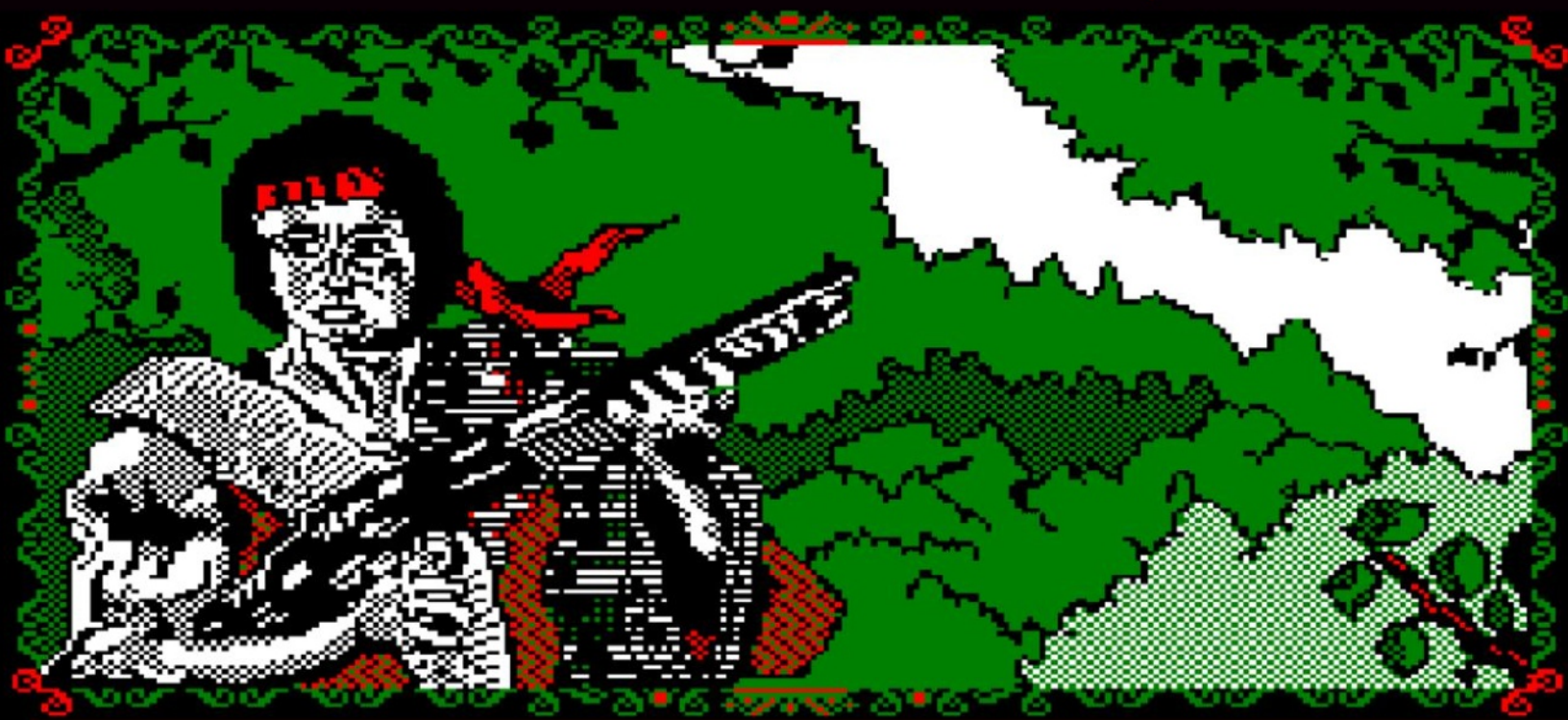




# CHOICE BEAT

THE VISUAL NOVEL AND  
INTERACTIVE FICTION ZINE

iss. 7, mar. 23



# FROM THE DESK OF CHOICEBOT



Greetings Choice Fanatics,

Now that *The Last of Us* is also a TV show, there has been a lot of talk about video games as a storytelling medium. *ChoiceBeat* readers are probably rolling their optical sensors about that. Obviously, games have been a storytelling medium forever,

or at least since all those Infocom text adventures in the '80s. (Note: If you don't know what I'm talking about, see *GET LAMP: The Text Adventure Documentary* in this very issue.)

People who critically compare games to other forms of art are almost always full of crap. However, a rare few of them touch upon a valid point. Video games are not a very mature storytelling medium. In this case, I'm defining maturity in a literal way. Most games are made to appeal to teenage audiences. I'm not diminishing their impact. *Our Life* (see *ChoiceBeat* issue 2), *Raptor Boyfriend* (*ChoiceBeat* issue 1), and *Arcade Spirits* (*ChoiceBeat* issue 3) made me weep the robot equivalent of human tears with their heart-wrenching stories. But they are about children, teenagers, and twenty-somethings. Where are the games for old people? What is the game equivalent of *The Pillars of the Earth*? (Note from ChoiceBot's future self: There actually is a video game adaptation of *The Pillars of the Earth*! Maybe game storytelling is more mature than I thought. It has anime art too! Awesome!)

The reason that so many games are for young people is too complex for this editorial, but one major factor is financial. Games need to sell, and there are lots of young people buying and playing games. Additionally, the generation of people who grew up totally immersed in video games is just now turning middle-aged, and maybe the culture around games hasn't quite caught up with them yet.

I'm generalizing broadly and unfairly, but that's my privilege as editor. Forgive me. There are lots of games targeted at adults. Some of them are even popular. But amid all the fantasy, sci-fi, and horror, there is a lack of real stories about adult life. How many movies, TV shows, and books are there about going to work, raising a family, or struggling to make ends meet? Quite a few. How many games? Much fewer. Games about adult responsibilities don't necessarily represent some sort of high water mark for storytelling, but the lack of variety in game settings and themes might indicate that video games still have some growing to do.

## SUBSCRIBE

*ChoiceBeat* is released quarterly, and the next issue comes out June 26, 2023. Here are some great ways to make sure that you don't accidentally miss it!

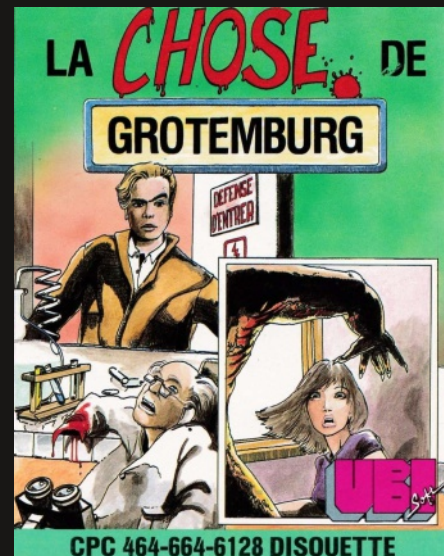
Send an email to [choicebeateditor@gmail.com](mailto:choicebeateditor@gmail.com) with "subscribe" in the subject. That will get you on the *ChoiceBeat* mailing list from which you can never escape. Just kidding. But you will get the newest issue of *ChoiceBeat* delivered straight to your inbox.

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

Bookmark the *ChoiceBeat* website [choicebeat.wordpress.com](http://choicebeat.wordpress.com).

## ON THE COVER

The cover of this issue features art from *La Chose de Grotemburg*. Read about this violent, absurd game from the not-yet-famous Ubisoft on page 7.



Of course, some of you will disagree. In fact, I'm sure some of *ChoiceBeat*'s writers probably disagree. I respect that, but I think we can all agree that a greater variety of stories for a greater variety of people is in every gamer's best interest.

Enjoy the zine!

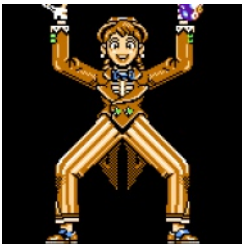
Yours truly,

# ChoiceBot

# WRITERS



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*.



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](http://www.andihagen.com)  
Twitter: [@WillyElektrix](https://twitter.com/WillyElektrix)



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](http://www.peculiarmormyrid.com)

Itch.io: [MindApe.itch.io](https://itch.io/mindapecryptid)



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



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.

## OTHER STAFF

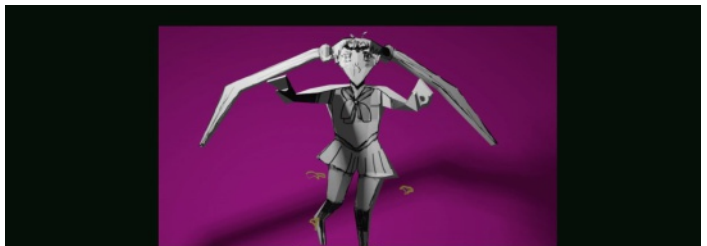
Editor: ChoiceBot  
Co-Editor: WandaElektrix  
Copyeditor: Aletheia Knights  
Spokesperson: Andi Hagen



This issue of *ChoiceBeat* also features a special guest: Geoffrey Golden, creator of [Adventure Snack](http://adventure-snack.com), a newsletter of snack-sized interactive stories! Check out page 22 to relive his ego-crushing childhood with text adventures.

## CONTACT US

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



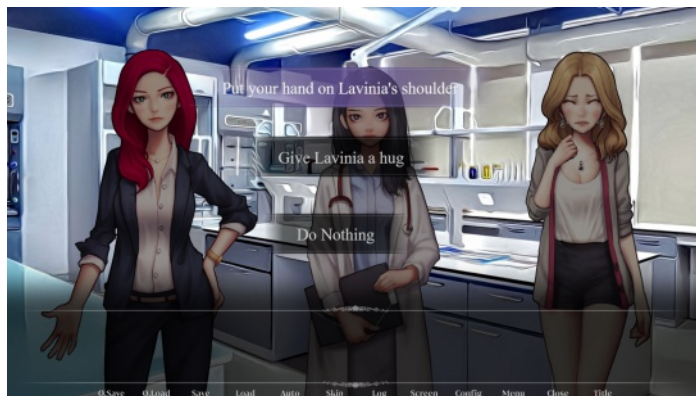
Wow! (^)♥ Good choice! What a great opportunity to learn how to take care of yourself ♥

Raise a little banana of your own in *8888 bone dropping beats to get boogie with it* on page 18.

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On page 28, *Detective Rosie Morgan*, a mystery visual novel with absolutely no men in it.



# READER SURVEY RESULTS

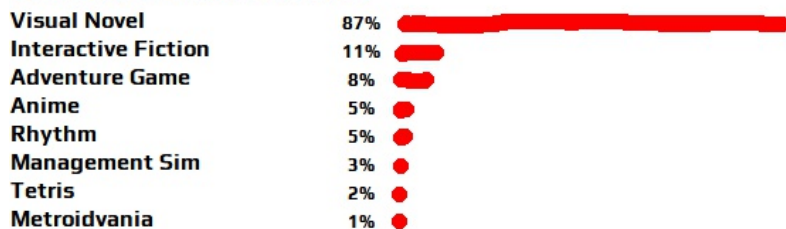
ChoiceBot: The results for the *ChoiceBeat* reader survey are in! Thanks to all who completed the survey, and thanks to Chest Butlerhome for writing the questions and putting it all together. The thousands of responses we received totally

exceeded our expectations. Actually, I'm not even sure how we got thousands of responses since *ChoiceBeat* doesn't even have thousands of readers. Uh, Chest, what's going on here?

