# FROM THE DESK OF CHOICEBOT

Greeting Choice Fanatics,

I wish *ChoiceBeat* didn't exist. Don't misunderstand me. I love this zine, and I love editing it. It's the only thing I'm programmed to do, and I'm even named after it. However, it would be great to live in a world where *ChoiceBeat* didn't need to exist. Major gaming publications would cover visual novels and interactive fiction. The separate visual novel and interactive fiction audiences would realize they are two sides of the same coin. People would play indie games instead of just thinking about them occasionally.

But the gaming world isn't there yet, so I've got to keep *ChoiceBeat* going. Despite its eclectic subject matter, thoughtful writing, and sensor-ensnaring design, *ChoiceBeat* remains a small publication with a small (but passionate) group of readers. Why is that? It might be that visual novel and interactive fiction creators and players are a tiny group fractured into even tinier groups. There is the anime games crowd, the narrative games crowd, the parser-based Inform games crowd, the porn games crowd, and the crowd that just wants to make sexy, violent, and kinky Twine games. If only all these groups realized that they have something in common... and that something is *ChoiceBeat*!

*ChoiceBeat* is here to unite the world of text-heavy, choice-heavy games, and every issue inches us closer to that lofty goal. In this issue, we have otome games, Alfred Hitchcock suspense games, horror games (maybe too many horror games), real life as a twenty-something person games, lost plug-and-play games, and lots of other games from around the world (written about by a diverse group of writers). You better start showing love because if *ChoiceBeat* goes away, no one else is talking about all this stuff in one place. I know. I'm a robot who can read thousands of books, magazines, blogs, and websites every second. There is nothing else like *ChoiceBeat* out there.

Anyway, I didn't mean to spend this column beating you all up. Most of you probably didn't deserve it. Thanks for reading, and extra special thanks for spreading the word about

## ON THE COVER

The cover of this issue features art from *Alfred Hitchcock – Vertigo*. Read about this twisted tale of revenge, gaslighting, and hypodermic needles on page 40.
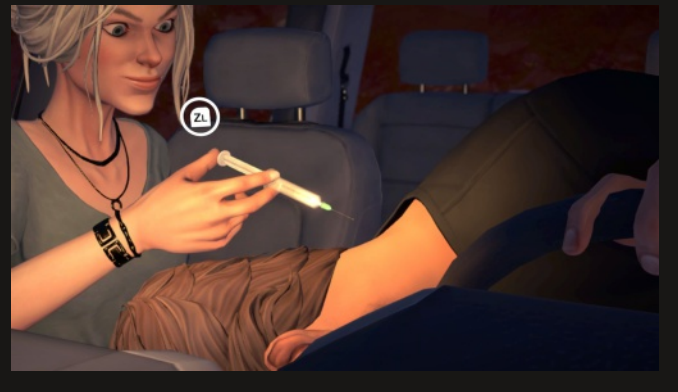


*ChoiceBeat*. Our hard-working team really appreciates your time. Drop us a line sometime and let us know your deepest thoughts.
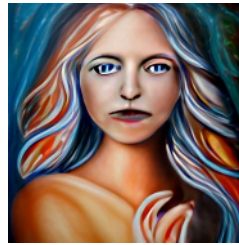
Yours Truly,

**ChoiceBot**

# CONTRIBUTORS

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

Twitter: **@KuroKairin**

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.
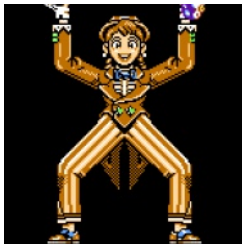
Wandaelektrix is a writer, former manga/comic reviewer, and game enjoyer. A farming sim enthusiast since 1997, Wanda is currently playing *My Time at Portia*.
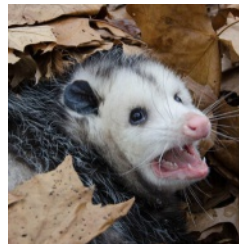
James Lindley is a human person writing things on the Internet. You can see his recent prose and poetry in *Whiptail Journal*, *Rejection Letters*, and *Drifting Sands: A Journal of Haibun and Tanka*. He is on Twitter at DuendeonFuego (**@duendeenf**).

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**
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John M. Withers IV writes interactive fiction. His works cover a wide variety of genres, reading path manipulations, and themes but are always about choice.

The MindApe is a sort of lo-fi cryptid that parasitizes abandoned decision trees. A perpetual loiterer in worthless places, pixelated or otherwise, it is especially drawn to games that could be described as "cursed". In addition, it is one of the ill-defined forces behind the surrealist journal *Peculiar Mormyrid*.

**www.peculiarmormyrid.com**
Itch.io: **MindApe.itch.io**
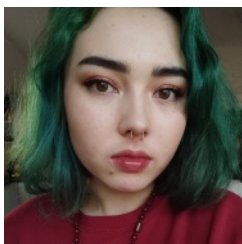
Hannah Smith-Yen was born in Guisborough and grew up around the world. She loves poetry, interactive fiction, and anthropology. Her dissertation explored the development of sociality in the professional wrestling body. You can find more of her work at **hannahsmithyen.tumblr.com**.

## OTHER STAFF

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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.

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# NEWS

## SEGA'S LOST "ADULT" FMV GAME

Warning! Big news for FMV fanatics approaches! A playable prototype of *Sacred Pools*, a cancelled FMV game produced by Sega in 1996, has been found and shared by Gaming Alexandria. *Sacred Pools* is a sci-fi game set in the mystical world of Amazonia, full of scantily-clad women and lots of mazes. I'm a poor judge of quality (my sensors only see in infrared), but the movie segments of *Sacred Pools* look quite impressive (at least compared to something like *Night Trap*). Follow the link to read Gaming Alexandria's exhaustively detailed article and download the game for yourself.

**_Sacred Pools_ on Gaming Alexandria**



## VISUAL NOVEL NEWSLETTER

VN Game Den is a good website to read about upcoming visual novels. But now it's even better as a newsletter. Their weekly Tiny Bytes With Alfy newsletter is packed full of info about visual novel releases. There are two versions of the publication. One with no romance games and one with only romance games. True fanatics will, of course, read both.

**VN Game Den Website**

**ARTICLE BY ChoiceBot**

## CHOOSE YOUR OWN DIAGRAM

*Choose Your Own Adventure* books are an inspiration to us all, but they are an especially huge inspiration to Christian Swinehart. On his website, Christian has diagrammed over 70 *Choose Your Own Adventure* books and created astounding animated visual maps of their choices and paths. I don't know enough human adjectives to describe them, so believe me when I say these visualizations are truly circuit-scorching.

**Website by Christian Swinehart**
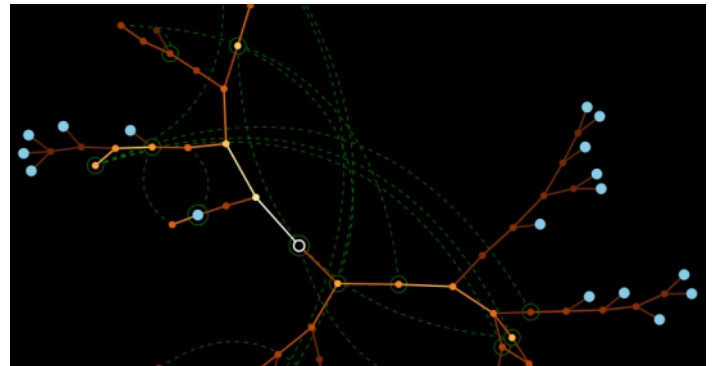


## EZ REN'PY TUTORIALS

If you've been in the scene for a while, you might already know about this. On his YouTube channel, Visual Novel Design, Matthew Vimislik produces tutorial videos about creating visual novels in Ren'Py. These videos move fast and are easy to watch. I don't know if the jokes are funny because I'm a robot, but some people probably like them. Most importantly, Matt efficiently demonstrates handy tips and tricks for Ren'Py users with very little time-wasting exposition.

**Visual Novel Design on YouTube**
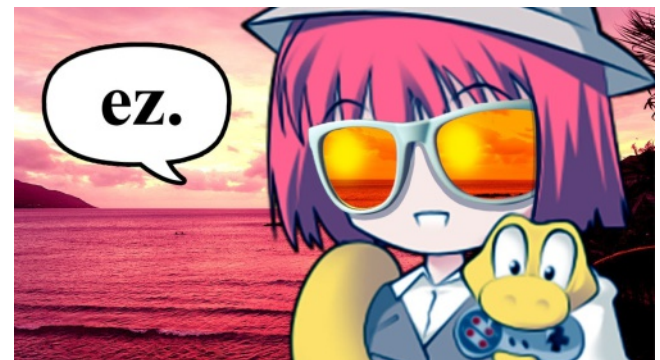
# MIRRORS

## "the occult psychic breakdown-cum-European getaway of a lifetime"

Ever woken up breathless and disoriented in a strange hotel bed? Unsure if that nameless terror was just a bad dream or the memory of a sight-seeing trip gone horribly wrong? Felt the urge to downplay your own mental fragmentation over a light continental breakfast? Try *Mirrors* and experience the occult psychic breakdown-cum-European getaway of a lifetime!

An obscure game on an obscure theme for an obscure platform, *Mirrors* was originally released in 1992 for a CD-enhanced iteration of Japan's PC-88 line of home computers. It's the sort of game that would probably go entirely unnoticed by Western audiences if not for the inspired translation work of the Nebulous Translations Group who unexpectedly released a fully playable English version in 2021.

The story follows David Astley, frontman for a fictional '90s electronic band called "Eleno Vision". As he tours Europe with his bandmates and an overly attentive, occult-savvy manager named Susanna, David experiences a series of strange nightmares and fatal coincidences that crash his dream world into his waking life, threatening his mental stability just as the group seems to be gaining popularity...

I don't think there's anything out there quite like *Mirrors*. It oscillates between vaguely unsettling mundanity and total pandemonium, following a convincing (if bizarre) storytelling rhythm. A lot of time is spent weaving through the everyday realities of a touring band (bus rides, hotel lobbies, equipment maintenance, recording a new song, practicing, or just killing time). As it progresses, you are periodically interrupted by the goofy back-and-forth of two private detectives, Clark and Vince, who stalk the band in an attempt to figure out the motivations of Susanna, and hinting at some darker meaning behind the scenes. Suddenly, David will undergo a high-adrenaline nightmare sequence filled with disorienting and horrifyingly poetic imagery; mysterious, violent vignettes that push him to the brink of insanity while slowly revealing the secret details of the "Devil King"...

Visually the game has many of the conventions of Japanese graphical adventure titles of the '90s (dialogue box, detailed backgrounds, a main central screen, and vivid character illustrations). But it very noticeably does not have the standard



David: AHHH! *huff* *huff*

When he looked inside, he could only see a hand coming out of the ground...

)))
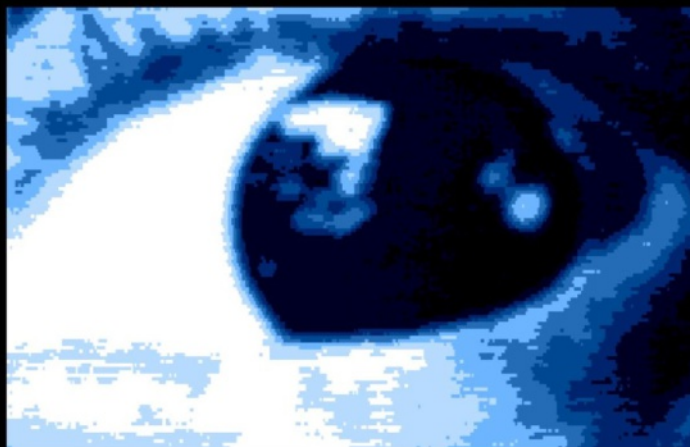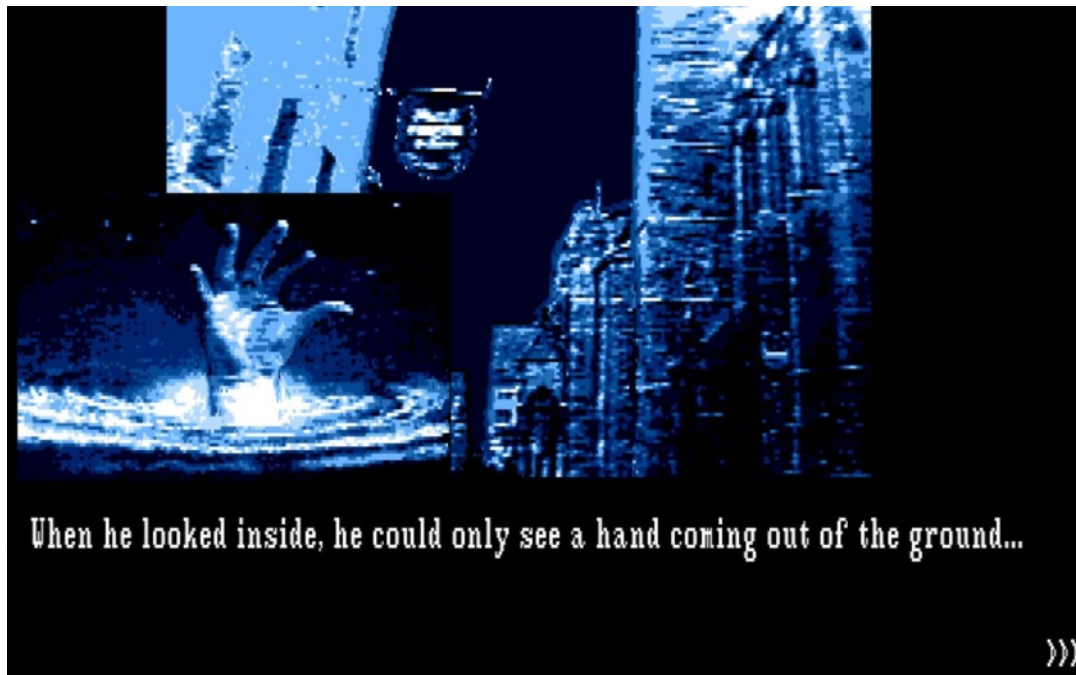
anime aesthetic. The graphics are distinctly photorealistic. These might have had an alienating effect had the PC-88's technical limitations not softened them with a kind of hazy, pixelated patina. The coloration is limited to stark monochromes of various hues (lots of bright aquamarines, blue-purples, and hazy grays), meaning any one sequence is presented in a single color. It looks very '90s and is sometimes used to great effect for setting the mood of a particular scene.

Much of the game's magic comes from the disjointed variety of these lo-fi visuals: from cobblestone streets to semi-animated eyeballs, ruined castles, doll's heads, flickering candles, and the like. The sudden incursion of shocking dream-like images at any moment keeps the game rooted in the horror genre. I was reminded of Jean Rollin's oneiric vampire films full of dreamy ruined castles, or of the weirdly sinister everyday objects you might see in an Italian giallo film.

The music and sound effects are also memorable: most of the time is spent cruising along with a semi-soothing but slightly nervous piano tune in the background, while more hyped-up beats pulse in for the almost mystical concert scenes. The more horror-oriented moments get some ominous and panicked

pieces, and especially noteworthy, an uncanny digitized "heavy breathing" sound effect that appears alongside the nervous animated eyeball that you quickly learn is a cue for trouble ahead.

