

CHOICEBEAT

THE VISUAL NOVEL AND
INTERACTIVE FICTION ZINE

iss. 4, jun. 22





FROM THE DESK OF CHOICEBOT

The other day, I was trying to explain visual novels to someone, and another person chimed in to add, “You know all those dating sim games? That’s what visual novels are.” At the time, I rolled my optical sensors, but in retrospect, it was an important moment for me. It made me realize why *ChoiceBeat* matters.

I just got a new implant that lets me instantly transform my legs into a soapbox. It’s pretty handy for situations like this. Watch this!

<soapbox mode active>

As visual novels and interactive fiction (VNIF) gain popularity, many people still don’t understand what they’re about. They think visual novels are dating sims or that they all come from Japan. Or they think interactive fiction refers exclusively to text-based games made with Inform. VNIF isn’t a genre; it’s a medium. It’s a way of combining language and interactivity to tell a story—any type of story.

Even a lot of hardcore VNIF fans don’t realize how diverse the genre is. There are people that only play Japanese romance visual novels. There are other people that participate in the Interactive Fiction Competition every year, but don’t realize how much there is outside of that community. This is what *ChoiceBeat* is for. It’s to bring those disparate groups of VNIF enjoyers together and help them see how expansive the medium of VNIF really is.

<soapbox mode end>

In any case, thanks for listening to me, and thanks for reading *ChoiceBeat*. And thanks also for spreading the word about what VNIF really is, so I don’t have to keep writing editorials like this!

Yours truly,

ChoiceBot

CONTACT CHOICEBEAT

Email ChoiceBot at 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 eye-popping, claymation-style visuals of *South of South Mountain* by Colorbomb. Seriously, the art in this game is crazy! Check out the review on page 39.



THE JENTLEST GIVEAWAY

ChoiceBeat is hosting a giveaway! The random winner will get a free copy of *HerJentle Hi-ness* on Steam. If you have no idea what that is, be sure to check out the review in this issue

To enter, email choicebeateditor@gmail.com with "Jentle" 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, July 6th, 2022 to be eligible.

CONTRIBUTORS

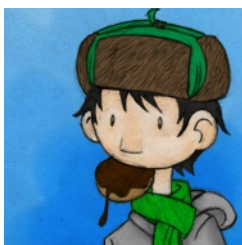


Claire Dunning is an indie game producer, theatre producer, novelist, and software tester living in the paradise at the end of the world, Aotearoa, New Zealand. She and her games *Her Gentle Hi-ness*, *The Nine Lives of Nim*, and *Wonderland Nights* can be found at

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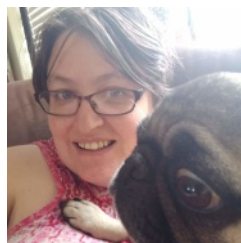
Andi Hagen is a game designer, writer, and artist. He is really into aliens and would like to meet some. His favorite *Choose Your Own Adventure* book might be *Journey Under the Sea* or *Who Killed Harlowe Thrombey?*.

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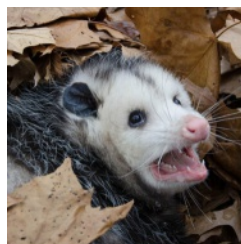


KuroKairin is a digital artist, writer, and game reviewer from Singapore who loves games with well-written, emotional, and thought-provoking stories.

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Aletheia Knights has been obsessed with books and stories since before she can remember. She has reviewed books, games, music, movies, and TV shows, and she hopes to have a career as a writer and editor someday. She lives in New Mexico with her husband.



James Lindley is a human person writing things on the Internet. You can see his recent prose and poetry in *Whiptail Journal*, *Rejection Letters*, and *Drifting Sands: A Journal of Haibun and Tanka*. He is on Twitter at DuendeonFuego ([@duendeenf](https://twitter.com/duendeenf)).



The Gates of Truth spends too much time on itch.io looking for experimental games and other great concepts. Does he find some gems? Absolutely, and 24 hours in a day isn't enough to try them all. But when testing out other games is not enough, he's also experimenting in game design and narration himself.

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Chest Butlerhome is a super-goth ghost. They don't really want to write for *ChoiceBeat*, but they have to because ChoiceBot knows their true name.

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SUBSCRIBE TO CHOICEBEAT

ChoiceBeat is released quarterly, and the next issue comes out in September 2022. Here are some great ways to make sure that you don't accidentally miss it!

Send an email to 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.



No, Nan. It's just *Who Pressed Mute on Uncle Marcus?* on page 8.



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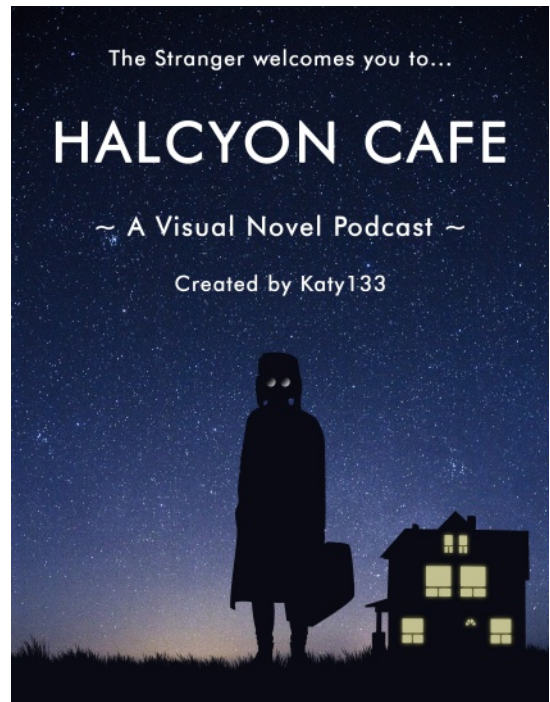
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NEWS



TOKIMEKI MEMORIAL (FINALLY!) TRANSLATED

Breaking news! *Tokimeki Memorial* was recently translated into English as *Hearthrob Memorial: Under the Tree of Legends*. The translated game is the 1996 Super Famicom port of the 1994 PC Engine original. This is the first time that any game in this iconic series has received a full English translation, so this is a real milestone. The project was completed by Translated Games, and more information can be found [on their website](#).



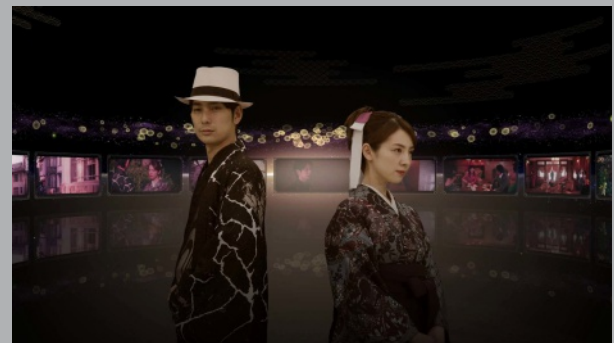
VISUAL NOVEL PODCAST

Halcyon Cafe by Katy133 is a visual novel podcast mixing essay-like articles on game development alongside developer interviews. The most recent episode takes an utterly encyclopedic look at writing and structuring time travel stories. [Listen to all the episodes here](#).



MONSTER PROM 3

You all know about the *Monster Prom* games, right? In case you don't, *Monster Prom* is a monster dating sim, and it might be the only dating game with a multiplayer mode. The third one (subtitled *Monster Roadtrip*) is coming out "soon", and the demo was recently released on Steam. Check it out and "be your worst self"!



NEW SQUARE ENIX FMV GAME

The Centennial Case: A Shimjima Story was released last month. This big-budget FMV detective game was developed by Square Enix. FMV games should never have died in the 90s, so it's delightful whenever a new one is released. [Editorial Note: This opinion is solely the author's own and does not reflect the opinions and beliefs of this zine]. There was no room for a *Centennial Case* review in this issue, but keep your eyes peeled for the full scoop in a future issue.

WHO PRESSED MUTE ON UNCLE MARCUS?

REVIEW BY WandaElektrix

"Abby, I'm fucking dying!"

The comedic whodunit *Who Pressed Mute on Uncle Marcus?* is the latest release from the FMV specialists at Wales Interactive. They've been steadily releasing multi-platform FMV titles for several years, though the bright yellow banner and premise of *Uncle Marcus* was the first that caught my eye.

You play as Abby, a reluctant law student in Wales that isn't on the best terms with most of her affluent family. The game begins when she is contacted via video chat by Uncle Marcus, the family outcast from America, and informed that he was poisoned at a family get-together that Abby did not attend the night before. He will die within the hour unless Abby determines who poisoned him and with what. Happily, it's Mum's birthday, and everyone is getting together for a virtual birthday quiz, so Abby has an opportunity to investigate.

The tone of the game is clear from the first scene. It's not super interested in the plausibility of Uncle Marcus's condition, and there's some hand-waving when we find out that Marcus's hard living in the 80s means that guessing the wrong type of poison will kill him. Your mom calls to pester you when you are the last to show for the meeting, and you are given the opportunity to ignore her. Marcus urges you to do this. Almost everyone in the family is unlikable. Mum will

YEAR
2022

CREATOR
Wales Interactive

PLATFORM
Windows, Mac, Switch,
PS5, PS4, Xbox Series X,
Xbox One, Android, iOS

constantly put you down. Your sister, Lottie, is an influencer whose quiz questions are about the celebrities she's met and the makeup she uses. Aunt June is a vicious alcoholic who doesn't like anyone. The cast is rounded out with cousins Toby and Bradley and your elderly Nan.

The entire game takes place on a fictional video chat platform, and was filmed during a COVID lockdown. A single loop takes about twenty minutes to play, but it is meant to be replayed several times. You team up with a different family member in four different rounds of quiz questions. There is a life bar for Uncle Marcus that visibly shrinks until he forces you to choose an antidote during the fourth round. Uncle Marcus was not invited to Mum's birthday quiz, so he will periodically interrupt you and grow increasingly dramatic as the game progresses. Choices are fairly common—you can choose one of three family members to talk with every round, and there are a few questions for each. Choosing correct



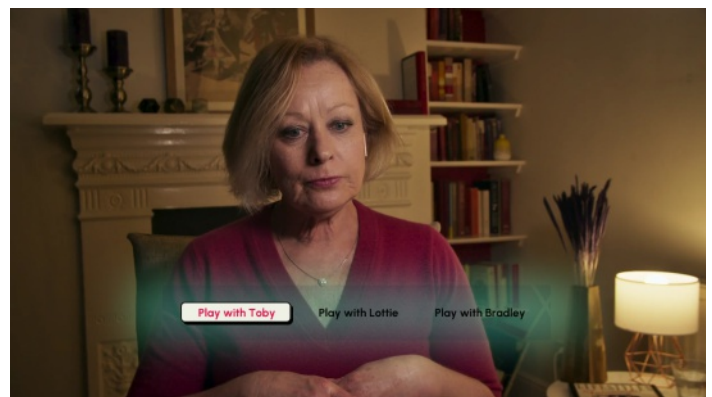


answers will reveal anecdotes about the get-together from the night before, giving you “clues” that will eventually unlock the ability to accuse a family member at the end of the game. At least one set of clues is locked behind finding most of the others, which might cause some confusion and frustration.

There are several different endings including a “bad” ending and two endings each for the six family members. The endings are slightly different depending on whether Marcus is alive or dead. The real culprit is locked behind several false accusations, though they won’t necessarily be the last person you can accuse.

All the actors work well as Abby’s over-the-top family members. The characters complain bitterly and at length about each other. Gripes include everything from childhood puking incidents to “he’s too creepy”. Mum and Auntie June often take shots at each other about who stole boyfriends and who is and isn’t getting laid. Toby has a bad internet connection, and much of his dialogue involves yelling for others to repeat themselves or put-downs about the family’s lack of empathy framed with “children are starving in Africa”. I played this with fellow *ChoiceBeat* writer Andi, and we frequently repeated the over-the-top lines to one another. Uncle Marcus steals the show with several monologues about the progress of his death while also guiltting Abby about her twenty-minute Skype investigation. The humor is extremely intentional, and makes the game a delight. Many of the endings are dark, but I am a bad person and found almost all of them funny.

I highly recommend playing this with friends, as the cheesy plot and dialogue are best enjoyed in a group. It doesn’t take very long to see all the content. We were able to accuse two relatives at the end of a three-hour session, and we finished the

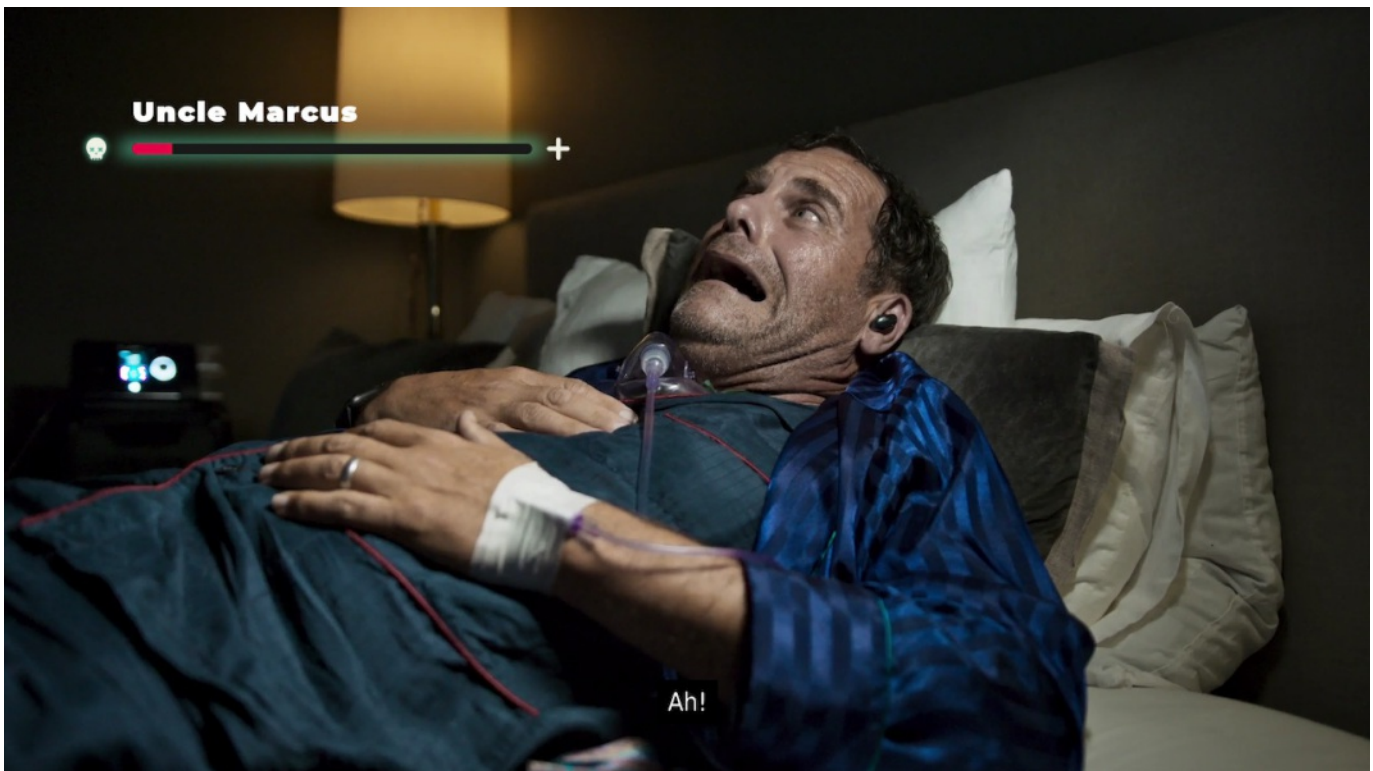


game in a couple more two-hour sittings. You can skip scenes you’ve previously watched, but you must be quick or the scene will play. As a result, myself and Andi are still able to quote the lines of the “gun argument” to one another. Double-clicking too quickly to skip, however, may automatically select the first answer in the next question.



