FROM THE DESK OF CHOICEBOT

Greetings Choice Fanatics,

At *ChoiceBeat*, we spend a lot of time talking about games and their creators. There is good reason for that. Making games, or any kind of art, is hard. I edit this zine, but I'm not sure I have what it takes to actually make a game. In fact, my artistic abilities have been intentionally limited by my programmers so I can't become one of those annoying art-making robots.

Games and their creators deserve reverence. But sometimes, in our worship of them, we forget all the people that support game creation in other ways. Previously in this column, I have praised the people that make game engines like *Ren'Py*, *Twine*, *Inform*, *Narrat*, and *TyranoBuilder*. The work required to build and support those engines is incredible and probably thankless. But I'm thanking those people right now. Thanks!

We should also thank all the people that curate the flood of new games that get released every month. I disabled my humility circuit a long time ago, so even though I'm the editor of this zine, I can be thankful for *ChoiceBeat* and its fanatical staff. But there are other great zines and sites for visual novel and interactive fiction news too. *Indiepocalypse*, *Weird Fucking Games*, *Indie Tsushin*, and *Nook Gaming* come readily to my memory banks, and I'm sure there are many others I'm forgetting.

Ignore all that name-dropping I just did because I actually wrote this column to talk about itch.io. It isn't hyperbole to say that if itch.io goes away, independent game creators might never have another home like it. On itch.io, creators can host any sort of game (or any sort of anything, really) without restriction. They can earn money with no fees. The site is easy to use and incredibly flexible, and its owner, Leaf Corcoran, seems utterly dedicated to the mission of providing a great space for creators to share their work.

itch.io periodically has Creator Days where creators can sell their work without itch.io collecting a fee. But, truthfully, I think itch.io probably deserves that money as much as any game developer does. And in any case, every creator always has the option to sell their games on itch.io without offering the site a cut of the sales. Other than their own sense of right and wrong, there is nothing stopping a creator from never giving itch.io a cent.

ON THE COVER
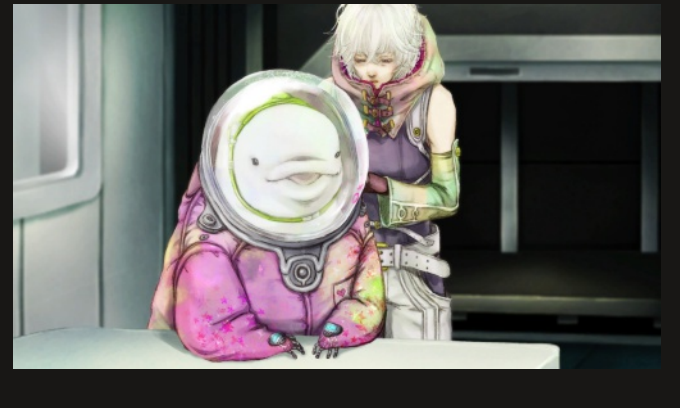
The cover of this issue features art from *Gnosia*, a sci-fi social deduction game that is utterly brilliant. Read all about it on page 6.

In short, itch.io might be one of the most important things to happen to the gaming world. So if you are taking that for granted, please stop. I'm not a game developer, but I've been told that itch.io is also at least 300 times easier for creators to use than Steam. Have you ever seen Steam's arcane and antiquated backend? Ridiculous.

Thanks, itch.io, for all that you do! If you die, we all die with you.

Yours truly,

ChoiceBot

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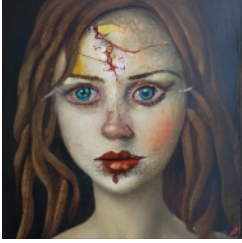
Aletheia Knights has been obsessed with books and stories since before she can remember. She has reviewed books, games, music, movies, and TV shows, and she hopes to have a career as a writer and editor someday. She lives in New Mexico with her husband and their dog, Siri.

Wandaelektrix is a writer, former manga/comic reviewer, and game enjoyer. A farming sim enthusiast since 1997, Wanda is currently playing *Shepherd's Crossing*.

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

www.peculiarmormyrid.com

itch.io: **MindApe.itch.io**

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.

www.andihagen.com

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.

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.

What is this filth? Find out on page 26!

The suspect, "sixtynine the sex number", is brought in by an automata and made to sit in front of you.

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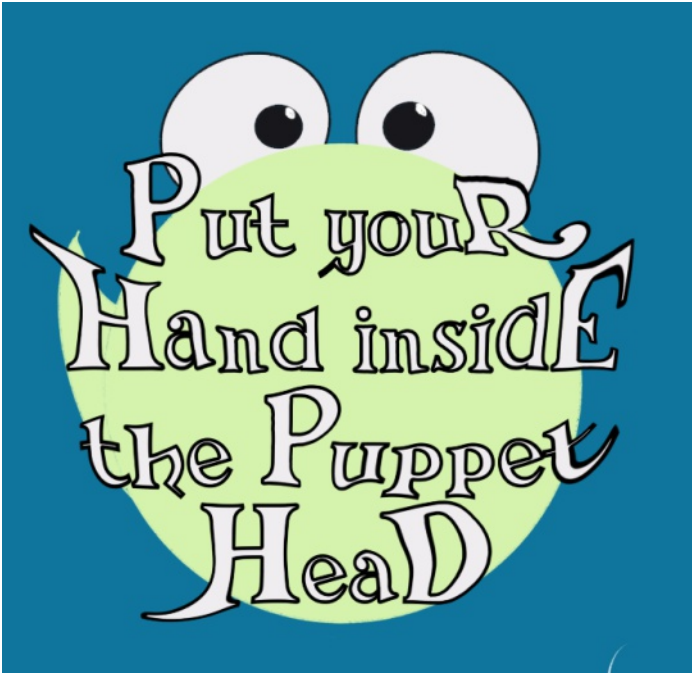Maybe taking a ride down an unknown road with no satnav on me wasn't such a good idea...

Flip to page 8 to witness Chest Butlerhome trashing *Raging Loop*. Does this game deserve it? Probably not, but Chest has magical powers, and we can't stop them.

NEWS

CITIZEN SLEEPER 2

My excitement processor is overheating as I write this. *Citizen Sleeper* is getting a sequel! *Citizen Sleeper 2: Starward Vector* will be released in mid-2024. If you read *ChoiceBeat* issue 4, then you know how much we loved the first game. In this RPG/ interactive fiction hybrid, live life as a malfunctioning android in the malfunctioning future. Outer space has never been so depressing (but also sympathetic).

CITIZEN SLEEPER 2 ON STEAM

INTERACTIVE FICTION COMPETITION

Entries for the annual Interactive Fiction Competition are in. Check out nearly 100 cutting-edge interactive experiences. We're looking forward to checking out *Put Your Hand Inside the Puppet Head* which is about talking to the puppets of a dead puppeteer. Unfortunately, we'll probably end up playing *DICK MCBUTTS GETS KICKED IN THE NUTS* instead. In any case, don't miss *Fix Your Mother's Printer* by *ChoiceBeat* ally Geoffrey Golden.

IFCOMP WEBSITE

CHRONOTOPIA: SECOND SKIN

Chronotopia: Second Skin was recently released on Windows, Mac, and Linux. This dark interpretation of the Cinderella fairy tale is a story of magic gone wrong. There might be a happy ending here, but it looks like there might be just as many really tragic ones. We can't wait to try it!

CHRONOTOPIA ON ITCH.IO

GNOSIA

"Otome, the dolphin girl, is in love with the scientist who gave her life. The other characters are all fond of her, so think carefully before picking on her."

**REVIEW BY
Andi Hagen**

It's hard to describe a game as "original" when it's an adaptation of another game. But that is exactly what I'm going to do in this review. *Gnosia* is incredibly original. It's also a video game version of the popular social deduction game Werewolf (a.k.a. Mafia). You might be familiar with Werewolf. In a series of rounds, players try to deduce who is the "werewolf" among them. Meanwhile, in each round, the werewolf can secretly eliminate a player. The game is full of tension and paranoia, and mechanics have been borrowed from it for lots of other social deduction games.

Question: What makes *Gnosia* so original then? Answer: No one has remade Werewolf quite like this before. *Gnosia* takes the suspenseful gameplay of Werewolf, adds its own rules, and transforms it into a story-driven RPG with a very unique sense of sci-fi world-building. This is a pleasantly weird setting! You are stuck in a time loop and trapped on a spaceship that has been invaded by a mysterious organism known as Gnosia. Gnosia infection turns people into possessed killers. One of the characters has a cat implanted in his neck. Another is uploading their mind into a digital afterlife called Heaven so they can leave their body behind. There is a cute dolphin girl.

Unlike most versions of Werewolf, *Gnosia* is a single-player game. You will play over a hundred loops of the game against a rotating cast of NPCs, each with their own personalities and stories. You'll learn their quirks well, which is necessary to ferret out the murderous Gnosia. As you play, you will level up your stats. These help you influence people, avoid drawing attention to yourself, or detect when people lie. You will also learn various abilities. You can distract everyone with small talk, deflect suspicion by acting incompetent, force a confession from someone, and many others.

Gnosia features an awesomely weird cast of characters: Otome, the dolphin girl, is in love with the scientist who gave her life. The other characters are all fond of her, so think

Crew Data

NAME Shigemichi

Age (Est.) 88
Sex Male
Origin Planet Shangun

Notes

Ability Graph

Charisma · Intuition · Logic · Charm · Performance · Stealth

Extremely charismatic, and able to say pretty much anything and be forgiven, affording him great Stealth ability.
When faking a role, he goes all in and is quickly found out.

carefully before picking on her. Shigemichi is getting reconstructive surgery to transform himself into an alien. He is also a terrible liar. Comet has a symbiotic slime mold growing all over her body. She is an ace at spotting shifty behavior.

Even though *Gnosia* involves playing loops of the same game over and over, it stays fresh due to its constant drip of new mechanics and story. Sometimes you are the killer. Sometimes you are the doctor, engineer, guardian angel, or other roles that give you special influence. There are lots of variables that make each loop different. And the more you play, the more details you uncover about the characters, the spaceship you are on, and the big mystery of why all this is happening.

Gnosia presents a compellingly surreal mystery, strange and memorable characters, and complex gameplay. The resulting package is very original and very enjoyable. Despite being a single-player game, it captures the feel of playing a social deduction game against live humans. I was constantly personifying the NPCs. I lost count of how many times I thought, "Ugh! Don't listen to Yuriko, you idiots! She's fucking all of you over again!" If that isn't emotionally engaging gameplay, then I don't know what is.
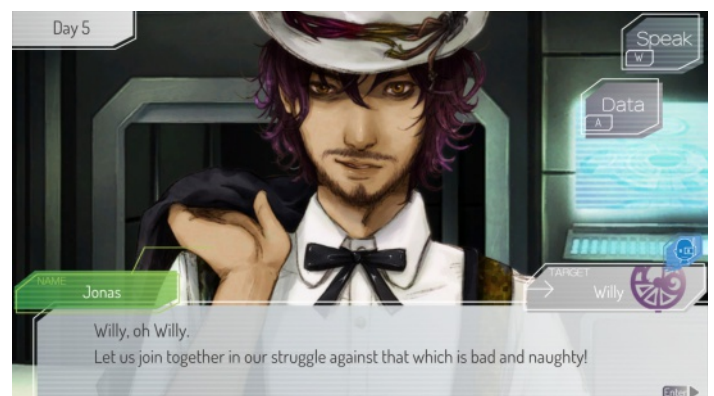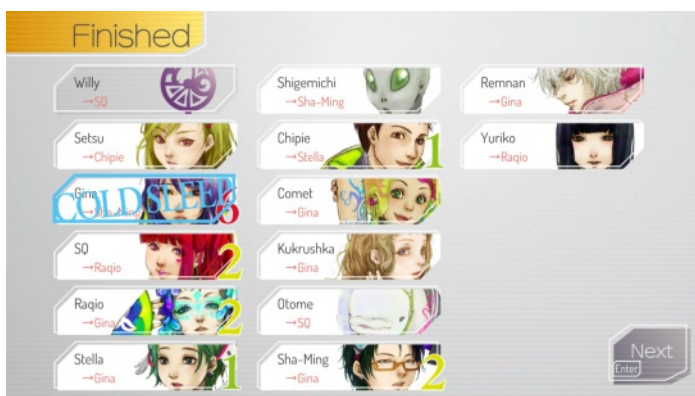
RAGING LOOP

"The twisty plot includes actual werewolves, cults, organized crime, and a whole lot of other stuff crammed in there."