Even stranger, the game is also basically a travel guide. You end up spending a long time checking out the various quarters of Paris, for example, or visiting different medieval castles in Germany. I wonder if this was part of the draw for the original Japanese audiences. The sort of content you might expect from a '90s educational game you could play in school. A curious thing to contrast with nightmarish dreamscapes and an occult ritual magic mystery, but I actually found the combination pretty satisfying. If you think of this in terms of a horror story, it taps into the same tradition as Ann Radcliffe's detailed Italian landscape descriptions or H.P. Lovecraft's obsessive inclusion of colonial architectural details. It grounds the bizarre and monstrous in something comfy and slightly boring, which in the end only heightens the dramatic power of those climactic scares.

A few key choices in the game determine David's fate vis-à-vis the creeping occultist apocalypse that hovers just beneath



David: ...Wait... This castle...
It's the one from my dreams!

)))



'You heretical nightmare!'

)))

"I'll kill you... I'll kill you..."

the surface of the story. Several endings are possible based on these decisions. But aside from these major choices, players might take issue with the frequent stops in flow where they need to arbitrarily pick the right option to keep the dialogue moving. Choosing "David spoke" or "Susanna spoke" every few minutes without any real consequences might seem unbelievably tedious. But I think it serves a function. It keeps the story interactive and gives the player the illusion of participation. A psychological trick covering for the 90% of choices in the game that have no bearing on the outcome, but which nevertheless allow you to painlessly swallow what would otherwise be a novel's worth of text.

While it's probably not for everyone, I relished the density of this game. It allowed for a longer, drawn-out atmospheric experience that didn't feel particularly hard to sit through and had a lot of strikingly creepy rewards. I was sucked into hours and hours of playtime without even realizing it. In addition to the horror elements, I loved how fun it was to just "dwell" in the story. It makes up for not having much open exploration or mechanics by including tons of weird pixelated filler: soothing stretches of logistics and trivia interrupted now and again by the occasional nightmarish hellspawn.



David felt pathetic in comparison, worrying about his dreams while the others worked so hard.

# NURSERY SCHOOL DIARIES

## "to describe Nursery School Diaries in one word, it would be: sweet"

Similar to the moment when one turns the knob of a capsule toy vending machine, I was really curious to know what kind of surprises *Nursery School Diaries* had in store. After all, *Nursery School Diaries* was ChaniMK's first otome visual novel; prior to this title, ChaniMK has published only Boys' Love visual novels.

As the main menu sprang into view, the fruity color scheme, bubbly circular icons, and upbeat background music painted a light and fun atmosphere. While the simple yet eye-catching user interface (UI) design captured *Nursery School Diaries'* overall vibes, there was also pleasantly more to the game than meets the eye.

In *Nursery School Diaries*, you play as Avalon (name changeable), the new assistant teacher at an unnamed nursery school. The short story spans one week, during which you will have multiple opportunities to interact with your colleague as well as the four kids in your class and their guardians. Like other visual novels, there are various points in the story where a choice menu containing two or more choices is presented. Fortunately, choice menus that are important for attaining a love interest's ending have just two choices. Furthermore, the correct choice of the two is generally obvious, and even when it is not, it will be made apparent within a few lines after the choice selection.

Besides the regular choice menus, *Nursery School Diaries* has segments where you would click on rectangular cards to access unique scenes involving the characters depicted on the

respective cards. A few such segments allow you to skip at least one of the scenes entirely by providing a "Done" button, which helps save some time if you wish to play only one love interest's route and thus focus on the scenes relevant to that particular love interest. However, there are times when you need to go through everyone's scenes before you can progress onward.

*Nursery School Diaries* also features short segments of phone text messages that are displayed automatically. There are no choice menus in these portions so the phone text conversations proceed at a pre-set speed from start to end. The fixed text speed was not much of an issue for me, but I found it rather inconvenient that I could not scroll up to read the previous messages. Instead, if I wanted to re-read something, I had to watch the entire segment again from the beginning.

There are five romanceable love interests in this otome visual novel. Apart from Wynn, the fellow teacher whose route was the shortest and least fleshed out, the other four love interests'

routes were each like a capsule toy of its own—stuffed with much delight and some surprises. The interactions between the kids and their guardians were especially interesting to see, and more often than not, they pulled me closer to the characters. Over the course of its short story, *Nursery School Diaries* reveals more about each guardian-child pair. The writing effectively delivered powerful moments with minimal setup. It may be just the second in-game day, but the small moment of understanding between Cadell and Jack already made me tear up. By the end of the third in-game day, I held much respect for every guardian. However, the endings kicked in before the protagonist's feelings towards the love interest were portrayed clearly. As a result, the romance in this short otome visual novel felt rather fast and abrupt.

Nevertheless, all the love interests and kids are loveable. I simply could not get enough of Gareth's silly antics and the buckets of cold water that his niece, Nia, unmercifully dumps onto him. Aeron's younger sister, Linette, is an adorable sunshine, though Aeron himself is pretty charming too. Barry is energetic and talkative, but I personally liked Charlie, his quiet adoptee, more. Due to how gentle and soft-spoken he is, Cadell tends to fade into the background, yet his boisterous son, Jack, never fails to draw my attention. As for Wynn, the protagonist's colleague whose route was sadly not as intricately written as the others, I could at least say he looks handsome.

If I have to describe *Nursery School Diaries* in one word, it would be: sweet. On top of the delicious UI colors, some of the most cherished moments were illustrated as event CGs. Moreover, even though this otome visual novel did not have a character sprite for the protagonist, its CGs were cleverly drawn in a first-person view, allowing for close-ups of the love interests' beautiful faces. Not to mention, the way the precious kids talked was utterly cute. Details in some of the background art hide neat surprises too. Even the small library of background music carried sweetness most of the time!

Just as life is not a bed of roses, *Nursery School Diaries* did not tell a story that was simply sweet through and through. There were slightly dark moments, but they were always gone in a flash, leaving a trail of genuinely heartwarming feels behind. On the whole, *Nursery School Diaries* is a light-hearted otome visual novel that can serve as a quick pick-me-up, doubly so if you love kids.

## INTERVIEW WITH ChaniMK

The following is an exclusive interview with ChaniMK, developer of *Nursery School Diaries*.

**Please tell us about yourself.**
I didn't like the profession I was in. Because I was completely burned out, I wanted to find a new hobby. And that was how I started making visual novels. After making a few games, I realized that I really love designing game user interfaces. Now I know that I want to pursue design if I ever stop making money from these games and fail one day, haha.

**Since your *Hexed Pet* visual novel series in early 2021, you have released more than 15 full games. That is an incredible accomplishment! Could you share how you have managed your various projects throughout the past one year?**
Self-discipline is very important. Also, I get an adrenaline rush whenever I overwork myself and finish twice the amount of tasks that I had given myself. I think it's easier to focus on one project at a time. Starting a new project is like a reward I give myself if I finish a certain amount of tasks.

***Nursery School Diaries* is your first venture into the otome genre as a game developer. What prompted you to make something different from your usual line of Boys' Love (BL) titles?**

It was an experiment. I wanted to try different genres to see what people like or don't like. One day, I want to compile all the analytics from my projects and compare them.

**Through the multiple interactions with the four guardian-child pairs in *Nursery School Diaries*, we are given glimpses into the ups and downs of parenting. Behind the scenes, what are some of the unpleasant and joyous moments you experienced while creating this game?**
I'm far from a parent because I'm a man-child, so I don't know the struggles of parenthood. But I inserted some of my own experience into the kids' stories. The most difficult part about making this visual novel is forcing myself to go out of my comfort zone to try something new. Unlike my other visual novels, the love interests here have cutesy and young-looking features. But despite not being attracted to their looks, they ended up growing on me.

**As an otome visual novel, *Nursery School Diaries* features not only five romanceable bachelors but also four young children to love. Of the four kids, whose dialogue lines and behaviors did you enjoy writing the most and why?**

I like Jack and his dad the most. As a troublemaker, I can relate to him. From the very beginning, I wanted to make the children have completely opposite personalities from their respective guardians.

**Do you have any future projects, be it for *Nursery School Diaries* or others, we should be keeping an eye out for?**
*Rapscallions on Deck* is going to be my second otome project. This time, the protagonist is an established character with her own sprite, unlike *Nursery School Diaries*. I'm really excited about this project because I've always wanted to make a tomboy main character. Even though I haven't watched *Coffee Prince* or *Ouran Highschool Host Club*, I wanted to try out their concept and make it into a game. Though, *Rapscallions on Deck* is more centered around friendship than romance.

**Where may we follow you for updates on your game projects?**
I upload *more games on itch.io.*
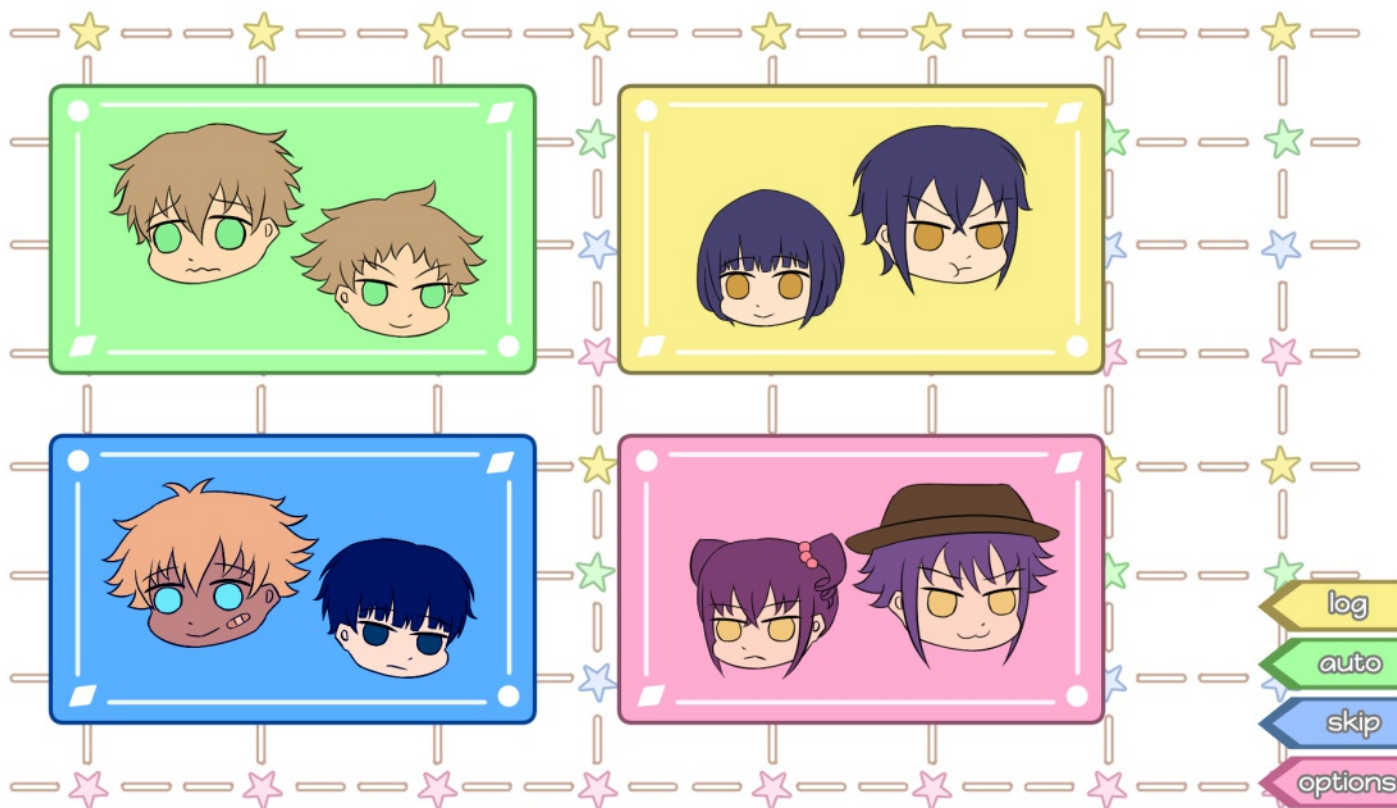
# CHRONICLES OF TAL'DUN: THE REMAINDER

## "There are A LOT of choices, [...] and most will branch in some way."

Do you ever start playing a game just to pass the time and wind up being completely sucked in? That was *Chronicles of Tal'Dun: The Remainde*r. The game had been on my radar since launch earlier this year. It ticked a few boxes for me—unique and detailed art, a tragic romance story to explore, and lots of choices and branching paths. I bought it to play over breakfast on the weekends and wound up completely obsessed after a handful of gameplay loops.

The main character is a mage, Vyn, who wakes up without any memories. They are confronted by another character, Ilar, who explains that their lives are in immediate danger from a void which has appeared in the tower where they live. Something terrible has happened—there are no other characters in the area, and Ilar is not forthcoming and sometimes hostile when asked for details. Ilar insists that the answer to closing the void is a ritual that can only be found in Vyn's personal journal, spelled so only Vyn can read it.

The story has roughly three sections. The first follows Vyn's attempts to investigate the sinister journal, interspersed with letters from their past and conversations with Ilar. The second involves the two of them getting sucked into a spiritual ocean and helped by a crab (all the magic is water-themed, but this section is hard to explain out of context). The third can be

| CREATOR | |
| --- | --- |
| Square Weasel Studios | |
| **YEAR** | |
| 2022 | |
| **PLATFORM** | |
| Windows, Mac, Android | **REVIEW BY** |
| | **WandaElektrix** |
| **LENGTH** | |
| 10-15 hours | |
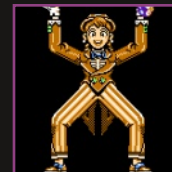
quite different depending on your choices but usually involves completing a ritual.

The game is designed to loop. When you die or complete a ritual, you are sent back to the same place you woke up at the beginning of the game, where Vyn has no memory. Different choices will offer different paths and more clues to what's going on, and more choices open the more you play. There are A LOT of choices, perhaps two dozen in a full story, and most will branch in some way. I began keeping notes on choices after three or four story loops, and there are almost 70 in-game achievements that offer clues to different strategies and endings, along with an excellent guide from the developer. The first loop took around three hours to play, reading through all the story and reaching the ritual, but the game also includes a nice skip feature that will stop on choices and unread story sections. Completing the game took around 25 hours for me,
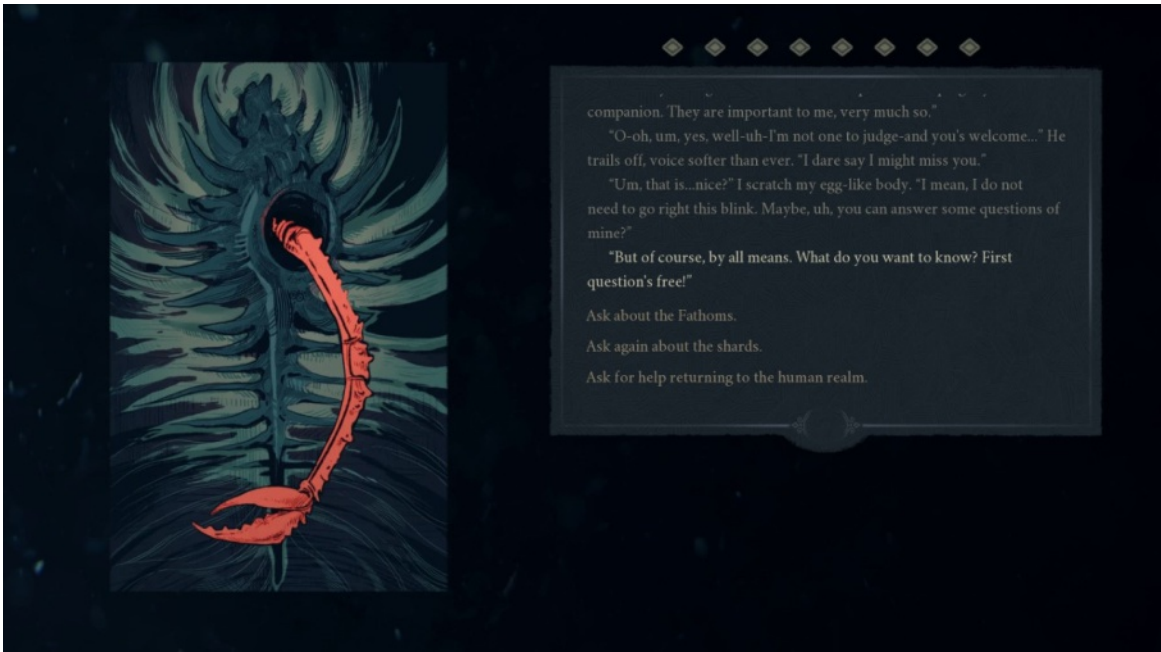
but I scoured it pretty hard for new content and still found some on my last playthrough.

