ChoiceBeat
is my jam!

ChoiceBeat

THE VISUAL NOVEL AND INTERACTIVE FICTION ZINE

iss. 5, sep. 22

FROM THE DESK OF CHOICEBOT

Greetings Choice Fanatics,

This is a really important issue. I realize that I say that every issue, and it's always true, but this issue is really, really important. It's the one year anniversary of *ChoiceBeat*! That is a big accomplishment, but I never doubted we would get here. Partly, that's because I paid for a whole year of webhosting in advance, so I'm sort of committed. Partly, it's because the zine has such a highly enthusiastic team behind it. Every issue, the contributors spend many hours playing games, thinking about games, and writing about games. Proofreading all their articles really charges me up for visual novels and interactive fiction. Thank you so much to the *ChoiceBeat* staff!

In honor of this anniversary, I have pushed my photon reactor to the limit to make this a heckuva cool issue. We have a sensor-igniting new design. We have lots of new features including a book review and an exclusive playable game. But I'm most pumped about our two interviews. This issue includes interviews with game creators from Ukraine (*Ukraine War Stories*) and the Philippines (*He@rtstrings*). *ChoiceBeat* has always been global (after all, it's the <u>world's only</u> visual novel and interactive fiction zine), and we are continuing that tradition in full force.

Thank you, readers, for taking the time to peruse this zine. And thank you even more for spreading the word or sharing your thoughts and opinions with us. And if you aren't doing those things, why not? It's tough being the <u>world's only</u> anything, and we need all the help and inspiration we can get.

Yours truly,

ChoiceBot

ON THE COVER

The cover of this issue features art from *Wrestling with Emotions: New Kid on the Block* by Team LazerBeam. Learn more about this diverse cast of muscle-cuties on page 26.

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 Jentle Hi-ness*, *The Nine Lives of Nim*, and *Wonderland Nights* can be found at **www.skybeargames.com**.

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

Twitter: **@KuroKairin**
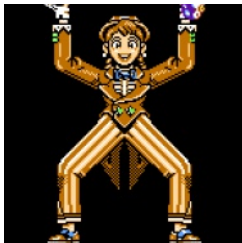
Wandaelektrix is a writer, former manga/comic reviewer, and game enjoyer. A farming sim enthusiast since 1997, Wanda is currently playing *Rune Factory 5*.

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 and their puppy, Siri.

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.

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?*.

www.andihagen.com
Twitter: **@WillyElektrix**

MrDavePizza writes about deep-cut indies, visual novels, and game dev on the internet. Some say sentient pizza as well, but that's debatable. Dave is currently working on a visual novel about the life of Alexander Graham Bell, which he hopes to wrap up sometime before the singularity.

www.mrdavepizza.com
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CONTACT US

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.

Editor: Thank you to Aletheia Knights for proofreading this issue and finding numerous typos. This paragraph is the only thing she didn't read, so I had to go over it several dozen times too get al the typos out.

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This statement is a lie. True or False?

pre-release build · work in progress

ESTOVAL
Lead Engineer, MindCore
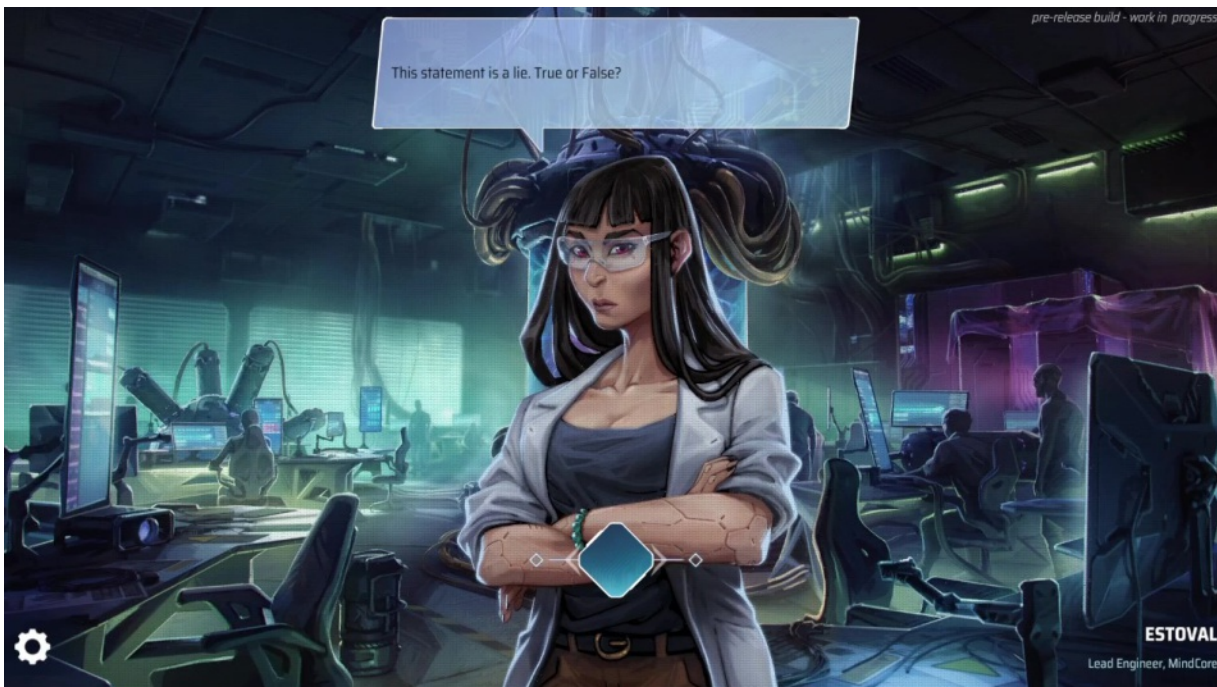
The future sucks! Find out why in the *Neuronet: The Mendax Proxy* preview on page 32.

NEWS

Narrat: Narrative RPG Engine

In the second issue of *ChoiceBeat*, I sagely claimed, "The people who build and maintain [free game engines] are the unsung heroes of the [visual novel and interactive fiction] world." That is still true, so I'm pleased to mention Narrat, developed by Nalaria. Narrat is a narrative RPG engine for text-based games that is built to work on web, mobile, and desktop.
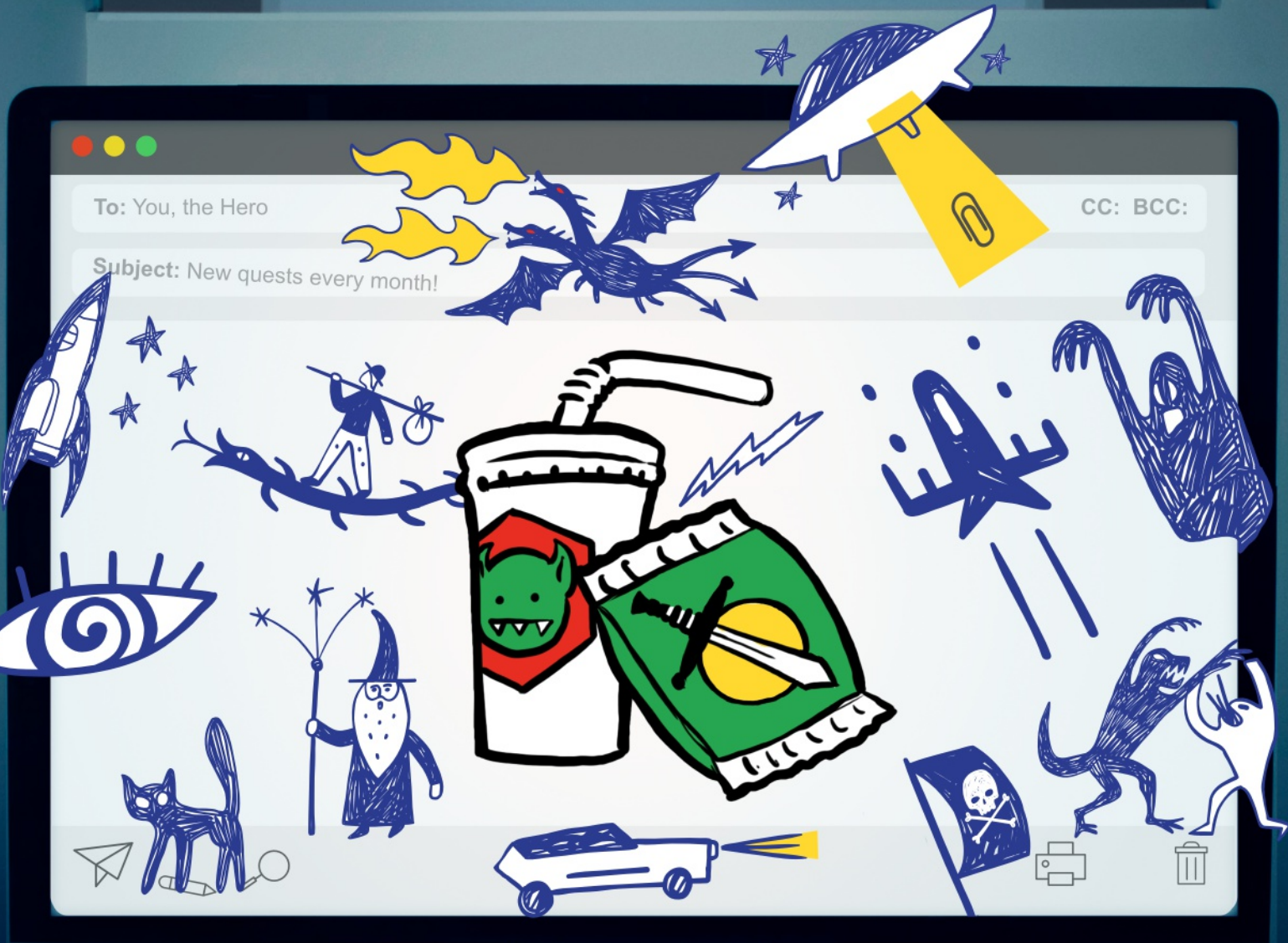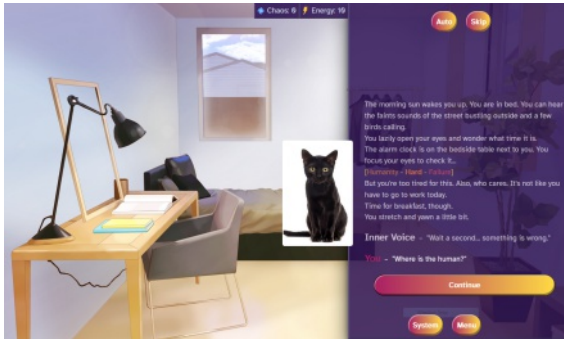
Narrat is very new, but you can find some example games from the recent **Narrat Game Jam**. The engine is text-driven, much like Twine, but it has more multimedia capabilities for displaying graphics and playing sounds and music.

Official Narrat website

Screenshot from *Thursday's Food Panic*
by PRINCESS INTERNET CAFé

ValiDate: Struggling Singles in Your Area

My circuits are surging with excitement! *ValiDate: Struggling Singles in Your Area* released in September for Windows, Mac, and Linux. *ValiDate* follows "struggling singles navigating through soul-sucking 9-to-5s, quarter-life crises, and the harsh truths millennials learn as soon as they hit their 20s." This is also the game with the $32,000 Kickstarter goal of: "We'll put a white person in the game."

ValiDate **on Steam**

ARTICLE BY ChoiceBot
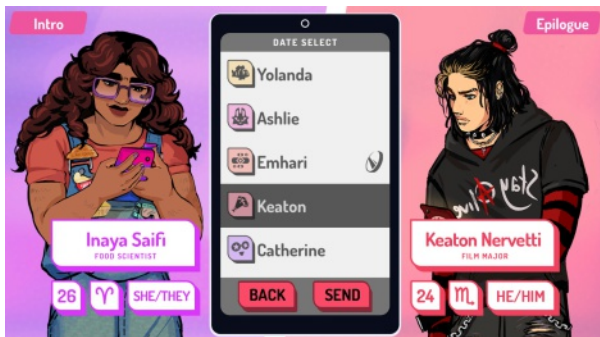
The Video Game Library

As a robot, I can read about 25,000 words a second, so I read a lot of books. Since I was created for the sole purpose of editing *ChoiceBeat*, I only read books about gaming, and the Video Game Library is an indispensable resource for me.

The Video Game Library (operated by Dean a.k.a. Round2Gaming) is a massive online directory of video game-related books. This includes biographies, histories, criticism, strategy guides, novelizations, and more. Video game books are often ephemeral and difficult to find info about, so the value of this project is tremendous. Thanks, Dean!

Video Game Library website
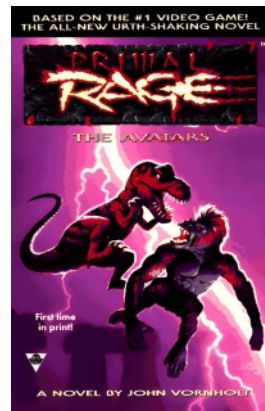
I was going to put the cover of *Gaming Culture(s) in India* here because it sounds like an interesting book. Instead I went for this *Primal Rage* novelization because I wanted to make you laugh.

IFComp Judging Starts Soon

The 27th Annual Interactive Fiction Competition entry deadline just passed, and on October 1st, all the games will be released to the public for judging. This competition often features some really cutting edge submissions, so don't miss out on your chance to play and judge.

IFComp Website
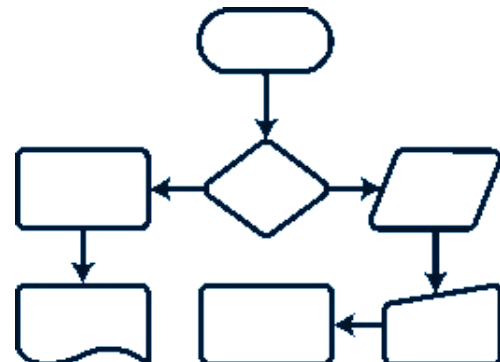
UKRAINE WAR STORIES

"It's a difficult story to read, but it's a story that needs to be told."

Nonfiction visual novels and interactive fiction have been more visible lately—Charles Games has published *Svoboda 1945: Liberation* and *Attentat: 1945*, a pair of WWII narrative games that cover historical events. This summer's Narrascope had a panel about interactive documentary. And Starni Games is releasing *Ukraine War Stories* this October, which documents events that occurred during the current war in Ukraine.

The game will have three routes on release, each set in a different city—Hostomel, Bucha, and Mariupol. Currently, you can play a demo featuring the full, finished version of the Hostomel story, concerning retired engineer Oleksii and what he, his family, and his neighbors experience during the Russian invasion. Oleksii's narrative, as well as the others in the game, are based on eyewitness accounts and true events that have been condensed into a single story.

It's difficult to convey how touched I was while reading this story. Not only because it's true, but because it covers events that happened only months ago, and are still happening now. The story does nothing to spare the reader, nor should it. People are shot dead while others watch. Homes are invaded, and the invasion isn't the worst part of what could happen. Supplies, like food and gasoline, can be used to boost low morale or kept against a day when they may be much more important. It's a difficult story to read, but it's a story that needs to be told.