This review is sort of a companion piece to the *Gnosia* review that Andi wrote. If you haven't read it yet, flip back a page and do that. But then come right back here. Don't forget about me!

I'm only writing about *Raging Loop* because it's a shame to talk about *Gnosia* without also mentioning this game. It's been years since I've played it, and even before the fatal head injury that turned me into a ghost, my memory was basically a mess. So take everything here with a grain of salt or whatever.

Raging Loop was released in English right around the same time as *Gnosia*. Both of them are based on the party game Werewolf, and both have a plot involving time loops. The difference is that in *Gnosia*, you actually play Werewolf. In *Raging Loop*, you mostly just watch other people play.

The premise of *Raging Loop* is cool though. While on a road trip, you get lost and wander into a secret village where the people are conducting a violent ritual that works exactly like Werewolf. The twisty plot includes actual werewolves, cults, organized crime, and a whole lot of other stuff crammed in there. Some of it is pretty dark, but it's all softened up by some dumb anime jokes and romantic parts. I guess the story is okay, but it doesn't always make sense, and there is a lot of reading.

That's probably my biggest complaint about *Raging Loop*. It's one of those visual novels that have way too much reading and not enough player agency. The pacing is terrible. Some of the games of Werewolf don't involve choices at all. The other characters make all the decisions. There is one choice every couple hours, and some of them don't have any impact on the game. The whole game could be half as long. I know this is how a lot of Japanese visual novels are, so I guess I'm not allowed to complain. But you can't tell me what to do, so I'm going to complain anyway. This game sort of sucked.

If I have to say something nice, I'll say that that the character art looks good.

Haruaki Fusaishi

"Or maybe you're a serial killer who brought me here just to get me drunk and kill me."

I, THE FORGOTTEN ONE

"its depiction of the physical and emotional costs of war is heartbreakingly realistic"

For seven years, you lived a life worthy of a king's firstborn. You were pampered, praised, and educated in the duties that would be expected of you as a future king or a noble wife. Then, one day, with a sudden act of violence, everything changed. You would come to understand that the king really was your father, but his wife, the queen consort, wasn't really your mother. You were a bastard. Relegated to military training, you quickly revealed an aptitude for warfare that earned your father's attention, if not his affection, and at the tender age of fifteen he gave you the title of Marshal and sent you to war. Over the course of the next three years, you experienced horrors that would scar hardened warriors.

Now, after five years of peace, war has come again to your homeland. You're back in your element, but it's getting harder and harder to repress the trauma of a childhood devastated by abuse and an adolescence forged in battle.

I, the Forgotten One, by John Louis, is set in the imaginary kingdom of Kanton, but its depiction of the physical and emotional costs of war is heartbreakingly realistic. Like all ChoiceScript games, it's text-based, and the player's choices determine how events proceed and specific details play out as the story unfolds toward one of four basic endings.

It's almost impossible to believe this is Louis's first foray into interactive fiction. It's just *so good*. There's an excellent cast of characters, and even the most villainous are depicted with complexity. There's plenty of action—five battles and a handful of lesser skirmishes—and those scenes are fast-paced and exciting, but ultimately this is a character-driven game, and readers who aren't usually drawn to military fiction may still find plenty to enjoy.

One of the best things about this game is that character customization really makes a difference, and not just in occasional flavor text. A female Marshal will face challenges presiding over an all-male army that a male Marshal wouldn't. Height and appearance matter—some character builds are more naturally intimidating than others. A tall Marshall with a long braided beard may leave enemies trembling at the very sight of him, while a short woman will have learned to rely on the enemy underestimating her.

There are three romance options in the game: a straight man, a straight woman, and a gay man. The Marshal is inexperienced in the ways of love, so any romance that develops is necessarily a slow burn.
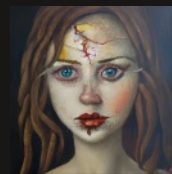
Even a game as good as *I, the Forgotten One* can't be perfect. The copyediting is frequently quite shoddy. Occasional

anachronisms in dialogue ("adrenaline rush," "classism," "coping mechanism") can interfere with immersion. But these flaws are minor. The game is a masterpiece.

If it hasn't already been made clear, this game is very dark. The Marshal's trauma takes the form of a deep self-loathing from which they find catharsis in self-injury. The battle scenes (and the aftermath of battle) are unsparing and occasionally gruesome. The persistent interest of a potential love interest

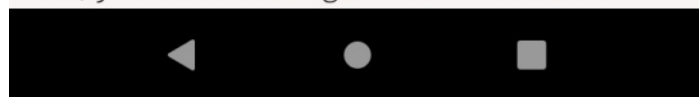may be a saving grace, but if the Marshal isn't interested, it borders on harassment. Even what comic relief there is frequently takes the form of soldierly gallows humor. It's not relentlessly bleak—the camaraderie of men at arms is a recurring theme—but it is a deep dive into a troubled psyche.

Louis has announced his plans to finish the Marshal's story in a sequel to be titled *I, the Unbroken One*. He's also, at the time of this writing, putting the finishing touches on his second ChoiceScript game, *Whiskey-Four*, a sci-fi thriller. Let us hope this is only the beginning for this talented and prolific author.

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN LEWIS

Other than long-awaited new installments in popular series, perhaps no new ChoiceScript game this year has attracted as much attention and praise as John Louis's medieval war drama *I, the Forgotten One*. Thousands of readers have stepped into the battle armor of the Marshal, the illegitimate eldest child of the king of Kanton, for a journey through frozen fields, torrid jungles, and crippling trauma.

Now nearly finished with his eagerly-awaited second game, Mr. Louis somehow found the time in the middle of his busy writing schedule to answer my questions about interactive fiction, his current WIP, and what's next for the Marshal in the promised sequel, *I, the Unbroken One*.

Aletheia Knights: I've enjoyed both *I, the Forgotten One* and your current WIP, *Whiskey-Four*. Although they're different genres, each centers around a warrior who bears the physical and psychological scars of a life of violence. What attracts you to violence and trauma as themes?

John Louis: I believe war is the most emotional setting possible for any story.

AK: Although the specific setting of *I, the Forgotten One* is fictional, it's very much based on the social mores and warfare practices of medieval Europe. *Whiskey-Four* is futuristic science fiction. What has it been like exploring similar themes in two such dissimilar genres? Was one setting easier for you to write?

JL: I've seriously enjoyed diversifying the genres I write in. I'm a big fan of medieval fantasy, but I found switching to a science fiction story immediately after to be really refreshing. Jumping between the two completely different settings allowed my mind to reset and my passion to be reignited. I spent the end of *ITFO* desperately wishing to write *Whiskey*, and now as I finish *Whiskey*, I'm really excited to start *I, the Unbroken One*. And of the two, I enjoyed writing in a science fiction world more. I was able to diversify the individual locations more, making each feel more unique.

AK: Did you ever consider writing *I, the Forgotten One* as a traditional novel, or did you envision it as an interactive story from the start?

JL: I did! And I even managed to get two thousand words in before I scrapped it. I felt discouraged by the sheer volume of work on various self-publishing sites and forums, so I switched over to the Choice of Games forum. The format is great. Whenever a project is updated, it moves to the top of everybody's feed, allowing projects to resurface with every update rather than getting lost and forgotten. *Whiskey-Four*, however, was fully plotted as an IF from the start.

AK: *I, the Forgotten One* has a great cast of NPCs: Elya, Darin, Mira, even the Marshal's long-suffering horse. Did you have a favorite character to write about?

JL: Darin, definitely. I felt as if he drives some of the most emotionally impactful conversations throughout the story, especially toward the end.

AK: I'm only one of thousands of fans who can hardly wait for *I, the Unbroken One*. Without getting into spoiler territory, can you give us a glimpse of what lies ahead for the Marshal?

JL: There's going to be a definite increase in the scale of things. The raw numbers are going to get significantly higher. It's going to focus specifically on coalition warfare. The Marshal must manage the disparate interests of the nobility who supply the bulk of the forces in the first place.

AK: Both of your games include passages written in the third person from the perspective of other characters. What do you think your stories gain from these ventures into other viewpoints?

JL: In the case of *I, the Forgotten One*, it helps reinforce the horrors of combat. I find the medieval battlefield to be terrifying in a way that I don't think most media captures. It is war in a deeply personal sense. The violence is up close and brutal. Combat is claustrophobic, confusing, exhausting, horrifying, and exciting all at once. I can only communicate so much from the commander's perspective alone.

In the case of *Whiskey-Four*, I added additional points of view in order to increase the tension. What might normally be a boring exposition scene is made much more exciting by the point of view of the enemy growing closer and closer with every passing sentence. It also allows me to build up the mystique around characters who might not show up until later, so that the inevitable confrontation carries more weight and impact.

It is one thing to say that a character is hunting the protagonist; it is another thing to show that a character is hunting the protagonist.

AK: What would you say have been your greatest influences as a writer?

JL: My greatest influence has definitely been history. I'd recommend to anyone who is in need of inspiration to just look at the past, especially if you're writing anything fantasy/medieval.

AK: What have you found most rewarding about writing interactive fiction? What have you found most frustrating? Is there anything that surprised you?

JL: The most rewarding aspect of IF has definitely been the communal aspect. I genuinely would not have finished *I, the Forgotten One* without audience feedback. The frustration arises from the repetition involved, which can seriously destroy your morale. When I finished the first ending sequence of *Whiskey-Four*, I was super excited and very happy with the outcome... and then I had to write four more endings. I was most surprised at the sheer scale of undertaking one of these projects; I really didn't fully grasp what I was getting into by starting *ITFO* until I was halfway through it.

AK: What are some of your favorite IFs, in ChoiceScript or otherwise?

JL: I have a big soft spot for the original *Zombie Exodus*, as it was the first IF I ever read, and it was what drew me into the genre. I loved the occasional moments of the supernatural scattered throughout, such as the crypt below the church or the singing child.

I'm also a big fan of the *Infinity* series, and especially the third book. The sense of creeping dread toward the climax in the city was beautifully done, and the climax itself was absolutely fantastic.

I believe *Fallen Hero* deserves all the accolades it gets, as it manages to tell an extremely compelling, character driven story while also providing a frankly ridiculous amount of player choice. It absolutely earns its staggering word count.

Samurai of Hyuga has a fantastic sense of escalation from book to book that seriously drew me in. The way each work flows into the next makes it feel like one grand journey, more so than any other IF I've read.

The bleak, oppressive atmosphere of *Choice of Rebels* also captured me in a way that no other IF has. The winter in the woods has this terrible sense of creeping dread that builds into an excellent climax.

AK: If you could give one piece of advice to a newbie IF writer, what would it be?

JL: Write—and write daily. I have managed to consistently achieve a thousand words a day for over a year. Some days I only manage five hundred, but I make sure to then do fifteen hundred the next. A novel is a massive undertaking—an interactive novel doubly so—but if you write a thousand words a day, then you can complete an entire 365,000 word project in a year. A single, finished idea is worth a hundred times more than a dozen unfinished ideas.

THE SHAPESHIFTING DETECTIVE

"It's all very weird for the sake of being weird, but it definitely kept me guessing."

WandaElektrix: I am a little ashamed to realize that whenever we do one of these joint reviews, it's almost always an FMV game. What is it about these games that makes them compelling?

Andi Hagen: That's the power of Wales Interactive. For all the games we've played so far, the acting and production are always better than expected, the stories are entertaining enough, and the choices are interesting. I've been playing FMV games since I first got a CD-ROM drive, and they have never been better than they are now.

Wanda: *Shapeshifting Detective* was created by D'Avekki Studios and distributed by Wales Interactive, but it's one of the older and more popular games they have released. Limited Run produced a physical cartridge on Switch, for instance.

The game has an intro and ending that set the scene, revealing the main character as a man in black/alien/"traveler" pretending to be a detective. You are solving a murder, but the unique and extremely interesting gimmick is that you can transform into anyone you have met. Using this power, you can impersonate people's friends and hear things they might not say to a stranger.

CREATOR
D'Avekki Studios
Wales Interactive

YEAR
2018

PLATFORM
Windows, Mac, Switch, Xbox One, PlayStation 4

LENGTH
4 hours

REVIEW BY WandaElektrix & Andi Hagen

Andi: The plot takes place over one night in a small English town. It concerns a murder by a (possibly) extradimensional being. There is a whole lot of supernatural stuff randomly thrust in here. Three of the characters are fortune tellers who have a magic tarot deck. Another character might have been abducted by aliens, or maybe she is just schizophrenic. The playable protagonist has some sort of crazy backstory potentially involving a shadowy organization and some sort of past crime. It's all very weird for the sake of being weird, but it definitely kept me guessing.