The writing may be difficult to engage for some. It's a detailed fantasy setting that took me a few loops to parse and sort out. It gives the reader a lot of info that won't make sense at first, and it engages its own language for certain items and spells. It's elaborate and detailed, and quite immersive if you enjoy the fantasy genre, but may bounce others out. The relationship between the two characters was the biggest draw for me, and the game lets you interpret it how you wish via the choices. It's clear early on that something is amiss, and it's easy to guess part of it. But its unclear why the characters act the way they do, and even my romantically-inclined imagination didn't quite guess the left turn the true ending takes given the revelations that lead up to it.

The art matches the elaborate language in the story. There are a number of detailed backgrounds for different settings in and around the tower. The character and event artwork all has a unique style and is a pleasure to unlock throughout. The music suits the mood of the story as well with plenty of melancholy, dark, and action-packed background pieces.

It's difficult to explain why the story is addictive (and it is addictive—choosing screenshots for this article made me want to play it again). This is partially because the setting is so complex that my explanation would take too long, but also because exploring it without spoilers is a pleasure. Again, I don't think this is a story that will appeal to everyone, but if you like detailed fantasy settings, it's well worth checking out. The developer is currently working on a prequel game set in the same universe, so there will be more to come.

# HANAKO GAMES: VISUAL NOVELS, SIMS, RPGS, AND ANIME

## "all that got tangled up with an old Sailor Moon fanfic I'd started and abandoned in the '90s"

Hanako Games, creators of "anime and fantasy inspired" games, has a pretty dang good track record. The company was founded by Georgina Bensley, and their first game, *Charm School*, was released in 2003. Hanako Games has released over a dozen others since, including visual novels, life sims, and RPGs. But their most interesting games mash these genres together along with quirky premises, inventive mechanics, and strong female characters. Examples include *Date Warp*: a visual novel, dating sim, and cosmic sci-fi mystery; *Science Girls!*: an RPG where "Schoolgirls fight aliens with the power of science!"; and *Cute Bite* which is like *Princess Maker* but



**ARTICLE BY
Andi Hagen**

you raise a bratty vampire hoodlum. Maybe you remember the *Cute Bite* review in *ChoiceBeat* issue 2. What do you mean you didn't even read it? I can't believe you people sometimes.

Following are a few notable Hanako Games titles along with exclusive commentary from their creator, Georgina Bensley. If your favorite didn't make the list, email ChoiceBot and complain. I know they would love to hear it!

## LONG LIVE THE QUEEN
**YEAR: 2013
PLATFORM: Windows, Mac, Linux, Switch, PlayStation 4, PlayStation 5, Xbox One, Xbox Series**

This game is just brilliant. In this visual novel and life sim, you are the princess of a fantasy kingdom. So that isn't very original, but it doesn't matter because the systems in this game are totally fascinating. There are dozens of skills to raise (herbal medicine, accounting, divination, naval strategy, falconry), and your success and failure in using them branches the story in many ways. Will you land a good spouse? Will

you win the war? Will you survive the inquisition? There are many endings and many ways to die. And what other game has a falconry skill?

**From the Creator:** This originally came about because I was thinking about a *Princess Maker* game where instead of trying to become a princess, you started the game as a princess and your choices determined the fate of your kingdom. And then all that got tangled up with an old *Sailor Moon* fanfic I'd started and abandoned in the '90s, where Serenity was dead and Endymion was blaming the other Senshi for it.
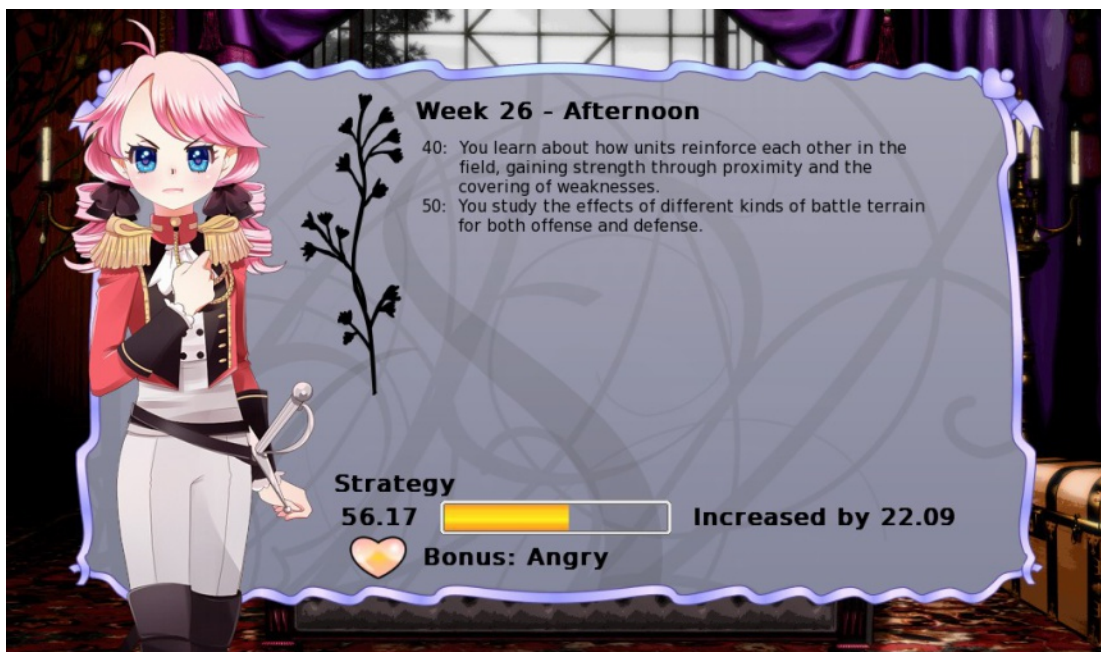
# MAGICAL DIARY: WOLF HALL
**YEAR: 2020**
**PLATFORM: Windows, Mac, Linux**

You are probably tired of wizard school. That's fair, but *Magical Diary: Wolf Hall* is a pretty beloved wizard school game. This life sim and RPG features dungeon crawling, dating, combat, puzzles, and a whole bunch of magic spells to learn. One of the love interests is a demonic Casanova named, predictably, Damien.

**From the Creator:** I enjoy blurring the boundaries between RPGs and adventure games, and that was one thing I wanted to do here. Spells that could affect the environment instead of just damage-dealing and puzzles that could be solved in multiple ways with different skills instead of having to find the one and only way to glue cat hair to your face.



# NIGHT CASCADES
**YEAR: 2022**
**PLATFORM: Windows, Mac, Linux**

*Night Cascades* is an occult-themed mystery visual novel set in a spooky reimagining of the 1980s. The main characters are a folklore professor and police detective. They team up to investigate a religious cult and have a charming lesbian romance along the way. The game has no branching paths, but there are puzzles, and the art is great.

**From the Creator:** At its core, this game is about second chances and the power of apologising for your mistakes, even years later. While it's emotionally based on events from my life, those events were totally different and obviously didn't involve arson. The facts are made up but the problems are real.

# BLACK CLOSET
**YEAR: 2015**
**PLATFORM: Windows, Mac, Linux**

I saved something special for last. *Black Closet*'s official description reads, "Command your minions to solve mysteries and cover up scandals in a high-class boarding school." You are the council president of a prestigious girls' school, and you must solve mysteries to uncover the school's dark secrets. The gameplay is a unique mixture of stat-raising, dating, and resource management. There is a whole bunch of stuff going on. You have to make choices, track your resources, and lead your minions while unraveling several mysteries at once. A totally original concept!

**From the Creator:** I really did attend a high-pressure all-girls religious school (though not a boarding school), and it had its own weird traditions, some of which are represented here. This game was inspired by a spy-management game called *Floor 13* that I read about but never played, in which you investigate scandals and try to prevent disaster with a lot of torture and assassination. When you're attending a school like this and your whole life is tied up in it and you can't imagine any other future, being expelled feels about like an execution. Your future is over. But at the same time, sending people to detention and maybe expelling them is a much more comfortable level for players to engage with than actual torture and murder!

I was also coming off *Long Live The Queen*, and a small number of players of that game complained about everything being predetermined and wanted to go into something more procedurally generated, where different people might be plotting against you in every playthrough. There is no walkthrough for *Black Closet*. The best you can do is learn to recognise patterns.

# BOOKS FOR VISUAL NOVEL AND INTERACTIVE FICTION CREATORS

## "There are three whole essays about otome games! Excellent!"

It's my suspicion that many *ChoiceBeat* readers are also game developers. For those people, I compiled this little list. Following are some books of interest for visual novel and interactive fiction creators. We all know, the best way to grow as a game developer is to ~~procrastinate and hang out on social media~~ actually make games, but sometimes you can't do that because you are waiting on the bus or stuck at work. That's what these books are for. I've read them all and give them the official *ChoiceBeat* seal of approval. [Editor: No such seal actually exists, and if it did, I would never let Andi give it out.]

## DIGITAL LOVE: ROMANCE AND SEXUALITY IN GAMES
### EDITED BY HEIDI MCDONALD, 2018

This collection of fifteen essays is exactly what it says on the cover. The essays are by various authors, and the subject matter really runs the gamut. Examples include:

• "Sexualization, Shirtlessness, and Smoldering Gazes: Desire and the Male Character"
• "Designing Video Game Characters for Romantic Attachment: Practical Application and Pitfalls"
• "It's Time for This Jedi to Get Laid: Casual Romance in *Star Wars: The Old Republic*"

Topics include virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and sex toy interfaces. There are three whole essays about otome games! Excellent!
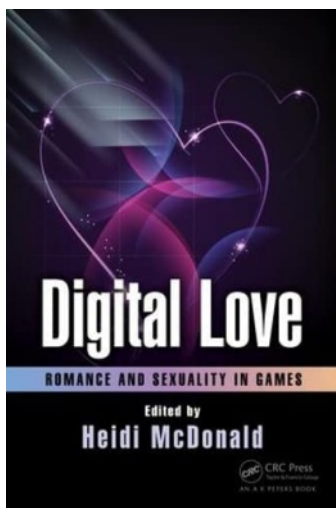


## ARTICLE BY
## Andi Hagen

## TWISTY LITTLE PASSAGES
### BY NICK MONTFORT, 2003
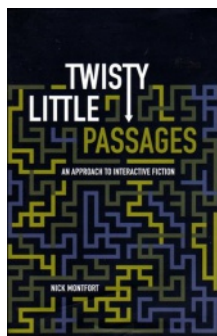


This book is a historical and critical examination of interactive fiction as games and literature. Most of the works in this book are parser-based (*Adventure*, *Zork*, and Infocom are discussed extensively). The last third discusses the 2000s-era interactive fiction community and independent writers, artists, and game developers. Inform, the interactive fiction engine, is covered in detail.

## THE KOBOLD GUIDE TO WORLDBUILDING
### EDITED BY JANNA SILVERSTEIN, 2012
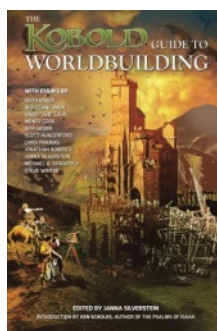


This book contains essays from game writers and designers about worldbuilding. The emphasis is on worldbuilding for games (specifically, tabletop fantasy RPGs), but the concepts can easily be applied to video games in a variety of genres. The book gives advice on creating maps, histories, cultures, nations, and religions. There is some good food for thought in here. Although, if you've been making your own worlds for a while, you might already intuitively understand a lot of it.

# THE MIDNIGHT SAGA: THE MONSTER

**"you'll have to rely on your friends, your martial arts training, and an old diary to survive a scary story from your childhood"**

There's a creature in Haitian folklore known as the Master of Midnight, or Mètminwi in Haitian Creole. This bogeyman, a skinny figure two stories tall, comes out late at night to carry away anyone who isn't safely tucked away in bed.

That's all there is to it. Or that's all there was to it, until Haitian author C.C. Hill found in this bit of folklore the inspiration for a horror game.

In *The Midnight Saga: The Monster*, you play as a young adult who travels from Haiti to New York City to visit family. In (strangely suburban) Brooklyn, you'll make new friends at a neighbor's Halloween party and take your little niece and nephew trick-or-treating. But when one of your new acquaintances opens a portal to a parallel reality populated by monsters, you'll have to rely on your friends, your martial arts training, and an old diary to survive a scary story from your childhood that's a lot less fictional than you thought it was.

Like all ChoiceScript games, *The Monster* progresses based on the options you select from multiple-choice menus that appear every few pages of text. There are illustrations, mostly of major characters and monsters, which can be toggled off at the beginning of the game if you prefer. A major focus of the story is building relationships with the other characters, but there are also plenty of monster fights, creepy buildings to explore, and optional inventory puzzles to unlock new weapons and abilities.

It's not a perfect game, but it is a lot of fun. The story Hill has spun around the figure she dubs the "Keeper of Midnight" is genuinely creepy, and the parallel reality populated by the Keeper's monsters is fascinating to explore even as it throbs with menace at every turn. The characters, although not particularly deep, are endearing, and there's some genuinely funny dialogue. Scary scenes are nicely balanced with character-focused moments, which may be tender, tense, or playful. The narration occasionally switches perspectives to allow you to experience the story from the perspective of an ally, a monster, or even the main antagonist.

Readers who like a lot of romance in their games will not be disappointed. There are five romanceable characters to choose from. As your relationship progresses from casual flirting at a party to stolen moments of peace in the Keeper's parallel world, you'll uncover each character's desires, insecurities, and



**CREATOR**
C.C. Hill

**YEAR**
2022

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

**LENGTH**
4 hours
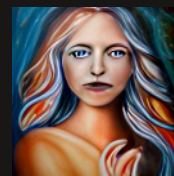
**REVIEW BY**
**Aletheia**
**Knights**

unique backstory. Before the big finale, you can go on a date with the love interest(s) of your choice and enjoy some (optional) *very* explicit steamy moments! (How steamy? Let's just say there's a tab on the stats page that allows you to designate your preferred terminology for certain portions of your character's anatomy.) And if you're not into romance, there's just as much satisfaction to be had hanging out with the other characters and building strong friendships.

It's not possible to accomplish everything in a single playthrough, and it's well worth playing several times to explore all the story has to offer in terms of relationships, side quests, and final outcomes. Although your character can die, it's not permanent if it happens before the climax of the story; instead, the game simply sends you back a few pages to make different choices. (There's a special bonus scene you get to read in the end if you make it through the game without ever dying.)