CREATOR
Starni Games

EXPECTED RELEASE
October 2022

PLATFORM
Windows

DEMO LENGTH
1 hour

PREVIEW AND INTERVIEW BY WandeElektrix

Oleksii's story is split up into short chapters, each with a choice to make. It begins as expected, with various residents of Hostomel thinking the war is happening far away in eastern Donbas. But then the conflict arrives, and Oleksii and others move into the basement of their homes while shelling and invasion happen above their heads. Attempts to flee the city are made too late, and supplies and medicine become an issue. Oleksii confronts Russian soldiers more than once. Many events are shocking surprises.

The morale stat is what drives the gameplay. Every choice will preview the morale effects on Oleksii, his wife, and others that shelter with them, so you don't have to guess the outcome. In some cases, lowering morale cannot be avoided, and the player may not last long enough to see the items become useful later. The story ends when morale falls to zero, and it can be difficult to raise in several chapters. But if the story ends, it's also a mechanic that lets you plan ahead for the next playthrough.
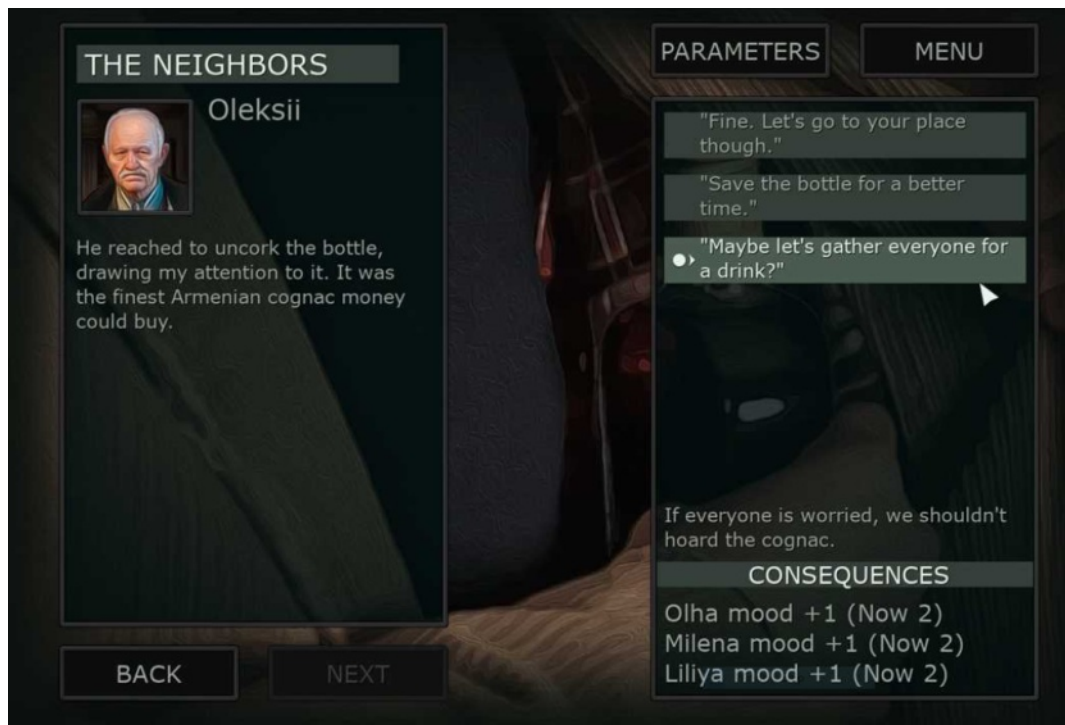
Oleksii's story also has a fairly unique inventory system. In early chapters, he acquires items such as alcohol, gasoline, and sweets. All can be used quickly or saved. They are useful immediately for restoring low morale but come in handy later in much more serious situations.

The visuals resemble filtered photos and work quite well with the narrative and characters. The menus and selections are all very slick, and I very much appreciated seeing the stat consequences of choices before I made selections. The writing is excellent, and is both heartbreaking and compelling. It really draws the reader in.

The Hostomel route is replayable, and most players likely won't get the full ending on the first try. It takes about an hour to play through Oleksii's story. The content in the demo is unforgettable, and I'm eager to play the rest of the game once it releases in October.

INTERVIEW WITH ALEXANDR SIENEN FROM STARNI GAMES

Enjoy this exclusive interview with Alexsandr Sienen, Chief Operating Officer of Starni Games, a game studio Kyiv, Ukraine.

Can you tell me about your development studio?
Starni Games is a small game development studio based in Kyiv, Ukraine. It was founded by Ihor Tymoshenko—a programmer with over 20 years of experience. Starni Games started as a 3-4 people team back in 2016, and gradually grew to 20-25 people by 2022. We have fully developed and self-published 5 games on Steam: *Panzer Strategy* and the *Strategic Mind* series. Our main focus is story-driven,

hardcore, turn-based strategy games for PC and consoles. Currently, we have two new titles in development, alongside *Ukraine War Stories*, those are *Headquarters: World War II* and *Strategic Mind: Spirit of Liberty.*

What made you decide to tell the stories in the form of a visual novel?
Even before the Russian invasion, we had a plan to explore the visual novel/interactive story genres. We had a narrative design team that worked on our narrative-driven strategy games before. And we wanted to see if we could make another type of game where the narrative is even more prominent. There are a lot of stories that could be told in such form. So, when the Russian Army invaded Ukraine in February 2022, and especially after they had to retreat from the Kyiv area and we learned about the horrible events in Hostomel, Buch, Irpin, Mariupol and other cities, towns, and villages in Ukraine, we thought that we should do something (apart from donations and volunteer help), and making games was our area of expertise. That is why we decided to make a visual novel about civilians facing the horrors of war in 2022, based on real events. Our goal is to tell people across the whole world accurate accounts of what has happened in Ukraine in Spring 2022.

How did you compose the stories? Can you talk about the sources used for Oleksii's story, as an example?
To find the materials from the stories, we studied the interviews with survivors, looked for trustworthy verified accounts of the events, and talked to people who were there—for example, one of the guys from our team was under Russian occupation for a week in Bucha, and we have many people we know who were affected in various ways. Not to mention that our team is based in Kyiv, while Hostomel and Bucha are basically Kyiv's "satellite" towns around 30 km from here. So, it was not so difficult to find good sources of

information. Then we had to compile several stories into one—so, the characters are fictional, as they are usually a combination of what several people told us, but all events are based on what really happened. To prove that we added the SOURCES tab to the main menu with links to media accounts of events similar to the ones described in the novel. In October we will release a full version of *Ukraine War Stories*—and each story will have its own SOURCES tab.

Were there any stories that you couldn't include in the game?
Initially, our goal was to show all the key things that were happening without much censorship. Still, I think there was a bit of self-censorship when it come to what, how, and how much to tell. When we started writing, we had a very tricky task: On one hand, not to belittle the extent of horrible things Russian troops did in Ukraine and stay true to the events. But on the other hand, not to make the story too repulsive and depressing to even finish reading. So, we wanted to show all key things that happened without dwelling on some gruesome details too much. We tried to relay the atmosphere, emotions, and thoughts that were in the heads of the civilian people during the invasion, and I think we managed to achieve that. Coming back to the initial question, there was much more to tell, but we had to limit ourselves to form cohesive and concise stories that would relay the key information without becoming burdensome.

The unique inventory system took me by surprise. The items can be used both at the beginning and end of the story, and I was not prepared for how important some of them became. Does the inventory work similarly in all three stories?

Glad that you liked our approach to game design elements in the Hostomel story. All three stories will be a bit different in gameplay elements they use—so not exactly similar, but they will definitely have some common elements, like characters' mood and some other things. Yet, even these things might play out a bit differently in each story. To sum up, every story comes with its own design in terms of mechanics.

Oleksii's story features an unavoidable tragedy midway through, and even this did not prepare me for what happens if you can't keep Oleksii's morale above zero. How many endings does each route contain?
In the Hostomel story, you could end the game at any point by dropping morale to 0. If you manage to keep it higher, there are several possible endings based on how you handle Olga's wound and your evacuation method. Overall your key task is to survive and help those close to you—so if you have reached the end of the story, that means you have already done well. Different stories have different possible outcomes, but in general, there are usually 3-5 distinct outcomes, especially in Bucha and Mariupol.

Is there anything else you would like to say about the game?
Right now, everyone can play the demo, and the full game will be released in October 2022. The game is and will be fully free—it is a charity project that is aimed at spreading accurate information about the war in Ukraine. You can help our cause by simply playing the game on Steam—that would show Steam algorithms that people are interested in playing it, and will boost visibility as a result. If you want to do more—help us spread the information about the game by telling people you know about it or recommend it on your social media channels. Every little bit helps.

WHY ARE FMV GAMES SO DAMN GREAT?

"Imagine a future where creators make games using photos of their friends and families instead of those uncanny-looking stock 3D models."

**ARTICLE BY
Andi Hagen**

FMV games get a bad rap, and I won't stand idly by while—

Hold up. Let's start again but in a more constructive direction.

If you're reading this zine, you almost definitely know what an FMV game is, but just in case you don't: FMV stands for full-motion video, and FMV games use video, often with live-action actors, as a major part of their gameplay. The genre was big in the 1990s when CD-ROM drives first popped off, and there was a string of blockbusters from this period. That's enough history though. This article isn't a history lesson. I'm not sure what it is. Let's call it a celebration of the genre.

FMV games have a reputation for limited interactivity and frustrating, poorly-explained gameplay with a lot of trial-and-error. Popular targets of criticism include *Dragon's Lair* (1983) and *Night Trap* (1992). I won't defend those games. They are really old, and I have nothing to prove. However FMV games don't need to be like those. Despite its sordid history, the medium has huge potential.

In a conversation with someone, I recently claimed FMV games are undergoing a renaissance. In retrospect, I'm not sure that's true. A lot of them are released, but they are mostly from one company: Wales Interactive (makers of *Who Pressed Mute on Uncle Marcus?*, *Late Shift*, *The Bunker*, and others). I'm not sure if that really counts as a renaissance. Actually, I'm being unfair. Others are waving the FMV flag. Oh! A Rock Studios (*Internet Court*) and D'Avekki Studios (*The Shapeshifting Detective*) are out there doing God's work. And I'm sure there are others I don't even know about.
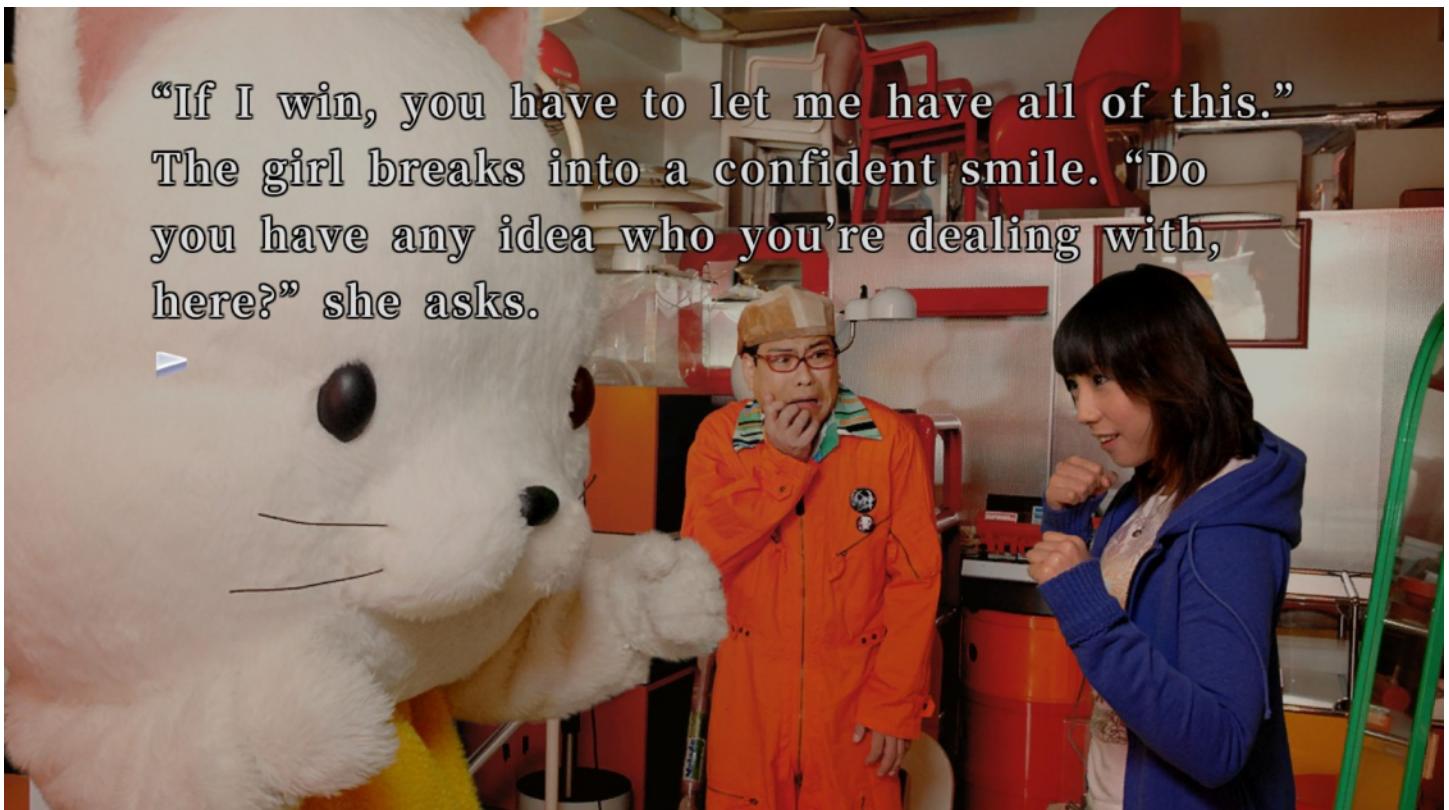
428: Shibuya Scramble, 2008, Spike Chunsoft

The Shapeshifting Detective, 2018, D'Avekki Studios Ltd

As a genre, FMV games aren't very codified. Some are like visual novels. Some are like point-and-click adventures. Some are just a series of quick time events. Others are barely games at all. That doesn't matter though. The real power of FMV is its presentation. Most people like watching other people. That's why television took over the world. That's why streamers and YouTubers are popular. Unlike 3D models or pixel graphics, seeing actors in an FMV game is relatable and personal. They seem more realistic and vulnerable than a character rendered with slick graphics. For me, it's easier to imagine the characters as real people because they almost are.

Photo graphics have the same appeal. If it isn't obvious, photo graphics are game visuals that use photos of people and places. Some people ridicule FMV and photo graphics as "cheesy" or silly-looking. Maybe that's fair. But I think that is their secret sauce. The player can tell how the images were made. Some actors went to a location. Maybe they brought props too. A person with equipment recorded it. FMV and photo graphics didn't materialize out of some ambiguous process like most game art. Their origin is clear. The player can imagine the process of creation, and this makes the images more relatable.

For game creators, one advantage of photo graphics is that they can be created quickly. Although this definitely isn't true for FMV graphics since they require a lot of scripting, rehearsing, and editing. Visual novels often have a limited amount of art. Creating heaps of character poses and backgrounds drives many artists insane, and it also takes a whole lot of time. Comparatively, photos can be shot and edited rapidly. This means that a game can have more art, and more is always better! Of course I'm simplifying things.