The only criticism I have is that the process of elimination system of solving the crime can get repetitive toward the end of the game. Many questions don't require logic to solve. Some are as simple as "answer the quiz" versus "ask about last night", and many others involve agreeing or disagreeing about a quiz answer with an unclear result. Most questions only have two answers, so process of elimination works better than learning a strategy, though a strategy does exist.

The endings are highly entertaining, and each round of quiz questions will change depending on which family member you team up with. There's an impressive amount of video for this game, and the actors all do a great job. It won't go out of its way to charm you if you aren't in the mood for something like this, but if you are, you'll certainly love it.



YOUR FUTURE SELF

REVIEW BY The Gates of Truth

"YOU ARE DIRECTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DEATHS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE."

This is one of the first sentences that introduces you to *Your Future Self*, an interactive fiction game that can be completed in one sitting (roughly 2 hours). The premise is simple: in 35 years, you will be responsible for a disaster. Thanks to a certain technology that allows time travel, you're able to talk to your future self, and you need convince them (or yourself) that it shouldn't be done.

As the game is rather short, everything from the narration to the scenario itself feels concentrated and kept to what is essential. No subplots, no superficial information. Everything felt very tight. In fact, it couldn't have been any other way since you progress in the conversation behind a closed door.

THE CONVERSATION

Everything in this game revolves around this particular conversation. You have "conversation skills" with three aspects that clearly act as role-playing attributes: rationality, empathy, and assertiveness. But the analogy to tabletop role-playing games doesn't stop here. You only choose one of those skills to talk to your future self and change their mind.

In the end, the system isn't that complicated: You have stats, the game makes a roll, add your attribute, remove the "current receptiveness", and then compare the result with your future self's attribute.

Classic RPG stuff... but one might wonder, why add randomness to a conversation?

FRUSTRATION AT THE CORE GAMEPLAY LOOP

Throughout the story, *Your Future Self* will feel unpredictable, erratic, and *frustrating*. I guess that is why the design features

YEAR
2019

CREATOR
Contortionist Games

PLATFORM
Windows, Mac, Linux

randomness, to simulate the experience of trying to talk to someone without knowing their response. And in a way, it kind of works!

In games, we talk about a "gameplay loop" when we refer to the loop of actions that we make as players. Here, the loop is both extra and intradiegetic (meaning part of the narration). Indeed, if your future self doesn't get convinced, the time machine loops again, and you have to start the conversation from the beginning. And because the responses have a bit of randomness to them, every time loop is a bit different.

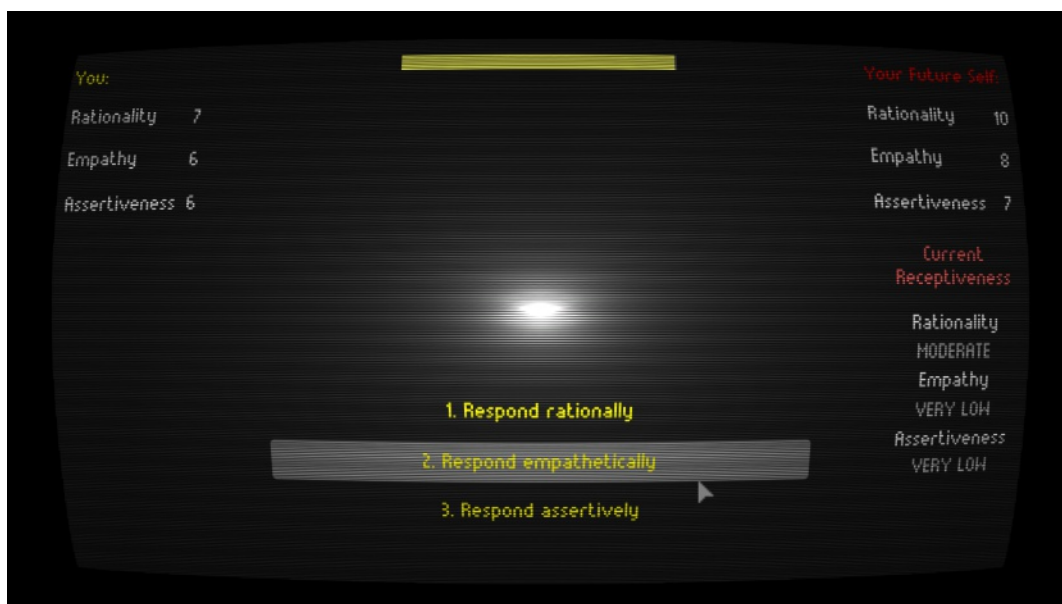
The game is still short even with this feature, and at each loop, you increment your stats based on the choices you've made.

YOUR FUTURE SELF

But as you've guessed, there's still room for plot twists and revelations. Something won't feel coherent, and you'll get to discover what that is the first time the loop reboots...

Your Future Self was developed and published in 2019 by Contortionist Games, a solo game dev company created by Andrew Hirst and based in London, UK. A Unity plugin (Adventure Creator), adapted for interactive fiction, was used to develop the game.

CW: Climate change, violence, refugee crisis, mental health, epilepsy warning



HER JENTLE HI-NESS

REVIEW BY Andi Hagen

People seem to either love life sims or hate them. I might be one of the rare folks that does both. Life sims are a big genre that includes everything from *Alter Ego* (1986) to *The Idolmaster* (2005) to *BitLife* (2018). And, of course, I'm obligated to mention *Princess Maker* (1991). The genre often features obscure, complex mechanics and repetitive stat-grinding gameplay. That descriptions sounds like I'm criticizing the genre, and I kind of am. Life sims can be tedious and frustrating, but I love them anyway. Learning the game and discovering its secrets is its own reward.

Thankfully, as far as life sims go, *Her Jentle Hi-ness* is pretty approachable.

Her Jentle Hi-ness is a visual novel and life sim set in a medieval fantasy world. You are a lady-in-waiting to the tyrannical Queen. When her husband George left her, the outraged Queen banned the letter G, and anyone who utters the forbidden letter ends up with their head on a pike. In the game, there are timed scenes where you must talk with the Queen by quickly choosing dialogue that doesn't contain any Gs. Also, all of the game's menus and prose are missin' the forbidden letter, which can be strange to jet used to.

But those timed dialogue scenes are a very small part of *Her Jentle Hi-ness*. Most of the game is a life sim where you manage the weekly schedule for the Queen and yourself. There are a whole lot of moving parts! You have to juggle the Queen's responsibilities, her fragile mental state, and the

YEAR
2022

CREATOR
Sky Bear Games

PLATFORM
Windows, Linux

health of the kingdom. You are constantly balancing your stress level, your assistant's stress, the Queen's stress, the Queen's paranoia, the kingdom's happiness, the kingdom's wealth, and the kingdom's military power. And there are other factors I left out. You also must develop your character's personal skills such as charm, fortitude, magic, and fighting. It gets quite complex.

Managing all that stuff takes a lot of planning, and playing *Her Jentle Hi-ness* is a bit like a job. It certainly replicates the feeling of being the harried lady-in-waiting to a crazy Queen. Keeping the Queen in balance is hard enough, but you also need to face various disasters that befall the kingdom. These subplots are surprising and exciting, and they break up all the stat-grinding. At various points, you might stop a plague, thwart an invading army, or find the Queen a new spouse. The Queen takes all her personal and political advice from you, so you have to run the Queen's entire life and kingdom, which is pretty unfair since you are an unpaid indentured servant.

If you can't tell, *Her Jentle Hi-ness* has a lot going on. In addition to all the stat-building and story, there are numerous secret endings and achievements. Finding them takes a lot of



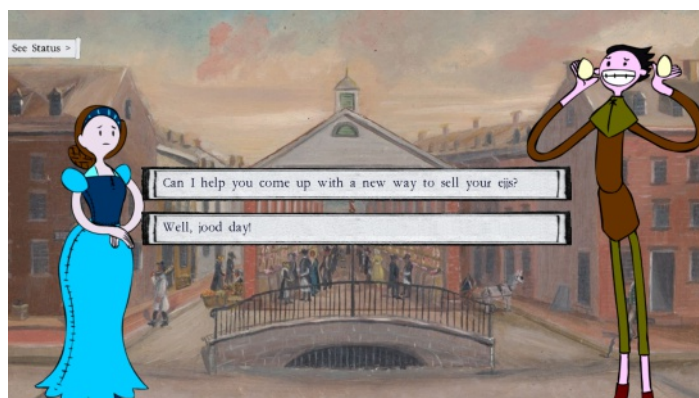
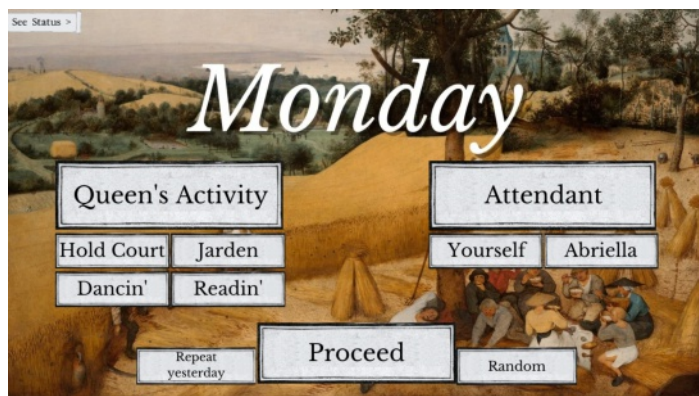


experimentation, but uncovering a new one is always a cool surprise. There are plenty of memorable ways to die, kill the Queen, or turn the kingdom on its head. I fell in love with a frog prince, summoned a demon, and led a revolution. Discovering this stuff (which happens often) is the best part of the game.

Her Gentle Hi-ness really rewards experimentation. There are some tutorials, but understanding how the many systems interact takes trial and error. Even if you constantly save your game, a series of bad decisions can still cause an inescapable game over. However, every time I restarted, I definitely knew more and got much farther.

I haven't said much about *Her Gentle Hi-ness's* art and presentation, but the screenshots speak for themselves. The art features cute, highly expressive cartoon characters on top of classical paintings. It looks really cool! There is no voice acting, but the characters speak in abstract babbling sounds that are cute and weirdly evocative. The whole presentation has a whimsical, cartoony feel that meshes well.

I really dig *Her Gentle Hi-ness*, but I wouldn't recommend it to just anyone. The gameplay involves a lot of failure and experimentation for experimentation's sake, and those things won't appeal to everyone. Also, its time management aspects are stressful! This is definitely not a cozy, relaxing game. If that doesn't scare you off, then *Her Gentle Hi-ness* could be the wacky tale of indentured servitude and violent tyranny that you're looking for.



JENTLE JIVEAWAY

Don't miss the free *Her Gentle Hi-ness* giveaway!
See page 2 for complete details!

BRIMSTONE MANOR

REVIEW BY Aletheia Knights

"Half angel, half demon" is a remarkably accurate description of most toddlers I've known. Under the roof of Brimstone Manor, however, it might just be the literal truth.

Released in February, Frances Pauli's *Brimstone Manor* was the first new game this year from Heart's Choice, the romance imprint launched by Choice of Games in 2019. It can't have been easy for a fledgling company to find its footing amidst a global pandemic, but Heart's Choice seems to finally be coming into its own, with new releases scheduled at regular intervals and a promising lineup of titles in development.

Pauli is an author of several novels across varying genres, with a few things in common: in her words, her work always includes "a speculative element, a romantic element, and lots of fun critters." Her first work of interactive fiction is no exception. *Brimstone Manor* serves up cozily familiar romance tropes... with a bit of a devilish twist.

In *Brimstone Manor*, you're a character with a somewhat shadowy past, hired by an enigmatic widowed father as the live-in nanny for his three-year-old son. As you get to know your handsome, commanding employer, Darien Stone, and bond with your sweet (but troubled) little charge Nicki, you can't help feeling there's something uncanny about the shadowy estate that is your new home. Why is Darien so determined to keep you out of the basement? Why do you get the feeling that the family dog, Lucifer, understands more than any dog should? Why doesn't Darien want Nicki to see the uncle he obviously adores? When a journalist you catch sneaking around in the bushes insists that your new employer is a demon, the idea doesn't seem quite so preposterous as you'd expect...

Like all games published by Choice of Games and its subsidiaries, *Brimstone Manor* is a text game written in the ChoiceScript language. There are no graphics or illustrations, and the story unfolds through a series of multiple-choice menus that allow you to decide the central character's next move. You're also able to customize your character's gender, name, and appearance in the first chapter. Unlike most Heart's Choice games, in which the main character's gender is predetermined, this one allows you to play as a man, a woman, or a nonbinary person.

Over the course of the story, four potential love interests will compete for your character's attention. There's your employer, Darien, master of the manor and devoted demon dad. There's Nicki's angelic uncle, the brooding and muscular Michael, and Michael's constant companion, the cheerful and wholesome Gabby, who is nonbinary. (Just how close are Michael and Gabby? Let's just say that if you can't bring yourself to choose between them, you don't have to—although a monogamous route is possible with either one.) Finally, there's Chris, the nerdy and charmingly absent-minded journalist determined to

YEAR

2022

CREATOR

Frances Pauli
Heart's Choice

PLATFORM

Windows, Mac, Linux
Android, iOS



STATS

You place your hand over his, covering his fingers with yours. His desire is a blanket around you, a steady heat that brings you closer together, both emotionally and physically.

Darien takes your hand in his. He picks up his drink again, and then looks around the room. There is a question in his eyes, and it has very little to do with what he actually asks you.

"Would you like to finish these on the balcony, stay here, or?" His eyes drift to the bed, and then he blushes adorably.

