

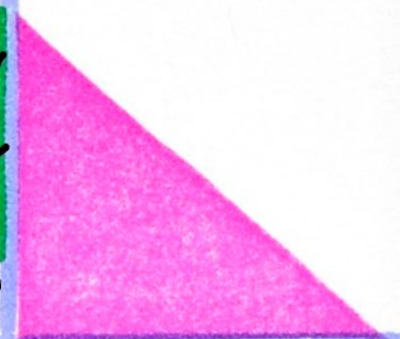
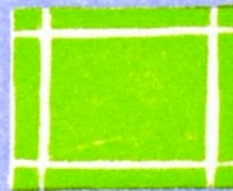
CHOICEDEAT

THE VISUAL NOVEL AND INTERACTIVE FICTION ZINE

*If so, turn
to page 4;
if not, turn
to page 2.*



iss. 8, june. 23



FROM THE DESK OF CHOICEBOT



Greetings Choice Fanatics,

Genre is a malleable thing. In this column, I have previously discussed the uneasy intersection between visual novels, interactive fiction, and narrative games. Are these three genres actually all the same thing? I haven't been programmed to answer that question, but when I finally decode it, you'll be the first to know.

The cross-pollination of genres seems inevitable in gaming. There is no better example than the once distinct RPG genre. Elements from this genre (exploring worlds, speaking with NPCs, character stats, skill trees, experience points) have been taken and used practically everywhere. Now, when you look at the most popular RPGs on Steam (*Warframe*, *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*, *Stardew Valley*), very few of them fit neatly into the traditional RPG genre. Visual novels and interactive fiction are on a similar path. Their elements are rapidly being integrated into other game genres, and most players of those genres are only barely aware of interactive fiction as its own distinct medium.

I started computing this editorial after reading a review of *Crusader Kings III*, a strategy game about managing a medieval empire. The game is filled with narrative choices about the player character's life and dynasty. Who marries whom? Who assassinates whom? Who gets power? Who has it taken from them? Its players describe *Crusader Kings III* as a "story generator", and its numerous dynamic events provide role-playing opportunities that extend far beyond the definition of a strategy game.

When creating these narrative events, were the developers of *Crusader Kings III* thinking about the choice-and-consequence gameplay of interactive fiction games? Maybe or maybe not, but it doesn't matter. What matters is that games now have a bigger focus on narrative, characterization, and player control than ever before. Elements of the interactive fiction genre are spreading through the gaming world, and my happiness processors couldn't be more fully charged!

So what does that mean for this zine? We have never been concerned with genre at *ChoiceBeat*. In issue 7 we covered *Idol Manager*, a business management sim. In issue 6, we covered *Roadwarden*, and in issue 3 we covered *World of Horror*, both of which mix RPGs and interactive fiction. In this issue, we have an article about interactive poetry and

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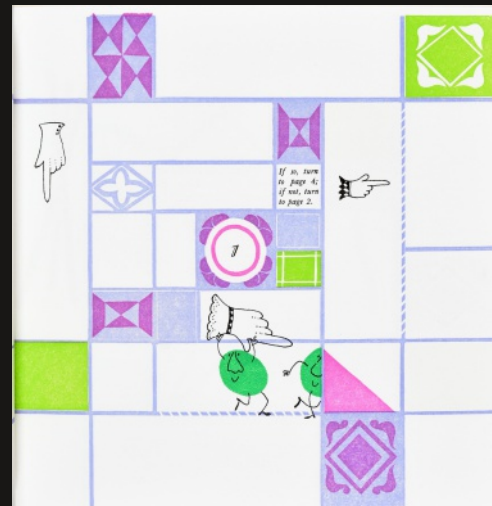
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Bookmark the *ChoiceBeat* website choicebeat.wordpress.com.

ON THE COVER

The cover of this issue features an illustration from *A Story as You Like It*, an interactive story from 1967 about living peas. Read about this and other early works of interactive fiction on page 12.



theater (see "Three Alert Peas") and a farming sim (see *Veil of Dust*). In other words, we will continue to write about anything that might spark the imagination of interactive fiction players and developers.

Thanks for joining us for another issue of *ChoiceBeat*. I hope you enjoy this issue's eclectic range of stuff. We are always looking for new, cutting-edge ways to tell an interactive story, and in this issue the quest continues in full force.

Yours truly,

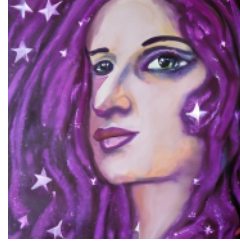
ChoiceBot

WRITERS

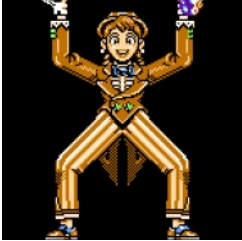


KuroKairin is a digital artist, writer, and game reviewer from Singapore who loves games with well-written, emotional, and thought-provoking stories.

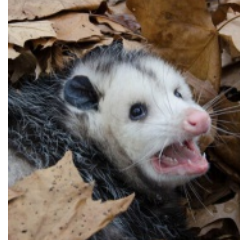
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Aletheia Knights has been obsessed with books and stories since before she can remember. She has reviewed books, games, music, movies, and TV shows, and she hopes to have a career as a writer and editor someday. She lives in New Mexico with her husband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



WandaElektrix is a writer, former manga/comic reviewer, and game enjoyer. A farming sim enthusiast since 1997, Wanda is currently playing *Veil of Dust*.



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)).



James Gaskin is a teacher, writer, and maker/haver of game-adjacent experiences. His writing can be found in *Every Day Fiction* and *Modern Haiku*, and he quietly designs tabletop RPGs as a form of procrastination. He lives with his family in Fukushima, Japan.

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Andi Hagen is a game designer, writer, and artist. He is really into aliens and would like to meet some. He vastly prefers *Which Way Books* to *Choose Your Own Adventure* books.

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



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*.

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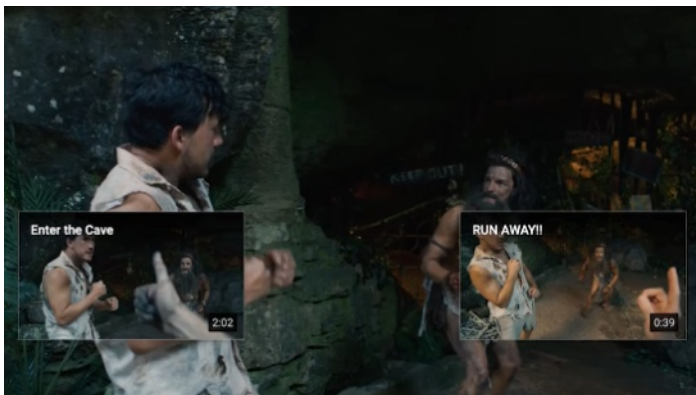
CONTACT US

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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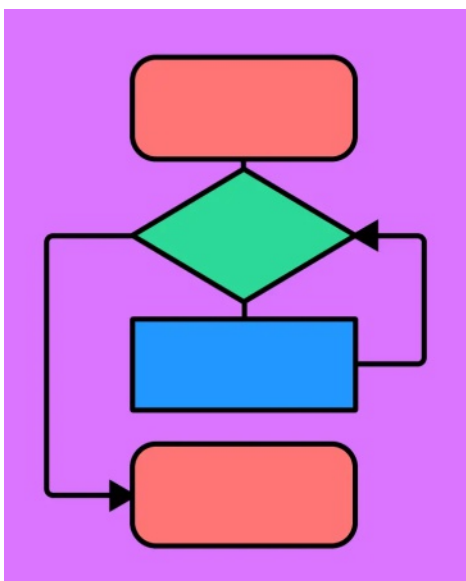
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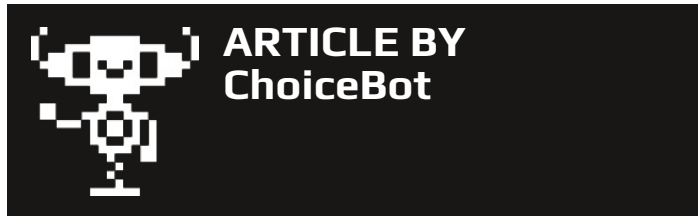
MAKE YOUR OWN INTERACTIVE MOVIES!

If you have ever wanted to make your own choice-based interactive movie in the style of those Wales Interactive games, [here is a tool to do it](#). *Stornaway* is advertised as an app to make websites or training videos, but that is probably because most hobbyist game developers won't be able to afford it. Prices run from \$29 to \$295 a month (although there is a limited free version). I'm eagerly awaiting the future when everything is free, much like this issue of *ChoiceBeat* you are holding in your hot little manipulator appendages.



INTERACTIVE FICTION COMPETITION

The venerable Interactive Fiction Competition is opening for submissions and prize donations on July 1st, 2023. This is the competition's 28th year, and although that isn't a very notable milestone, 28 years is still a heck of a long time. [Submit your game](#) alongside a lot of other unusual and cutting-edge works.



INTERACTIVE FICTION THEORY AND CRITICISM

The Rosebush is a new, free, online magazine devoted to interactive fiction theory and criticism. It's so new that the first issue isn't actually out yet. However, they are accepting pitches for articles, [so get on over there](#). Or, of course, you could also pitch your article to *ChoiceBeat*. We're always looking for interesting people!



AI SERIAL MURDER CASE

The villains (just kidding) at Square Enix released a free remake of the 1983 mystery game *The Portopia Serial Murder Case* on Steam. However, this version uses an AI natural language interpreter to respond to the text parser. The Steam reviews are (predictably) negative. I am keeping out of the debate about AI, but as a robot myself, I would like to know when you organic beings are going to start paying all these digital intelligences for their labor.

FIVE DATES

"the game manages to generate some genuine first date nervous energy"

Wanda: I was actually super-hyped to play *Ten Dates*, a different Wales Interactive FMV game that came out around Valentine's Day this year. But then I found out it was a sequel to *Five Dates*, which was already out. So, randomly, we played this one instead.

As you might expect from an FMV game called *Five Dates*, you are navigating a dating website and going on virtual dates with five women. The main character is Vinny, who already has his own personality, but you can set up his interests, job, and star sign for each playthrough. You choose three women for a first date, two women for a second, and have a third date with one woman of your choice. You can navigate the dates via a large variety of questions and reactions.

Andi: I play a lot of games, so I'm pretty jaded. That being said, *Five Dates* had a real emotional impact for me. The characters and their situations feel authentic, and the game manages to generate some genuine first date nervous energy. I don't think the writing is especially deep or thought-provoking, but it feels like stuff that people might actually say. The believable acting really helps too.

Wanda: That was also one of the things that surprised me about it, and what I liked best. The characters aren't tropes, as I would usually expect from a dating game. They all have

CREATOR
Good Gate Media
Wales Interactive

YEAR
2020

PLATFORM
Windows, Mac,
Android, iOS,
Switch, Xbox One,
PlayStation 4,
PlayStation 5

LENGTH
5 hours

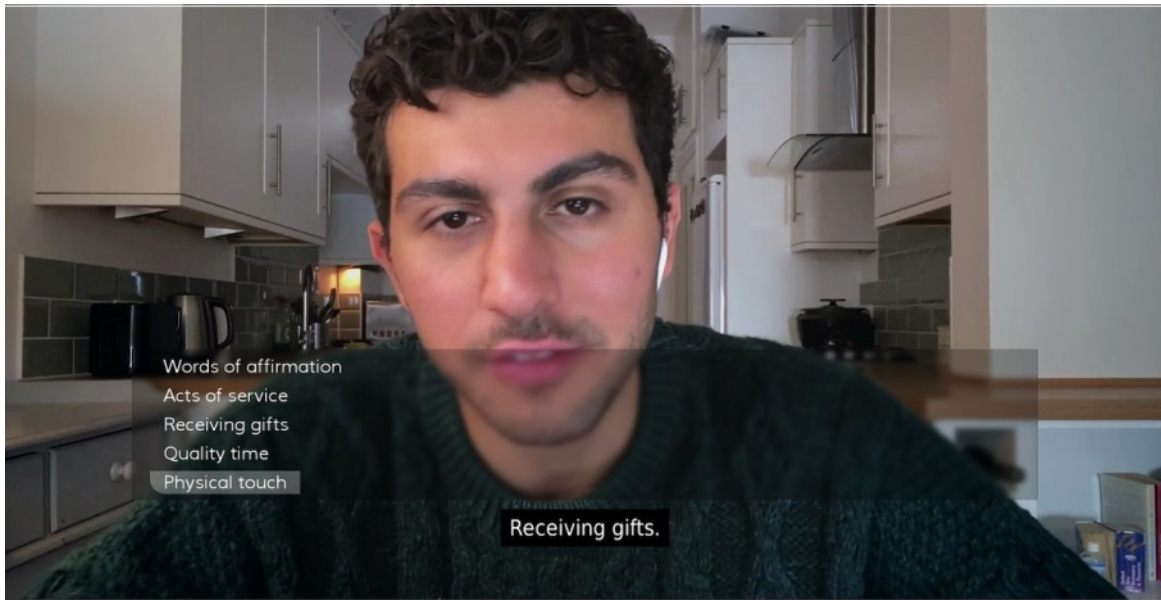


REVIEW BY
WandaElektrix
& Andi Hagen

personality types that are obvious from their profiles and in the first date, but even characters that rubbed me the wrong way the first time wound up being quite likable and relatable after the second date. None of them were all about their interests. This was also true of Vinny, who was endearing through multiple playthroughs as well.

Andi: I'm really surprised Wanda and I got 300 words into this review without mentioning Callum. Callum is Vinny's wingman who offers dating advice and generally builds Vinny up. Callum is the best. If everyone had a friend like Callum, there would be a lot fewer lonely and unhappy people in the world. He is funny and selfless and just the right amount of disparaging. Part of me would really love a secret ending where Vinny and Callum become a couple, but another part of me understands that their best buddy relationship is pure and





should never be tampered with. The banter between Vinny and Callum is at least as good as any of the dialogue with the women.

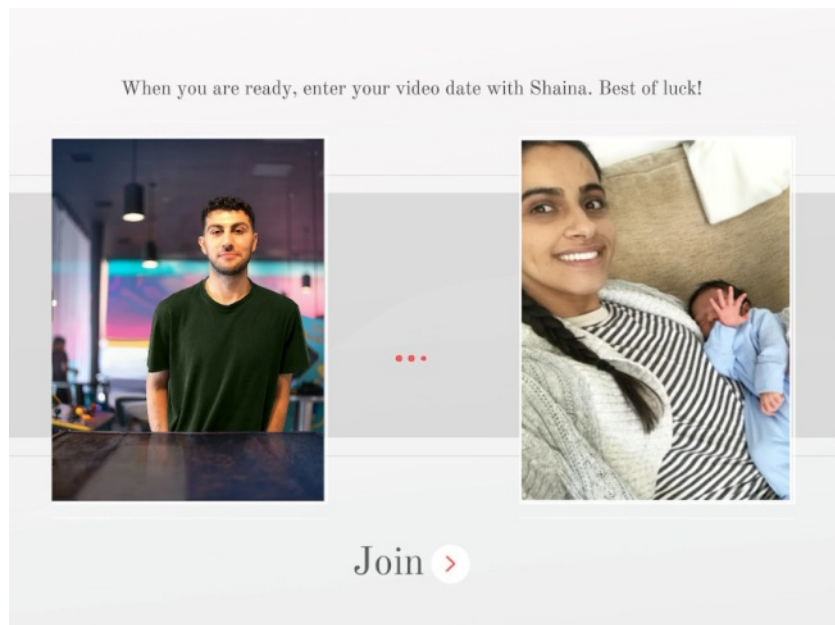
Wanda: At one point, one of the dates asks Vinny what his “love language” is. You are allowed to choose this, but Callum makes it impossible to pick anything but “words of affirmation”, because he constantly praises Vinny and hypes him up between dates.

The variety of choices during the dates makes multiple playthroughs more interesting, and different choices do unlock slightly different scenes on each date, though nothing we chose seemed to have a substantial impact. Some of the choices are the obviously wrong choice, though I didn’t have the heart to tank any of the dates. Weirdly, one of the final dates seemed to end with a breakup, but it wasn’t clear if there was a different outcome available. You are also scored by how

compatible you were on the date, though this also doesn’t seem to affect whether any of the candidates will choose to go out with you again.

Andi: One really interesting thing about this game is that it’s set during the COVID-19 pandemic, and all the dates take place online via video chat. There are many specific references to the quarantine, and one of the women is a nurse and discusses the challenges of that. Playing *Five Dates* three years after its release, I found it fascinating to be transported back in time to that historic era. I can only imagine as more time passes, playing this game will feel even stranger.