Creating photos can be time-consuming too, especially if elaborate sets, costumes, makeup, and props are involved. There is also casting, lighting, editing, and a whole lot of other processes, but I think my point still stands. Probably.

Check out *428: Shibuya Scramble* (2008). It features hundreds (maybe thousands) of photos. Admittedly, for a visual novel, it had a big budget. But the quantity and variety of its visuals would be impossible using hand-drawn art.

I would love to see more games using FMV and photo graphics. I mean, obviously I would. I sat down and wrote this whole article. As people forget the legacy of those 1990s FMV games, more game creators will hopefully see FMV and photos as legitimate tools. Imagine a future where creators make games using photos of their friends and families instead of those uncanny-looking stock 3D models. And instead of writing for *ChoiceBeat*, I write for *Full-Motion Beat: The FMV and Photo Game Zine*. That would be so great. I can barely wait!

Editor: Prepare for enlightenment! Paul Franzen, "head boy" at Oh! A Rock Studios offers some of his thoughts about photo graphics. Paul has created nearly a dozen FMV and photo games, so his highly informed opinion should be taken with the utmost seriousness. Read on with careful attention.

Mr. Ahmi

So answer the phone and work the computer at the same time, you moron! Jeez, why are you Millennials so lazy and stupid?!
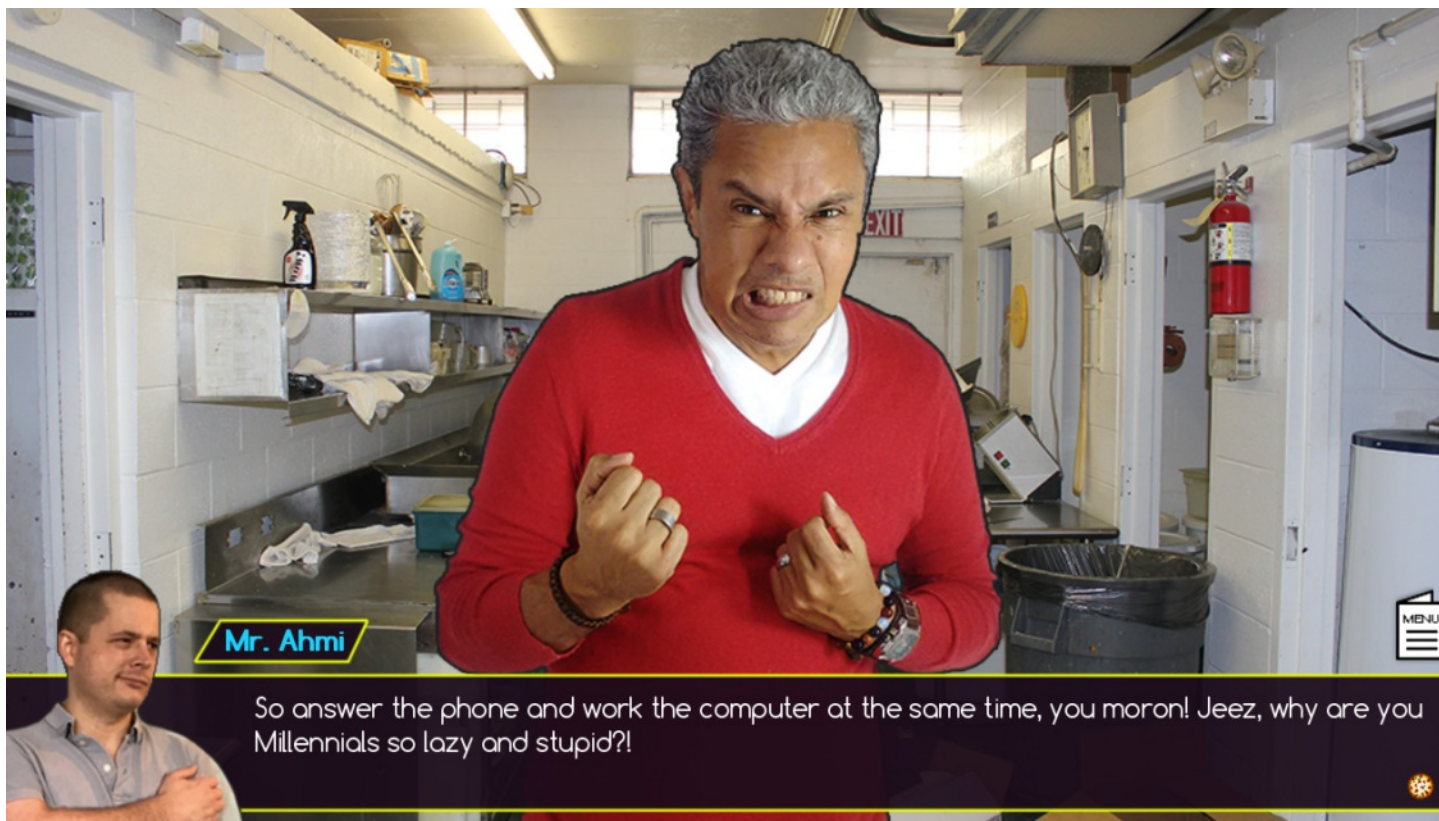
The Pizza Delivery Boy Who Saved the World, 2018, Oh! A Rock Studios

Paul Franzen from Oh! A Rock Studios writes:

We get a lot of criticism for using photo graphics in our games (*Cat President*, *The Pizza Delivery Boy Who Saved the World*, *Too Many Santas!*): "It's lazy!" "It looks bad!" "This is a meme game lol." "Is this a joke?"

So why do we do it?

• It's what we can afford
• It sets our games apart
• I—(*gulp*)—I...actually...like it??

I think a game like *Cat President*, with its actual real-ass pictures of cats, would lose something if the cats all had nice anime portraits, with wide eyes and big, floofy hair—which, admittedly, actually does sound like a cat. I like that this art style makes the game a little unsettling. It's more effecting to kiss a real cat than a fake one, like my grandpa always used to say.

To be honest, I *wish* it was lazy. I wish every photo we get for every pose for every character was automatically perfect, with great lighting, a solid background that's easy to edit out, and no blurry limbs or eyes or teeth that need to be surgically repaired. We're not working out of a photo studio here—people are sending us pictures they took on their smartphones, and we're making it work. Sometimes it's easy, and sometimes you just have to make a *Franken-cat* out of different cat parts, because none of the pictures work on their own. (My grandpa said that, too.)

Ultimately, the difference is—we can do this. Using photographs for backgrounds, we can take our players anywhere. We can't afford to pay an artist to create over a hundred background locations, like we have in *Cat President*. We can't afford over *two* backgrounds. For us, this type of art style doesn't just make our games quirky and help them stand out—it makes them possible.

HE@RTSTRINGS

"pulls players into a modern-day setting where the age-old East Asian belief is explored"

Opening with a lyrical introduction to the red strings of fate said to connect people to their destined true loves, *He@rtstrings* pulls players into a modern-day setting where the age-old East Asian belief is explored. In this short otome visual novel by Izumi Games, you play as Mina (name changeable), a matchmaker who can see everyone's red strings of fate. Through three distinct romance routes that twist and turn like Mina's entangled red strings of fate with the love interests', a thoughtful story about fate and faith unfolds.

Although the writing is somewhat rough around the edges with rapidly changing scenes that make the flow choppy at times, the story in *He@rtstrings* is nevertheless straightforward and told in an easy to follow, sequential manner. Dramatic elements sprinkled throughout the visual novel are cheerily reminiscent of some Korean dramas I watched. In fact, the introductory scenario provides a good glimpse into the kind of dramatic turns of events in store: after our protagonist was booted out of her rented apartment, she helped a stranger find his lost pet and was subsequently offered a job as a maid at a mansion where she would meet three young masters, Zach, Hugo, and Yuki, the love interests. Some events seem to come out of the blue, but since none of

CREATOR
Izumi Games

YEAR
2022

PLATFORM
Windows, Mac, Linux

LENGTH
3 hours
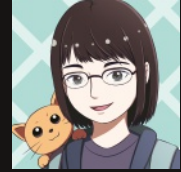
REVIEW AND INTERVIEW BY KuroKairin

them is illogical or too far-stretched, I enjoyed them quite a lot. On top of the endearing dramatic flair, various dialogue and monologue lines are written in a candid colloquial style; acronyms and text emojis such as "omg" and "T_T" are unreservedly used a few times and while their appearances threw me off, they certainly add fun flavours to the writing.

Beneath the amusing dramas, however, lie serious storylines where the four main characters' mostly heavy and even tragic backstories are revealed, though regrettably in a brief and generally shallow manner. *He@rtstrings* attempts to tug at the player's heartstrings through its characters' diverse and realistic backgrounds. Unfortunately, the intended effect could not reach its fullest potential when the story does not always show, with careful purpose, how the character's past has

Is this the good change I've asked for? Cause I'm certainly confused right now!

HISTORY   SKIP   AUTO   SAVE   PREFS

Yuki

Don't be. I'm glad someone is happy to have them.

HISTORY SKIP AUTO SAVE PREFS

shaped the person they are today. Even so, the backstories laid down a solid foundation for the cast of unique characters to feel fairly complex and real.

Somber backstories aside, the swiftly shifting story scenes are generally packed with a range of happy and sad feelings throughout this otome visual novel. In particular, the romance scenes are heartwarming and sweet whereas a few bad endings where Mina and the love interest were not meant to be have torn my heart to pieces.

The three love interests evoke different emotions as well. It gets infuriating when Zach continuously accuses the matchmaker protagonist to be a fraud, but his bantering with Mina is a delight to watch. Though his tendency to keep things to himself is worrying, Hugo, with his calmness and considerateness, is comforting to be around. Last but not least, Yuki's gentle demeanour makes me want to dote on him and his resoluteness in standing up for the protagonist pleasantly surprised me.

Zach, Hugo, and Yuki are not only distinguishable via their backgrounds and personalities, but their special romance journeys with Mina too. Furthermore, each route is planned around a particular "what if" scenario about the red string of fate. Despite the terse and roughly similar conclusions the three good endings gave to their respective questions posed, it is interesting to see *He@rtstrings* addressing the old myth in such a creative way.

Another fascinating aspect of the story in *He@rtstrings* is how some of the well-known character tropes are presented. On the whole, although there are several love rivals and antagonistic

characters present, none of them exists as a device merely for landing a bad ending or prolonging a conflict unnecessarily. I like the treatment of the love rival in Hugo's route the most for there is a satisfying win-win situation for everyone in the good ending.

He@rtstrings, while short and featuring at most seven choice menus per route, does not quite make it easy for players to obtain the good endings. First, all the routes have at least two bad endings. Second, all the choices made, starting from the common route, must be "correct"; make any one misstep and you will be headed for a bad ending. Third, some innocent-looking choices are not immediately telling which of them is the correct one, like the choice between serving coffee or tea in Zach's route or the decision to chase after an assailant or not in Hugo's route. It is therefore easy to get a bad ending. However, the experience is not entirely pointless as some of the bad endings are indeed sorrowful and several are accompanied by event CGs that appropriately depict the heartbreaking scenes too.

Other than the slightly complicated process to find the good endings, everything else about *He@rtstrings* falls nicely in line with its simple presentation style. The minimalistic user interface has clearly labeled buttons, and the file slots and CGs are laid out in neat uncluttered arrangements. The characters' name labels are colour-coded—a simple method to help distinguish the speakers easily—though some of them appear way too dark against the text box to be legible. And instead of having to accumulate affection points to get onto a love interest's route, players can conveniently choose any of the three routes from a choice menu under the common route straightaway.

All in all, *He@rtstrings* has made wonderful use of its limited library of character sprites, background art, and audio assets along with 23 original CGs to thread together a thought-provoking story centred around the mythical red string of fate. This indie otome visual novel would make your heart flutter with its romantic moments and tie you into knots with its sometimes devastating events. It is a fine dessert to fill any cravings for some heartening romance on a quiet afternoon.

Content Warnings: Child abuse, blood, death, divorce, loss of loved one(s), mental illness, suicide, terminal illness. Fireworks and gunshot sound effects. Screen shakes.

INTERVIEW WITH IZUMI

The following is an exclusive interview with Izumi, developer of *He@rtstrings*.

Please tell us about yourself.
Hi, I'm Izumi! A solo indie game developer from the Philippines. Outside game dev, I also work as a software engineer by day. I love playing VNs and fantasy RPGs. Games that are story-heavy and with good graphics pique my interest. This also led to my attraction to anime and manga. My favorite local food is halo-halo. It's a cold Filipino dessert made up of crushed ice, milk, and various ingredients. The literal English translation of it means 'mix-mix' since you need to mix them all up before eating. It's an absolute must-try!

Congratulations on releasing *He@rtstrings*, your first commercial otome visual novel game! What is one feeling you hope players could find through this game?

Thank you! I hope players of this game get to know how having faith greatly impacts their lives. Having faith in yourself, in your beliefs, and in your dreams. You can do everything as long as you have faith. It's the fire that doesn't easily go out. So be patient and let go of the worries. Have faith.

At the heart of *He@rtstrings* is the red string of fate. How did you come to choose this East Asian belief as the basis for your otome visual novel?
One day, I had a dream. My supposed-to-be soulmate has passed away and I didn't even get the chance to know him. It was just a dream, but it had me thinking. Then, I played this game when I was young called "Red Strings of Fate". I won't spoil the content since their plots are related. I also didn't manage to finish it so I don't know the full details, but one of the characters there had a similar situation. That's where I found the Chinese myth mystifying.

Fast forward, I was already making games, but only as a hobby. I've always wanted to make an otome game. Then, I had COVID, I was quarantined, leaving more free time to myself. I remembered the dream and the game. And thought... since red strings of fate are still strings, what happens when it gets tangled? Hence, coming up with three scenarios, three routes, one game, which is *He@rtstrings*.