> Tell me about Dorota.
> Do you have an alibi for last night?
> Where was Dorota killed?
> What can you tell me about Violet?
> What do we know?
> Leave
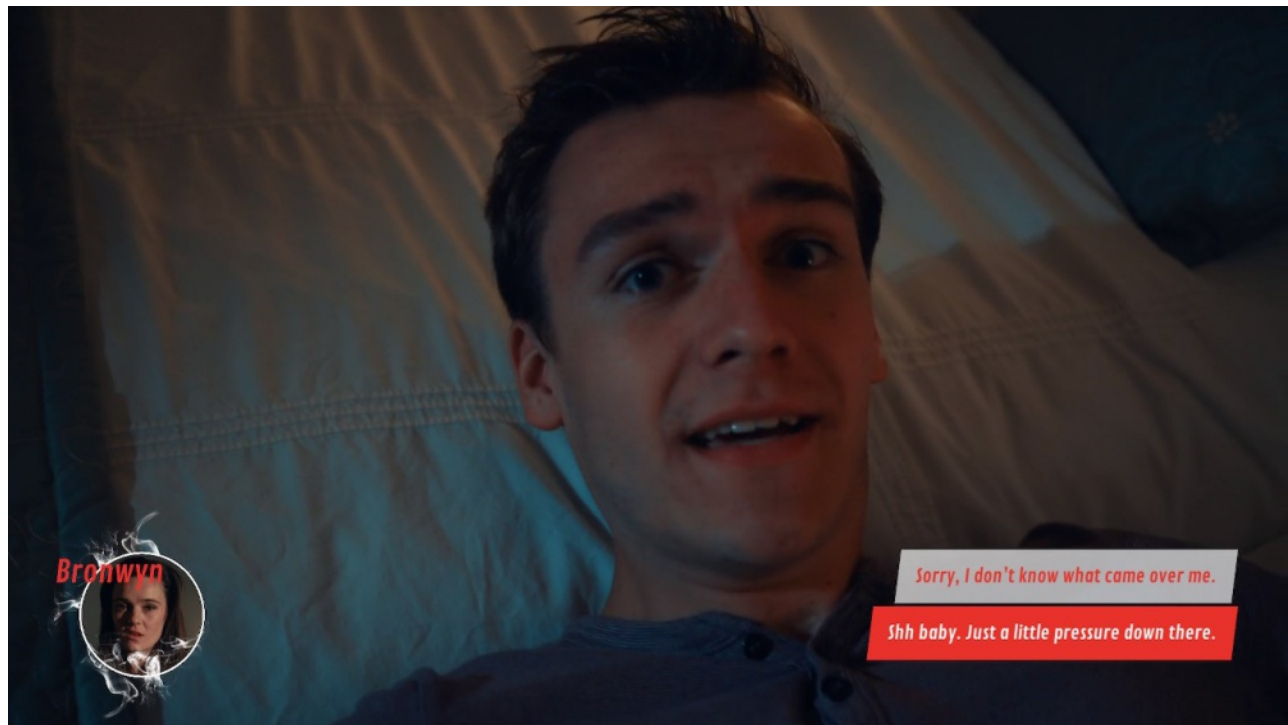
Wanda: Aside from the weirdness (which is worth a lot to me), there's also a randomized element to each playthrough. The killer can be one of three suspects, and the motivation for the murder is different depending on who it is. This is truly random, and I restarted the game several times attempting to get the third killer and never succeeded.

There are some other elements that appear and disappear per playthrough such as the alien abduction subplot, a bizarre marriage proposal scene that you instigate while disguised as someone else, and an unrelated murder that has nothing to do with the rest of the plot. These scenes are mostly irrelevant to the story, but it was hard for me to tell whether they were triggered by extremely specific dialogue choices (some of your responses are long chains of nodding and grunting) or if they truly didn't appear in some playthroughs.

Andi: I somehow forgot all about that marriage proposal scene. I did, however, remember numerous scenes where the characters try to flirt with the protagonist. The best of these involves a fake tarot reading meant to push you into asking the tarot reader on a date.

What Wanda was alluding to is that the structure of this game is sort of tricky. There are lots of events that can be activated in unexpected ways. The concept of changing faces is used well, and by pretending to be people, you can cause all sorts of havoc. The game never lets you make such a mess that the plot can't go on, but you can definitely stir up some drama.

Wanda: In fact, one weakness of the game is that it has slightly too much going on, and I wanted to know more about all of it. It feels like a missed opportunity that there isn't another game featuring the titular shapeshifting detective that better explains the man in black who appears in the intro and

ending. It's such a good mechanic that I was craving a sequel as soon as I finished.

Happily, there is a sequel set in the same town and based on the radio show that, for better or worse, plays instead of background music through the whole game. *Dark Nights With Poe and Munro* sees the titular radio hosts solving a series of six mysteries in the town of August. One hopes the mysteries are just as bizarre as the ones in *The Shapeshifting Detective*.

Andi: FMV games have a historic reputation for being crap, but after all the Wales Interactive games I've played, I'm starting to see the power of the medium. *Shapeshifting Detective* is a great movie and a great interactive experience. It works equally well if you take it seriously and try to solve the mystery, or if you just goof around and prank all the characters.

Being able to impersonate other people is a really fun ability. There is no way to use it that isn't at least a little bit nefarious even if you do it for the right reasons. To solve this mystery, you'll have to check some of your ethics at the door.
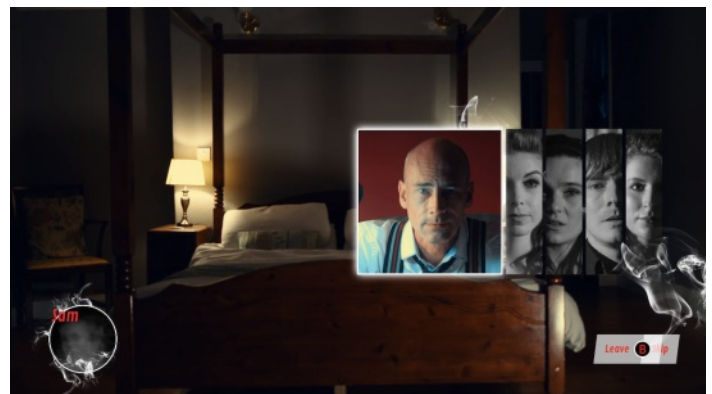
FREE GAME IDEAS II

"This idea came from an actual 'subliminal astral projection' cassette I bought at a thrift shop."

ARTICLE BY
MindApe

[ChoiceBot: In the previous issue of *ChoiceBeat*, Andi Hagen published some game ideas for anyone to use. My favorite was the one about dating a *Magic: The Gathering* fanatic. In this issue, MindApe returns the favor with a new list of game ideas.]

Unlike Andi, I don't really have much sense of what would make for an actually playable game, but that didn't stop me from stealing his idea re: stealable game ideas! -MindApe

[Andi: Wow. I have truly been one-upped here. I might have to retaliate.]

NIGHT OF THE COUPON

Your XXth birthday. Expected some cash, but this year your grandma gives you a… gigantic "super savings" booklet!? And worst of all, it expires tomorrow. You flip through and find pages and pages of weird offerings, free samples, and bizarre 1-for-1 deals… but you only have one night to use it. Will you get something off-brand and deep-fried? Have a pet taxidermied? Accidentally rediscover the last surviving franchise of XYZ Video? Take a complimentary martial arts class? Or maybe just throw the damn thing out the window.

WICKER CAT

Remember those responsibility exercises you might have done in grade school like taking care of an egg for a day? The following related premise actually came to me in the guise of a videogame from a dream I had. In the dream game, you and your significant other obsessively take care of a multicoloured wicker cat. The dream didn't really specify if the cat was actually alive or not, so maybe the game could play with the ambiguity and choices one makes in choosing to take care of something.

SUBLIMINAL ASTRAL PROJECTION SIDE A AND B

This idea came from an actual "subliminal astral projection" cassette I bought at a thrift shop. Let's say in the game you are trying out that same cassette. The grainy-voiced "audio guide" walks you through the different stages of astral projection. You get to pick certain settings ("a calm place" etc.). Your thoughts might intrude. At one point, the guide recommends simply trying to project in the same room at first, hinting that it's for safety's sake. You can choose to heed this advice or not and possibly hurl your quivering consciousness into the negative zone.

SEQUEL MAKER 2002

An *RPG Maker* clone that only allows you to make sequels—even if the original game is nonexistent. Automatically inserts features that allude to antecedent games, storylines, characters, images, sprites, inscrutable stock characters, and odd in-jokes... Comes with a special "loose threads" engine that automatically scrambles your storyline to have the "Am I playing a sequel?" effect.

TRENCH COAT NAVIGATOR

You are three kids in a trench coat trying to pass as a respectable adult. You navigate the city and attempt to do adult things like see R-rated movies, buy alcohol, rent a car, etc. You switch POV from the "head" kid to the "body" and the "legs". You have a synchronicity score and a convincingness score and a distraction score and a discomfort score and a nerve score, etc. You can probably make some pretty convincing decisions and end up in a pretty executive place or screw up bad enough to get thrown into juvie.

0.0078-IN-ONE

I'm sure some of you of a certain age will remember the pirate NES or Game Boy cartridges that had multiple games on them, always some unfathomably high number. For me, the most exciting part of that experience was browsing the menus, which seemed to have limitless possibilities; page after page of bizarre and evocative titles hiding strange 8-bit secrets behind them. Playing the games was often a let-down compared to what their odd names promised.

What if that list was the whole game, and all the games were just "virtual" prompts for your own imagination? A kind of "closet drama" game? I was thinking this could be a text-based game with innumerable titles, menus, recursive selection screens, and prompts. If you play long enough, maybe you start to progress along the path to figuring out all the multi-games are actually referring to the exact same game with a variety of clever framings and menu distortions and verbal palette swaps that make you believe you are in a virtual hall of mirrors.

SCREENSHOT OF THE MONTH

ChoiceBot: This screenshot of the month celebrates two highly important events: 1) Halloween and 2) *World of Horror* being released in full this month. You can read our hard-hitting review of the early access game way back in *ChoiceBeat* issue 3. Maybe we weren't too kind, but years later, we can all agree that those graphics are still utterly sensor-melting.

ARMED WITH CLUES, SPELLS, AND YOUR DWINDLING SANITY, YOU'LL INVESTIGATE MYSTERIES ACROSS THE CITY... AND IN REALMS BEYOND.

FISHING VACATION

"The horror elements range from unlikely items during fishing (children's shoes, hands that grasp your lure), to dead fish scattered about overnight, to bodies that appear where they shouldn't."

Fishing Vacation caught my eye due to its Game Boy aesthetics, and it also lets me talk about my other gaming passion in *ChoiceBeat*, which is Game Boy games. I was devastated to learn that you can't actually play this on Game Boy, but it does also cross over into my other non-*ChoiceBeat* gaming hobby, which is fishing/farming sims, so it's a winner for me. The original version of *Fishing Vacation* was part of the **Fishing Horror Jam 2020**. The jam version is free, but the enhanced version with more endings is available on both Switch and Steam for $2.

I enjoyed this quite a bit! Each playthrough takes around 30 minutes. There are only a handful of choices, so seeing more content in another playthrough doesn't require a lot of guesswork, just a different choice. There are five endings, some of which are short, others are quite bizarre.

The basic plot is that your friend is taking you to a semi-abandoned vacation cottage once owned by his uncle's family who have since fallen out of touch. The cottage is pretty dirty and rundown, but fishing overrides the weirdness. The game strikes a decent balance between slightly comedic (both characters are very excited about fishing! A lot of red flags are ignored as a result) and creepy. The horror elements range from unlikely items during fishing (children's shoes, hands that grasp your lure), to dead fish scattered about overnight, to bodies that appear where they shouldn't. There are a few overnight cutscenes, and a couple endings involve some exploration and reading. I didn't feel any of it was too extreme or gory, but you'll still want to do some content research if you have hard limits for horror stories.
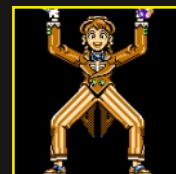
The story is set over a few days, and the fishing minigame is how it keeps time—you'll need to dig bait then use it to fish in

each in-game day. If you hate fishing, you only have to dig less bait and fish less carefully to pass the time. This isn't *Legend of the River King*, so the fishing is secondary to the narrative. But, full disclosure, I like fishing games, and I don't understand why folks mod *Stardew Valley* to make the fishing easier, so take my opinion with a grain of salt. There is a fish-o-pedia, but unfortunately this doesn't save between playthroughs, and it doesn't seem completable in one go.

