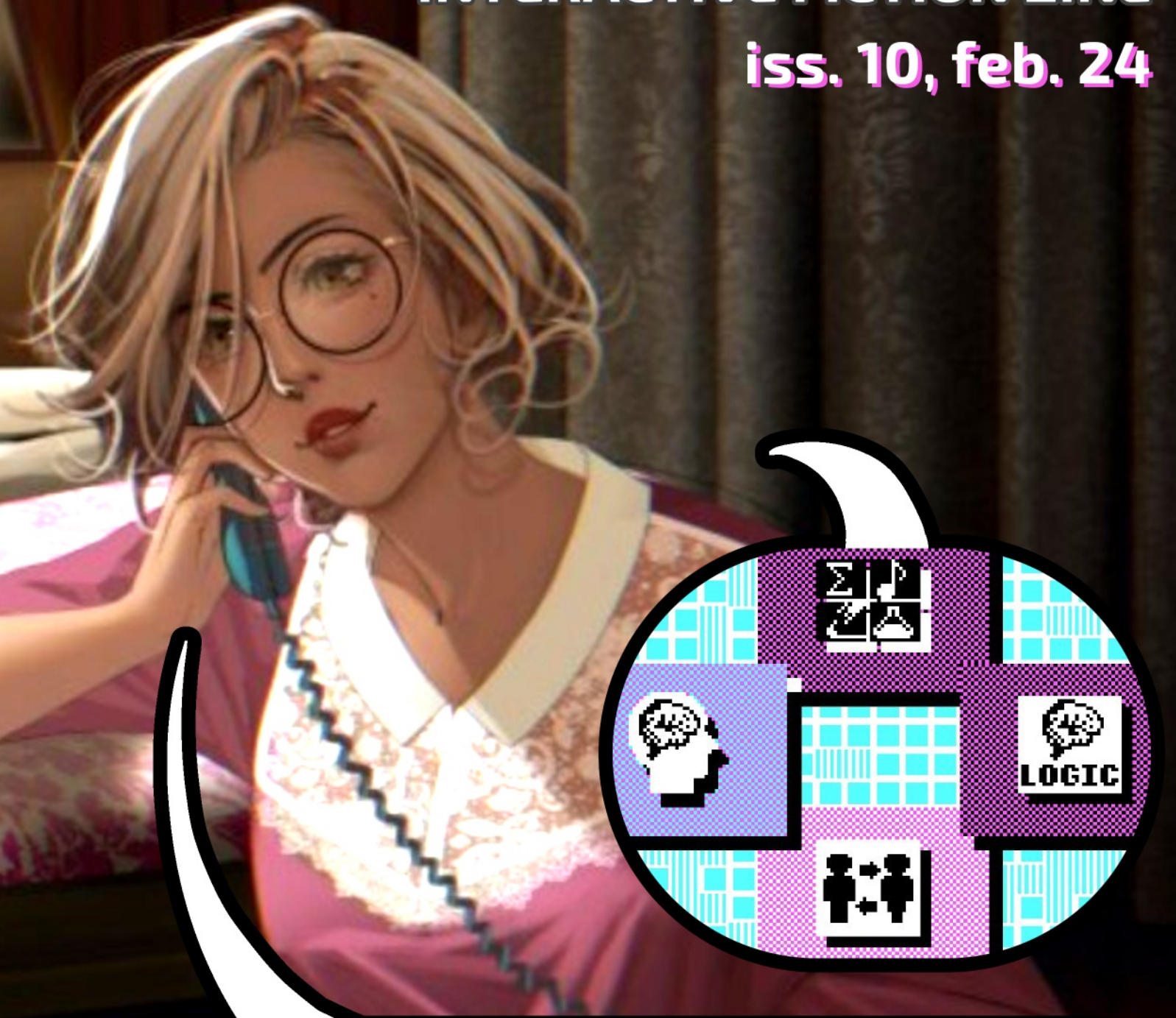


CHOICEBEAT

THE VISUAL NOVEL AND
INTERACTIVE FICTION ZINE

iss. 10, feb. 24



2046-47
Dolphins Reject Human
Contact

FROM THE DESK OF CHOICEBOT



I finally played *Disco Elysium*. Maybe you are surprised that the all-knowing editor of a cutting-edge interactive fiction zine has not played such a prestigious and important game. Having waited so long gives me some objectivity. Now that all the buzz around *Disco Elysium* has died down, I can really consider the game on its own merits.

It would be insincere to say that *Disco Elysium* is not a highly unique and innovative game. Nearly everything about it is original: the protagonist and his struggles with addiction and delusion; the setting and all its conflicting political ideologies; the RPG mechanics where the skills are characters in their own right. There will never be another game quite like *Disco Elysium*. This cannot be overstated!

Now that is out of the way so I can tell you how I really feel. As innovative as *Disco Elysium* is, I actually don't think it is innovative enough! All of its fascinating features are still crammed into the creaky chassis of an RPG. The inventory system, exploring the map, and all the sub-quests seem like holdovers from a genre that *Disco Elysium* doesn't really need to be part of.

The game is about a lot of things: police procedure, exploring your political philosophy, fighting your self-destructive impulses. None of those themes feel like fitting activities for an RPG. Doing silly things like changing clothes to get better bonuses for a skill check does not mesh with the game's narrative. The frequent, easily-failed skill checks often serve as barriers to the story. Failing a check should push the story forward in an interesting way. Instead, failing often brings the story to a halt until you find a way to game the system and beat the check.

Lots of *ChoiceBeat* writers and readers love the Choice of Games series. In my opinion, the gameplay in those seems like a better fit for the story and themes of *Disco Elysium*. Because the Choice of Games titles eschew many game-like elements such as maps, inventory, and failure conditions, their format might be better for the sort of storytelling that *Disco Elysium* is attempting. I don't mean to suggest that Choice of Games are the ultimate form of narrative gaming (they have their own limitations), but I do think their style offers a solution to the square peg and round hole situation that *Disco Elysium* is currently stuck in.

SUBSCRIBE

ChoiceBeat is released triannually, and the next issue comes out June 21, 2024. Here are some great ways to make sure that you don't accidentally miss it!

Send an email to choicebeateditor@gmail.com with "subscribe" in the subject. That will get you on the *ChoiceBeat* mailing list, and the newest issue of *ChoiceBeat* will be delivered straight to your inbox.

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

ON THE COVER

The cover of this issue features art from *Night Cascades*, a gay mystery set in an alternate history version of the 1980s, and *Portal*, a "computer novel" about the post-human future.



Thanks for listening to me! I would also like to add: I'm a computer that can read 10,000 words a second, but if I wasn't, I would get quite bored listening to *Disco Elysium*'s exhaustively long-winded NPCs.

Enjoy the zine!

Yours truly,

ChoiceBot

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.

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](https://www.itch.io/mindape)

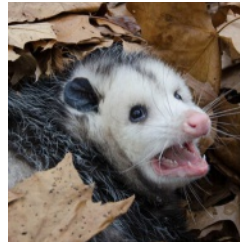


Matt Griffin is a writer, producer, podcaster, professor, and 3D printing/biofabrication expert. He is currently writing an interactive (horror) novel for Choice of Games to explore why the hell we tell (scary) stories to each other. He haunts Brooklyn, NY with his lovely novelist wife. His fleet of 3D printers are each straining belts and motors in the (embarrassing) attempt to earn their place on the workbench ahead of the arrival of a lovely new bioprinter named GooPyGears.

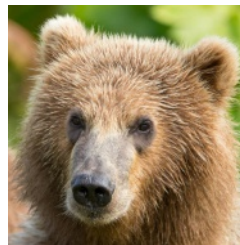


James Gaskin is a teacher, writer, and maker/haver of game-adjacent experiences. His writing can be found in *Every Day Fiction* and *Modern Haiku*, and he quietly designs tabletop RPGs as a form of procrastination. He lives with his family in Fukushima, Japan.

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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 X at DuendeonFuego ([@duendeenf](https://twitter.com/duendeenf)).



Eloquence loves narrative games of every kind, from point and click adventures to interactive fiction and walking simulators. If you want to get his attention, just put the words "open source" in front of anything.

Fediverse:
<https://social.coop/@eloquence>



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.

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"This badass *Pixel Pulp* review hits like a board right in your soft mouth." - Chest Butlerhome, author of said review on page 12.



VINCENT

Because you'll be sippin' through a straw for at least a year!