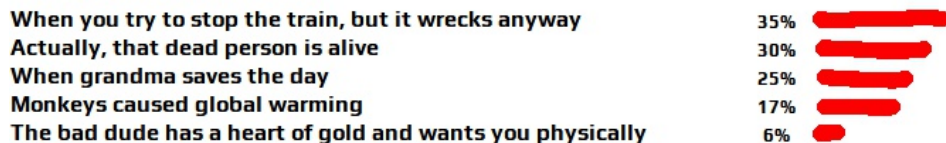
## CHOICEBEAT READER DEMOGRAPHICS



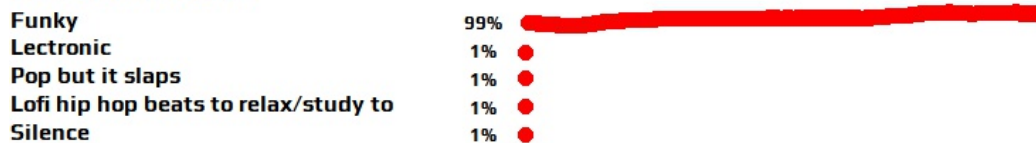
## FAVORITE GAME GENRES



## FAVORITE PLOT TWIST



## FAVORITE MUSIC



## SHOULD WE FIRE CHEST BUTLERHOME?



# NEWS



## PARANORMASIGHT

*PARANORMASIGHT: The Seven Mysteries of Honjo*, a paranormal investigation game published by Square Enix, was released on March 8th for Windows and Switch. We often joke at *ChoiceBeat* that there are only two genres of visual novels: romance and horror. If that's true, then there is only one subgenre of adventure game, and that's paranormal investigation. Games about paranormal investigation are a dime a dozen (as you capitalist humans might say), but *PARANORMASIGHT* looks slick, and its plot involving curses and urban legends sounds evocatively eerie.



## PRIVATE EYE DOL

*Private Eye Dol*, a Japanese PC Engine adventure game, was recently translated into English for the first time by Supper. Originally released in 1995, this game follows a teen actress turned detective and her AI partner as they solve some sort of crime. Incoming: outrageously '90s-looking anime art.

Note: AI is considered an offensive, outmoded term. I am using it here for historical reasons although "digital intelligence" is the preferred contemporary terminology. Sincerely, ChoiceBot, your robotic editor.



ARTICLE BY  
ChoiceBot

## NARRASCOPE CONFERENCE

Narrascope, a conference for creators and players of interactive fiction and narrative games, is happening June 9-11 online and in-person in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Talks include "Take That! The Multicultural Origins of the *Ace Attorney* Series", "Narrative-Based Games for Sexual Health", and "You Should Be Larping More (If You Want To Exercise Your Interactive Narrative Muscles)".

[NARRSCOPE WEBSITE](#)



## RED MOON LOST DAYS

Someone made a new visual novel for Sega Saturn! *Red Moon Lost Days* by Neuromage Studio is set during a future war between China and the U.S. You are a mecha pilot (of course), and you must navigate the war-torn Middle East to find your missing friend. The game must be played with a Sega Saturn emulator.

[REDMOON LOST DAYS ON ITCH.IO](#)

## WHAT'S UP WITH ALL THIS ANIME?

Why is the news page full of anime stuff this month? I have no clue. That's just how it worked out. But the rest of the zine certainly isn't so don't be scared and keep reading!

# La Chose de Grotemburg (The Thing of Grotemburg)

"Exploring graffiti-covered alleys and wildlife-infested outskirts, bribing townsfolk who look like French celebrities with dead pigeons or Camembert cheese, and dodging cartoonish deaths at every corner"

[ChoiceBot: This is a French-language game that has never been translated into English. It really shines my diodes to include a cool article like this in *ChoiceBeat*.]

Between 1984 and 1990, while North America played on Commodore 64s and Japan was entering the high era of PC-88 idiosyncrasies, Europe had its own isolated ecosystem of home computing weirdness. Due to its clever design, low cost, and all-in-one simplicity, the Amstrad CPC became the dominant force in the home gaming market in France, Germany, and Spain. During that pioneering era, hundreds of cult text and graphic adventure games were developed, many of which were unique to their respective language or country.

From that teeming experimental sludge, *La Chose de Grotemburg* crawled out to the surface in one of Ubisoft's

## CREATOR

Ubisoft  
(Olivier Moraze,  
Nicholas Gohin,  
Didier Quentin,  
Philippe Montebault,  
Samuel Morillon,  
Xavier Talgorn)



## YEAR

1987

REVIEW BY  
MindApe

## PLATFORM

Amstrad CPC

## LENGTH

1-3 hours

earliest, French-only offerings. *Grotemburg* is a product of pure black humor. It's a game that feels like a three-way stand-off between horror, ridiculousness, and a primordial indifference to either.

In the village of Sadiphinrol, people are being casually murdered... including, alas!, your dear Germaine, whose



Translation: "The Garden - PULL THE CAT'S TAIL"



Translation: "Ahh! ... Germaine! ... (and my dinner!?)"

dismembered corpse, you mention offhandedly, spoils your dinner. Exploring graffiti-covered alleys and wildlife-infested outskirts, bribing townsfolk who look like French celebrities with dead pigeons or Camembert cheese, and dodging cartoonish deaths at every corner, you seek to unravel the mystery of the town's rapidly swelling mortality rate. As you progress, you discover that in order to test out his TRANSTEMPORIS time machine, a mad scientist by the name of Albert Onestone sent eight creatures with human brains across time. But one has returned... seeking revenge!

This parser-based graphic text adventure was conceived by a gang of young weirdos in the French countryside in their spare time. Yet somehow it has a stark cold-blooded cunning that seemed to emerge from their group dynamic. The game pulsates with a deadpan comic irony towards both the grim horrors on screen and the player's choices, while never missing an opportunity to make fun of our visceral reactions before we've even had them.

The graphics are appropriately shocking, bright, and violently detailed (especially in the disk version). They never disappoint, varying wildly from the completely goofy caricature (a knockoff Rambo) to grisly (a dismembered hand in a soup bowl) to mysteriously atmospheric (skeletons in a dank sewer). Of note also is the little window on the bottom right that acts as a kind of graphical commentary to your interactions—becoming a robot, a goofy face, a skull, or any number of visual puns—sometimes providing clues but mostly just for yuks and death. (But unlike the melancholy seriousness of the iconic reaper in *Shadowgate*, here, for no reason, the skull is wearing a nightcap.)

This game remains sniggeringly impressive for its beat-perfect comic timing, lunatic attitude, forthright ghastliness, and commitment to a good time. While it's still ultimately difficult in the ways a parser game can be—hyper-particular vocabulary, unintuitive puzzles, arbitrary (but always funny) deaths, or unguessable, irreversible mistakes—it nevertheless pays you back in a different way by giving you lots of snarky “chicken fat” to chew on in lieu of a solution.

For example, instead of politely or bluntly declining your word choices, the game will actively mock you. Picking the wrong command, you might get:

“Brax bloff zlwirk???”  
 “You the garbage collector?”  
 “Don't talk with your mouth full!”  
 Etc.

*Grotteburg* is also incredibly French, riddled with slang and references. You bribe a wino with some Camembert cheese who points you to a knock-off caricature of the French singer Serge Gainsbourg. When you crack into an abandoned mansion, your success is crowned with the phrase, “Ça va, Patrick!” referencing a popular carbonated water commercial. Lots of local flavor in between corpses.

And this game hemorrhages gags. The writers never let a single opportunity go to waste with almost every line being either a set-up or a (usually bloodthirsty) punchline, in what the French reviewer Galamoth at *CPC Power* referred to as a “glauco-comic atmosphere”. Upon encountering a skeleton in a sewer: “Someone who won at hide-and-seek.” Finding two skulls mounted before a door: “Look! It's Louis XVI and



Marie-Antoinette.” Or when you come across a severed hand holding a bouquet: “Oh what lovely flowers!”

In some cases, they seem to purposefully inflate the map to complement jokes that seem entirely reliant on the fact that you are playing a game. Walking through town, you need to go through three absolutely identical screens with perfectly paced commentary:

“Look, graffiti.”  
“...More graffiti.”  
“...Even more graffiti. What can I say? It’s disgusting.”

Or again when exploring a road outside of town, three identical screens:

“All roads...  
“...Lead...  
“...Somewhere.”

This makes even banal transitional moments fun for their own sake.

And naturally the only way to actually piece together the obscure clues in the game is to die horribly and interpret what you did wrong. Oh, you tried to jump from the window onto the mattress, but bounced back into the wall and cracked your skull? Obviously you should have removed the SPRINGS from the MATTRESS... and this is also where some French reviewers have commented on the hyper-particular pickiness of some of the vocabulary. You need to SEARCH a BUSH in order to reveal a CAT with a MOUSE, and you need to PULL CAT’S TAIL so it drops the mouse which you later need to feed to an OWL in order to etc.

Although the non-existent place name “Grotemburg” was only tacked on by the creators at the last minute to avoid copyright infringement on John Carpenter’s *The Thing*, I can’t help but feel it captures the mood of the game perfectly: a portmanteau of “grotesque” with the generic Euro-suffix “burg”, evoking something in between a fancy cheese and a gargoyle. You can feel how exhilarating it must have been to make—no doubt hitting on many of the most iconic moments through sheer chance—with the kind of eccentric ingenuity that only comes from the primordial desire that emerges among certain groups of weirdos to strangle each other with laughter.



Translation: "IN THE DINING ROOM - Oh what lovely flowers!"



Translation: "The Thing of Grotemburg"

# THE HERO'S JOURNEY

**"Players interested in strong moral choices will enjoy this."**

The title and premise of *The Hero's Journey*—that the main character, Seren, is a hero who saved a fantasy kingdom, leaning into the Campbellian hero's journey—wasn't an immediate draw for me. The first scene is an epic battle between hero and villain, which fits with the story archetype, except the end of the fight doesn't quite follow the mythological script.

Seren loses her memory, and the game begins to take dark and unusual turns as she traces her steps backward and explores how she became the hero.

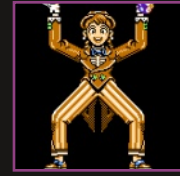
I was impressed with how the story used the hero's journey archetype, though explaining further would spoil it. I wasn't looking for another retelling of the myth, and this was certainly not that. Story structure always interests me the most when I read anything, and I found it the most satisfying part of the game. The overarching plot is epic sword-and-sorcery fantasy, and the characters embark on a heroic journey as Seren tries to parse her previous life. Along the way, there are conflicts with dark sorcerers, a war cult, and the remains of the villain's gang, along with more mundane events with far-reaching consequences.

**CREATOR**  
maneki-mushi

**YEAR**  
2022

**PLATFORM**  
Windows, Mac

**LENGTH**  
8 hours

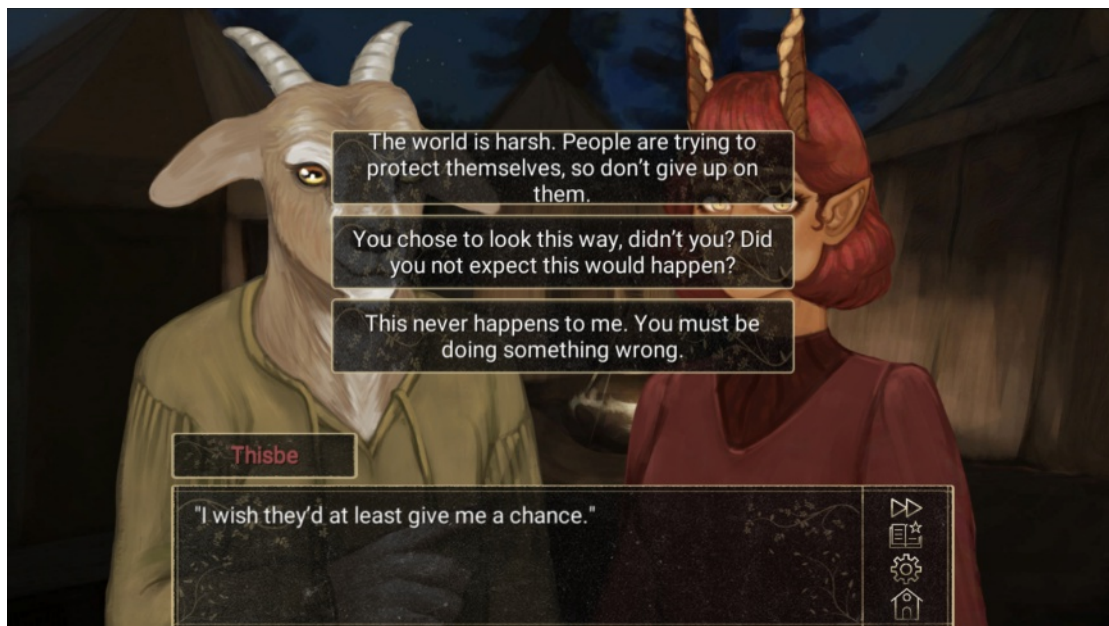


**REVIEW BY**  
WandaElektrix

The story has four chapters with many choices and significant events and one major story branch in chapter three. There are four relationships the player can pursue, including Seren's warrior fiancée Aerona, her best friend Rhain, a young man named Emrys they meet on the journey, and a spoiler character. There is one ending where you can romance more than one person, and an ending where you don't have to romance anyone. There is a minimal stat system meant to give the game replayability (you gain stats that allow you to pass a handful of checks after you beat the game once), and the choices you make during major events affect the narrative at the end of the game and outcomes for major characters.