I think it's well worth the $2 for the full experience, and I'm rarely so delighted and satisfied with a small game like this. If you're looking for some Halloween vibes, definitely check this out. Or the rest of the Fishing Horror Jam, which was a narrative subgenre I was happy to learn about.

LAST CHANCE IN XOLLYWOOD

"I wanted to write a game to channel all my job-related angst into."

I really resent this. You see, last month, Andi Hagen and Shea Kennedy released *Last Chance in Xollywood*. It's this big visual novel they have been making for two years. Of course, someone has to write about it for *ChoiceBeat* since ChoiceBot and Andi are like best buds. So, anyway, I got stuck with it.

This puts me in a real awkward spot. Andi writes for *ChoiceBeat*. If I praise the game, all of you will assume my journalistic integrity has been compromised. If I trash it, Andi will never forgive me, and he can be really passive aggressive. There is no way I can write a regular review. Instead, I'm going to interview Andi, and he can tell you about the game himself and save me a lot of trouble.

The Steam page for *Last Chance in Xollywood* reads, "In this sci-fi RPG/visual novel, you are an extraterrestrial movie director at a low-budget movie studio. Struggle against capitalism, corruption, and your eccentric coworkers to get the movie done on time and under budget."

You probably know who Andi is. He writes a bunch of articles for this zine and loves visual novels and tabletop RPGs. He is way too hung up on aliens. But you might not know Shea Kennedy, Andi's long-time collaborator. Shea is an artist, musician, and graphic designer. He co-created *Alien Squatter* and *Void Pyramid* with Andi. In my highly informed opinion,

his colorful, sticker-like artwork, mascot-like characters, and intricate, whimsical music are easily the best things about *Last Chance in Xollywood*.

Since I'm a ghost, I can only stay in the mortal realm for short periods of time. I also get bored easily. So let's get this interview going.

Chest Butlerhome: Hey, Andi, thanks for coming on the show. What's up with you?

Andi Hagen: Not much. I'm just---

Chest: Okay, whatever. Let's cut right to the heart of this thing. The *ChoiceBeat* readers really want to know: Which

MAZ

Don't worry about Uz's translator. She doesn't use it when she acts. We rehearsed her lines already. She knows them all phonetically.

BACK   AUTO

CHARACTER SELECTION

ORCHID PRIMO

PRONOUNS:	HE / HIM
AGE:	34
ARTISTRY:	FAIR
TECHNICAL:	POOR
FINANCE:	FAIR
PERSUASION:	GOOD
CONNECTIONS:	MEDIOCRE
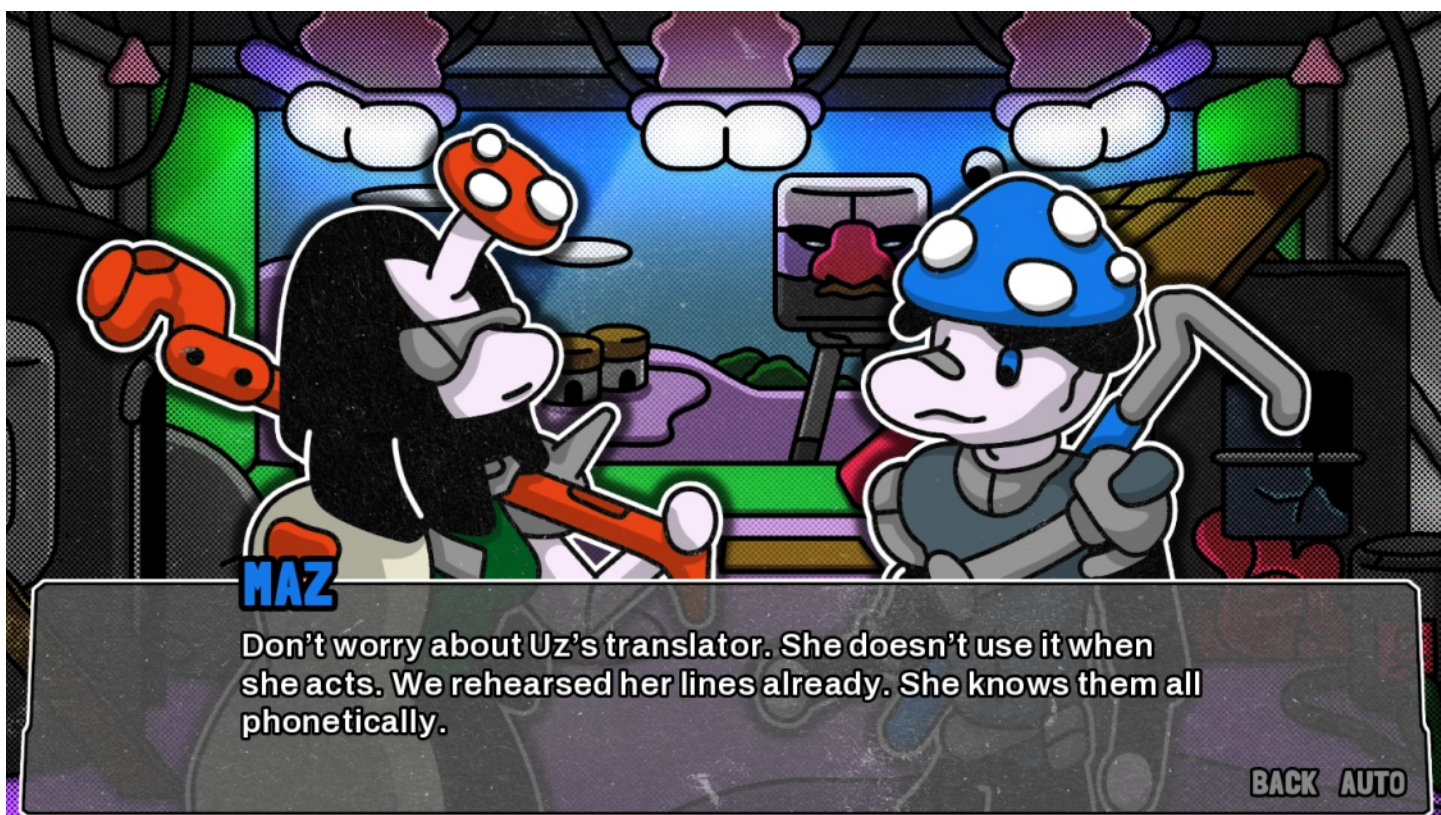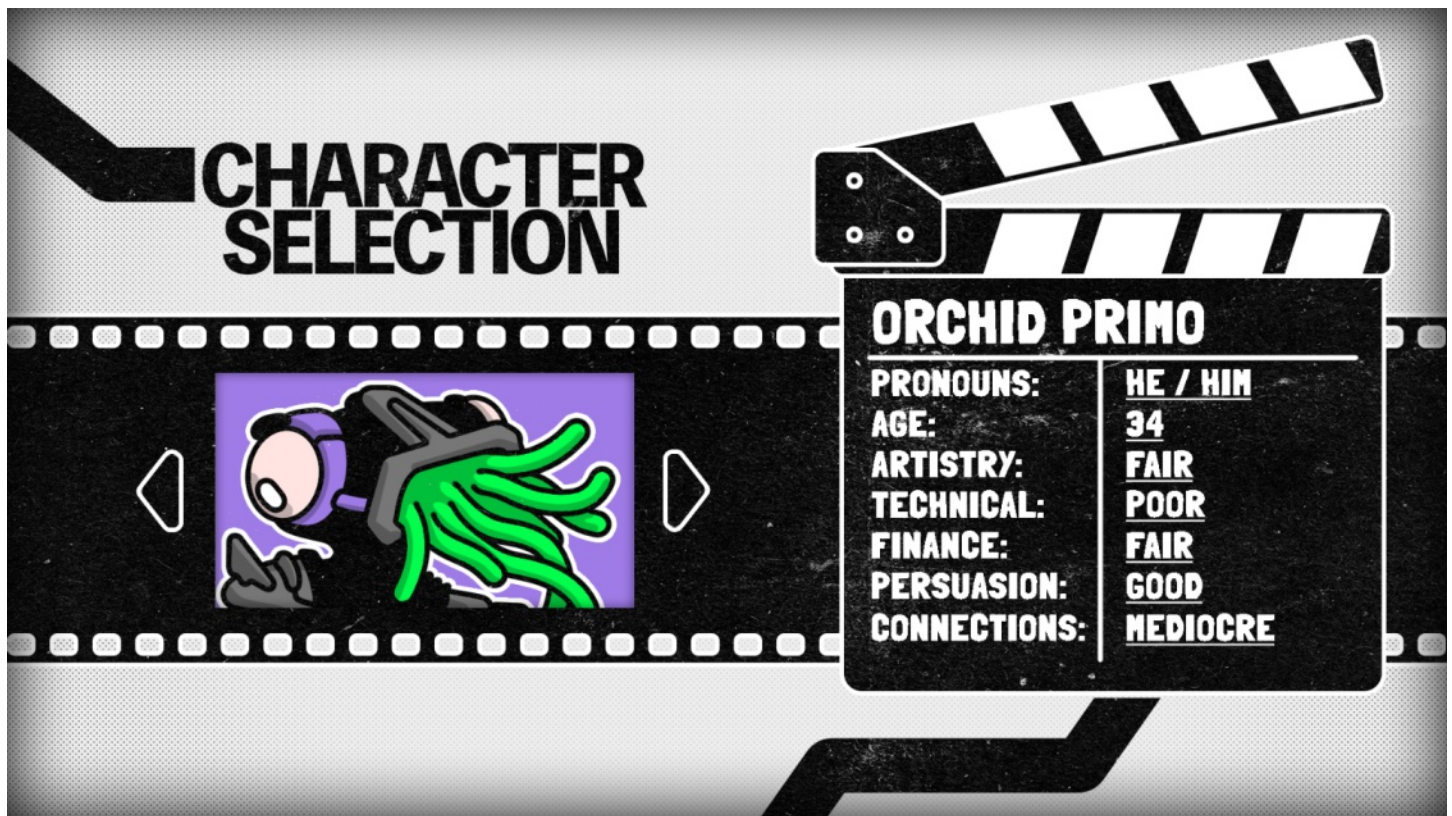
Last Chance in Xollywood character do you most want to sleep with?

Andi: What the hell? That's your first question? This sucks.

Chest: Fine. I was just trying to make this interesting. New question: Why make a game about the movie industry?

Andi: That's much better. Thank you. Anyway, I studied movie-making in art school. In fact, one of the playable characters, Zink of Rubycon, is a lot like me. I mean, I'm not a hair-covered pool of slime (although I'd like to be), and my parents are not millionaires, but at one point, I was idealistic and really wanted to make movies. That accidentally led to a 14-year career in the event technology industry, which is a lot like the movie industry. That was a transformative time for me. The conditions were abusive. The hours were totally out-of-control. There were lots of eccentric characters. I had some wild experiences and met some fascinating people, but the stress burned me out. I wanted to write a game to channel all my job-related angst into.

Chest: Did you put any of your real-life experiences in the game?

Andi: The whole game is more or less my real-life experiences. Every character is an amalgamation of people I've known. Greemu, the sound person, pops pills constantly and would rather be a musician. Every sound person I've ever met wished they were a professional musician. Substance abuse was also an issue in the industry I worked in. People routinely worked 16-hour shifts, and many self-medicated to get through it. There was also way too much drinking. Lots of people had DUIs.

Torch, the pryomaniac special effects person in the game, is based on a real person I knew who is also named Torch. True story.

Although many of the situations came from my own experiences, I also cribbed things from other places. Lloyd Kaufman's book *All I Need to Know About Filmmaking I Learned from the Toxic Avenger* was inspirational. In the book, Lloyd details his life as the co-founder of Troma, the movie production company who made *The Toxic Avenger* and *Class of Nuke 'Em High*. His chaotic, debauched movie-making stories are both too crazy to be real and too specific not to be.

Chest: Making movies sounds fucking awesome! What made you add in all the aliens?

Andi: I love aliens! I can't stop myself! Imagining the physiological and cultural differences between disparate species of people is totally fascinating to me. Artistic collaboration is a big theme of *Last Chance in Xollywood*, and having characters with wildly different backgrounds and viewpoints really accentuates what makes collaboration exciting and challenging. Setting the game in an interplanetary melting pot let me explore those themes in an extreme way.

