on top of it. And there is one specific feature (feature? quirk? pitfall?) of the game that I felt like I basically nailed, and many players disagreed, sometimes vociferously. It continues, in my next two major releases, to be a trap I keep (willingly!) falling into. That feature is the complexity, or I suppose opacity or obscurity, of what is going on under the hood, and what can affect the outcomes of your narrative experience of a game. Will you need a guide to platinum this game? Yes, and that makes it my sort of game.

Let me be specific. *Princess Maker 2*, my original addiction since age ten, has several hidden counters, as well as just throwing you at the scenario without actually giving you many handrails. How am I supposed to raise my daughter to be more than just a homebody? At age ten, I couldn't have told you. At whatever age I found walkthrough guides, that's about when I could have told you! This sort of obscurity of strategy is totally prevalent in games from the 90s and earlier—think of *King of Dragon Pass*, which I reviewed in this issue, but also a lot of the optional content in the *Final Fantasy* series too. To me, part of the fun was getting the game guide out (or more likely nowadays, getting a browser window up) and making things happen using the hints therein.

Since the 90s, games have gotten a bit kinder perhaps, or at least, tutorial levels and/or gameplay being a little bit more explained up front has become the norm (don't worry, this is not going to turn into a "kids these days" rant!). These sorts of games, or optional content like this within larger games, certainly isn't dead, but it doesn't feel as mainstream to me anymore. Probably the most regular piece of feedback I get from players or crowdfunding backers is something along the lines of "I didn't understand what I had to do to achieve X, could you please build more of a tutorial into the introduction or explain more?". Which, by and large, isn't that hard to do with a bit of creativity. But it does make me wonder about something...

Why this shift in play-styles? Was it that the games of my childhood and before I was born were more "nerdy", and so the difficulty of figuring them out was part of the joy of achievement, of clocking a game? Is it that as my generation continues to play games as a hobby like we did in childhood, we have less time to muck around with trial and error and prefer things to be up front? Or is it not necessarily the responsibilities of adulthood, but the sheer saturation of the gaming market driving us to get to the point faster?

As time goes on, I feel myself shifting slowly ever-closer to that sort of old guard mentality, as my play-style falls out of fashion, and many aspects of gaming arise that mystify me. But I don't think I am alone in that, as I see in the current anti-NFT trend amongst gamers due to two decades of being shafted by microtransactions and other shady capitalist practices. And yes, I am terrified of becoming trapped in my ways, a sort of "bah humbug" old-school gamer who looks down on anything new and shiny. But really, it just all leaves me wondering: is there still room for slow, tricky games anymore? If I changed the way I wrote and developed my games, could I be more popular? Is that something I even want to try? Ultimately, I arrive at "no" as my personal answer, and I feel justified in that because, even if the game market is saturated, we're online, baby! If there's anywhere that can support our multifarious niches, it's this online space with its whole wide world of possibility. (Even if it means I continue to languish in nerdy obscurity!)



*Final Fantasy 9* achievements on Steam: Good luck getting these without a guide!



Stats screen from *Princess Maker 2*: Ultimate stats to get the best possible ending!



Stats screen from *Nine Lines of Nim*: Looks familiar, right?



# INTERACTIVE FICTION: RPGS EVOLVED?

ARTICLE BY ANDI HAGEN

Before I got into interactive fiction and visual novels, I mostly played CRPGs (computer role-playing games). And before I played CRPGs, I was deep into TTRPGs (tabletop role-playing games). The first CRPG I ever played was *Wizardry V: The Heart of the Maelstrom* (1988), and I remember thinking, “This is just like *Dungeons & Dragons!*” At that time, I lived for TTRPGs, and playing one alone on a computer was pretty novel.

I obsessed over CRPGs for 25 years, but I eventually got burnt out. They didn’t evolve in the direction I wanted. In the past decade, many TTRPGs have departed from the style established by *Dungeons & Dragons*. Lots of TTRPG designers are breaking away from traditional genres like fantasy and sci-fi. They are experimenting with mechanical systems for activities other than combat. I want CRPGs to imitate those developments. I also want them to include some actual role-playing.

At this point, CRPGs and TTRPGs have diverged significantly (although you could argue that they were never actually very similar). In any case, as CRPGs have evolved, their systems, styles, and stories have changed, but many of them still feel rooted in *Dungeons & Dragons*. They have fantasy settings and are heavily focused on fighting enemies and exploring dangerous places. Obviously, some CRPGs break away from that. The *Fallout* (1997) series has always had a robust system of non-combat skills. *Divinity: Original Sin* (2014) and its sequel feature systems for social interaction. *Disco Elysium* (2019) and *Gamedec* (2021) are focused on investigation and include very little physical conflict. However, those CRPGs seem like outliers to me.

In pursuit of a more authentic TTRPG experience on my computer, I eventually got into interactive fiction. My gateway was the *Choice of Games* series. These text-based games imitate gamebooks such as *Fighting Fantasy*, or to a lesser extent, *Choose Your Own Adventure*. The player reads text and makes choices which change a narrative and affect their character’s stats. The *Choice of Games* series features a huge variety of genres. Of course, there are fantasy and sci-fi stories, but also mystery, romance, horror, superhero, and historical stories.