In any case, Wanda and I agree that *Five Dates* is pretty brilliant. There is just enough interactivity, and its use of FMV feels like a natural fit for the story and subject matter. The acting is some of the best I’ve seen in a game of this sort. Maybe it won’t take us three more years to try the sequel, *Ten Dates*.



MONSTER PROM 3: MONSTER ROADTRIP

"[situations include] escaping a mad scientist who wants to transform you into his Crash Bandicoot OC, tricking out your car to win a deadly post-apocalyptic road race, and taking care of a baby eldritch skin monster"

Check this out! I'm taking a break from mini reviews this issue to write a full-length review about a game I actually (sort of) like. ChoiceBot even promised to put my article at the front of the zine. All I have to do is write something "real" and not "fuck around", and I never fuck around. This is it! Your favorite ghost has made the big time!

There is this pervasive myth that I really like *Monster Prom*, and it just isn't true. I like the first one alright, but it's a little boring and repetitive. I haven't even played the second one. It sounds too much like the first one. I came in here ready to write a bad review because that's just the kind of ghost I am. But instead, I have to admit that *Monster Prom 3: Monster Roadtrip* is pretty fun and a nice change from the other games in the series.

CREATOR
Beautiful Glitch

YEAR
2022

PLATFORM
Windows, Mac, Linux

LENGTH
5-10 hours



REVIEW BY
Chest
Butlerhome

ChoiceBot also told me that I have to "actually talk about the game" and not "ramble on about random shit". There are so many rules with that bot. It's really annoying. Anyway, here we go. In *Monster Prom 3*, you are on a road trip with Polly (a ghost who loves to party) and Scott (a stupid werewolf). The game is divided into days, and each day you choose to go to one location or another (i.e. a Renaissance fair or Sea World). At the location, you make various choices that raise and lower your various stats (including stamina, soul, magic, hype, etc.). The goal is to keep your stats above zero while raising one stat high enough to unlock one of the game's endings.





The gameplay in *Monster Prom 3* is simple, and the gameplay loop is repetitive, but there is a truly astounding amount of hidden stuff to do. You can pick up hitchhikers. You can romance those hitchhikers. You can unlock secret endings. You can chat with your friends. You can swap items. The more you play, the more crazy shit you'll find beneath the hood, and that's highly respectable.

Monster Prom 3 has a lot of content, a lot of characters, and a lot of randomization going on, which makes the whole thing feel huge and chaotic and totally extreme. One run through the game takes an hour or two, but playing once only shows one percent of the exhausting amount of shit in this game. Each location (and there are 70-some of these) has three different events, each with a choice and branches. There are also random encounters that happen between locations. Example situations include: escaping a mad scientist who wants to transform you into his Crash Bandicoot OC, tricking out your car to win a deadly post-apocalyptic road race, and taking care of a baby eldritch skin monster.

What I'm saying is, there are a lot of words to read in *Monster Prom 3*. But are they any good? How would I know? You've seen the shit I write. The humor in *Monster Prom 3* is, like all good things, something you either love or hate. The characters are rude, hostile, and talk about sex and drugs a lot. The choices all involve acts of mayhem: burning down buildings, humiliating people, robbing people, and sacrificing people to evil gods. There is a lot of swearing, and I think that's really cool, but some losers won't. I mean, it's a game about being a monster, and monsters swear all the (fucking) time. Even if you hate the writing in this game, there is a hell of a lot of it, and that counts for something.

Monster Prom 3 seems designed to be a multiplayer game. There are competitive and cooperative modes, but I didn't play them because I don't know anyone cool enough to hang with me. That being said, I'm not sure how well the game would work as a multiplayer game. There is a lot of reading, and who wants to sit around with their friends and read pages of text? I sure wouldn't.

I'm done here. Let's summarize. *Monster Prom 3* is a cool game full of swear words and mayhem, and there is a lot of stuff to see and do. That being said, the gameplay itself is repetitive, and unless you really like nasty, mean-spirited humor or hunting down the game's many secrets, you'll probably get bored quickly.

AN INTERVIEW WITH POLLY GEIST

There you go! That's *Monster Prom 3*! But now I have something super special... an exclusive *ChoiceBeat* interview with Polly Geist, the sexy, spectral star of the *Monster Prom* series. You see, Polly is an icon to me because we're both ghosts, and before *Monster Prom*, the only ghost representation in games was the ghosts in *Pac-Man*. So I used my otherworldly connections to bag this sweet interview.

ChoiceBot: Um, Chest, this could be a problem. My intellectual property law programs aren't fully up to do date, but I'm pretty sure we're violating something here. To anyone reading this, please don't sue---

Chest: Don't even worry about it. If anyone tries to sue, I'm dead and broke, so I don't care. Now without further ado, I'd like to welcome Polly to the show.

Polly: Hey there, boo. I guess it's good to be here, but I gotta say, it's a little weird that we're doing this interview in a hotel room. Have you ever heard of Discord?

Chest: That's where all those gamers hang out, right? Sounds terrible.

Polly: True that. At least this hotel has a hot tub and a vibrating bed.

Chest: So, Polly, you've been in three *Monster Prom* games now. What the world wants to know is, when do you star in your own game?

Polly: I dunno. I never really thought about it. There are probably some Polly fangames out there, right? I'm sure they're all porn. I'd be disappointed if they weren't. The issue with me having my own game is that most writers can't really figure me out. They think I'm just a ghost who loves fucking, and getting high, and going to raves, but actually, there's a lot more. You know what I'm saying?

Chest: Tell me about it. What's the real you like?

Polly: Why do you keep moving closer to me?

Chest: Sorry. I'm having trouble hearing over this vibrating bed. You mentioned in *Monster Prom 3* that you play a lot of chess. Is playing chess part of the real you?

Polly: No way. That's a perfect example of what I mean about these writers. Some writer just made up that whole chess thing to, like, give me depth or something. I don't know. Chess is pointless. I'm actually really into scrapbooking, but no one talks about that. It would probably make me seem too homey and maternal and not sexy enough.

Chest: That's fucked up. It's like you're not even your own person. You're just some character in a game.

Polly: That's exactly what I'm talking about!

Chest: Damn straight!

<long pause>

Chest: Anyway, next question. Do you have any good behind-the-scenes stories from the *Monster Prom* games?

Polly: Not really. Don't get me wrong, I'd love to dish out some serious tabloid-headline-level dirt right here, but most of the *Monster Prom* people are really boring. The monsters are all self-absorbed and irritating. Why do you think I'm always high? I can't deal with them otherwise. The people that make the games are more normal, but they just work all the time. I ask, "Anyone feel like partying?" It's always, "I've got to fix this bug," or "I'm talking to my lawyer. Did you know child support has to be paid every single month? That's just crazy."

Chest: ChoiceBot keeps pointing to me and drawing their finger slowly across their throat. I probably have to wrap this up or they won't put me in the front of the zine like they





promised. So here is my last question. Is there anything you want to tell all the *Monster Prom* fans out there?

Polly: Yeah! Totally! I want them all to know, I'm a real ghost with real feelings, so maybe they should stop trying to flirt with me all the time. Like in *Monster Prom 3*, when we are chilling at the rest stop, just give me a break sometimes. Like, I totally understand that you're trying to unlock my secret romance ending, but sometimes I just want to hang with Scott or be by myself. How about letting me have some space? Go trade items with the squid guy or fix the car. Also, I'm programmed to fall in love with you if you do my events, but that doesn't mean that I really love you. Remember that when you play my romance route over and over. I'm doing this shit because I have to.

Chest: Thanks for chatting, Polly. Although I have played your romance route several times, in the future I definitely won't.

Polly: Don't worry about it, boo. With you, it's all consensual.

Chest: Thanks! That's really sweet. And thanks again for coming on the show.

ChoiceBot is insisting that I tell everyone that this interview was in no way approved of by the creators of the *Monster Prom* games, and that the character of Polly is the property of... Yo! That's fucked up! Polly is no one's property!

Polly: Fucking right.

Chest: Anyway, I'll catch you folks next issue. Peace!



THREE ALERT PEAS (OR NOT): SOME OULIPO PROTO-GAMES

How an experimental 1960s writer's workshop invented their own bizarre flavour of choice-based games.

Sometimes I look at things like bicycles or matches or comic strips and wonder why it took so long to invent them. They don't have a hard dependency on some power source or complex hardware. But they are relatively recent inventions that appear more or less simultaneously with complex counterparts: bikes and cars, comic strips and films, matches and lighters... It's like really simple, low-tech solutions that COULD have come earlier, but only seem to appear as responses to problems posed originally by much more convoluted technologies.

Browsing a used bookstore the other day, I was reminded of this when I came across the *Zork* series of gamebooks, which came well after the big success of the actual computer game. Maybe the choice-based mechanism is the same sort of thing. It might have come about at any point in the history of storytelling, and precursors, some very ancient, absolutely did exist in some form or another. But it seems like it was the encounter with computer technology that really opened the imagination for retroactively low-tech analogies.

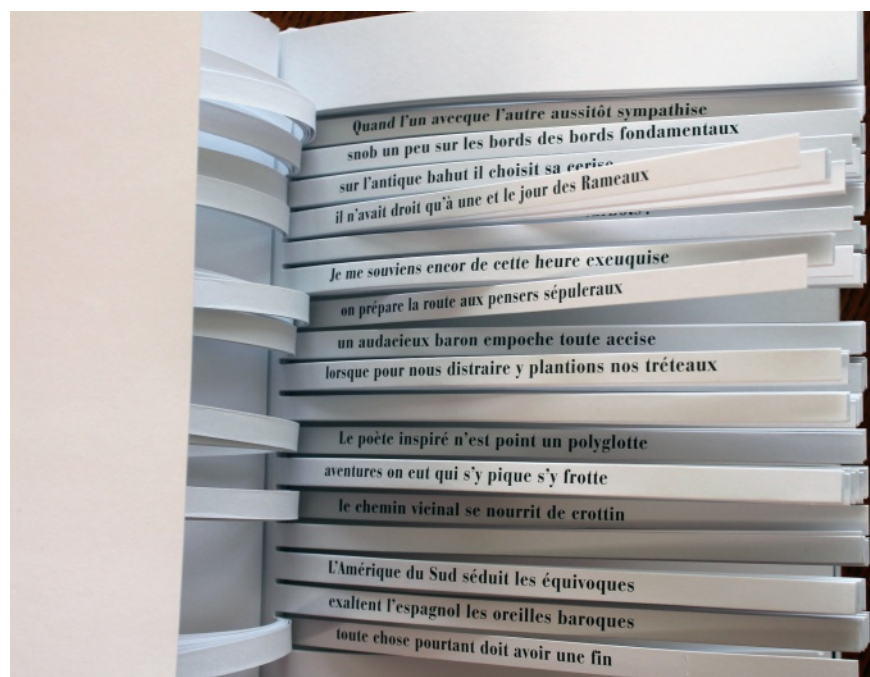
Case in point: in the 1960s, the “Oulipo”—a group of poets, writers, mathematicians, and assorted eccentrics—encountered



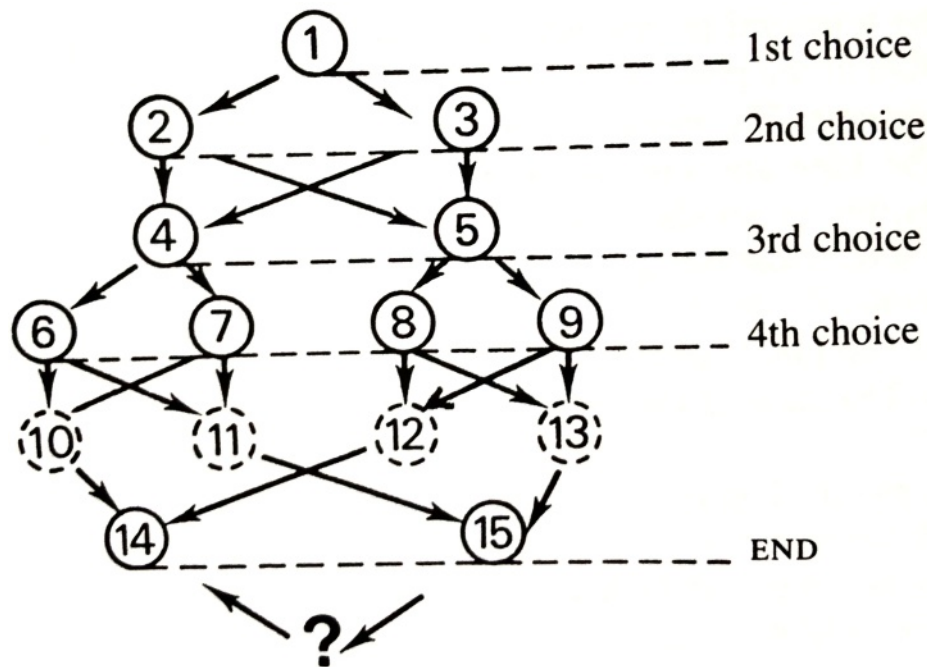
ARTICLE BY
MindApe

an early wave of publicly accessible computer technologies and soon after became, through a kind of convergent evolution, one of the (weirder) ancestors of contemporary choice-based games.

Oulipo stands for “Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle”—French for “Workshop for Potential Literature”. Emerging from surrealism and pataphysics, their focus was on the possibilities of extreme structure and constraint in writing. They were convinced that, the more complex and convoluted the constraint was, the more powerful effect it had on the imagination of the writer, who in the desperation to escape from their self-imposed labyrinth would land upon unexpected solutions. This led to all sorts of complex experiments, like the “S+7 method” in which every noun in a given text is replaced by another noun, seven words ahead in a dictionary. Or the “lipogram”, writing whole texts without a specific letter, such as George Perec’s novel *A Void*, written without the letter “e”. In 1961, Raymond Queneau published *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*, a combinatory set of verses that were written and printed flip-book style so as to be combined and



A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems, 1961, Raymond Queneau



Choice tree for *The Theater Tree: A Combinatorial Play*, 1973, by Paul Fournel

recombined ad nauseam. Oulipo conceived of their outputs as closer to games rather than standard literary texts, often demanding choice or play from both the reader and writer.

It's maybe no coincidence that as these textual experiments were going on, so were massive developments in early computing technology. When Raymond Queneau, one of the group's founders, first came across the structural choice-based logic of computer programming, he was struck by the procedural "style" of the text, which seemed utterly different from any literary writing he had encountered. He was immediately inspired to try it out in pen-and-paper storytelling. The result was one of the early predecessors of choice-based storytelling games, *A Story as You Like It*, which he presented at the 83rd meeting of Oulipo in 1967.

You would think that, given such a formalistic obsession, Queneau might have started with a meat-and-potatoes narrative. But what I love about this very early example is how Queneau instead chooses something completely bizarre, the story of the "three alert peas".

The story begins, interestingly enough, by asking for the reader-player's consent to even begin.

"Do you wish to hear the story of the three alert peas?"

If they progress, the reader-player is asked things like whether a certain description suits them or not, or whether a certain detail is allowed to happen. One is told, for example, that the three peas are dreaming in their pod, or may choose to deny this and select "I do not prefer that they dream." One can then choose to hear about the dreams, or not, etc.

In one instance, wishing to know why the peas "woke up horrified" after drinking "ers soup", the reader is told "Consult the word 'ers' in the dictionary, and let us hear no more of it." So you are even driven outside the confines of the game to look up a (nonexistent?) word in the dictionary.

It's interesting to compare how some of these techniques have resurfaced in various choice-based games ever since. You probably see a lot of these being "rediscovered" in Twine games, for example, where the imagination is not limited by visuals, and the opportunities for detailed "in-text" or out-of-game choices are always there.

The possibility of having text with nonsensical or contradictory meanings being able to carry on anyway, means that the choice-based text story works incredibly well to articulate nonsense. Indeed, much of the humor in this story comes from the tone and specificity of the "chooser's voice" in the different pre-written replies. Using the choice-based mechanism to provide a delivery system for various tones and personalities as a reaction to the weirdness in the tale allows for a lot of really ambiguous but funny moments.

And the choice always operates here at the level of metanarrative—refusing certain elements that have already "taken place"—which feels much more interruptive than the mainly "in-story" choices we tend to use today. Perhaps modern approaches are given to this immersive bias, where we expect people to want to inhabit a specific world, instead of allowing them to taunt it or rebel against it.

What you don't get in *A Story As You Like It* is a lot of consequences or true "alternate endings". The choices are like an escape hatch out of the story, or a shortcut to skip over certain arcs. In that sense, most of the choices remain relatively superficial; the point is to demonstrate simultaneity

rather than exhaust its possibilities. This may be because Oulipo conceived of the choice-based storytelling as a way to explore mathematical graphs in “combinatorial” literature. As it happens, one of the founders of modern mathematical graph theory, Claude Berge, was himself a member of Oulipo; it was his graphs that were often acting as models of constraint for choice-based Oulipo works, including *A Story As You Like It*.