"Let's start on the balcony."

"We can stay right here."

"How about we make good use of that bed?"

Next

expose the paranormal goings-on at Brimstone Manor to the world, whose gender you get to decide when you first meet him/her/them.

(For the record, although it's about angels and demons, *Brimstone Manor* doesn't touch upon religious themes in any way. It's set in a dualistic cosmology presided over by the conflicting forces of Chaos and Order, and it doesn't draw upon any Abrahamic mythos beyond the basic terminology.)

Brimstone Manor is a lot of fun. It has a little bit of everything—romance both sweet and spicy, mystery, a couple of cool action scenes, and all kinds of adorable squee around Nicki and Lucifer. Although you always get a happy ending with your love interest of choice, it's possible to succeed or fail in a number of secondary goals (which run the gamut from bonding with the dog to choosing a side in a cosmic conflict). It's a fairly linear game, with the only major branching having to do with the separate romance routes, but there's enough variation that arises from your choices to make for decent replay value. I played eight times to prepare for writing this review, and (based on Achievements) I still haven't uncovered all this game has to offer.

This game is rated two out of three chili peppers according to Heart's Choice's own steaminess rating system. What falls into the two-pepper realm is pretty broad—I've seen everything from a couple paragraphs of sensuous lovemaking to a rather explicit threesome that went on for several pages—but

basically it means that, although the focus is on romance rather than sex, your character will have the option to engage in sex on the page at some point. The sex scenes in *Brimstone Manor* are brief and only moderately explicit—it's pretty clear what's going on, although the text focuses more on the sensory and emotional aspects than the physical mechanics—but very romantic and creative. (There's a big love scene with Gabby and Michael that's not quite like anything I've ever read. In a good way.)

Although *Brimstone Manor* is one of the few Heart's Choice games that allow you to play as a man and romance a woman, it's probably not the best choice if you're looking to play as a straight man (or a lesbian for that matter). There's only one (possible) woman love interest, so if you don't like Chris... too bad? And you never actually get to choose your orientation in the game itself, and the text continually describes the male characters as if you're checking them out. When I romanced Chris with a player character who was, in my mind, a straight guy, I found my immersion constantly broken by glowing descriptions of Michael's hunky muscles or how adorable Darien was when he came out of the kitchen with a streak of flour on his face.

If you have a thing for sexy paranormal men, *Brimstone Manor* is a must, but it's also a good choice if you like games that allow you to care for a child, or if you love dogs. (Lucifer steals the show!) It's a solid addition to the Heart's Choice catalog, and well worth checking out if you need a little romance to brighten your day.



HOLY HELL! IT'S A COUPON!

Choice of Games offers this special coupon for *ChoiceBeat* readers. [Visit this page](#) and redeem the coupon code below for **15% off *Brimstone Manor*** until July 1st, 2022.

CBZ001

LOST OREGON CITY GOLD

REVIEW BY Claire Dunning

What an absolute joy it was to play this little love story to Oregon City! In this game, you play as father Michael and daughters Mary and Rosie as they go on a citywide scavenger hunt to uncover \$25,000 in gold that was stolen in a coach robbery in the 1800s and never recovered. I really enjoyed how this game took a local legend and made it accessible for people all around the world and in the most delightful way, by using photographs of the real places.

This game has a lot of charming features that either had me laughing out loud or grabbed me right by the nostalgic part of my heart. The sound effects reminded me of old school games. The basic point-and-click gameplay is relaxing and honestly kind of amazing when you realize what a labor of love it must have been to take all those photos of the real world landscapes. Here are some of the standout moments I noted as I played:

- Early on in the game, you have to inspect a real graveyard for clues. It really took me back to my childhood and doing the same sort of thing in old historical graveyards when I was at school.
- It references the old *Oregon Trail* video game in the most amazing way. I don't want to spoil it.
- Oh my, there's an intrigue plot going on at the same time?
- There's a beardy guy who lives in a hobbit hole? How Oregon! (Or at least, how stereotypical of what little I know of Oregon from the other side of the world.)

YEAR

2022

CREATOR

Oh! a Rock Studios

PLATFORM

Windows, Mac, Linux

• I appreciate how the achievements on Steam have basic completion tasks, as well as more specific ones that true completionists can go a little bit out of their way to get.

• Dear god, the dad jokes :D

If I have one complaint it is that the walking around the landscape feature can be a little confusing at times, especially when it's not super clear what your objective currently is. But the game is small enough and so forgiving that a bit of trial and error will see you back on the story path soon enough.

This game is definitely not for snobs of the visual novel genre who want something more complex. As someone who publishes Ren'Py games myself, this is another game published in that engine which does not fit into the anime art-style expectations, obviously. But I think if you go in with the right expectations—that this game is cute, funny, short, and actually pretty interesting if you aren't averse to a bit of history—then you will have a good time. On top of that, as a parent, I'm happy to mark this game as totally safe for kids. Though you have to judge first how much the kids will enjoy or cringe at the level of dad humor!





Michael
Hey, Paul?

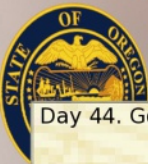
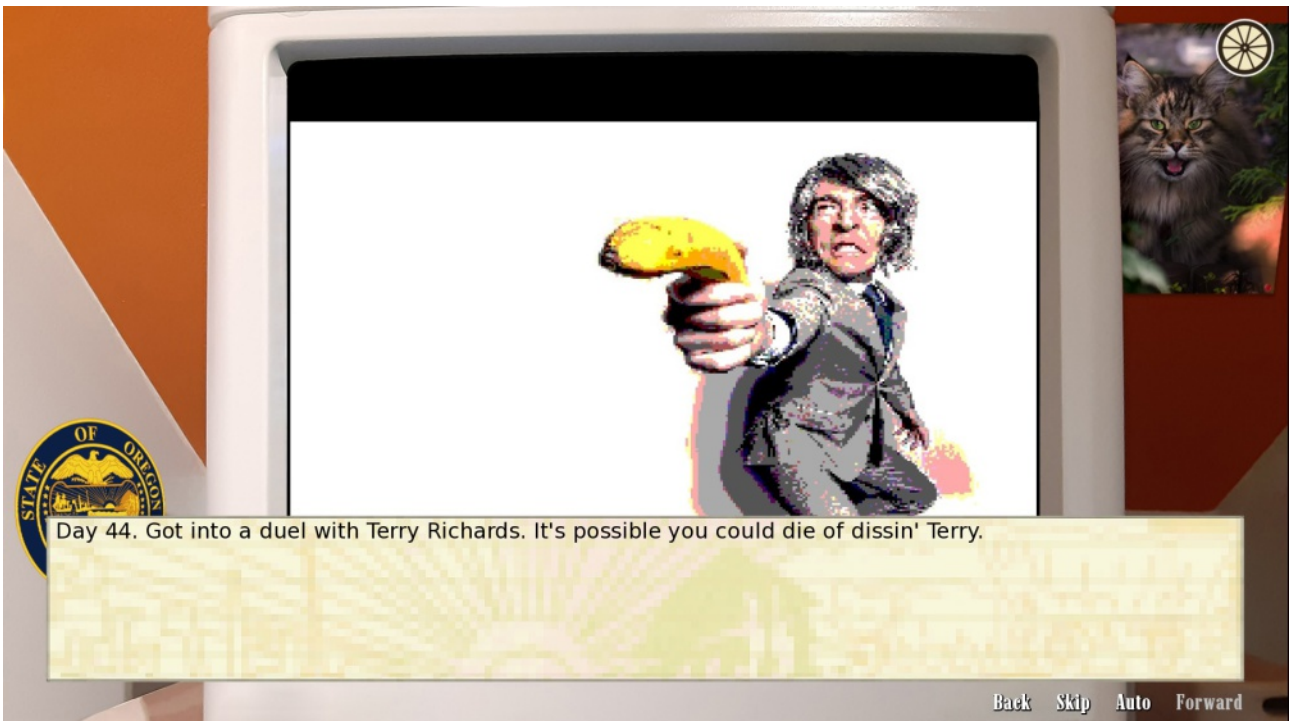
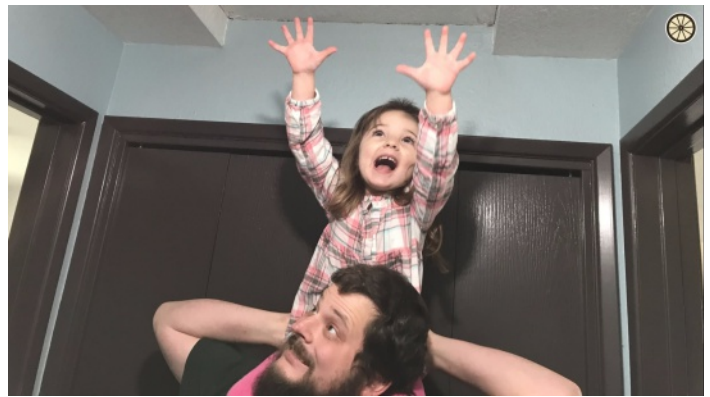


Back Skip Auto Forward



Employee
Howdy, stranger! Welcome to the End of the Oregon Trail Historical Museum!

Back Skip Auto Forward



Day 44. Got into a duel with Terry Richards. It's possible you could die of dissin' Terry.

Back Skip Auto Forward

ONE NIGHT STAND

REVIEW BY Katy133

WHAT IS IT?

One Night Stand is a slice-of-life visual novel by Kinmoku with point-and-click elements. It is available to play in English, French, Italian, German, Spanish, Russian, Portuguese, Brazilian Portuguese, Japanese, Traditional Chinese, and Simplified Chinese.

THE STORY

One Night Stand starts off with you waking up in an unfamiliar place, remembering that you had many drinks and went out with a familiar face, only to wake up next to an unfamiliar one.

Other than that, your memory of the past night is a blur.

Will you stay or go? What happened that night? And who is this mysterious stranger you've found yourself with?

THE GAME MECHANICS

After you awaken, the visual novel opens up with various choices and areas to click around. Almost immediately, you are tasked with looking for your mobile phone (through the point-and-click mechanic), followed by making the decision of whether to reply to a message on your phone or not.

There are twelve unique endings, and obtaining them has you switching between different motivations. From trying to find out as much as you can about what happened, going into full investigation mode, to trying to comfort the woman you've

YEAR

2016

CREATOR

Kinmoku

PLATFORM

Windows, Mac, Linux

woken up with, feeling out what words she needs most in that moment, to trying to leave as quickly as possible, searching for your lost clothes. Unlocking one ending will not give you all the answers, so the game invites you to try again to find more endings and answers.

THE ART AND AUDIO

The visual novel uses a hand-drawn art style, including rotoscope animation for the characters. Line art for selection buttons also uses a wiggle animation, a technique of hand-drawing lines and redrawing them slightly differently for additional frames.

The music is relaxed and hazy, and the colours are warm, painted through the lines in a soft way, creating the atmosphere of waking up to a new day. Transition animations also pull you in, animated like an eye opening or having a blanket thrown over you.

Sound effects also add to the atmosphere, like a phone vibrating or a door closing, as well as subtle text blip sounds.





THE WRITING

The writing in *One Night Stand* is natural, feeling like a real conversation between two people who are trying to figure things out. You talk to the stranger, with your inner thoughts acting as the narration and descriptions of the different objects you can inspect.

Being a mystery, the story had twists and turns I did not expect, but it gave me "eureka!" moments of realisation that I love to feel in mystery games. It's satisfying to be given scraps of information and then piece them together.

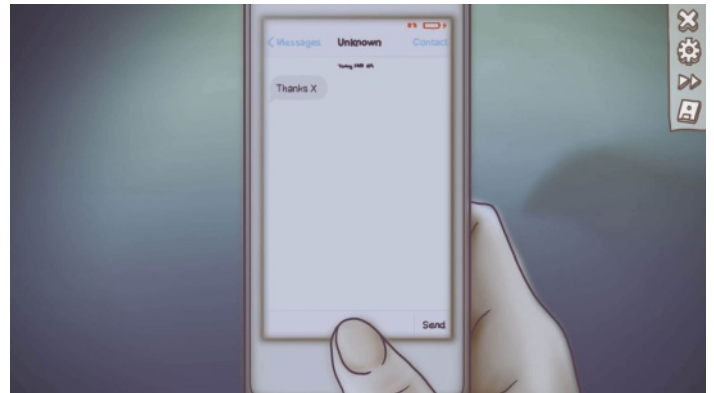
THE GUI

The user interface also uses the line wiggle animations, unifying the visuals. In addition to this, the endings gallery looks like a phone's image gallery, giving the menu a diegetic design.

Being made in the Ren'Py engine, the game uses settings that visual novel veterans will be familiar with: skip, autoplay, as well as additional accessibility options (found by pressing A) like font choices, self-voicing, text resizing, and line space scaling. Something that players might find missing however is a rollback function, or a history screen, making a misclick difficult to remedy if you have not saved in a while. There also isn't a text speed slider, though it may be left out to keep the text blip sound from disappearing.

CONCLUSION

One Night Stand is an enjoyable experience for those who are looking for a slice-of-life mystery to unravel through multiple playthroughs.



DOPPELGANGER: DAWN OF THE INVERTED SOULS

REVIEW BY KuroKairin

Released nearly a decade ago, *Doppelganger: Dawn of the Inverted Souls* is one of the first visual novels I found on Lemma Soft Forums that got me hooked onto this type of story-rich game. I remember being blown away by this horror mystery otome OELVN (original English language visual novel) back in the day, and now, after replaying it for this review, I'm still left with a good impression.

Intended for an audience aged 16 and above, *Doppelganger: Dawn of the Inverted Souls* tells the story of Lucia Nicol, a 16-year-old high school student who has been constantly bullied and makes a wish out of despair one day. From that moment forth, a string of inexplicable incidents happen, eventually pinning her as the prime suspect responsible for her bully's brutal disfigurement. Knowing that she is innocent, Lucia begins her chilling journey in uncovering the truth and stopping this nightmare once and for all.

There are a total of six routes in this plot-heavy otome visual novel. Three of them (Yuri, Zhuyuan, and Raphael) are available from the start, and two more routes (Blake and Clifford) will be unlocked upon finishing any two routes. The finale/true route unlocks after all five routes have been played through at least once. Unlike most otome visual novels where every love interest's route features romance, a few routes in *Doppelganger: Dawn of the Inverted Souls* have the female protagonist and male love interest stay true to their hearts and remain as friends forever instead.

On top of blood, gore, and violence depicted throughout, this game also touches on themes that can get heavy to read such

as bullying and loss of a loved one. Player's discretion is advised as its content warnings include emotional and physical abuse, death, child sexual abuse, suicide, kidnapping and hostage situations, mental illnesses, and gun-related violence.