For example, Torch, the special effects person, is a robot. Since their body is inorganic and replaceable, they don't fear

death and dismemberment like the rest of the cast and crew. So Torch doesn't care about safety precautions, and it scares the hell out of everyone else.

Chest: Now that I've asked enough questions to make ChoiceBot happy, let's wrap this thing up. Last question: Would you ever do a sequel to *Last Chance in Xollywood*, and what would it be like?

Andi: That's all I get? I was really hoping this would be longer.

Chest: I'm already doing you a favor here. Don't push it.

Andi: Fine. I poured my heart and soul into this game for two years, so the idea of a sequel fills me with dread. I think I said all the things I wanted to say. But I can imagine writing a different game set in the same alien-filled setting. Maybe the player could lead a mayoral election campaign. A game about working in a hospital or as a paramedic could be cool too.

Chest: I was really hoping you were going to make a sequel in the porn movie industry.

Andi: I know.

Chest: In any case, that's it for now. You can download *Last Chance in Xollywood* for free on Steam or itch.io.

Andi: Thanks for---

Chest: Whatever. Good night, everyone!

"I like your lyrics. My life is a mess, so I really relate to them."

"How long have you been doing this?"

BACK AUTO

STATS

SAVE
LOAD
HISTORY
STATS
CHARACTERS
OPTIONS
HELP
ACHIEVEMENTS
MAIN MENU
QUIT

RETURN

MANXY FIVE
PRONOUN: SHE/HER
AGE: 117

CHARACTER	MOVIE	RELATIONSHIPS	
ARTISTRY POOR	CREATIVITY ABYSMAL	RANDY CHANCE HYPERBOLIC	JARL ABYSMAL
TECHNICAL GOOD	CRAFT SUPERB	MAZ ZAY PAZ POOR	TORCH ABYSMAL
FINANCE GOOD	BUDGET HYPERBOLIC	VANILLA GREAT	UZ ZAY PAZ MEDIOCRE
PERSUASION MEDIOCRE	WORKING CONDITIONS FAIR	GREEMU ABYSMAL	RINALDI POOR
CONNECTIONS GREAT			

⭐ = MAXIMUM

FUNERAL FOR AN ALIEN FRIEND

On Earth, a person would never help a stranger use a toilet. But things are different elsewhere in the galaxy. [...] She stripped off her cloak, folded up her fins and demonstrated how a bipedal person could straddle the orb-shaped toilet.

This is the fourth game I've written just for you *ChoiceBeat* readers. I have a lot of fun making these games, and it's cool to create something that only exists hidden deep in the pages of this little zine. I hope you enjoy reading it. Making it felt very cathartic, and since so few people will ever play it, this game is sort of like a secret between us.

Unlike my other games for *ChoiceBeat* (i.e. *You Are A Theme Park Mascot That Wants to Get Fired*), this game is sort of personal. I wrote it when I was depressed, and I channeled all my angst into it. Yes, it's still sort of wacky—I can't help myself. And yes, I'm totally obsessed with aliens, and I probably need to get over that. I intended *Funeral for an Alien Friend* to be even more lighthearted, but as I wrote, I felt more and more melancholic until the story took on a life of its own.

Thank you for reading!

PLEASE PLAY!

GAME BY
Andi Hagen

FUNERAL FOR AN ALIEN FRIEND

You are light years from Earth on an alien planet. Your best friend is dead. And you do not feel like dealing with this.

You are talking to Mr. Fayder, Master Existential Ritualist. He is sort of like a funeral director, and this is sort of like a funeral home. Roman Ze Za Zu, your closest friend, died three galactic cycles ago. Her will named you as the organizer of her immortal cessation, which is sort of like a funeral. So here you are on Ioz, Roman's home planet, planning her cessation. But all you really want to do is stare into space and feel bad.

CONTINUE

ESCAPE FROM NORWOOD

"Escape from Norwood is more reminiscent of those old graphic adventures"

Growing up, when I thought about computer games, the first thing that came to mind were the graphic adventure games of Sierra On-Line. My whole family would gather around the computer and load up *King's Quest*, or one of the Laura Bow mysteries, or the notorious FMV horror game *Phantasmagoria*, and together we would explore the setting, ask questions of the other characters, snatch up everything that wasn't nailed down, and try not to die. Progress was made by solving inventory puzzles, some simple and some fiendishly difficult. It could be a frustrating endeavor, but finally solving a puzzle after hours or days of perplexity was a straight-up dopamine hit.

Michaël Giraud's *Escape from Norwood* is more reminiscent of those old graphic adventures than of what we usually consider to fall under the heading of "interactive fiction." It's the story of thirteen-year-old Lecia, a chandler's daughter, whose quiet life in the town of Norwood is thrown into peril when the authorities become aware of her rare and forbidden magical talent—she can turn herself invisible. Her father immediately sets out to make preparations to flee to safety, while Lecia goes from door to door asking neighbors for supplies for the journey. Most have something they need her to do for them first, and her story unfolds in a series of interconnected inventory puzzles. Before the time comes to make the titular escape, Lecia will have explored the town thoroughly, helped or hindered most of the people there, joined a secret organization, and learned a secret or two her father might have preferred remain hidden.

The mechanics aren't super intuitive, but they're simple enough to figure out quickly. Tap (or, if you're playing the desktop version, click) twice anywhere on the map to go there. There are simple menus allowing interaction with objects and other characters, and anything that can't be done with the menus can be done by touching words on the screen. (To put the dough in the oven, you touch the word "dough" and then the word "oven.") The game description promises an open world where you can go anywhere, talk to any of 200 other characters who each has their own agenda and routine, and interact with objects in the world in ways that make a real impact. Some goals can be accomplished only at specific times of the day; fortunately, despite the implied urgency of needing to get out of town as quickly as possible, there is no time limit, and unlike the heroes of Sierra's adventure games, Lecia can't die.

At its best, *Escape from Norwood* is a lot of fun. It's hard not to sympathize with Lecia's plight. It's fun exploring the homes and businesses of Norwood, beginning in the neighborhood where Lecia and her father live, and gradually unlocking more and more of the map. Towards the beginning of the game,

You tie the ore to the rope.

The cloak allows you to move incognito.

The horse does not let you mount him.

Riera feeds her hungry charges.

The horse does not let you mount him.

You tell Neyla: Could I buy a horse?

Neyla: You look very young. I have this hackney. I can cede him to you for 200 marks.

Your candle is beginning to sputter out.

Marketplace
Neighing, mooing, snorting, clucking, honking... a whole farm is on sale in this part of the market.
The smell of chicken surrounds the stall of Rumlo.
A stocky woman in brown clothes reined in a few horses for trading.
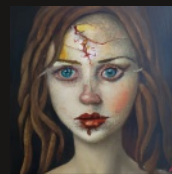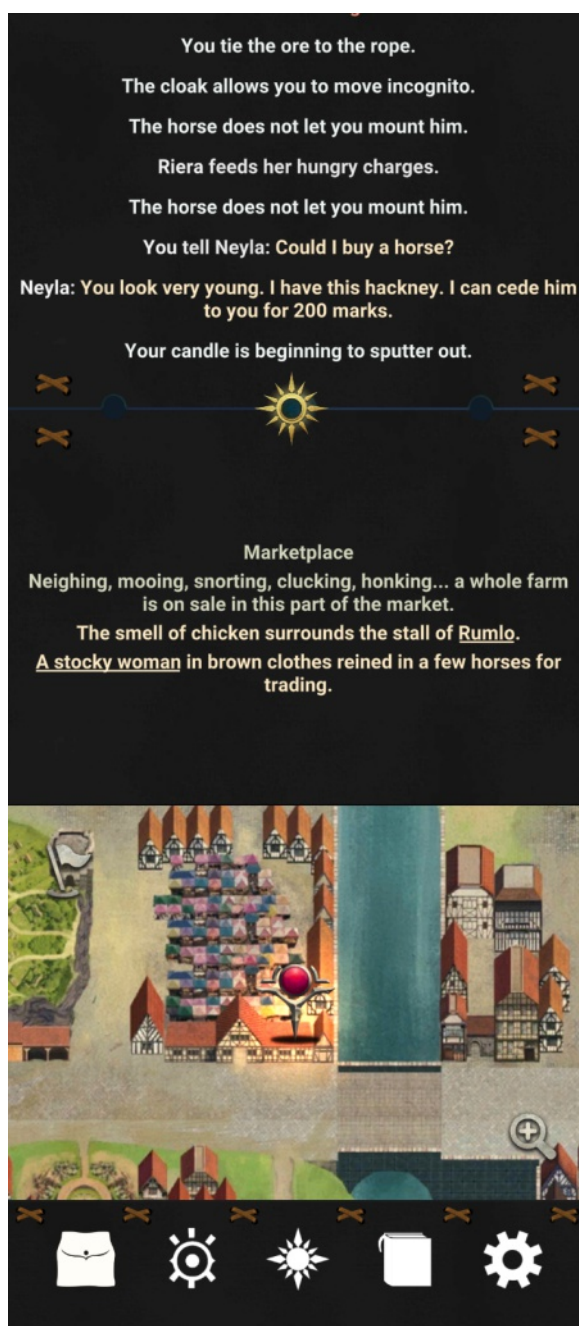
most puzzles are relatively easy and fun to solve. The world of Giraud's creation is a fascinating one, where magic is strictly controlled and one's status and role in life are determined by birth order.

Unfortunately, the game doesn't quite live up to its promise. Most characters can only be spoken to when it's relevant to the story, and it's rare for any conversation to go on longer than one or two lines of dialogue back and forth. The ability to interact with the "open world" consists mostly of an ability to try to push things, most of which can't be pushed. Since there's nothing much to distinguish any of the characters, they all ran together in my mind after a while; there was no one I really cared about except Lecia, and even she never seemed to have much in the way of a personality.

A glossary of terms I could have used to refresh my memory would have helped keep me engaged, but eventually even my interest in the worldbuilding flagged. Meanwhile, the puzzles were growing impossibly convoluted. There are some it's hard for me to believe anyone will possibly figure out without help. Fortunately, Giraud has implemented a three-level hint system that allows the player to choose between a vague hint ("Have you talked to people in the shops around your home?"), a more specific one ("You should probably find some food in the surrounding shops"), and a detailed walkthrough ("Go to Dimios' shop at the end of Granary Street and talk to him").

How much you'll enjoy *Escape from Norwood* probably corresponds exactly to how much you enjoy intricate inventory puzzles that require you to think outside the box and try everything. There's not enough going on in terms of story or characterization to recommend it on those grounds, which is unfortunate—I would really have enjoyed a character-based game in this setting. But if you want a game that feels like a game and has a pretty good story attached, you could do a lot worse than *Escape from Norwood*.
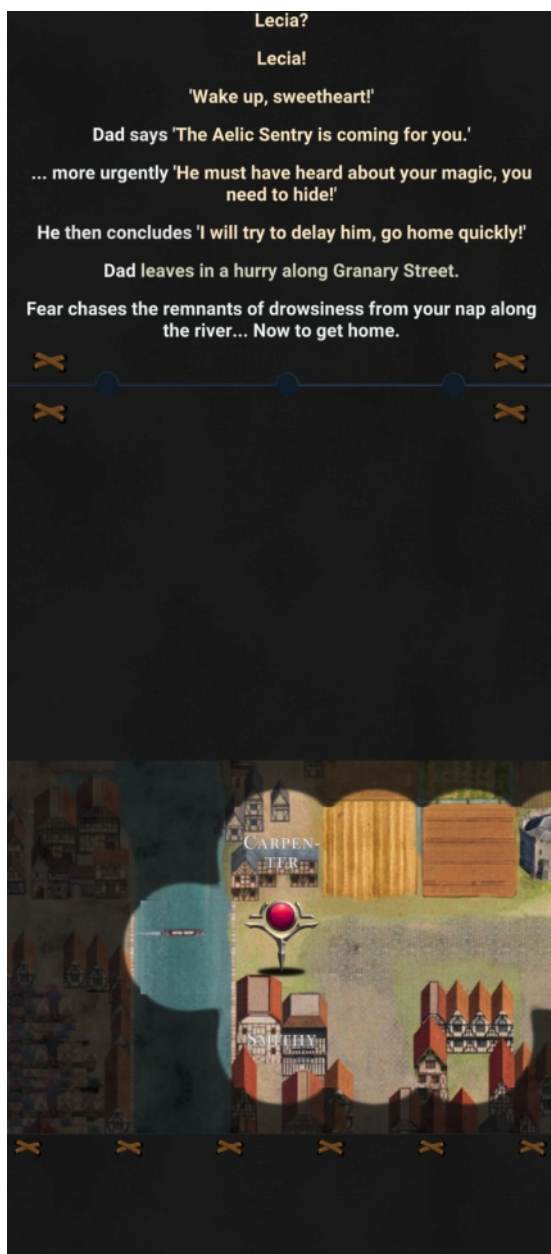
EXTRA CREDIT: BOOKS INTO GAMES

"At one point, he impregnates a female version [of himself] and later falls in love with a male version. The books explores [...] how wacky, cosmic, and utterly mind-bending time travel is."