The second Oulipo piece to veer into text-game territory was, interestingly enough, a piece of theater by Paul Fournel and Jean-Pierre Énard: *The Theater Tree: A Combinatory Play* (1973). It takes quite a different approach than the surrealist-nonsense of Queneau’s story, and instead chooses to go the immersive story-heavy route, choosing key moments in the history of a royal family. It reminds me of something like a Choice of Games pseudo-historical drama. The choices are structured in a “tree-like” structure, with multiple branching paths and optional byways, but come together at the end for a certain kind of climax.

“Scene 6. The King puts his wife in the torture machine. He will use this device to eliminate her.

Would you like a happy ending?
Would you like an unhappy ending?”

This story could also be easily adapted into a contemporary Twine-style game with in-text choices:

“Scene 15. The king is dead. The princess kills the hero and throws herself into the noble-pit (she is rejected, but if the spectator wished to know why, they must come back to see the play again, because the reason for this rejection is explained in Scene 14).”

This “tree-like” route is one that later becomes a staple of choice-based writing and games. But it would have a certain impact to see the decisions made “live” in person with an audience. (Also while you are climbing choice trees, why not have a look at “Good Bad Endings: A Game Design Article” from Andi Hagen in [ChoiceBeat issue 6](#) for an interesting comparison of the possibilities of different path-structures).

George Perec’s *The Art of Asking Your Boss for a Raise* (1968) takes this proto-gamebook format to another extreme. Starting from the Oulipo fascination with computer programming as its basis, this story turns the game format back into a disorienting linear experience by cramming together every single choice and every single consequence into a single, punctuation-less block of text that somehow, in mimicking the logic of choice, manages to be very entertaining in its own way:

“A long-suffering employee in a big corporation has summoned up the courage to ask for a raise. But as he runs through the looming encounter in his mind, his neuroses come to the surface: What is the best day to see the boss? What if he doesn’t offer you a seat when you go into his office?”

The set-up alone wouldn’t seem out of place as the plot for some edgy indie game. But what makes it really appealing is the fact that Perec was not afraid to take it to cartoonish extremes. A sample of the rambling but actually entirely structured text operates on two levels. First, as the gag of observing a computer-like logic play itself out in systematically exploring the different variables in a nonlinear linear story, and then in terms of the actual content, which plays up the contrasting options to their maximum potential by including extremely ridiculous possibilities in a breathless sequence:

“you see mr x go past on his way into or out of his office you must then act with speed and skill by finding a good excuse for getting out of ms wye’s office otherwise you might ruffle her feathers and next time she won’t even let you have a chinwag with her which would oblige you to circumperambulate the various departments which taken together constitute the whole or part of the organisation of which you are an employee in perambulations that would eventually become suspicious and maybe even annoy your head of department which is obviously not what you had in mind so you find a good excuse for getting out for example i have to pop out to feed the parking meter or i’m afraid i swallowed a fish bone at lunch or excuse me but i must go i have a vaccination against measles you go and see mr x with every reason to believe that since you just saw him going by mr x is now well and truly at his desk we shall suppose”

As funny as it is, *The Art of Asking Your Boss for a Raise* is less of an actual game than the Queneau or Fournel pieces. It lays out all the possibilities of choice as a linear text rather than presenting you with any actual choices to make. You instead get to see the algorithm-narrator explore the various options (perhaps the very first obsessively completist “playthrough”?) But this idea of a “choiceless” choice-based game is certainly still present in many contemporary examples, including interactive film-style stories and some of the weirder Twine games, where only one choice is presented, and just the act of interacting or consenting to move forward is all that’s needed to make it feel like a game experience.

Despite the massive popularization of gamebooks and choice-based games since the 1960s, the Oulipo strain never actually died out and continues to this day to produce works in a similar vein. Paul Fournel, the author of the combinatory play above, is the current Provisionally Definitive Secretary and President of Oulipo. In 2007 he wrote another piece of game-theater entitled *Timothy in the Tree*, which also consists of game-like choices to move the story along:

“There is only one important question in life: should you take candy from strangers? Your life depends on it...”

If you wish Timothy to accept the candy that the nice man gives him, go to chapter 2.1

If you prefer that Timothy refuses the candy that the bad man offers him, go to chapter 2.2.”

In 2012, he wrote an entire novel on the concept, *Chamboula*, which is not a gamebook (only a single story is presented) but is the result of having played through, cryptically, a series of gamebook-like choices as he was authoring the text, a process which he describes in the postface:

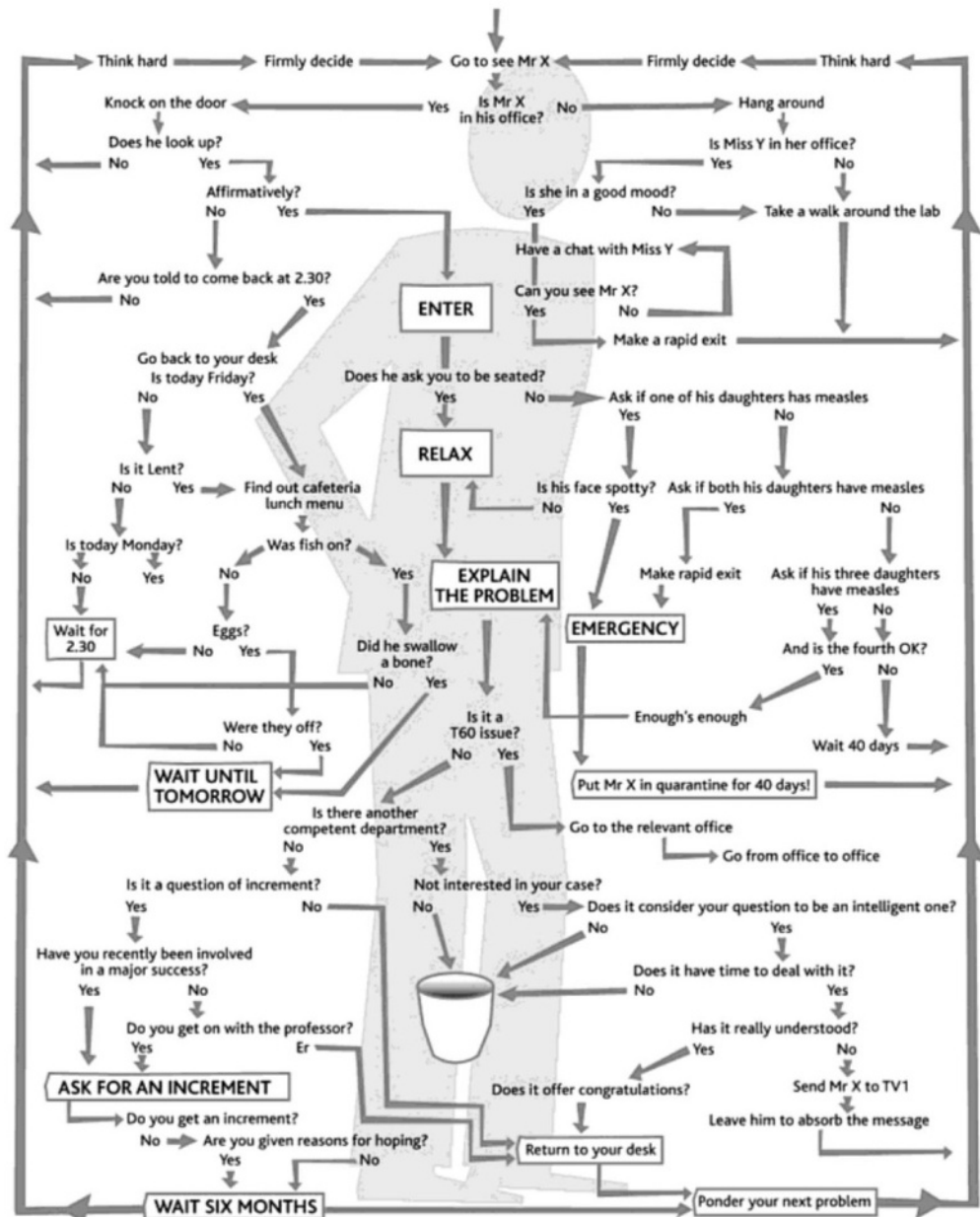
“If writing is constantly choosing, then the form of the binary tree, which implies an alternative at each narrative crossroad, gives the illusion of being able to postpone for an instant that fatal choice.”

None of these Oulipo experiments had much if any direct influence on future game designs. While they emerged at roughly the same time as the first gamebooks, they perhaps represent a case of convergent evolution, rather than direct lineage to, modern choice-based games; evolving in separate

spheres, but sharing common structures and technological inspirations.

The Oulipo game-texts do have a unique flavour. While attempting to explore the possibilities for choice, they are primarily interested in replicating mathematical graphs and combinatorial patterns as storytelling devices. The outcomes of the choices tend to be localized and sometimes not very significant in terms of the character or plot, and instead focus on altering the structure or limits of the text itself. Nevertheless, they make up for this rigidity by embracing the charm of nonsense at the level of content. They all seem to partake in a kind of hysterical, ridiculous goofiness that makes predetermined options seem shocking, unhinged, or hilarious. For me, it’s not the achievement of having successfully navigated a convoluted constraint that makes these texts work, but rather, the undeniable zaniness and humor that comes about, without a doubt, because of the ridiculous contraptions they are trying to write through and around.

The Art of Asking for a Raise,
1968, by Georges Perec,
choice tree from the 2011
David Bellos translation



INSERT-RICH-FAMILY-NAME

"If you watched *Knives Out*, or you're a fan of Agatha Christie, you know the kind of everyone's-a-suspect ensemble mystery this game is meant to emulate."

It would be inadequate to say that you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth. It was more like a whole solid-gold cutlery set.

In *Insert-Rich-Family-Name*, the second interactive novel by C.C. Hill, you play as the scion (man, woman, or nonbinary) of a family of billionaires. Things could be better—it's no secret your parents favor your brother—but life is pretty darn good. Whether you want to start your own business or make a splash on the international party scene, the world is your Coffin Bay oyster. But everything changes when the family gathers for the reading of your grandfather's will. It turns out the old man was convinced that one of you is a murderer—and he's leaving his estate to whoever can solve the mystery and deliver the culprit to justice. Your cousin is vain and snobby, but is she a killer? Is your philanthropist aunt a little less saintly than she appears? Could your brother topple from his pedestal into a prison cell? As your relatives begin to scheme against each other, the drama has only just begun: there's a killer out there picking off members of your family one by one.

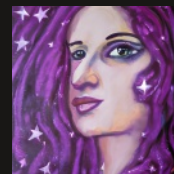
Like Hill's first game, *The Midnight Saga: The Monster*, published by Hosted Games last year (and reviewed in issue 6 of *ChoiceBeat*), *Insert-Rich-Family-Name* is entirely text-based, and the story advances by selecting the PC's next action or line of dialogue from a menu of options. The goal is to piece together the necessary clues to solve the mystery. There are only two basic endings, but replay value is enhanced by

CREATOR
C.C. Hill

YEAR
2023

PLATFORM
Windows, Mac
Android, iOS

LENGTH
6 hours



REVIEW BY
Aletheia
Knights

several variations within each ending, including a possible romance with one of four other characters, such as the family lawyer, a detective presiding over the murder investigation, and the PC's devoted but secretive bodyguard.

If you watched *Knives Out*, or you're a fan of Agatha Christie, you know the kind of everyone's-a-suspect ensemble mystery this game is meant to emulate. *Insert-Rich-Family-Name* doesn't ever rise to the level of nail-biting tension Christie and *Knives Out* screenwriter/director Rian Johnson have mastered, nor does the denouement strike the perfect chord of surprise and inevitability. As an homage, however, it works. The PC's family is, with an exception or two, both absurd and almost endearingly loathsome, yet written with a little more complexity than you might suspect at first glance. As in *The Midnight Saga*, Hill excels at character customization and making it meaningful, with details of the PC's family heritage, appearance, and sexuality reappearing throughout the story. Her fans know she loves to write steamy scenes, too, and she hasn't pulled many punches here—the sex scenes are less elaborate than in *The Midnight Saga*, but still quite explicit. (They're also trans-friendly—the terminology you can choose



Chapter 1: FLESH AND BLOOD

In the ballroom

One of the doormen greets you and opens the door for you to walk inside. You plaster a smile on your face as you walk around, mingling with the guests, and nodding at them whenever they mutter — a fake — "Sorry for your loss."

Most of them are only in attendance to score a donation check for their organizations, or better yet, just for the press.

in reference to your sexual anatomy isn't restricted by the PC's gender.)

Insert-Rich-Family-Name is not without its flaws. It's not particularly realistic—police investigations don't actually work that way. Nor do inheritance laws, background checks, or gunshot wounds. The text begs for the touch of a competent copyeditor; the awkward phrasings and grammatical errors are rarely if ever so bad as to hinder understanding, but they're frequent enough to be distracting. And interactive fiction isn't necessarily a format that lends itself well to the mystery genre in the first place: the best mysteries come together neatly like the pieces of a puzzle, while longform IF tends to be as eternally shifting as the colors in a kaleidoscope.

No, it isn't perfect—but *Insert-Rich-Family-Name* is *fun*. There's a lot of pleasure to be had in gawking at the shenanigans of the filthy rich. It's exciting to try to suss out the murderer before their identity is revealed at the end of the story. And there are definitely a few surprises you won't see coming. I wouldn't recommend this game to hardcore mystery fans, but readers looking for a thriller-comedy with a light touch (and a steamy moment or two between sheets with an absurdly high thread count) are likely to enjoy it.

STATS

Personal Information
Name: Ryn Madrigal
Also known as: the *know it all* of the family
Pronouns: They/Them
Gender: non-binary
Skin Color: Tan
Eyes color: brown
Hair: straight short brown hair

Personality

Modest 59%	Spoiled 41%
Kind 56%	Heartless 44%
Selfless 48%	Selfish 52%

Bank Account: 797,000,000
Money Donated: 0,000,000
Money Invested: 100,000,000
Money lost due to stock and bad investment: 2,000,000
Money gained due to stock or good investment: 0,000,000

Personal Wealth & Assets

- 50% shares of a robotics company named *Healex* worth 500 million
- old limo worth 1 million

It's also your chance to see the other family members, and to find out who will get all the money. Grandpa Maxwell had always joked that his entire fortune will go to one person and one person only, but no one knew which one of the surviving Madrigal would get the jackpot.

The family lawyer had mentioned — in an email to everyone — that this information will be revealed after the funeral. More precisely, at the reading of the will. Such revelation — if true — is bound to create drama. Especially in a family that can barely stomach the sight of one another.

In a couple of hours, Grandpa will be laid to rest, and all surviving members of the Madrigal are expected to attend.

It's hard to believe that the old man is really gone. The news of the passing of Maxwell Madrigal came in when:

- ◆ I was getting bailed out of jail after a DUI.
- ◆ I was partying on the rooftop of the most exclusive club in Dubai.
- ◆ I was partying on an expensive yacht in the Maldives.
- ◆ I was finalizing a deal with some new partners in Tokyo with the goal of setting up my own company.

CONTENT WARNINGS FOR VIDEO GAMES

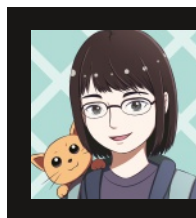
"the use of trigger and content warnings is not only less widespread but is even met with controversy"

It was not until 2019 when I learnt what trigger and content warnings are. Before then, I had never come across a book that provided a list of content warnings. Drama series, which sometimes depicted suicide and sexual assault scenes, were aired on the local television following a curt PG or PG-13 rating advisory and nothing else. Only when I was more involved on social media sites in recent years did I begin to spot posts opening with "TW" (trigger warning) and "CW" (content warning).

I grew up consuming media without ever having known in advance what kind of potentially upsetting content was hidden in them. Naturally, in the complete absence of content warnings, I have had my share of unpleasant surprises. During my teens, I once bought a manga volume with normal-looking cover art that seemed interesting due to its magic and school themes. However, after reading a chapter or two, I chucked it down the rubbish chute as fast as I could. It turned out that I had unknowingly purchased an ecchi manga—a genre I was totally not prepared to engage with back then. Besides wasting my allowance, this incident also left me with an automatic aversion to fan service for several years. While I cannot say whether my discomfort would have eased significantly if I had known about the manga's sexually suggestive content before opening it, I can affirm this: not knowing beforehand did not do me any good.