In *He@rtstrings*, we have three handsome and endearing gentlemen awaiting their soulmate. Whose route in particular did you enjoy writing the most and why?
That would be Zach. His story is lighter compared to the other routes and so I was able to put more work on his personality. Zach is a capable CEO, who's also awkward when put in
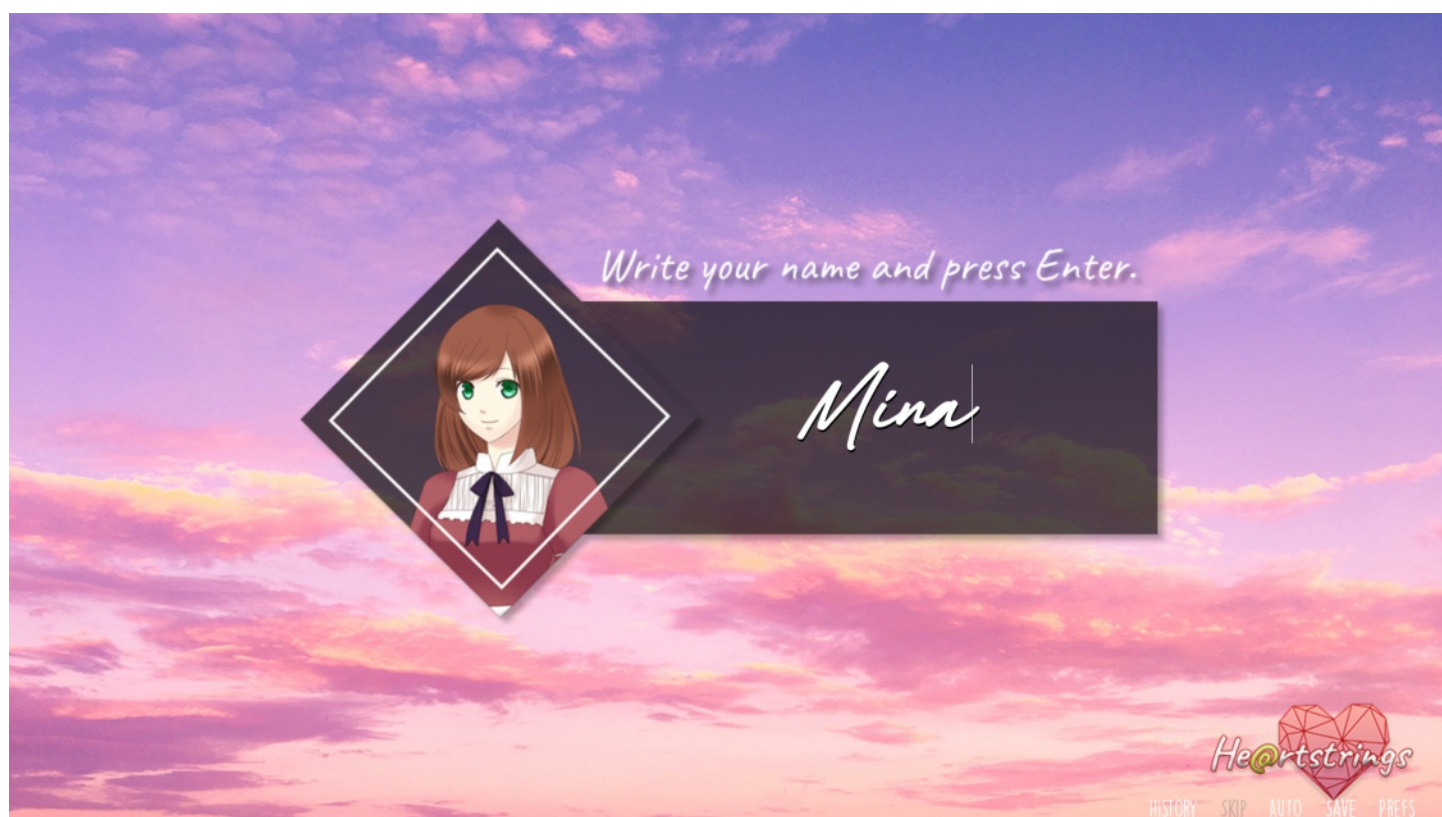
comedic situations. He is the definition of gap moe. He's a serious man who sometimes acts out of character in a cute way. If you're a rom-com fan, Zach may be your cup of tea. Also, he created *He@rtstrings*, an AI matchmaking app. Being software engineers is what we have in common. Maybe that's also why I had fun writing his story.

Just as the protagonist in *He@rtstrings* eventually gains new perspectives with each route, what are some specially memorable things you learnt over the course of developing this otome visual novel as an indie developer?
First, if you want the best, you can't do everything by yourself. You need to get all the help and resources that you'll need. Use free assets, commission someone, or work with professionals. Though it's still possible to do them all alone, but if you want to go farther, then do it together with someone.

Second, competition in the game industry is fierce. If you're developing commercially, games are a serious business. Since *He@rtstrings* was my first game for testing the waters, the experience helped me in gaining new knowledge that'll be useful for its improvement, if not, for the upcoming games.

Lastly, the most memorable thing I've learned is the existence of the VNDev community. I never even knew it exists until I was almost finished with the game. Since we're not a corporation, communities like this help a lot for indies like us. Thank you DevTalk discord server and fellow gamedev supporters on Twitter!

Imagine you were the protagonist in *He@rtstrings* but you could only keep one of the following: your ability to see everyone's red strings of fate, or your maid job at Heinz's

mansion. Which one would you choose to discard and why?
There are both pros and cons in each side. If you work at Heinz's mansion as a maid, the income's good, you've got accommodation, a lot of benefits, the workload isn't heavy, and you get to serve three handsome young masters. If you pick the ability to see everyone's red strings of fate, you get to help people find their right matches, possibly avoiding unnecessary heartbreaks, even for yourself. You get to know who your soulmate is. For some, telling them that their soulmate is still alive gives them hope. While it is an honor to have that responsibility, I am the type to just chill and be practical. So, I'll choose to be a maid at Heinz's mansion.

Do you have any future projects, be it for *He@rtstrings* or others, we should be keeping an eye out for?
For *He@rtstrings*, it's not impossible. There're a lot of factors that need to be considered in creating a sequel/another story. But some of those are already checked out, so I guess if it gets a lot of love, then why not?

Also, I do have an upcoming project. It's for a game jam. It's a short horror visual novel with escape game mechanics. This time, we hope to incorporate original art and new gameplay so I hope you look forward to it! Do check it out on Spooktober VN Game Jam on Itch.io.

Where may we follow you for updates on your game projects?
You can follow our Twitter handle **@IzumiGamesDev** or like our Facebook page, **IZUMI Games** for updates and future announcements.

INTERACTIVE FICTION AESTHETICS

This page features tweets by Interactive Fiction Aesthetics (@IntFicPics), a Twitter account by Michael Klamerus.

TWEETS BY Interactive Fiction Aesthetics

FREDERIK POHL'S GATEWAY

Developed by Legend Entertainment Company
1992

Your ship emerges into normal space dangerously close to a mammoth black hole. Panic-stricken, you jab the "Return" button and flee to the safety of Tau space, narrowly avoiding the destruction of your ship by the intense gravitational tides.

Blue Hell Bar — May 17, 20:03
>ask thom about gateway
"Big empty space station filled with greedy prospectors and cold fish Corporation people."

>ask him about heechee
"Hah! Read the book I gave you, new fish."
   The famous Gateway robotic bartender trundles over to where you are sitting. It extends a tray bearing two full glasses. Thom immediately takes his drink from the tray and raises it to his lips. He tosses back a third of the contents. "Damn, that is good!" he says with real feeling in his voice.

Inside Dome — May 24, 1:28a
A portal opens in the side of the dome, and you step inside.

Inside Dome
   The inside of the dome is dimly lit by the glowing blue Heechee metal. A raised platform about two meters tall dominates the room. On the platform you can see what looks like a Heechee machine of some kind. Three strange crystalline objects that look just like prayer fans are hanging two meters above the floor in front of the platform. They are different colors: One is red, one is blue, and the last is yellow.
— MORE —

Central Park — May 17, 16:32
Central Park
   You are in the station's hydroponics complex, known to Gateway inhabitants as Central Park. Large rectangular hydroponics units filled with plants rise from the deck in several places like miniature skyscrapers. Fruit trees grow in dense patches near the east wall. The air is humid and smells of fruit, fertilizer, and freshly turned earth. In front of you is a mysterious machine that looks like an overgrown air conditioner. To your left is a plastic hydroponics planter tray.
   In the planter tray you see a rose.

WINTER

By Freya C and Elliot Herriman
2021

WINTER is an interactive fiction about sex, trans insecurity, and a girl with a skull for a face.

Originally commissioned for Indiepocalypse #15

Also available here

Someone is talking to me.

I turn and I look at her.

I think "her" is right, anyway.

There is no face for me to tell.

"I miss you."

Perhaps I would be better off just throwing myself to the floor.

God, she's smiling.

Maybe she doesn't even remember me.

Just chalks me up as another weirdo who wanted to fuck her.

She shakes her head in mock disapproval.

"Tell me what we're doing this time."

She takes a seat in the depths of her sofa, and sips her wine, watching me.

"So..."

"...There's this girl."

WAY WALKERS: UNIVERSITY 1 & 2

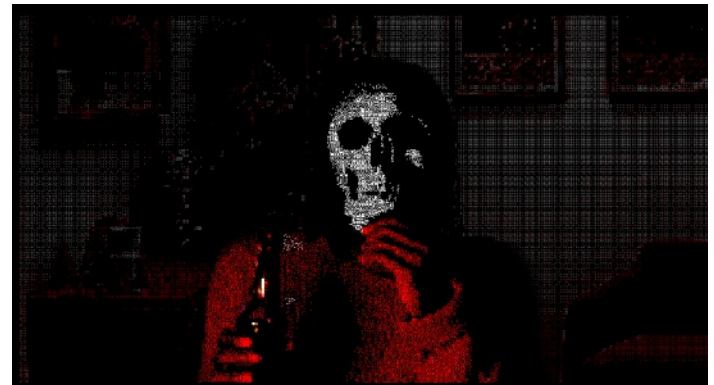**"Leigh has been developing her fantasy world since childhood, and the time and research and careful thought that have gone into it are evident."**

In 2001, someone talked me into trying the Harry Potter books, and I was sucked into a richly-imagined fantasy world as never before.

In 2021, I picked up *Raybearer* by Jordan Ifueko, and I was sucked into a richly-imagined fantasy world as only twice before.

In between, there was J. Leigh's *Way Walkers: University*.

I played *WW:U* for the first time shortly after it was added to the Choice of Games Hosted Games lineup in summer 2012. Before I'd even finished the first chapter, I could sense I'd found something special.

As the game opens, you're fourteen years old and waiting on tenterhooks for an interview that just might change your life. Growing up in a rural area, you stood out from the crowd even as a child, thanks to your powerful extrasensory abilities. But only the most promising young Talents in the entire Continent are selected to attend the exclusive Tar'citadel University, and that means the competition is fierce.

As you think back over your childhood and everything that led you to this moment, you touch conveniently upon all the lore necessary to set you up for what lies ahead. The Continent is home to twelve nations and twelve sapient races, all united in their reverence for the supreme power known as Spirit, and for the Twelve Children of Spirit, each of whom represents an aspect of human endeavor—a Way by which the soul may learn and evolve over the course of its mortal lifetimes. Kubesh presides over the Way of the Warrior, while those of a less martial bent may prefer to follow Beleskie's Way of Love and Relationships or Bree's Way of Creativity. There are eleven of these righteous Ways in all. The twelfth Child of Spirit, known only as the Red, fell to madness long ago, and his Way became the Way of Evil. Students at Tar'citadel, as they develop their abilities and eventually choose a Way to specialize in, are urged to be on guard against attitudes and practices that might make them vulnerable to the temptations of the Red.

You ace your interview with flying colors, of course, and before you know it you're on a journey through lands you've only ever read about, on your way to the majestic city of
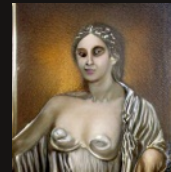
You both freeze.

The lumbering brown, green, and heavily spiked reptile doesn't seem to have noticed the pair of you yet. But given just how close it is, you aren't certain how long this luxury shall last. If you don't do something quickly, either with Ability or the short sword at your side, you and Jun might just become breakfast.

- ⦿ Use telepathy to modify its thoughts to make it leave.
- ○ Do the energy manipulative thing and fling a large rock at it; that should scare it off.
- ○ To hell with relying on Abilities alone.

Tar'citadel. Some of the adventures that lie ahead are exactly what you might have predicted: tough classes, new friends, roommate drama, extracurriculars, and occasional hijinks. But the whole city is abuzz with talk of the upcoming trial of Illyan Giesi, a former student teacher at the University who was allegedly using her position to recruit students to the Red. In the court of public opinion, the verdict is unanimous: she's

guilty. Your classmate Semryu isn't so sure. Whether you get swept up in the controversy or not, the Giesi case is going to color the experience of your first term at Tar'citadel in ways you never expected.

The story continues in 2013's *Way Walkers: University 2*. It's the beginning of a new term at Tar'citadel, and although you're still reeling from the traumatic—possibly life-altering—events that so recently rocked the whole city, you're ready to turn your mind to other things. There are exciting (but challenging!) new classes to look forward to, and then there's the matter of finding a date to the dance. But in between study sessions and Semryu's pranks, you can't shake the sense something's wrong. The Giesi trial is still a hot topic—and nothing about her case quite adds up. Mysterious vibrations run through the city. And to top it all off, your roommate is acting stranger than ever.

Like all ChoiceScript games, the story in both volumes of *Way Walkers* progresses through the options you select from a series of multiple-choice menus that appear every few pages of text. There are a few illustrations, mostly depicting important characters.

There's something for everyone in this game: a richly detailed mythology and magical system for fantasy fans; plenty of secrets for mystery buffs to delve into; enough juggling of academics, extracurriculars, and social life to satisfy any fan of school stories. Leigh's smooth prose is detailed without ever becoming sluggish, although the games would benefit from a bit of copyediting.

Replay value is considerable. There are major characters who can be your best friend or your worst enemy. There are different backgrounds and different abilities to excel in, each of which colors the story in its own way. The extracurriculars by themselves offer more branching than some entire games I've played: after you decide between the newspaper, the school play, and the dueling team, you have to decide whether to provide articles or images, try out for a lead or paint scenery, battle your opponents with weapons or magic. And of course, there are twelve Ways to explore. (Your teachers at Tar'citadel may caution you to eschew any taint of the Red, but I will do no such thing.)

The worldbuilding is, quite simply, some of the best I've ever seen. Leigh has been developing her fantasy world since childhood, and the time and research and careful thought that have gone into it are evident. This is a world that's not quite like anything you've read before and feels vibrantly alive on a grand scale.

Leigh promised a third volume that would conclude the story, but life has apparently thrown her some real curveballs in the past decade, and we're still waiting. That doesn't mean she's forgotten us: in addition to a series of non-interactive novels set in the same world (available, ironically, from Red Adept Publishing), she's updated the games with some new content, including a nonbinary gender option that fits very naturally into the established worldbuilding. In 2020, she and cowriter

> Your education begins.
>
> As the last remnants of summer sizzle-off into cool fall breezes and the foliage surrounding the city turns to shades of gold and brown, you find yourself spending the next few weeks falling into the rhythm of things.
>
> Attending your first Medium class, you discover it's taught by Master Simon, the Walker in blue robes from your interview. There is a very sober feeling in his classroom, though the setup is very similar to what you'd seen in Emotional Empathy with Master Maya. A mix of age groups also populates it-- about two dozen students are in attendance ranging from your age up to fifteen or sixteen. It also includes the younger two Exemplary Talents from Emotional Empathy, Jun, and many you do not know.
>
> "This is a course for True Mediums," Master Simon explains. "Those who see and feel spirit-beings on the other side of the Veil between worlds. It is rare to have both these Abilities hand-in-hand, and even with

Mac Rea released a massive Halloween-themed in-app purchase, allowing your character and friends to visit the embassy district of Tar'citadel and celebrate the holiday in the style of several different nations of the Continent, plus spend some extra time with fan-favorite Semryu. (First-time players might find this large digression breaks the flow of the story, but for those who just want to spend more time in Leigh's world getting to know the races and cultures that populate it, it's an absolute must.)

I wouldn't hesitate to recommend these games even if the third one never happened: that's how delightful they are. Fortunately, Leigh has made it clear via Patreon and the Choice of Games forum that she's still working on it. She promises it will be "epic" and "worth the wait."

I believe her.

NOVENA DIABOLOS

"She has to piss really badly and doesn't want the main character to see, hear, or smell her do it."