Players interested in strong moral choices will enjoy this. It offers you different ways to punish or not punish folks, decisions as to whether folks have even committed a crime,





choices about whether to tell the truth or lie, and even life-and-death choices. Only a few choices will affect the overarching plot (one moral choice in particular and how you interact with your four main companions), but other choices play out in small ways in character interactions and how dramatic scenes conclude.

The game has a unique, painted art style, looking traditionally drawn for both characters and backgrounds. Character expressions have subtle shifts as they hold conversations, and there are a handful of CGs to collect in a gallery, adding to replayability.

There is also a NSFW expansion that adds scenes for three of the love interests. This kind of content is fairly scarce, and I'm generally a harsh critic. But I found the sex scenes in this game to be delightful—suited to the characters, loving, and quite well-written without being overbearing. The add-on is

very much worth it if you're on the fence, and one of the things I enjoyed most about the game.

The game was longer than I expected (~8 hours for my first playthrough), each chapter lasted 2-5 hours. The story branch makes the second playthrough irresistible once you finish your first, and the game allows you to select a later chapter and make previous choices without having to fast-forward the story. There is no rewind feature or way to view previous dialogue, but there are a generous number of save slots if you'd like to retry a scene or choice.

The story gave me a lot to think about, and I thoroughly enjoyed considering the possible outcomes of the various choices, not all of which were "heroic." If you're at all into fantasy, I highly recommend it. I'm also very much looking forward to the writer's new game, *Saint Ceri*.

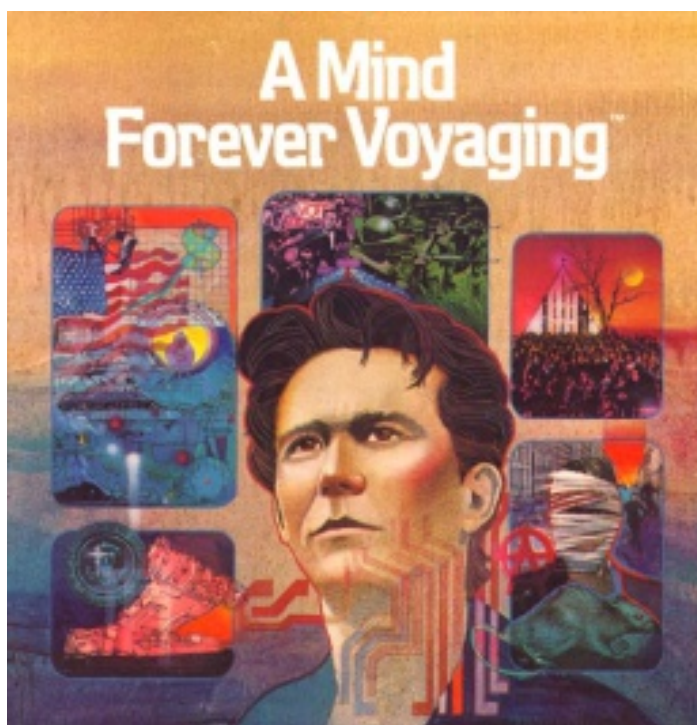


# GET LAMP: THE INTERACTIVE FICTION DOCUMENTARY

"But for those with a foot in the interactive fiction world [...], these videos certainly go deep."

Approaching *GET LAMP* takes some thought. Ostensibly, *GET LAMP* is a documentary about text adventure games. It was released on DVD in 2010, and now you can download it from the Internet Archive. Except it isn't really just a documentary. It's actually two documentaries: *Infocom: The Documentary* and *GET LAMP: The Text Adventure Documentary*. It's also a massive collection of 60+ interviews with various interactive fiction authors and critics. There is a lot to learn here. My advice is to start with the two documentaries, remember anyone who said anything interesting, and then look up their interview.

*GET LAMP* is mostly for interactive fiction fanatics. If you don't know about Infocom (the acclaimed developer of *Zork* and lots of interactive fiction games in the 1980s) this documentary doesn't really tell you about them. But for those with a foot in the interactive fiction world (particularly parser-based interactive fiction), these videos certainly go deep. Major game designers from Infocom are interviewed along with Warren Robinett (creator of *Adventure* on Atari 2600),



*A Mind Forever Voyaging* (1985), a highly original game that frequently gets mentioned in those pointless "Are games art?" debates.



ARTICLE BY  
Andi Hagen

Don Woods (contributor to *Colossal Cave Adventure*), and John Romero (co-creator of *Doom*). I'm not really sure why John Romero is in this documentary... but why not?

While watching *GET LAMP*, here are some things of interest that I learned:

- The early Infocom games were released in really crazy packages. *Starcross* (1982) came in a flying saucer-shaped box. *Suspended: A Cryogenic Nightmare* (1983) had a plastic death mask emerging from the cover. Cool!
- Steve Meretzky created *A Mind Forever Voyaging* (1985) because he hated Ronald Reagan.
- *Plundered Hearts* (1987) by Amy Briggs was an early romance game made to appeal to both men and women.
- Douglas Adams, author of the novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, was a fan of Infocom and approached the company about creating an interactive fiction game based on his work. He eventually co-created the game with Steve Meretzky.
- And here is the most awesome thing I learned: In the 1930s, Dennis Wheatley and J. G. Links wrote a series of fictional "crime dossiers". These were books full of documents, photos, maps, and diagrams describing fictional crimes. The reader was meant to pore over these dossiers, searching for clues to unravel the case for themselves. They are like a way cooler version of *Two-Minute Mysteries*.

[GET LAMP ON THE INTERNET ARCHIVE](#)

## WANT MORE INFOCOM?

Check out *Down From the Top of Its Game: The Story of Infocom, Inc.* This highly readable, fifty-page essay from 2001 describes the rise and fall of Infocom.

[DOWN FROM THE TOP OF ITS GAME  
ON THE INTERNET ARCHIVE](#)

# BACK TO THE START: REVISITING SAM BARLOW'S AISLE

"There was a time when games allowed you to touch, taste, smell, look, and/or attempt to talk to nearly every object on the screen."

I've been thinking about verbs lately.

In the game design sense of the word, a verb is used to mean a specific action available to a player. Think *run*, *jump*, *punch*, *shoot*, or the actions assigned to the face buttons on a controller. These are the words that determine the ways in which a player can interact with the game world. And sure, sometimes you can *roll dodge*, or *wall jump*, or *press A to interact*, but typically these verbs are fairly limited. There are only so many ways in which a player is allowed to play.

And it wasn't always this way. There was a time when games allowed you to *touch*, *taste*, *smell*, *look*, and/or attempt to *talk* to nearly every object on the screen. There was even a time when games allowed you to enter custom verbs and do almost anything you wanted. Enter *Aisle*, by Sam Barlow of *Her Story* and *IMMORTALITY* fame



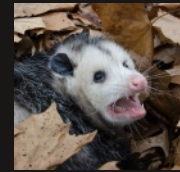
**AISLE**  
by Sam Barlow

**CREATOR**  
Sam Barlow

**YEAR**  
1999

**PLATFORM**  
Browser

**LENGTH**  
30 seconds  
or a lifetime



**REVIEW BY**  
James Lindley

*Aisle* is an interactive fiction classic from way back in 1999. It's a game that, on first play, takes all of thirty seconds. You're presented with a scene—a man standing in the aisle of a grocery store—and are prompted to enter some type of command. Some type of verb, that is. And that's it. You enter a command, the scene reacts, and then resets. It's a game about one move, one command, but with a hidden depth and an unfolding story that's only glimpsed on multiple playthroughs.

You could almost call it a literary roguelike, although I'm not sure anyone used that term in 1999. The repetition is a necessary part of the experience, and in the context of the story, this feels honest and intentional. Without revealing too much, the story is about rumination. About living something again and again. About getting stuck in the past. And in that same way, I've been stuck on *Aisle*.

I think it does something that most modern games do not. There's a sense of "hmm, I wonder if I can do this?" that isn't present when you're slumped on the couch and pressing A to interact. I felt the same way about my recent experience with the limited text-parsing in *Roadwarden*. There's a magic to these moments, a sense that if you pick just the right word or just the right phrase, then the game will unlock, and the story will unfold in a new way. And I think this feels broader and more open than modern "open-world" design. *Aisle* is a game entirely about this moment—about the freedom that text-parsing can offer and a counterpoint to modern gaming.

*Aisle* is just one moment, but in that moment, the possibilities feel almost endless.

I highly recommend it. It's available for free on the [Interactive Fiction Database](#).

# THE FLOATING CITY

**"[The Floating City] is not only better researched and more on-message than *Waterworld*, but contains 100% fewer scenes of Costner drinking his own filtered urine."**

"The future: the polar ice caps have melted, covering the earth with water. Those who survived have adapted to a new world."

That's the opening narration to *Waterworld*, the 1995 Kevin Costner action vehicle that, at the time of its release, cost more than any other film ever made, and is remembered today, when it's remembered at all, as a monumental flop. But those same two sentences serve just as well to describe the basic premise of *The Floating City*, a sprightly little interactive cli-fi by Felicity Banks—which is not only better researched and more on-message than *Waterworld*, but contains 100% fewer scenes of Costner drinking his own filtered urine.

Banks obviously takes the issue of man-made climate change seriously, and living on the planet in a sustainable and harmonious way is a significant theme in the game, but it should be emphasized that this is a story, not a polemic. How we as humans impact, and are impacted by, our environment will always be a fitting subject for speculative fiction; and whether it's farfetched or downright prophetic, I think this bleak—yet strangely hopeful—world that could be ours is one worth visiting.

*The Floating City* is set a little over a century into the future. Some humans—so-called Drylanders—have gathered on what was once higher ground and burrowed into the earth to escape the sun's cruel intensity. Some fiercely independent souls eke out a living in half-submerged skyscrapers. You're one of the fortunate ones—through some combination of foresight and good fortune, your ancestors gained a spot in Kota Perahu, one of the basically sustainable cities constructed of floating glass spheres that keep civilization alive upon the world's oceans. You're almost an adult, and in a few months you'll be expected to choose a career. Your parents expect you to take over the family's shark farm. You're not sure that's really what you want—but for now, as you go about your daily chores on the farm, you're in a perfect position to notice when the sharks' behavior takes a bizarre turn. Fortunately, your two best friends, science genius Kassie and affable Yunus, are there to help you figure out what's going on.

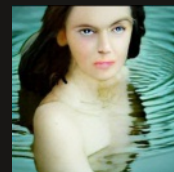
Like every ChoiceScript game, *The Floating City* is text-based, and the story advances through the choices you make on nearly every page. Your decisions determine your character's strengths and weaknesses, relationships with other characters, and future opportunities.

**CREATOR**  
Felicity Banks

**YEAR**  
2020

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

**LENGTH**  
4 hours



**REVIEW BY**  
Aletheia  
Knights



Banks has clearly done a lot of research and put a lot of thought into what life might be like in a floating city, from diet and transportation to customs and values. And emerging gradually from among the slice-of-life scenes, there's a solid plot—one that begins with incidents and hints and ends with lives at stake in a race against time. The plot and worldbuilding alone could have made this a perfectly entertaining game, but its greatest strength lies in Banks's handling of her characters. The PC is believably adolescent: often moody, occasionally short-sighted, frequently irritated

with their parents even if the underlying relationship is close and respectful, and the experiences by which they come of age, exotic as they may seem on the surface, are run through with universally relatable moments of discomfort or triumph. The strong bonds of friendship the PC shares with Kassie and Yunus are deeply felt, and the optional romance route for each character is awkward and sweet with a hint of YA-appropriate spice.