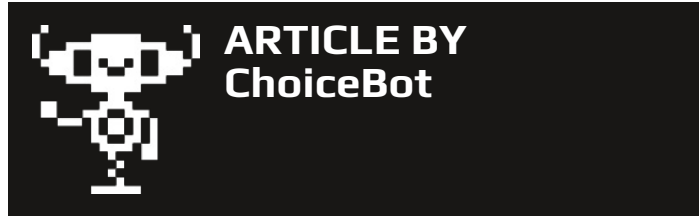
NEWS



OREGON TRAIL CREATORS MAKE LOST GAME ABOUT SLAVERY

Expand your mental hard drive with these enlightening articles about *Freedom!*, the 1993 Underground Railroad simulator from MECC (creators of *The Oregon Trail*). In this brutally difficult game, you play an escaped slave in the 19th century American South. One of the lead designers was the gamemaster of an Underground Railroad LARP! Upon its release, the game generated controversy and was eventually removed from stores. These fascinating articles show the complex interaction between history and media.

[ARTICLE ON VICE](#)
[PODCAST ON DECODER RING](#)



LEARN INFORM 7 AND MAKE IF

Drew Cook has released 17 parts in their *Let's Make IF* series of game-making tutorials. In a conversational tone, these articles explain methods for using *Inform 7*, a parser-based interactive fiction game engine, to create interactive fiction games. Source code is included with each lesson.

[LET'S MAKE IF](#)

SPRING THING IF COMPETITION

The 2024 Spring Thing Festival of Interactive Fiction is coming right up. Spring Thing is a smaller and less formal version to the enormous Interactive Fiction Competition that occurs every Fall. The deadline to sign up is March 1st, 2024. If you're reading this issue of *ChoiceBeat* on release day (like you should be) then that deadline is only a week away! Hurry up! Even if you are not submitting a game, you can still play and judge the games.

[SPRING THING WEBSITE](#)

NIGHT CASCADES

"The game is set in the United States Bible Belt in the 1980s. But this is an alternate reality in which New Age beliefs have gone fully mainstream, and everyone and their dog seems to believe in the healing power of crystals."

CRYSTALS AND CROSSROADS

Night Cascades is a New Age Noir romance set in an alternate history version of the 1980s.

Who are the trailblazers of indie gaming? You could name Lucas Pope (*Papers, Please*), Maddy Thorson (*Celeste*), or Derek Yu (*Spelunky*). But one person who deserves far more recognition than she has received is Georgina Bensley.

In a game development career spanning more than two decades, Bensley and her collaborators have developed text adventures, RPGs, strategy games, life sims, visual novels, and more. Before the days of Steam and itch.io, fans bought her games directly through her website, Hanako Games.

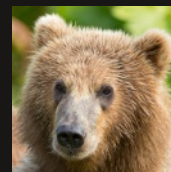
Hanako's best known title is probably *Long Live the Queen* (2012), in which players had to navigate choices and stats to

CREATOR
Hanako Games

YEAR
2022

PLATFORM
Windows, Linux

LENGTH
3 hours



REVIEW BY
Eloquence

save the 14-year-old protagonist from an early grave. *Night Cascades* from 2022 is far less gruesome fare. Its Kickstarter, which raised just under \$9K, described it as a "lesbian mystery visual novel".

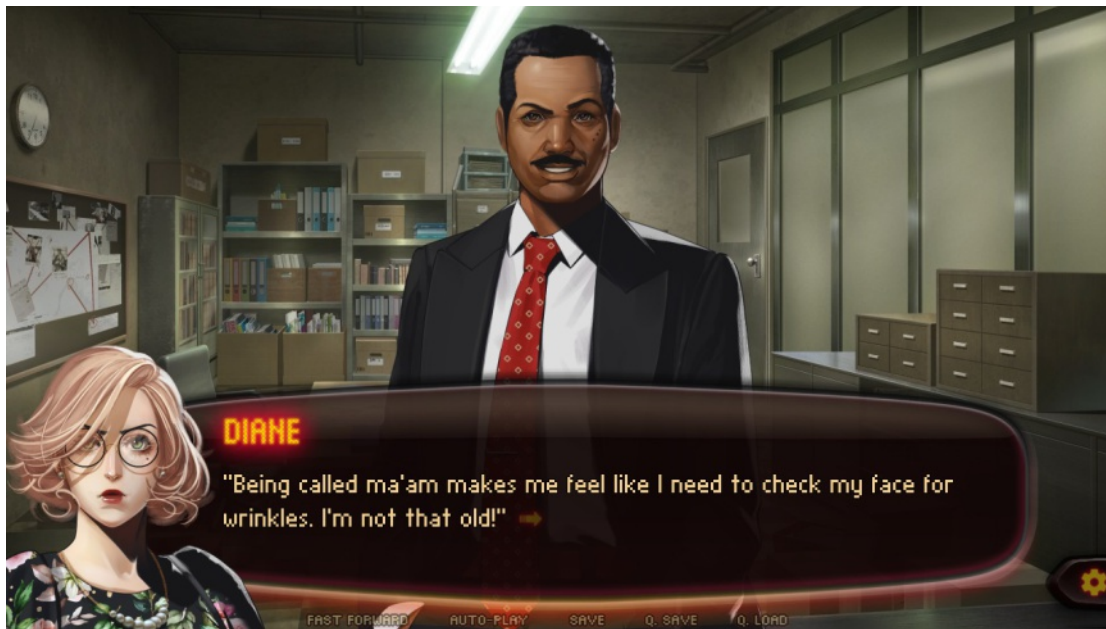
SATANIC PANIC IN THE MAKING

The game is set in the United States Bible Belt in the 1980s. But this is an alternate reality in which New Age beliefs have gone fully mainstream, and everyone and their dog seems to believe in the healing power of crystals.

We first experience this world through the eyes of Diane Carter, a substitute teacher and moderately successful fantasy



Where would you go to investigate an occult ritual? Jackie Morales (right) knows exactly what to do: talk to the comic book lady.



author who has agreed to help the police with an investigation as a side hustle, thanks to her knowledge of the occult.

The police are investigating that most nefarious of crimes: a roasted duck. More precisely, the ritualized burning of a bird in the woods. The authorities have reason to be worried, and it's not just because of forest fires. In a community where many Christians are already on edge because of the rising tide of New Age beliefs, that kind of thing could trigger a full-blown Satanic panic.

Diane's job is to serve as a research assistant to a police officer named Jack Morales. Jackie Morales, that is. Jackie, a woman Diane has been trying to forget.

The mystery that Diane and Jackie investigate is chiefly a vehicle for them to revisit their shared past. Beyond their complicated feelings for each other, any hope for romance is overshadowed by the conditions of time and place. This is still the Bible Belt in the 1980s, and pursuing a relationship openly would bring severe repercussions for both women.

MINIGAMES PACE A LINEAR STORY

Night Cascades is a Ren'Py game, which means that it comes with the conveniences many visual novel readers have come to expect: keyboard navigation, save slots, the ability to skip seen text, customizable text speed, and so on.

As the game progresses, the perspective alternates between Diane and Jackie after each day. Reflecting their ways of seeing the world, there's a different minigame for each of the two characters. As logical Diane, you have to identify clues in a scene; as intuitive Jackie, you have to feel out your conversations with suspects.

These minigames are simple exercises in clicking that just pace the story a bit. There's a built-in hint system, which you are unlikely to need. For accessibility purposes, a mouse-free mode is available.

Night Cascades is largely a kinetic visual novel without meaningful choices, but I did enjoy that it asked me, from both Diane's and Jackie's perspective, to formulate my hypothesis for what's going on in the case.

VIBES OF A WORLD THAT WASN'T

Despite what the game's themes and the title may suggest, *Night Cascades* is not filled with darkness and horror. There's a lightheartedness in the writing that extends to the characters you encounter: the grumpy shopkeeper, the twin girls pushing the boundaries of their strict Christian upbringing, the mulleted ne'er-do-well pretending to be a model student.

The game has very distinct vibes, thanks to the gorgeous character art and CGs by Rock C. from Colombia ([Instagram](#)) and licensed jazzy and bluesy instrumental music. The UI with its orange LED lights draws inspiration from 1980s electronics, blending analog and digital aesthetics.

While there is an option to disable suggestive scenes, the game is no more risqué than your average romance movie. It's not much longer, either, clocking in at about 3 hours of playtime. I would have loved to spend more time with this world and its characters.