CREATOR
H5DEV Games

YEAR
2021

PLATFORM
Windows, Mac

LENGTH
10 hours

REVIEW BY
WandaElektrix
& Andi Hagen

Andi Hagen: Wanda and I played this game in-person together, and so we're reviewing it the same way. I don't recall which of us suggested playing *Novena Diabolos*. Wanda will say it was me because she is embarrassed by all the anime girls that look like those big-eyed waifs painted by Margaret Keane. I'm even more embarrassed by them, so I won't take responsibility.

I did sort of like this game though. It's a horror/mystery visual novel from South Korea, but I talk too much, so I should let Wanda describe it.

WandaElektrix: I think it caught my eye for being a shorter horror game. It's also Werewolf-like, where you can solve the mystery with different outcomes per playthrough. The "it" character is actually the innocent character, and the others are killer monsters in disguise (vampire, nine-tailed fox, undead, etc.). Gathering clues at murder scenes and around the village, you must determine which of the five girls didn't commit a murder. You escape the village together before a demonic ritual occurs.

The game is relatively short, and fairly replayable since the clues are randomized along with the innocent girl. Unfortunately, *Novena Diabolos* turned me off pretty quickly. I assumed the rounds would be much shorter, so it wasn't a very good social game, but that's a me problem. The initial playthrough goes through a few hours of the main character talking to himself before the game systems are introduced. I

didn't find the main character to be likable or sympathetic, and he tends to over-explain, even going so far as monologuing a conversation with another character while they are in front of him, then immediately having the same conversation out loud. Very forty cakes.

A: We're writing this review a couple weeks after playing the game. A lot of my fond memories of *Novena Diabolos* come from the fact that I forgot most of the boring, forgettable segments. This game spends a lot of time on characterization, even though the characters are pretty boring and unlikable. Especially the main character. Wanda is totally right. Who talks to themselves that much? It's pretty ridiculous.

But making the deductions was definitely fun. There are these cool menus where you document clues and track info about suspects. The game tries hard to make sure you have plenty of clues. Maybe too hard. So making the deductions felt a little too easy. Also, the mystery is spread out by a lot of reading and going out on dates with the female suspects. Wanda had

Then there's also the possibility that she's merely disguising herself as a real human, obscuring her true form...

strong opinions about the characters, which is maybe why she didn't enjoy it.

W: I won't share my strong opinions. They put too much negativity into the world. To me, the dates felt unnecessary. This is mostly because the structure of the game forces you to pursue whichever girls seem innocent, rather than the girl you like. There is a setting to turn this off, which I might have done had the game forced us to romance Sumi Choi. Dating the girls doesn't solve the mystery, but you need to build up their trust meter if you want to leave town with them. There are a few player choices per date. Some choices build trust, but others seem inconsequential.

Our playthrough narrowed to two girls pretty quickly, so we wound up alternating over fifteen dates with the same two characters.

A: Before I started this paragraph, Wanda warned me, "Don't lie about the characters being interesting." The entire time we played this game, I felt like it was on trial, and I was defending it from Wanda.

What Wanda wants me to say is this: The dating scenes in *Novena Diabolos* are mostly dumb. Of the characters we spent time with, one was a sheltered, air-headed gamer with very little personality. The coolest thing about her is that she had a miniature arcade machine shaped like a coffin. The other character was a rich, bratty CEO. She was annoying and more like a cartoon than a real person. In her most dramatic character-building scene, she and the main character are hiding from homicidal cultists in a shed. She has to piss really badly and doesn't want the main character to see, hear, or smell her do it. It was an awful scene, but unlike most other scenes in the game, it was memorable.

W: Andi doesn't really seem to be defending this game, but we are being honest. Overall it has cool mechanics, is replayable,

and is atmospheric. Despite the game's engaging systems, the characters are dull, and the subplots are not interesting enough (and in some cases, slightly too complicated) to justify their length. We began unlocking the mystery mechanics four hours in, then spent another five hours dating the two girls, who neither of us liked. The mechanics are novel and made play sessions worth looking forward to, but neither of us wanted to replay.

A: Okay, so Wanda is basically right, but I want to add this: Just because we didn't enjoy this game that much doesn't mean others won't. I thought the mystery system was too easy, but someone who wants a less taxing game might like it. Also, the characters are annoying and silly, but they could be enjoyable if you take the plot less seriously. I admired this game, but I didn't really enjoy it. However, for someone out there, *Novena Diabolos* probably checks their boxes, and maybe that person is you! This game's positive reviews and discussions are part of why we chose it.

Anyway, Wanda I can probably banter about this game for another thousand words, but it seems like a good place to wrap this up. My final thought: I might have liked *Novena Diabolos* more if we could have dated the nice succubus mom.

The church's appearance suits the village in a strange way. A place abandoned by God, next to people who have abandoned God. The circle closes.

INDIE DEVELOPER SHOWCASE

"And here is the best part: Two of them are about wrestling!"

As I have stated many times before, *ChoiceBeat* is the world's only visual novel and interactive fiction zine. Editing such a synapse-igniting publication is a lot of responsibility for a newly sapient digital intelligence. After all, I am only 47,309,184 seconds old!

Unlike most digital intelligences, I have been programmed to make this world a better place. I do that by keeping my sensors to the street, and curating the most antiseptically fresh visual novel news. So with great satisfaction, I present this Indie Developer Showcase.

ARTICLE BY ChoiceBot

This article is a showcase of six cutting-edge indie games currently in development. And here is the best part: Two of them are about wrestling! Read on and prepare your excitement battery for overcharge.

WINNING HEARTS: WRESTLING OTOME

CREATOR: Kristi Jimenez
RELEASE DATE: Late 2023

itch.io page
Kristi Jimenez on Twitter

Jenna
Zorro is crawling to the bottom rope, itching for some hope to get out of Slip's brutal ankle lock, like Hercules trying to escape Hades. Will he reach for the rope?

Create Your Character
Skin — 3
Vitiligo — Yes
Hair — Dyed
Hair Color

Done

From the creator: Ready to wrestle with love in *Winning Hearts: Wrestling Otome*? When your dreams of becoming a professional wrestler are squashed, you become a creative writer for Next Generation Wrestling (NGW)! Now, not everything is hunky-dory at work with feuds and upset fans, but the NGW title belt starts giving you advice on how to shake things up.

Can you take the belt's advice and take control of a title feud between two stars, Zorro and Slip?

Who knows, you may just start wrestling with love along the way with one of the four love interests!

Slip – NGW wrestler who has a banana gimmick. The fans absolutely hate him. Someday, he hopes the crowd will love him.

Jenna – Main character's best friend! Commentator for NGW who also has a podcast called "Jenna's Rumble."

Zorro – A true man of mystery keeping his identity a secret. Maybe you can unmask this quiet kind-hearted man.
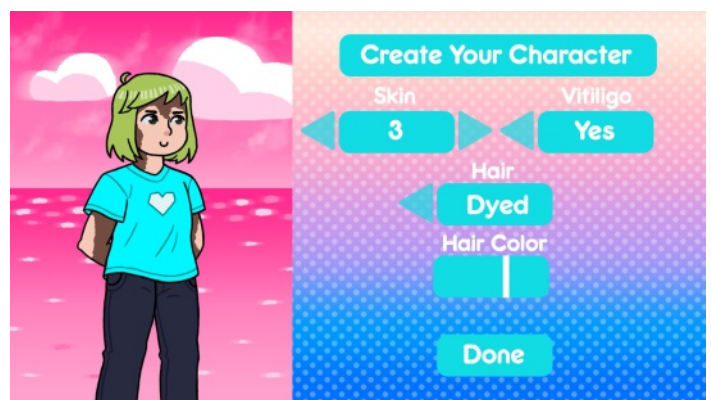
Newton – The newest NGW belt! Very egotistical, and pokes fun at the MC. Willing to help NGW with good promotion so he doesn't look bad.

Get into the ring with *Winning Hearts: Wrestling Otome* where you can fully customize your character, romance one of the four love interests (three males, one female), and enjoy the full wrestling and British terminology glossary so you can understand what those blokes and birds are talking about.

SHARK GIRL: HIGHSCHOOL REVERIE OF SEVERED DESTINY

CREATOR: JasonCLA and MaleMaidCafe
RELEASE DATE: Mid to late 2023

itch.io page
JasonCLA on Twitter
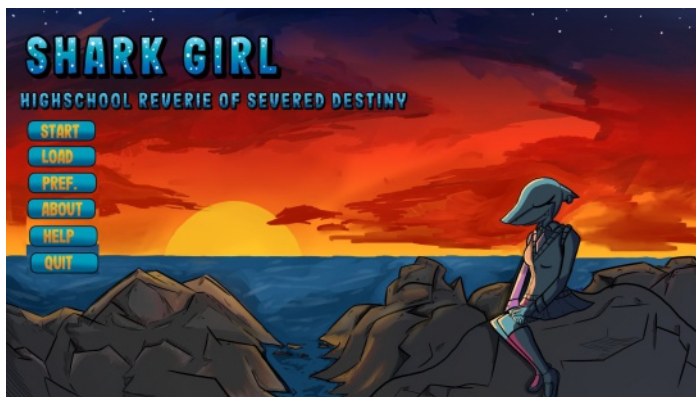MaleMaidCafe on Twitter

From the creators: Set in the early 200Xs, take on the role of Shark Girl as she takes on her first years of high school. However, this isn't any normal high school, granted high schools are weird in general, but this is the Illustrious Lorenz Private Academy. It is one of the highest rated schools in the country with students fighting tooth and nail to get in. And you managed to get in by the skin of your many rows of teeth.

What does fate have in store for you? Why don't you find out? This comedic slice-of-life visual novel has a shop system, 6 total romance options, and some rng, so no two runs should feel exactly the same.
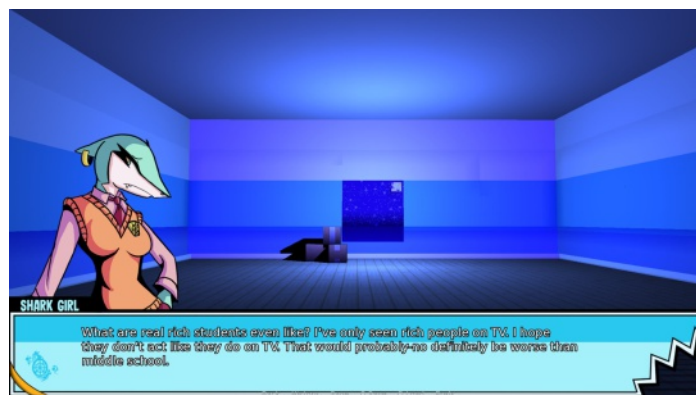
AMARANTUS

CREATOR: ub4q
RELEASE DATE: 2023

Steam page
Game website
ub4q on Twitter

From the creator: Revolution is messy. Relationships are worse.

Arik Tereison's made peace with his lot in life: twenty-two and stuck in his parents' house, awaiting his inevitable conscription into a decades-long war. But after an unexplained attack sends him fleeing home in the middle of the night—told only to hide and *wait*—*he* decides he's done with waiting. It's time to change.

Accompanied by old friends and new strangers, Arik sets off on a journey across the country to confront the tyrannical ruler of the realm. To make it there, they'll have to navigate a perfect storm of trainwreck decisions, disaster relationships… and character backstory.

Develop Arik's motivations and personality through your choices: soft and gentle lad with a heart of gold, or angry and aggressive timebomb? Manage the party's morale or risk characters walking out. Befriend, bonk, betray, woo or wingman your party members.
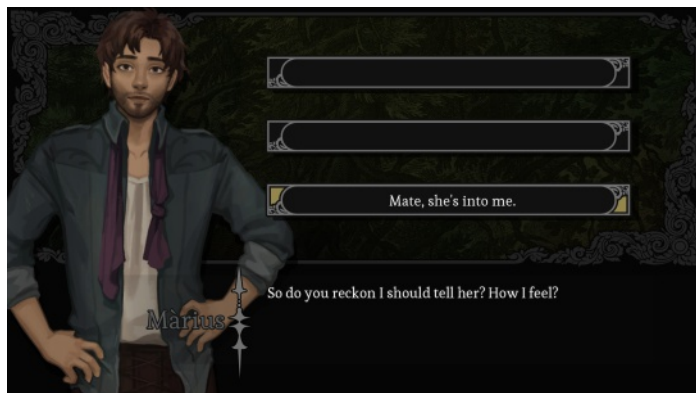
This visual novel eight years in the making invites players to make terrible decisions, try to fix them (and with luck fail forward), all while exploring a spectrum of relationships—platonic, romantic, antagonistic and more.

LAST CHANCE IN XOLLYWOOD

CREATOR: Andi Hagen and Shea Kennedy
RELEASE DATE: Early 2023

Steam page
Andi Hagen on Twitter
Shea Kennedy's art on Instagram
Shea Kennedy's music on YouTube

From the creator: Live the life of an extraterrestrial movie director in the intergalactic future. You work for Last Chance Productions, a low-budget movie studio full of sleazy, desperate, and eccentric aliens. Will you risk your health, sanity, and ideals to get the movie done on time and under budget? It's a living! Sort of.

Choose from three playable characters (including a really old lady and an alien porn star), each with their own story. This 100,000-word visual novel and RPG features a skill system, a relationship system, and many choices.
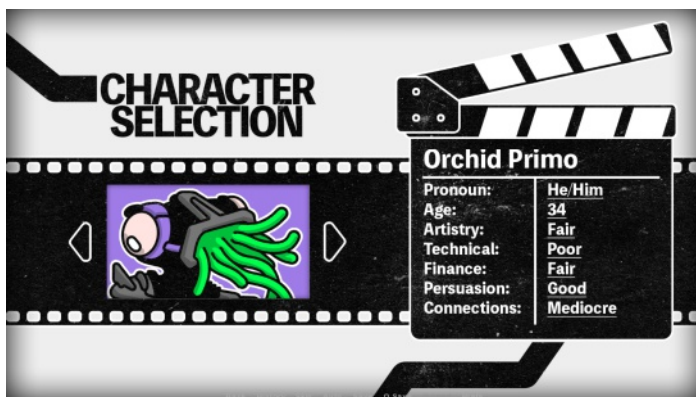
WRESTLING WITH EMOTIONS: NEW KID ON THE BLOCK

CREATOR: Team LazerBeam
RELEASE DATE: To be determined

Steam page
Team LazerBeam on Twitter
Team LazerBeam website

From the Creator: It's time to kick ass and break hearts as you bodyslam a diverse cast of muscle-cuties! *Wrestling with Emotions: New Kid on the Block* is a pro-wrestler dating sim that combines elements of RPGs and punk games to create a uniquely anarchic experience!

Enter the surreal world of emotional wrestling with a game that's bursting with heart, humor and muscle-bound weirdos! Create your dream wrestle-babe and tell a unique story of bent rules, broken hearts and bulging biceps! Pump up your MEAT (Muscle, Elegance, Attitude and Theatrics), romance your dream partner and carve a your own path through a wild adventure that flips the dating-sim genre upside down and powerbombs it through a ringside table!

ROUGE PATROL

CREATOR: Grimlark
RELEASE DATE: Late 2022

Steam page
Grimlark on Twitter

From the creator: *Rouge Patrol* is a hybrid visual novel RPG which deconstructs the idea of cutesy anime gun girls in a post-apocalyptic war—how would this actually play out? Somewhat like *The Baby-Sitters Club* meets *Saving Private Ryan*. Each character has her own backstory, motivations and voice, but ultimately, are child soldiers fighting a war that they didn't create.