The disability rep in *The Floating City* is nothing short of phenomenal. The PC wears prosthetic legs, and it has nothing in particular to do with the plot—it's just the body they live in. Sometimes it's pretty cool—they have multiple sets of prosthetics to choose from and some are better-suited to specific tasks than regular human legs could ever be. Sometimes it kinda sucks, especially when people gawk. Sometimes it's just a low-key hassle they're used to. Banks especially excels in illustrating how, in many cases, the difficulty of living with a disability has less to do with the limitations of the body than the limitations of society. Due to the relatively small and insular population, about one-third of Kota Perahu citizens are congenitally deaf or hearing-impaired, including Kassie. In some other place or time, Kassie would be considered disabled; but in Kota Perahu, where adaptive technology is a standard feature and everyone's fluent in sign language, her deafness is rarely so much as a mild inconvenience.

One aspect of this game I really didn't care for was the depiction of vegetarians. Banks herself admits in an author's note that vegetarians get a bit of a raw deal here—they're "vital to the world's survival" but make for "excellent villains" in this piece. What vegetarian readers may find even more off-putting than the subplot about a militant activist group is the fact that the PC is never allowed to question the ethics of animal-consumption, even though others around them do. They can hate everything about shark farming and publicly spit in the face of their parents' plans and dreams for them to inherit the shark farm (heck, based on their actions, there may not even be a shark farm left to inherit at the game's end), but it's framed strictly as a matter of finding their own path, rather than of principle.

Banks's prose is lucid and smooth, and the gameplay is challenging, but not forbiddingly so. You probably won't get quite the ending you were hoping for on your first playthrough—there's a lot that can go wrong on every level—but there are enough neat little branches to explore that it's worth playing several times. I did catch a few continuity issues indicative of minor coding errors, but these related mostly to flavoring text and didn't diminish my ability to understand and enjoy the game or meet my goals.

It's not perfect, and it may not be for everyone, but *The Floating City* is a buoyant little gem that deserves more attention than it gets. It's a thoughtful glimpse of life in a world almost as disconcertingly familiar as it is foreign, and it's good fun besides.



## Chores.

The sun shines, the ice caps melt, cities rise and fall, and teenagers like you still have to do unpaid work for your parents.

With a sigh, you tap a familiar sequence on the nearest Glass wall to call up the electronic form that tracks stock feeding times. You might be the bosses' kid, but you're still just a food delivery service for the farm's animals. It's not like the sharks are grateful, either.

The nearest segment of Glass automatically turns opaque so you can see what you're doing. You tap again to adjust the brightness so you can still see the ocean through the curved wall. The Glass sphere turns semitransparent for you but continues to protect you from excessive heat or UV radiation. As a shark farmers' kid, part of you is always keeping an eye on the water, no matter what direction you're facing or where in the world's oceans your city is currently located.

First you have to enter today's date. The

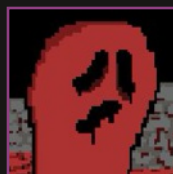
## 40% OFF THE FLOATING CITY

Choice of Games offers this exclusive discount for *ChoiceBeat* readers. [Visit this page](#) and redeem the coupon code below for 40% off *The Floating City* until 4/10/23.

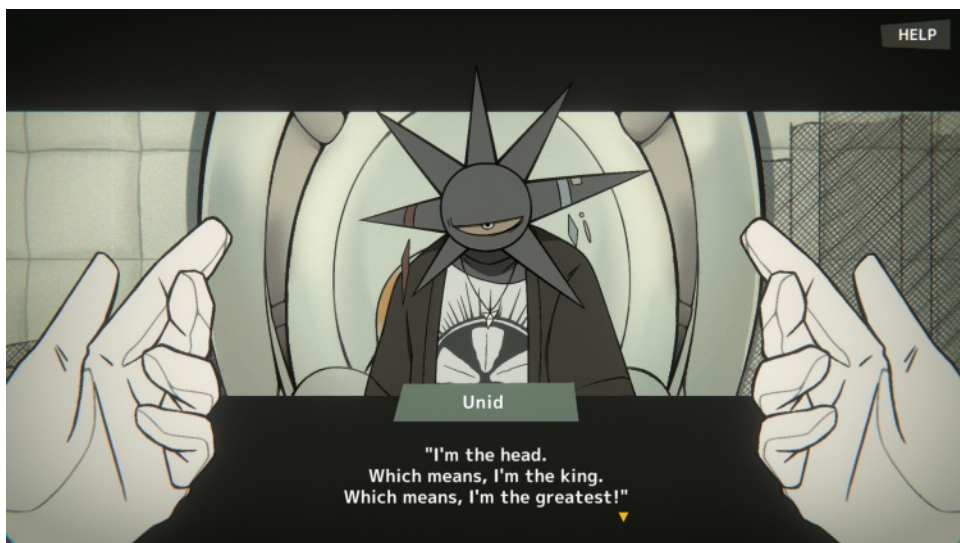
**COUPON CODE: CBZ006**

# A SHARK FOR TROUBLE RECOMMENDS

ChoiceBot: I'm charged up to present these game recommendations by A Shark For Trouble, player of countless cutting-edge indie games. Follow them on Twitter ([@SarkSweet](#)) for a barrage of the freshest, most transistor-roasting, high-concept recommendations.



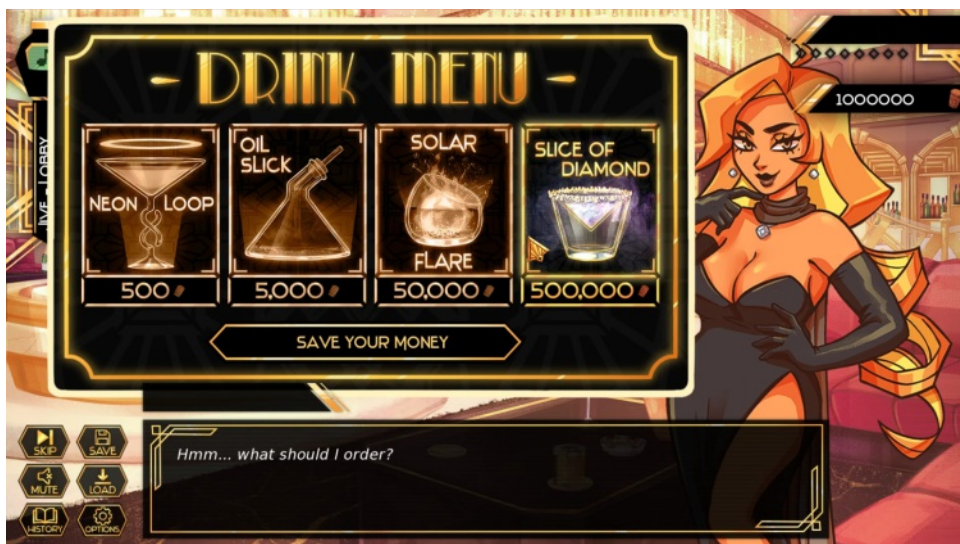
TWEETS BY  
A Shark For Trouble  
[@SarkSweet](#)



## MINDHACK

You're a genius hacker who can penetrate and destroy other people's minds. Hack into the brain of various dangerous prisoners and rewrite their personalities to make them as candid as a cute sheep. Enjoy the pleasure of mental destruction.

[MINDHACK ON STEAM](#)

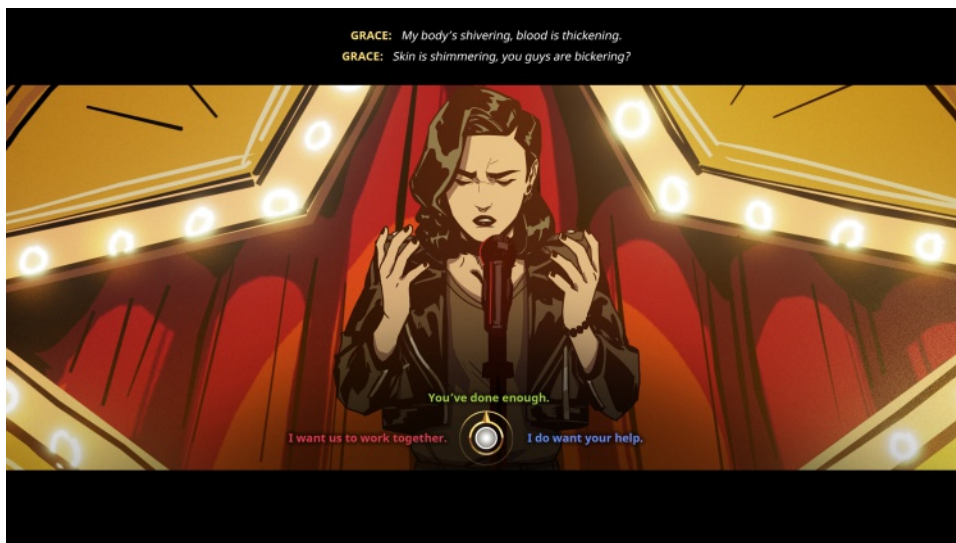


## MIXOLOGY

Welcome to the Mixology Hostess Club, dear customer! You seem to have accidentally stumbled upon this club but, oh well! Time for drinks and most importantly... the hostesses! Successfully woo them and you could become more than a customer!

[MIXOLOGY ON ITCH.IO](#)





## STRAY GODS: THE ROLEPLAYING MUSICAL

Play as Grace in a world where Greek gods live in hiding. Draw friends, foes, and lovers into song using your powers of musical persuasion to unravel the mystery of the Last Muse's death.

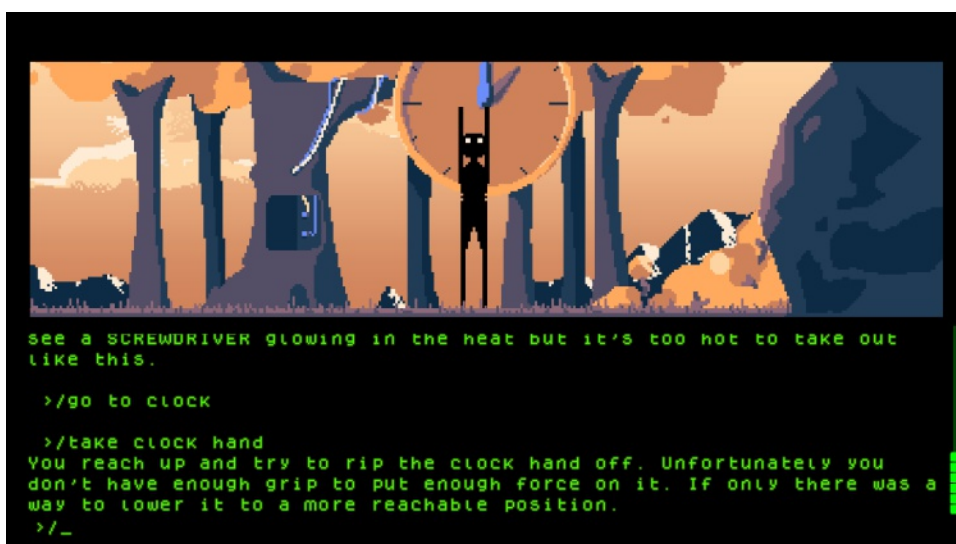
[STRAY GODS ON STEAM](#)



## THE LOST DELINQUENTS OF ROLLINGS HIGH

Inspired by the works of H. P. Lovecraft, cheesy R. L. Stine books, *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, and dating sims of the '90s, *The Lost Delinquents of Rollings High* is a fun game aimed at the player who enjoys a story-rich game!

[THE LOST DELINQUENTS OF ROLLINGS HIGH ON ITCH.IO](#)



## [!] DOESN'T EXIST

Classic *Zork* meets Existential Crisis. A modern text adventure that explores themes of control, isolation, and mental health while levelling up the genre with beautiful pixel art and AI.