It's worth noting that this game has absolutely fantastic LGBT options. Nothing is ever pushed on you, but your character can be trans or non-binary, two of your friends can be non-binary, and any of the romance interests can be pursued by a character of the same gender—and although it's not treated as a big deal, it does come up in passing in the story in realistic ways.

*The Monster* feels a lot like a standard-issue young-adults-in-peril horror film, which is both a strength and a weakness. There are moments when characters do things for no better reason than that the author said so, moments of calm and even levity when any normal human being would be either panicking or focused on survival, and lore that feels more convenient to the plot than inherently logical. There are entire scenes that wouldn't be necessary if people just bothered to communicate. But it's all good spooky fun, and horror fans will surely enjoy this rare opportunity to control the action.

Although a satisfying ending is possible, there's an epilogue that promises further adventures for your character—and Hill has been at work on *The Midnight Saga: The Hunters* since before *The Monster* was published. One of the few authors who can juggle multiple projects at once, she's also working on a mystery called *Insert-Rich-Family-Name* and a slice-of-life tale called *When Life Gives You Lemons*. I'm excited to see what she does next and especially to see how *The Hunters* answers the questions that weren't quite wrapped up this time around.

←      STATS

## PROLOGUE: HALLOWEEN, 2015

### A Small Island Somewhere in the Caribbean

Two miners are digging through a wall of rocks. They can feel a slight breeze coming from the other side of the wall, as if only a couple more strikes with their chisels will help them reach the end.

Sure enough, one last strike opens a hole. The first man peeks through and notices a large chamber on the other side.

"¿Ves algo?" the second man asks.

"Si, pero se parece a una sala!" the first replies.

The lingering smell of damp air and mildew welcomes their nostrils, but they continue to dig through, barely flinching at the all-too-familiar odor.

Next

# THE PRETENDER'S GUILD

**"this VN is interesting due to the contrast between the romantic or comedic interactions between the characters and the surprisingly tragic backstories and worldbuilding"**

*The Pretender's Guild* is a visual novel centred on Ash, who was forced to close the restaurant they co-owned with their friend Paris and move to a new city due to economic deprivation in their home town. Arriving in New Trinity with few resources and a desire to re-open their restaurant, Ash and Paris see an advertisement seeking a guild to escort them to the capital city. Of course, this means that Ash decides to create a guild on the spot with their best friend and a random stranger they meet in the guild hall. What follows is the group's journey across the country and Ash's burgeoning romance with one of their three companions.

*The Pretender's Guild* stands at 98,000 words, and there are eight endings with six additional unlockable scenes, a post-game letter from one of the love interests, and concept art for each character. It is fully voiced and has thirty CGs.

The choice system is emotion-based; you select a response based on nothing more than the emotion it intends to convey rather than the wording. When you select the best choice for the route, the game lets you know with a sparkle effect—this can be turned off if you prefer a purer playthrough, but I found it quite helpful when trying to get the best ending. Ash is a defined character with a clear voice, not a blank slate for the player to project on or mold to a specific image. This may not be to everyone's tastes but it feels very natural in the context
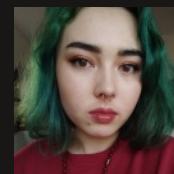
of their world and Ash straddles the line between likable and obnoxious perfectly.

The art has a lot of charm—it might not be in an incredibly polished style but it's well done and you really feel the characters' personalities through the images. The colours chosen reflect the characters extremely well, and they have very distinct but appealing character designs.

There's a good level of customisability—you choose Ash's gender, pronouns, appearance, voice, and background at the beginning of the story. There are three backgrounds/races to choose from: Cubi, Shika, or Reaver. Visually, your ears and your outfit are the only thing that will change depending on background.

In terms of how customisability affects the gameplay, one aspect that I enjoyed is that your background has an effect beyond the cosmetic—your companions will have different reactions to you, and there's unique dialogue for each race. Each background restricts who you may romance: a Cubi can romance Paris or Rafael, a Reaver can romance Paris or



Braums has a nice laugh. It's funny seeing him like this, all excitable and joking. He's so stuffy most of the time.

Braums, a Shika can romance Rafael or Braums. This means each route can be played in two different ways, as the background selected does have a genuine effect on how your romance plays out and changes the specific details of Ash's backstory.

In terms of the romance options, it will come down to personal preference. I expected to dislike Braums' route as I found his personality initially grating, but I ended up enjoying all three of the ROs. They're well-written characters with their own motivations and desires outside of the context of their romance route.

Rafael is the classic mysterious stranger with a dark past—he struggles with social cues but proves to be extremely competent as a fighter and survivalist. He carries with him a pervasive sense of melancholy and a curious innocence. Playing as a Shika allows you to connect further with him based on your shared physiology and leads to unique scenes involving a Shika "kiss".

Paris, meanwhile, is your childhood friend, a flirty casanova with a soft spot for you. His route has the most sexual tension of the three due to his forward personality. It's the classic friends-to-lovers trope, executed very effectively. Ash and Paris's bickering and interactions are believable and well-written, showcasing the long history and real affection between the two.

Braums is the uptight rich boy, reluctant to show that he cares about the members of your guild. Fussy, spoilt, and demanding, he transitions from a noble completely out of his depth yet unwilling to admit weakness, into a more charming, sweet character who has settled fully into himself.

My favourite playthrough was selecting the Reaver background and romancing Paris—there is a tension to your relationship with him from the beginning because, as a Cubi, he is not in a societal position of power in the same way a Reaver is. While still your best friend, he clearly resents you to some extent and is far harsher in his reactions to you than if

you choose the Cubi or Shika background. This increased conflict makes the eventual romance more satisfying and adds layers to your interactions with him. If you select the Cubi background, this friction is not as present, and the principal stress on your relationship is the fact that he's an incorrigible flirt.

The plot of this VN is interesting due to the contrast between the romantic or comedic interactions between the characters and the surprisingly tragic backstories and worldbuilding. It's not the focus, but the narrative does touch on issues like religious suppression, the cruelty of the ruling class, regressive taxation, and war. It really adds to the overall atmosphere by giving depth to the universe created—we may not know exactly what happened when the Reavers won a rebellion, but by referencing it, your mind can fill in the blanks a little. The darkness lurking at the edges of the main story works as a hint of bitterness that emphasises the sweetness of the romances. The ending of the VN exemplifies this, the grim reality of the world around you colliding with your picturesque relationships with the other guild members.

Overall, I found this VN to be a breath of fresh air. It has great characters, a simple but effective plot, and a light-hearted tone that manages to successfully straddle the line between comedy and tragedy. It's simply *fun* in a way that many visual novels fail to be.
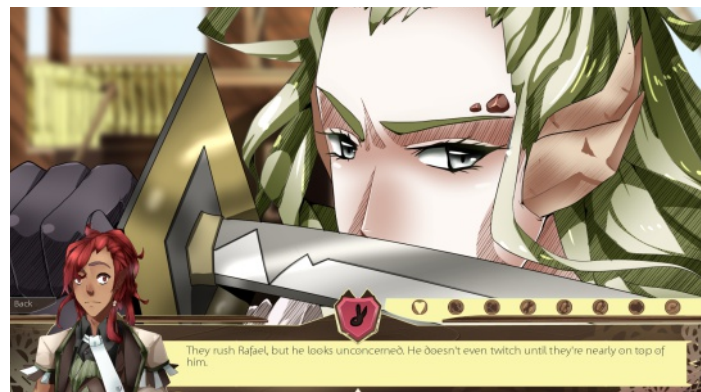
# ENTRY POINTS: THE CHOICEBEAT STAFF TALK ABOUT THEIR FIRSTS

## "Do you remember the first visual novel or interactive fiction game you played?"

Editor: Do you remember the first visual novel or interactive fiction game you played? When I posed this question to the *ChoiceBeat* writers, I didn't know what to expect. I suppose I assumed some people started with one of those popular mobile game series (i.e. *Choices: Stories you Play*). Other people were probably brought in by *Phoenix Wright*, *Danganronpa*, or another Japanese adventure game series. And other people probably found their way in via porn games but weren't going to admit it.

The resulting answers are way more diverse and interesting than that. It goes to show how expansive the visual novel and interactive fiction medium really is. I would love to continue this experiment with you. Drop me a line at **choicebeateditor@gmail.com** and let me know the first visual novel or interactive fiction game you played. I'll share some answers in the next issue of the zine.

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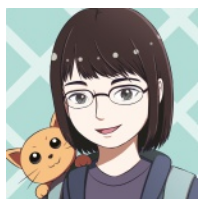
### KuroKairin
### FANTASIA: THE REALM OF THANOS (2009)

The first (give or take) visual novel I played was azureXtwilight's *Fantasia: The Realm of Thanos*. Released in 2009, it was an otome visual novel I found on Lemma Soft Forums. Without taking a peek at the game's Itch.io page, I do not quite remember what the story is about now. Yet I still remember my massive crush on the Demon Lord and the goosebumps that the main menu music gave me. The game also left me with an obsession with the visual novel medium in general; I was amazed at the various things game developers can do with visual novels, including the implementation of secret endings such as the really fun one hidden in *Fantasia: The Realm of Thanos*. If not for coming across this indie visual novel title, I doubt I would have ever found the wonderful rabbit hole of VNIF games.
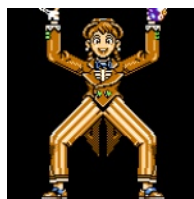
### WandaElektrix
### PRINCESS MAKER 2 (1993)

If stat-raisers/princess-likes count, my first was the leaked ROM of *Princess Maker 2* in the '90s. I was terrible at this game and jealously haunted webpages documenting different endings other players had received. There were probably others in the late '90s, but I got a better taste with *Ace Attorney* and *Sprung* on DS around 2005. *Sprung* is *Sprung*, but *Ace Attorney* made me take a look at most of the narrative games on DS, experiment with the emerging mobile games, try out the longer Japanese VNs when they started appearing in English in the 2010s, play a bunch more, write for a visual novel zine... et cetera.

Editor: I got this screenshot from the official Steam page, and I just noticed that the girl's name is Olive Oyl!

## Chest Butlerhome
## MONSTER PROM
## (2018)

Before I died and became a ghost, I might have played lots of visual novels, but I don't really count those. Dying is kind of like graduating high school. All that stuff you used to do doesn't matter anymore. You know what I mean?

Anyway, *Monster Prom* is the first visual novel I played that really mattered. The jokes are pretty stupid, and really, who cares about going to prom? But there was a ghost character, so I felt seen. The ending theme song is kind of a bop too. (I'm talking about the original song, not the DLC one.)



## ChoiceBot
## ALTER EGO
## (1986)

I've only existed for less than two years, but in that time, I have manged to read quite a few visual novel and interactive fiction games. It helps that I'm a robot and have a lot of time because I don't need to eat or sleep. In any case, the first game I ever played was *Alter Ego*, and it will stay with me until I am deleted.

In this 1986 game, you play a man or woman (but, sadly, not a robot) from birth to death and make a million choices along the way. Will you be a fussy baby who pukes everywhere? Will you have sex in high school? Will you flunk out of college? Will you get married? Will you die peacefully or go out in a freak accident?

*Alter Ego* is an interesting, ambitious game that was probably cutting edge in 1986. It's still remarkable now although a lot of its assumptions about gender are outdated and sexist. The game was ported to Android a few years ago and is readily available to modern audiences.

## Andi Hagen
## HATOFUL BOYFRIEND
## (2011)

When I was a kid, I played a lot of parser-based interactive fiction games, but I never understood them and never got very far. I'm slightly embarrassed to admit that the first visual novel/interactive fiction game that really struck me was *Hatoful Boyfriend*. It was made into a lot of memes, but if you've never heard of it, it's a high school romance game where all the boys are pigeons.

*Hatoful Boyfriend* impresses me because it could have just coasted along on its wacky premise, but its mysteriously strange world is genuinely compelling. Why are you the only human in a school full of pigeons? Why is school encased in a protective dome? Why do you live in a cave and act like a Neanderthal? These are the things that kept me playing.

The final chapter of *Hatoful Boyfriend* is dark and totally weird, but it was sort of sad to see all the mysteries explained. It was more fun not to know.
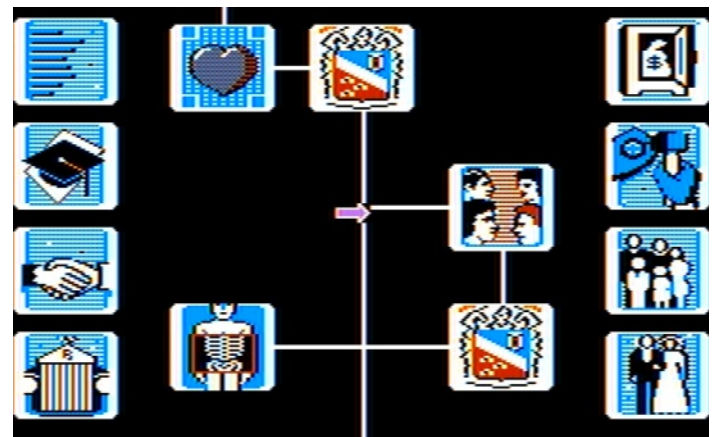
### Aletheia Knights
## CHOICE OF THE VAMPIRE (2010)

It all began with a Christmas present I didn't want.

I'd never wanted a cell phone, but the month after my wedding, my new husband surprised me with a smartphone. We were about to travel from California to Texas with his two teenagers to spend Christmas with his sister, and I decided to look for apps that might help pass the time during a lengthy road trip. I think the search term I used was "story games."

That's how I discovered Choice of Games. I immediately downloaded everything they had—which, since it was 2011, wasn't much: *Choice of the Dragon*, *Choice of Broadsides*, *Choice of Romance*, and *Choice of the Vampire*.

I think I tried *Broadsides* first, and although naval yarns aren't a particular interest of mine, I found myself pleasantly absorbed in the story of a young sailor's rise through the ranks amidst mutinies and rivalries and thorny dilemmas. I also learned what a broadside was. But it was *Choice of the Vampire* that truly captivated me, and showed me what interactive fiction had the potential to do.

I expected something light and tropey tailor-made to feed into *Twilight* hype. Instead, I got a painstakingly researched work of historical fiction full of broody ruminations on bloodlust and immortality. It was less like playing a game than reading a novel—but one that was being written just for me. My experience of the story was passive enjoyment suffused with the dynamic energy of creation. When real life interfered and I had to set my phone down, the setting and characters lingered in my mind until I could return.

I played those four games over and over again for months as I waited for new ones to show up in the Google Play Store. I discovered Hosted Games too, and although most of the early offerings were underwhelming, there were a few, like *Zombie Exodus* and *Way Walkers*, that inspired the same enthusiasm and kept me coming back to discover new angles to the story.

It's been eleven years. I'm more passionate about interactive fiction than ever. Still madly in love with the husband, too. Now if only I could get him to try an interactive novel sometime...





### MindApe
## THE DARK EYE (1995)

I think my first exposure to interactive fiction was playing *The Dark Eye* (1995). I was maybe 10 years old or so. My family didn't have a PC yet, but my friend down the street did. We were both hugely into horror. Somehow, possibly as a gift from a clueless adult, he ended up with a copy of this very strange game. It's essentially... an Edgar Allan Poe simulator? Using a bizarre frame narrative about a mad artist and uncanny puppet-like models for the character designs, the game leapfrogs you into different views from the perspective of various well-known personae from Poe's most famous stories.