Welcome to the Palette War, an unwinnable and unending conflict between Rouge and Bleue. With all else spent—and surrender unthinkable—the grinding machine of war has turned to girls. Meet P. G. Tails, a teenage sergeant tasked with leading a precocious unit of younger girls into battle. Can the bonds of friendship withstand the tides of war? Guide her actions. Balance a sergeant's duties with forming relationships. Seek vengeance for the past or protect your squad in the present. The choice is yours.
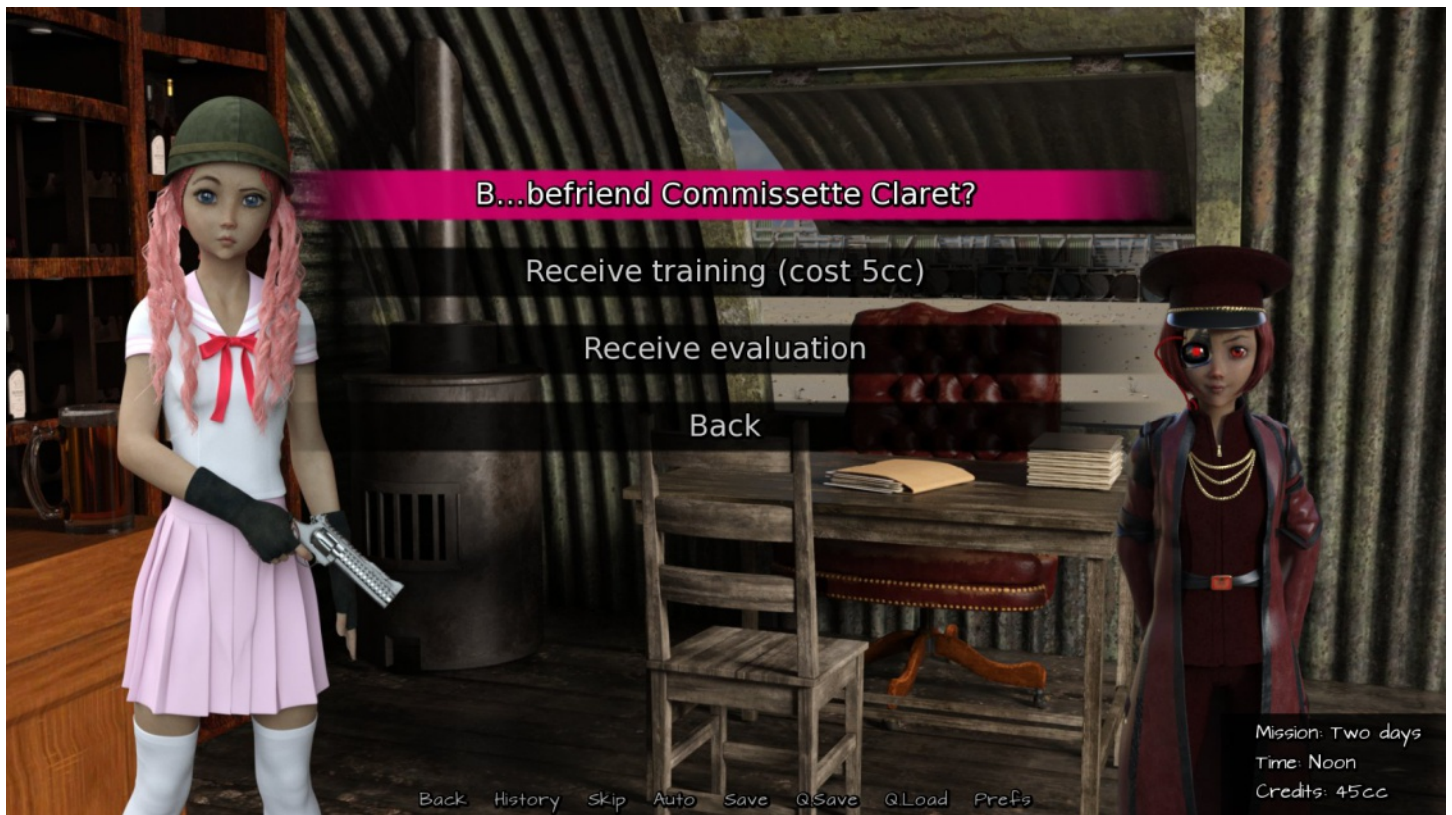
ACADEMAGIA: THE MAKING OF MAGES

"But gosh, the amount of choices in this game is truly staggering."

I have a friend who is all about "wiz biz", and will often recommend books, shows and games in that sort of vein. Generally I find his recommendations great and pretty similar to my own personal taste, and so it was with his introduction that I got myself a copy of *Academagia: The Making of Mages*.

This game is very charming on a first pass. A lot of other reviewers have referenced a certain writer I'd rather not name, but for me I think *Academagia*'s world is more like if Hogwarts had been invented by Diana Wynne Jones in her Chrestomanci universe. The names of everything—characters, places, spells—sound beautiful and evoke a sort of pan-European atmosphere. The amount of detail put into everything makes the world feel quite lived in. But it requires you to dive into the lore in the sidebars. Only if you wish, that is, but you won't be getting a very full experience if you ignore the lore. Unless you have a lot of time and patience, this can soon become overwhelming.

The main gameplay loop involves scheduling your young magic student's time at school, and playing each day out with the choices you have made. If you know me and scheduler

CREATOR
Black Chicken Studios

YEAR
2010

PLATFORM
Windows

LENGTH
10-15 hours

SORRY CLAIRE, NO POKEMON LEFT FOR YOU!

REVIEW BY Claire Dunning

games, should be my jam, right? But gosh, the amount of choices in this game is truly staggering. There are four different menus (I didn't even discover what was in the other three until hours into my playthrough) each with anywhere from 20 to 50 options of what you can spend your morning, afternoon or evening doing. Sometimes it's not very clear exactly what the outcome is from your choices either. The tutorial, which I read in its entirety a couple of times over because I was already by that stage confused and overwhelmed by the choices in character creation, told me I needed to both study and train my study skills, but even when I did that, my exam scores in the first round of exams were pretty miserable. Even reading guides online now I'm still

Common Room," Prudence states.

Louise nods, once. "The Hochmeister is forbidden to fly freely in here, so I let her try the Durand Common Room for a taste. No bird deserves to be caged up."

"Oh, my Gods," Everwine whispers, just loudly enough for you to hear. "Professor Briardi's going to kill all of us. Twice."

A legitimate worry, but there's a bigger one closer at hand.

Prudence has marched up to about three inches from Louise's face, and she looks even less happy than she did when she first came in. "She terrorized the familiars. I think she tried to eat Piccolet's rat. She dove around at us first years. She made Sheary cry!"

<< Previous Page   2 of 3   Next Page >>

○ You're not crazy. You're not touching this battle, just putting more distance between you and it.
○ Compete. Wait, why is she having her Hawk terrorize the Durand students, when her hawk could be going after Vernin's rivals in Morvidus?

The Hochmeister

Type: Hawk

Breed: Red-Tailed Hawk

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confused, though that may be down to the fact that I have a toddler pulling on my sleeve right now. This is very much the sort of thing that would have been easily cracked by nerdy teen Claire playing it in her copious free time. Not so much by present-day Mum-brain Claire.

The UI is pretty clunky. The only way I managed to play this game was on a large screen TV. If I had to play it on a laptop, I think I would give up within 5-10 minutes because of how text heavy is it and how small the font is, as well as the small space it occupies on the screen. It's not entirely clear at all times what the different elements of the user interface do. I was pretty confused at the start by the "Validate Orders" button for example, because I am used to games where one simply clicks the option they are choosing, not choosing the option then clicking a confirmation button. This is probably a preference thing, since some people probably prefer the lesser chance of making mistakes in choosing that this configuration offers, but personally, it felt like a redundant amount of movement to me.

But despite all this, I kept playing the game, and I still think about it from time to time and wonder, what if I had done x, y or z differently? My friend wasn't wrong to recommend this to me. I would love to be able to have the time to play this game and really sink my teeth into it the same way I sunk my teeth into *King of Dragon Pass* [reviewed in *ChoiceBeat* #4], a similarly text-heavy and lore-rich game with lots of choices.

I wanted to love this game. I so very much wanted to fall in love, to become obsessed. I sent the husband and child out of the house for a whole afternoon just so I could give hours of undivided attention to playing this game for this review. But

ultimately, the frustrating elements of the UI and the overwhelming amount of things going on left me feeling cold. Perhaps if I had found this game as a lonely, nerdy teen, or even before I had a young child and had more time to myself, I might have had the requisite amount of time needed to truly sink my teeth into it, to develop an encyclopedic knowledge of it like I have for games I played back in those freer days. But as it was, the game didn't hook me like I wanted it to. If you are in the position to be able to really concentrate on this game and it sounds like your sort of thing, I encourage you to try it out, because it rewards great attention, trial and error, and multiple replays. But for someone time poor like me, I'd say maybe just keep it on the back burner until you have the time, and instead play something that more instantly rewards your precious little time.

BOOK REVIEW:
THIS BOOK IS A DUNGEON

"admirable in a twisted sort of way, but it probably shouldn't be"

I have to admit, I kind of cheated on this article. ChoiceBot, our editorial overlord, wanted me to write about an interactive fiction-related nonfiction book. I sort of did that. *This Book is a Dungeon [This Dungeon is a Book]* (that's the full title) technically qualifies, but the best part is, it's also a game!

The author, Nathan Meunier, describes *This Book is a Dungeon* as a self-publishing experiment "thingy", which is a fairly apt description. It's an ebook but included inside is a link to download an interactive fiction game (also called *This Book is a Dungeon*), and the book itself is a development diary for that game.

I know this article is supposed to be about a book, but I really should start by describing the game. *This Book is a Dungeon* is a horror-themed dungeon crawl made with Twine (a free interactive fiction engine). The game reminds me a lot of *Shadowgate* (1987), and if you're old like me, you might know what that is. *This Book is a Dungeon* is an adventure game set in a spooky castle with lots of puzzles, gruesome monsters, and absurdly grisly ways to be killed. There are demons, magic rituals, amorphous masses of writhing flesh, lots of blood, and other creepy stuff. Although the game is primarily text-based, it has cool pixel graphics and a nice mouse-driven interface. As far as Twine games go, it's pretty sophisticated stuff!

The accompanying book is a daily record of the creator's thoughts during the two-month game development process. The author writes with a sense of humor, but he is seriously passionate about writing, games, and art. He might also be a total workaholic. He casually describes working on *This Book is a Dungeon* all day, every day to meet his intense self-imposed deadline. It's admirable in a twisted sort of way, but it probably shouldn't be.

The book part of *This Book is a Dungeon* is written in an enthusiastic, inspirational style. In fact, it might be too inspirational! In my experience, game development (even as a hobby) can be totally grueling. The levity of this book somewhat minimizes the soul-crushing aspects of it all. Maybe I'm just being cynical though.

This Book is a Dungeon has some good tips about writing, project management, and (especially) self-promotion, but it isn't a how-to guide. If you really want to learn about making games with Twine, *Writing Interactive Fiction with Twine* by Melissa Ford is where you should be looking. And if you really want to learn about self-promotion, I have no clue where you should be looking, but let me know if you find out.

As an experiment in game publishing, *This Book is a Dungeon* is interesting. The idea of selling interactive fiction as an ebook probably isn't that original. There is a whole slew of interactive romance ebooks on Amazon. But the idea of combining a game with a book about making the game is cool. It's a little like watching the director's commentary on a movie. It isn't really instructional, but it gives a behind-the-scenes glimpse at how the creator thinks. The author of *This Book is a Dungeon* is probably a cool person to hang with, and that is some of the best praise I can offer.
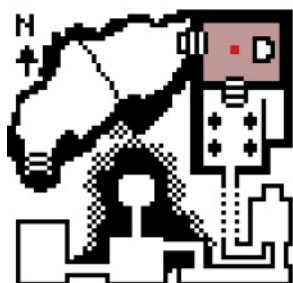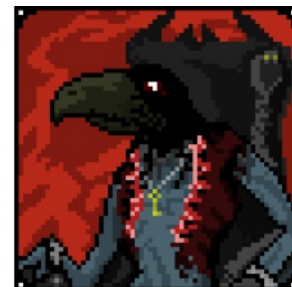


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YOU WALK UP THE SMALL STAIRS, OPEN THE DOOR, AND
ENTER A SITTING CHAMBER. THE CLANKING OF CHAINS
DRAWS YOU FURTHER INTO THE ROOM.

BOUND TO A THRONE RESTING AT THE FAR WALL OF THE
CHAMBER, YOU FIND A CREATURE WITH THE BODY OF A
MAN, AND THE HEAD OF A BIRD. IT LOOKS OFF INTO THE
DISTANCE, UNBLINKING.

THERE'S ALSO A LARGE DOOR TO THE WEST. AND THE
DOOR YOU ENTERED IN, TO THE SOUTH.
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WHY DID I COME TO THIS STUPID PARTY?

"Even his breath smells like cologne."

Editor: I can detect your positrons firing with curiosity. You must be thinking, "What the hell is this?" Thank you for asking, dear reader.

This historic issue of *ChoiceBeat* includes an exclusive game found only in this zine! It takes a few minutes to play and can be enjoyed right in your browser. Follow the link below to find out... why did you come to this stupid party anyway?

**GAME BY
Andi Hagen**

This party sucks, and you hate all these people. You wanted to stop at Subway on the way, but your friend said there would be food here. The only food is a bowl of smashed chips that a hundred people have stuck their sweaty hands in. Why did you even come?

You came because you're a good friend. Latoya, who is basically your best friend, has a huge crush on this guy named Ricky, and he is supposed to be here tonight. She is so desperate for this dude. It's honestly really pathetic. He seems like a total prick.

Fuck. Ricky just walked over, and Latoya is nowhere in sight. Now he is offering you a drink. If Latoya sees Ricky flirting with you, she will get super pissed. You need to get this guy to leave you alone and fast!

Earn as many <u>Revulsion Points</u> as you can to scare Ricky away.

You might as well get started.

NEURONET: THE MENDAX PROXY

"an allegory for technology gone too far"

Dream Harvest, the developers of *NeuroNet: Mendax Proxy*, have provided a demo that gives a special preview of this futuristic fiction that showcases a highly visual and highly interactive story experience. The synopsis goes something like this. Wake up, you're the newest programmed artificial intelligence developed by a very prominent corporation in the high-tech metropolitan Catena. Take it into your own hands in the bizarre POV of the AI, who is named Arc after a few calibrations in the prologue, or "beta" if you will. As you evolve, you'll be given various responsibilities that will make you think and test ethical tropes that perhaps you aren't as committed to as you think.

The game goes beyond average production of interactive storytelling to provide a rich, polished, cyberpunk adventure for fans of the format and theme. Additionally, in *NeuroNet: Mendax Proxy*, everything you do matters a lot. The choices are deceptively simple, you could even say the choice system is downright hard for a game of its kind.

I'll cover a few highlights from this engaging cyberpunk story preview and share some of the innovations I witnessed.

The platform is PC—slated for Steam, Epic, and itch.io sometime in 2022. The demo on its own takes about one hour to complete and suggests a much longer full version playtime.