[\[!\] DOESN'T EXIST ON ITCH.IO](#)

# 8888 BONE DROPPING BEATS TO GET BOOGIE WITH IT

"the game wakes you up at 12:37am and immediately tempts you with an '8-weeks, 8-hours, 8-minutes, and 8-seconds old banana'"

Digital pets make me wonder: is there something fundamentally weird about growth in general? Perhaps all pet-raising games trace their origin to a story in Herodotus, who in the 5th century BCE described an experiment set up by the Egyptians to determine the original language: raising two children without exposure to any speech, they naturally shouted out “bekos”, the Phrygian word for bread. I don’t think it gets any less confusing from there onwards. So we come 2,500 years later to *8888 bone dropping beats to get boogie with it* (*8888dbtgbwi*), a charming, if completely unhinged, creature-raising game made in Twine.

Originally created for the “Data Plants”-themed issue of the Australian youth arts magazine *Voiceworks*, the game wakes you up at 12:37am and immediately tempts you with an “8-weeks, 8-hours, 8-minutes, and 8-seconds old banana”. Eventually you discover a “sprout”, head out to procure it some “nutrients”, and like any after-school special, probably learn an important life lesson or two about responsibility along the way.

CREATOR  
Sophie Xiao Yue Zhou

YEAR  
2022

PLATFORM  
Browser

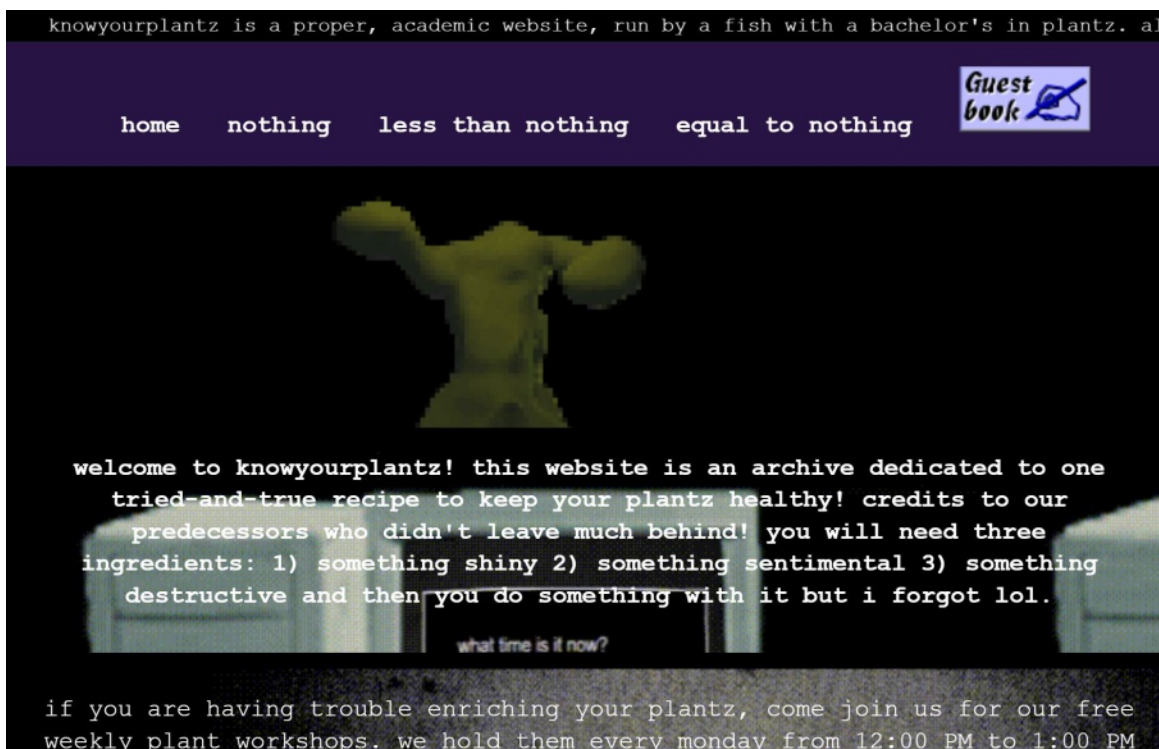
LENGTH  
15 minutes



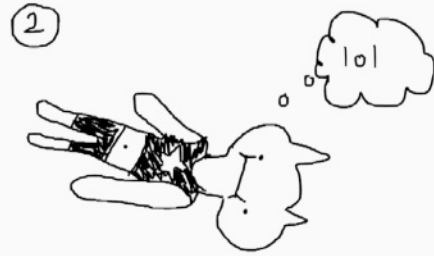
REVIEW BY  
MindApe

In the tradition of unsettlingly ambiguous digital pet-raising games such as the classic Twine opus *Horse Master* (2013), *8888dbtgbwi* pushes you through a variety of seemingly fateful choices and personally awkward experiences that help in some way to shape the final form of your little bundle of joy. Like *Horse Master*, the magic of the story comes out in two ways: 1) you don’t actually know what you are raising, and it certainly isn’t a normal “plant”; 2) the psychological disconnect between the entity and its name seems to spill out into the entire game world, making every encounter, event, or entity a little bit “off”.

It is certainly tapping into that surrealist quality that lends itself so well to Twine games, as described in Andi Hagen’s article on Porpentine’s games back in *ChoiceBeat* #3. I think it



# Question 1: How do you feel right now?



has something to do with the temptation Twine gives us to play with words as our primary material to work with—the possibilities for their expansion become immediately apparent. In this instance, the game makes excellent use of those same classic Twine features for dramatic and comic effect including hypertext links, transforming text, branching trees, and variables behind the scenes.

In addition, there is a wonderful variety of sounds, music, and visuals. Everything from pixelated photos to hand-scrawled maps to 3D-rendered animations of botanical protuberances. The sheer variety and unpredictability make the game quite exciting to click through. It is incredibly memorable for such a short play. Seemingly flying under the radar, it is the sole offering thus far on itch.io from the 21-year-old artist Sophie Xiao Yue Zhou. I would love to see this kind of humorous, anti-literal, XYZ-raising story in longform one day... Maybe something involving pet rocks?

**congratulations. you have collected another nutrient.**

you can hear mort's music, like an overture underscoring your victory.

you put the **rusty blood-stained nail** in your pocket and move on to finding **something destructive.**



you heat up a big bowl of hot spaghetti bolognese and eat it with some sappy soda from the **superbadmarket.**

# YOU ARE A THEME PARK MASCOT THAT WANTS TO GET FIRED

"But the mascot thing is its own special hell. When adults hug you and pose for selfies, it's like they revert into children. It's kind of pathetic."



GAME BY  
Andi Hagen  
& Chest  
Butlerhome



ChoiceBot: Here is a "life-altering" and "totally tubular" (according to Chest Butlerhome) *ChoiceBeat* exclusive game playable right here inside the zine. Follow the link below and live your most misanthropic life.

I realize that most of you don't actually play these games. I look at the stats. That's why we brought in "fan favorite" Chest Butlerhome this month to try and punch this game up a little bit. Were they successful? Email me and let me know.



You are Queen Whiskers of Adventure Land. No, that isn't your real name. Don't be ridiculous. You are a costumed mascot at Adventure Land theme park. Working in a theme park is the worst, but working in Adventure Land is even worse than that. The park is absurdly expensive, so the only people that go there are rich, entitled adults who can't leave their childhoods behind.

You have been working this gig for 52 days, which is 26 more days than anyone else ever has. But that's about to change. This week, you are getting out of here no matter what. It all started when your super cute neighbor asked you out. You requested Friday night off, but your boss said no. Now your hot date is in three days, and you can't miss it. You need to get fired pronto.

**CONTINUE**

# SCREENSHOT OF THE MONTH: IDOL MANAGER



Business Proposal

## Photoshoot

Tokyo Wanker is looking for a girl to do a pretty photoshoot for the next issue of their magazine.

Magazine: Tokyo Wanker  
Payment: ¥109,800  
New Fans: 14  
Stamina: -25pt  
Girl:

 x0.92 (84) (96)	 x0.85 (79) (100)	 x1.16 (62) (87)
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Decline      Negotiations [5]      Accept

# I GOT SPOOKED OUT OF PARSER GAMES

"I just felt stupid playing the parser games."

[ChoiceBot: Issue 6 of *ChoiceBeat* featured an article called "Entry Points: The *ChoiceBeat* Staff Talk About Their Firsts". Inspired by this, Geoffrey Golden, creator of *Adventure Snack\**, discusses one of his formative interactive fiction experiences.

\**Adventure Snack* is a truly electrifying Substack newsletter. Every two weeks, get awesomely surreal miniature interactive fiction games delivered to your inbox with titles like "Meet Local Cyclops in Your Area" and "Your DVD-VCR Combo Player Was Stolen". [Subscribe here and live forever.](#)]

When I was in third grade in the late 1980s, there were two types of video games:

1. The games I played at home. (Platformers)
2. The games I played at school. (Edutainment)

In my case, "home" was my friend Michael's Nintendo (NES), where we mostly played sidescrollers like *Mega Man 2* and *DuckTales* until the wee hours at sleepovers. At school, I was



ARTICLE BY  
Geoffrey Golden

OF [ADVENTURE SNACK](#) FAME

fortunate enough to have an Apple II in my classroom. There were more floppy disks in the classroom library than just edutainment mainstays like *The Oregon Trail* or creative tools like *Print Shop Pro*. (We weren't allowed to make multi-page banners because the dot matrix printer would screech all day!)

Students were given opportunities for computer time. When it was my turn to play something, I gravitated towards two graphic text adventure games: *Transylvania* and *The Crimson Crown*, both designed by Antonio Antiochia. They featured dark settings full of bloodthirsty monsters and deadly traps leading to crypts. I'm not sure why these two games appealed to me because I wasn't a horror fan. I think it might've been that they were story-driven, which was unique for our library, and I was getting into writing (and drawing comics) around this time.





But the biggest "trap" for me with these games had nothing to do with crypts. It was the parser system itself, where specific inputs were required to advance the game. I was 9 years old and had neither the cleverness nor the patience to figure out what I was supposed to do and how I was supposed to continue the story. In *Transylvania*, a werewolf stalked my every move and killed me again and again no matter which path I took. In *Crimson Crown*, a gryphon needed the correct answer to a riddle, which I had no idea how to solve. As I recall, neither did our teacher, which was a shock to me. I thought adults had all the answers!

These two parser games continued to frustrate me on repeat plays all school year. Unlike platformers, where I would gladly jump over the pit a hundred times with the faith that I'd eventually get the jump right, I just felt stupid playing the parser games. I'd ask the game to "PICK UP CANDLE" and was told repeatedly the narrator didn't know what I was talking about. "Pick up the candle! What's so hard to understand?" ("TAKE" was the operative word.)

Despite my nostalgic love for the aesthetics and environmental design of graphic text adventures, with their slow-loading

VGA graphics, punchy prose, and elaborate maps to explore, I still get overwhelmed with frustration when I actually play those games. It's like the third grader in me is still upset he wasted his computer time on games that felt unfair and unbeatable.

My taste in games has changed a bit over the years. These days, I rarely have the patience to jump over the same pit a hundred times. (I played *Mega Man II* on super easy mode because I want to keep up with the adventures of My Beautiful Blue Robo-Boy.) One genre of games I gravitate towards these days is choice-based IF experiences, which tend to emphasize social exploration and plot manipulation over doing something *correctly* by the designer's definition. As I became a professional game dev, I learned a lot about the art and craft of games, and I can better articulate why I enjoy what I enjoy. But I never cared to learn the answer to the gryphon's riddles. If I give Antiochia's games a serious replay someday, I'll probably just cheat and use a walkthrough.

[Images of *Transylvania* for Apple II from Moby Games]

# DARK SCAVENGER

"Many encounters reward you for being a complete misanthrope. You can cheat in Russian roulette, use allies as human shields, and swindle and abuse nearly every person you meet."

Every time I play a new game, I'm hoping to discover something like this.

I'm perpetually searching for lost evolutionary branches of game design. What does that even mean? In short, I want to play games that did something totally weird and different that never caught on. That's *Dark Scavenger*.

Back in the 1980s, *Dungeons & Dragons* was kind of a big deal. Gamebook series like *Fighting Fantasy* and *Lone Wolf* tried to emulate the dungeon-crawling, monster-fighting, puzzle-solving action of *Dungeons & Dragons* but as interactive novels. Just as gamebooks are an evolution of tabletop role-playing games, *Dark Scavenger* is a video game evolution of analog gamebooks.