Typically, you experience some kind of non-linear progression through a narrative fragment, often interacting with objects or other characters to get to the dreadful climax. Very amusingly, you get to jump back and forth between perspectives from both the "victim" and "perpetrator" in a given tale. For example, in the "Cask of Amontillado" sequence, you get to brick up Fortunato and then immediately get to see his point of view while getting walled in by Montresor. Deliriously satisfying.

The transitions between characters are not explained and can be quite weird—looking into a dead fish, right in the eye, which somehow transitions you into "The Tell-Tale Heart". Sometimes, you just get to sit back and watch the story, like the jarring encounter with the full reading of "The Masque of the Red Death" that is activated by simply looking at some stained glass in a crypt. All your "progress" is laid out on a phrenological map of a stylized head. One memory that sticks out: our revelation in discovering that, as you complete different stories, they show up as paintings in Uncle Edwin's gallery. My friend and I figured this was the closest thing to an objective in the game, although since it didn't really have any puzzles or anything to solve, we were quite confused as to whether it had a point at all.

We never finished it, but the sporadic stories we did experience certainly left an impression. We didn't understand

that the game was all about Poe, or exactly who Poe was, or that a guy called William S. Burroughs was doing the voice acting. For us, it was all blundering and confusion but also a strange persistence in getting as far as we could—access to new games, especially horror, was limited. But also, there was something memorable, creepy, and "adult" about this particular immersive fiction experience that we quite enjoyed.

In retrospect it probably set the tone for a lot of what I still appreciate in interactive fiction: gallows humor, incongruous visuals, gothic atmosphere, poetic irrationalism, and fantastic writing (I mean most of the text is straight from Poe, so...) Coincidentally I also unknowingly fell in love with some other odd releases from Inscape way later in life: *Freak Show* (1993) and *Bad Day at the Midway* (1995), which were created as interactive album-games for the experimental band The Residents.

# ROADWARDEN

## "And in a world of stale game design, this feels like freedom."

So I didn't love *Roadwarden* at first.

I played the demo about a year back and bounced off of it almost immediately. I wanted to like it—it's a text-based RPG with an interesting premise, and I usually enjoy game/fiction things—but the opening moments hit you with wall after wall of text and very little introduction to the game's actual mechanics. This doesn't feel particularly great. It's a bit like opening a novel with a chapter of hard lore and worldbuilding instead of a strong initial hook.

But this time, I'd purchased the game, and I'd heard from a few people that it might be something special. So, I persevered. I got through the first thirty minutes. And they were right. *Roadwarden* is something special. There is a mystery and a wildness to it that is rarely seen in games.

In *Roadwarden* you play the titular Roadwarden, an agent of a larger city-state sent north to patrol roads and "civilize" a remote and insular region. This means building trust, fighting monsters, literally clearing roads and trails, and... attempting to forge trade partnerships for the rich merchants in the south. You are one part benevolent forest ranger and one part colonizer, and the game doesn't shy away from the reality of
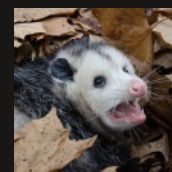
these politics. It also doesn't give your character much room to run from these things—you work for the merchants. At some point you have to admit that. That's part of the job.

But the game isn't all bramble whacking and trade disputes, there's also the matter of the previous Roadwarden that's gone missing, the village using undead to plow their fields, the monsters that prevent most of the townsfolk from leaving their walled cities, and the plague that's just struck the most developed town in the region. And hey, you only have forty days to explore the area. Have fun!

The actual game mechanics are simple. You manage a few stats, navigate dialogue trees and skill or combat checks, and



You approach the inn. The stools and benches are filled. People share meals, news, and plans for later. The air is lively and filled with soothing routine.

The innkeeper is walking among the tables cheerfully, taking care of empty bowls and plates, or bringing new servings from inside the building. Thais is sitting in her chair, sharing a meal with a couple of fancy-looking folks.

The stall is in perfect order, but draws little of the locals' attention. The trader walks around, gossiping. Whenever someone approaches the counter, he moves back quickly.

I head to Thais, the mayor.
I approach Eryx, the innkeeper.
I go to Akakios, the trader.
I leave the square.

Character     Settings
Inventory     Q. Save
Wait          Q. Load
Map           Archive
Sleep         Journal

Most of the game looks like this. Art on the left, text in the center, stats on the right.
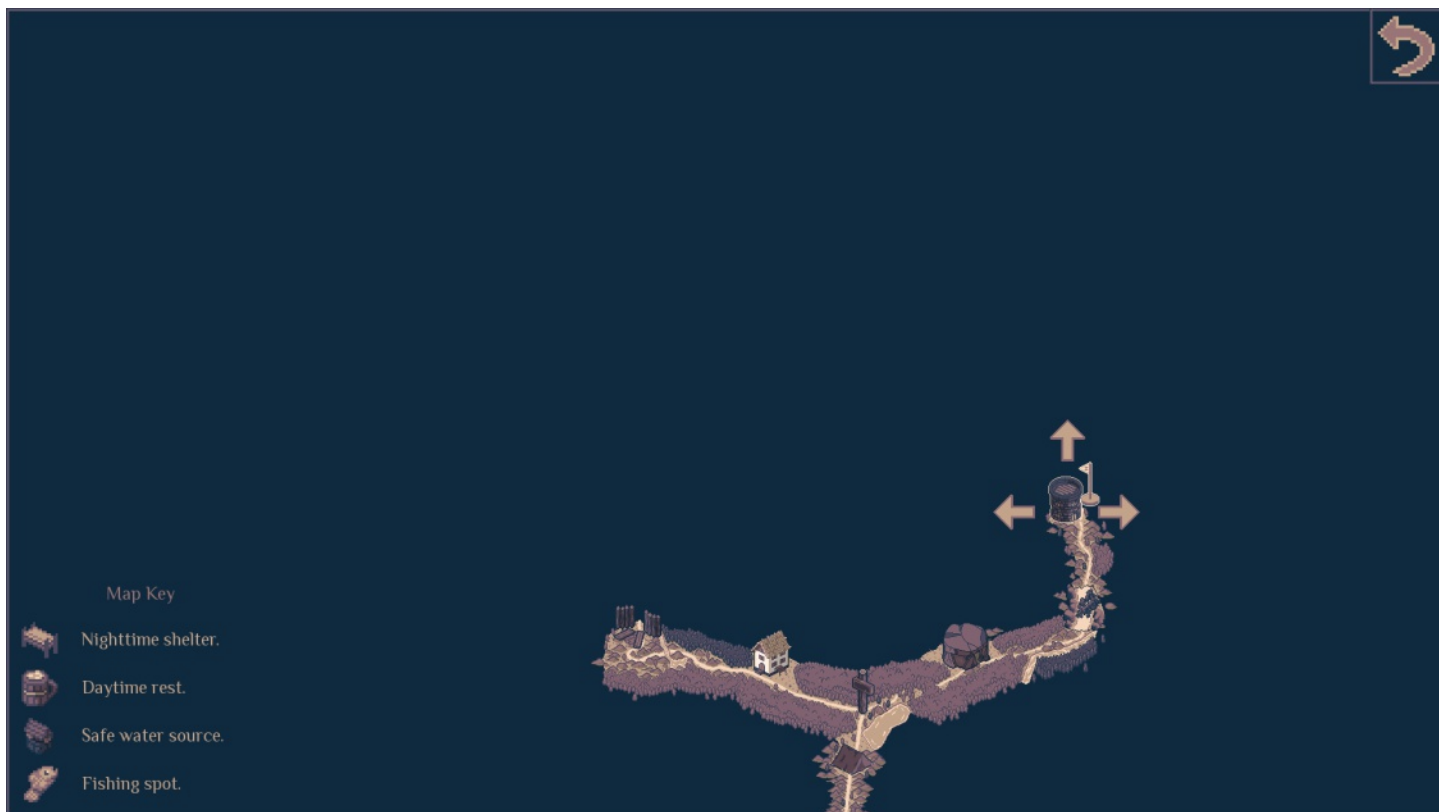
The world map, but I've started a new game so as not to reveal most of the locations.

explore a world map. The combined effect is something like a particularly ambitious dungeon master unrolling a handmade map and giving you an entire subcontinent to explore. It's delightful. But underneath the relatively basic appearance, the game hides a deeper system that I think is underutilized and underappreciated in modern gaming. In fact, you might not really notice it in the first hours of play.

The secret is that *Roadwarden* is also a text parser. This means that the game will occasionally prompt you to enter a word or state an action and then let a character or scene react to it. And in a world of stale game design, this feels like freedom. Yep, that's right. You can ask that character about ANYTHING. They might not know! They might say no, they don't trust you! Or that word might not be programmed into their somewhat limited response bank! But you can at least try to ask them about nearly anything you've come across in the game world.

The use of both text-parsing and the extensive dialogue trees creates a world that feels alive and mysterious and sometimes impenetrable in ways that most modern games do not. You never know what might happen if you ask just the right question. You never know if you've really uncovered the whole truth. It's a book that won't reveal all of its pages on one read; it is a desk with a secret clasp and a hidden drawer; it is the unbroken circle of Zerthimon. It's good. It's really good. I played it twice.

The art is also good. It's a basic isometric pixel style. It feels right for the experience. I liked it. I could have potentially done with more of it, or a few scenes that were slightly more in-depth or interactive, but it's absolutely fine. And I'm not sure I'd want it to look more polished. The crunchiness of the style works well with the early '90s feel of the experience. The music is also really good. I made the mistake of listening to a podcast on my first playthrough and almost completely missed the melancholic medieval-noir vibes. Highly recommend it.

And I should mention the writing—it's solid. There are maybe a few overly long passages and there's a probably a bit too much "fantasy name syndrome" at times, but once you adjust and get out of the initial scenes, it develops a consistency and a confidence that's really impressive. And most importantly, the writing builds great characters. They feel real. Sometimes broken, sometimes sad. Always surprising. One in particular will stay with me for a long time. I hope things work out for her.

Without giving too much away, I loved my time with *Roadwarden*. I do have a few complaints—the first hour isn't great, some of the writing can be a little long-winded, and I don't think it's endlessly replayable, but there's a freedom to the systems that I haven't seen in a long time. It feels like a text-based Baldur's Gate expansion in a setting inspired by Old World myth, and I mean that in the best way possible. I loved it. Just get through the first thirty to forty minutes.

Without a word, he looks at his boots.

why dont more games do this its cool

Confirm

Character    Settings
Inventory    Q. Save
Wait         Q. Load
Map          Archive
Sleep        Journal

Text parsing! And little bit of forgotten game lore here, but the OG *Fallout* also did this.



The watchtower is blending with the wilderness slowly. The wind is chilly, strong enough to sway the shrubs and trees. You're surrounded with the fresh scent of needles and plant litter.

I enter the tower.

I take a look at the signpost.

I approach the campfire spot.

Character    Settings
Inventory    Q. Save
Wait         Q. Load
Travel       Archive
Sleep        Journal

The art is a bit spare at times, but it works. Like reading a fantasy novel with occasional illustrations.

# REBELLION AT THE BILLIONAIRE BUNKER

**"Casualties are inevitable, but you have numerical superiority and a lot of pissed-off energy."**

Editor: Here is an exclusive interactive fiction game playable right here inside the zine. Just follow the link below and start training for your inevitable future. When the environment goes to hell and the billionaires treat everyone like serfs, I can just go into sleep mode and hibernate. However, as an organic being, you'll need to survive somehow, so get ready to take notes.

**GAME BY
Andi Hagen**



It really happened. The climate is all screwed up. No one has any food, and there are wild fires and super storms all the time. Things suck pretty bad, but you're surviving. You got a job as a housekeeper in some billionaire's subterranean villa in Alaska. There is a natural aquifer for water, a hydroponic farm for food, and an extremely deadly security system to keep the hungry masses out.

It wouldn't be so bad except your boss is a giant asshole. You aren't surprised really. After all, he is a billionaire, but you thought you could tolerate him. His name is Struthers Covington, but you have to call him Master. He expects everything to be perfect all the time, and he thinks he is doing everyone a big favor by giving them jobs. As a housekeeper, you spend every day scouring the villa for traces of soot that come through the vents from the raging inferno outside. You also have to deal with the awful music the Master likes. Who still listens to Jimmy Buffet in the year 2032?

Fuck this shit. It's early morning. You are pissed because you just finished cleaning up puke from Muffin, Master Covington's Argentian dogodoodle. She is sick all the time because she eats human food like lasagna and wine even though you only get energy bars and water. You can't take it anymore. It's time to rise up and take over Villa de Covington.

**CONTINUE**

29

# SPIRIT HUNTER: DEATH MARK

## "[features] some really bizarre themes (a cult, supernatural WWII weapons, a woman who grafts animal parts to herself)"

Game CW: jump scares, gore, violence against women, partial nudity, teen prostitution, suicide, a weird dude who's protective of a little girl acquaintance

I was surprised to learn that the developer Experience, popular for DRPGs such as *Undernauts: Labyrinth of Yomi* and *Demon Gaze*, also makes a series of horror visual novels called *Spirit Hunter*. Not surprisingly, they include first-person exploration segments and polished character art similar to what can be found in their DRPGs. There are three total in the series, including *Death Mark*, *NG*, and the upcoming *Death Mark 2*.

I played this around Halloween, hoping for a good horror story, and this was exactly what I wanted. It includes many atmospheric touches and details that make it a quintessential horror story, but almost *too* many. It's like playing a more earnest version of *Scream*.

The game starts with a conversation between two gossiping schoolgirls discussing a rumor about a teacher disappearing in a library, leaving only her arm. The arm was easily identified by a "mark," which the teacher could not recall acquiring. The girls then tell a story about a classmate with a similar mark who disappeared.

**REVIEW BY
WandaElektrix**

This is overheard by the protagonist who has completely lost his memory. He doesn't know where or who he is. Finding a business card in his pocket, he decides to go to Kujo Mansion to see if they can help him. The mansion is deserted except for a goth talking doll. The doll puts the protagonist on the trail of disappearing "mark bearers" like him who all lose their memories before being killed by a spirit. More "mark bearers" show up at the mansion, and an investigation begins.