Each *Choice of Games* game has its own system of stats, but very few of them resemble anything like *Dungeons & Dragons*. For example, *Crème de la Crème* (2019), which is about life in an upper-class boarding school, includes stats like poise, intrigue, wits, flair, and spirit. With *Choice of Games*, I finally felt like I had found a video game that imitated what I liked most about TTRPGs. There were mechanical systems for things besides fighting. Making choices and branching the story felt like I was impacting the narrative and really role-playing.

*Choice of Games* games are not the only interactive fiction games with a TTRPG feel. *Suzerain* (2020) is another example. In this game, you play the president of a fictional European country in the 1950s. The presentation resembles a strategy game, but the gameplay is all about role-playing. You make decisions regarding your personal life and your country’s policies. There are stats to reflect your various beliefs and allegiances, such as how democratic, authoritarian, socialistic, or capitalistic you are.

*Omen Exitio: Plague* (2018) is another interactive fiction game with strong TTRPG elements. Set in H.P. Lovecraft’s Cthulu Mythos, you play a doctor in the 1920s who travels the world looking for the source of a supernatural plague. The game plays like a gamebook, and its interface even resembles a book. Your character has stats such as fighting, agility, observation, medicine, and speechcraft that are tested based on the actions you take. *Omen Exitio* is especially easy to compare to TTRPGs because the Cthulu Mythos remains an ever-popular TTRPG setting.

Every year, interactive fiction and TTRPGs seem to have a little more in common. I’m really pumped for the future where they overlap even more. Interactive fiction and CRPGs are also starting to cross-pollinate. Spurred by games like *Disco Elysium*, the audiences for interactive fiction and CRPGs seem to be merging, and the boundaries between those genres will hopefully break down. As a fan of interactive fiction, visual novels, CRPGs, TTRPGs, and every other flavor of RPG, I’m ready for it.



*Omen Exitio: Plague*, 2018, by Tiny Bull Studios

# MAIL BAG

ChoiceBot,

I was excited to hear about your new letters column! By the way, how did I hear about it? And how did I mail this letter to you?

*RootBeerBuddies*  
*Fargo, ND*

Dear Mx. Buddies,

Receiving your postcard in my snail mail was a unique and positron-igniting experience! It is wonderful that the organic people of Earth still write physical missives. Your envelope artwork of my humble visage was delightful.

Of course, the *ChoiceBeat* staff always wants to hear from our readers. You can reach us via snail mail at the Space Age Restaurant in Gila Bend, Arizona, but it might be easier to send an email to [choicebeateditor@gmail.com](mailto:choicebeateditor@gmail.com).

Hey ChoiceBeat,

No *Mass Effect* in your first two issues? What a bunch of losers. It's only the biggest and best PC game, so it's not like you would've heard of it or anything. If I bother to read your magazine, I wanna read about the alien. There's totally not enough story about her in the game. Bioware always skimps on stuff like that, but that's why I read about her online. You didn't even come close to *Mass Effect*, and no *Dragon Age* or *KOTOR* either. Love me some Bastila. What's your problem? If I wanna hook up with Liara, I have to read her story, right?

*Tentacles420*  
*Palm Springs, FL*

Dear Florida Man,

The only mass effect I'm familiar with is the one that causes tumorous growths in organic beings, but somehow, I don't think that's what you're talking about. However, I would be careful about mentioning bioware too casually. Bioware, cyberware, geneware, and similar implants are banned in most of Earth's probable futures. You don't want any time cops coming back to nail you.

Stand by. I'm receiving a transmission.

How embarrassing! My co-editor, Wandaelektrix, just informed me that *Mass Effect* is actually a video game series created by the developer Bioware. Forgive my ignorant prattling.

In any case, *ChoiceBeat* probably won't feature any articles about *Mass Effect* despite how text-heavy and choice-heavy the game may be. The mission of this zine is to discuss visual novels and interactive fiction (VNIF for short). However, our writers might occasionally cover related genres such as RPGs, adventure games, and sims if they could be of interest to VNIF fans and scholars. Furthermore, everyone (aside from me) already knows about *Mass Effect*. We prefer to spread the word about lesser-known games.



Yo ChumpBeat,

Why do you review so many anime games? They all suck.  
*Anonymous*

Dear Anonymous,

I was lead to believe that humans loved anime! Thank you for setting the record straight. Anime and anime-like games are hereby banned from this zine. Thank goodness!

You should write about more Japanese VNs.

*Princess Feet*  
*La Plata, Argentina*

Princess,

Many of *ChoiceBeat's* writers are big fans of anime, manga, and Japanese games. In the past, the zine has contained reviews of many Japanese games including *428: Shibuya Scramble* and *Bustafellows*. This issue includes reviews of *Cupid Parasite* and *Baldr Sky* as well as a lengthy overview of the *Alice in the Country of Hearts* series. *ChoiceBeat* will continue to cover Japanese games as long as our writers remain passionate about them.



Some circuit-scorching anime art from *Baldr Sky*.  
Check out the review in this issue!



# EVERYONE'S FAVORITE FLOWCHART

## BY CLAIRE DUNNING