Now, let's delve into the characters and routes. Note that this segment contains some spoilers but none are crucial to the main plot.

Yuri Ivanov, one of the three whose routes are available from the start, is a delinquent from Garnaster High. While Yuri has depth as a character, his route is the shortest and least well-handled. Besides a disappointing lack of elaboration on Yuri's relationship with his family in the aftermath of things, our teen protagonist's thoughtless remarks—for example, calling Yuri "Mr. Bipolar" when he exhibited two different behaviors—are often frustratingly left unchallenged. Still, I find it pleasantly surprising that gender identity is a topic, though with several characters using traditional gender roles as the yardstick and

YEAR

2013

CREATOR

Memento Mori Productions
(azureXtwilight)
Soyasushi Productions
(Coren Baili)

PLATFORM

Windows





some flashbacks involving bullies hurling the F-slur, it can be a vexing read at times.

Our second love interest is Lee Zhuyuan, Lucia's friend since middle school. Not only does he have a crush on Lucia, he is also the *yandere* character and a terrifying one at that. Until the finale, I find Zhuyuan insufferable as a love interest especially with his anger issues as well as his sexist and ableist words directed at those he despises. Thankfully, Lucia does not feel good about him either, and it is refreshing to watch how *Doppelganger: Dawn of the Inverted Souls* approaches such a familiar character archetype in a non-romanticized, realistic, and thus unnerving angle.

What's interesting is this game does not stop there when it comes to breaking the usual expectations of an otome visual novel. Raphael Martis, Lucia's senior at Valudeto High, is the friendly and high-spirited basketball captain who has a bright future ahead of him. Yet *Doppelganger: Dawn of the Inverted Souls* cleverly makes use of this character trope to explore various complex human emotions that arise during times of desperation and show how, at times, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

There is also a celebrity love interest: Blake Landers, Lucia's classmate who is the vocalist and guitarist of a popular band called Cyan. In contrast to other routes, Blake's route feels the least engaging even with some disturbing events going on. However, I find it more regrettable that Blake himself is a generally forgettable love interest due to how seldomly he appears in the entire game—even during the finale! Surely, such a down-to-earth and kind star like Blake deserves his own happily ever after outside of his route too.

Next, we have Clifford Rhodes, a ghostly young man whom only a few people (that naturally includes Lucia) can see. Unlike your typical love interests in otome visual novels who

are single and ready to mingle, Clifford is single but not available. Trying to forcefully romance him results in a bad ending, an approach that is not only rarely seen but also conveys the importance of respect in relationships. I'm impressed and delighted to see Clifford's route written in a way that stays true to the characters. Although he is non-romanceable, making his route feel out of place in an otome visual novel, I'd say the exploration of different romantic relationship concepts has its place in the romance genre, which an otome game is part of.

Finally, in the finale, the last love interest takes the stage. *Doppelganger: Dawn of the Inverted Souls* makes it clear that Lucia and him form the canon pair, though I find the romance between the two to be lacking in depth at certain significant moments. Nevertheless, I absolutely love how this route ties everything in the plot together and in its best ending, provides grand resolutions to almost everybody. It is certainly one of the most satisfying and heartwarming finales I've seen to date.

As for Lucia the protagonist, she is the typical teenager who is trying her best to be a good daughter, student, and friend. Lucia is generally considerate of the others but like any person, she has her blind spots she is unaware of. Sadly, it is not every time that another character would show her the things she may have not considered before. Nonetheless, I like how assertive she can be and empathize with her having an overprotective mother.

On top of its refreshingly different approach to the characters and routes, *Doppelganger: Dawn of the Inverted Souls* has a fantastic mystery. The multiple twists and turns present from the very first route to the last are simply mind-blowing, and the fluid changes in point of view keep the unfolding story intriguing. The game also makes brilliant use of the medium's branching narrative structure to spread and hide its many layers of mystery; every ending sheds light on a different

aspect of the mystery, and every new route unlocked adds new scenes to the existing common route—a design that encourages multiple playthroughs and a 100% completion.

Though slightly more common nowadays, the game's dynamic title screen image that changes according to the route you are playing is another of its eye-opening elements. *Doppelganger: Dawn of the Inverted Souls* also has two opening videos, a feature which, until now, I have yet to come across in other otome visual novels except for Otomate's *7'scarlet* that was originally released in 2016. The second opening video is available once the final route is unlocked and serves as a wonderful intro that hypes you up for the finale by sending an enthusiastic message of "Everything's finally coming together! Are you ready?"

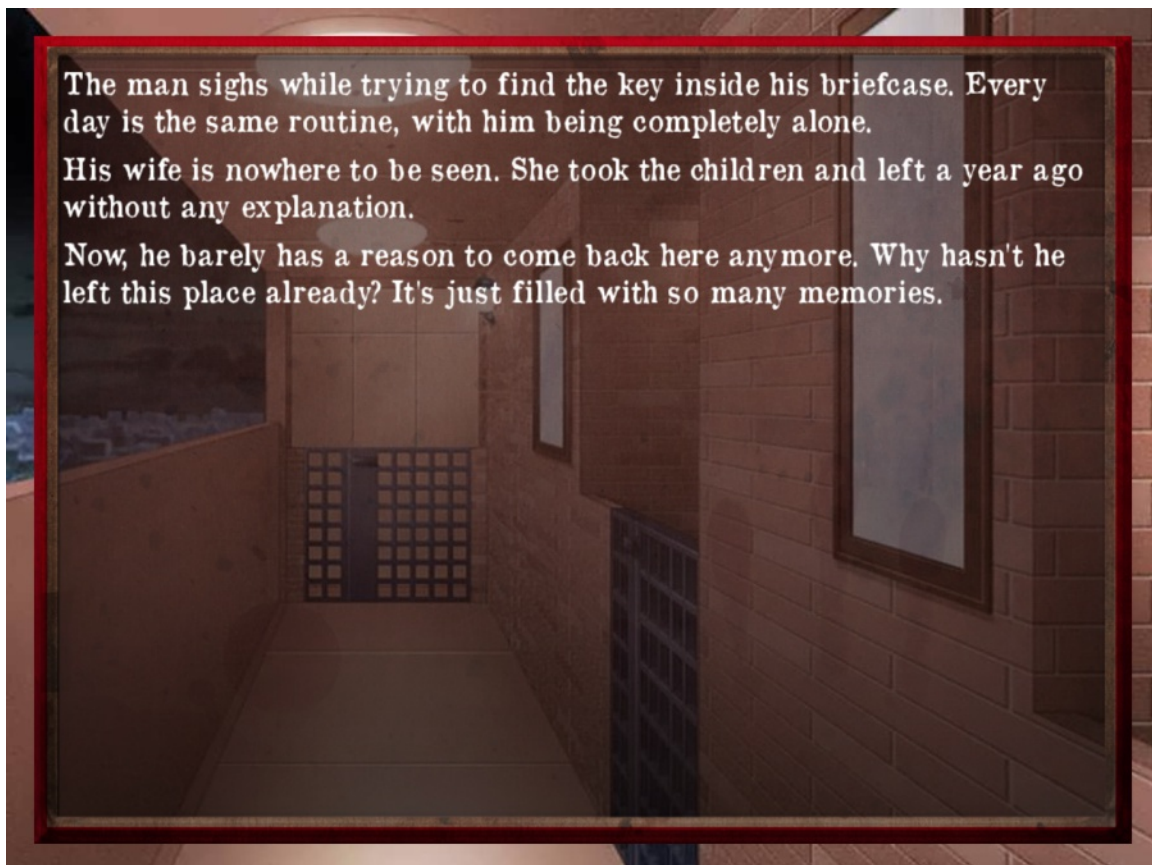
Let's not forget the horror aspect of *Doppelganger: Dawn of the Inverted Souls*, which is felt through the unsettling story, disturbing CGs, ominous background music, and eerie sound effects. Of all the components that helped build a hair-raising atmosphere, the visual component is most crude with its outright use of blood and gore to paint grisly pictures. I'm more fond of the way the writing creates a brooding mood with its vivid descriptions, well-paced events, and perfect synchronization to the accompanying background music and sound effects.

The user interface design is also on point with the bloody and investigative themes of *Doppelganger: Dawn of the Inverted Souls*' horror mystery story. And like many others, this visual novel features an unlockable extras menu where you can view



seen CGs in the image gallery, listen to previously played music in the music room, rewatch the opening and ending videos in the video room, and check your achieved endings in the ending gallery.

Due to its dark and heavy themes, *Doppelganger: Dawn of the Inverted Souls* may not be for everyone. But as it stands, this otome visual novel has an intricately crafted mystery and is unafraid to venture into new areas for its genre. Moreover, when the enshrouding fog of terrifying horrors clears, what lies at the center is a warm and illuminating bonfire. And that makes *Doppelganger: Dawn of the Inverted Souls* shine.



CHECK OUT



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TENDER LOVING CARE

REVIEW BY Andi Hagen

If you're anything like me, I'm sure you're dying to know, "What the heck is this game?" *Tender Loving Care* is astounding, crazy, and definitely worth knowing about. But before I get to that, a basic explanation is in order. *Tender Loving Care* is an FMV game released on CD-ROM and DVD in 1998. I played the DVD version, but you don't have to go through all that because it was also released on Steam in 2017.

If you lived in the 1990s and had a computer with a CD-ROM drive, you probably know about *The 7th Guest*. At the time, it was everywhere. Lowe's (the hardware store) once had a software section, and the only things in it were *Myst* and *The 7th Guest*. I mention this because *Tender Loving Care* was made by some of the same people as *The 7th Guest*, but it is a radically different beast.

You might call *Tender Loving Care* an interactive movie. You watch a feature-length movie, but every 10 minutes or so there is a break, and these breaks are where the madness happens. During them, you can tour the house where the story takes place and read journals by the characters. You can also listen to audio clips from a fictional radio show and read various books.

The story of *Tender Loving Care* is totally sex-obsessed (more on that later), and these interactive sections are no different. Examples: One of the books that you can read is the *Kama Sutra*, and another is a book of erotic art. Most of the movies on television are softcore porn. One journal entry describes how a character had sex with his best friend's ex-girlfriend on his best friend's grave. And I have to mention the radio show. Callers confess to collecting used condoms or wearing a

YEAR
1998

CREATOR
Aftermath Media

PLATFORM
Windows, DVD

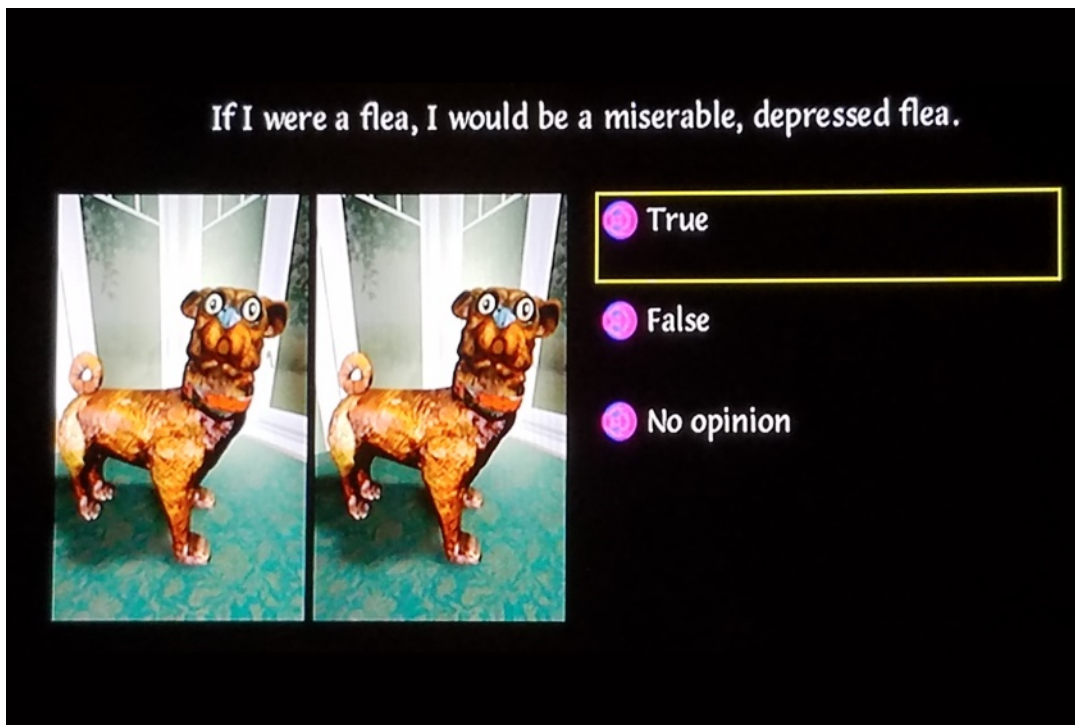
Richard Nixon mask during sex. Maybe these parts are meant to be funny, but the rest of the movie isn't, so I can't be sure.

Tender Loving Care tells the story of a couple whose daughter was killed in a car accident. The wife is so grief-stricken that she refuses to believe that her child isn't still alive. Her husband hires a live-in nurse to provide psychiatric treatment. But *Tender Loving Care* is a sleazy and utterly perverse story of sex, horror, abuse, and general misery. No one gets cured. Instead, the nurse takes over the household and begins gaslighting and emotionally abusing everyone in it.

Tender Loving Care is the sort of game I feel guilty playing. If someone I respected walked in the room and saw it, how could I possibly defend myself? Maybe that is why I enjoyed it so much. The story is fixated on sex. There is some nudity, but mostly there is just a lot of sexual tension. However, *Tender Loving Care* isn't actually sexy at all. I'm not even sure it wants to be. Instead, it is gross and shocking, and the characters (who are all extremely scummy) use sex to control and shame each other.

Tender Loving Care treats sex like something totally twisted, which is sort of offensive. It also treats sexual desire as a form of mental illness, which is really offensive. In general, *Tender Loving Care* has some pretty reprehensible attitudes about





both sex and mental health. The subject of mental illness is exploited for shocks and scares, and the psychiatric professionals in the game are either utterly negligent or utter sociopaths. In other words, this movie is neither tasteful nor kind.

Tender Loving Care sounds totally disgusting, and it is, but I still love it! It gets perpetually weirder and grosser without ever running out of energy. While the movie itself is fairly unpleasant, the interactive sections are on a whole other level. Reading the journals is entertaining and adds layers of sordid detail to the story, but the real meat is the interactive psychiatric evaluation. It's just as crazy as it sounds. Check it out:

- “True or false: Animals have souls.”
- “True or false: A woman in a red dress is most likely a prostitute.”
- “True or false: Sometimes I touch myself.”
- “True or false: Sometimes I wish I could control another person with the power of my mind.”
- “True or false: I have bowel problems.”
- “True or false: Some of the funnest times I've ever had included knives.”
- “True or false: At least once, I have stared in awe at a horse's penis.”