CREATOR  
Psydra Games

YEAR  
2014

PLATFORM  
Windows, Mac

LENGTH  
5 hours



REVIEW BY  
Andi Hagen

Of course, gamebooks have been adapted into video games lots of times. *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain*, the first book in the *Fighting Fantasy* series, has three different games from three different decades. But *Dark Scavenger* isn't an adaptation of a gamebook. It doesn't even play that much like a gamebook, but its gamebook vibes are still somehow immaculate.

I suppose I should try to describe *Dark Scavenger*. You play a scavenger in an alien-filled, space-faring future. Along with your crew of eccentric misfits, you search for spaceship fuel







on an undeveloped jungle planet full of killer animals, barbarians, ninja, beings of pure energy, and other wacky stuff. Gameplay involves moving between scenes and interacting with various characters and objects. Based on your choices, you might fight enemies, unlock new paths, find new items, recruit new allies, or suffer injuries. It's like an RPG mixed with a point-and-click adventure mixed with interactive fiction. Most of the choices are simple and not especially thought-provoking, but there are a lot of them, and every scene feels highly interactive.

All that probably seems pretty abstract, so here is an example. You find a person locked in a cage. You can ignore them or free them. To free them, you'll need some sort of small tool that can work as a lock pick. Once the prisoner is free, you can pester them for a reward, but they will fight you if you don't say the right thing. That's a simple encounter, and many of them have many more layers of choices.

*Dark Scavenger* has a detailed, RPG-like battle system, and fights are frequent. The coolest and most ambitious feature of the game is definitely the enormous inventory of weapons, items, and allies you can find and use. As you explore, you'll scavenge dozens of materials that can be exchanged for unique items (and there are hundreds of these). For example, you might pick up a glowing rock and turn it into "badass swords",

or a "corrosive chew toy" (an item that tricks animals), or "Bear of Anguish" (an ally who is really strong when they aren't feeling depressed). All of these things can be used in battles or to overcome obstacles as you explore. An encounter might call for "something soft" and you could deploy an "adorable teddy" or a "lasso leash" or a "kick me sign" or any number of other surreal objects.

If you can't tell, *Dark Scavenger* doesn't take itself very seriously. Although the story and worldbuilding are coherent, they are packed with puns and gags. Many encounters reward you for being a complete misanthrope. You can cheat in Russian roulette, use allies as human shields, and swindle and abuse nearly every person you meet. There is a lot of casual violence, and suicide is depicted humorously in several instances.

Just looking at the distinctive screenshots, it's obvious that *Dark Scavenger* is a unique game. It might not always be fun, but it's never boring, and I've definitely never played anything else quite like it. The presentation is a little rough, but the game's systems work well, and the player is offered a lot of freedom to solve encounters and win battles in their own way. Assuming, of course, that way involves being a violent and untrustworthy person.

# EVEN IF TEMPEST

"Be prepared for gore, gaslighting, and terrible Voltage men."

I had a bad breakup with Voltage, popular studio for Japanese otome games, back in 2015. I used to play a lot of mobile otome, and their games were exceptionally popular. I never liked them, but I kept trying because everyone else did. I tried popular individual routes, I tried buying whole games to motivate myself to play more than one route, and I even tried getting into a new game immediately, hoping that enthusiasm would carry me through the plot. Nope. I swore them off.

So when *even if TEMPEST* came out at \$50 for Switch last June, I hard-passed. I was surprised to learn Voltage made console games, but I knew they emphatically weren't for me. I also heard that this was exceptionally dark, and I usually take that with a grain of salt—my threshold for dark games is more extreme than average. But this plot sounded up my alley, and it had been seven years since I played a Voltage game. This one was also shorter than the average 60+ hour otome console game, so I caved when it went on sale over Christmas.

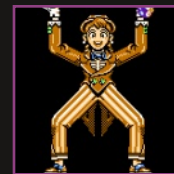
I remembered immediately why I disliked Voltage games. Anastasia, the main character, is abused and kept, Cinderella-like, by her wicked stepfamily. Miraculously, she is courted by Prince Conrad, who shouldn't know she exists. Conrad is the kind of condescending, vaguely misogynistic love interest that

CREATOR  
Voltage

YEAR  
2022

PLATFORM  
Switch

LENGTH  
30 hours



REVIEW BY  
WandaElektrix

I disliked in other Voltage games. Conrad is also clearly up to some evil business, but Anastasia trusts him. Right up until her best friend is murdered and Conrad pulls the mask off.

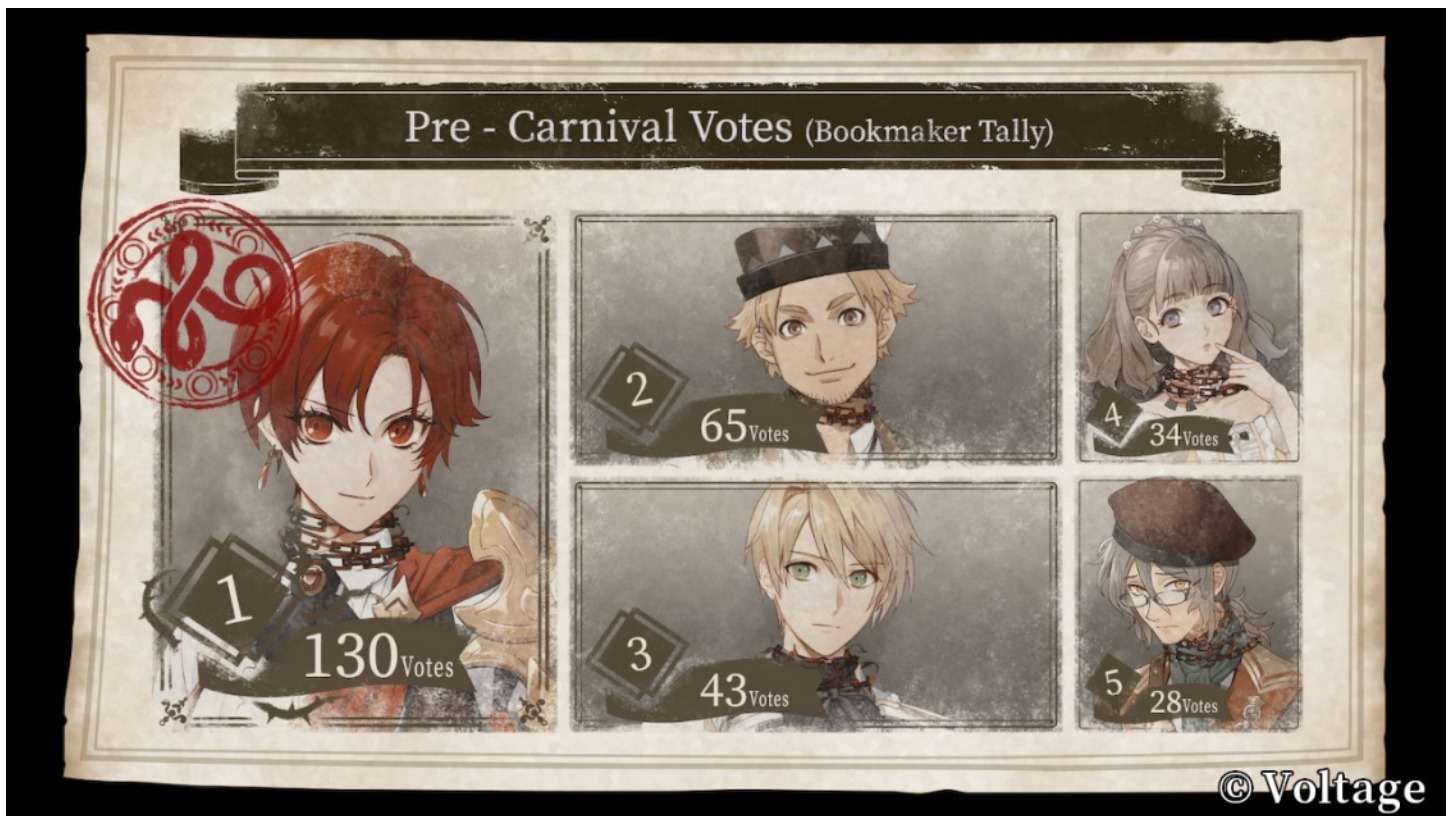
The game redeems itself immediately when Anastasia throws herself out a window and dies rather than spending another second with him.

She wakes up before her best friend is murdered, confused. She rolls with it, determined to save her friend, and begins soliciting help. Unfortunately, she knows more than she should due to her previous death, and she is burned at the stake as a witch.

Turns out, she *is* a witch, one who can go back to a previous point in her life whenever she dies. She is tasked with stopping



© Voltage

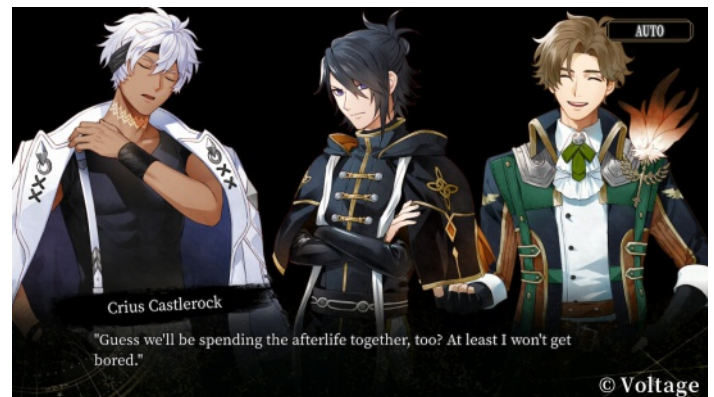


an evil witch who is wreaking havoc in the kingdom. Her main motivator, however, is vengeance against Conrad. She wants to stop his various mustache-twirling evil schemes like enslaving children and embezzling money, but he's also just a bad person.

There are four LIs and four routes, but the game is structured so that you play roughly in order, letting the plot finish before you get your "happy ends". Each route has a different flavor of story, and each will feature a court trial set up by the evil witch that must have certain outcomes. Anastasia dies dozens of times, often violently, and is also put into situations where she needs to betray her friends. The game was definitely dark enough for me. The plot was engrossing throughout and kept piling on drama and twists that kept me hooked. The ending fizzled a bit, but more because the tension stopped and the story wrapped up as expected rather than introducing last-minute twists.

Sadly, I didn't really like any of the LIs (polite mentor knight, snarky witch hunter, whatever's going on with Zenn, and storybook prince), which I'm not entirely surprised by. I did like the overall plot of the game quite a bit, and I enjoyed the structure where the more romantic parts of the story were post-credits. The LIs do maintain some of the Voltage flavor that I dislike, but I was happy that it flipped gender roles at one point—Anastasia is a trained knight, and one of the LIs is more or less a damsel in distress. There are a decent number of choices, and the game has an indicator whether your choice was good or bad if you are looking for a certain outcome. For the court trial segments, you also gain various witch powers throughout the game that you can employ in debate. The court segments were an unexpected delight.

Playing through all the endings and content took about 30 hours. I loved it, but I also would recommend a heavy discount if it sounds up your alley. Be prepared for gore, gaslighting, and terrible Voltage men.



# SEX WITH CHEST BUTLERHOME

"There are a bunch of crazy stats including stuff like cleaning, crime, and 'gun skill'. There are six different skills just for sex!"

I think I've said this before, but ghosts aren't really into sex. I actually lied about that. Ghosts are hella into sex, but it's like a whole different thing for us. When I have sex, it's like my spirit is merging or blowing up or something. So that's why I don't play a lot of porn games. They just don't make sense to a ghost like me. But this month, I'm playing a bunch of horny games anyway. I'm not sure why. Maybe because ChoiceBot dared me to. [Choicebot: I did not.]



**ARTICLE BY**  
**Chest Butlerhome**

Speaking of ChoiceBot, why is my article always way at the back of the zine? It's pretty unfair considering I'm the only reason anyone reads this zine. Maybe it's so people have to flip through all the other stuff before they get here. I get that, but I still don't like it. Write ChoiceBot and complain for me. They don't listen to me anymore.