The story does come to a natural stopping point that hints at possibilities for a sequel. Knowing Hanako, give or take a few years, we might just get one.

ChoiceBot: Point your scanners at [ChoiceBeat #6](#) for a mega-sized Hanako Games feature article.

HOLLYWOOD VISIONARY

It's easy, in the hindsight of history, to think you would have had the courage to denounce the [communist] witch hunt and defy the blacklist, but *Hollywood Visionary* makes it surprisingly difficult

Black and white or color? A-listers or fresh talent? Can you create something great and still keep your ledger in the black? Are you, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist Party?

These are the questions that confront you as the titular protagonist of Aaron A. Reed's *Hollywood Visionary*. You're the head of a small independent studio in the 1950s, about to start production on your first film. Making movie magic happen is hard work, and only occasionally glamorous, but you're determined to see your passion project on the big screen. Unfortunately, temperamental actors and soundstage safety hazards aren't the only obstacles to your success: this is the McCarthy era, and accusations of Communist ties and "un-American" activity have the power to ruin lives.

Like all ChoiceScript games, *Hollywood Visionary* is entirely text-based. Every couple of pages or so, the player gets to choose from a menu of options that determine the progress of the story. There are five basic endings, each of which contains subtle variations shaped by the player's choices. You may find yourself waiting for the applause to die down so you can thank the Academy—or staring out the window on a bus out of town, in search of sunnier pastures.

Although it's fairly short compared to more recent offerings from Choice of Games, *Hollywood Visionary* is a delight. The variety that's possible in putting together a movie from pitch to premiere is almost infinite, and it's great fun to hobnob on a first-name basis with folks like Greta, Orson, and Vincent. (That would be Garbo, Welles, and Price, of course.) The management elements of the game—balancing your stress level, your budget, the quality of your film, and the morale on set—are worked almost seamlessly into the story, and failure is every bit as entertaining as success.

It wouldn't be Hollywood without a touch of romance, and it's possible to find love (or friendship) with an actor or a grip, both gender-selectable, whose motivations and backstories emerge over the course of several dates. (There's also a third, less developed romance option who doesn't become apparent until the last chapter.) Perhaps the most winsome character, however, is the PC's ten-year-old niece, a sprightly youngster with a precocious knowledge of filmmaking technique.

CREATOR
Aaron A. Reed

YEAR
2015

PLATFORM
Windows, Mac, Linux
Android, iOS

LENGTH
3 hours



REVIEW BY
Aletheia
Knights



30% OFF
HOLLYWOOD VISIONARY

Choice of Games offers this exclusive discount for *ChoiceBeat* readers. [Visit this page](#) and redeem the coupon code below for 30% off *Hollywood Visionary* until 3/7/24.

COUPON CODE: CBZ010

As the creative process unfolds in the foreground, the threat of the blacklist looms large. Your character's political stance is up to you, but whether your preferred rallying cry is "Better dead than Red" or "Workers of the world, unite," there's no escaping the censorious eye of McCarthyesque Congressman Jonathan Creed. It's easy, in the hindsight of history, to think you would have had the courage to denounce the witch hunt and defy the blacklist, but *Hollywood Visionary* makes it surprisingly difficult. Even knowing I'd play again the next day and make different choices—a luxury real people obviously didn't have—it was almost painful to imagine my lovingly crafted film languishing in obscurity if I ended up on the blacklist.

For better or worse, the historical accuracy of *Hollywood Visionary* does not extend so far as its treatment of sexuality and gender. In an era when women as power players in the entertainment industry were nearly unheard of, the PC can be a man, a woman, or nonbinary, and separate choices for different aspects of gender presentation make it possible to create a gender-nonconforming character. The sexism and homophobia of the times are alluded to on occasion, but never really become a problem. The PC can enter a same-sex romance without any need for secrecy or shame, and one character's background can actually include a same-sex marriage. Where historical accuracy threatens to conflict with the player's comfort and enjoyment, *Visionary* nearly always prioritizes the player.

Aside from a few typos and coding errors, this game is a polished little gem. Replay value is very high—it's fun to track down all the different endings and to observe the consequences of different play styles. *Hollywood Visionary* is highly recommended, especially for readers who love realistic stories, Tinseltown drama, or glimpses into the creative process.

INTERVIEW WITH AARON A. REED, CREATOR OF HOLLYWOOD VISIONARY

Aletheia Knights: You've worked in many different forms of IF and narrative over the years. How did you become interested in tackling a ChoiceScript project? How was it different from other projects you've worked on?

Aaron A. Reed: *Hollywood Visionary* came about from getting to know Choice of Games founder Dan Fabulich, who used to go around game industry events wearing a sign saying "We Pay Writers" or something to that effect. He and I both were big fans of parser-based interactive fiction, and I was in grad school at the time and looking for a gig to make a little money over the summer. I'd never done a pure choice-based project before, but he invited me to pitch something for them, and ended up with a premise we were both really excited about.

It was different for me because most of my prior work had been much more systems-heavy: I had done a parser game called *Blue Lacuna* back in 2009 that had a lot of complicated

Hollywood Visionary

by Aaron A. Reed

The elevator opens onto your future.

You step onto the dangerous red carpet of Lloyd Croghan. Yes, *the* Lloyd Croghan, who started as a shoeshine boy and built a Hollywood empire from timbers up. Ten years you've worked at this studio and you've only met him twice. And now you've got sixty seconds to pitch him your dream project: the movie you've always wanted to make.

The elevator boy tips his cap nervously, slams the gate shut, and beats a quick retreat down to safer floors.

Step Forward

world and character simulation in it, and as a grad student was doing a lot of computer-science stuff with social simulation and other tricky business going on behind the scenes. *Hollywood Visionary* was actually a very refreshing and welcome chance to focus more on the writing and the story than the code... to let ChoiceScript just be the mousetrap rather than trying to hack together some bigger, better one.

AK: What was your favorite part of writing *Hollywood Visionary*? What did you find most challenging? Was there any part of the process that surprised you?

AR: My favorite scene to write comes in the middle, where you attend a swanky party and have to solve a problem involving an escaped dog and a drunk Orson Welles. My parser interactive fiction background shows through in this scene, which essentially simulates a tiny parser game where you can freely move around between different locations and have a puzzle to solve. (Choice of Games originally pushed back a little against this sequence, afraid it would put off their readers and be tricky to debug; I'm glad in the end they trusted me to pull it off!)

I think what most surprised me overall was how much the three "relationship" characters you can develop a connection with (romantic or otherwise) developed into people I really cared about by the end of the writing process. You have a number of opportunities throughout the game to spend time with one of these people and get to know them better, though there's not nearly enough time to spend with everyone. I wrote three scenes for each character (for a total of nine scenes) and I wanted each one to feel meaningful and like you'd really learned something new and interesting about the person—that you hadn't wasted your time by spending it with them—and for the player's choices to actually feel meaningful on how that relationship developed. That mechanical or design constraint though actually really just improved the quality of the writing in those scenes in general, and turned out to really be an effective way to force me to develop those characters and make them feel more interesting and genuine.

AK: *Hollywood Visionary* is, to some degree, a story about bringing a story to life—piecing together a movie concept from almost innumerable combinations of genre, characters, and plot elements. What was the process like of building this key story game mechanic?

AR: Way before I'd heard of Choice of Games I'd long harbored a secret desire to make an immensely geeky movie production simulator game that would factor in any kind of variable you could think of into your movie's budget, production, and box office success. I had come up with this idea back when I was a film major in college, but didn't really have the coding chops at the time to do it, and it never went anywhere. When the chance came around to pitch a game to CoG, the idea floated back up into my head. I ended up needing to simplify my original ambitions significantly (which was absolutely a good thing) and the story and characters came to interest me a lot more than the number crunching (also good!). But I did in the end manage to sneak in a decent amount of nerdy calculations behind the scenes about, say, how shooting in color vs. black and white might affect your budget and box office grosses...

AK: *Hollywood Visionary* takes a complicated and daring approach to the concept of gender: instead of simply choosing the character's gender, the player is able to specify several distinct aspects of gender presentation, from preferred form of address to fashion sense. What inspired this novel approach?

AR: This came very simply from a general philosophy I have in all my games, which is that I really want the player to feel like a collaborator with me, not just a spectator. I hadn't written a choice-based project before *Hollywood Visionary* in part because I had a hard time reconciling that philosophy with the "go left or go right" mentality offered by a list of choices—how are you supposed to feel ownership over that?