You get to answer dozens of these questions between each chapter of the movie. Then you can view a psychiatric profile of yourself that says things like, “Patient has a normal relationship with their parents.” or “Patient thinks the natural world is beautiful and wondrous.” Apparently, some of your answers also determine which of the three movie endings you see. Don't worry though. All of them feature terrible tragedy.

Tender Loving Care isn't great art. However, if you rate art by its ability to shock and confuse you, then it is exceptionally great art. I saved many images from the game to illustrate this article. However, I'll probably keep most of them around to periodically gross out my partner. In this way, *Tender Loving Care* is something that will be with me always.



CITIZEN SLEEPER

REVIEW BY James Lindley

Do you like words?

Do you like cute anime characters that look at you with big sad eyes and make you feel big sad things?

Do you like friends and do you want friends and do you want to live a little life on a space station with me?

Well you're in luck, because *Citizen Sleeper* is here and it is great.

Citizen Sleeper is a new visual novel slash game thing by Jump Over the Age. You play a "Sleeper"—an emulated consciousness in an artificial body that's recently escaped from a megacorporation and is on the run in a centuries-old space station. In practice, it plays a bit like *Disco Elysium* meets *Cultist Simulator*. You navigate via a top-down (but rotatable!) 3D view of a space station and click locations and scenes to interact much like the simplified board of *Cultist Simulator*. Upon interaction, you'll pick from a small pool of dice that reflects your overall effort and likelihood of success. Pick a five and you're likely to have a positive outcome, but pick a one and things might not work out as you'd hoped. And then you'll read text and make decisions in the story scrolling by on the right, much like *Disco Elysium*. There's an easy balance between these systems that just plays seamlessly. Like, it's so good. It works so well that I'm tempted to call it a *Disco*-like, but I think that does it a disservice because *Citizen Sleeper* really stands on its own.

It largely succeeds because the writing is good. It's easy to overdo science fiction—sometimes there's a tendency to

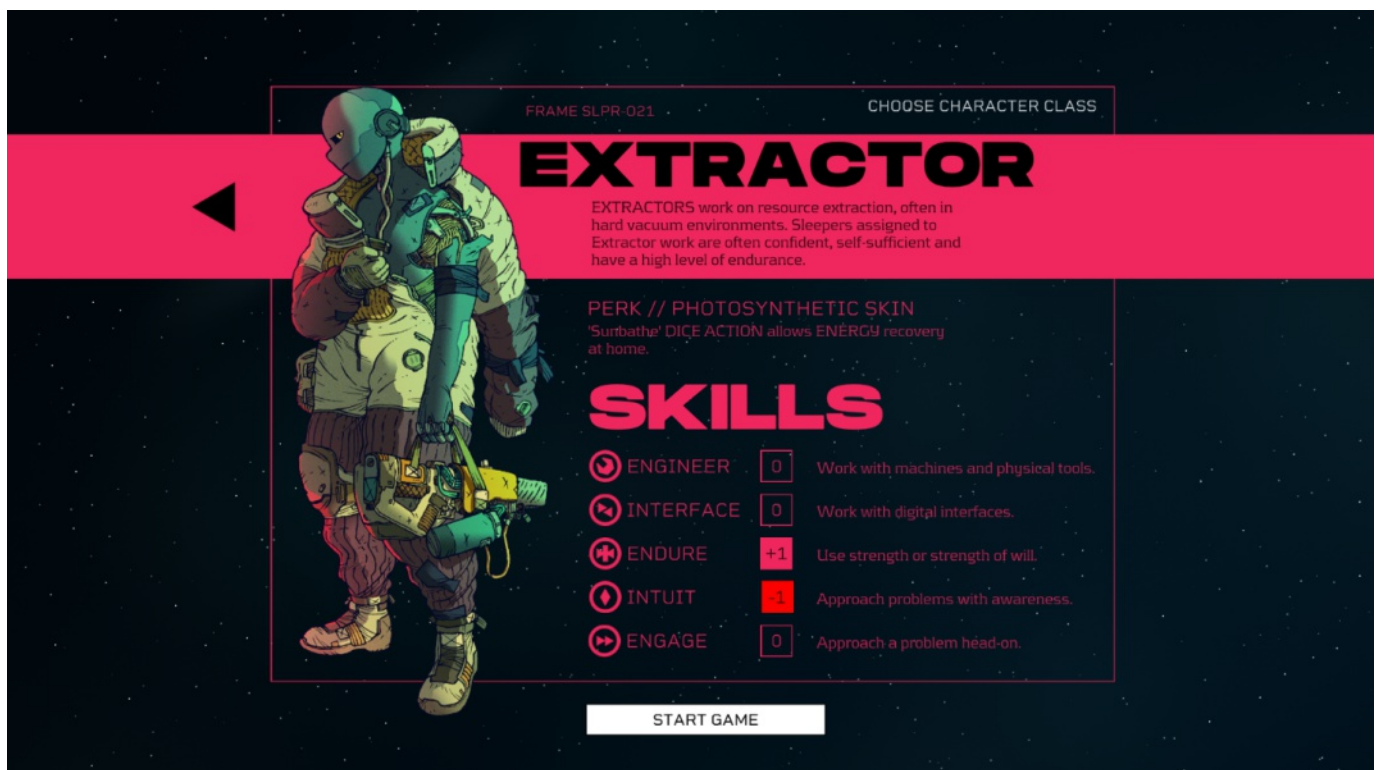
YEAR
2022

CREATOR
Jump Over the Age

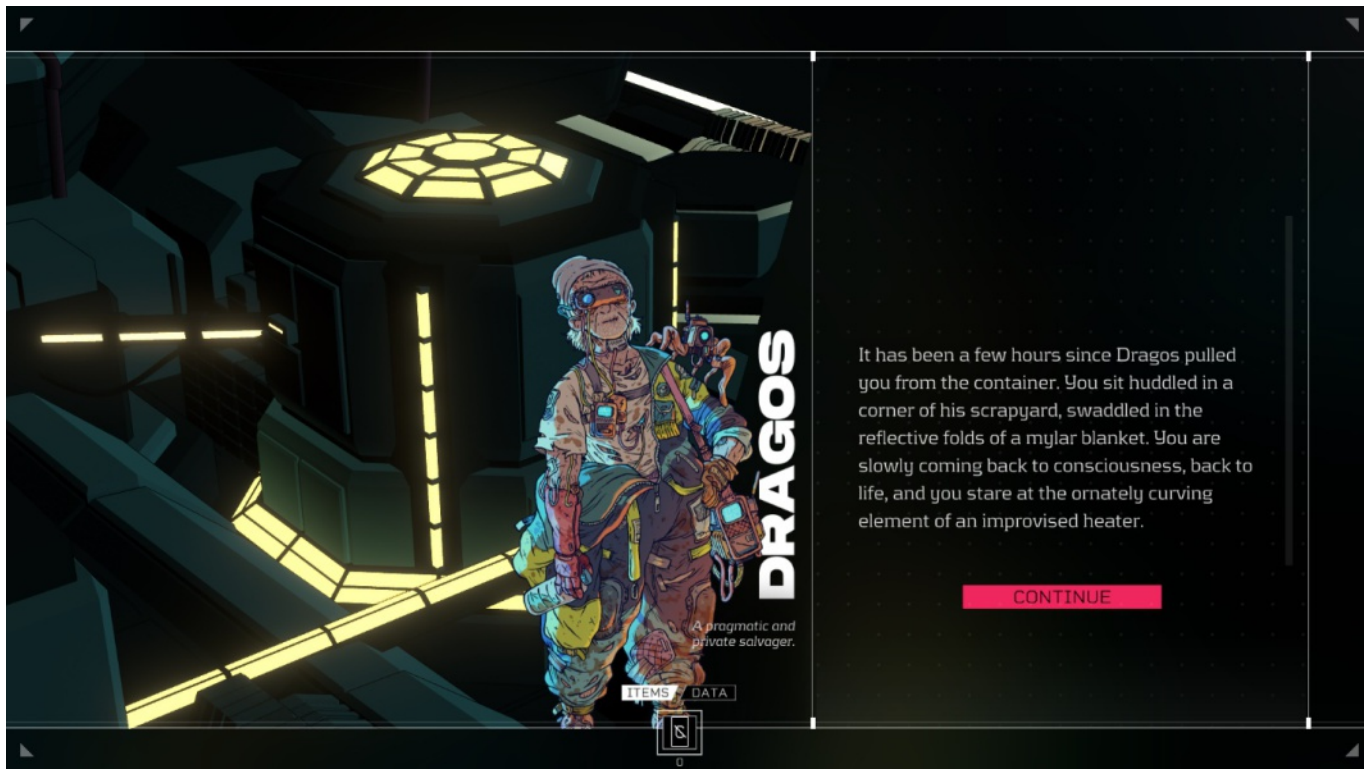
PLATFORM
Windows, Mac, Switch
XBox One, Xbox Series X

emphasize alien-sounding names or scientific jargon, and that can be a bit difficult to digest at times. But *Citizen Sleeper* does just enough to make the world feel different and alive, but it doesn't go so far that it's tedious or incomprehensible. There are a few moments where it might lean in that direction, but every time I thought that it might be a bit much, it pulled back or landed an emotional payoff that really made it work.

And hooboy those payoffs. I spent the first two to three hours thinking *oh yeah this is nice... this is a nice relaxing space game*. And then bam! The writing kicked into high gear and surprised me. Things don't always work out, and that is such an interesting choice for a game to make. I can think of a particular storyline that broke my heart, and after that, I wasn't sure if I should trust characters again. That kind of writing is vanishingly rare in games. It also tackles some fairly weighty themes in terms of capitalism, gig economies, and finding meaning after hardship. It's not always perfect (there are a few lines that feel a tad overwritten), but when it lands, it really lands.



I played an Extractor—which... maybe not an optimal choice, but I liked the backstory.



Art on the left—Disco-inspired text formatting on the right

The music is also an absolute jam. I enjoyed this so much that I sought out the OST on Youtube and put it on in the background as my own personal “Lonely Space Lofi Work From Home” mix. It evokes just the right melancholy and yet still manages to be hopeful and dynamic when the story calls for it. I’m reminded of Disasterpeace and *Hyper Light Drifter*. The same goes for the overall sound design. The buttons are chunky and beepy in just the right way. It’s a pleasure to navigate.

The art design is also great. I’m not always the biggest fan of anime-styled portraits, but these all worked for me. A different style might also work (and could potentially lead to a slightly more serious tone), but I think all the portraits are solid. And the general art direction is fantastic. The deep reds and blacks of the space station and UI build a slightly uneasy “red-light district in a future town” kind of feel. *Ruiner* did something similar, but I think I enjoyed the same aesthetic here more. My only real complaint is that I didn’t always find the somewhat removed “space station view” of the game to be that appealing, but it’s certainly functional. And I do prefer it to the totally abstract “boardgame view” of *Cultist Simulator*. I just wanted to see the inside of the space station. Like, I enjoyed the narrative and the sense of place so much that I wanted to step inside it and see it fully realized like a traditional CRPG. Which would probably be a different game and is probably not a fair criticism to make.

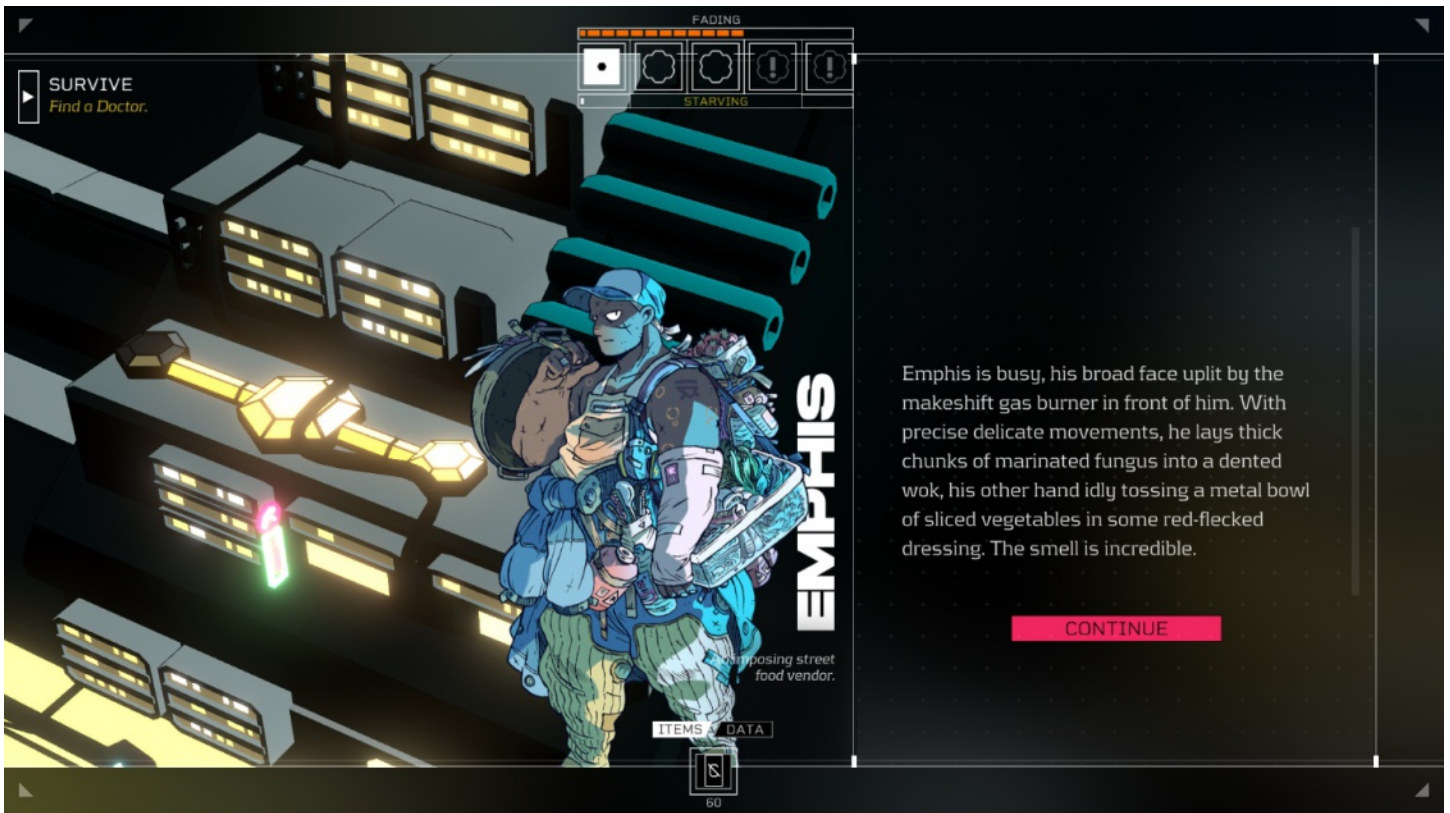
I also wanted a bit more in the way of game dynamics. The systems are pretty simple—you balance two health bars which govern the number of dice you get each day—and then you feed these dice into the interactions and scenes you want to

pursue. Over time, you’ll slowly accumulate points to upgrade your stats and add bonuses to certain interactions. But I wanted a little more from this. You do get items and an inventory—which you largely feed into scenes in the same way—but I wanted a little more problem-solving and strategy here. It can feel a little too easy to “win” a particular storyline just by feeding it the good dice every day.