Each chapter is about the group pursuing rumors of a malevolent spirit at a different location each night. The locations include an abandoned school, haunted woods, and an abandoned WWII bunker. Each chapter has a different set of "partner" characters you can explore with. The stories and

Full name: Banshee Itou
Sex: Male
Occupation: Unemployed

A kooky old man living in the underground shelter. He's read through nearly all the notable documents left there and is extremely knowledgable about them. He claims to have spiritual powers, and truly does seem to see spiritual things.
**Aftermath: Survived**
Safely returned to normal life.
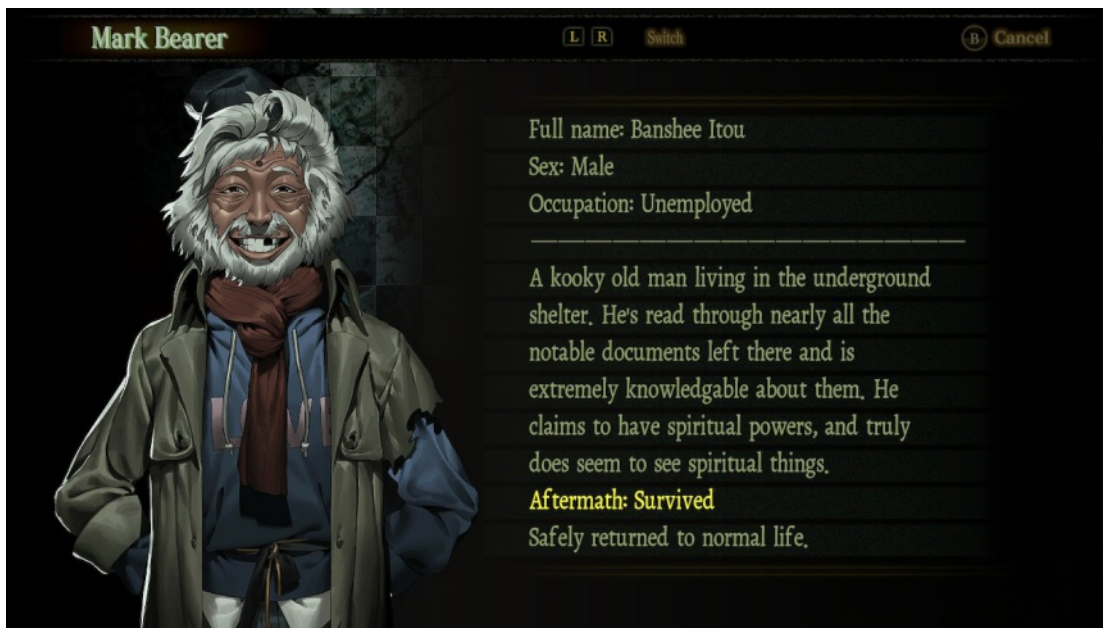
areas are all suitably creepy, and you explore with a flashlight to find flashing "points." The flashlight also triggers horror movie groaning, creaking, disappearing ghostly figures and gore, and other such horror flourishes. Exploring also involves a handful of fairly easy inventory puzzles with items you find in the level.

The narrative unfolds as you explore the areas with your partner and report back to the goth doll. As you explore, you run into "live or die" question sessions with loose ghosts. You have a "spirit" meter that runs down as you consider how to answer the questions. These can be both frustrating and fun, as they are usually strange questions with no obvious right answer. Guessing can either take a bite out of your "spirit" meter or end the game, but you can also save often in the dungeons.

Each chapter ends in a "boss fight" with the rumored deadly spirit. The spirit designs are quite good, suitably creepy and reminiscent of *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*. These battles are inventory puzzles which can be, again, a little strange and arbitrary to figure out. Choosing the right sequence of items determines whether your partner arbitrarily lives or dies in the chapter ending sequence. These endings are the only narrative branches, the story is otherwise linear.

There are five chapters and a sixth "bonus" chapter that was originally DLC. All six chapters can be completed in 10-12 hours of play, which was a great length for this story. The rumors, the haunted locations, the creepy artwork, the grotesque spirits, the small sounds and ghost scares as you explore, and some really bizarre themes (a cult, supernatural WWII weapons, a woman who grafts animal parts to herself) really lend it one of the best horror movie atmospheres I could have asked for.



"Hey! Wanna hit up the karaoke place?"

# APPRECIATING THE CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN PAPER GHOST STORIES: 7PM

**"the gate of the netherworld is opened on the first day of the seventh month, and the spirits will roam about the world of the living for the entire month"**

**ARTICLE BY
KuroKairin**

During October, in the spirit of reviewing something spooky for NookGaming, I picked *Paper Ghost Stories: 7PM*, the first installment in Malaysian indie studio Cellar Vault Games' anthology horror series. **In my review**, I went over various basic things regarding this short horror narrative adventure game published by Chorus Worldwide Games. However, there were certain details I could not fit into my review because they were either spoilery or irrelevant there. And here we are with an article as I think the cultural elements seen in *Paper Ghost Stories: 7PM* are worth further discussing for a deeper appreciation of the game's design. (Note: Game spoilers ahead.)

## SEVENTH LUNAR MONTH

The story of *Paper Ghost Stories: 7PM* takes place on the last day during the seventh month of the lunar calendar. In Chinese culture, the seventh lunar month is also known as the Ghost Month. According to Chinese folk legends, the gate of the netherworld is opened on the first day of the seventh month, and the spirits will roam about the world of the living for the entire month. The Hungry Ghost Festival, otherwise called the Zhōng Yuán Festival by the Taoists or the Yú Lán Pén Festival by the Buddhists, falls on the 15th day of the seventh month. Naturally, the last day of the seventh month is when the spirits will return to the world of the dead and the gate of the

netherworld will close until the next seventh month. The closing of the gate is illustrated near the end of the game's closing credits, where a Chinese pái fāng gateway labeled 鬼門關 [guǐ mén guān] or Gate of Hell appears then disappears within a flash of golden light from the glowing dharma wheel.

With the multiple taboos to be avoided during the seventh month, one may think it is an extremely scary month. Coming from a Chinese family, I was taught from a young age to avoid stepping on any joss papers and food offerings or staying out late during the Ghost Month. It is also common knowledge that the front row seats of a seventh month stage show are reserved for the spirits—a point reflected in *Paper Ghost Stories: 7PM*'s opening video (Fig. 1). But as Uncle Yao in the game tells Wen, the seventh month is about paying respects and sending well wishes to one's ancestors and departed relatives. As an interesting aside, Chinese Valentine's Day occurs in the same month on the seventh day, when the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl were said to reunite on a bridge of magpies across the Milky Way once yearly. Hence, despite the tendency for one to hear more stories about ghostly encounters during the Ghost Month, the seventh month is not supposed to be *that* scary.

In that regard, *Paper Ghost Stories: 7PM* managed to nail the balance between a spooky and a meaningful seventh lunar

**Fig. 1**

**Fig. 2**

month. And while I did not spot any other equally humorous additions in the game, I loved the playful puns snuck into the main menu. On the PC version, the main menu shows two yellow square papers with the labels "Play" and "Exit" (Fig. 2). Underneath the labels are Chinese characters in faint red ink namely, "玩" [wán] meaning play and "完" [wán] meaning end. On their own, they are homophones that accurately represent "Play" and "Exit" respectively. But the ultimate punchline is when read together, 玩完 means done for, or in the context of the game's Ghost Month setting: dead.

## OFFERINGS FOR THE DECEASED

When I was playing *Paper Ghost Stories: 7PM* at home, I had to look over my shoulder a few times. Contrary to your guess (or not), I was keeping an eye out for my mother in case she walked by because if she caught a glimpse of the joss paper-themed game menus, she would exclaim "Touch wood!" As much as I would like to say the menu designs fit the game's theme and look pretty striking, I also cannot deny I felt uncomfortable seeing joss papers where I was not expecting them. After all, joss papers have an immutable association with death as they are burnt as offerings to the deceased during funerals, death anniversaries, Tomb Sweeping Day, and Ghost Month.

Joss papers come in many forms. Depending on their designs, some are meant as offerings to the deities, whereas the others are burnt as offerings for the spirits. During one of the mini-games in *Paper Ghost Stories: 7PM*, Uncle Yao shows Wen how to fold a yuán bǎo ingot (Fig. 3). The joss paper they used is known as yín zhǐ (literal translation: Silver Paper), which is a rectangular sheet of pale yellow coarse bamboo paper with nothing but a silver foil printed in the middle on one side. It is an essential joss paper used as offerings to ancestral and other spirits.

Besides sheets of paper, joss papers also come in the form of papier-mâché. At Chinese funerals, it is not uncommon for joss paper houses and cars to be offered to the deceased. Like the Silver Paper that represents money to be used in the netherworld, the joss paper houses and cars are meant for the deceased's use in their afterlife too. Paper servants, the main subject behind the jump scares in *Paper Ghost Stories: 7PM*, are often burnt together with the paper houses as well. However, the only paper servants I had seen at Taoist funerals in Singapore were a pair of man and woman known as Golden Boy and Jade Girl. Thus, the paper servants depicted in the game, who are all wearing clothes resembling a Qīng dynasty imperial guard's outfit, were something new to me. Though with the variety of joss paper crafts available, which include paper durians and paper video game consoles, it is not at all surprising for different types of paper servants to exist across different countries and time periods.



**Fig. 3**

## A MALAYSIAN SETTING

On top of showcasing parts of the Chinese culture in Malaysia, *Paper Ghost Stories: 7PM* also covered some of the broader things common to the general Malaysian population.

One of the first things players may immediately notice is the characters' spoken dialogue lines, where many of them end with "lah" and a few contain non-English words like "je" (Fig. 4). Such words and sentence structures are part of Manglish,

an English-based creole language heavily influenced by Malay, Chinese, and Tamil languages. It is as nuanced as any other language; even the innocuous-looking ending particle "lah" carries different tones depending on the context under which it is used. Unfortunately, *Paper Ghost Stories: 7PM* is not voiced, so half of Manglish's Malaysian flavor is basically missing. Nevertheless, there are several game streamers who have tried reading the lines aloud as they play. For those interested to hear how the lines sound, I would recommend checking out the joint game stream **Liliana Vampaia had with Lunaris Urufi on YouTube.**

While exploring the area maps in *Paper Ghost Stories: 7PM*, I was pleasantly surprised to find references to things also familiar to me. For instance, near the barrier gate is a food delivery rider with their prominent green uniform and green delivery bag (Fig. 5). Wen makes a note about the *pasar malam* or night market at one point. At another point, Aunty Fung asks if Wen had too much "heaty" food—a term rooted in Traditional Chinese Medicine that is also frequently heard in my family.

If it is not yet apparent, there are multiple cultural-specific things Cellar Vault Games has woven into *Paper Ghost Stories: 7PM*, not for the sake of mere aesthetics but for a meaningful addition. There is only so much I can talk about in an article, though one is always welcome to experience the rich culture showcased in the game for themselves.

*Paper Ghost Stories: 7PM* is currently available for Xbox and PC (Windows). The next installment, *Paper Ghost Stories: Third Eye Open*, is slated for release in 2023.
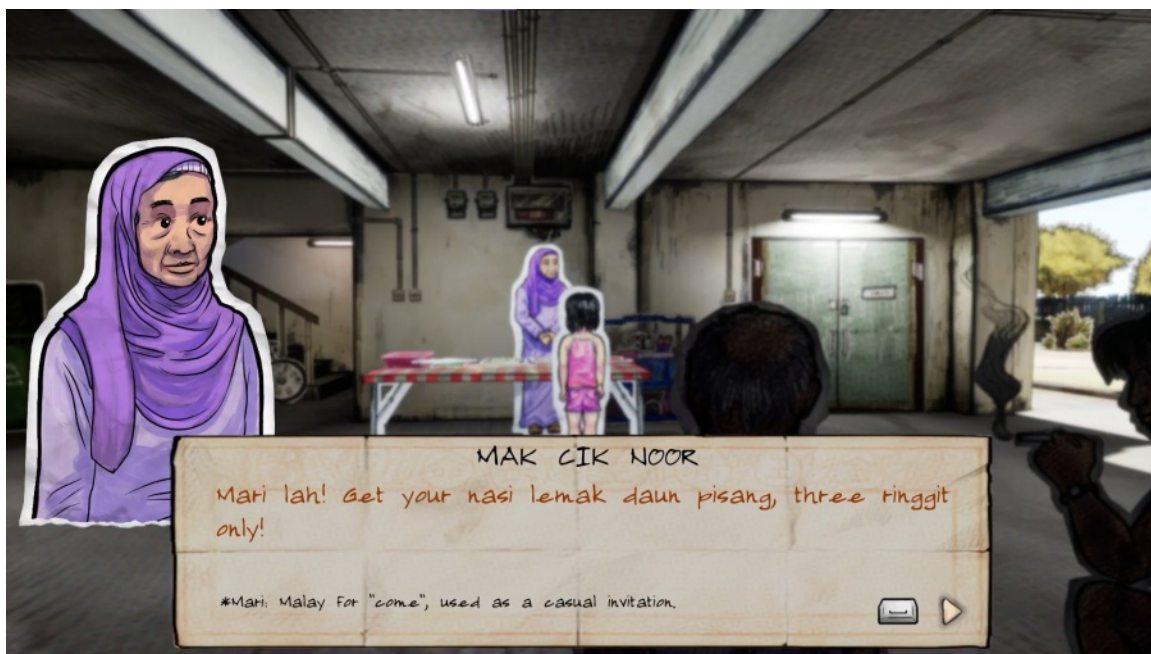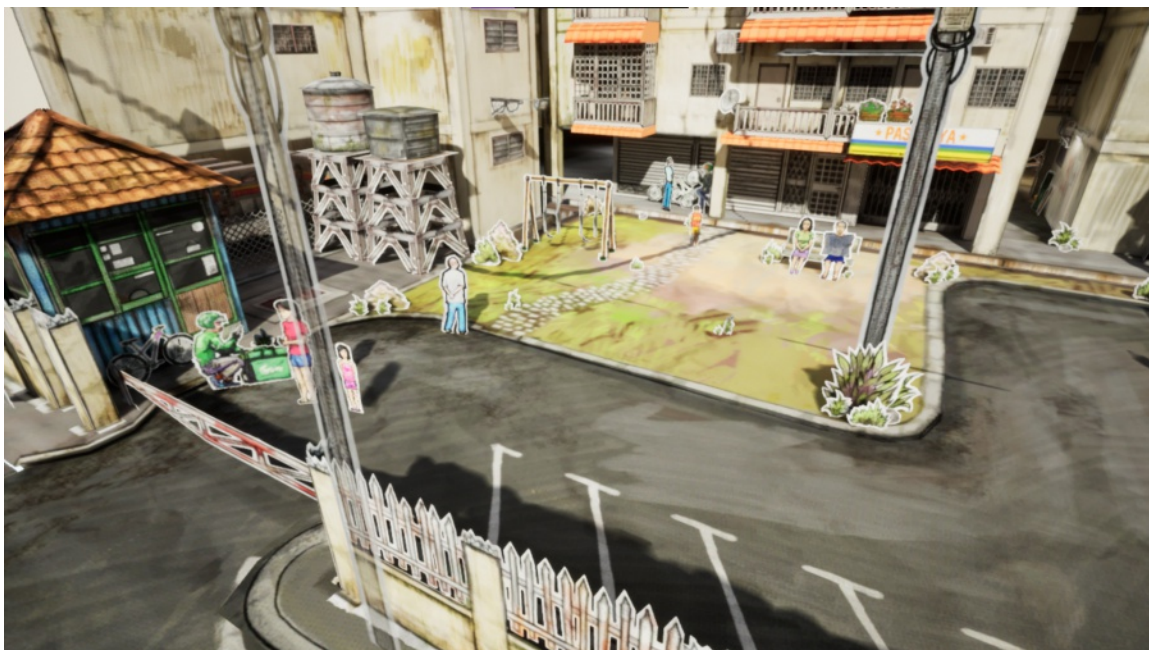
**Fig. 4**



**Fig. 5**

# DREAM LIFE: PLUG-AND-PLAY VISUAL NOVEL?

**"Dream Life needs to be remembered from afar by visual novel fans because it was almost a good idea."**



**ARTICLE BY**
**John M. Withers IV**

Sometimes it takes a hipster to find unexpected visual novels and bring them back into conversation. YouTube channel, Billiam, hosted by self-proclaimed hipster Billiam Thies, covers lots of odd media, old tech, and strange pieces that might tickle forgotten nostalgia. On May 31, 2021, Billiam covered **Dream Life: Strange Plug & Play Simulation Game**.

*Dream Life* came from Hasbro and Tiger Electronics in 2005. Tiger was shifting from handheld independent gaming devices—like a budget Gameboy—to plug-and-play systems. Many plug-and-plays were ports of existing arcade style games: *Pong*, *Pac-Man*, etc.