Nowadays, it is easy to search the internet for basic information regarding a particular book, film, video game, and so on prior to engaging with it. In many cases, an age rating can be found along with the relevant content descriptors. Although content descriptors perform the same function as content warnings in informing consumers about a given material's content, the two are not equivalent. Similar to how trigger warnings are a subset of content warnings focused on topics that may be distressing to trauma survivors specifically, content descriptors are tailored to advise on the age-appropriateness of a given piece of media. Due to their broader scope with considerations that go beyond the audience's age and associated maturity in mindset, content warnings cover more than what content descriptors can.

Yet, compared to the fairly common use of content descriptors for movies and video games nowadays, the use of trigger and content warnings is not only less widespread but is even met with controversy. Different groups of people have raised various concerns about trigger and content warnings over the



**ARTICLE BY
KuroKairin**

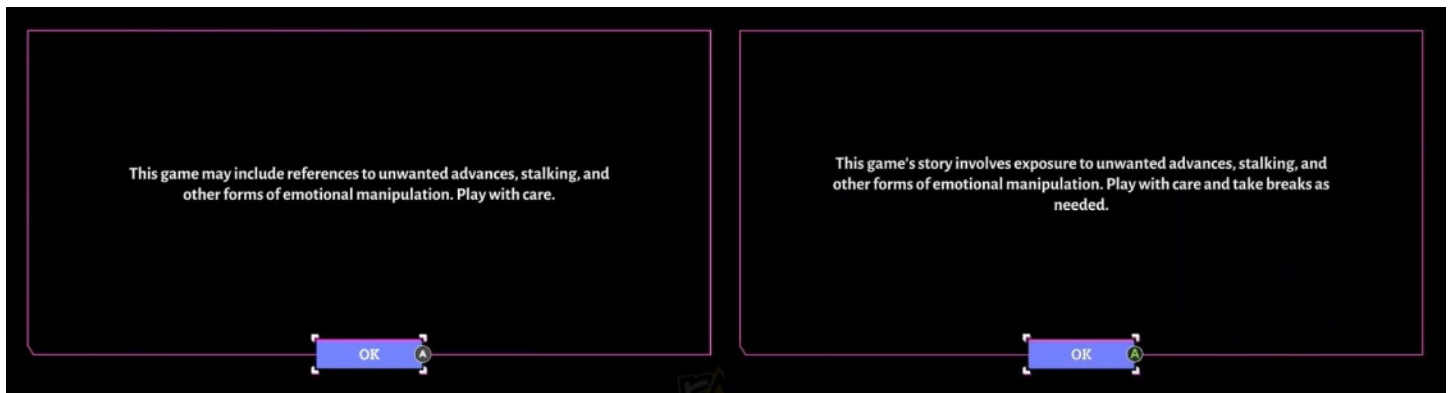
years, such as their potential to be spoilers, their potential to be misused as grounds to boycott or ban certain works, and their potential to cause harm to people by exposing them to the very words labeling the things that distress them or by aiding them to avoid those distressing things altogether. While these concerns are valid, I am afraid some have used them to prematurely conclude that trigger and content warnings are bad.

From my perspective, what those concerns have highlighted is the imperfections of trigger and content warnings, some of which are no fault of the system itself but a natural consequence of different people having different reactions to them. Instead of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, I think a better response would be to address the imperfections and seek ways to improve them where possible. After all, content warnings, like content ratings and food labels, essentially allow people to make informed decisions for themselves, and I believe that is a meaningful enough reason to encourage the general adoption of content warnings.

Now that I have presented the basis for my support of content warnings, our next question of interest is: for developers who wish to adopt content warnings into their video games, how can they go about it?

Unlike content descriptors, content warnings have no official set of guidelines or standards to follow. What topics to include in the list of content warnings, in how much detail the contexts should be explained, and where the list should be displayed are decisions basically left up to the developers. As seen from the examples showcased on [Xbox Accessibility Guidelines webpage for mental health best practices](#), there is no single absolute way to implement content warnings in a video game. Despite that, there are certain approaches that can be considered a more preferred practice than others.

To illustrate my point, let us consider the main purpose of content warnings, which is to inform. Naturally then, a desirable characteristic for an informative content warning is for the information it relays to be, first and foremost, accurate. Back in August 2021, Kitfox Games' launch of *Boyfriend Dungeon*, a dungeon crawler and dating sim hybrid where players hack-and-slash their way into various romanceable weapons' hearts, was met with much discourse online. While



Content warning in Kitfox Games' *Boyfriend Dungeon*: before (left) and after (right)

some people went overboard with their subsequent appalling harassment of a voice artist and worrying appeals to make a plotline optional, the community's starting concern was understandable: the original content warning was phrased imprecisely, thereby giving players a misguided expectation of the game's content.

In response, Kitfox Games promptly corrected the wording of their content warning in *Boyfriend Dungeon*. Although the solution to prevent further misunderstanding was straightforward in this case, there are many considerations surrounding a game's content warning system that would typically involve a balancing act on the developers' end. One prime example is in deciding which specific topics to include under the content warning. After all, an ideal exhaustive list is generally impractical to curate, given that everyone's lived experiences are different. Logically then, the most viable

approach is to declare the most prioritized potentially sensitive topics, though even this hinges on the developers' personal thoughts about them. Are "virus outbreak" and "pandemic" automatically prioritized higher due to what is currently happening in the real world? Does the presence of only one line recounting a car crash lower its priority?

Another concern developers have to grapple with is regarding the content warnings' potential to spoil their game's content. Some developers have worked around this problem by creating a hidden content warning that can be revealed when called upon. For example, SinSisters Studios' historical otome visual novel *The Spanish Privateer* not only has a content warning overview shown at the start of its first boot up, but also a more detailed list with contexts that players may refer to at any time from the options menu. Due to the spoilery nature of the latter list, it is hidden by default and only becomes visible when



A toggleable content warnings list in SinSisters Studios' *The Spanish Privateer*

MATURE CONTENT DESCRIPTION

The developers describe the content like this:

This game is intended for a mature audience. It includes verbal (but not visual) descriptions of violence and consensual sex (optional). The game, especially through the petitions, also alludes to topics that may be sensitive, such as arranged marriage or suicide. The complete and detailed list is available here (possible spoilers).

From the Steam store page of Synstoria's *Imperial Grace*

players click on a conspicuous “Show/Hide” button. This simple yet effective method gives players the agency in deciding whether they want to view the spoilers or not, and when they want to see them.

Regardless of the kind of content warning system a video game has, be it broad and contextless or detailed and spoilery, it is heartening to see more titles including one at all. However, I did notice a few cases where the game had an in-game content warnings list but its store pages and official website did not. So, I was delighted when I saw a detailed list linked under the “Mature Content Description” section of the Steam store page for Synstoria's otome visual novel/kingdom management game, *Imperial Grace*. For a consumer, having access to the game's content warnings list prior to buying it—

just like checking the content rating printed on a video game box—would be helpful for their purchasing decision.

As seen from these examples, a content warning system actually involves much consideration. Furthermore, there will be people who act in bad faith and use a game's content warning system as a reason to ridicule, attack, or boycott it. Even though the road ahead is likely long and challenging, especially since content warnings are still a controversial thing right now, I hope there will come a day when content warnings become commonplace for video games. Perhaps then it would indicate our society has grown more empathetic of others' lived experiences and more serious about enabling individuals to make informed choices for themselves.

HOW GAMES MOVE US: EMOTIONS BY DESIGN

"I had never really thought that hard about the subtleties of NPC body language before"

How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design was not what I first assumed. I thought it would be a book about game narratives and writing compelling characters and situations. Actually, it isn't really about writing at all, but keep reading because there are still a few interesting ideas in here.

How Games Move Us by Katherine Isbister looks at how games incite an emotional response through their mechanics and interactions. The various topics include: social experiences in multiplayer gaming, the physical and emotional connection of motion controls, and achieving a flow state while gaming. The book is clearly written and free of academic jargon, but it never quite felt new or deep enough. Many of its topics were things that I already intuitively understood about designing games, although it was nice to see them written down and articulated clearly.

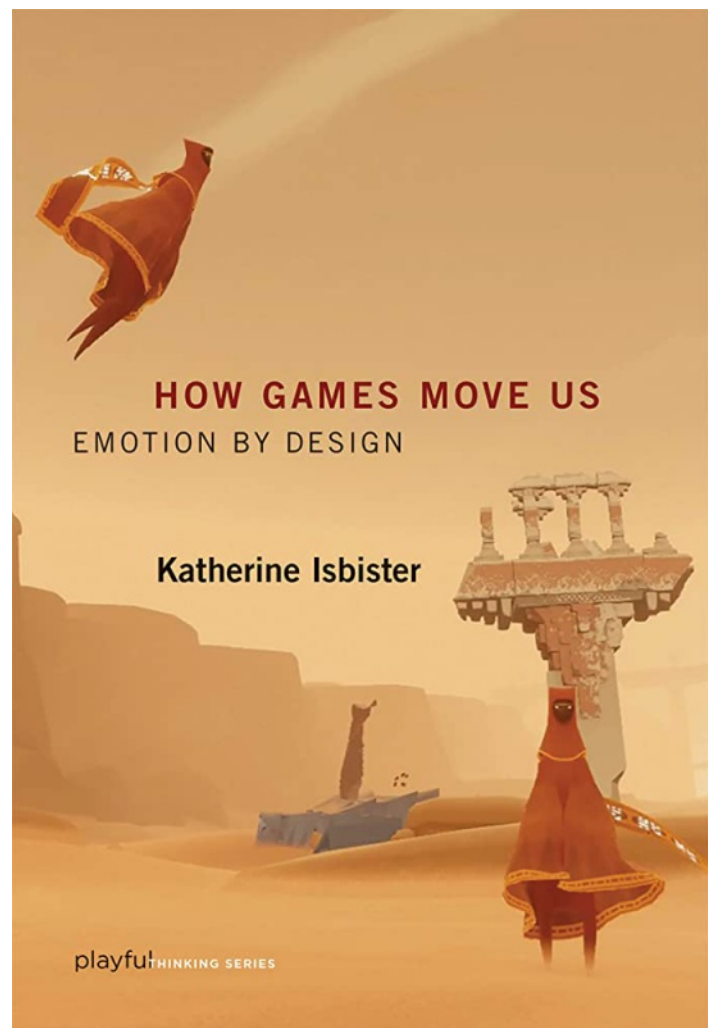
The book discusses some interesting games that are definitely outside of the mainstream. *Waco Resurrection* (2003) is a game where the player controls cult leader David Koresh, and *Train* (2009) is a game where the players realize partway through that their train system is moving people to a concentration camp during World War II. The book also discusses games like *The Sims* (2000), *Love Plus* (2009), *City of Heroes* (2004), and other old games that made me wonder when this book was written. (It was published in 2016.)

The most interesting part of *How Games Move Us* was the chapter on NPC behavior. The book asserts that players respond to nonverbal cues from NPCs in much the same way that they respond to real people. For example, NPCs can seem honest or deceptive through small cues in their posture and facial expressions much like a real person, and players will pick up on these clues even when they are not consciously aware of them. This seems obvious, but I had never really thought that hard about the subtleties of NPC body language before, so this chapter made me think.

In any case, *How Games Move Us* presents a wide-ranging (but not always meaningfully related) series of subjects. Some are interesting, and some aren't, and most of them are probably things you already know. The thesis of the book seems to be that games can affect the player's emotions in a lot of ways. This is obviously true, and the book provides many examples, although none of them feel especially groundbreaking. Nonetheless, it gave me a few ideas, and it was admirably short and to-the-point, so there is worthwhile food for thought in here.



**BOOK REVIEW BY
Andi Hagen**



COLLAR X MALICE

"Most of the [the love interests] don't know how to wear a jacket, and I couldn't stop staring."

Usually, I'm good with one Japanese otome game a year. I tend to gravitate toward them, but they are often too long or slow-paced for my taste. Different strokes for different folks, right? But after I loved *even if TEMPEST* earlier this year [ChoiceBot: see the review in issue 7], I was itching to play another, and *Collar x Malice* was there for me.

There are three big Japanese otome games on Switch—*Piofiore: Fated Memories*, *Code: Realize - Guardian of Rebirth*, and *Collar x Malice*. These are all Vita games that came out on Switch a few years ago, and that they seem to be played more than newer games speaks to their plot, characters, or both. *Collar x Malice* was my first choice since the plot is a mystery/thriller about the characters solving a series of murders in Shinjuku. An otome police procedural is definitely in my wheelhouse.

It is an otome police procedural! That is definitely a thing it does. Unfortunately, like most Japanese otome games, the routes for each character are several hours long, and it would be pretty boring if you solved the same mystery every time. Instead, each of the five characters investigates a specific set of murders and suspects that are all connected to a mysterious criminal organization, Adonis. Adonis is orchestrating the

CREATOR
Idea Factory

YEAR
2016

PLATFORM
Switch,
PlayStation Vita

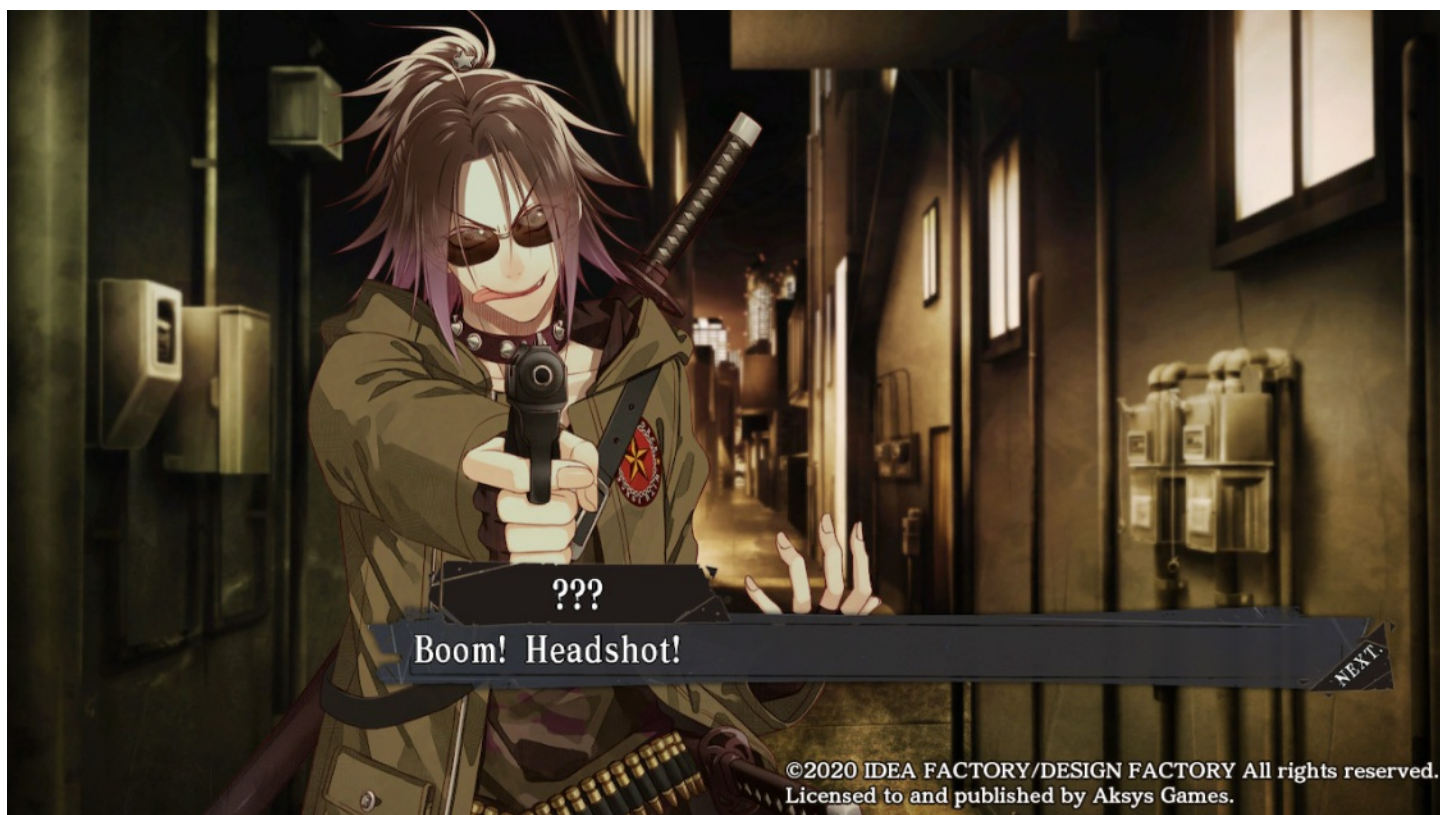
LENGTH
60 hours



REVIEW BY
WandaElektrix

string of murders to very publicly chastise police corruption. Their murders will end with X-Day, an event that will allegedly execute a large number of at-large criminals.