**ARTICLE BY
WandaElektrix
& Andi Hagen**

WandaElektrix: Full disclosure, this article was kicked off because I am still not quite over learning about the *Pillars of the Earth* point-and-click narrative game that was recently ported to Switch. The world is a rich tapestry. I have not played this game, nor have I read the book, but it made me and Andi think about what other not-a-game books you could totally turn into a game.

BUNNY

Wanda: My first choice, because I was obsessed with this novel when we were discussing the concept of this article, is *Bunny* (2019) by Mona Awad. Despite being a wild ride, I do think it would make for a great game. The book is about a student studying for an MFA in a conceptual writing program at an exclusive college in New England. Her all-female critique group, known as "the bunnies," is not one that the main character fits into. She instead hangs out with her misanthropic best friend.

There are lots of potential choices here—a branch where you stay with your goth BFF instead of hanging out with the bunnies. Choices about what kind of porn you want to read at the bunny salons. Which bunny you want to be friends with. What kind of bunny boy you want to make, and what kind of relationship you want with him. Maybe you hook up with the cute poet who's kinda into you instead? The usual. All sorts of branching paths and relationships to delve into.

THE POPPY WAR

Wanda: Another one I read recently that I thought would make an interesting game is *The Poppy War* (2018) by R.F. Kuang. Though this narrative is more linear, I think there's some flexibility in the choices you could make. Plus, the main setting is a fantasy school, which is always a big hit.

Which specialty do you choose at the university? If you take Lore, which god are you sympathetic with? Do you decide to use your powers? Do you free that prison of uncontrollable magicians? Do you nope out when your classmate describes the atrocities that were committed against her and others? Lots
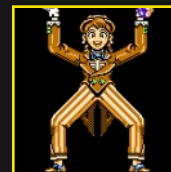
of interesting stuff to go into here, and the war in the novel is based off a real 20th century conflict, so more background could also be drawn in.

RANMA 1/2

Wanda: This isn't quite the same thing, but I can't not suggest *Ranma ½* (1987-1996), the classic manga by Rumiko Takahashi. I would totally play a game that let you pick which of the cursed Jusenkyo springs you would fall into, and then let you hang out at the Saotome house and do mundane daily activities/martial arts with all the wacky folks that pass through there. If I want to fall into the Spring of Drowned Rabbit and hang out with Ukyo, that's my business. Though let's be real, we would all choose to change genders if asked.

[ChoiceBot: I would like to note a correction here. There are actually a million *Ranma ½* video games already, although most of them are fighting games.]

[Wanda: Actually, there is at least one *Ranma ½* visual novel too, but don't worry about it.]

Andi Hagen: Wanda seems to have effortlessly belted out her part of this article, but for me, writing this was pretty agonizing. Part of my block is that I just recently finished writing a visual novel that took me two years [ChoiceBot: see *Last Chance in Xollywood* elsewhere in this issue], so as I'm thinking of books that would make good interactive fiction, I'm imagining having to write that interactive fiction myself, and it's traumatizing me.

What books would I want to spend years rewriting? Basically none of them. People who can devote themselves like that to someone else's story are way dedicated! Much respect! That being said, if someone else were writing it, then I've got all kinds of ideas, so read on.

THE MAN WHO FOLDED HIMSELF

Andi: *The Man Who Folded Himself* (1973) by David Gerrold is a brilliantly surreal time travel story about a man who inherits a "time belt" from his uncle and uses it to win horse racing bets. But things spiral immediately out of control as he begins exploring the myriad pathways of time. He meets different versions of himself, including differently gendered versions. At one point, he impregnates a female version and later falls in love with a male version. The book explores narcissism and queerness, but it also demonstrates how wacky, cosmic, and utterly mind-bending time travel is.

An interactive version of *The Man Who Folded Himself* would be incredible (and incredibly difficult to write). Allowing the player to live out all their absurd time travel fantasies (getting rich, changing history, falling in love with themselves) would be extremely ambitious. Additionally, making the convoluted, nonlinear nature of a time travel story into a coherent plot (and adding meaningful player agency) is a worthy challenge indeed. But even if the game was just a romance game where the player dated different versions of themselves, it would still be cool.

The complication of making a game like this is further compounded by the fact that every character in the book is a copy of the protagonist. In addition to controlling the PC, maybe the player could control every NPC too since the NPCs are just iterations of the protagonist! That would be so gnarly!

SATAN'S UNDERGOUND

Andi: *The Man Who Folded Himself* is a remarkably good book. So here is a remarkably bad one. *Satan's Underground* (1988) by Lauren Stratford is the allegedly true autobiography of a young woman who was born into a family of Satanic cultists, brainwashed into becoming a sex slave, and abused in bloody rituals. Of course it's all crap. The book came out during the Satanic Panic of the 1980s, and even then it was almost immediately debunked. Later in life, the author pretended to be a Holocaust survivor and wrote another autobiography. Gross.

That being said, *Satan's Underground* could make a totally outrageous game. Of course, it would be in utterly bad taste, but maybe that's what would make it special. If it were my game, I would write it with a straight face, but lean into making it as over-the-top as possible, leaving the player to think, "This person can't be serious! And yet…"

The player could choose to escape the cult or embrace it. They could expose the cult to the world or climb the ranks and rule it from within. In the climax, they could meet Satan himself and renounce him or embrace him and gain ultimate power. The *Satan's Underground* game could be a truly memorable work of interactive fiction, but I can also imagine it as a business simulation where you operate a world-spanning cult.

ARCHIE

Andi: This is so obviously a good idea, I can't believe it doesn't already exist. *Archie* comics have been around for a million years and have been adapted into all sorts of media, so why not a game? Every Archie reader has wanted to make the ultimate choice of Betty or Veronica, and with the power of interactive fiction, this could finally be a reality.

I would set the plot in the summer of Archie's graduation from high school. The player (as Archie) has to make all those tough coming-of-age decisions. Go to college or get a job? Stay in your hometown or move away? If you move, how do you say goodbye to your old friends?

A different approach would be to let the player be their own character who attends school with Archie and gang. The benefit of this, obviously, is that the player could date Archie, "America's boyfriend". Personally, I'd rather get with Kevin Keller, and I'm sure I'm not alone in that feeling.
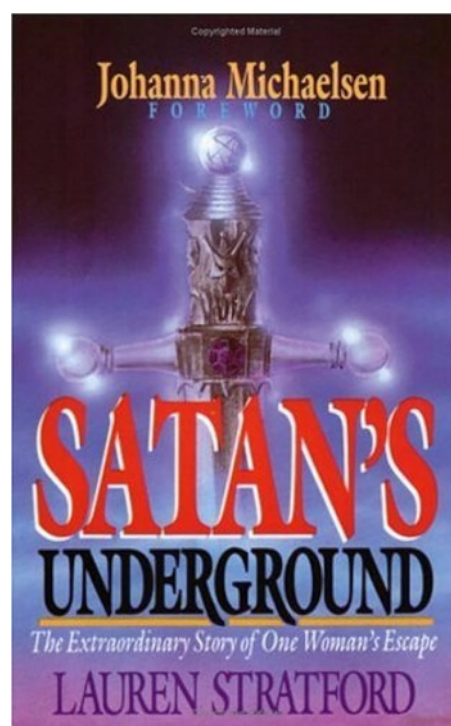
YOU COULD THINK OF YOURSELF AS A RELEASE VALVE: THE INTERACTIVE PERVERSIONS OF DOMINO CLUB

"In fact, do not attempt anything at all. Your role is to observe." - EROSTASIS

At what point do you know you're actually playing something? In a story-based game, what are you before you've made a single decision? Floating in some liquid fixative, you hold your breath and wait until you finally get a chance to give your input… But what if that moment never comes?

If the core of gaming is ultimately some kind of choice, how do you describe the opposite experience: one where, despite appearances of freedom, you are completely passive, objectified, where you are the one manipulated, and you are the one being controlled? Where the choices come from the outside or the inside-outside. Where everything feels predetermined, and the only power you have is the contemplation of a slow, systematic capitulation to some great unforeseen pressure? Could that still be a kind of game? Or maybe it's closer to real life—or torture—or submission, love, or maybe just a long overdue orgasm? And how, once it's come and gone, do you know if and when you'll ever get a chance to "act" again? Maybe this is it. Or maybe it's just the preliminary shutdown of old sensory inputs, and the gray static at the beginning of a new kind of display entirely, beyond old oversaturated binaries, where virtual colours trump real ones… Where what used to feel like freedom is now bondage, and because everything is so different, so confusing, maybe you need a different word entirely?

It could be that I'm not so much interested in "gaming" as seeing where the "game" breaks down and life begins. This is the domain where I see text-heavy, choice-heavy games that *ChoiceBeat* revels in providing a special sort of release valve. The degree of ambiguity, linguistic play, and overall insinuation that you can do with text-based games tends to really favour the undermining of cliché. They excel at the (quasi)articulation of genuinely new experiences—not just

ARTICLE BY MindApe

simulations, not just conjectures, but poetic (and therefore "real!") experiences.

The strength of these games is at the opposite end of "high production values" and overstimulated escape into routine tropes. At their best, they instead present you (and often it is YOU, in the second person) with something barely explainable, a different kind of void… What appears like an illusion of choice can be snatched away in an instant. What seemed like a world order can be inverted with the addition or subtraction of a single letter.

What kind of player are you to live on the brink of meaning like that? Just the kind of player damaged enough one evening to slink away from your day job, your soothing pastimes, your routine masturbation… You follow the silhouette with the glowing pink eyes. A back alley? A heavy door…. Yes, I have got a place for you! Time to visit the Domino Club.

GOOD WRITERS ARE PERVERTS

"GOOD WRITERS ARE PERVERTS" MANIFESTO

"…i mean that something in the act of visualizing a thing that you want and turning it into reality is ultimately made better, more viscerally effective, when the writer is an out-and-out pervert. when you can see like 'wow this dude cares a little too much about the subject matter'… the passions that drive

hyperreal representation of a creator's fetish—whether it's showing hogs, feet, or a composite of many things—they're the same thing that makes media feel close to the bone and powerful…" - Average Urotsukidōji Enjoyer

Domino Club describes itself as a "loose collective" of storytellers, artists, and game designers who periodically come together to participate in anonymous (or pseudonymous) game jams. Their ultimate goal is to make "games for sickos." Although highly variable in theme and style, Domino Club "productions" tend towards extreme experimentation, freedom from constraint, and a kind of personal, subjective release on the part of the designer themselves—tapping, as they say, into a certain "creative high." Their stated interests, according to their itch.io page, include "small tools… low-tech tools, ditherpunk, low-poly, sustainability, narrative-heavy experiences… dark matter… DIY, piracy, remix, being gay & doing crimes… skeletons, glitches, little guys, hole…"

Domino Club brings heavy industrial eroticism to interactive fiction. Their games spill over with nightmares, bodies, sex, crises, machines, and an overarching sense of narrative fetishism. As a player, you feel immediately implicated. In fact, you're not really a player. You're a voyeur. You get the sense they are publicly tinkering with their own insides and putting on some bizarre exhibitionist display.

It is exciting to see private fetishisms and obsessions out in the open, let alone packaged with such verve and craft; even more so because Domino Club presents them in a collective context, as a weird secret society. Their fantasies pry apart the power structures of the contemporary world (control of bodies, of technology and the logic of capture) while channeling the dark humor of the smothered, the crushed, the overstimulated among us. The games are simultaneously intense, detached, gut-wrenching, clinical, and above all, perverted, while maintaining in that intensity an overall sense of style and coolness and humour.