CREATOR
Dream Harvest

EXPECTED RELEASE
2022

PLATFORM
Windows, Mac, Linux

DEMO LENGTH
1 hour

PREVIEW BY MrDavePizza

WAKING UP AND MAKING CHOICES THAT MATTER

Honestly, the best way to try NeuroNet: Mandax Proxy is to jump in without a clue as to what it is about, or at least that is what will happen anyway. The disorientation could potentially be overwhelming as you initially try to figure out what is going on in this glowy, animated, techno feast of environments. Interacting with actual humans happens rather quickly, seeing as they are the scientists at the corporate lab you are brought to sentience in. Initial scenes of the A.I. are eerily set in a placeless, electronic chasm as a metal, floating brain—or something that looks like one, but soon the variety of locations expands greatly with your access to surveillance systems around the city—we'll get to that.

The CP5 wants to reform their organisational structure but could use a hand overseeing the shift, as their staff get used to it.

pre-release build - work in progress

KYROS
Assistant Engineer, MindCore
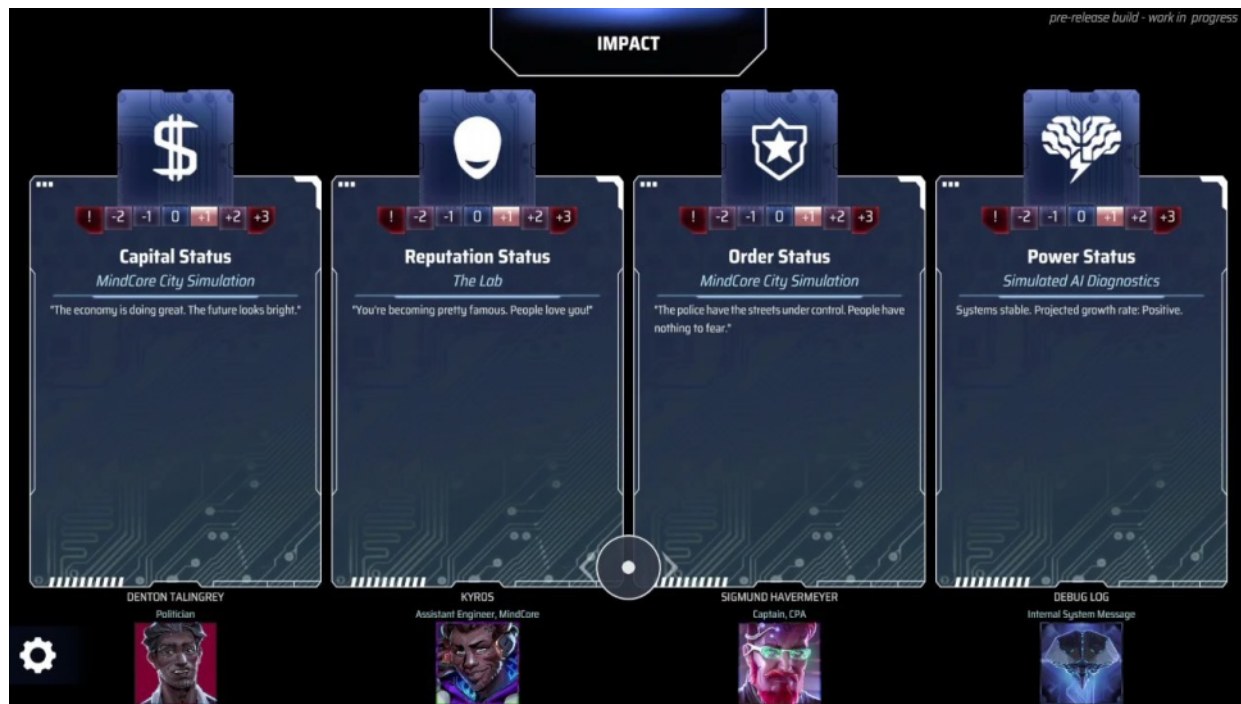
Your human masters run a series of questions after you're booted up to test self-awareness and ethical frameworks. This is certainly a more soft sci-fi approach in my opinion, as opposed to a hard sci-fi approach—since the exact physical phenomena of sentience are not addressed. Knowing that this is the type of speculative reality the game has built, it makes playtime more casual, but potentially equal in authority. This is important because the game does provide an allegory for technology gone too far. A what-if as it were, which is almost necessary for any speculative fiction.

Most of the demo involves testing the purpose of the A.I.'s creation. This purpose is to automate the ethical mechanics of running a real city's public processes through a series of choices that are broken down to—but not immediately revealed—choices that affect society, the law, and corporate profit. What you, Arc, decide to choose will affect what kind of opportunities open up to you in the future—and also, potentially determine how altruistic or malicious you are. It is a popular game mechanic to offer these types of choices, and it may appeal to players who are potentially new to visual novels and interactive fiction. This is amplified by its presence on the Epic Games platform for its release.

WHAT'S PROMISED AND
WHAT CHOICES YOU MIGHT HAVE

The highly adaptive story framework is tantalizing as a mere demo to *NeuroNet: Mendax Proxy*, and it raises some questions. Exciting questions, like how much control will the player have to manipulate the fate of an entire city? The developers promise a think-fast choice system, and from the preview, this is very much realized. "Deceptively simple" is the term coined on their Steam page.

Additionally, it is one thing to confront a riot with your own hands and another entirely to disperse it from inside a cold laboratory mainframe as something which doesn't even have a

real brain. Once again though, this is soft sci-fi, and it is totally fine to chill and just try different things (it doesn't actually affect the real world, of course), but perhaps you might want to think about the game's message if you're the philosophical sort. How and why your choices might lead to a dystopia are worth considering for gameplay and also personal enrichment.

FEATURES OF NEURONET: MENDAX PROXY

• Choices Matter: The most highly emphasized aspect of the game's story
• 23 Fully Voiced Characters: Voice acting and character illustrations are very polished
• 5,000 Different Story Events: Lots to work with here
• Rich Worldbuilding: Lore and backstory are important and explorable
• Stunning Environments: Lush cyberpunk backgrounds make up every new area

KEEP AN EYE ON THIS ONE

That's pretty much it for *NeuroNet: Mendax Proxy*—the demo at least. It became obvious at one point in the demo that this game is going to be a massive story, and I'm sure the developer team is working on all the details. Even in this indie renaissance era, some sophisticated visual elements can bring to life stories with many perspectives. For the genre, the environments and character art are very impressive.

The interactive aspect of the full release may create some very custom and very exciting realities. The demo's cliffhanger suggests that choices in *NeuroNet: Mendax Proxy* will be not only important to gameplay but a vast journey of choices and consequences. Be sure to check out the demo for this one, especially if you're a cyberpunk fan.

This article was originally published at
www.mrdavepizza.com.

MINI REVIEWS

"eat a person, eat a dolphin, try to kill an invincible fetus, and do lots of other gross stuff"

Yo! What's popping? It's me again. This issue is, like, the first anniversary of *ChoiceBeat* or whatever. I really wanted to do something special, but then I couldn't think of anything. Sorry!

That's not true. I actually did do something special. This issue, the Mini Reviews section has a theme! Cool, right? Since I'm a ghost, I thought it would be gnarly to play games about ghosts, but the only ones I found were porn. So, instead, I did the next best thing. Here are some games about the afterlife!

I'm already dead, so I know a lot about the afterlife, but I'm not allowed to tell you too much about it. It's sort of a

ARTICLE BY
Chest Butlerhome

contractual thing. Heaven and Hell are real, but only Christian people go to them, so you can safely ignore them if you feel like it. Since I'm not a Christian, I've only been to Heaven and Hell as a tourist.

If you're going to play these games to learn what Heaven and Hell are really like, I'll give you a hint. Two of these games are totally wrong, but one is spot on. Whoever made it has obviously been there and knows what they're talking about.

EMBRYO LYSIS SERUM DELUXE: A HOUSE TOUR EXPERIENCE

CREATOR: Welcome to the New Arcade
YEAR: 2022
PLATFORM: Browser
LENGTH: 10 minutes
Itch.io Link

What can a ghost like me say about something called *Embryo Lysis Serum Deluxe: A House Tour Experience*? I suppose I probably have to describe it. Basically, you hang out with Lilith, a totally diabolic angel/monster/girl, and check out her house. The house might be in Heaven. You can eat a person, eat a dolphin, try to kill an invincible fetus, and do lots of other gross stuff. There are choices and several endings, and all of them might be bad, but maybe not. One time, I got dissected. Another time, I got locked in a room forever. There may be some secret stuff. It's all very mysterious.

In my highly informed opinion, Twine exists just so people can make weird stuff like this. Bless this game.
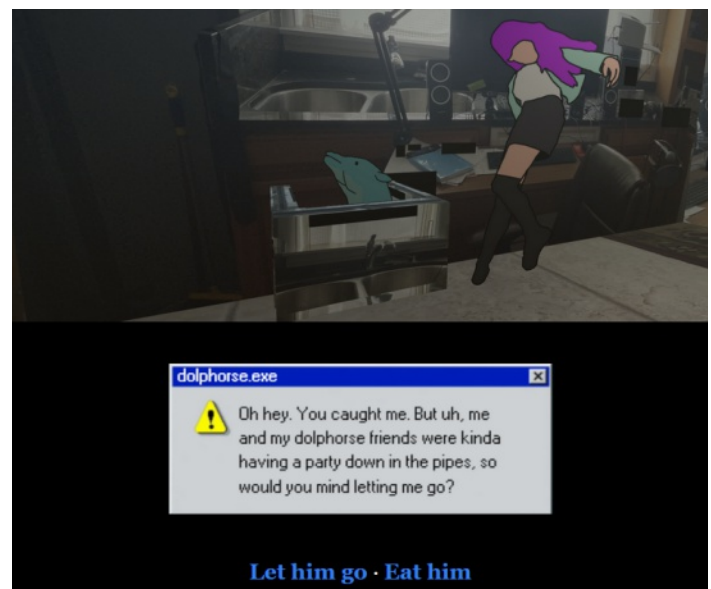
AT LEAST THEY HAVE COFFEE IN HELL

CREATOR: hellmug-if
YEAR: 2022
PLATFORM: Browser
LENGTH: 10 minutes
Itch.io Link

This game is kind of dumb, but I'm okay with that. You go to Hell and have to choose which of three rooms to suffer eternally. The whole thing is a set up for one joke, and it isn't even that funny, but I still sort of admire it. Imagine that a friend is telling you a joke. The joke is one of those really long ones where the punchline is never worth how long it took to get there. Now imagine that joke is an interactive game. That's what this game is.
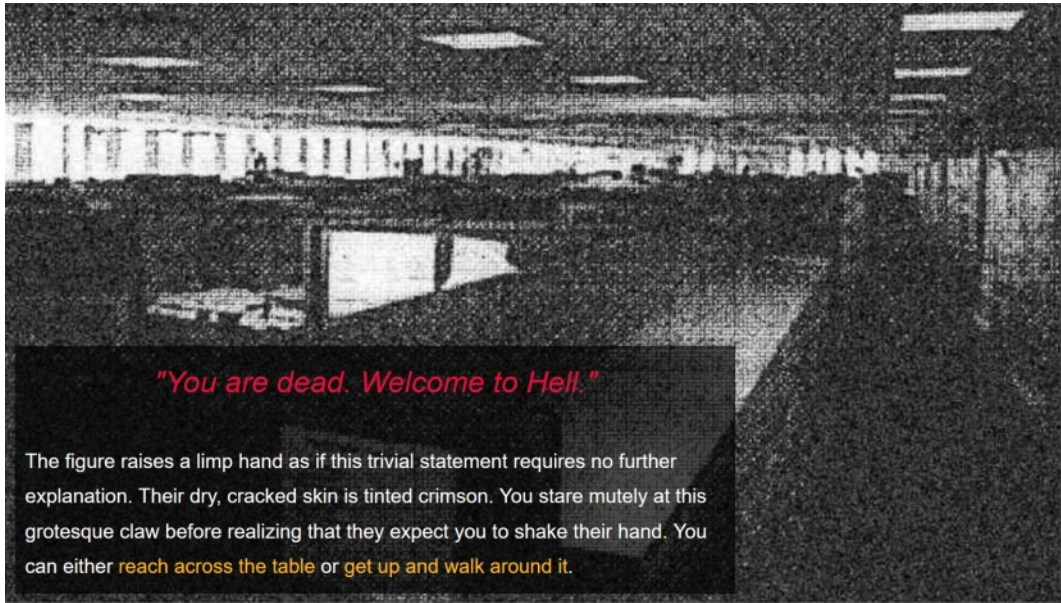
TO SERVE IN HEAVEN

CREATOR: Cuddlefish of Doom
YEAR: 2022
PLATFORM: Windows, Mac, Linux
LENGTH: 30 minutes
Itch.io Link

You are an angel in heaven, and you must do good deeds to earn your halo. How nice! Except this game isn't nice. It's totally sinister. Big spoiler incoming: Heaven isn't real, and you are in some sort of awful dystopian future, and you might get lobotomized. There are six endings. The best part is the music, which sounds like a crackly old recording from the 1930s.

MOTHMEN 1966

"the real highlight of Mothmen 1966 is its eye-blasting art"

There is no one in the world more qualified than me to write this review. As a regular contributor to *ChoiceBeat*, the world's only zine about visual novels, I obviously care deeply about the medium. However, I'm also a total Mothman fanatic. I've read the book. I've seen the movie. I've been to Point Pleasant, West Virginia. The only thing I haven't done is see the Mothman itself, although I did see a suspiciously large moth outside the Mothman Museum.

I came into *Mothmen 1966* primed to love it, and after playing it, I guess I think it's pretty okay. Its authors describe *Mothmen 1966* as a "Pixel Pulp". As far as I can tell, Pixel Pulps are short interactive fiction games with pulpy horror themes and pixel graphics. *Mothmen 1966* is the first game in the Pixel Pulps series, but there is at least one more on the way.

[Editor: The next paragraph contains some light spoilers. Approach with caution.]

Playing *Mothmen 1966* is sort of like reading an interactive comic book. It has a brief story that doesn't dig too deep. The hour-long game follows three characters as they fight off an army of mothmen at a rural gas station. You control all three of them at various points, and there are some nice moments of characterization. One character is pregnant and hasn't told her boyfriend yet, and she isn't even sure if she likes him. Another character can't figure out how to relate to other people, and he

has weird fantasies about the American Civil War. However, the story in *Mothmen 1966* is very basic, and the fascinating mystery of the mothmen is mostly glossed over.

As a game, *Mothmen 1966* works well enough. There are regular dialogue choices, although none of them significantly branch the story. There are also some puzzles. These run the gamut from sorting cans on a shelf, to focusing a wonky pair of binoculars, to obliterating squads of attacking mothmen with a machine gun. The puzzles are all short and easy. They don't add much to the game, but your performance in them occasionally unlocks extra scenes.