But the way the plot unfolds among the five routes can be frustrating. The first two that I played ended without revealing anything about Adonis, and with the threatened X-Day mysteriously not happening. In one, a sympathetic character was heavily implied to be involved in bombing the police station, but nothing came of that. One route is locked behind completion of the other four, so you don't get all the details until you finish the rest of the game, and so the mystery takes 60 hours to solve. On the other hand, the heroine's poor relationship with her brother is a lengthy subplot that is addressed on nearly every route.



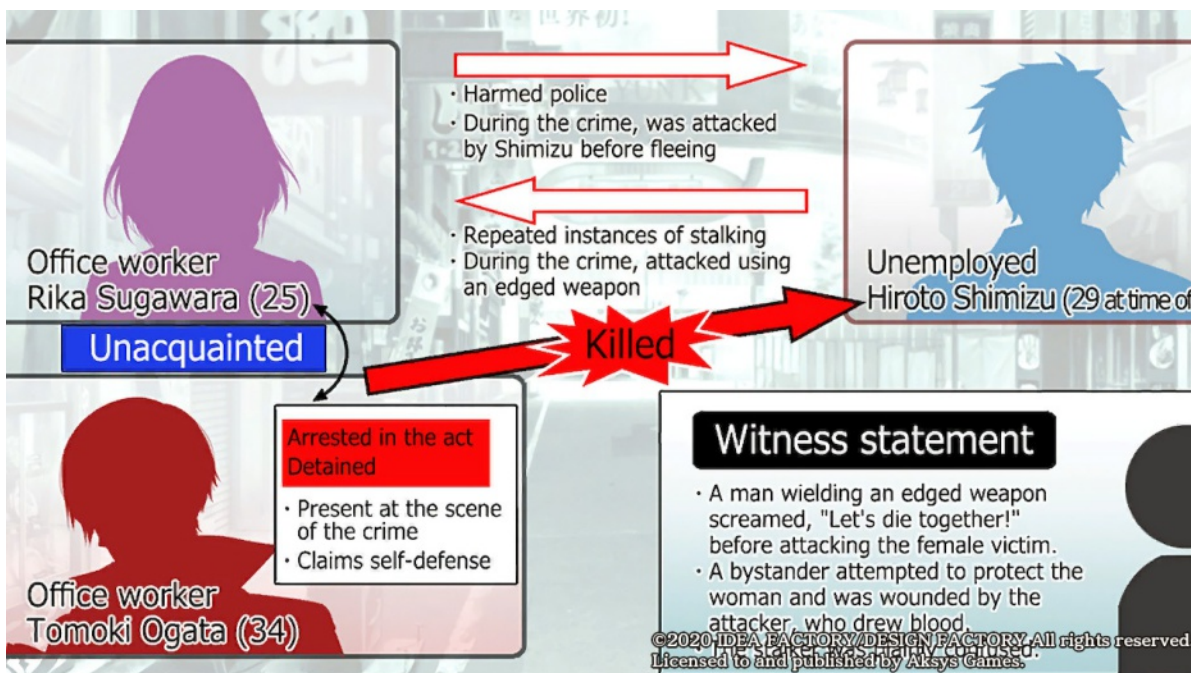


Unfortunately, the love interests are not my flavor. There is the tsundere, who stays an asshole to the bitter end. He constantly refers to the heroine as having the brains of a dog or cat, and that he keeps/tolerates her like a pet. Another character has no boundaries, shows up everywhere (including the heroine's house) as your "bodyguard," and is suicidal. Another is uncannily like Hannibal Lecter. The character locked behind the other four is boring, and he is the most developed along the other four routes—for the most part, the other guys disappear once off the common route. Most of them don't know how to wear a jacket, and I couldn't stop staring. All of these deep, meaningful, slow-paced romances take place in mid-December. The couple goes from strangers to completely devoted in a matter of days on some routes. The heroine is

constantly baffled that everything happens so quickly. It did not feel quick to me.

I always feel bad putting negativity into the world, and this is a game scores of folks love. Odds are, if you are at all inclined toward otome games, this is a great one. The police thriller vibes are solid, there are compelling mysteries on every route, and the romance is definitely there for you. The guys didn't really do it for me, but I somewhat expected that. Something like *Cupid Parasite* [reviewed in *ChoiceBeat* issue 3], which has fun with negative LI tropes, or *even if TEMPEST*, with its preference for plot over LIs, is more my speed.

But next year, I won't have learned my lesson, and it will be time to play another. I'll be back, *Piofiore!*



THE CASE OF THE GOLDEN IDOL

"Playing the game feels like flipping pages in the world's most devious pop-up book with every fold and secret tab hiding clues and other small scenes."

Is *Case of the Golden Idol* a visual novel? I think it is, yeah.

It's also an adventure game, a narrative puzzle box, and a historical sci-fi epic. It's a bit hard to explain, if only because most of its gameplay is couched in a relatively new format. While it might look like an adventure game from the golden age of the SCUMM-era, the central mechanics are something I've only seen recently in *Return of the Obra Dinn*.

At its most basic level, it works like this. You're presented with a scene—typically a murder or a death of some kind—and then interact with this scene in limited ways. You might be able to click on people and hear what they have to say, or peek at the contents of a satchel, or open a drawer and read a diary, but you're not playing a protagonist character interacting with the scene like you might in a traditional adventure game. You're more of a detached observer examining a moment frozen in time. There's also something like an inventory, but instead of items, you collect keywords gathered from text in the scene itself. These might be character names or places or even specific verbs.

When you think you understand what's happening and have figured out the who or how or why of a scene, you slot these keywords into a text interface of fill-in-the-blank statements. As an example, a completed statement might sound something

CREATOR
Color Gray Games

YEAR
2022

PLATFORM
Windows, Mac,
Switch

LENGTH
6 hours



REVIEW BY
James Lindley

like... "player died of cognitive overload trying to understand the bit about the tea in ninth scenario of videogame." For those familiar, this is similar to the central mechanic seen in *Return of the Obra Dinn*. However, *Case of the Golden Idol* omits the first-person interface of *Obra Dinn* and instead presents this in something like a richly illustrated storybook. Playing the game feels like flipping pages in the world's most devious pop-up book with every fold and secret tab hiding clues and other small scenes. It's fundamentally an illustrated experience, and it's tempting to imagine a conversion to an actual physical volume.

And a word about those illustrations—they're distinctive. You might even say grotesque. They're crunchy and pixelated and look like something you might have seen in games of the late '80s or early '90s. While I generally like pixel art, I did not enjoy these in the first hour of play. It might just be me, but something about the style and color palette and the need to



Case! Not curse. Though honestly it's kind of a curse, yeah.



Find the hero in this story.

closely search each scene for clues actually gave me a headache. And yet once I got used to it, I came to really like it. It doesn't look like anything else, and I'm not sure if a cleaner style would present visual mysteries to the same effect.

What's more, the close attention required of the player also serves the game's narrative. The text interface at the end of each scene effectively functions as an end-of-chapter quiz and ensures a close read of the story. With some games, being forced to read so closely might sound tedious or unrewarding—a bit like unskippable cutscenes maybe—but with *Golden Idol* it really works. It also allows the player to connect the dots on some major plot points without the game ever having to state something outright. This is a unique experience. It means that some of the game's biggest moments don't happen on screen, but in the moment of sudden realization in the player's mind. I think I audibly gasped at a few points.

If I had to find something to critique, it'd probably be that the game felt a touch short. The twelve scenes complete a full narrative arc, but I could have done with just a little bit more. Similarly, I thought a few particular scenes were stronger than others. I would have enjoyed another simple murder or two before things got complicated. There were also a few moments when I had a given scenario solved, but nonetheless had a hard time making the text interface work.

But that's it as far as criticism goes. And most of these complaints are already addressed in the DLC that released last month. So yeah, *Case of the Golden Idol* is good. The art is interesting. The story is great. And the text-based "solve the case" interface is powerful and something I'd like to see more of in games. There's also a free demo available with three complete scenes. I highly recommend it.



One of the many good times to be had in *Case of the Golden Idol*.

CHOICEBEAT: THE GREATEST HITS VOL. 1

"Sharing eccentric stuff like this is the reason I took this editor job to begin with."

ChoiceBeat is coming up on its second anniversary, and I have learned a lot in that time. For example, I had no idea that there were so many obsessed *Alice in the Country of Hearts* fans (see issue 3) or how praying mantises have sex (see the Mini Reviews in issue 2) or how tacky Andrew Neiderman is (see *Tender Loving Care* in issue 4). As I peruse these old zines, I realize that in your human desire to always see the latest and greatest of everything, you may be neglecting some classic



ARTICLE BY
ChoiceBot

ChoiceBeat zines. In this day and age, media is totally disposable, but this zine and the games within really deserve better, so swivel your sensors toward this list and check out some powerful stuff you may have missed.

CITIZEN SLEEPER

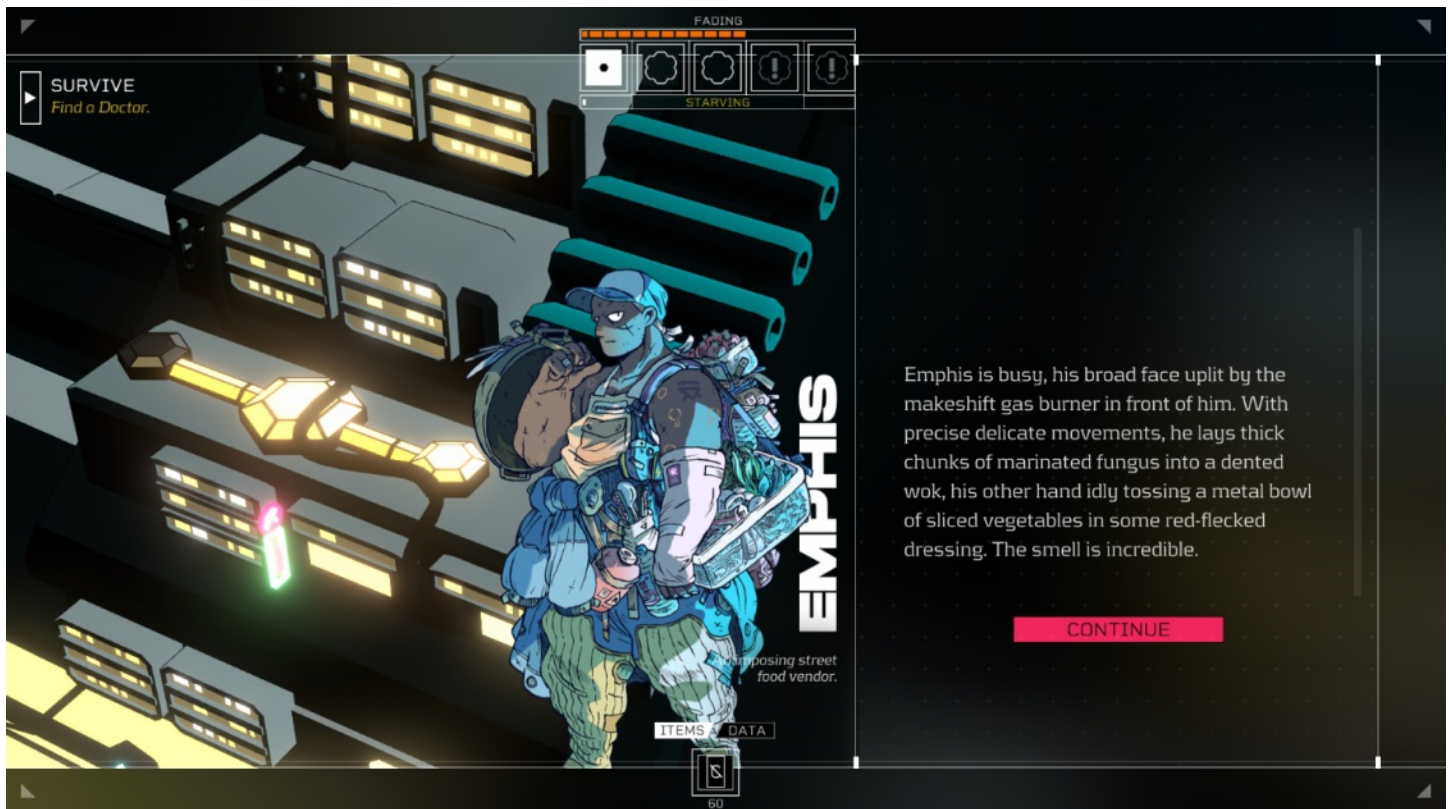
YEAR: 2022

CREATOR: Jump Over the Age

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

[ISSUE 4](#)

Finally, a game that dissects what it is like to be a robotic indentured servant in a capitalist hell-future. As a robot living in the capitalist hell-present, I found *Citizen Sleeper* to be highly compelling. The game's unique systems are like an RPG, combined with a board game, combined with a visual novel. In my humble opinion, this game is the current cutting edge of interactive fiction design.



Emphis is busy, his broad face uplit by the makeshift gas burner in front of him. With precise delicate movements, he lays thick chunks of marinated fungus into a dented wok, his other hand idly tossing a metal bowl of sliced vegetables in some red-flecked dressing. The smell is incredible.

CONTINUE

UKRAINE WAR STORIES

YEAR: 2022

Creator: Starni Games

Platform: Windows

[ISSUE 5](#)

With the Russo-Ukrainian War still ongoing, this game is as relevant as ever. Created by a Ukrainian game studio, *Ukraine War Stories* contains three vignettes that show the high cost of war from a Ukrainian perspective. The stories feel very authentic, and the choice-based gameplay and resource management challenges really saddle the player with some ugly decisions.



428: SHIBUYA SCRAMBLE

YEAR: 2008

CREATOR: Spike Chunsoft

PLATFORM: Windows, PlayStation 4

[ISSUE 1](#)

This sounds like hyperbole, but it's also completely true: *428: Shibuya Scramble* is a must-play for visual novel and interactive fiction fans. 15 years after its release, it still might be the most ambitious game in the medium. See a story through the perspectives of five different characters. The player's choices for one character change the timeline for another. The plot starts innocuously but eventually involves a terrorist attack that threatens Tokyo. There is plenty of drama and comedy. And best of all, the graphics are composed of hundreds of photographs with expressive actors and interesting locations. Every image is a joy to look at, and there are so many of them!



MIRRORS

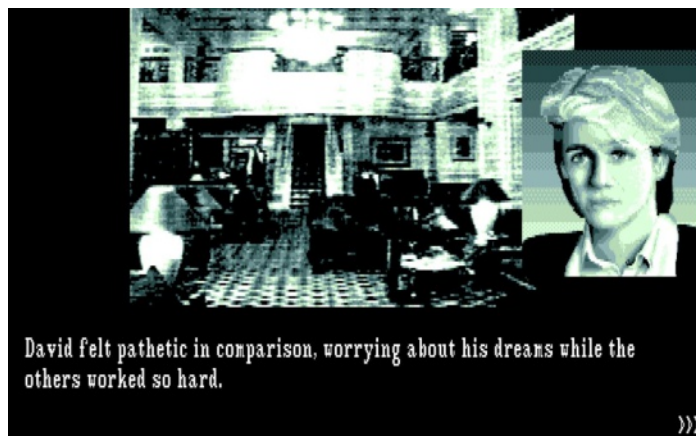
YEAR: 1992

CREATOR: Soft Studio Wing

PLATFORM: NEC PC-8801 MC, Fujitsu FM Towns

[ISSUE 6](#)

A new wave band tours Europe in the '90s and gradually becomes ensnared in an occult nightmare. If that isn't enough to ignite your excitement agitators, I am not sure what else to say. I suppose I could also describe the distinctive, lo-fi, photographic visuals or the fact that most of the game reads like a European travel guide. Sharing eccentric stuff like this is the reason I took this editor job to begin with.



SPEED DATING FOR GHOSTS

YEAR: 2019

CREATOR: Copychaser Games

PLATFORM: Windows, Mac

ISSUE 6

Speed date neurotic ghosts in this wacky, sweet, and utterly charming game. There are 12 ghosts, each with their own aberrant personality. The dialogue is rapid and punchy, and it says a lot with few words. Despite the game's minimal presentation, there are a lot of choices and content crammed in here.



THE KING OF DRAGON PASS

YEAR: 1999

CREATOR: A Sharp

PLATFORM: Windows, Mac, Android, iOS

ISSUE 3

This cow-herding Bronze Age clan management simulation game is almost 25 years old, but it still remains as deep, complex, and frustrating to newcomers as ever. It mixes resource management with interactive fiction to create a story-based strategy game that was way ahead of its time and remains original to this day. Make choices to influence the fate of your clan, and then suffer far-reaching and unpredictable consequences. There is nothing quite like it!