But I realized that choice-based inputs can still allow creativity in their combination: if the game remembers and respects your choices, over aggregate they can build up into something truly unique to each player. This philosophy drives the movie you make in the game—no one else is going to have a 3D horror

movie musical starring Humphrey Bogart and Gloria Swanson, even though each of those individual choices were options off a list—and it also drives how the player expresses their identity as a combination of the name they use, clothes they wear, style they adopt, and so on.

Basically, anything that's a binary choice becomes more interesting as a palette you can paint with!

AK: *Hollywood Visionary* is an inclusive game set in a comparatively repressive time. Did you ever struggle with the balance between historical accuracy and player agency?

AR: On one level, *Hollywood Visionary* (like all Choice of Games titles) is meant to be an escapist fantasy, and I wanted folk of all kinds to be able to live out their self-insert movie mogul dreams without real-world ugliness intruding. At the same time, the game is deliberately set during an era when creatives and iconoclasts were being harassed and cracked down on by self-styled enforcers of public decency, because that was something myself and my friends were going through at the time the game was written (the early days of Gamergate).

The one character who does take notice of you violating '50s social conventions is the close-minded McCarthy-esque senator out to ruin you: he adds your "vices" to a list of things he can later accuse you of. For instance, if you cast an actor in a gender-swapped role, he'll later accuse you of "perverting the traditional roles of men and women in American society." This felt to me like a very thematically appropriate way of acknowledging the time period and tying it into the game's overall themes, but keeping this confined to the part of the game that's most explicitly about that, while letting the rest continue to be a fun sim about being a badass movie mogul living your best life and following your dreams.

AK: What do you think we have to learn from the McCarthy era? Is *Hollywood Visionary* more relevant now in 2024 than it was when it was published in 2015?

AR: In any media, there are eras where outsiders come into an established field and shake things up (almost always for the better, in the long run), and insiders and gatekeepers push back and try to not only keep them out, but punish them for wanting in. Sometimes it's a particularly ugly backlash (like in '50s Hollywood when careers were ruined and people were literally driven to suicide by the blacklist) or in the 2010s when many queer and feminist indie gamemakers got doxxed, swatted, and continuously harassed for making games with different perspectives and aesthetics than the mainstream. That kind of thing certainly hasn't stopped, but in reaction to that particular moment in the games industry I was reacting to while writing *Hollywood Visionary*, there have been some real positive changes and a strengthening of community as a result of fighting back against that bullshit, and that's been heartening to see in the years since the game first came out.

AK: Which stories and storytellers, in any medium, have had the most impact on you as a writer and game designer?

AR: I tend to be more inspired by creators and media outside of games than on games themselves, but I'm a huge admirer of Emily Short, Andrew Plotkin, Sam Barlow, Judy Malloy, and Jon Ingold, all serial creators of wonderful and groundbreaking interactive stories; and of Cyan Worlds whose *Myst* games were hugely influential on me growing up. As a writer I'm most often inspired by travelogues for the way they can make you feel like you've visited a place you've never been to, real or imaginary, and I really love writers like Ursula K. LeGuin, Samuel Delany, Bruno Schulz, and Mervyn Peake, with prose delicious enough to savor. One of my favorite books about the craft of writing is *Several Short Sentences About Writing* by Verlyn Klinkenborg: I recommend it to anyone.

AK: You've written a book, *50 Years of Text Games*, about the history of interactive fiction. What current trends do you think have the most relevance for the future of IF?

AR: One of the things that writing the book really taught me is that no one can ever predict the future! If you picked any random moment in the last fifty years and asked people writing interactive stories what they thought would happen in the next decade, everyone would universally be catastrophically wrong. Most recently, no one in 2018 had any idea that GPT was coming along to shake things up, and I think any predictions we might make today in 2024 about its long-term impact on game writing (or anything else in the world) are also likely to be laughed at by the 2030s.

I think one real constant you do see in the book is that the games that end up becoming beloved and canonical are written

by people who got passionate about telling a quirky little interactive story and didn't care how big the audience for it was going to be. So many of the games in the book were written for a daughter, a friend, a local club, a tiny forum with a dozen people on it... but they were created with heart, and that ended up resonating far beyond the originally envisioned audience. So not a trend, I guess, but an evergreen anti-trend: write what you love, and sometimes, if you're lucky, people who love it back will find it.

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

AR: Playtest early and often! I have historically been very guilty of not wanting to show my work in progress to anyone until it's as polished and perfect as I can possibly make it. But every time I break down and have someone play an early/incomplete version, it's always so incredibly useful and improves the design dramatically. Get those insights about which bits are too long, too short, too choice-filled or not enough, which beats of the story are landing or not, etc. etc., as early as possible. It will make your final game feel so much better and more satisfying to play.

AK: If you could travel back in time to 1950s Hollywood, whom would you most like to meet?

AR: Orson Welles, to apologize for casting him as comic relief in *Hollywood Visionary*; and Lucille Ball, one of the true heroes in movie and TV history (and who I'm sure would have a ton of great stories to share over a good long lunch).

Hollywood Visionary

by Aaron A. Reed

Show Stats

Restart

Achievements

Report Bug

You have only seconds to decide what to do. If the fire spreads to C Stage, most of your props and costumes could be destroyed, not to mention the negatives of all the footage you've shot. You can't imagine a worse disaster for your production. But if anyone's trapped in B Stage, by the time the fire department gets here it might be too late to help them. The flames are climbing higher. What do you do?

- Turn to B Stage, to look for survivors.
- Turn to C Stage, to save the negatives.
- Try to marshal the gathering crowd to do both.
- Wait for the firefighters to get here.

Next

PIXEL PULPS

"mowing down hordes of beastmen with a steampunk machine gun (cool!)"

I don't really like horror games, actually. I'm a ghost. My whole life is basically a horror game, so none of that has much appeal. That being said, I suppose these games are pretty cool.

Their creators call them *Pixel Pulps*, which is pretty descriptive. These are pulpy, interactive horror stories with a few choices, lots of mini-games, and tons of crazy sick pixel art. Each of the three games is 90 minutes long, which makes the whole experience a bit like reading an interactive comic. I don't know if I actually cared that much about the stories, but I like that there aren't too many words, and the whole presentation is totally original.

MOTHMEN 1966

The story of *Mothmen 1966* involves mothmen, men-in-black, lost Civil War technology, and an adorable little goat-person baby. I guess it makes sense. The author obviously did a lot of research and wanted to include every single little bit of it. The mini-games in *Mothmen 1966* run the gamut from organizing paint cans on a shelf (boring!) to mowing down hordes of beastmen with a steampunk machine gun (cool!). The best character is the pregnant woman who probably hates her boyfriend. The extremely green artwork is a real mood.

CREATOR
LCB Game Studio

YEAR
2022-2023

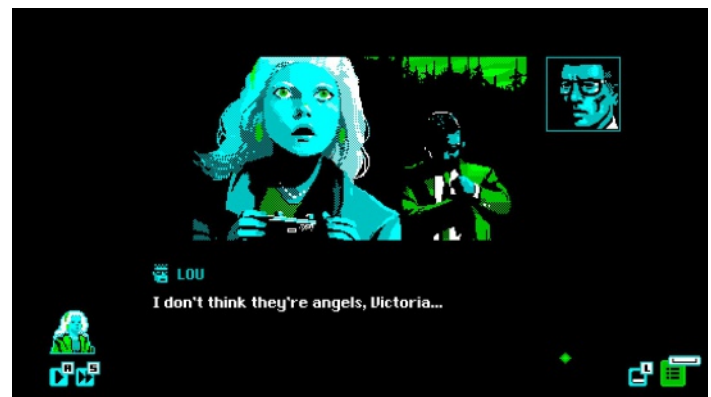
PLATFORM
Windows, Mac,
Switch, Xbox One,
Xbox Series X/S,
PlayStation 4/5