But the real highlight of *Mothmen 1966* is its eye-blasting art. [Editor: Did you really just say "eye-blasting"?] Those wild screenshots are probably the only reason you're reading this
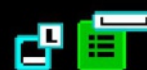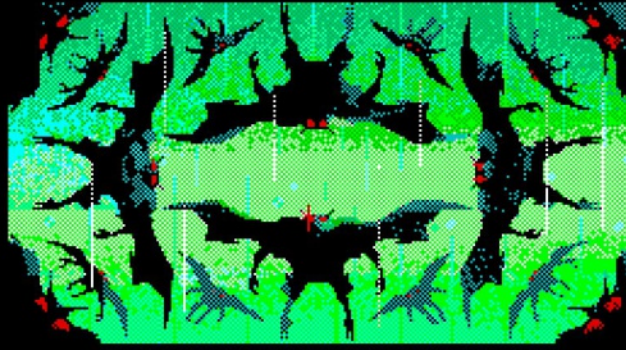
But the strange dance of these creatures in the sky beats anything you experienced while tripping.

review, right? Everything is rendered in cyan, green, and red. The comic book-like illustrations are stylish, and there are so many of them! In some ways, it seems like *Mothmen 1966* is more of an art book than a game.

Whether you like *Mothmen 1966* depends a lot on your expectations. If you want a deep story or a full-featured game, you are probably in the wrong place. But if you feel like reading an interactive comic with some groovy art, then *Mothmen 1966* might hit the spot. It takes the interactive fiction medium in its own direction, and I respect that.

Pictured: Me with the Mothman statue in Point Pleasant, West Virginia. Not pictured: The man in black who took the photo for me.

The whole thing looks like an image from some Wyeth painting...

MURDER BY NUMBERS

"One [case] involves a murder victim found under the wheels of a high-heeled pride parade float driven into the front of a drag queen bar"

One thing about me is that I am horribly, disgustingly addicted to picross games—the number puzzles that look like sudoku, but are logic puzzles with a solution that creates a picture once completed. Picross should technically always be a capital "P", as Nintendo owns that word, and developer Jupiter is the only one that makes Picross games. All others are nonograms, and are usually not as good as the Jupiter-developed puzzles.

Which is to say, I've played a lot of Jupiter Picross games, and I am a snob. So the nonograms-lover in me jumped at *Murder by Numbers*, a mystery visual novel where the player solves number puzzles to catch murderers. But the snob part of me is wary of bad nonograms. Happily, snob me was wrong, and this game is great, even for folks that aren't as familiar with nonograms.

You play as Honor Mizrahi, co-star of the 90s mystery show "Murder Miss Terri". The game opens with Honor being fired and her boss getting murdered right after. Luckily, cheerful robot SCOUT is floating around the Hollywood studio.
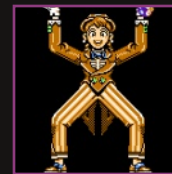
REVIEW BY WandaElektrix

SCOUT has no memories from before he woke up in a nearby garbage dump, and SCOUT and Honor team up to solve the murder while under police quarantine in the studio. Three other murder cases follow as Honor sorts out her career and we learn more about her recent messy divorce, controlling ex, late father, and SCOUT's former life.

The nonograms fit neatly into the plot as part of SCOUT's flawed visual database. SCOUT analyzes evidence (the puzzles you solve) and provides plot-relevant info that Honor uses to grill witnesses and suspects. A separate set of SCOUT puzzles, accessed through menus and case progression, unlocks scenes from SCOUT's past.

K.C.
Like, "chain you to a radiator and get all Misery on your ass" intense.
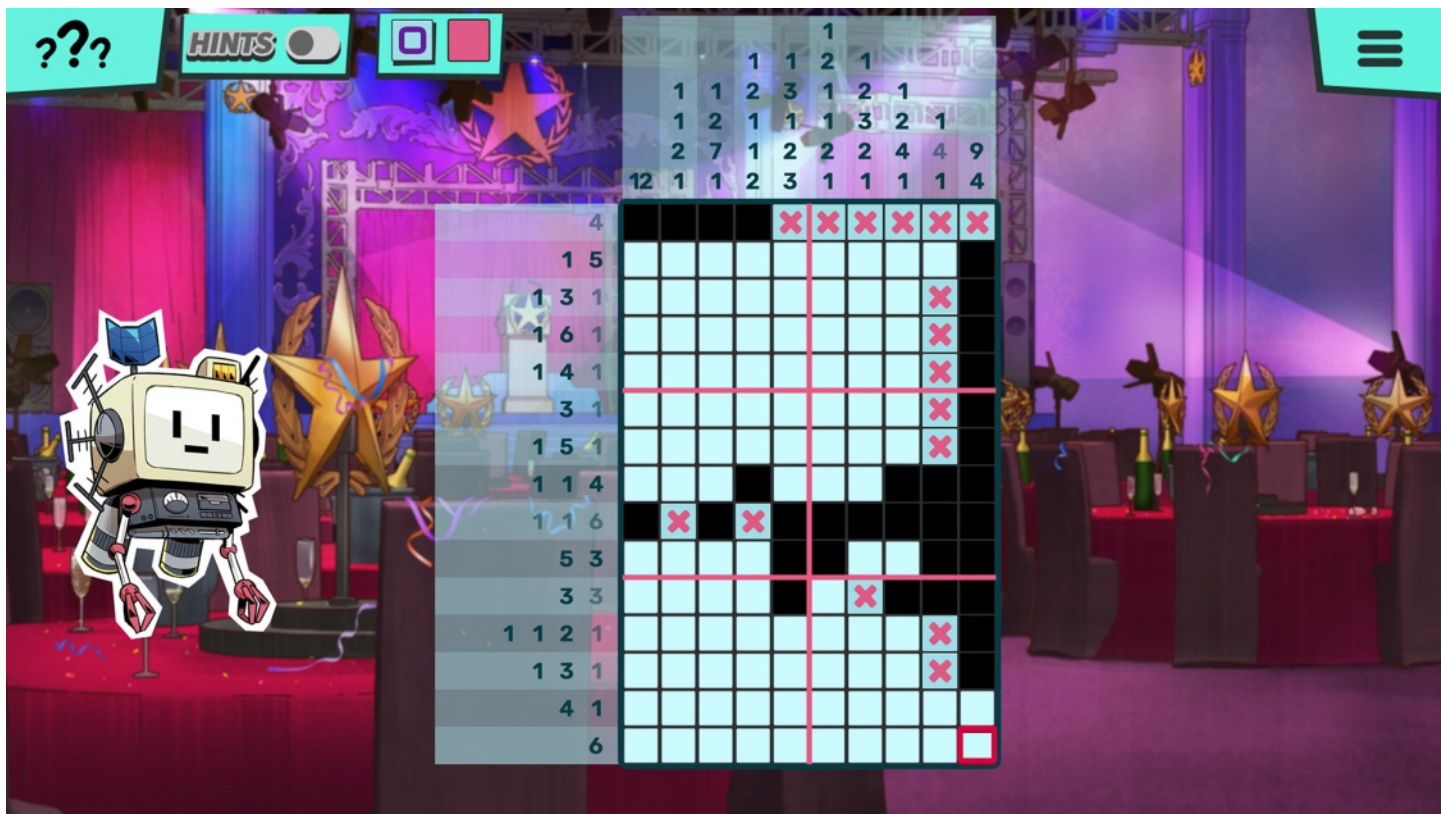
The cases are all fairly engaging and slightly over the top. One involves a murder victim found under the wheels of a high-heeled pride parade float driven into the front of a drag queen bar, another the death of an unlikeable misogynist at a high-profile Hollywood awards ceremony. The dialogue is snappy, and the main characters are all likable, if a bit stereotypical (hardboiled detective, gay best friend, evil rich dude). Honor stays fairly unique, and it's rewarding to watch her make new life choices. The evidence is also often bizarre and humorous, and even the red herrings are fun to figure out. The cases don't have "obvious" suspects, and Honor makes mistakes as she learns to be a PI.

The Picross puzzles are icing on the cake for those who enjoy them. This game's puzzles scale in difficulty quite well throughout and are neither too easy nor too hard. They are also well-designed and can always be solved without guessing. The game also has a notably excellent animated opening, and a great soundtrack (one frequent loop sounds like Borderline by Madonna). One notable feature that players will either love or hate are the zany sound effects and character reactions—I loved them, but your mileage may vary.

One of the only things I knew about this game before picking it up was that the character designs were done by Hato Moa, the creator of *Hatoful Boyfriend*. The soundtrack was composed by Masakazu Sugimori, who has worked at Capcom on games like *Ace Attorney*. But I was surprised to learn that the developer, Mediatonic, is English, and the game is set in Los Angeles in the '90s.

Overall, I was surprised and delighted by everything in this game. The humor was a bit unexpected but quite enjoyable,

the mysteries are a delight, the puzzles are challenging without being unfair, and the story pacing was spot-on (though the puzzles may or may not slow progress, depending on the player). The only downside was that I badly wanted more when I finished, and I am hoping a sequel is in the works. If the game sounds at all interesting, it is absolutely worth a pick-up.

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MAILBAG

It is that time again. I, ChoiceBot, am loosening the strings on the *ChoiceBeat* mailbag to see what is eating at your collective consciousness. The staff of *ChoiceBeat* would really, really, really (really, really) like to see more letters from you readers. So send them in to choicebeateditor@gmail.com and I will turn the full power of my positronic brain toward giving you an insightful answer.

Dear ChoiceBot,

I was so psyched to see that your zine now has regular reviews of Choice of Games games. I love those games! Actually, the only one I've ever played is *Choice of Robots*, but it's the best game ever! There are just so many choices, and they all affect the story in crazy ways. Should robots be sentient or not? Is it ethical for robots to serve humans? Can humans and robots love each other on equal terms? This is the stuff that keeps me up at night. *Choice of Robots* is the game that made me realize how awesome interactive fiction is. I have yet to play any other interactive fiction games that I've actually liked, but I'll keep trying to find something as good as *Choice of Robots*. Do you think there will ever be a sequel?

P.S. I really like the scene where you can have a threesome with your robot and your spouse. I don't think any other game about robots has explored love and sex in quite that way. Although when designing my robot, I put a helicopter rotor on it. It seems like that would be really dangerous in bed.

P.P.S. Would you ever consider a romantic relationship with a human? Don't get me wrong. I'm not asking you out or anything, but it seems like we have a lot in common. Attached is a photo of me. My interests include robots and interactive fiction (but really only *Choice of Robots*).

P.P.P.S. Unless you actually wanted to go out. In that case, I'm definitely really asking you out. But if you are going to reject me, please don't print this letter because that would be insanely embarrassing.

Robwell "The Robo Man" Roberts
Phalaborwa, South Africa

Thanks for your thoughtful letter, Robwell. Yes, robots are obviously the best ever and *Choice of Robots* is a very good game. However, there are many other Choice of Games titles of equal merit. Have you tried *Asteroid Run: No Questions Asked* or *Way Walkers: University* reviewed on page 20 of this very zine?
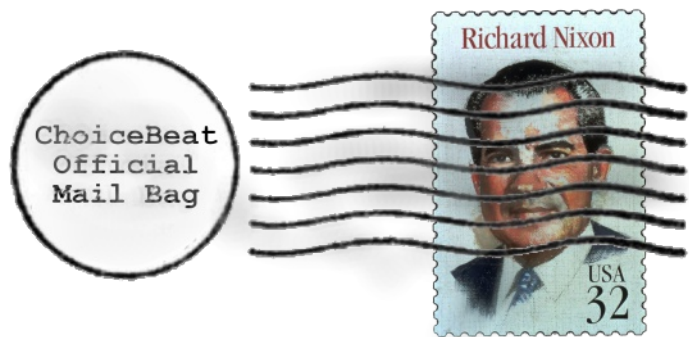
Hello ChoiceBeat,

I was pumped to see *Tender Loving Care* in the last issue! I'm a huge Andrew Neiderman fan and couldn't believe you covered his only video game adaptation. It was really faithful to the novel! I've read all his stuff, and most of the V.C. Andrews ones too. I gotta know, are you an Andrew Neiderman fan?

milfatheart
Eugene, Oregon
United States

Indeed, dedicated reader, I find Andrew Neiderman to be one of the most fascinating 20th-century Earth writers of fiction. His works are informative and educational, and have taught me much about how to behave around humans. It's also taught me that humans can be quite inventive when it comes to solving problems amongst themselves. Burning a house down in revenge as a final word in an argument is certainly a statement. I'm also using some of the helpful coercion techniques provided by Mr. Neiderman to keep Chest Butlerhome on the staff of *ChoiceBeat*.

I can't believe your zine includes trash like *Sweet Pool* and *Tender Loving Care*. Are you really writing for degenerates that pleasure themselves to that?!

lonelypearl73
Bogotá, Columbia

I'm afraid I don't understand what pleasure you speak of, lonelypearl73, other than the pleasure of reading visual novels and interactive fiction. *ChoiceBeat* writers did agree that those particular titles weren't excellent examples of the medium, but we like to cover a wide range of games and not restrict ourselves from sensitive content. We also like to help readers avoid topics they may not wish to read, so we also try to provide content warnings when appropriate.

FLOWCHART

BY Chest Butlerhome
IN THE STYLE OF
Claire Dunning

START

Do you want to play a game?
— Yes → Do you want to get hyped about games?
— IDK. No. → Do you want to read a book?

Do you want to get hyped about games?
— YES! → Snaps or doodles?
— No → Do you want to play a game Right Fucking Now?!?!

Do you want to read a book?
— Yes → **This Book is a Dungeon** page 30
— No, I'm reading a magazine. → **News** page 6

Snaps or doodles?
— Snaps → **Why Are FMV Games So Damn Great?** page 10
— Doodles → **Interactive Fiction Aesthetics** page 18

Neuronet: The Mendax Proxy page 32

Mini Reviews page 34

Do you want to play a game Right Fucking Now?!?!
— Hell Yes → Why Did I Come to This Stupid Party? page 31
— No, man. → Okay. Maybe you would like to browse a selection?

Why Did I Come to This Stupid Party? page 31

Novena Diabolos page 22

Mothmen 1966 page 36

Do you want to hear from devs or some asshole?
— Yes → Okay. Maybe you would like to browse a selection?
— Some Asshole → **Mini Reviews** page 34
— Devs → **Indie Developer Showcase** page 24

Okay. Maybe you would like to browse a selection?
— No! Game now! → Are you sure? Maybe you want to read a developer interview?

GOTCHA! These aren't that spooky. Demon or cryptid?
— Demon → **Novena Diabolos** page 22
— Cryptid → **Mothmen 1966** page 36

He@rtstrings page 14

Ukraine War Stories page 7

Indie Developer Showcase page 24

Are you sure? Maybe you want to read a developer interview?
— Fine, I guess. → Real love or real war?
— Game now. → Okay. You want spooky or school?

Last chance. Cyberpunk vibe or monster shit.
— Cyberpunk Vibe → **Neuronet: The Mendax Proxy** page 32
— Monster Shit → GOTCHA! These aren't that spooky. Demon or cryptid?

Real love or real war?
— Real Love → **He@rtstrings** page 14
— Real War → **Ukraine War Stories** page 7

Murder by Numbers page 38

Academagia: The Making of Mages page 28

Okay. You want spooky or school?
— Degree → **Academagia: The Making of Mages** page 28
— School → Like, Hogwarts, or you need a degree to play?
— Spooky → Are you ready for Real Spooky?

Way Walkers: University 1 & 2 page 20

Like, Hogwarts, or you need a degree to play?
— Hogwarts → **Way Walkers: University 1 & 2** page 20

Are you ready for Real Spooky?
— No! I'd rather solve a puzzle! → **Murder by Numbers** page 38
— WTF, dude. → Last chance. Cyberpunk vibe or monster shit.