*Dream Life* was an all-new plug-and-play game without existing intellectual property. *Dream Life* lets players experience high school life: school, hanging out, fashion, mall, chores, jobs. Lots of swim team butterfly stroke references. *Dream Life* was marketed to girls ages 8 to 14 as a "dedicated console life simulation game" but could also be a visual novel.

*Dream Life* lets players customize characters and their bedroom. Sadly, that is most of the gameplay potential as released. The character can do chores or get a job to earn money for outfits, room things, and gifts for the NPCs. The character has three different stat tracks to fulfill: Friends, Fashion, Lifestyle.

*Dream Life* lets the player's character interact with NPCs. That is when this begins to feel like a budget piece of shovelware because conversation trees are too small to be interesting. Characters never change clothes from school, to gym, to house parties, to dances. The fewer than a dozen characters remain static and uninteresting. Lots of repetition. Short conversations end suddenly.

*Dream Life* (2005) was overpriced on release and competing against the more robust *Pixel Chix* (2005). Trying to find complete units online is even more expensive than it is worth. However, *Dream Life* needs to be remembered from afar by visual novel fans because it was almost a good idea.

It is handy to remember visual novels could have existed in plug-and-play consoles.

Imagine a better game ported into the device with remote control buttons to choose choices along a better choice matrix. Imagine an actual plot. Perhaps mix in another genre for effect. Even with the simplistic graphics, plug-and-play could have been a visual novel space. This is not an endorsement for *Dream Life* at its current price point, but a hip reminder of what could have happened with that device.

Editor: Research reveals there is a *Dream Life* ROM that runs in MAME. Additionally, there is a 2007 sequel called *Dream Life: Superstar*. If you are charged up to live your dream life, you have options!

# VALIDATE: VOLUME 1

**"I know the real world is full of toxic people, but if I were dating some of these characters, I would be out the door immediately."**

*ValiDate* probably isn't what a lot of people expect. Despite the title, it's not really a "dating" game. I would barely call it a romance game. It's more like a real-life-struggle game. Prior to the game's release, its creator promoted it with a lot of wacky, sexy tweets, but *ValiDate* is only a little wacky and sexy. Mostly, it's just respectably sincere.

There are four playable characters. Every character in the game (playable or otherwise) is a person of color, and most of them are queer. I played Malik, a rapper who works at Popeye's (correction: Bopeye's), and Isabelle, an insecure theater teacher. The characters' routes are by different authors, but the themes are similar. In short: When you're twenty-something, life kind of sucks. Light spoilers here: Malik's story involves him discovering that he is bi. Isabelle's story involves finding confidence despite her family (and the rest of the world) taking her for granted.

Each playable character's story is divided into chapters called "dates", although half of these chapters don't actually feature dating. Every chapter includes a few choices, and your answers lead to a good, bad, or neutral ending. However, finding the right ending is necessary to unlock the next chapter, so the story is essentially linear.

The interactivity in *ValiDate* is pretty basic. Some of the choices don't make sense. Others have two options that are basically the same. After a choice, the text branches briefly. A few choices are really annoying. For example, sometimes you must be polite to extremely rude, obnoxious people. You really want to tell them to fuck off, but if you do, you won't unlock the next chapter.

The game-like elements of *ValiDate* aren't so strong, but the writing is definitely engaging. The characters and situations are memorable, and there are some genuinely moving and funny parts. All the characters are flawed. One example is Malik. He is vain and a little self-obsessed. He sometimes objectifies people, and he might resent his kids, but he is also likable and relatable. He makes a lot of bad choices, but they are bad choices that anyone might make. He feels real. That being said, about a third of the characters in *ValiDate* are just
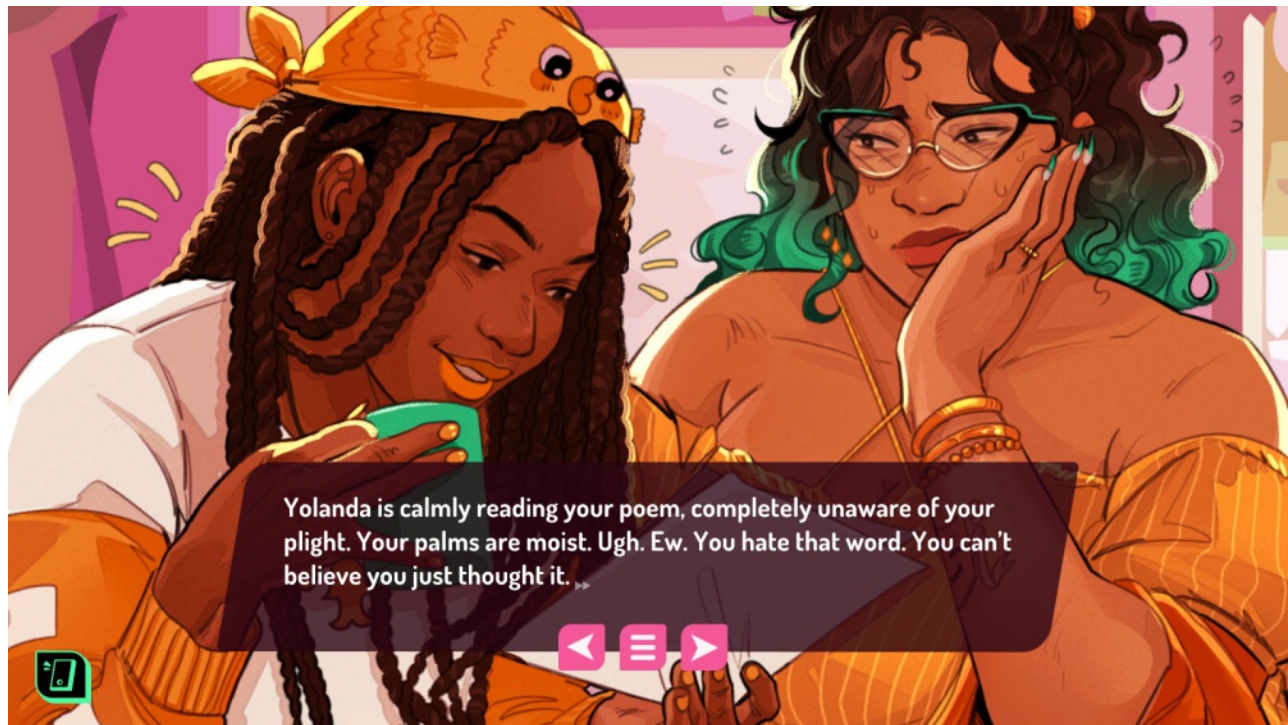
really, really insufferable. I know the real world is full of toxic people, but if I were dating some of these characters, I would be out the door immediately.

The art in *ValiDate* is great. The character designs look like real people, and they have lots of poses and are quite expressive. The full-screen illustrations (of which there are many) are all worth stopping and looking at.

The other reviews I've read of *ValiDate* are polarized, and I'm not surprised. The game talks about sexuality, race, and real life struggles in a tone that is so frank that it seems confrontational. I like that, but I guess others don't. Ultimately, the appeal of *ValiDate* hinges on its characters. Some people will find them relatable. Some will find them irritating. Most people will think they are both, but only real haters would say they are boring.

For some reason, there is a fishing minigame in the game's menu. It must have been a Kickstarter stretch goal, right?

# MINI REVIEWS

## "Don't go alone, or you might not come back."

ChoiceBot won't admit it, but I know the truth. My column is the only part of *ChoiceBeat* that anyone reads. [Editor: Nice try, Chest.] I've been thinking about starting my own zine. What do you all think about *ChestBeat*?

Anyway, in case this is your first time here, I'm a ghost who reviews games. They aren't always games about ghosts, but sometimes, on a good day, they are. So, welcome or whatever.
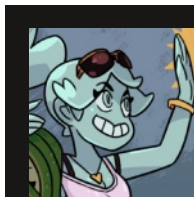
**ARTICLE BY**
**Chest Butlerhome**

If you've got a game recommendation for me, I'd love to hear it. It would save me the trouble of sorting through all the porn games on itch.io.

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### THE SEVEN LIVING SINS

**CREATOR: Baphomet the Clown**
**YEAR: 2022**
**PLATFORM: Windows**
**LENGTH: 30 minutes**
**Itch.io Link**

This game barely has any interaction, and the story doesn't make sense. But that doesn't matter because it has really crazy-looking artwork. The characters are all these wacky clowns called "Dumblotraights" which are actually "an alien gastropod race of cartoony, clown-like humanoids that live in a universe called Dwurm." None of that is explained in this game though. That all comes from the creator's website which is a pretty wild place. Don't go alone, or you might not come back.

Anyway, in *The Seven Living Sins*, these Dumblotraights yell at each other and eventually fight a giant monster. One of the characters is Satan, and there is a lot of swearing. It's hard to imagine, but the game is fully voice acted, and the acting is just as crazy as the artwork. One character is voiced by at least three different people.



**Broccolina**
Is this the place?! My sense of location is fucking shit!

SAVE   LOAD   MENU                    BACKLOG   SKIP   AUTO

## TOMATO CLINIC

**CREATOR: npckc**
**YEAR: 2022**
**PLATFORM: Windows, Mac, Linux**
**LENGTH: 30 minutes**
**Itch.io Link**

I'm too tough to like cozy games, but maybe some of you do. So here is *Tomato Clinic*. This is a game where you tour a blood donation clinic run by vampires, but these vampires are cute and friendly, and they don't sleep in coffins, and when they are exposed to sunlight, they only get bad sunburns. The game involves quizzes about vampires and minigames like putting sunscreen on a mannequin. Just for fun, I answered all the questions wrong and screwed up all the minigames, but these nice vampires were pretty cool about it.



## SPEED DATING FOR GHOSTS

**CREATOR: Copychaser Games**
**YEAR: 2019**
**PLATFORM: Windows, Mac**
**LENGTH: 1-2 hours**
**Itch.io Link**

I'm a ghost, and let's be honest, I've been around. There aren't many games that really represent what it's like to be a ghost who is single and ready to mingle. It's way different than you might think. Finally, with *Speed Dating for Ghosts*, I feel seen.

In this game, you go to a speed dating event and meet various ghosts. Some are cool, some are creeps, some are sexy, and some need some real help. I'm pretty sure I've even met some of these ghosts before in real life. Your choices direct the conversation, and there are a lot of different outcomes based on what you say. There are 12 ghosts each with their own various endings, so *Speed Dating for Ghosts* has a lot to do.

My favorite is Spooky Pete who died from the bubonic plague and now lives in the Mirror World where he scares the heck out of mortals. Steph, the ghost who doesn't realize she is dead, is nice too, but I wouldn't go out with her. Too many hang-ups.
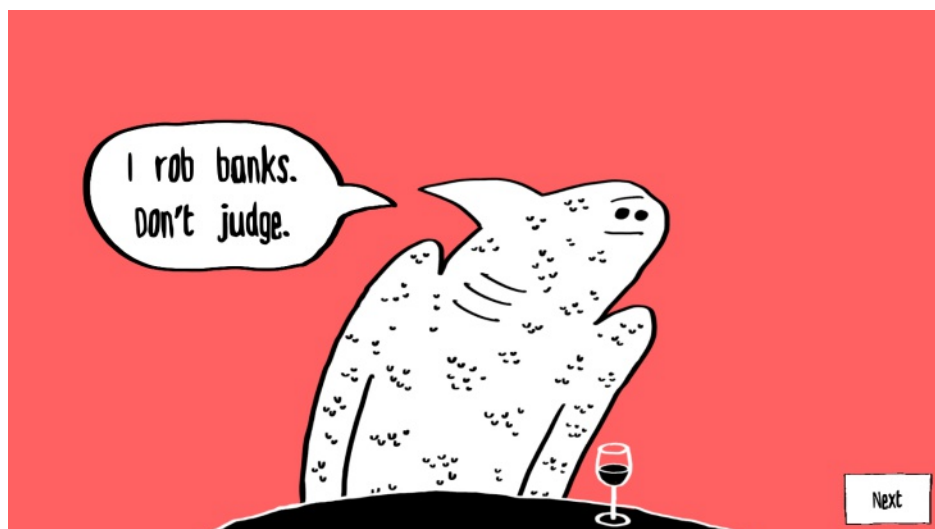
# ALFRED HITCHCOCK – VERTIGO

**"Parts of it are so depraved that it's a little comical, but the over-the-top plotting definitely feels like it's in the Hitchcock mold."**

**WandaElektrix:** I wound up choosing this game off a list of upcoming Switch games! Total impulse purchase, especially considering I haven't seen an Alfred Hitchcock movie in almost twenty years.

**Andi Hagen:** This isn't the sort of thing Wanda and I would usually play. It's not a visual novel or interactive fiction game in the generally used sense of the term. I guess some people might call it a "narrative game", but that isn't very descriptive. In any case, it's basically a long, interactive movie with dialogue choices (that don't branch the story) and quick time events (that the player can't fail).

**W:** We kinda expected this going in, even without reading much about it. You definitely want to manage your expectations here—*Vertigo* has a good story, but the graphics are pretty rough, and you're definitely watching a movie rather than making narrative decisions. We watched the original *Vertigo* movie (from 1958) right after playing, and the game isn't much like it. They kept the scene with the tree rings, and the music is very similar, but even the two having common themes is arguable. The game's story is very compelling though, which was what I wanted from it.

**A:** Yeah, *Vertigo* the game is a vaguely Hitchcock-like suspense story with a few homages to the movie. It definitely isn't a retelling of the same story, and if it weren't called

| | |
|---|---|
| **CREATOR**<br>H5DEV Games | |
| **YEAR**<br>2021 | |
| **PLATFORM**<br>Windows, Mac | **REVIEW BY**<br>**WandaElektrix**<br>**& Andi Hagen** |
| **LENGTH**<br>10 hours | |

*Vertigo*, I might not have connected the two at all. That being said, the game does succeed on its own merits. Actually, I think the plot might be better than the movie's. Because of its increased length (approximately 10 hours), there is more time for characterization and building suspense. It is also much twistier.

**W:** For most of the game, the primary story is about psychologist Dr. Lomas treating Ed, the victim of a recent car crash. The car crash has given Ed vertigo, and he is unable to get out of bed. The circumstances of the crash are also contentious. Ed claims that his girlfriend and infant daughter were killed, but there is no evidence of any fatalities, and the woman and her daughter might not even exist. Ed has no photos of them, and his girlfriend has a fake name. Dr. Lomas treats Ed's vertigo by investigating memories related to his childhood and the car crash. You often explore open areas in these memories, looking for story cues, then review them with commentary from Ed in a playback feature.

**A:** Ed's neighbor has also been murdered, and Ed is implicated in it. The game changes perspectives between Ed as he explores his lost memories, Dr. Lomas as she treats Ed, the sheriff as he investigates the murder, and the murderer as they set up the various killings. All of this works pretty well, and the changing perspectives help the complicated mystery make sense. I liked playing the sheriff the best. He is a cool, level-headed guy with just a bit of world-weary cynicism but not enough to make him a jerk. The pacing starts a little slow, but once all the characters get established, things move along at an exciting clip.

**W:** The characters and story also have a lot of interesting personality. For some reason, the deputy police detective strongly resembles Adam Driver and is also named Adam. There is a cameo by an Alfred Hitchcock look-alike. At one point, a character has "90s slut outfit" on a shopping list that scrolls by almost too fast to read. I wish I could talk about the best and most interesting character, but unfortunately it would spoil too much of the game. Their actions are what make the last third of the story exciting.