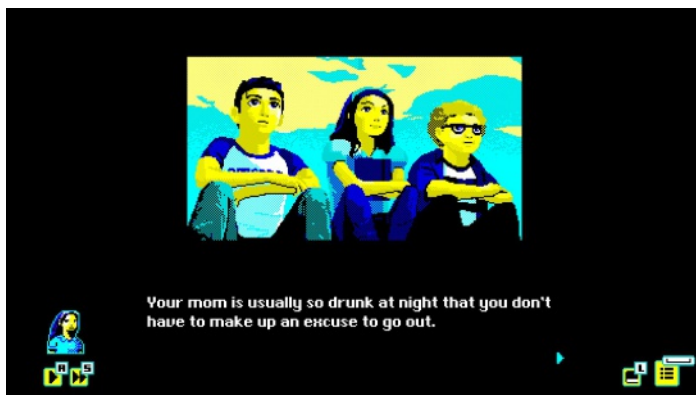
LENGTH
90 minutes



REVIEW BY
Chest
Butlerhome

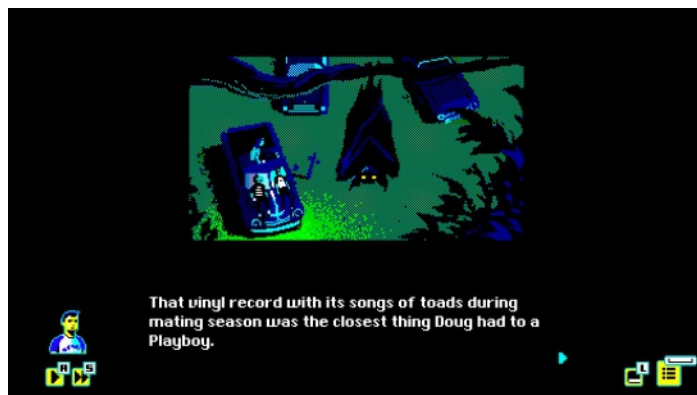
[ChoiceBot: We've discussed the *Pixel Pulps* series in *ChoiceBeat* before. [Check out issue 5](#) for a full review of *Mothmen 1966*.]





VARNEY LAKE

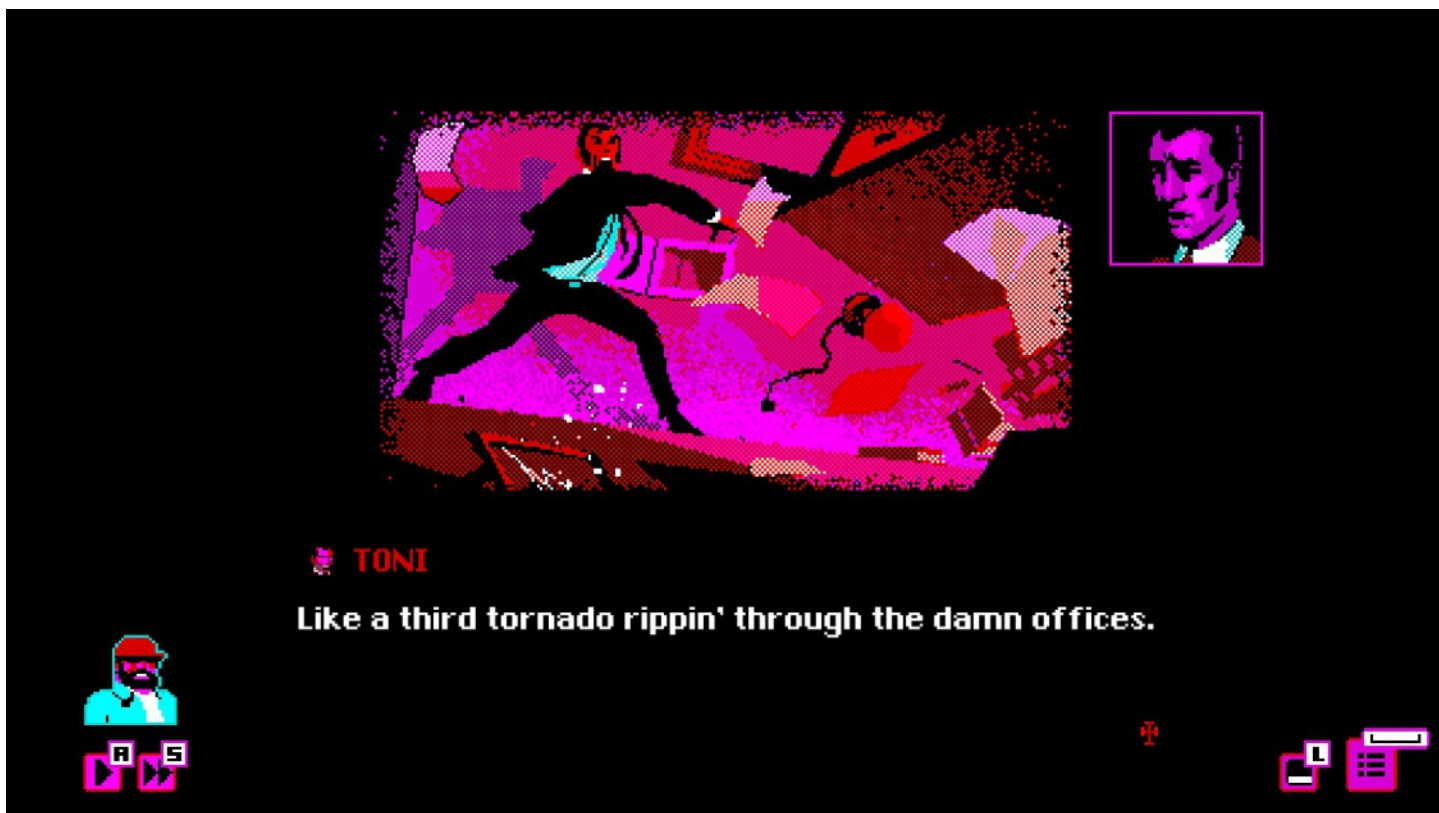
This story hooked me in pretty hard. It's a bittersweet, nostalgic tale of three kids that make friends with a vampire on summer vacation. The Stephen King influence is palpable here. *Varney Lake* isn't that original, but it's charming, and that counts for something. The mini-games are back in full effect. Like *Mothmen 1966*, one of the mini-games is yet another version of solitaire (why?). The goat-man from the first game is also back! And he has a dancing mini-game for almost no reason. There are some other references to *Mothmen 1966* too. They don't matter, but if you didn't play it, you'll definitely wonder about the random guy who apparently experiences every alternate reality all at once.



BAHNSEN KNIGHTS

Bahnsen Knights takes place in an alternate history version of the 1980s where America is constantly getting wrecked by enormous tornadoes. Cool. The story is about an FBI agent who is infiltrating a religious cult. The story isn't very coherent this time around. The cult is really into cars for some reason. They also do totally sadistic stuff like drive down the highway with a person tied up and stretched between four vehicles. But who are these cultists? Why are they so crazy? No idea.

This time, there is a driving mini-game (called a "road exorcism", which sounds pretty rad) and yet another version of solitaire. I guess the creators of these games must really dig solitaire.



PORTAL: A COMPUTER NOVEL

[INITIATING...]

[INTRO-BRAIN IS A PROGRAM THAT SYNTHESIZES A SNAPPY OPENER OUT OF QUESTIONS NOBODY ASKED]:

We are used to thinking of "interactive" fiction primarily in the first person. "I" play a character or a role and respond to (in)significant choices (romantic, historic, dramatic, comedic) that ultimately shape the outcome of "my" experience. *Portal*, on the other hand, is a game without a real "me" character, and it instead presents you with a vacated situation, a dead world, and a disparate accumulation of leftover data. It's the story of an emergent intelligence learning to frame itself against the facts of an already completed future epoch. What to do with it all?

Portal was quite different from the parser-based adventures it was competing against in the '80s. Marketing itself as a "computer novel", it provides you with an interface, a single story, and a sequence for uncovering the novel-length text. While there is a ton of back-and-forth navigating and interactivity, there is a distinct lack of choice, which has led many reviewers to suggest it might as well have just been physically published as a novel (it later was). However, just as many reviewers have cited its excellent story, gripping narrative, and addictive quality.