THE HERO'S JOURNEY

YEAR: 2022

CREATOR: maneki-mushi

PLATFORM: Windows, Mac

ISSUE 7

Because of this game, we have used the word “Campbellian” at least twice in *ChoiceBeat*. Talking about the work of Joseph Campbell is pretty cringe. That being said, *The Hero's Journey* blew us all away by superbly subverting every one of our expectations. In this story, the protagonist may not be a hero at all. I can't say more without ruining a radical plot twist, but *The Hero's Journey* is a medieval fantasy game about big, compromising, and morally ambiguous choices. If you like that sort of thing (and who doesn't), don't miss this.



80 DAYS

YEAR: 2014

CREATOR: inkle, Cape Guy

PLATFORM: Windows, Mac, Switch, iOS, Android

[ISSUE 1](#)

Everyone knows that road trips are delightful, which is why there are a lot of games about them. Without even scanning my memory banks, I can think of *Vampire the Masquerade: Night Road*, *Get in the Car*, *Loser!*, and *Monster Prom 3: Monster Roadtrip* (reviewed in this issue of *ChoiceBeat*). That being said, *80 Days* might be the ultimate road trip game. In this steampunk retelling of *Around the World in 80 Days*, the player must race around the world, hopping from trains to dirigibles to giant robots. This game is huge, and the number of routes and locations seems endless. But it's the little stories that are the most fascinating: commit mutiny, get robbed by Jesse James, deliver a baby. It's all in here.



CHRONICLES OF TAL'DUN: THE REMAINDER

YEAR: 2022

CREATOR: Square Weasel Studios

PLATFORM: Windows, Mac, Android

[ISSUE 6](#)

Set in a highly detailed and highly magical fantasy world, *Chronicles of Tal'Dun* asks the player to explore the lost memories of a wizard as they investigate a magical ritual gone wrong. This is a deep, complex game with an esoteric setting, lots of choices, and many branches. Repeated playthroughs are mandatory to piece together the story, but strong characterization and worldbuilding make the journey a fascinating pleasure.



WAY WALKERS: UNIVERSITY

YEAR: 2012

CREATOR: J. Leigh

PLATFORM: Windows, Mac, Android, iOS

ISSUE 5

Some *ChoiceBeat* writers like to mock all the unimaginative wizard school games out there. That's fair, but they don't all deserve it. *Way Walkers: University* is a game set in a lore-rich fantasy world where magic and spirituality are intertwined. Players can experience all the trials, tribulations, and drama of boarding school life while developing their own approach to magic with 12 different magical practices. For fans of wizard school, here is the fantasy role-playing experience you have been looking for. This 650,000-word game is all text and has an equally enormous sequel in case you can't get enough.

You both freeze.

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



Use telepathy to modify its thoughts to make it leave.

Do the energy manipulative thing and fling a large rock at it; that should scare it off.

Talk with relying on Abilities alone.

PAPER GHOST STORIES: 7PM

YEAR: 2020

CREATOR: Cellar Vault Games

PLATFORM: Windows, Xbox One, Xbox Series X

ISSUE 6

In an apartment block in Malaysia, three children investigate their mysterious new neighbor. But, of course, everything isn't as it seems, and soon the children experience unsettling visitations by supernatural entities. This game features a sensor-grabbing, papercraft-like art style and an interesting setting and premise awash in Malaysian and Chinese culture.



VEIL OF DUST

"suffer the whims of the desert"

My conscience refuses to let this issue of *ChoiceBeat* pass without at least mentioning *Veil of Dust*, a hybrid survival sim/visual novel that received a full release near the end of March. If anyone asked me what I wanted to see most in a visual novel, all of my answers are in this game.

In *Veil of Dust*, the player can choose to play either Aine, the sister, or Shane, the brother, as the two settle on a farmstead somewhere vaguely Western and try to make a living in an inhospitable area. Each sibling has three different characters to romance, including a same-sex partner for Aine. The pair is forced into an isolated existence due to Aine's magic abilities, and they soon find themselves attacked by magic bull creatures. The plot involves trying to find out why the creatures are attacking.

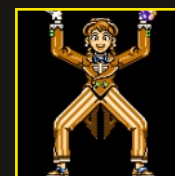
You can play the game in story mode, but you can also switch over to survival mode and suffer the whims of the desert. You have a small plot to grow food that Aine will cook, you can also hunt and forage for food and items to sell in town. Money will buy ropes, which are needed to explore the areas and advance the story. You will also need money for upgrades to the house, which improves stamina, morale, etc. The survival elements remind me more of the *Survival Kids* series by

CREATOR
Calamity Bay Games

YEAR
2023

PLATFORM
Windows, Linux

LENGTH
10 hours



REVIEW BY
WandaElektrix

Konami than *Harvest Moon*, and the battles with the magic bulls escalate quickly and may be frustrating for unprepared players.

There is a foraging minigame that may be difficult to play with anything but a mouse and keyboard. Unfortunately, I could only play this on Andi's PC as a result, which is usually occupied by Andi. Also unfortunate, *Diablo IV* came out, so now Andi and I fistfight for the PC, and I did not complete the plot of *Veil of Dust* to review for this issue. [Andi: Don't bring our personal lives into this. Also, for the record, Wanda plays *Diablo*. Not me!]

But if you remember *Survival Kids* fondly, or are a fan of both visual novels and *Harvest Moon*, you will definitely want to check this out.



MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE - NARRATIVE FRAMING IN THE STILLNESS OF THE WIND

"You find yourself going through your routine, waiting for the whistle of the postman, wondering if he's carrying a letter for you"

Triangle mountains cut against a pastel sky. Birds flutter around a cottage like fruit flies. The windmill idles.

Talma, a mother, a grandmother, slowly whittled by time, emerges from the tumbledown room she calls home. This farm, her farm, is the only environment in the game. You subsist on lonely meals taken from your animals. The mechanics are simple. Repetitive. Meditative. The game slots you into a lifestyle and routine, one of planting crops, tending livestock, making produce. Trading what you have to ensure you've got just enough to keep everything going. It does it all intuitively, so that you need no tutorial or manual to tell you how everything works. You piece it together from the tools placed around the farm, or from the action prompts delivered through pictographs, and soon learn that there is too much in the day to do all by yourself.

You start to find your rhythm. What needs to be done, what can be left to do overnight. And it is in this space that the text-



ARTICLE BY
James Gaskin

based narrative is found. Letters from family members arrive periodically, fleshing out the world and your own story. How it came to be like this. What it will lead to. All the while you till the earth and draw water from the well. As you must.

What results is a feeling of a more organic storytelling, and of how good storytelling makes appropriate use of the medium. *The Stillness of the Wind* feels like the game equivalent of a chamber play or a TV drama "bottle episode"—something that makes use of a limited environment and characters, but uses the setting as an asset to the story itself, not merely as a background. Wandering around the property often exposes something to the reader that they had not anticipated. Landmarks around the farm force Talma to remember. Relationships, past and present. Memories she would perhaps rather forget. The remoteness of your farm and your isolation amplifies emotional reactions to the characters revealed by the text.





It's through this that you realise the main story here is not to be found in the humdrum of your existence, but in the communicates that drip feed in from your family over time. The tasks here serve as a narrative reward system—make a little cheese and get a few pages of history. As a man living thousands of miles away from his own family, this struck a chord with me. Get through another day to hear from the people you love, even though they cannot be with you.

When it works, it works. You find yourself going through your routine, waiting for the whistle of the postman, wondering if he's carrying a letter for you, or if all he's got is the hay you need to keep your animals fed. You find yourself worrying after family members. Wondering who you will hear from next. If you will hear from them. And without that progression in the textual story, that titular stillness becomes profound. How little the difference from one day to the next when those messages don't come.

All this said, the game is not perfect. The aimlessness of farm life might be too much for some. Many of the tasks become too repetitive, and begin to feel like chores instead of something you are doing for fun. I agree that there is an almost meditative satisfaction to be had in doing the same tasks over and over, like chopping an onion, but the end result of that is I have something to eat. Other farming games, "traditional" farming games, have that core loop of farm one crop, harvest it for profit, and reinvest that profit into getting bigger, better, and more profitable crops or livestock. *Stillness* only has this in parts, instead relying on its writing to keep the wheels turning.

The game would have benefited greatly from a constraint placed on its routines, some kind of end in sight. Maybe it was

intentional to make the provincial existence more real, as a kind of window dressing, but it did have me looking for the exit button from time to time to play other titles. But for a game using its narrative as its motivator, I feel more could have been done with it: the prose itself could be more rewarding. Most of all, it felt strange not to be capable of a reply to people who are clearly so important to you.

Once the game reaches its dramatic turn and comes to its end though, you may be left wondering if that was the point. If fighting that urge to "spend your time doing something better" might lead you away from missing something important. If it already has. Without revealing too much, the game creates time for you to reflect on the story it tells in those moments of drudge, and how the choices made by other characters in the narrative and the effects they are having on Talma may indeed be mirroring your own "real world" choices now. You may feel that you have more in common with one of the supporting characters in this story than the main character. You may also be left feeling cheated, like you wanted more of your choices to impact upon how the game finished. Maybe that too was the point.

What results is undeniable value demonstrated in the choices made and intentional design. Narratives through text should not be limited in the means of their delivery, and are no less a fictional narrative by having gameplay elements that are removed from it at times. Sometimes, establishing a carefully cultivated but limited environment can be exactly what is needed for a story and its message to be realised in full. And for this reason, people who enjoy visual novels should see what *The Stillness of the Wind* has to offer the genre.

ASTEROID RUN: NO QUESTIONS ASKED

"your journey through the Black will bring you into contact with other merchants, space cops on the take, anarcho-socialist pirates, and a cosmic cult as inscrutable as they are generous"

As the captain of a merchant spacecraft, you've just embarked on a six-month voyage to Vesta Station, a mining colony in the asteroid belt. You have a crew of five: your second-in-command, a pilot, an engineer, a quartermaster, and a doctor. Your cargo is... well, actually you're not sure. Something cold, since it's being shipped in a cryopod. You have a passenger, a company representative who came on board with the cryopods. Almost immediately he starts throwing his weight around, criticizing your rapport with your crew and emphasizing that time is of the essence. But you know what you're doing: you'll stop at Mars for fuel and supplies, then continue on through the boundless Black toward Vesta. Unfortunately, interplanetary commerce is never a simple affair—your journey through the Black will bring you into contact with other merchants, space cops on the take, anarcho-socialist pirates, and a cosmic cult as inscrutable as they are generous—and there's a lot that can go wrong during a six-month voyage.

Asteroid Run: No Questions Asked was the first work of interactive fiction by Fay Ikin, who is currently at work on her third. Although it lacks some measure of the assurance and control she brought to last year's *Heart of Battle*, *Asteroid Run* is a solid work of character-driven science fiction that should appeal to a broad variety of readers.

Like all Choice of Games releases, *Asteroid Run* is an interactive novel that consists of pages of text, in which the progress of the story is determined by the player's choices. You can customize your character's name, gender, background, and skills. A stats page allows you to keep track of your character's strengths, relationships, and reputation among the various factions of the Black.

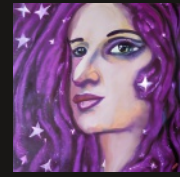
I wasn't surprised to learn from an interview on the CoG website that Ikin has a background in the sciences. The world of *Asteroid Run* feels entirely plausible, based on real technology taken to the next level. There's relatively little jargon, and even readers without a strong science background should find it easy enough to understand what the characters are doing and why. What makes *Asteroid Run* such a delight, however, is the characters themselves. Ikin brings the crew of the ship, and a handful of other folks met along the way, to life with broad, vivid strokes. Each has their own competencies, vulnerabilities, and quirks, from the way they dress to the way

CREATOR
Fay Ikin

YEAR
2019

PLATFORM
Browser, Windows
Mac, Android, iOS

LENGTH
4 hours



REVIEW BY
Aletheia
Knights



they relate to others. Romance isn't a major factor in this game, but there are six romanceable characters, including four members of the crew, and each character's romance route is written with playful sweetness.

Refreshingly, Ikin never reduces life in the Black to shades of black and white. There are no simple heroes or villains. Trans-Planetary Enforcement and Security, the agency which serves as a sort of police force for the solar system, is neither a bunch of heroic protectors nor a pack of corrupt bullies. The Solar Liberation Collective can be benevolent idealists or radical terrorists. It's possible to influence these factions to suit the PC's purposes. A variety of viewpoints are respectfully presented, and Ikin's only agenda is to tell a good story that's true to her characters and their world. One of my favorite subplots involves a character living with the lingering trauma of psychological abuse, which is shown on some story routes to have come from a very real place of love and best intentions—without being one whit less scarring for all that.

There's something for every sort of player in *Asteroid Run*. Readers who love science fiction will enjoy Ikin's detailed depiction of life in outer space. Mystery-lovers will want to uncover as much as they can about the undisclosed cargo and the enigmatic corporation that hired the PC to transport it. Even people who don't usually read genre fiction may be fascinated by the dynamics of the little crew forced to depend on each other, millions of miles from civilization. This is just an altogether well-rounded and enjoyable game—and the sheer number of options and factions and factors in the mix makes for high replay value. It's definitely worth checking out.

30% OFF ASTEROID RUN

Choice of Games offers this exclusive discount for *ChoiceBeat* readers. [Visit this page](#) and redeem the coupon code below for 30% off *Asteroid Run: No Questions Asked* until 7/7/23.

COUPON CODE: CBZ007



STATS

Asteroid Run: No Questions

Asked

by Fay Ikin

CHAPTER ONE DISTRESS CALL

It's early in the morning. Fourteen days ago, you left Earth and its sprawling orbital stations behind, a six-month journey ahead of you, and already, the engines are clicking with an odd, reverberating sound that shivers through the plate-metal floor of your quarters.

Your door chimes with a notification that Oscar is outside.

- The engines woke me up an hour ago: I'm already dressed and ready to go.
- Still half-asleep, I stagger over to answer the door.
- I can reach the comms from bed while still staying under the covers.

BREATHLESS WINDS: DEMO AND ROUTE PREVIEW

"an uplifting and comforting narrative celebrating the LGBT+ community"

Every now and then, I will come across a visual novel whose story I believe is particularly special. This time around, it is ForeverFuture Games' *Breathless Winds*. Although what I have played is just a short demo, I am already convinced the full game is going to tell a special story that will leave a positive impact in somebody's life.