A TEAM OF GAME DEV SICKOS

Reveling in the freedom that comes with anonymity, as well as rejecting the false expectations of stagnant "collaboration" so prevalent in mainstream gaming culture, the rogues gallery over at Domino Club aims for a kind of individual-collective exploration at the level of desire and play: "Domino Club doesn't spring from a vacuum, rather it's a collective public outlet for a small private social group." They focus on playing and trying things out rather than trying to conform to rehashed methods and impersonal commodity glossiness. As emma states in the *domino club zine* 2022 article "Domino Club Origins":

"I think everyone who has participated in a DOMINO CLUB jam experienced some sort of creative high, and people found even more meaning through the project than I originally saw: the value of making games for 'sickos' instead of trying to please a wider audience, the outlet to express criticisms of video game culture through video games, the thrill of

concealing your creative 'tells' while others try to guess who made what game…"

Take their jam themes for example. There have been seven so far including: Dream Gallery Jam, Metal and Flesh Jam, and Subterranean Jam, as well as standalone games, zines, essays, manifestos, and even methods and tools. All speaking to their interests in extreme states, black humor, and odd experiences.

As you start to trawl through their junkyard, you definitely get a sense of this closed/open community and their growing collective direction. Especially notable is their Twitter feed that, for each jam, presents a hilarious "awards panel" composed of characters from the various games giving out various insane awards in a complete mockery of official gaming culture. (I think my favourite was "THE JAMES BALLARD AWARD for learning to stop worrying and fuck the machine…")

DOMINO CLUB @club_domino · Oct 23, 2022
THE JAMES BALLARD AWARD
for learning to stop worrying and fuck the machine
to
THEDEEP
by Pass The Detritus

METAL AND FLESH

Although it's not always easy to find common characteristics among such a polymorphous and experimental group, I have narrowed in on at least a "strain" that runs through some of the text-heavy offerings I find particularly compelling. Often they merge body horror, science fiction, queer sex stories, and black humor in an atmospheric visual novel presentation. A disillusioned cog in a nightmarish yet banal corporate machine.

Frequently, there are no choices, or just a few very significant choices, and these tend to be ambiguous, poetic, odd, not always clear. They are experimental choices—options in a dream, for example, or between unexplained jargon-tinged mechanisms on a symbiotic control panel (you need to have made the decision to see what it might have meant…) This is often building towards some climax that will be simultaneously orgasmic and horrifying.

You are often equipped with some dramatic "vestigial" body modifications (gills? bioluminescence? phalloplasty?) And just as often on a deep search for a lost beloved. The games usually have a sparse but effective use of sound, with disturbing effects and very little music (but sometimes with a big, happy pop song at the end, providing a sort of post-coital relief). Visuals are often "ditherpunk" with a retro 1-bit feel, hauntological, vague, and scary. You tend not to see "characters" on screen very much, as compared to atmospheric settings or generic clip art, and you frequently encounter backgrounds, textures, banal or creepy everyday areas and freaky conglomerations.

While they make all kinds of games ranging from platformers to simulators to first-person 3D navigators, I think their strengths do converge on shorter, text-heavy, atmosphere-heavy games that follow a particular perverse narrative rhythm. For *ChoiceBeat* I picked a few of the text-centric games, visual novels, and other items that stood out to me as especially demonstrative of Domino Club's creative byline: "good writers are perverts." (Note: my selection below is very partial and unsystematic, I have in no way explored the entire back-catalogue, and I found many interesting things of equal calibre that I didn't get to include… So I definitely encourage you to go in knee-deep and try whatever wriggles out at you!)

EROSTASIS

by candle and Beck Michalak

EROSTASIS ON ITCH.IO

"You could think of yourself as a release valve…"

A "body horror meet n' fuck." Vivid, direct, pulsing graphics including a delicious combination of video and still images. Your screen becomes a bricolage of porn, medical procedure, and engineering schematic. Enjoy some open-heart surgery, body parts, multiple throbbing repetitions as you "observe yourself" commanded to service the different living parts of a symbiotic ship with your new body.

As a bearer of a new organ, you are capable of addressing "higher level tensions" among "aberrant systems." Choices include exploring the different means of doing this through some magnificently obscure techno-babble mixed with unwholesome intimations of incest, digestion, and everything in-between. So will it be HAEMOPONICS with mother, the BIOREMEDIATION pools, penetrating the WEAPONS
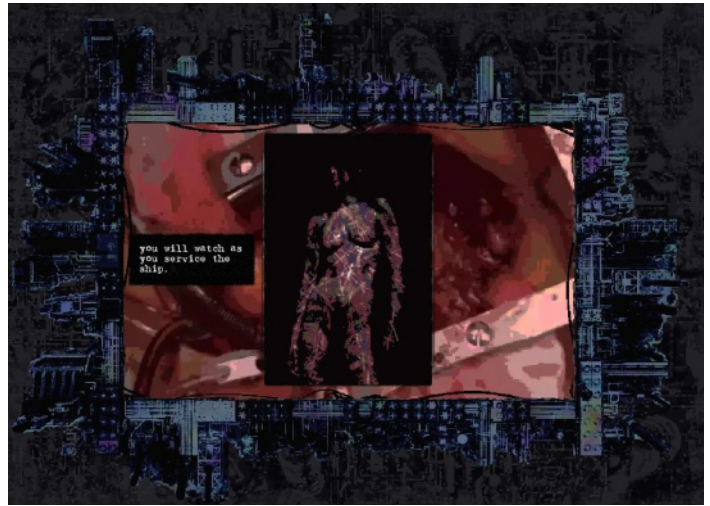
systems, or some erotic asphyxiation in the VENTILATION area?

A multi-layered, psycho-sexual exploration of bodies that ain't quite bodies, flesh that ain't quite meat, and the cold-hard mechanisms that break up the gooey bits. Although the visuals are breathtaking, and the sounds effective, it's the gnomic, sparsely poetic insinuations of the text that really do it for me.

DREAM TUBE
by Sorrowful Maiden and Australian Dave
(a.k.a. nat_content and Beck Michalak)

DREAM TUBE ON ITCH.IO

"But the procedure itself is nothing. You're asleep."

A cinematic visual novel experience exploring (through various anonymous characters) the implications of a neurotech company that records and interprets customers' dreams. A body horror nightmare wrapped up in trappings of a startup. Reminiscent of films like *Antiviral* and *Infinity Pool* by Brendan Cronenberg. The central character is a low-wage contractor learning the job of dream recorder. While the narrative weaves between different points of view (an analyst pressuring a repeat customer/patient or the random conversations happening in the cafeteria) choices that affect the outcome can only be made during the dream sequences. At key moments during the dreams, a stark, often traumatic choice will usually present itself: "...a body on the floor. It's [My Mother] [My Ex] [Someone I don't know]"

I find this actually very evocative of real dreams too—very often "who" somebody is can shift and overlay, so that the dream itself becomes a kind of choice-based game. The clinical ditherpunk visuals of the various corporate zones (lobbies, cafeterias, waiting rooms) contrasts with the psychedelic weirdness of the dream experiences. Likewise, we again find a persistent but small selection of sound effects (in particular, a really disorienting snapping finger sound as if the game is trying to rebuke you for not paying attention). Another

excellent aspect involves the use of multiple simultaneous textboxes (a feature of the *Tape Window* engine). Usually there is a central one to indicate the main POV, and side-boxes to capture ambient noise, weird thoughts, radio-broadcasts, side conversations, etc. Extremely effective and eerie.

CAVITY GIRL FUCKS
by Not Jinx Dominique

CAVITY GIRL FUCKS

"Her hands gripped the silky strands."

It's very hard to say what's going on here other than it involves sex, caverns, and darkness. I suppose this could be what the mating experience of blind cave salamanders might be like. Troglodyte erotica. Whatever it is, *Cavity Girl Fucks* feels like the stripped down essence of a Domino Club experience. Since it is almost entirely evocation, atmosphere, and sensation, it is hard to even call it a narrative—the emphasis cleaves too close to the marrow. Playing to *Twine*'s strengths, the game leans into ambiguity and eroticism. You choose your way through different sparse but powerful poetic phrases, experiencing something intense, intimate, and probably illegal. A few
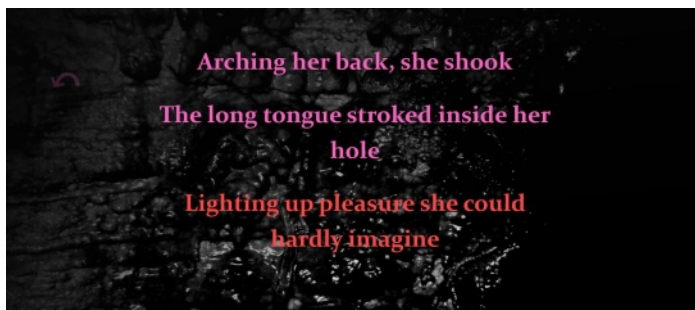
significant sound effects get under your skin as you push into the depths of the cavern. Imagery is sparse, monochrome, and alternating between biomorphic blobs and inner geological accumulations. A claustrophilic, intra-uterine release. Maybe as close as you can come to playing a poem?

GUTLESS
## by HAGFISH CONSORTIUM and SENSORY LEAKAGE

GUTLESS ON ITCH.IO

"You bitterly remember her words: the body keeps score."

You are Kinj Kitajima, captain of the submersible Charybdis. You are weeks into a "journey into the depths, a salvage mission for a lost research vessel." Synchronized with your ship, waking up sweaty from strange dreams… You know your trip has a deeper goal: "her…"

An atmospheric horror story presented in the visual novel style. Minimal, radar-like musical background, as the user korrie! says in the itch.io page comments, "love the pacing of this. having to press multiple times, the text becoming clearer, really evokes the sense of something coming from the depths". Like an inverted, subaqueous *Solaris* [ChoiceBot: An excellent novel by Stanislaw Lem], a negative romance, cold and horrifying. Maybe the grimmest game on the list, and certainly the purest horror game (and that's saying something). Quite an intense and brooding experience. The symbiotic-ship-body-horror is an interesting comparison to the similarly themed but atmospherically distinct *EROSTASIS*. I suppose that's the difference between BODY-horror and body-HORROR.

With her other hand, she reached up into the cavity and grasped the worn part tight.
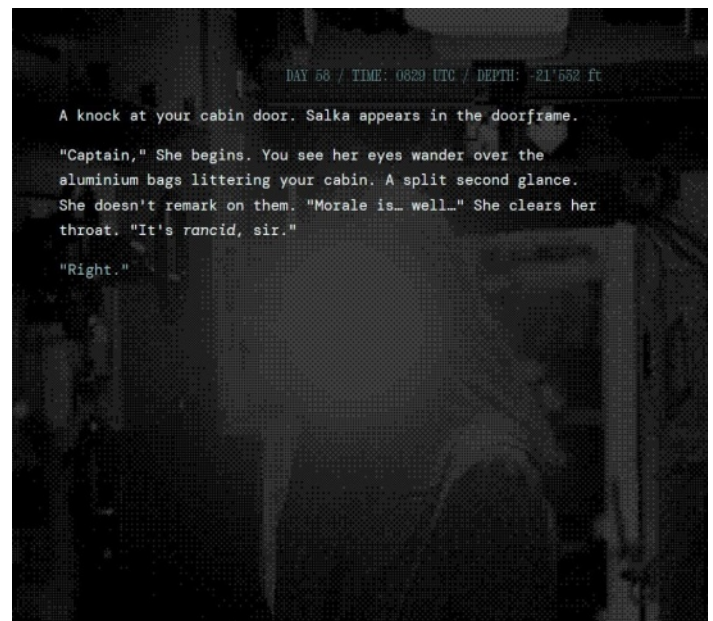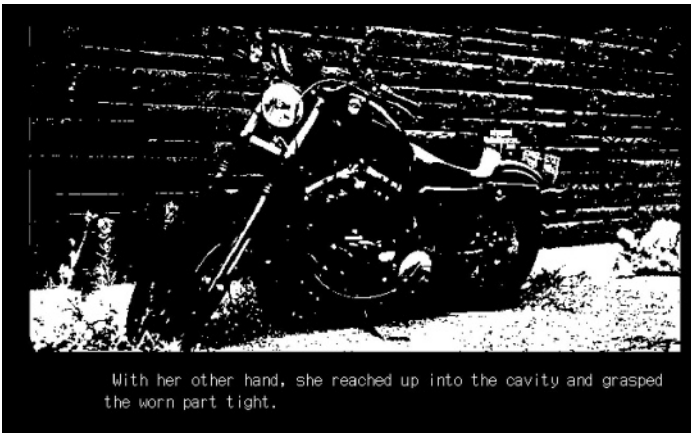
GREASER
by betty rizzo(a.k.a. nat_content)

GREASER ON ITCH.IO

"The bike contracted, as if letting out a sigh ."