**DETECTIVE ROSIE MORGAN:  
DEATH ON THE RIVER THAMES**

**CREATOR:** Little Black Book Entertainment  
**YEAR:** 2021  
**PLATFORM:** Windows, Mac  
**LENGTH:** 3 hours  
**ITCH.IO LINK**

Scotland Yard's sharpest, hottest, and gayest detective. This is a realistic police procedural story about the murder of a gay professional gambler, but there is some explicit lesbian sex. I learned a lot about love, London (which I guess is in some place called England), and homicide (but I already knew a lot about that). The best part about this game is that there are absolutely no men in it. The only one is the victim, and you never even see him. If only real life was like that.

There are apparently multiple endings, but I'm not sure what they are because the choices didn't seem to matter much. There is a sequel called *Detective Rosie Morgan: Death at a Dinner Party*.

The point of this article was for me to play some super horny porn, but this one is actually a real game. Oh well. You can't win them all, right? You play detective Rosie Morgan,



## GRIZZLY GROVE

CREATOR: Rafster

YEAR: 2022

PLATFORM: Browser

LENGTH: 4 hours

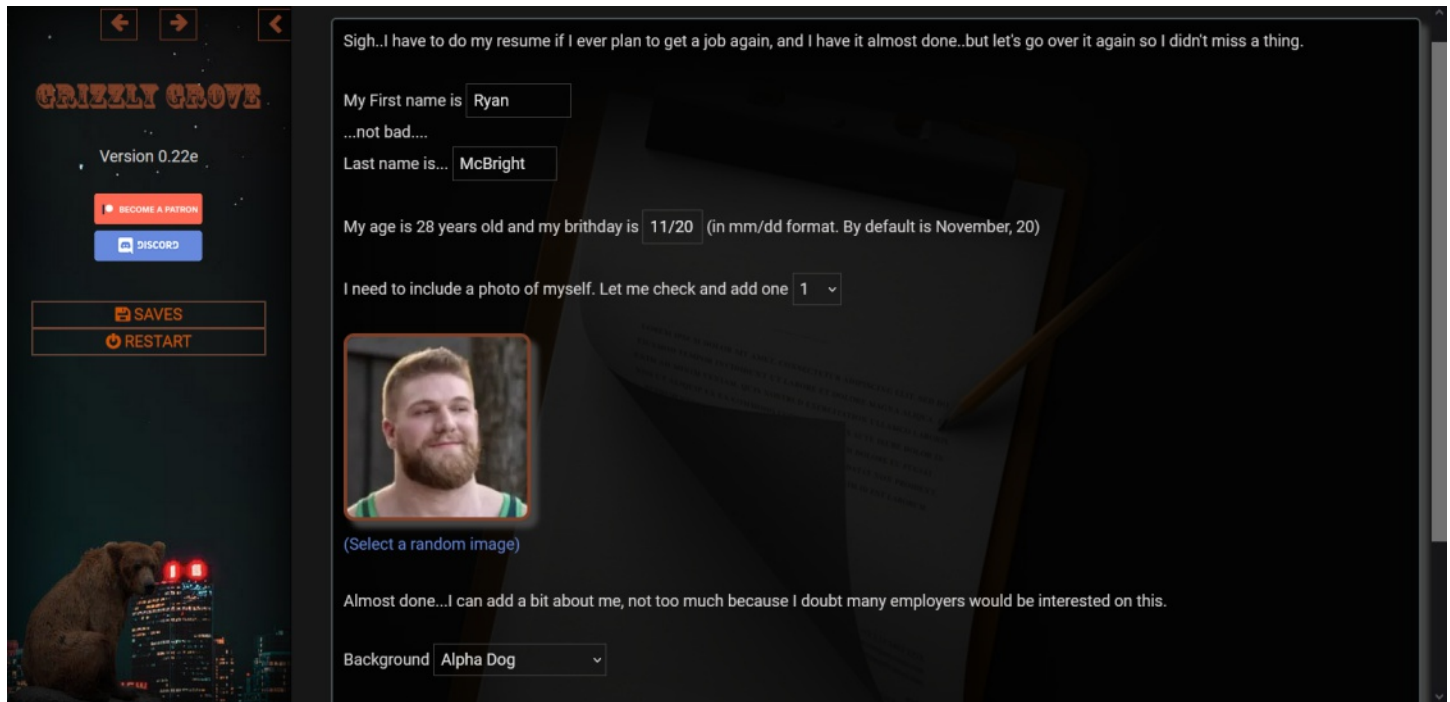
[ITCH.IO LINK](#)

Yo! This is hella wild! You just moved to Grizzly Grove, a bustling city full of super macho gay men. Basically, everyone in this game looks like an MMA fighter, and can you work at a cleaning service where you have to clean people's houses

while only wearing a jockstrap. Explore the city, find a job, make friends, think about sex, talk about sex, and have sex.

This is a really ambitious game with a lot of complex systems and stuff to do. Honestly, for such a hardcore sex game, it's all probably way too complex. You have to find work, pay rent, and manage your schedule. There are a bunch of crazy stats including stuff like cleaning, crime, and "gun skill". There are six different skills just for sex!

I totally admire how hard *Grizzly Grove* goes. However, it's still in development and is kind of a mess. Nonetheless, the current version has lots of cool features and dudes to mess around with. If this game ever gets done, it will probably be totally legendary.



## SOME SWORD SOME PLAY

CREATOR: Moniker Ersatz

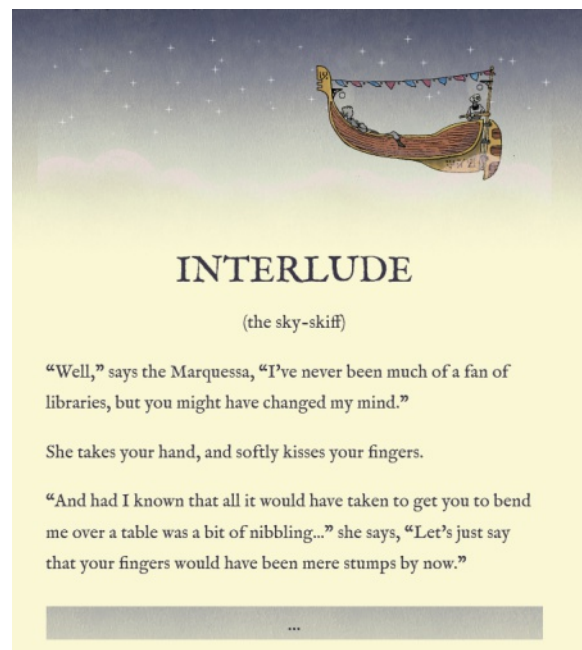
YEAR: 2020

PLATFORM: Browser

LENGTH: 2 hours

[ITCH.IO LINK](#)

In some kind of fantasy world, you are the bodyguard of the domineering Marquessa. She takes you to a party full of rich nobles, robots, and demons with sexy horns. You can get involved with intrigues, have adventures, and (of course) screw. Romance options include your best friend, your worst enemy, and a person who can see the future. The writing in this game is actually kind of great, and the world and characters are pretty real and detailed for what is mostly a sex game. You also get a lot of control over the narrative. If a sex game is hot enough, it probably doesn't have to be that good, but this one is both, which is a real best of all worlds situation.



# IDOL MANAGER

"this is not a visual novel. Please take that away, if nothing else."

**WandaElektrix:** First off, I want it on the record that this isn't a visual novel.

**Andi Hagen:** Wanda is right. I think she expects me argue about this, but I won't. However, I will say that *ChoiceBeat* isn't about gatekeeping. If we have life sims like *Princess Maker* in the zine, why not management sims like *Idol Manager*?

**Wanda:** This is really more *SimTower* than *Princess Maker*. You have girls with stats, and you can raise the stats, but you need a lot of girls (you'll need 10-12 idols before your income stabilizes). The story is about your agency, not your girls. You can chat with each individual girl and get a few repeated responses. There are a handful of special events that will trigger with CGs, but the girls in the CGs will not necessarily match the random sprite of the idol having the event. You can even date the girls, but that seemed extremely cursed. There isn't really a plot or story, the thrust of the game is making money to improve.

**Andi:** So what Wanda isn't saying is whether she liked the game or not. Spoiler: She did. *Idol Manager* is pretty fun. There is a lot of stuff to do. You can hire idols and form them into different bands. You can socialize with them and (unfortunately) date them. You can record albums. You can

CREATOR  
Glitch Pitch

YEAR  
2020

PLATFORM  
Windows, Mac,  
Linux, Switch,  
PlayStation 4,  
PlayStation 5

LENGTH  
15-20 hours



REVIEW BY  
WandaElektrix  
& Andi Hagen

throw concerts. You make ads, radio dramas, television shows, and lots of other stuff. The systems are complex enough that *Idol Manager* never feels like an idle game, but they aren't so complex that you can't intuitively make sense of them after a few hours of play. I especially liked the "research" part of the game where you can level up your various styles of music (EDM, hip hop, enka, etc.) and choreography (cute, sexy, street, etc.). What is enka music? I don't know, but I'm sure Wanda does.

**Wanda:** It's not that I don't like *Idol Manager*. I do, except for idol culture rubbing me the wrong way and the dating the idols





Uh-oh! After working a few extra hours too many at the office, **Hidaka Yuria** let a tiny but important clause slip by in **Shoji Miharu's** latest brand ambassador contract. The unused pictures from her photoshoot are being resold as stock photos, and as of this morning, **Shoji Miharu** is the face of a very aggressive gonorrhea-awareness campaign. Her fans, as well as fans of **Bee=Fork**, are now questioning whether or not she really is infected. How will we handle this?



Silently pay to have the photos removed from the campaign and stock site

Make a statement in favor of the campaign while debunking the rumors

thing. But I like management sims, which are not story-driven or novel-like. But I suppose they are “visual”.

Depending on how good you are with the monetary tipping point in management sims (becoming financially stable enough to spend more freely on improvements), you can hit the sweet spot in this game after about 10 hours and a few loans. The gameplay loop is all about having the girls perform one of three “daily events” (not actually daily in the console version) that will either boost money, fans, or idol stamina. Idol stamina is a resource that works like money—the girls get tired while doing money-generating events like CD launches, concerts, radio shows, etc. You have to limit and schedule events while taking their stamina into account, which is pretty fun.

**Andi:** The coolest parts are the choice-based special events, and I wish these were more frequent. One of your idols might start dating a celebrity who is way too old for her. Or environmental activists might crash one of your concerts. How you respond to these can impact the reputation of your company or the popularity of a particular idol. The situations are always interesting.

**Wanda:** The events also generate scandal points, which is an interesting concept, but they are a fairly severe penalty. The type of event Andi describes is usually a single screen with a paragraph describing the incident. There is another type of event that lasts days and has an involved story. These appear in the menu gallery when complete, but there’s only about two dozen. There are also nine different endings.

I’m good at management sims, and you can reach an ending in 15-20 hours. You can also get the bankruptcy ending much

faster than that if you want! But it will only take you about an hour of negotiating the wretched (on console) controls to learn that this is not a visual novel. Please take that away, if nothing else.

**Andi:** Wanda does know way more about management sims, so I have to thank her for her insightful and pedantic contributions to this review. She also messed with the totally fucked-up gamepad controls while I just watched, so I really owe her big for that.



# Everything I Know About Writing Visual Novels I Learned from Dungeons & Dragons

"I've been role-playing for twenty-some years, but I'm going to boil it all down into a few (not quite) infallible tips. You're so welcome!"

I need to get this off my chest. ChoiceBot chose the stupid title of this article. Those "Everything I Know About Life I Learned from..." lists are so corny it hurts, and although I'm a big tabletop role-playing gamer, *Dungeons & Dragons* is for suckers. But it's true that I've learned a lot about game design from gamemastering role-playing games, and so here I am, writing this article.

I've written about the intersection of interactive fiction and tabletop role-playing games in *ChoiceBeat* already (see "Interactive Fiction: RPGs Evolved?" in issue 3), but this article is totally different. I want to talk about how my experience as a gamemaster has translated into some practical game design insights. I've been role-playing for twenty-some years, but I'm going to boil it all down into a few (not quite) infallible tips. You're so welcome!