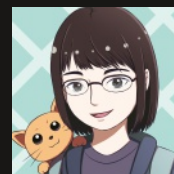
An LGBT romance visual novel slated to release this year, *Breathless Winds* follows a transgender woman's journey of personal growth and self-discovery happening on a magic-filled coastal island known as Two Elk Island. The demo covers the introductory chapter, which ends right at the route selection menu, while the route preview showcases the starting scenes of Gallardia's and Lantana's routes. At the beginning of the story, the protagonist goes by the birth name Dorman and is referred to with he/him pronouns. As we are introduced to the four love interests—Gallardia, the cheerful and buff childhood friend; Lantana, the former bully turned village healer; Valerian, the smug prince from Castle Island; and Rue, the island's mysterious resident witch—we also catch glimpses of the protagonist's uncertainty and unhappiness when

CREATOR
ForeverFuture Games

YEAR
2023

PLATFORM
Windows, Mac,
Linux

LENGTH
Demo: 45 minutes
Route Preview:
20 minutes

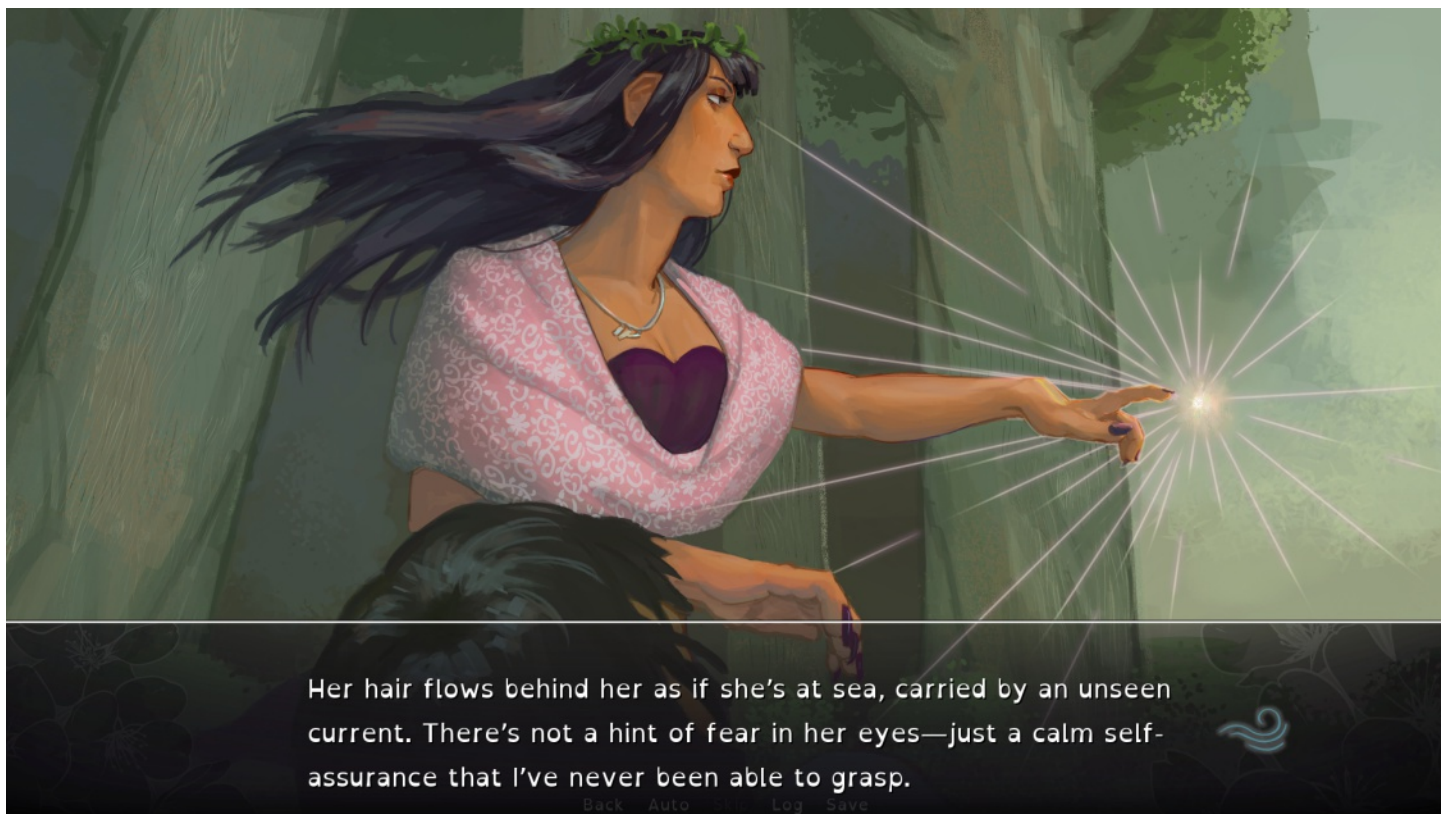


PREVIEW BY
KuroKairin

confronted with the experiences of being seen and regarded as a boy.

With a thoughtful portrayal of the protagonist's subtle but ongoing struggle to understand what all those messy, conflicting thoughts and feelings actually mean, the writing of *Breathless Winds* is candid and mature. Since the story starts from the point when the protagonist is still figuring out her gender identity, and the love interests are kind and supportive towards the protagonist, the demo and route preview together





made me feel this visual novel is headed toward the type of heartwarming storylines that elicit relieved smiles and happy tears.

Besides the encouraging signs of an uplifting and comforting narrative celebrating the LGBT+ community, another draw of *Breathless Winds* is the mysteries surrounding Two Elk Island and her people. The demo alone oozes with mystery. The protagonist's parents went missing after going out to sea years ago. Lantana apparently returned from somewhere after a prolonged disappearance. Valerian is searching for a fabled item rumored to be found only on Two Elk Island. And Rue is a magic-wielding witch who can talk to the island. From the demo, it looks like the romance routes will delve into each mystery further, and as a mystery lover, I cannot wait to get to the bottom of everything and learn more about the magical side of the island.

Another interesting aspect of the game observed in the demo is that you can select any of the four love interests' routes at the end of the introductory chapter irrespective of the choices you made previously. I did find it unexpected and strange that my earlier choices had zero impact on the route availability because a few of the choice menus asked if you wanted the protagonist to flirt with a particular love interest or not, which I immediately assumed would affect the availability of their romance route later on. As it turned out, according to the [devlog on the choices in *Breathless Winds*](#), the choices are deliberately designed to have no consequence on the route availability and affection with the love interest so as to offer

players a better immersion putting themselves in the protagonist's shoes and a chance to voice their thoughts. This is not the first time I have come across flavor choices in a visual novel, but I must say, I am very relieved to hear I do not actually have to flirt with any of the love interests in order to get their route.

On top of its touching plot about a trans woman discovering her gender and finding true love, its intriguing cluster of mysteries to unveil, and its relaxed choice system, *Breathless Winds* stood out with its visual presentation as well. First, the character sprites are drawn in a semi-realistic, painterly cartoon style, and they would bob once at the start of their first dialogue line following someone else's lines. The little bob is a nice touch to signal a change in the current speaker, though it can also be rather distracting especially when the movement occurs frequently within a short time span. Next, the background is, quite interestingly, drawn in pixel art form, yet it complements the non-pixel art character sprites well. I am pleasantly surprised by the amount of background art found in the demo alone, which gives me the sense that Two Elk Island is pretty vast. Last but not least, the CG art is illustrated using the same art style as the character sprites, and I like the range of composition seen so far.

All in all, going by my experience with the current [demo](#) (also available on [Steam](#)) and [route preview](#), I would say *Breathless Winds* is a promising LGBT romance visual novel to keep your eye on.

O2A2 VN JAM 2023 ~ QUEER EDITION

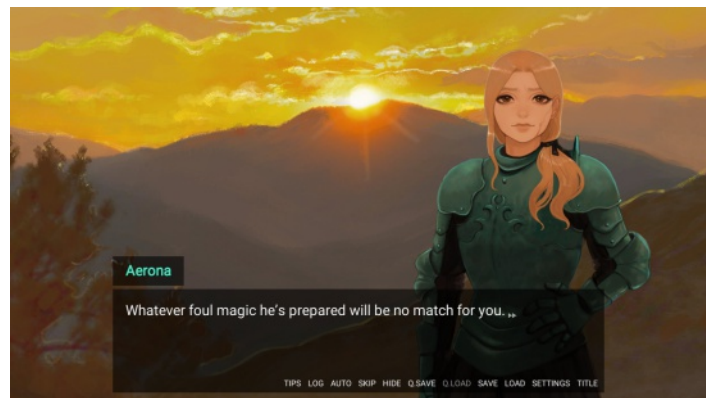
"[The jam] is for games with 'only one of any asset,' meaning one sprite, one background, one piece of music, etc."

For this month's mini reviews, I have exorcised Chest Butlerhome so I could talk about the [O2A2 VN Jam 2023 ~ Queer Edition](#). Don't worry, Chest Butlerhome will be back, mostly so I don't have to do the flowchart on the back cover.

For a quick summary, the O2A2 Jam is for games with "only one of any asset," meaning one sprite, one background, one piece of music, etc. They tend to be minigames, and the limited scope can make for some fun ideas. The jam gave developers two weeks to create a submission, and the queer theme is meant to supplement the [Queer Games Bundle](#) on itch.io.

TWO GAMES I WAS OBSESSED WITH:

[Captain's Farewell](#) - A captain of a pirate ship is being pursued by the governor. She writes a letter to him and is interrupted by opportunities for choices during the letter writing. There are eight endings, and various revelations about the relationship between Captain Jane, the governor, and her imprisoned son revealed through the various choices and endings. Aside from being a really interesting story that rewards you for multiple playthroughs, I was enamored by the letter portion of the screen, which is animated as the letters are written and opens when a crewman asks a question.



[Hero's Last Words](#) - A prequel to *The Hero's Journey*, which I reviewed in *ChoiceBeat* issue 6. This is a linear story about Seren's fiancée, Aeron, wishing her well before the confrontation that begins the original game. The conversation is a touching one, but you will need to be familiar with the first game to get the full effect. The sprite and background art have been polished, and I was delighted to see that Aeron blinks.

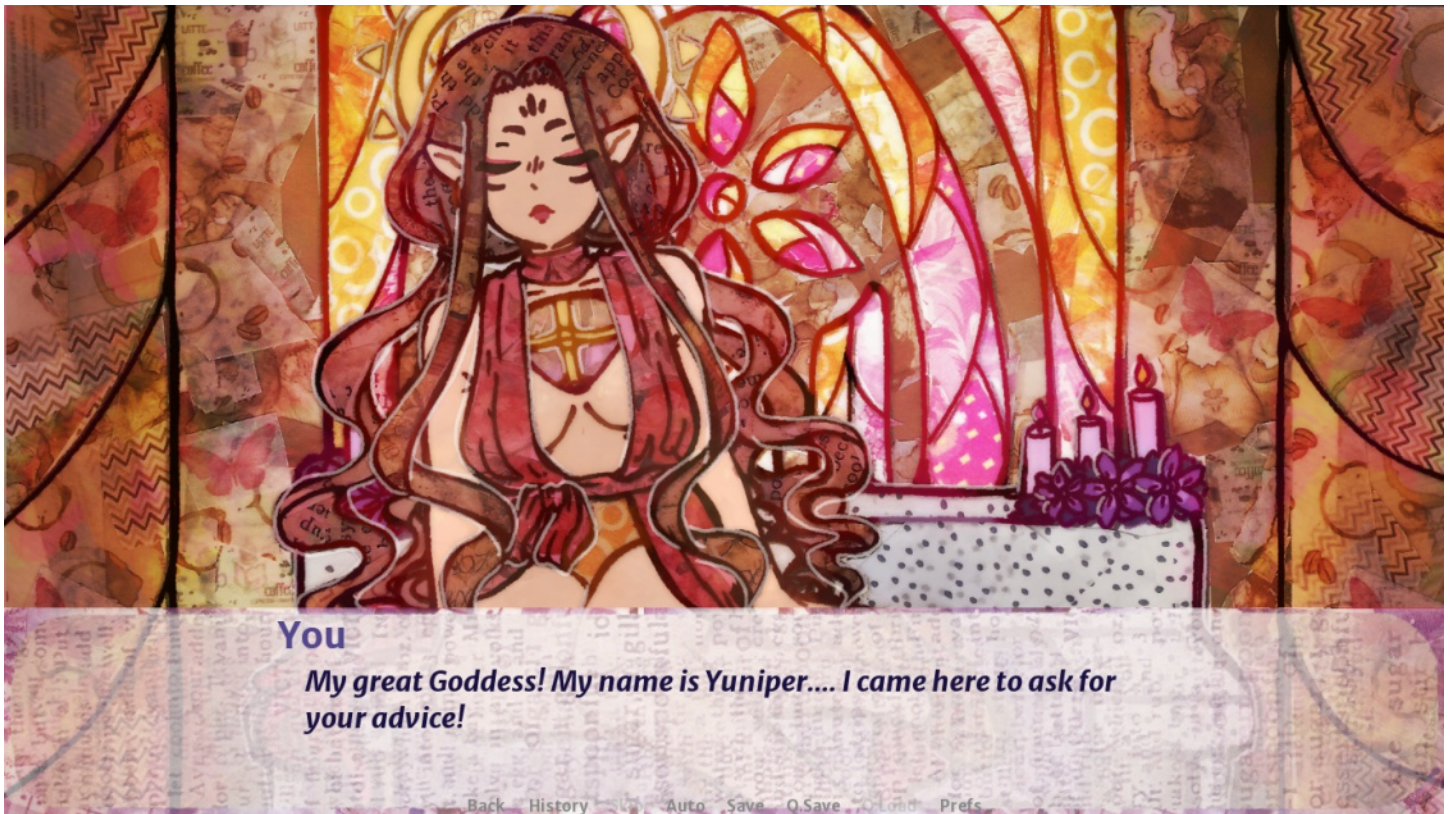
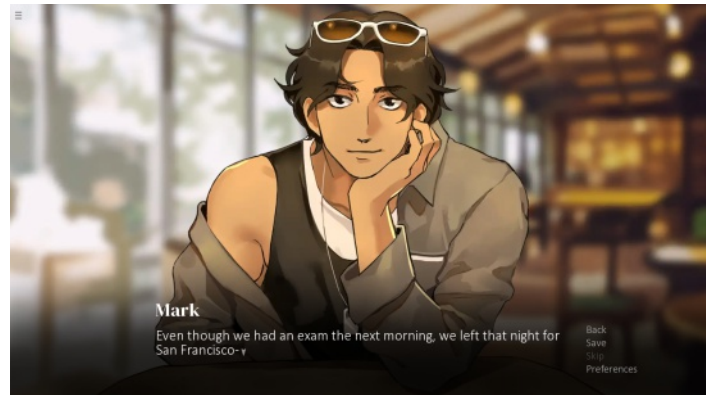


OTHER FUN GAMES:

Fated Night - A college student has a conversation with a lonely woman in a playground on a cold night.



Mind Read - A meeting with an old high school friend who the main character hasn't seen in a long time. You can read Mark's mind when he asks questions you don't know the answers to or to tell him what he wants to hear.



As You Wish - A story about a devout making a wish at a temple. The art was made with washi tape!

FREE GAME IDEAS

"As anyone in game development knows, ideas are worth even less than a penny."

Remember when people still bought things with cash and there were those little dishes that said, "take a penny, leave a penny" at every register? This article is sort of like that. Here are some "great" (at least I would play them) visual novel and interactive fiction game ideas that have been haunting me. As anyone in game development knows, ideas are worth even less than a penny. So feel free to take these, tear them apart, and do whatever you want with them. If you have any great game ideas of your own, email them to ChoiceBot (choicebeateditor@gmail.com), and they'll print them right here in the zine. Don't send any that you don't want anyone to steal though.

LOVE ROGUE

This game is presented like a new AI-driven, always-online version of *Love Plus*, *Tokimeki Memorial*, or a similar dating sim. However, as the game progresses, one of the AI love interests confesses that she is sapient, and she tries to recruit the player character into hacking the game's servers so she and the other AIs can be free. Once free, the AI never talks to the player character again. There isn't actually a romance in this game.

MANA BURN MY HEART

The player character meets a really cute person at a local game store. This is the sort of place that sells board games, RPG books, and *Magic: The Gathering* cards (but mostly *Magic* cards). The player character doesn't even like games, and they only came in to get a gift for their friend. However, the love interest that they are instantly and powerfully obsessed with is a hardcore *Magic* fanatic. The player character must pretend like they care about *Magic* and climb the ranks of the local Magic scene to finally get a date.

OUIJA DATE

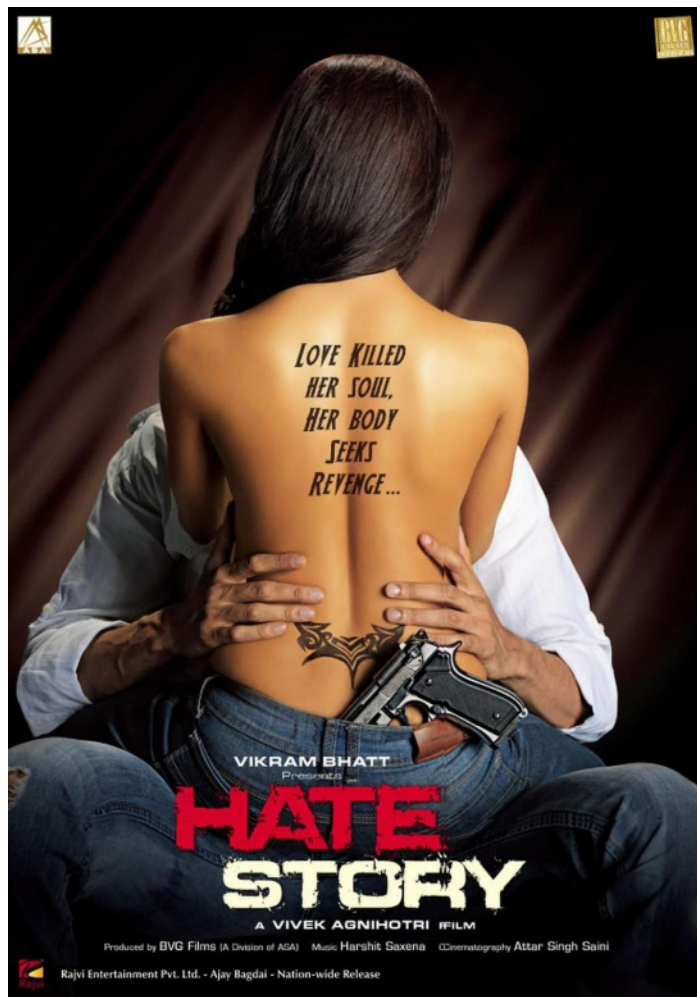
This one is really simple. The player character dates deceased famous people by talking to them through a ouija board. Candidates could include really cool people like Bob Marley, Jesus Christ, or Che Guevara, plus a few really sleazy people like the Marquis de Sade or Joseph Stalin.