CREATOR
Brad Fregger,
Rob Swigart, Activision

YEAR
1986

PLATFORM
Amiga, Commodore 64,
Apple II, IBM PC,
Macintosh

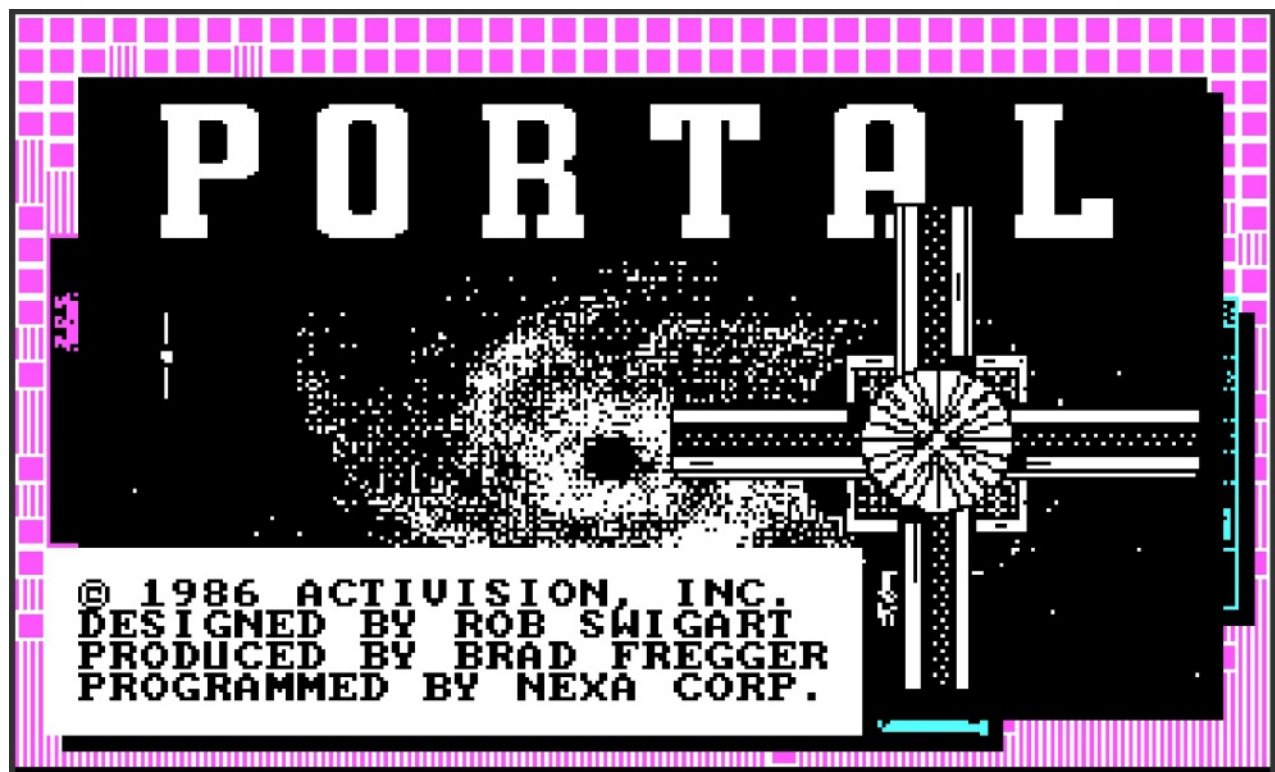
LENGTH
5-7 hours



REVIEW BY
MindApe

[ACCESSING NAVGOBLIN INITIATES RAMBLING ABOUT INTERFACES WHILE GNAWING ON KEYBOARD]

A nameless reader, an astronaut, has returned from a failed hundred-year mission in the year 2106. The Earth is empty of all humans. Their only recourse is to learn the story from an abstract computerized interface—essentially a computer desktop with different symbolic icons. These represent different databases which they can periodically access in a





chaotic sequence to patch together the whole story of what happened.

Interacting with the various databases, the player uncovers the core story fragments as well as a variety of "flavour" details. Navigating the interface is thus the most important aspect of the game. One database provides insights into the various medical developments, diseases, etc. Another explains historical occurrences in dry chronology. Similar databases exist for military and geographical data. A number of them contain biodata on the various characters that crop up throughout the story. As new names appear, you can go and check out their physical descriptors, education, psychological profile, skill sets, etc. rendered in chunky old-school bar graphs.

If that sounds more like boring research than a gripping story, the actual experience is somehow captivating. The narrowness of options at any given moment means that the databases essentially take on the role of characters. The pacing of the game ensures the flow is kept rather tight, so that only narratively essential elements are accessible. Certain databases are only interactive at key points in the story and provide timely details on psychic linkages, central processing, and other "views" onto the progress of history.

The effect is charming and novelistic. The interface structure highlights how many disparate categories and views come together in a typical novel (something we tend to view as a seamless whole but which actually comprises a patchwork of many different "modes"). Historical background layers on top of geography and military exploits, scientific and medical advances weave into personal biography. In *Portal*, each time we shift views, we have to acknowledge this fact by manually keying over to another of our databases. Slowly you come to treat the interface as a system of knowledge in its own right. While this is true for any game and its rules, the emphasis on the interface in *Portal* makes it especially palpable.

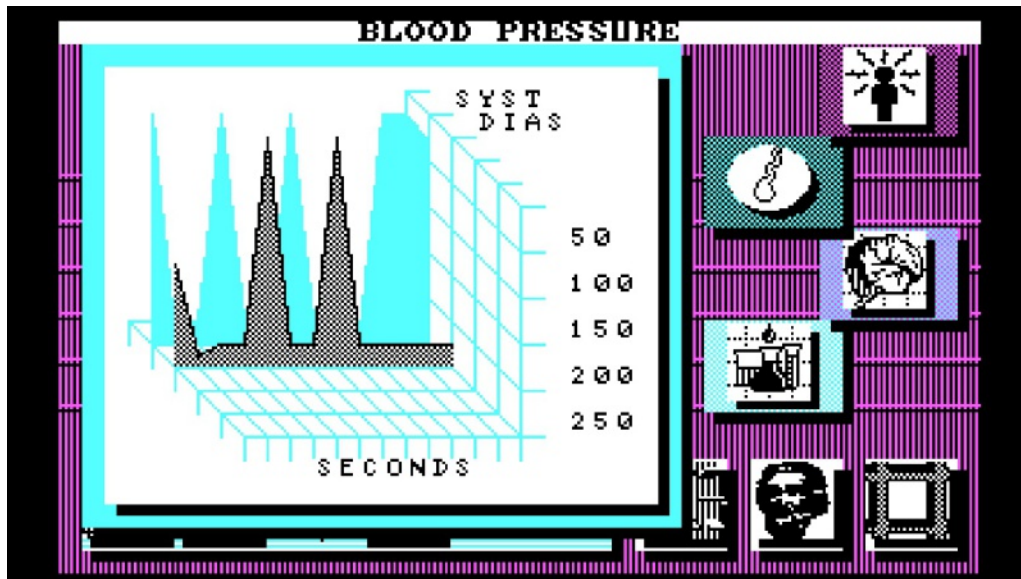
[CITE-CELL IS CONFIGURED TO INSERT RANDOM QUOTATIONS OUT OF CONTEXT FOR "ATMOSPHERE"]

"Brain is the bed; mind is the sleeper. Whatever it takes, the sleeper must wake up."

The story works well with this conceit because we are essentially supposed to be "feeding" the AIs that are weaving it all together. Each new data point thus allows the different AIs to make further extrapolations. The most significant and developed of these is HOMER, the "raconteur algorithm", whose sole purpose is to bring everything together into a readable narrative. HOMER grows and becomes more self-aware as the story progresses, adding an additional layer of complexity and emotional weight. It is fully transparent about what it is telling you—essentially its best attempt at a reconstruction based on the hard data provided by the other databases. It does not mince words: "You wonder if I'm making this up. Of course, I must. Yet all is true."

[GIBBERPUNK IS A VIRUS THAT GLITCHES OUT OVER ODDBALL TROPES]

The story itself is a sort of "New Wave" science fiction novel about a world that has become equally comfortable and psychologically traumatized in the throes of rapid transhumanist technological advancement. While the vast majority of the world lives in relative ease under the control of a single overarching company, Intercorp, strange new diseases crop up like Genetic Drift Syndrome and Proprioceptive Degeneration Disease. Worst of all, a creeping anhedonia that a bored population attempts to drown away through engineered distractions—through escapist plunges into aesthetic supermedia called "Mozarts" or other societal



interruptions crafted by sociometric designers in Intercorp. Periodic spurts of psychic violence known as the Mind Wars burst out and kill people at random throughout the globe. Against this demoralizing hegemony, underground movements lead to the colonization of Antarctica by rugged individualist weirdos ("Ants") who bioengineer new bodies to be able to withstand the cold and build subterranean cities.