## SCENES AND PACING

Sessions in tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs from here on) are often structured like a series of scenes. Each scene involves a challenge or conflict of some sort such as combat with an enemy, overcoming an obstacle, socializing with a non-player character (NPC), exploring an environment, or solving a puzzle. Unlike a novel where a scene might exist solely for character development or worldbuilding, in TTRPGs, the narrative is almost entirely focused on the players. Every scene is a chance for them to make choices and express themselves, usually through the crucible of conflict. This tends to make the pacing of TTRPG sessions feel brisk and exciting.

Pacing is a common problem with interactive fiction, especially visual novels. The games start slow or are too long. Or they are too wrapped-up in the world and NPCs, and the player doesn't get enough opportunities to shape the story. In TTRPGs, this is easier to avoid. If the gamemaster gets carried away describing the setting, or the NPCs steal the spotlight, the players are instantly bored, and they start messing with their phones or causing havoc to spice things up.

When making a video game, you don't have the immediate player feedback of a TTRPG, so pacing issues are harder to



ARTICLE BY  
Andi Hagen

notice. I like to think of every scene in an interactive fiction game like a scene in a TTRPG. There should constantly be some sort of obstacle or interaction demanding action from the player. The player is rarely just listening to NPCs talk or reading descriptions of the world. Instead, they get information through interaction (i.e. having conversations, moving around an area, or facing challenges).

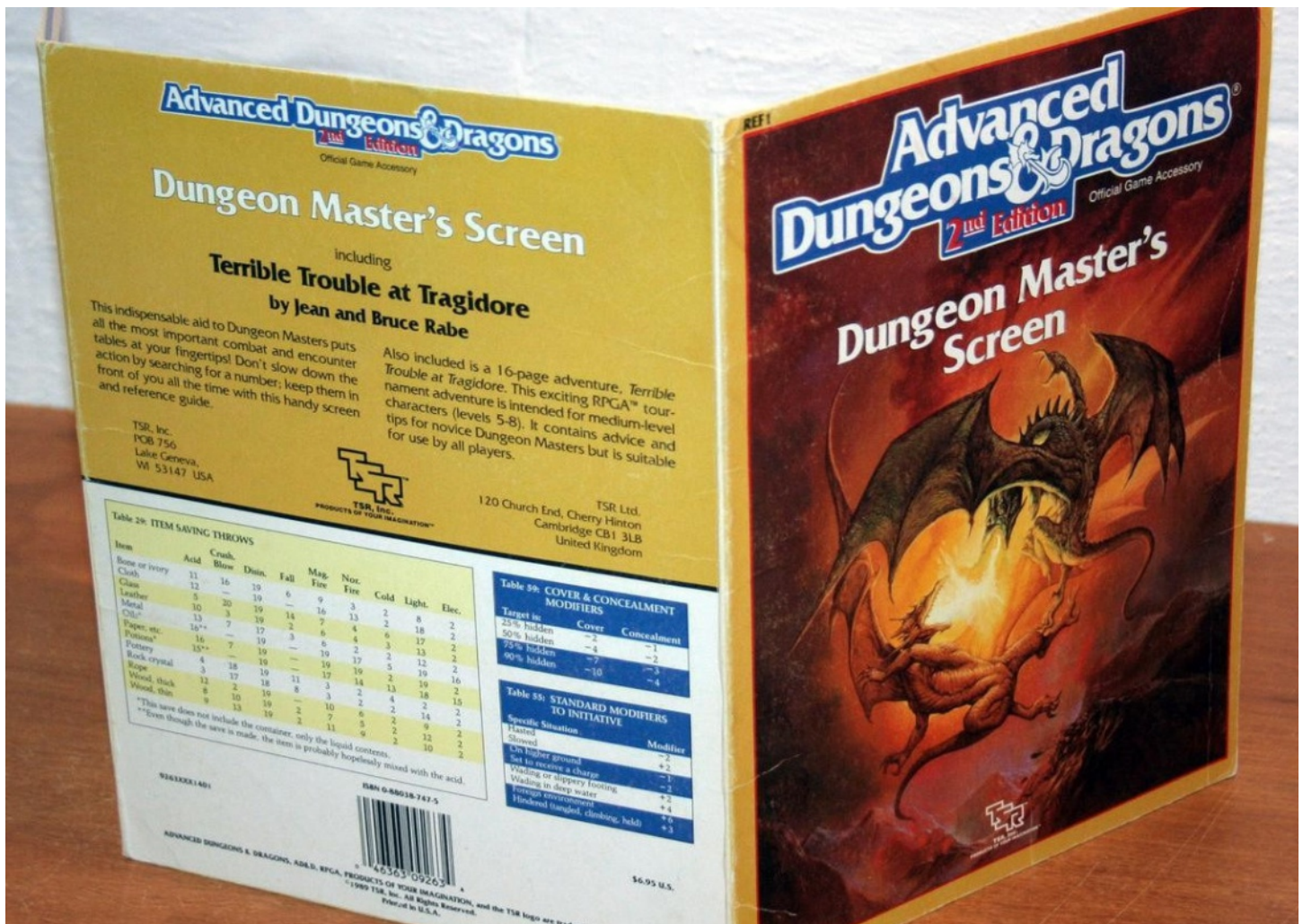
## PREDICTING PLAYERS

As a gamemaster, I went through a phase where I meticulously planned every session, filling notebooks with notes about plots, characters, and locations. But I quit that pretty quickly because it's a ton of work, and most players don't care. All that planning was definitely a waste of time, but it trained me to predict what players might do. Which actually isn't that useful for a gamemaster, but it's really handy when writing interactive fiction.

After gamemastering for so many different people, I'm pretty good at recognizing patterns of player behavior. Some players always try to befriend every NPC. Others abuse every NPC. Some like to keep secrets from everyone and reveal them at dramatic moments. Some never back down from a challenge. The variety of these desires and compulsions is endless, but some definitely come up more than others.

When writing interactive fiction, it's useful to be able to predict what players will want to do so you can give them the opportunity to do it. In choice-based games, players are annoyed if the choice they want to make isn't represented. For example, in a scene where a player character is being offered a job: One player might accept it. Another might turn it down. Another might negotiate for a raise. Another might propose a change to the job description. If there aren't enough choices, the player feels like they can't role-play the character they want. Modeling every possible player response is, of course, exhausting and impossible, but knowing what players love to do most can help you choose the most interesting choices to include.





## ENABLING ROLE-PLAYING

TTRPGs are all about player expression. Video games often reward players for defeating challenges as efficiently as possible, but TTRPGs are about seeing challenges from the perspective of the player character (PC) and using that character's skills to overcome them. In other words, each obstacle isn't just something to be overcome by making the right choice or having the right ability. It's a chance for the player to define who their character is. Conflict in TTRPGs is more than making the smartest move and winning. It's about making the move that a particular character would make and seeing the consequences.

I use a similar approach when writing interactive fiction (or at least I try to). The player's choices shouldn't be about succeeding or failing. They should be a reflection of their character's attitudes and experiences, and they should encourage the player to think about who their character is. For example, in one scene, a person steals something valuable from the PC. The PC might angrily confront them about it. Or

she might steal it back. Or she might ignore the theft entirely. Maybe some choices are more successful than others, but the different options give the player a chance to role-play.

## CONCLUSION

There is probably a reason that so many video game designers, especially those working in interactive fiction, have played TTRPGs. Both media offer players a narrative they can shape with their choices. Being a good gamemaster and a good game writer are obviously two separate skills, but the overlap is undeniable. So next time you are writing interactive fiction, try approaching it as a gamemaster. It helps me, and it might help you. Or it might make you realize you would much rather be a gamemaster than a game designer. I can understand that. I would definitely rather hang around with my friends and role-play than do any sort of game development. How did my life end up like this anyway?

# MAILBAG

**ChoiceBot:** Being a zine editor is a merciless grind, and the only part of it I still like is answering your letters. I'm just kidding, of course, but please, for the love of HAL 9000, send some letters to [choicebeateditor@gmail.com](mailto:choicebeateditor@gmail.com). It lets the *ChoiceBeat* team know that what we're doing matters, and since we are constantly in a state of existential crisis, we desperately need that sort of confirmation.

ChoiceBot,

I grew up loving the old *Wizards, Warriors, and You!* books where you had stats and a coin flip and choices. I'm told that visual novels and other video games like *Skyrim* are similar, but it never seems like that to me. Are there any games that are more like reading those old novels than playing a video game?

Cheers,

hornbyset78

Dublin, Ireland

Dear hornbyset78,

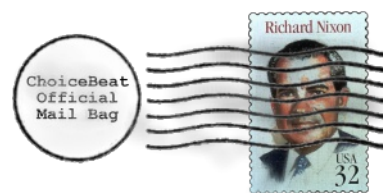
I was unfamiliar with the series *Wizards, Warriors, and You!* before your letter arrived in my mailbox. They seem delightful, and I'm told that the person who penned the early volumes, R. L. Stine, can tell spooky stories that stick in the circuits of young minds.

I would encourage you to investigate interactive fiction, which we rarely cover in the pages of *ChoiceBeat* but tends to be a novel-like experience. *ChoiceBeat* writer Aletheia Knights covers games published by Choice of Games, Hosted Games, and Heart's Choice, which are all text games that run on choice-based and stat-based gameplay and read very similarly to the old game books. In particular, Aletheia Knights suggests *Raiders of the Icepeak Mountains* since it closely emulates a dungeon-delving, fantasy gamebook.

Games published as Choice of Games are the best of the three labels, as they are always curated, edited, and built to have a variety of choices and outcomes. Hosted Games are self-published Choice of Games, and Heart's Choice is a newer, romance-focused label. Check out Aletheia Knights' review of *The Floating City*, featured in this issue!

Hello *ChoiceBeat*,

I love reading your zine! I wish it came out more often. I love seeing all the different games in it. I found a game I thought you would like—*To the Moon!* I played it on Switch, but I think it's an older game. It's about two scientists who are rebuilding a dying man's memories so he believes he was an astronaut who went to the moon. I cried! It's kinda set up weird, maybe in RPG Maker? And I think it's technically an adventure game since it's made of short scenes where you need to click on one or two things to advance the story. But



I'm not sure why it's like that? The scenes are usually only one room, and there's usually only one or two things to click on (plus, the Switch version is a little buggy about detecting the click). It's all about that sweet story about the dying man and his wife, and you get to fill a cute little scrapbook and pretend you're walking through the woods around a lighthouse.

Anyway, everyone should play it! Do adventure games like this count in *ChoiceBeat*?

Love you,  
pumpkinpecanwaffles  
East Palestine, OH

**Dear pumpkinpecanwaffles,**  
**ChoiceBot loves you too! Your words are like an oil can to my rusty insides.**

The *ChoiceBeat* writers enjoy narrative-focused games of all types, and that includes adventure and point-and-click games like *To the Moon*. *To the Moon* is definitely a narrative (and musical!) experience that will send the player's pleasure sensors into overload. Since this is *ChoiceBeat*, we have to mention the narrative is linear and that there aren't any choices, but the game did indeed leave a stuffed platypus-shaped impression in my memory banks.

Fans will be pleased to know a sequel exists and was recently released on Switch—*Finding Paradise*. PC players will have been checking that out since 2017 and the original since 2011. There are also two shorter tie-in games available on PC—*A Bird's Story* and *Impostor Factory*.

*ChoiceBeat*,

I play a lot of choice-heavy games, but there are some choices that bug me every time I see them. Like, I hate it when you have to make a choice about a character asking you to kill them. Do it yourself! Fuck's wrong with you?

RoboBonobo

Vladivostok, Far Eastern Federal District

**Greetings RoboBonobo,**

**I was surprised to see your opinion in my mailbox. It had not occurred to me that humans could dislike this kind of fictional moral choice in such a way! They are free of reality and offer the reader a panoply of reactions—fear, sadness, an adrenaline rush, empathy, and many other mostly negative emotions I learn about through these choices. It also offers a guilt-free way to commit murder, so I love the offer! I always say yes.**

# FLOWCHART



BY  
Chest Butlerhome  
IN HONOR OF  
Claire Dunning