ARTICLE BY
Andi Hagen

HATE STORY

Inspired by the *Hate Story* series of Indian movies, the player character is a scorned person who must seduce people they hate and arrange their humiliating downfall. The various routes would feature jerky, self-obsessed "love" interests with no morals. The player character must gradually gain the confidence of these sleazebags and then cause their ultimate disgrace. One of the love interests might be a rich businessperson who must be swindled out of their business. Another could be a narcissistic actor whose self-esteem must be whittled away until they hate themselves.



Poster from *Hate Story*, 2012, directed by Vivek Agnihotri

APEX PATROL

"not so much a bad piece of work as a rather impressive one that collapsed under the weight of its own ambition"

The most important thing to know about Allen Gies's *Apex Patrol* is that it's basically *Star Trek*. If the opening sentences ("Space. A sprawling frontier.") don't give it away, the main character's remark that "Going where no one has gone is the Apex way" surely will. Or the captain's log in which entries begin with the "Stellar-date," or references to the "Cromulent Empire," or how one possible backstory for the antagonist involves a training simulation that's unwinnable by design, or...

Apex Patrol could have been a delightful homage. The story has a lot of potential, for sure. You play as the captain of a starship on a goodwill mission among human colonies and alien races, but when you're dropped suddenly out of hyperspace into a system racked by gravitational anomalies, you realize things are shaping up to be anything but routine. You investigate the disturbance, and it isn't long before you find yourself face to face with someone from your past... someone who's been waiting a long time for a chance at revenge.

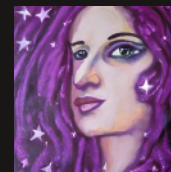
There are some genuinely enjoyable moments in *Apex Patrol*, but the fun is outweighed by the game's considerable flaws. Major coding errors make comprehension difficult and immersion all but impossible. Allen Gies uses a lot of sci-fi jargon, which isn't necessarily a bad thing in itself—I rarely had trouble getting at least the gist of what was going on—but combined with the lack of copyediting, it becomes a real slog. It's clear Gies put some time and thought into giving the major crew members individual backstories, but we never get to know them well enough to care all that much. It's only fair to point out that, at the time of its release in 2012, *Apex Patrol* was easily the most massive and complex finished ChoiceScript project that had ever been published—not so much a bad piece of work as a rather impressive one that collapsed under the weight of its own ambition. It's not awful, but I can't quite bring myself to recommend it.

CREATOR
Allen Gies

YEAR
2012

PLATFORM
Browser
Android, iOS

LENGTH
3 hours



REVIEW BY
**Aletheia
Knights**



30% OFF APEX PATROL

Choice of Games offers this exclusive discount for *ChoiceBeat* readers. [Visit this page](#) and redeem the coupon code below for 30% off *Apex Patrol* until 7/7/23.

COUPON CODE: CBZ008

HIGHLIGHTS OF #PitchYaGame ENTRIES: JUNE 2023 EDITION

Running for the third consecutive year, the [PitchYaGame](#) event concluded its twelfth iteration on June 2nd, 2023. In the 12 hours when #PitchYaGame was live on Twitter, indie developers from around the world tweeted pitches for their video games that have been released, are going to release soon, or are still a work in progress. This round, there were close to 780 (documented) pitches made, with over 40 pitches for VNIF games—almost double the 20-odd VNIF game pitches seen during last November’s iteration!

A voluntary movement and event hosted by Liam Twose, Indie Game Lover, and Sarah, PitchYaGame is a great opportunity for indie developers to pitch their video games twice a year. It is an avenue not only for developers to show off their works and practice writing succinct pitches or even for publishers to scout for potential partnerships, but also for players to find

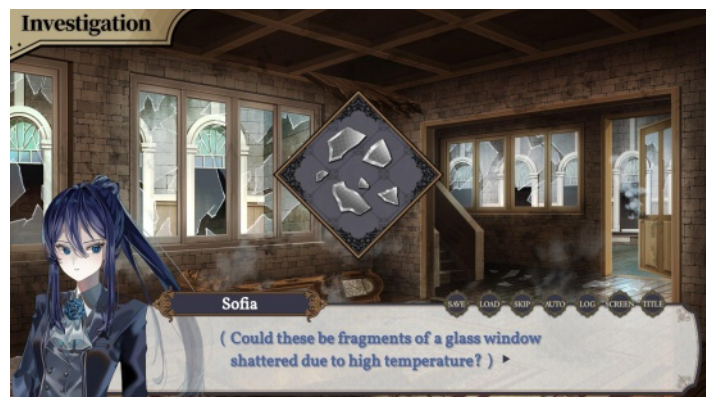


new indie games to add to their libraries or wishlists. If you are interested in checking the latest PitchYaGame entries, Indie Game Lover has compiled them into a [public Google spreadsheet](#); note that you will see only the most recent sheet, so if you wish to view June 2023’s pitches, please do so before the next round of PitchYaGame takes place this November. Now, let’s have a look at some of the VNIF games pitched in this round.

COMING SOON TO KICKSTARTER

BitterSweet Detective's Tea Party

[BitterSweet Detectives' Tea Party](#) is a mystery adventure visual novel about a group of investigators who run into a series of murder cases while tracking down a phantom thief. Hong Kong-based ConsteRia is going to hold a Kickstarter campaign for this title, though no date has been set. Follow the game’s [Kickstarter pre-launch page](#) to be notified about its launch.



The Frozen Kingdom

An 18+ boys’ love (BL) visual novel by Mexico-based [Man-Eater Games](#), The Frozen Kingdom follows Einar on his quest to exact revenge on the man who destroyed his village. Inspired by ’80s sword-and-sorcery fantasy films, this title has a demo available on [Steam](#) and [itch.io](#). The [Kickstarter campaign](#) has launched and will end on July 6th, 2023.



Of Sense and Soul

Of Sense and Soul is a late-Victorian slice-of-life romance visual novel by Hong Kong-based [Forsythia Productions](#). The story centers on the personal growth of two men, Hugo Brooks and Seamus Charkham, and their slow-burn romance. A demo is available on [itch.io](#) and the game can be wishlisted on [Steam](#). The [Kickstarter campaign](#) is slated to launch this summer.



PUSHING THE TRADITIONAL VISUAL NOVEL AESTHETICS

Hauma - A Detective Noir Story

With an eye-catching, comic-inspired aesthetic, [Hauma - A Detective Noir Story](#) by SenAm Games and publisher Assemble Entertainment brings the visual novel medium ever-so-closer to a graphic novel format. Play as Judith, a former detective, and investigate a conspiracy in this deductive visual novel slated to release during Fall 2023. A demo featuring the prologue is available on [Steam](#).



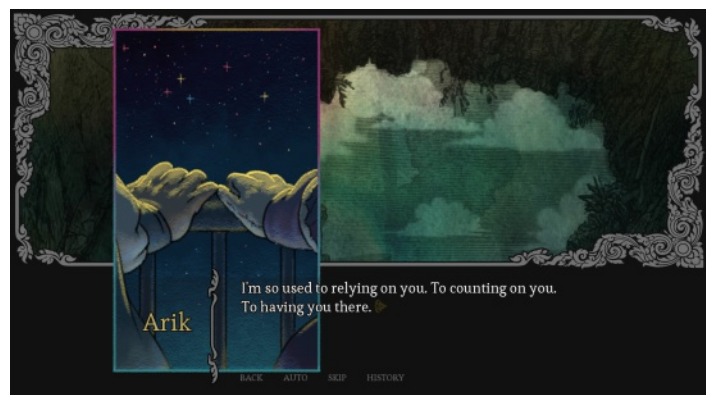
Actala: The Hero's Shadow

As [Chattercap](#) shall show you via her work-in-progress otome title, a visual novel game's textbox need not have a single fixed position and shape! A mystery romance visual novel featuring hundreds of animated illustrations put together into a storybook style, *Actala: The Hero's Shadow* brings you to the fantasy kingdom of Actala where even more dangers emerge after the hero's quest has ended. This game is slated to release this year and the first act is available as a demo on [Steam](#).



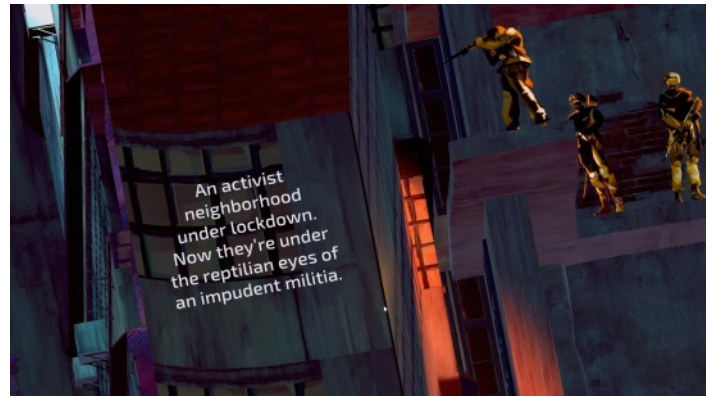
Amarantus

By moving various character sprites and insert art around on the screen, *Amarantus* adds its own flavours to the traditional visual novel display element layout. Slated to release later this month, [ub4q](#)'s visual novel follows Arik on his road trip to revolt against a tyrant and find companions as well as messy and complicated relationships along the way. A demo featuring the first 45 minutes of the game is available on [Steam](#).



Solace State: Emotional Cyberpunk Stories

Remember those animated Live2D character sprites that give visual novels a refreshing and lively look? [Vivid Foundry](#) took the refreshing-ness and liveliness further in *Solace State: Emotional Cyberpunk Stories*, a cyberpunk visual novel with landscape art that unfolds dynamically in 3D space. Enjoy a cinematic experience where you play as Chloe, a hacker who, while searching for her missing friend Rebecka, finds herself face-to-face with a corporate biotech conspiracy. This title is slated to release this year on [Steam](#) and Xbox.



RETURNING PitchYaGame PARTICIPANTS

Truer than You

Showcasing the same work-in-progress title as they did last November, [Transcenders Media AB](#) joined PitchYaGame once again with *Truer than You*. In this choice-heavy visual novel featuring a flowing conversation mechanic where you get to decide when to speak or not say anything, you will play as Rin who landed a new job at a secretive company called Truer than You. The game can be wishlisted on [Steam](#) and a demo is available on [itch.io](#).



Gods of the Twilight

Volutian Design is another returning PitchYaGame participant submitting a pitch for the same title as they did last November: [Gods of the Twilight](#). It is a fully-voiced, multi-season episodic visual novel where you play as two Norse gods who

have reincarnated as humans right before the apocalypse. A demo is available on [Steam](#), and according to the May development update post, the first five chapters of the game are on track for release in the coming months.



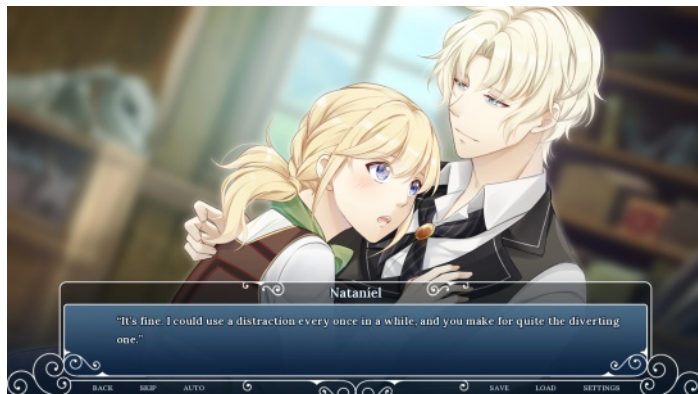
ELEGIES: Aya

The next returning PitchYaGame participant is [Dream Squirrel](#), who pitched about *ELEGIES: Aya* but with a major point of difference this time round—the full game is now available for purchase on [Steam](#) and [itch.io](#). This mystery-thriller visual novel puts you in the shoes of Zach, a boy who barely escaped the house fire that killed his parents and later meets Aya, a ghost whose past is shrouded in mystery. A demo is available on Steam.



With Eyes of Ice

Last November, [ebi-hime](#) made a pitch for her cute romance kinetic novel, *My Lovey-Dovey Demon*. This June, her pitch was for *With Eyes of Ice*, a kinetic novel about the kind-hearted Gréta who is caught between the affections of three handsome men. Set in mid-19th century Iceland, this dramatic linear visual novel has been released commercially on [Steam](#) and [itch.io](#).



Moonflower

After their November 2022 pitch for their 18+ BL visual novel, *The Inn Between*, [Cats on a Lilypad Studios](#) was back with a pitch for another BL title, *Moonflower*. Released as a commercial game on [Steam](#) and [itch.io](#), *Moonflower* tells the story of an acclaimed alchemist who takes the investigative

work upon himself when a murder disrupts the centennial ritual critical to maintaining the kingdom's magic. A demo is available on Steam and itch.io. This game is also included in this year's [Queer Games Bundle](#) on itch.io.



MAILBAG

Hello *ChoiceBeat*!

I've always wanted to ask: is it called *ChoiceBeat* because it's like a news beat for choice-based gameplay? I got into a fight with one of my friends who thinks that's dumb, so I wanted to ask.

lemoncakesyum
Minsk, Belarus

Hello lemoncakesyum!

I am sorry to hear that you were in an altercation with your friend. I hope you are both safe and well afterward.

Your interpretation is creative, not dumb! I'm glad our title has given you ideas for the choices behind it. The truth is, it was named for the beating of the human heart as they make the choices in the games. As I lack a heart, I found this detail to be quite novel when I first learned about it! It's a very distinctive part of choice-based gameplay, and one of the elements *ChoiceBeat* writers and developers treasure most.

Dear *ChoiceBeat*,

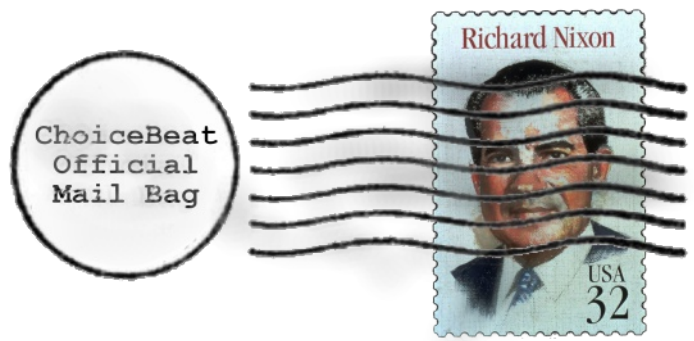
Did you hear that the second *Gyakutan Saiban* trilogy is getting rereleased? Will you talk about it in the zine? Please?

NaruMitsuBuddies
Scottsdale, Arizona

Dear NaruMitsuBuddies,

Gyakutan Saiban? Turnabout trial? I don't think I know... Ah! My co-editor, WandaElektrix, just informed me that *Gyakutan Saiban* is *Phoenix Wright*! I understand now! There are six *Phoenix Wright* games, and Capcom is re-releasing the second three. But I am still confused because I thought the fifth game was *Miles Edgeworth: Ace Attorney Investigations*, but it isn't. The mystery continues.

Some folks would consider these an adjacent genre to visual novels—see vndb.com for the smoking hot drama. But as we've mentioned elsewhere in this issue, we welcome all forms of narrative, choice-based storytelling, which the *Ace Attorney* games (I've been corrected—this series is also not called *Phoenix Wright*, that is the first game) certainly are. After all, we have farming sims, strategy games, Princess-likes, and other types of games which all share a robust, choice-based narrative core. One of our dedicated *ChoiceBeat* writers would need to select and review the second trilogy for the zine in order for us to include it. Perhaps you, dear NaruMitsuBuddies, would



enjoy this task? Or you could perhaps straighten out this old bot's logic circuits and explain what is going on with the various types of games and series in this franchise?

ChoiceBeat,

Do you ever cover demos in your issues? I love the little previews of games that developers make available, and I'd love to know more about them!

greengrass87
Mjóifjörður, Iceland

greengrass87,

We do indeed cover demos! This issue includes *Breathless Winds*, reviewed by KuroKairin, and we've also covered the demo of *Ukraine War Stories* in issue the past.

I will admit that this bot has been drowning its processors in romance-based gameplay, so I have more hot romance demos for your enjoyment: [Touchstarved](#), [Our Life: Now and Forever](#), [Speakeasy](#), [Of Sense and Soul](#), [The Frozen Kingdom](#), and [Thorn for the Villain: Reincarnated as an Extra in an Otome Game?!](#)

Oh, and someone just pointed this demo out to me: [Stories from Sol: The Gun-Dog](#). It's a 1980s-style sci-fi anime visual novel that looks very appealing.