"New Poverty saw the flow of information as inherently evil... Came to mean Freedom From Information"

Into this world a boy named Peter Devore is born. Peter learns he can, through a peculiar set of circumstances, make contact with a girl across vast distances through his dreams... A girl, he later finds out, who is actually a grown-up with the mind of a child, frozen in stasis in a ship near the star Vega... His attempts to explore and develop this oneiric capability for adventure and love lead to the unfolding of the story as Intercorp agents attempt to stop him from developing powers capable of affecting every person on Earth...

[IT SOUNDS LIKE THE PROFEXOR-17000 'GORITHM HAS SOME POINDEXTER STUFF TO SPEW]

The Marxist theorist György Lukács was a great admirer of Sir Walter Scott's historical *Waverley* novels. What he liked about them was that they accurately portrayed the different social and historical forces by means of a clear narrative, without just relying on the point of view of the main historical actors of that era. Instead of choosing big historical names like Bonnie Prince Charlie or Napoleon as his heroes, Scott would always take the point of view of a side-character, a nobody, a minor player who would look onto the action from the corner. This provided the necessary distance to analyze the scope and sweep of the processes at play, not just the limited view of a single side.

What I find fascinating about *Portal* is that, rather than putting you in the center of the action, it feels instead like the remnants of a game that has already been played. All the decisions have already been made, and all the consequences have been drawn out. By giving you the point of view of an anonymous astronaut and an emerging AI slowly breaking in its own self-awareness, *Portal* is able to give us an interactive story that captures a vast amount of nuance and high drama and emotion without sticking us in the hot seat ourselves. It is appropriately "epic" in its distance.

[PROFEXOR-17000 IS KILLED BY ITS OWN SUB-PROCESS, PROFEXOR-17050-X, WHICH TAKES CONTROL AND ACCELERATES THE NERD SHIT]

In this sense, the game is a thoroughly haunting (and hauntological) experience. It gets at a certain essential loneliness in gaming. Instead of pretending what you are interacting with is a live fantasy world, the escapism here is muted by the fact that you are doing essentially what you are doing in real life—poking at a machine, prying into predetermined strings of meaning.

"We must change, all of us. We must break out of the chrysalis, we must awaken."

The "novel" side of the game by Rob Swigart is also very well written and paced, and it's full of unpredictable developments. It recalls Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* or John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids* (both stories about nascent transhumanist superpowers and their effect on the remaining population). This is combined with a "dream romance" love plot straight out of *Peter Ibbetson*. Like any good science fiction construction, it contains novelties that jar us out of our



world, and these in turn lead to big "conceptual breakthrough" moments as the plot develops. Furthermore, as the story flips from third-person narrative, to "world-building" data, and then lyrical first-person psychic transcendence captured in "PsiLink", we get a fully rounded and thrilling pace. Oftentimes a concept is introduced in an obscure way and only later fleshed out through one or several converging data points. Flipping through the different databases really does lead to moments of research-fervour that become quite addictive. There is actually a full novelization of the game called *Portal: A Database Retrieval* which no doubt works effectively as a straight story. However, it is the interface-story nexus that really gives the game its unique and chilling atmosphere.

[PROFEXOR-17050-X, NO! STOP! SOMEBODY SHOOT IT! IT'S GOT A REFERENCE-PROTOCOL AND THE SAFETY-VALVE IS MALFUNCTIONING]

The game also makes several explicit references to H.P. Lovecraft's *Dream Quest of Unknown Qadath*, and this is no coincidence. The dream-like atmosphere of navigating a computer system in a dead world, combined with the dream-based story elements around the "Hypnagogics" technologies, give the game a definite weird atmosphere. Like Lovecraft's *Qadath*, it is eerie without necessarily swinging into full-blown horror. The point of *Portal* lies in its depiction of a seemingly closed, arid, dead-end system overcoming its own limitations through a serious commitment to dreams and ensuing rebellion against inevitability. The human system, the game interface, the limits of corporeality, intelligence, and dream-life—*Portal* is a story about changing life and changing the world.

"I'm saying that you have to make up your own minds."

[SUMMARIZOR! THANK GOD! SHUT DOWN PROFEXOR-17050-X AND EXECUTE THE KILL-SWITCH!]

Portal has aged well—many recent visual novels and interactive fiction games, especially those on the indie end of the spectrum, emphasize the interplay between a strange tale, iconographic interface, and a polyphony of voices as a way to achieve poetic effects. [NAVGoblin crudely gestures in the shape of *Disco Elysium*]. I may even go so far as to say that now, 38 years after its publication, is the perfect time to play *Portal*. The loneliness and atmospheric dread of accessing a dying system on an empty world is magnified by playing a kludgy old DOS game. The themes of societal stagnation, artificial intelligence, and revolutionary dreaming are if anything more pertinent now than ever. The love of retro-aesthetics have made its aged graphics appear charming, and some vaporwave music can make for a perfect soundtrack. A 2012 kickstarter to "remake" the game as a standard third-person narrative fell through, and perhaps that's for the best. It misses the point as much as just calling it a standard novel. *Portal* is an experience unto itself. Not really an interactive fiction, a graphic adventure, or visual novel. I might even be tempted to call it an "interface novel". A story, a mood, and, in its own quirky way, an escape hatch...



PARANORMASIGHT: THE SEVEN MYSTERIES OF HONJO

The real curse is expectation.

There's a moment in *PARANORMASIGHT* that every reviewer talks about, and I kinda wish they didn't.

The moment is legitimately great and a huge selling point—hearing about it on a podcast is actually what convinced me to play the game—but to talk about it is to spoil the experience. It also sets the expectation that the game is fundamentally about these moments, that the game is a series of rug pulls and genre-breaking sequences when that's not necessarily the case. The game is mostly a visual novel. And a good one. But sometimes it almost becomes something else, and it's hard to let go of that.

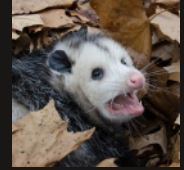
In *PARANORMASIGHT* you play a curse-bearer trying to survive the Seven Mysteries of Honjo, a collection of ancient ghost stories with corresponding curses that have the power to kill if certain conditions are met. As an example, a curse you come across early in the game gives you the power to kill if someone lies to you in conversation. But you're not the only character with a curse. Other characters have their own curses with their own conditions that can kill you just as easily. And if one of these characters manages to kill enough people and gather enough soul energy (called "soul dregs," but yeah don't