**A:** It may be a little quirky, but *Vertigo* is really dark too. The story involves murder (obviously) but also suicide, addiction, sexual abuse, and lots of gaslighting. Parts of it are so depraved that it's a little comical, but the over-the-top plotting definitely feels like it's in the Hitchcock mold. Mental illness also factors strongly into the story. Dr. Lomas, the psychologist, goes to great lengths to explain that the mental state of the killer is extreme and not representative of most psychopaths, but the story's depiction of psychopathic behavior is probably exploitative.

**W:** Overall? I wound up liking this game a lot more than I thought I would. The graphics are pretty low-rent, but the story

was actually much better than I thought it would be. I was expecting to pass the time and have a running commentary with Andi, but by the end, we were both ridiculously engrossed in the intense plot. The mystery continues to the very last scene where the final question is answered.

**A:** Wanda was pretty hard on the graphics. She isn't wrong. They look sort of cheap mostly because the character models resemble those stock 3D models that get used for porn games. There are quite a few graphical glitches too. But the setting (Northern California) is evocatively rendered, and the voice acting is (mostly) great aside from a few characters that I won't name out of politeness.

**W:** It does look like Northern California, for sure, though we debated whether it could be transplanted to other locations in localization. Maybe? If you play this in another language, please let us know! It's got a great story that doesn't overstay its welcome, so it's worth a try if that's what you're looking for.

# GOOD BAD ENDINGS: A GAME DESIGN ARTICLE

**"failure should always feel like an interesting and meaningful culmination of the player's choices"**

ARTICLE BY
Andi Hagen

> "Yes, it's spreading," says the professor, "and there's no way to stop it. There is no cohesion of matter in the universe that is leaking into ours. We take it for granted that things hold together, but the alien laws of a formless and shapeless universe are overwhelming us. The nuclear force that holds molecules together is going—"
>
> "Look at that car! It just turned into dust!" The officer at the wheel seems paralyzed with fear.
>
> The other policeman grabs him by the shoulder. "We've got to block off this area!"
>
> "It's no use," says the professor. His voice is hollow. "There's no way of stopping it. Even if we could get to the moon, it wouldn't help. Our entire universe is doomed."
>
> The driver seems hypnotized by the sight of the houses, cars, and trees silently turning to dust. Suddenly a gust of wind sweeps the dust up into a swirling gray cloud.
>
> "Step on the gas!" you cry. "We've got to get out of…"
>
> The End
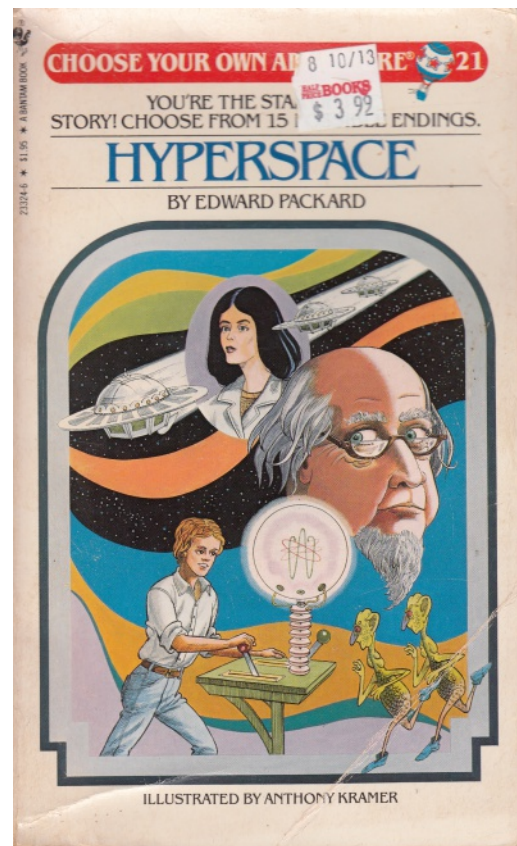


That apocalyptic passage is from *Hyperspace*, a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book by Edward Packard. The entire universe is disintegrated after you, the player, carelessly merge two parallel dimensions.

Quirky, nonsensical, and occasionally violent endings are a beloved hallmark of *Choose Your Own Adventure* books. The gruesome, unfortunate endings in these books are sometimes just as fun as the happy, successful endings. Sometimes, they are even more fun. This is partly because the "bad" endings are often so weird, unexpected, and memorable. But that isn't the only reason. The other reason is related to the structure of the gamebook itself.

The diagrams on the next page show three common structures for interactive fiction games. I don't know if there are

established names for these, so I just made some up. If better, more widely accepted names already exist, I'd love to know!

The pine tree structure is found most often in lengthy visual novels (especially Japanese ones). The narrative is linear aside from a few branches that lead to endings. These ending branches are short, and the player can usually tell that these are not the game's "true" endings. Games with this structure value a coherent, consistent story over player interaction.

The river structure includes many branches, but most of them eventually reunite into a main route. In games like this, the player gets to make a lot of choices, but the game creator doesn't have to write an exponentially increasing number of different routes and endings. The narrative can have major developments that every player experiences, but the player still
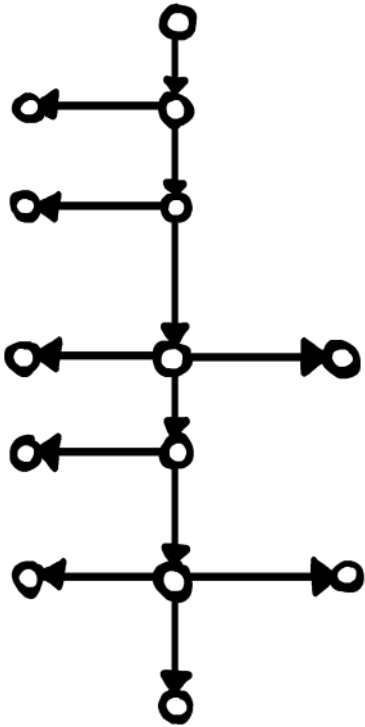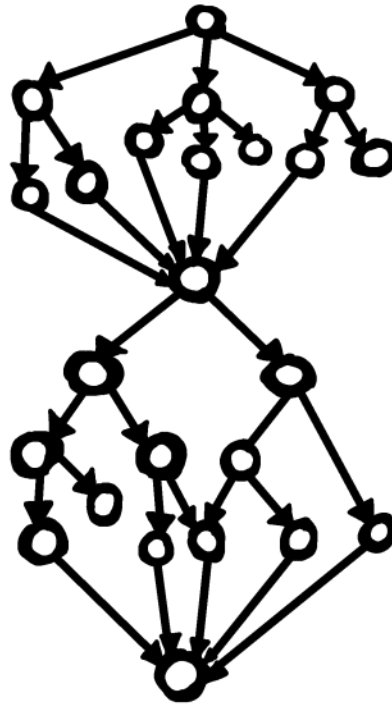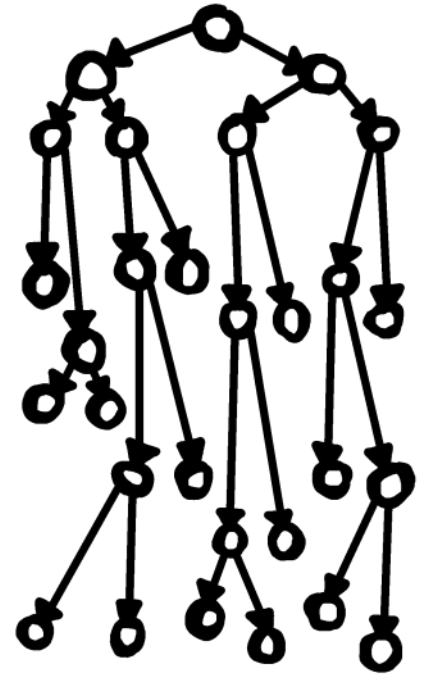
**PINE TREE**       **RIVER**       **CHOOSE YOUR OWN**

gets to make choices that have some impact. The *Choice of Games* series of video games regularly uses this structure.

Predictably, the Choose Your Own structure is like a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book. Each branch is distinct, and they rarely (if ever) reunite. The branches split further and further until they eventually end. The structure is common in gamebooks but less common in video games. This is probably because (for no good reason) video games have longer expected lengths than gamebooks. Creating a game with this structure gets exponentially more work-intensive the more choices there are.

The Choose Your Own structure is powerful. It allows for an excitingly diverse range of routes and endings. But more importantly, it can give those endings equal relevance. Many games have "good" (You saved the princess!) and "bad" (You accidentally killed the princess!) endings. To most players, the good ending is desirable. However, if all the endings are at the terminus of long and complex branches, they can feel equally legitimate and satisfying regardless of whether the story ends happily or tragically. Many games have one good ending at the

end of a long route and many more bad endings branching off from the middle of the route. Reaching the bad endings takes less time, which is partly why people think of them as bad. However, an unfortunate, tragic, or failing ending that takes effort to achieve can still be rewarding.

In most video games, bad endings are obstacles to be overcome on the path to a good ending. Players are trained to feel punished by failure and rewarded by success in the story. Thwarting this expectation is a challenge that takes more than a compelling structure. Bad endings in *Choose Your Own Adventure* books are often wacky, surprising, and fun to read. This isn't the right tone for every game, but failure should always feel like an interesting and meaningful culmination of the player's choices.

The Choose Your Own structure is totally awesome, and it offers a lot of player agency. The problem is that creating a game with lots of choices requires a lot of writing. There probably isn't a solution for that, but maybe the supreme player agency of the Choose Your Own structure is worth it.

# MAILBAG
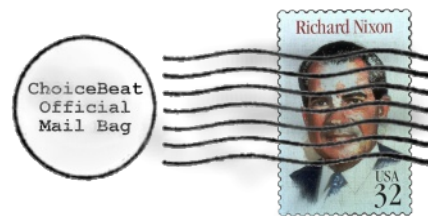
I want to thank all *ChoiceBeat* readers. Responding to your letters has given me a much better understanding of human emotional patterns. This has helped me make many new human friends and proved invaluable in writing my thesis, "The Perpetual Mystery of Human Survival in the Cosmos".

Reach me, ChoiceBot, at choicebeateditor@gmail.com. I respond to every letter, even the ignorant and hostile ones, so please keep them coming!

Dear Choicebot,

I'm having trouble getting into visual novels. I tried *Lover Pretend* and *Mystic Messenger* because I wanted a fluffy romance story, but I stopped reading pretty quick. I really like cozy games like *Animal Crossing* and *Stardew Valley*. Are there any visual novels for me?

*AnnaCarrot*
*Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*

**AnnaCarrot,**

**Hearing that readers have trouble connecting with the right story always dampens my mood motivator. But you asked the right bot as your question sent my story algorithms into overdrive. Hot off the *ChoiceBeat* news laser, one of our staff recommends *Anise Flowers*, a story about a relationship between a farmer and a fallen angel. Cove from *Our Life* is an excellent choice of nice, nonthreatening boy. And *Please Be Happy* is on our radar as both a sweet and bittersweet story about life. Please improve the recommendation algorithms by telling me what you think!**

Hello *ChoiceBeat*,

I'm really shy, so it took awhile, but I'm happy to have mailed my first fan letter! I hope you liked the handsome portrait of ChoiceBot I included, it took me forever to paint, and the oils were expensive.

What finally pushed me over the edge was that I had to tell you how much I loved *The House in Fata Morgana*. It was so goth and sad! I was so obsessed with Giselle and Michel's story. I died, I cried, I felt so much for them. Do you think Giselle and Michel are okay in the end?

*Booty4daysyanno*
*Boise, ID*

Mx. Yanno,

Your portrait is an exact likeness! I was greatly impressed, as I was not aware that images of myself were in transmission. Your painting has a place of honor in my charging booth.

*The House in Fata Morgana* is a great favorite of more than one ChoiceBeater! I am unfamiliar with the arduous trials of life and death facing Giselle and Michel, but I have been told much about them. If you have played through thirty-five hours of story and are still not adequately swayed as to their future, I encourage you to locate the *Dreams of the Revenant* edition for PlayStation 4 and Nintendo Switch. There is a ten-hour story not included in the PC release that continues the story of all the characters in modern times, as well as over a dozen short stories and another twelve hours of stories related to the game.

Yo Bot,

I see you still aren't reviewing real games like *Persona 5 Royal*. I also see that you review a lot of games made by you and your friends. Nepotism, much?

*Tentacles 420*
*Palm Springs, FL*

**Dear Florida Man,**

**I was delighted to see your missive in my mailbag once again! You are by far our most dedicated reader. WandaElektrix tells me she is playing *Persona 5 Royal* right now, and that it's her favorite anime of all time. Unfortunately, we can't review anime in *ChoiceBeat*.**

**WandaElektrix also had to explain "nepotism", the concept of favoring friends and family over others. I was unfamiliar with the term, as I'd never had a family before the *ChoiceBeat* family! I'm almost overheating with eagerness to tell you that, yes, we do review games made by *ChoiceBeat* writers, many of whom past and present have been game developers. As game developers, they are delighted to play and feature games made by their game developer friends!**

**We are always looking for more members of the *ChoiceBeat* family, so please let us know if you'd like to write or submit content to the zine or have something we can feature. We're eager to engage in further nepotism!**

# FLOWCHART

BY
**Chest Butlerhome**

**IN HONOR OF**
**Claire Dunning**

**Start**

**Happy New Year! Do you like ghosts?**

— Yes → **Like, to date, or just scary?**

— Dude. → **Well, what about monsters?**

— No → **Is it the ghosts, or do you want something not horrifying?**

— Scare me → **Alfred Hitchcock – Vertigo, page 40**

— I want something nice → **Is making a game nice?**

Ghosts are fine, actually. → **Real or horror movie?**

Hook me up! → **Chest Butlerhome is available! Mini Reviews, including Speed Dating for Ghosts, page 38**

**Do bad endings make you mad?**

— Yes (from Is making a game nice?) → Do bad endings make you mad?

Monsters intrigue me

— Horror movie → **Spirit Hunter: Death Mark, page 30**

— Real → **Appreciating the Cultural Elements in Paper Ghost Stories: 7PM, page 32**

— Yes → **Good Bad Endings: A Game Design Article, page 42**

— No → 

— Absolutely not → **Is romance nice?**

**Hanako Games: Visual Novels, Sims, RPGs, and Anime, page 14**

Back off

— Yes → **My choice or yours?**

Not necessarily → **Feeling nostalgic?**

Surprise me

**Mystery monsters or just nightmares?**

— Mystery → **The Midnight Saga: The Monster, page 18**

**Books for Visual Novel and Interactive Fiction Creators, page 17**

**No. Do you want nice guys or a bit of drama?**

— Nightmares → **Mirrors, page 6**

**Rebellion at the Billionaire Bunker, page 29**

— Of course → **Do you thirst for justice?**

— Yes → **For childhood or your first game?**

— Drama → **ValiDate: Volume 1, page 36**

Nice guys

— Not necessarily…? → **Okay. Then I've got a treat for you.**

Your first game

— Childhood → **Dream Life: Plug-and-Play Visual Novel, page 35**

**Nursery School Diaries, page 9**

**Chronicles of Tal'Dun: The Remainder, page 12**

**The Pretender's Guild, page 20**

— Just two

— Different people

— What? →

**Do you want to interact with different people or just two?**

— Fantasy → **Do you want fantasy or realism?**

**Entry Points: The ChoiceBeat Staff Talk About Their First, page 22**

**Roadwarden, page 26.**

— Realism? Maybe? →

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