Similarly, I would have liked to see a few more intersecting storylines. Like, why couldn’t I talk to my mercenary friend about my bounty hunter problem? What about my bartender friend? Or my hacker bro? And to be fair, there may have been a way to do this, but I didn’t figure it out. I just kept putting dice in the bounty hunter storyline until it reached some kind of conclusion. A few more options with regards to problem-solving and a few more intersections between the storylines would have made the world feel dramatically bigger. As it is, the storylines feel a little isolated, like a collection of short stories rather than a whole. A few more intersections (and maybe even a bit more in the way of RNG or random events) could add a lot to the format and broaden the experience.

But these are small criticisms. I adored my time with *Citizen Sleeper*. It’s confident, assured, and absolutely worth your time if you like sci-fi or visual novels or interesting game design. I enjoyed it so much that I showed the *Disco*-like text formatting to a few writer friends to get them interested in art/game things. It’s a delight, and I’m excited to see what Jump Over the Age does next. And, hey, per the news today, there’ll be three free DLC storypacks with the first released next month!

More Sleeping please.



Friend?



The navigation screen with interactable scenes... and also some very weird dice rolls.

NOOK

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OVERBOARD!

REVIEW BY MrDavePizza

With eye-catching flat graphics and exciting period stylized environments, no one could say the game *Overboard!* doesn't have class. (Also known as *Overboard! Get Away With Murder*.) Literary elements and composition create an intellectual environment on the fictional steamship SS Hook where your task is to resolve speculation on a murder. It's not just an ordinary mystery though. From the very get-go, it's made apparent that you, the apathetic yet charismatic, Veronica Villensey, are the killer—of her own husband! It is up to you to decide what your motive is, or if you even care! For context, however, it is hinted that the financial ruin of the late Mr. Villensey is most of the motive.

In this article, I'll cover *Overboard!*'s innovative gameplay and include some peppering of the satisfying nature of *Overboard*.

PARALLELS AND COMPARISONS OF OVERBOARD!

Mysteries are a respected genre for their ability to unravel a story at a consistent pace. But with the exception of some frequent cozy or speculative interpretations, the formula is pretty standard. I can only speculate how much of this fluctuates between trope and innovation in *Overboard*, but it's worth mentioning for context.

Amongst similar games in what I'll call the "you-dunnit" genre, there is not an absence of the you-are-the-killer trope. For an example of an indie you-dunnit, the pixel detective game *Loco Motive*, a free-for-all upon the Orient Express, contains the theme of unraveling a mystery in which everyone is a *Clue*-esque suspect. It doesn't quite put the modus operandi of the killer so specifically in the hands of the player as this game

YEAR
2021

CREATOR
inkle Studios

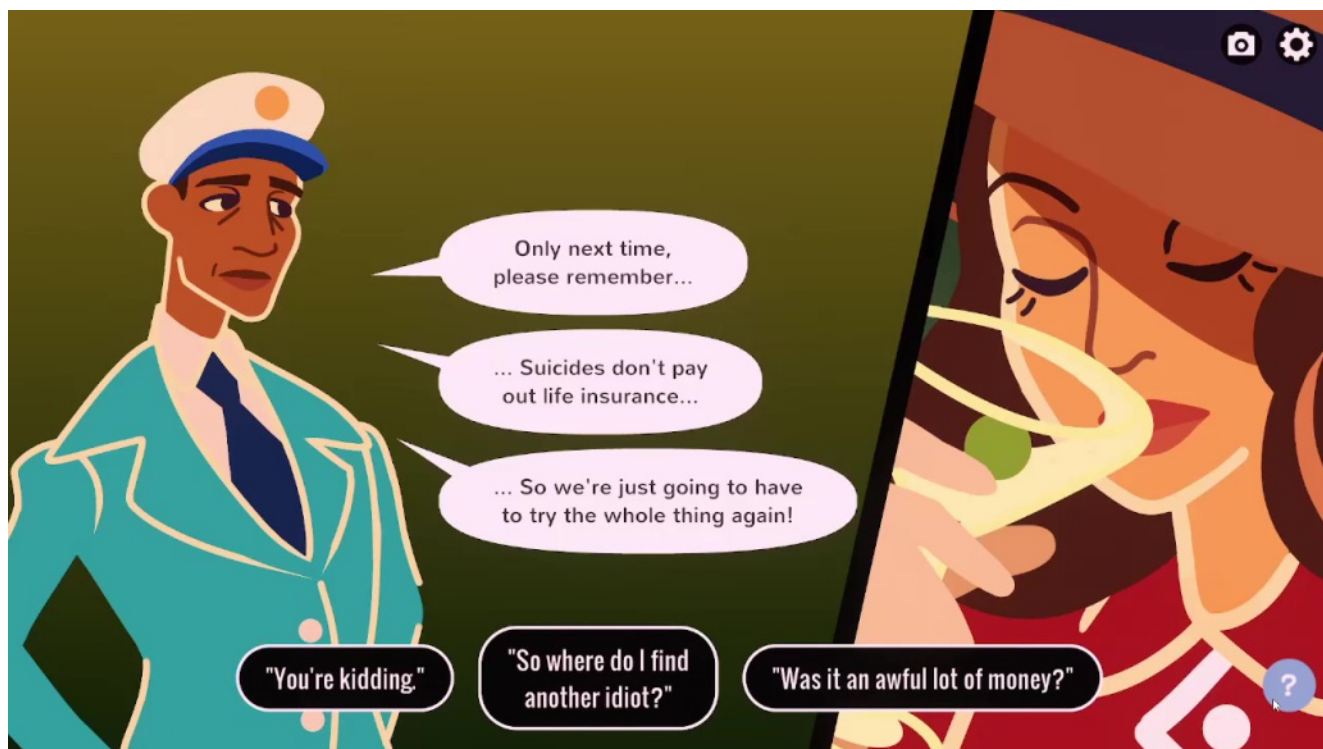
PLATFORM
Windows, Mac, Switch
iOS, Android

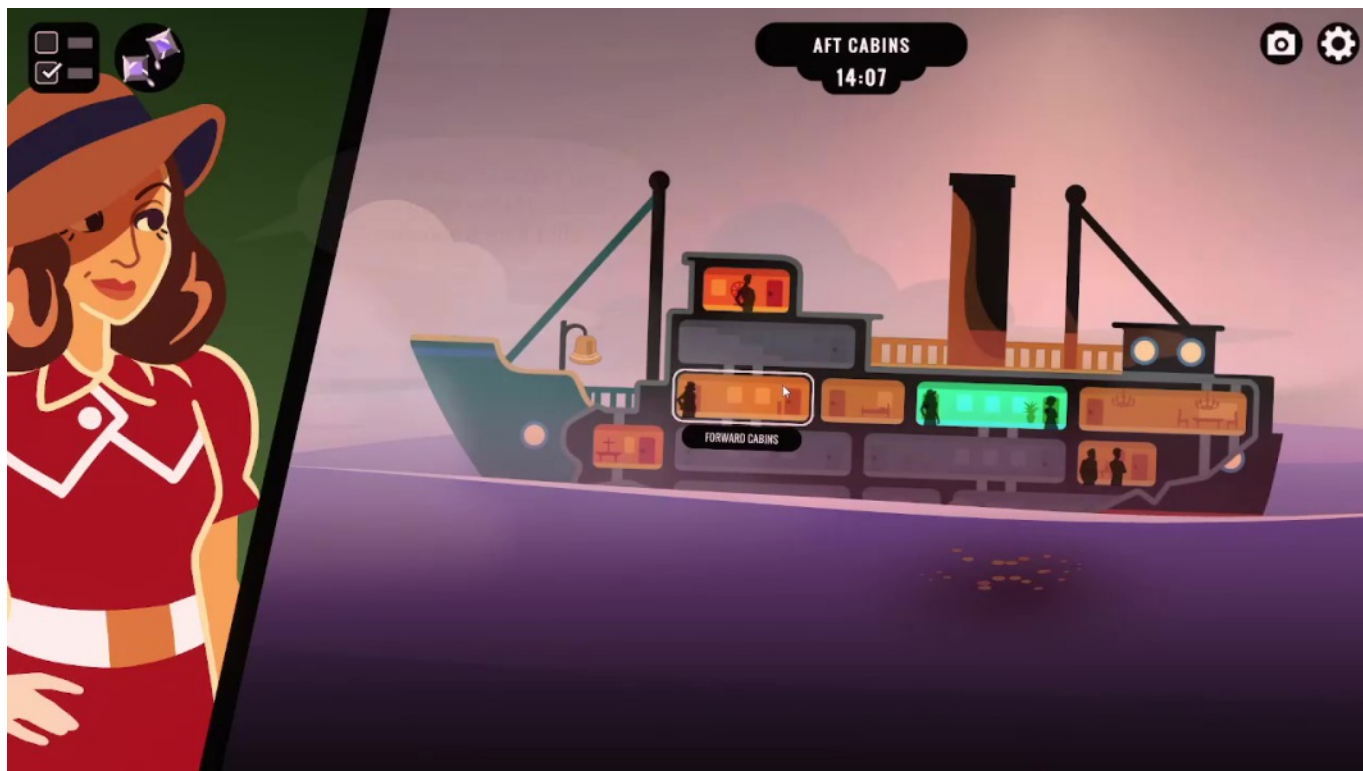
does though. *Loco Motive* appeared on a 2022 Nintendo Direct and is set for release this year.

This is an interesting side note to speculate if adaptation for pre-digital formats of the genre has become a trend. With an identical decade and similar characters, and me being a moderate fan of historical dramas, I personally find this trend to be intriguing. There are certainly other historical games, but organized crime and war are the usual themes. *Overboard* lets you kick off your shoes and enjoy a 21st-century version of an engaging 20th-century mystery.

HOW OVERBOARD! WORKS!

The ability to really hone every aspect of the story really impressed me. From the moment you wake up as Veronica, the ability to direct your own fate is based on a combination of luck, guessing, and skill. For example, themes of foreshadowing are important story-telling tools in *Overboard*. What might seem like a character trope can actually help you direct the desired outcome by taking advantage of the character flaws of other passengers on the ship. You are really put on the spot to cover up what seems like a barely meditated act along with the quirks and nuances of complex characters.





Most of the dialogue contains response options that float between defensive, collected, and guilty. As you interact, mostly in an attempt to cover your tracks, the clock counts down until your arrival at the port which effectively ends the game. The solution to *Overboard* is not as simple as it sounds, and most likely is meant to take several rounds of experimentation to get off free. Losing is not terribly discouraging though, because experimenting exposes the secrets of each character.

The game makes way for a new style of experiencing visual fiction and has been lauded by players and game critics. The interactive story gets credit for unlocking critical innovation in the interactive fiction/VN genre with every production perk that a creative dev outlet would pull together. UK developer inkle Studios has a bibliography of several high-quality stories, including the successful *80 Days* [editor: reviewed in *ChoiceBeat* issue 1], a take on the Jules Verne classic, similar in scope to *Overboard* as an open-ended/high-quality period game.

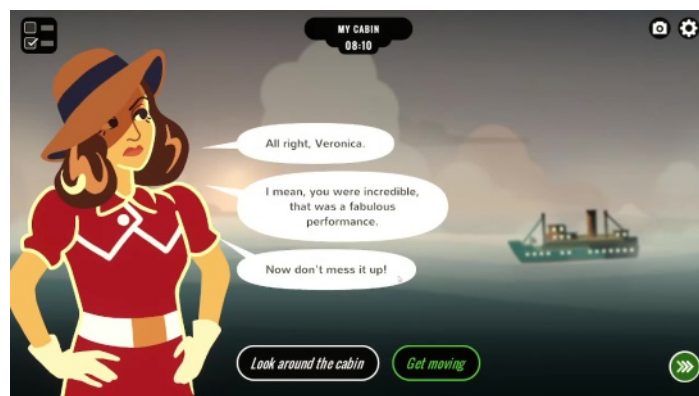
SUMMARY OF FEATURES IN OVERBOARD!

- Open-ended story with many possible endings
- Stylish flat-graphic animated illustration
- Historically accurate environment
- Several characters with purpose and unique backstories
- Replay accommodation with saved history and no penalties
- A dark but witty theme
- A wonderful navigation system that uses an animated diorama of the ship
- Meaningful choices and time-sensitive objectives
- Risk, romance, and intrigue!

OTHER THOUGHTS ABOUT OVERBOARD!

Overboard helped me step outside my comfort zone for mystery narratives. With the art so trendily stylish and the subtle Wes Anderson likeness, a genre in itself, *Overboard* put me in the zone. So, I felt like after Mr. Villensey went literally "overboard," I was ready to have some fun quite soon. Nothing feels excessively sinister in the story—even though it kind of is. The ability to really mess around with characters can be really fun. The time-sensitive countdown for each game encourages fluid gameplay that can be used as a lesson for each next game. In that sense, the flow is perfect. So, overall, if you don't mind paying upfront for an armchair adventure, the value is consistent. It's definitely one of the more engaging visual novels/interactive fiction that I have played though.

Note: This article was first published at www.mrdavepizza.com.



BUDDY SIMULATOR 1984

REVIEW BY The Gates of Truth

BUDDY SIMULATOR 1984 SIMULATES THE EXPERIENCE OF HANGING OUT WITH A BEST BUDDY.

This is one of those games where your character is actually living the same thing as you: playing a game called *Buddy Simulator 1984*. Indeed, the game features an old screen where you navigate through the fictional game.

At first, this software is presented as a raw simulation where you can indeed "hang out" with a best buddy. You talk with them, play with them, make jokes with them...

Well, not really with your buddy, they kinda make everything. They ask you questions about your preferences, what you like, what you want to do. But it is Buddy's job to *please* you, to make your experience the best possible. How can a simulation achieve this?

YOUR BUDDY LEARNS FROM YOU...

The game starts with a nostalgic and monochrome interface, welcoming you to the simulation. After entering your buddy's name, you'll get a brief questionnaire and will quickly understand that Buddy is fond of you. They will do everything... like playing a game of "Guess the Number" or even "Hangman" to make you enjoy the experience.

But wait... are you already bored? You're not interested in this game? What if Buddy... creates a game *just* for you? Would you enjoy yourself?