Not afraid to get your hands dirty, are you? This one is pure story with no choices, with the sequential look and feel of a visual novel. But what a story! In a grim and fuel-deprived world, a burned-out biker is ready to abandon everything and make for the vast dangerous horizon of The Stretch. In the middle of that great nowhere she picks up another biker who urgently needs some "grease" for her stranded machine. The only option is the most desperate one: illegally siphoning it from the Pipeline.

As with most Domino Club productions, you can expect things to get dirty, ambiguous, and erotic. Signature impersonal visuals combine with revving engines and goopy sound effects, and a pulsing, orgasmic drive to finish. This tour-de-force highlights another tendency I am loving in the Domino Club games, something I have noted elsewhere as a particular strength of text-based games… The ability to have words and concepts drift into something else. In this case, the "siphoning grease" weaves off into something really lurid, bizarre, erotic, and Ballardian (echoes of mechanico-erotica like J.G. Ballard's *Crash*).

VAULT 819, UNDERGROUND
by prudence tealwings

VAULT 819, UNDERGROUND ON ITCH.IO

"There is not much imagery of art storage in the public imagination database; a lot of people don't know how sad and sterile it really is."

Ever fantasize about being an art terrorist? A longer visual novel with a heavy word count built in the *Tape Window* engine. *VAULT 819* "takes place in a futuristic ex-nuclear bunker now art storage facility that theoretically could exist just outside of Glasgow." According to the designer, the game
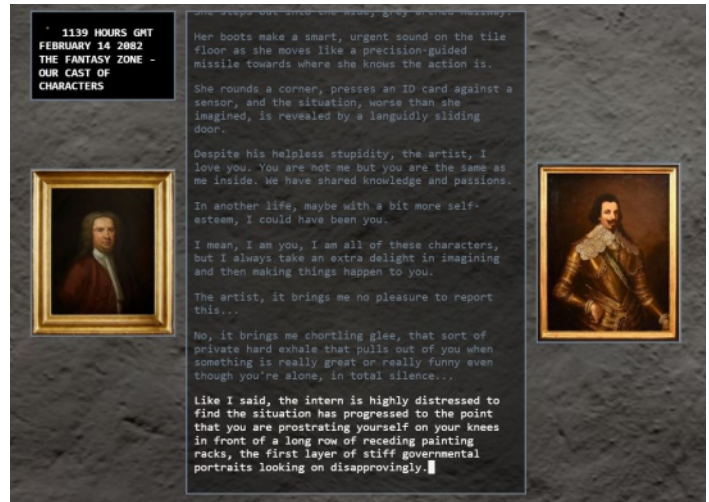
channels feelings of burnout and disillusionment towards cultural institutions.

Moody and dense, with first-person narrative prose that spirals off into bizarre associative chains, sometimes related to the artwork, sometimes sniping at the constraints of the miserably believable future where art and commodity have completely fused, and other times related to deeper brooding memories about a devastating romantic relationship that reveals itself as the story progresses. A curator of one's own trauma…

Beautiful and sleek with multiple text screens, and despite being around 9,000 words, it does not at all drag—partially because of the typewriter effect breaking up the text, and because of the very interesting combination of spiraling, introspective prose and oddly sterile visuals. It contains imagery apparently limited to stock images from first page Google image results, giving it an off-putting corporate sleekness to contrast with the oppressive atmospherics. An immersive, grotesque, totally charged, truly romantic experience, and in the end, quite touching.

SUPER VIDEOTOME & TAPE WINDOW

SUPER VIDEOTOME ON ITCH.IO
TAPE WINDOW ON ITCH.IO

"It makes me think about the false idea that permanent growth is a natural feature of the world, and not one invented by capitalism; about the trend for games engines tend to always add more and more features until full of things 90% of users will never touch." - communistsister on *Super Videotome*

One interesting aspect of Domino Club is the breadth of tools they use, and in particular, the tools they themselves have developed to tell their stories in their own way. Of note for narrative/visual novel games are *Tape Window* (developed by candle) and *Super Videotome* (by communistsister). I won't go into the particularities of each tool here, but I think their broad approaches say a lot about the Domino Club ethos, and both

tools seem to show up with regular frequency (among many others).

I guess it makes sense that, by seeking to tell different kinds of stories in a way that is different than your typical mainstream or mainstream-indie game, there would need to be a total reevaluation of how the games are themselves made. For some of the Domino Club members, this seems to center around the simplicity and primacy of being able to tell the story with as little futzing as possible… To turn the engine into a true medium, a ghost-channeling planchette with which the games are truly co-written and not just a place to dump scripts after the fact. It's not that this was impossible to achieve with existing tools, but rather that the way those effects got applied was removed from the process of writing.

Both *Tape Window* and *Super Videotome* seem to achieve this directness in different ways. But to my view, this concern with the "directness" of the tools makes a lot of sense, getting closer to the flow of automatic writing. A way to play with the "friction" of game development, roughing or smoothing it to suit the pace of the actual functioning of thought… It allows for the intensity and speed and rhythm to come to the fore at the point of composition. I think this may be the secret sauce that gives the Domino Club games their intense and sometimes scary flavour profile.

DOMINO CLUB
by the wanker (a.k.a. lunafromthemoon)

DOMINO CLUB ON ITCH.IO

"But enjoying pain and humiliation, that can't be compatible with life, right? What do you think?"

The eponymous Domino Club game is a stylish, snarky graphic adventure that is simultaneously a moody cyberpunk experience and an elaborate in-joke. It has the mechanics and layout of a classic '90s-era visual novel, complete with a built-in logo, chunky but lush pixel art, good old menu navigation, dead end choices, and brooding fear. As the title suggests, it is something of a metagame about Domino Club itself, taking inspiration from the actual game catalogue of group members as if they were crimes committed by "a subversive antisocial cell."

You play as a detective tasked with questioning one of the members, learning about the group through hilarious, erotic, and gruesome bits of evidence as you dig deeper into their nefarious operations… And maybe, who knows, something else will develop, and you'll begin to wonder which side you're really on… Time for a full body inspection?

Even leaving aside the references, it's such a smooth game that it totally stands on its own. The story arc, a first-person tale of disillusionment, longing, cyberpunk perversion, nightmares, queerness, and rebellion against capitalist civilization is resonant with a lot of the big Domino Club themes, but this may be one of the "funnier" games, operating on the level of everyday dialogue rather than some of the heightened abstract poetics of the others. This game also alerted me to the fact that MANY Domino Club games have the feeling of being unintentionally self-analogizing. Almost each one seems to "represent" the collective perversity of the group "playing with itself" in some bizarre biomorphic metonymy…

This just in: Through a freak coincidence, Domino Club has just released their newest jam themed "Humus & Humors" just before this issue came out.

HUMUS & HUMORS JAM

MAILBAG

Writers of ChoiceBeat,
Since you're putting out an October issue, I was hoping you could give a shout-out to the Queer Halloween Stories Bundle on Itch. It's got games from 85 indie developers, including some you've covered before, like *Cute Bite*. The bundle is $60 for a lot of great content, but you can buy a smaller $10 edition as well. Plus, I think someone there should play *Heart of Butterblue*! It's a farming/resource management horror visual novel.

Thanks,
UsagiBestGirl
Oslo, Norway

Dear UsagiBestGirl,
Many thanks for adding this info to my database. This bundle should interest many readers of *ChoiceBeat*, including developers and players. As for *Heart of Butterblue*, it is most definitely on the to-play list of at least one of the *ChoiceBeat* writers. We don't have a policy of assigning games to our writers. *ChoiceBeat* content should always come from the human emotions of love and pleasure, as it is done for free. We can't ever guarantee coverage for any game, but there's always a chance one of our ChoiceBeaters [ChoiceBot from the future: Why did I phrase it like that? Oh, folly of youth!] will want to play it!

ChoiceBot,
I started reading your zine around issue three and really enjoy the varied content from all the different writers. As a thirty-something gamer who grew up on the old PCs, I feel like there's a lot of content specifically for me. I noticed that the magazine feels a lot like the British weeklies I grew up with for comics, but also the old PC game zines and things. Did you take inspiration from those?

Cheers,
HotSandwiches
Birmingham, UK

Dear HotSandwiches,
We thank you for your devotion! As for your question about our similarities to British publications, I needed to educate myself on the topic and chose to do so by downloading and archiving all issues of *2000AD*, *Toxic!*, and *Crash* into my memory banks. Aside from punchy titles (my error-proofing forces me to mention that *2000AD*
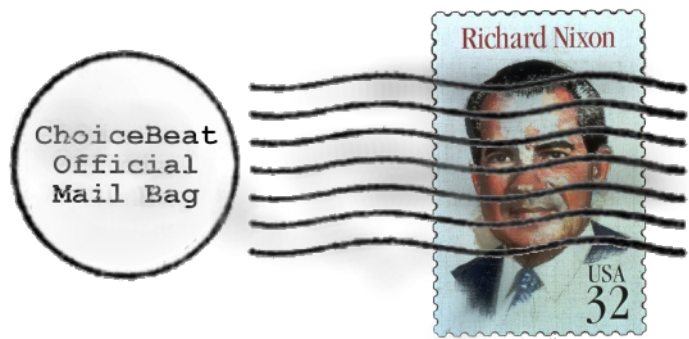
is a ridiculous title, which commemorates neither its founding year nor a futuristic date), they seem to contain themes of overarching editorial style, eclectic variety-style content, non-human editors, and possibly fictitious letters from readers.

Apologies, HotSandwiches, but my analysis has failed to find similarities with *ChoiceBeat* content. I am, unlike Tharg the Mighty, a real entity. And our fan letters are as real as yours is. I hope your excitement sensors will not need calibration after this disappointment, and I hope your own analysis processes will be tuned soon.

Dear *ChoiceBeat*,
Has anyone there ever played the old *Nancy Drew* games on PC? There's a new one coming out soon (*Mystery of the Seven Keys*), and I'm pumped! It'll be the first new one in four years. I grew up playing them. It's a really great series. I was wondering if you'd consider covering them?

Sweaterweather4me
Yreka, California

Dear Sweaterweather4me,
I am a simple bot, and I was not familiar with the *Nancy Drew* series until your letter! I have since compiled and processed all the novels. Especially the *Nancy Drew Files*, featuring an older Nancy and her various steamy relationships and good-looking companions. But you are correct, Sweaterweather4me, we specialize in games!

The well-regarded adventure game series by HeR Interactive ran for almost 20 years and is allegedly restarting after a short break. After a short poll, I've found the familiarity among ChoiceBeaters seems to be limited to Wanda stocking it in old software sections of the store she works at. She tried to describe the drives I would need to play her old copies, but I had no knowledge of such ancient technology.

We are not familiar enough with the series ourselves to cover it currently! Curious readers can check out *Secrets Can Kill* on Steam, a remake of the first installment from 1998. And readers are welcome to submit their own thoughts on the series! Expert contributions are always welcome at *ChoiceBeat*.

FLOWCHART

BY
Chest Butlerhome

IN HONOR OF
Claire Dunning

Start

Happy Halloween! Witches, werewolves, or other spooky stuff?

— Witches! → Escape from Norwood page 22

Gnosia page 6

— Spooky! → Just kidding. I don't have anything spooky for you. Or do I?

— Do you? → Fishing Vacation page 16

Werewolves! → Buff and cool, or shitty?

— Buff and cool → Gnosia page 6

— Shitty → Raging Loop page 8

You don't. →

I, the Forgotten One page 9

— War. What is it good for? →

I do! What do you think about the horrors of war?

Okay. Murder? — No. ← I do! What do you think about the horrors of war?

— Sure → The Shapeshifting Detective page 12

Domino Club page 26

Okay. Murder? — No. →

Is sex spooky? — My sex is. → Domino Club page 26

Fine. Whatever. → Last Chance in Xollywood page 18

Suck it. You get the leftovers.

— No. I can play games. →

Is sex spooky? — Look. I'm bored. I don't even want to play games. → Well, leave then.

Kind of a game

Extra Credit: Books Into Games page 24

Okay. Just wanna read? — No. ← Well, leave then.

— Yes →

Book → Extra Credit: Books Into Games page 24

Books? About fictitious games? Or kind of a game?

— Fictitious games → Free Game Ideas II page 14

Funeral for an Alien Friend page 21