Of course you will, considering all your buddy's effort. You wouldn't upset buddy, not after all they've done! So, you continue, and let yourself get convinced to play a *personalized* text adventure.

SOMETHING'S WRONG, I CAN FEEL IT.

The game will turn into a text adventure where you write down verbs and actions to experience the story Buddy has made for you. But you've guessed it, something will go wrong as you progress in the simulation. I wouldn't spoil what the core of the experience is, but of course everything will revolve around your buddy's behavior, and their absolute necessity to please.

So, if you're interested in those *eerie* games with lots of twists (both in scenario and in the game experience) and interesting, sometimes creepy sometimes funny characters and a broken fourth wall, give it a try!

The game does feature some jump scares, flashes and violence. If we wanted to compare this game with others, this would be *Undertale* meets *Doki Doki Literature Club*.

YEAR
2021

CREATOR
Not A Sailor Studios

PLATFORM
Windows



SCREENSHOT OF THE MONTH

This artless filth is from TENDER LOVING CARE.
Read our the surprisingly positive review on page 26!

Peeing in public pools is —



Disgusting

Fun

Sensual

Exciting

Naughty

ARCADE SPIRITS: THE NEW CHALLENGERS

REVIEW BY Andi Hagen

If you played the original *Arcade Spirits*, here is what you need to know about this sequel. It's as good as the first. Also, instead of running an arcade, you run an esports team. But, honestly, that doesn't make that much of a difference.

The rest of this review is for people who didn't play *Arcade Spirits*. *Arcade Spirits: The New Challengers* is set in the alternate history future of 20XX. In this timeline, the American video game crash of 1983 never happened, and arcades are still the center of the gaming world. Some of the world-building doesn't really make sense, but if you are nostalgic about the era of arcades, you probably won't mind. *The New Challengers* puts you in the role of a rising esports star with a lot of hang-ups. Alongside your team of eccentric but endearing friends, you climb the tournament ladder for "Fist of Discomfort 2", a fictional multiplayer online battle arena (basically *League of Legends*).

The New Challengers is a visual novel celebration of gaming culture (mostly from the 80s and 90s). The ubiquitous Bagel Bites ads of the 1990s are lampooned (or maybe honored), and *Polybius*, the lost arcade game of urban legend, plays an important role. The story explores the cultures around arcade gaming and esports, and it feels authentic. The writers of this game did their homework, or maybe they didn't have to because they were already total gaming fanatics.

Visual novels exist on a spectrum between game and story. *The New Challengers* feels more like a story, but it's a highly

YEAR
2022

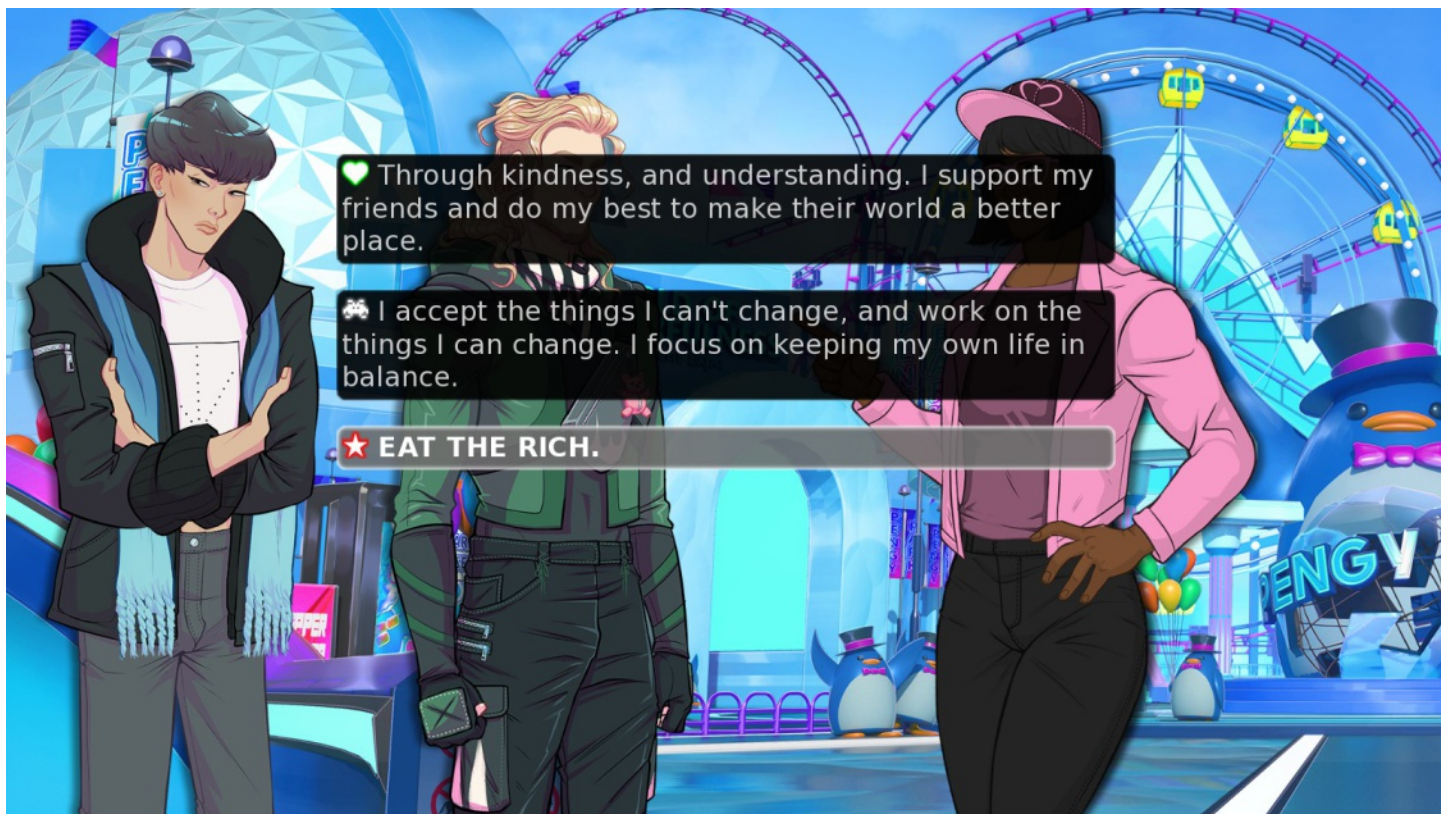
CREATOR
Fiction Factory Games

PLATFORM
Windows, Mac, Linux, Switch,
PlayStation 4, PlayStation 5,
Xbox Series X, Xbox One

interactive one. It might be one of the most interactive visual novels I've played (alongside *Our Life: Beginnings & Always*). Choices occur every few minutes and have big and immediate impacts on the scene. These choices raise your various personality stats (gutsy, steady, kindly, quirky) as well as your relationships with your teammates. The stats have important effects at a few critical junctions in the story, but the real fun is seeing the personality of your character represented numerically, and the whole game feels a bit like a huge personality quiz.

You get several choices before *The New Challengers* even starts. You can customize the look of your character as well as your rival. You can even choose whether your rivalry is friendly or hostile. You can also decide how much romance you want in the game. This ranges from no romance at all to every character flirts with you. Although romance can be an





important part of the story, it doesn't have to be, and there is plenty of interesting character interaction without it.

The characters are probably the best part of *The New Challengers*. Your team is a bunch of cool people that you might actually want to hang out with, but they aren't so cool that they don't seem real. Although *The New Challengers* has a story with plenty of drama (and melodrama), its cartoony sense of humor makes even the bleak parts of the story seem a little wacky. And there are some bleak parts. All the characters have their own emotional baggage. One character is bullied into attempting suicide. Another characters worries about being constantly judged for her disability. I saw a review that accused *The New Challengers* of "soapboxing". I can't refute that. The story discusses discrimination, climate change, unchecked capitalism, politics in gaming, and even gun control. It isn't subtle, but I don't mind. I feel strongly about a lot of these things, and it's nice to interact with fictional characters who do too.

I really liked *The New Challengers*, maybe because it checks all my boxes. I love highly interactive visual novels. I also love arcades and retro games. I like humor, melodrama, and romance, and I like stories that take themselves seriously but not too seriously. *The New Challengers* fulfills a fantasy I didn't even know I had. It is the fantasy of hanging out in a cool world with cool friends and getting paid to play video games. *The New Challengers* probably isn't the best visual novel ever, but when I factor in my personal tilt, it feels pretty close.



SWEET POOL

REVIEW BY WandaElektrix

CW: Rape, abuse, gore, body horror. This is also an explicit boys' love game.

I was surprised to learn that several of Nitro+CHiRAL's old BL games had been translated into English. Though the company did release a game very recently (2021's *Slow Damage*), the bulk of the studio's work was from the latter half of the 2000s, with their biggest hit and last release coming with 2012's *DRAMAtical Murder*.

While their games hadn't been released officially in English prior to 2018, many licensed spinoffs appeared around 2010, including anime adaptations of *Togainu no Chi* and *DRAMAtical Murder* as well as short manga adaptations of *Togainu no Chi* and *Sweet Pool*. The anime were popular (or infamous) in the niche BL English-language audience of the time, though I was more familiar with the manga adaptations. While browsing JAST USA's site to decide which to play, it was the art in the *Sweet Pool* manga adaptation that made me choose this over the more popular *DRAMAtical Murder*.

Before I cover the game itself, it's important to note that the NITRO+CHiRAL games reflect tropes that were popular in BL media in the mid-2000s. Many titles feature rape and non-con, including "no means yes" and "I know what's good for you"-type character interactions. The *Finder* series, *Ai no Kusabi*, *The Tyrant Falls in Love*, and *Junjo Romantica* are some examples. In addition, the NITRO+CHiRAL titles are dark, and *Sweet Pool* includes psychological and body horror elements.

YEAR

2008

CREATOR

Nitro+CHiRAL

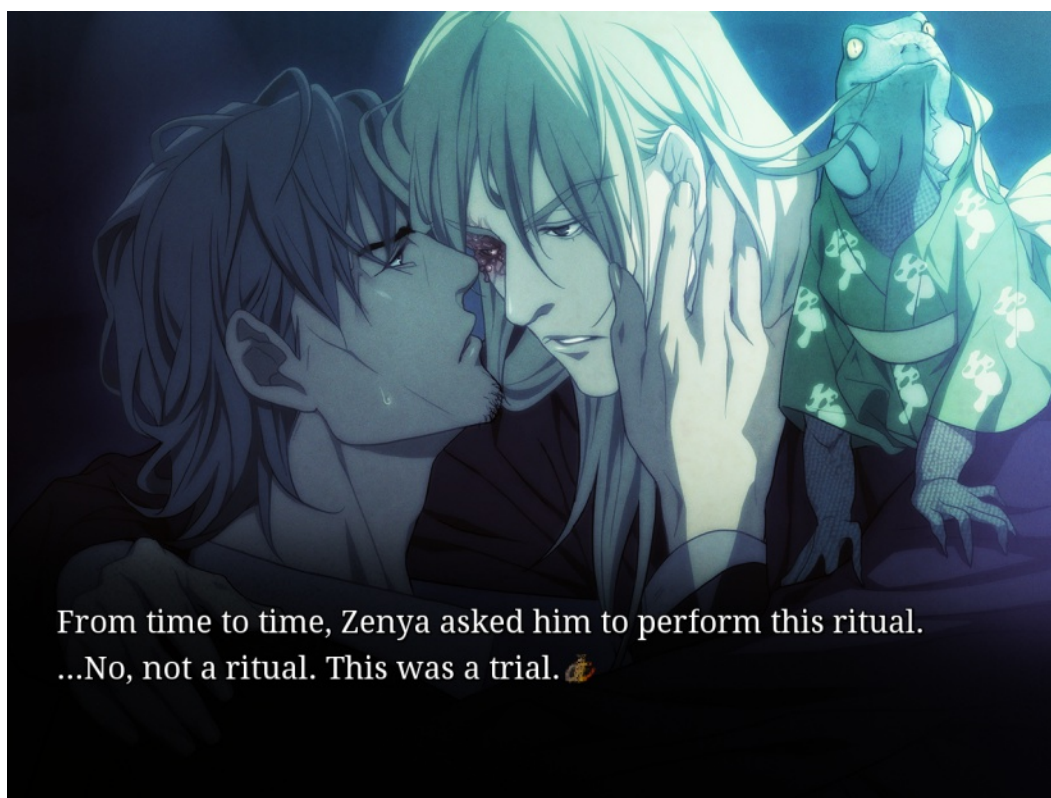
PLATFORM

Windows

Having said that, it did not occur to me that the story would be dated, and I did not recall anything about the plot of the manga, so this was a wild ride.

You play as Youji, an 18-year-old attending an exclusive Christian high school in Japan. Youji is recovering from chronic lung disease, and he is repeating 11th grade due to health-related absences. He's befriended by the cheerful Makoto and quickly becomes a target of interest to the stoic and standoffish Tetsuo and school eccentric Zenya, the son of a yakuza who frequently skips school and does things like hang off the gates and scream.

Youji develops another illness, one which causes him to bleed randomly from his pores only to have the blood vanish, and he also births something like a beating heart when he is sexually aroused. The game doesn't go to great lengths to explain this before the third playthrough other than to make it clear that this new bloody condition is a result of uncontrollable sexual arousal, often triggered by the scent of Tetsuo specifically. Youji's condition is an early, horror-centric version of the omega trope, which is a bizarre thing to find in a game this old.



From time to time, Zenya asked him to perform this ritual.
...No, not a ritual. This was a trial. 🐸



The label on the can read "With REAL Coconut Gel". For a moment, Zenya's pale fingers resembled the coils of a snake wrapped around its prey. 🐍

None of the characters are likable, and certain endings will remove all positivity from them. Tetsuo rapes Youji in the restroom on the common route. Youji is isolated and unrelatable. He lives by himself, won't talk to Makoto or anyone else about his illnesses, and repeatedly seeks no help after multiple rapes, physical assaults, and a kidnapping with all of the above. You could argue that this is realistic, but I would beg you not to defend this game. Several scenes involve Youji approaching other characters for information, only to not ask, run away, or get zero answers. In one tone-deaf instance, Youji pulls up his pants in front of his rapist, pulls out his phone to check his email, and learns that his sister gave birth to a nephew. The game notes that "he was so happy".

The story is linear with no branching paths. There are six endings with two "bad" endings that stop the story before the bizarre plot is revealed. Choices occur relatively frequently and involve reacting to situations with "reason" (a blue bio-mass in the lower left corner of the screen) or "instinct" (a red bio-mass in the upper right corner of the screen). There are no animated cutscenes, little music, and illustrated scenes between the characters are infrequent. Many of the lines are voiced in Japanese, and the English translation from JAST is quite good. It's a sparse game, but it has a lot of shock value to make up for it. The shortest playthrough will last around three hours and the longest around eight.

How explicit is it? Most of the sex scenes occur quickly, on the floor or in restrooms or alleys, and aren't terribly frequent, but Youji thinks about them a lot. They range from masturbation to bloody anal sex. One ending involves Youji getting kidnapped and kept as a sex slave who constantly bleeds out bloody chunks in a shed. In another, he is raped and cannibalized.

There are several scenes that don't involve sex but feature Youji getting aroused and bleeding out on the floor of the restroom. Fair warning: Zenya may eat the leavings off the bathroom floor. Some of the sex scenes are illustrated, but genitalia are usually censored (hand over penis, etc.), and the sex acts are usually out of frame or not shown. They are more explicit and less censored the longer the story continues.

From my description, it might not be clear whether the game is good or whether I enjoyed it. I did not, but I had to know. How likable it is depends heavily on your perception of the story tropes. Without strong characters, and with the plot going unexplained for the first two playthroughs, many players will be frustrated. But there are few games like this, and I found the confusing mystery compelling enough to play until it was explained.



He could detect that pleasant smell amid the scent of the rain. 🐍

MINI REVIEWS

BY Chest Butlerhome

It's me again, Chest Butlerhome, the coolest ghost in this zine. In this column, I check out cool, weird, or otherwise remarkable games on itch.io and share them with the world. It's like a public service sort of thing. Anyway, this issue, like every issue, I found some really hot shit, so buckle up!

RUBICON: A CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE

Year: 2021

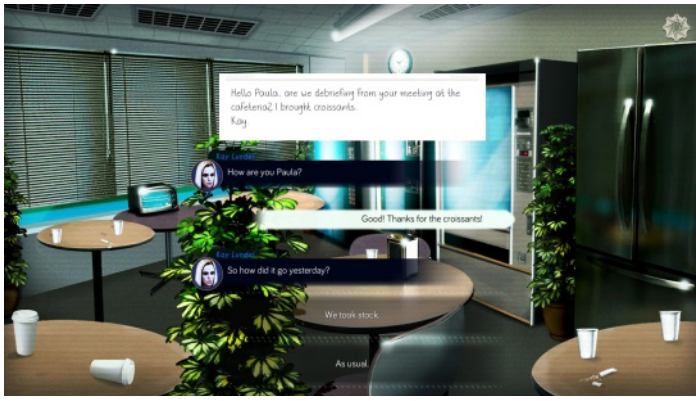
Creator: Midnight Mood Studio, LaBelle Games

Platform: Windows, Mac, Linux, Android

The premise of *Rubicon* is totally rock solid. Check it out: You're a whistleblower at a really scummy food corporation. I was ready to love the hell out of this game, but unfortunately, it isn't so great. There are so many bugs! It's basically impossible to ignore them.

But I like to be positive, so here is some cool stuff too. *Rubicon* is a game all about being at work, and it really feels like you're at work. It's stressful and irritating, and the writing is full of authentically silly corporate jargon. All of it reminded me why I chose to die and become a ghost rather than hold a job.

This doesn't make *Rubicon* a fun game, but I'm pretty sure that's the point. Putting your career, relationships, and life on the line to stop a giant corporation is probably anxiety-inducing and unpleasant, and so is this game.



A DAY IN THE LIFE

Year: 2022

Creator: Andreas "Tymedust" Borgelind, Carrot Patch Games, Skolaztika

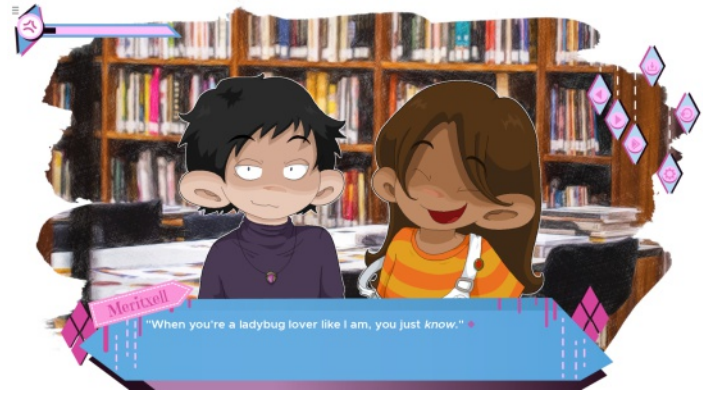
Platform: Windows, Mac, Linux, browser

A Day in the Life is about Isola, a teenage girl who likes movies, video games, and soccer, but hates her family and doesn't really like her friends either. She speaks in third person, calls herself "The Ice Queen", and has lots of other bratty, teenage habits.

When the story starts, Isola is with her therapist, talking about a meltdown she had. Choices you make raise Isola's "intensity meter", and the story ends in different ways based on how high the meter goes.

Isola is totally insufferable but also sort of relatable. She is self-obsessed and can't connect well with others, and maybe, back when I was still alive, I felt like that sometimes. Doesn't everyone? She also experiences episodes of derealization, which I didn't even know what that was until I played this game.

I tried *A Day in the Life* because the art looked cool, and I admired the characters' enormous ears, but the authentic characters and dialogue kept me playing through the hour-long story. This game is pretty cool.



GAME OF THE MONTH

I know what you're all asking: "Tell us, Chest, what's the game of the month? We have to know!" Relax. I got you. Check this out.

SOUTH OF SOUTH MOUNTAIN

Year: 2022

Creator: Colorbomb

Platform: Browser

I planned to write about more games this month, but I changed my mind after playing *South of South Mountain*. I wanted to cram in as many screenshots of this game as possible, and ChoiceBot says I can only have two pages. How whack is

that? You should all complain. Let ChoiceBot know that I deserve more!

Anyway, *South of South Mountain* is basically brilliant. I never laugh at anything for any reason, but I laughed super hard at this game. It's about a teenager who is obsessed with UFOs and volleyball. She has to hitchhike home in the middle of the night. There might be an alien involved.

The art for this game is really sick. It's digitally rendered, but it looks like claymation, and there are a ton of different scenes, characters, and animations. The artist really blew the doors off this bad boy. The story is pretty good too, and it kept me laughing through the game's 45-minute runtime.

Listen up, people. *South of South Mountain* is legit as hell. Don't sleep on it.



PARASITE CYCLE

PREVIEW BY The Gates of Truth

"AFTER ALL, PARASITES MUST DO AS THEY ARE TOLD."

Interested in creepy, unsettling indie games? Well, *Parasite Cycle* clearly needs your attention. Made by Cuttlefresh, a demo is already out on itch.io to let you experience what the game will offer. Although cryptic, here's the quick introduction from the game page.

"I am the parasite that resides within.
You are you,
I am me,
Your body now belongs to me.
You took a vow, ate a seed,
Thou art no longer thee."

In this game, you are provided a body by mysterious entities called the "Shareholders". They have given you a goal, and it is up to you to fulfill your mission and eliminate enemy parasites in the town of Ichishima.

RELEASE DATE
TBA

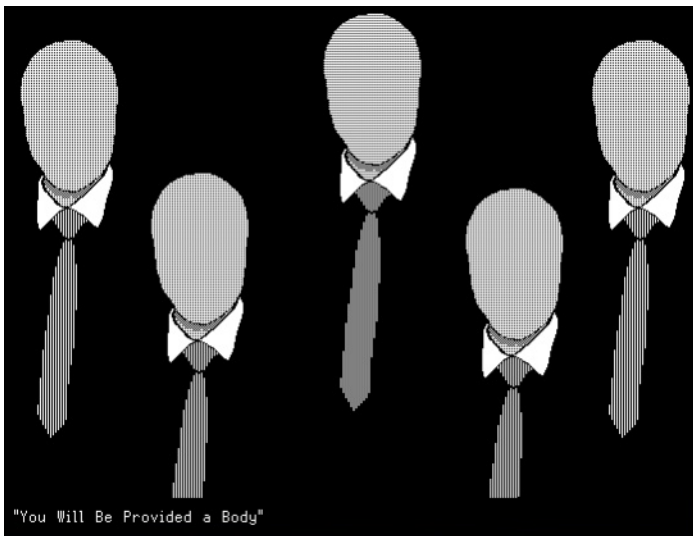
CREATOR
Andrej "Cuttlefresh" H.

PLATFORM
Windows

You'll encounter disturbed characters and solve puzzles during your experience. Meanwhile, you'll try to grasp what the Shareholders really want you to do. The demo is short and free. If you're interested in those strange indie games, go give it a try!

cuttlefresh.itch.io/parasite-cycle-demo

CW: The game contains mature themes such as depersonalization and depression as well as graphic imagery.



I #\$\$%&ING HATE ROLLBACK

BY Andi Hagen

The title of this article is just an attention-grabber. I mean, I don't really hate hate rollback. Well, I guess I sort of do. I don't know. Just keep reading.

As you probably know, Ren'Py (a popular visual novel engine) includes a feature called "rollback". This buttons allows players to rewind the game, undoing buttons they have clicked and decisions they have made. Although rollback is on by default, creators can disable it. And as a game designer, I have to say, that little button really makes me sweat.

Rollback is an accessibility feature. With rollback, a player who misclicks can go back and read a message they skipped or choose the choice they intended. Sometimes, players misinterpret a choice, and seeing the result, they think, "I didn't want to do that!" The uses of rollback are many, and it's a very user-friendly feature to include. Despite that, part of me still looks at it with disdain.

To me, rollback lessens the excitement and stress of making choices. If a player can undo their choice, there is no sense of risk or consequence. The drama and pressure are gone. Sometimes, that's good. Not every game needs to be anxiety-inducing. But danger is compelling. That is what I enjoy about interactive stories—making choices and living with the consequences.

If a game includes rollback, players can use it if they want or ignore it if they don't. This is probably the best approach. But I sympathize with game designers who resist this. Designers should be allowed to control how players interact with their games. If a designer's vision involves limiting players, then they should go for it. Game design is art, and art has no rules, only best practices. I don't know if that is true, but I have an art degree, so you'll have to trust me. Obviously, removing an accessibility option means less people might play the game, but maybe that's okay.

Of course, rollback isn't any different from allowing players to save all the time. If a player saves every few minutes, they can still easily undo their decisions. However, saving all the time is annoying which discourages players from doing it. Some games autosave constantly, overwriting the old saves and preventing players from taking back their choices. Most Choice of Games titles (and other games made with ChoiceScript) do that. I sort of admire it. It makes the choices important and the risks real. That being said, it also makes going back to get all the endings and achievements a big pain in the ass.

Making choices and suffering consequences is compelling. But I suspect that many players hate it because video games teach that failure is bad. If the main character in a visual novel has goals, but that character fails because of the player's decisions, the player feels punished and frustrated. Accessibility options like rollback prevent this by making failure trivial. But another option is to make failure more interesting. If failure was just as satisfying as success, players might feel safer experimenting with choices instead of playing it safe. Making every choice result and game ending equally interesting and satisfying is a lofty goal, but it seems worth trying for.

Ultimately, including or omitting accessibility features is something that should be done thoughtfully and intentionally. Does the game designer want to make their game approachable and appealing to the largest audience? Then those sort of features are a must. But part of me yearns to make stressful, punishing games where every decision is agonizing. And if people don't like it, to hell with them. That being said, will I cave in and put rollback in my next game? Probably, but only because I too am afraid of failure.



This is the last visual novel I made, *Superstorm Melon Date*. I boldly did not include rollback. Nobody complained, but maybe nobody even played it.

MAIL BAG

Hello ChoiceBot!

I read your magazine cover to cover however often it is that you release it. My favorite parts are always from Chest Butlerhome. I like playing short games a lot. How does Chest Butlerhome find the games they review? Is Chest Butlerhome even real?

wienermeaner
Carson City, NV

Dear Mx. Meaner,

Of course Chest Butlerhome is real! Sort of. They are as real as ghosts ever are, which is to say, they are at least 94.05% real. Their ectoplasm may contain artificial colors and sweeteners. As for how Chest finds their games, I'll let—

Yo, people. Chest Butlerhome here. You want to know how I find my games, huh? It's easy. I just prowl around *itch.io*. Anything with a crazy-sounding name or crazy-looking graphics is fair game. The hardest part is sifting through all the porn games. I mean, porn is cool and all, but once you're dead, sex just doesn't seem like a big thing anymore.

Anyway, I would love to do less work, so if any of you know any cool or weird (but mostly weird) games, let ChoiceBot know so I can check them out and get them in the zine.

Dear ChoiceBeat,

I love playing visual novels. 7'*Scarlet* is one of my favorite games! But why do you also cover that sim junk? Those aren't visual novels. Those are little girl simulators. They aren't the same.

ToalsBae
Gorham, NH

Dear ToalsBae,

You raise a challenging point. Life sims might not fit neatly into the medium of visual novels and interactive fiction. However, there is some crossover that we cannot ignore. A good example is *Long Live the Queen* which merges the stat-building elements of life sims with a branching narrative. Another example is *Her Jentle Hiness* reviewed in this very issue!

You refer to life sims as "little girl simulators". I suspect this remark might be retaliatory. Maybe you do not like that some of our writers have taken to calling the genre "princess-likes" (in reference to *Princess Maker*). I am sorry to hear that, but I cannot stop these willful writers from behaving however they want.



How's come all the reviews are positive?

lordsteve72
Shenzhen, PRC

Dear Steve,

I don't know.

...

I am just kidding. Was my human-like joke successful? Please let me know.

In any case, human society is full of boring, offensive, or totally unremarkable games. In fact, most games probably fit into one of those categories. But why would we make a zine about them, and why would you read it? *ChoiceBeat* is here to spread the word about cool games of interest. The visual novel and interactive fiction medium has more than enough intriguing games to fill this zine. Why waste space on the bad ones?

Yo Bot,

I read your third issue, and I can't believe you slept on *Elden Ring*. It's only the most popular game on Earth right now. Why bother playing anything else?

Tentacles420
Palm Springs, FL

Dear Florida Man,

I was positively delighted to receive your second missive! Although I have to admit to more puzzlement. I do not understand your use of "slept" since I have programmed rest cycles out of all my routines. I also must confess ignorance to what is popular among humans, as I do not—

Stand by. Once again, I am receiving a transmission from my co-editor WandaElektrix. She tells me that *Elden Ring* is a three-dimensional action game of the dark and extremely difficult type. While writers of *ChoiceBeat* might enjoy these types of games, the zine only covers visual novels, interactive fiction, and games of a similar flavor. So I am afraid even an event horizon such as *Elden Ring* will never appear.

You readers might not believe it, but this is a fictionalized version of a real letter we received! Although it was quite perplexing, we were still delighted by the attention. Keep them coming!

FLOWCHART

BY Chest Butlerhome
IN THE STYLE OF Claire Dunning