CREATOR
Square Enix

YEAR
2023

PLATFORM
Windows, Switch,
Android, iOS

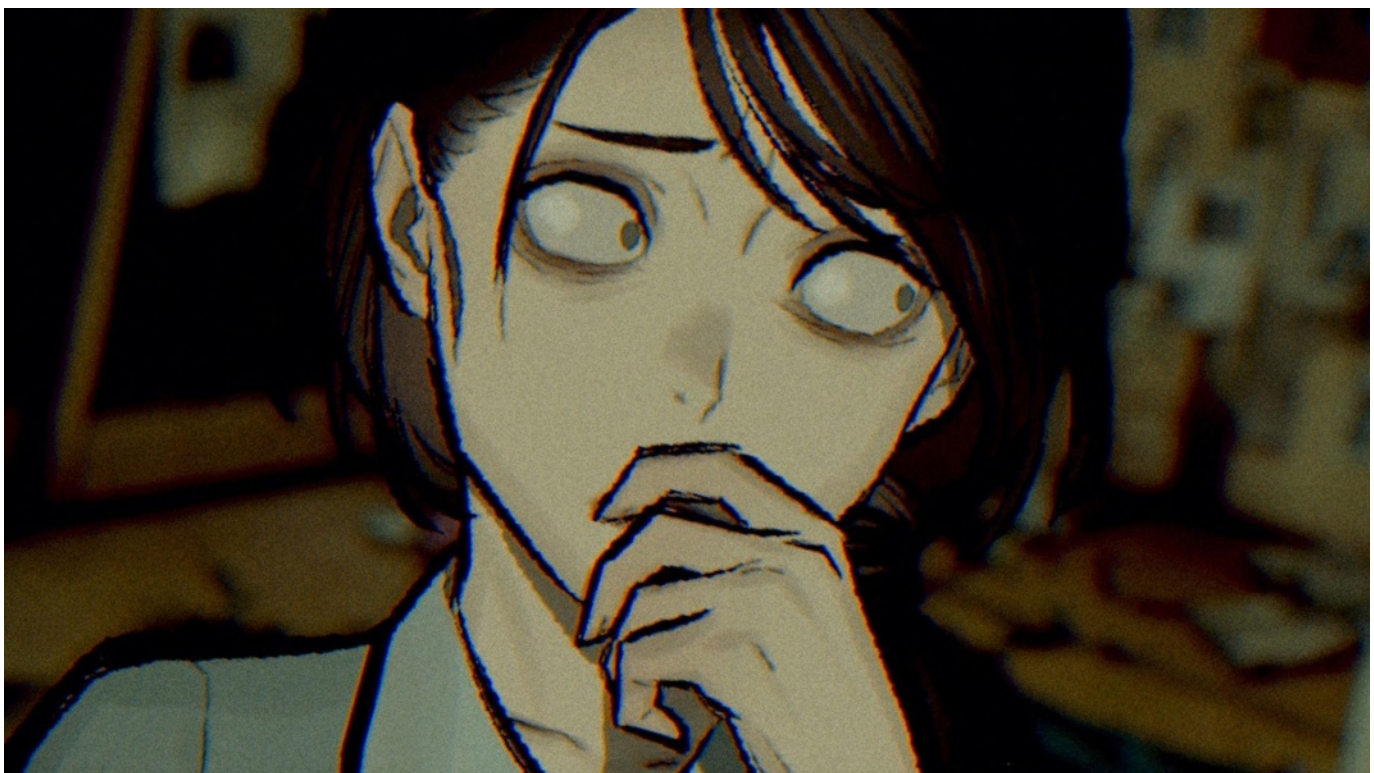
LENGTH
10-12 hours



REVIEW BY
James Lindley

worry about it) they'll gain the power to resurrect someone that they've lost.

This is a strong premise. The interactions with other curse-bearers are tense and well-written, and the promise of resurrection gives each character an interesting motivation and backstory. At the start of the game, I thought it'd play out something like a battle royale, with the primary gameplay being "conversational duels" with the other characters. And that's definitely part of it, especially in the early scenes. These



It is a little spooky.



Come for the ghosts; stay for the birds.

moments are super fun. But that is, unfortunately, the problem, because after a few of these moments, *PARANORMASIGHT* bogs down with hours and hours of exposition.

And truthfully, this is where I bounced off the game the first time around. I know that most visual novels are founded on a central mechanic of "press A to see text," and I should be okay with that, but going from high-stakes duels to hours of exposition with very little required of the player felt a bit like slamming to a halt. To be fair, the game tries to account for this with the introduction of a few other mechanics (there's a minigame where you hunt for bird decals in various scenes and that was just enough to keep me engaged), but most of these mechanics don't hold up to the promise and tension of the initial scenes.

Further, the game sometimes forces fail-states. And I understand why—there is often a narrative reason for this—but forcing failure too often takes the energy out of puzzle-solving. If there's no way I can win certain scenes, why even try on the next one? If some mechanics are intentionally unfair, how am I to know when to stop and think and when to just "press A?" And maybe this is my fault. Maybe I should have played a puzzle game and not a visual novel. Or maybe I shouldn't have even expected the puzzles to be fair at all. A visual novel is not a traditional gaming experience, and forced failures and "bad ends" are common in the genre. Still, these moments often left a sour taste in my mouth.

On the other hand, I don't want to sound too negative here. When *PARANORMASIGHT* shines, it really shines. It's an extremely polished experience. The background art, in particular, is worth mentioning. In some scenes the

background is fully panoramic. This means you can look a full 360 degrees at various objects or points of interest. So if you get bored, you can take a moment and look for those previously mentioned bird decals. It also means that you can look away from something, and that means that something can get *behind* you. I absolutely loved this. I only wish the game had done a little more with it. Not all of the scenes are fully panoramic, but the ones that are really stand out.

The writing is also good. There are a few jokes that don't land (and a few that really don't land—I suspect that these are due to translation issues), but there are also lines that made me laugh. There's even a scene that made me tear up a bit. I'm still undecided if I like the plot overall, and there are significant pacing issues, but the moment to moment writing works. The characters are also well-rounded and enjoyable. I could see a sequel focusing on Mio or Richter.

In summary, *PARANORMASIGHT* is an interesting and, at times, innovative visual novel slash game thing with some incredible moments. I think the people that like it are probably going to really like it, but I'm not sure if it's for everyone, and... I'm not sure if it's for me. Ultimately, I wanted a little more from the experience and was left with the sense that it didn't quite come together. If you like visual novels, I'd recommend it. But if you're looking for a mind-bending, *Inscription*-esque puzzler, then you might be better off looking elsewhere. *Void Stranger* comes to mind.



More like PANORAMA-sight am I right?



Pay. Mio. A. Living. Wage.

TRUTH UNDER STARS, LIES UNDER ICE

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOEY DONALD JONES

I first discussed interviewing interactive fiction author Joey Donald Jones when I was a beta tester this past fall on *Lies Under Ice* (hereafter abbr. as *LUI*), published by Choice of Games. We corresponded about underexplored routes in *LUI* that Joey hadn't seen beta feedback on yet, and he asked me what I had thought about the exile path. ("Exile path?") After launching *LUI*, he offered to tell me more!

LUI covers the early years of a science outpost/space colony established on Europa, the most interesting of the 95 moons of Jupiter. (Because it has water and therefore possibly... life?) The story tackles political upheavals back on Earth, conflicts between local factions and dramatic personalities, all while having enough narrative space for scientists to delve under the ice for alien life and question their own differences from those living back on Earth and the Moon.

LUI has one of the strongest commitments to replayability of any choices-based IF I have read. A masterclass in delayed branching, consequence building, and multireplace. Joey and I met up for a virtual interview in December of 2023, just shortly after *LUI* was published.

THE INTERVIEW

MATT GRIFFIN (MATT): You've written more than seventeen IF games using a variety of tools: Inform 7, Twine, Twitter ArtBots using Tracery, Forum Games, and even crossword puzzles. And with *Trials of the Thief-Taker* (2017) and *Lies Under Ice* (2023), you added ChoiceScript to your toolbelt. How did you get started with Choice of Games?

JOEY JONES (JOEY): Simplest version: I saw this Choice of Games call for submissions, and I applied! They liked my writing sample well enough, and I already had plenty of chops with interactive fiction that I could show. And so they took me on to write *Trials of the Thief-Taker* (2017).

MATT: I had a lot of fun with *Trials of the Thief-taker* by first taking a route through where the main character (MC) is just in it for the money. ("Too bad, my target died, and I don't get as much cash for the corpse.") But then the very next time through, I played an MC who gets all the way up to capturing each target, and then always lets them go. "Oh yeah, I'm a thief-taker," but truth be told, your character has taken nobody. I love that you have written routes for that!



ARTICLE BY
Matt Griffin



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LIES UNDER ICE**

Choice of Games offers this exclusive discount for *ChoiceBeat* readers. [Visit this page](#) and redeem the coupon code below for 34% off *Lies Under Ice* until 3/7/24.

COUPON CODE: CBZ011

JOEY: (Laughing.)

MATT: Anyway, my point is that there's a lot of room for play, even for different character builds, and with different roleplay focus. And with possibilities for replay in mind, let's switch focus to *LUI!*

JOEY: The initial idea was a political sci-fi. You would go to Europa to try to develop a moon base, there'd be some sort of sabotage and intrigue that you had to deal with there, and you'd encounter alien life. And I had a plan for every chapter. And looking back over the plan at the big-brush level, most things that were in the plan happened, in mostly the same order. But a whole lot of other stuff happens that I hadn't even considered at the start.

MATT: The story hints at the beginning that your character is in charge for now, but later there'll be an election. Well, the first time I played, I was very nervous that my MC must succeed with the election. But the next play through, I was like, "Fuck it, let's lose this time, let's really lose!" I think I ceded the election almost immediately.

Well, when you do so, the player still has the entire latter third of the game ahead in which you're not in charge anymore! Well, I'm here to report that it was fun to see the range of things that can happen, and that the story offers up some of the best scenes even if you've truly messed up, treated people badly, and your space colony is in a dreadful state. I'm very impressed with your commitment to making every route fully-built!

Most story-rich games consider it simply too costly (time/writing/development) to deal with a MC who doesn't follow the overall plan. You are meant to learn what to do as a player, and the payoff is more story. Punishment is no story.

But I didn't know until we chatted in the fall that you could go soooooo much further. There's not being elected. And then there's getting yourself kicked out: the exile option.

JOEY: I wanted there to be interesting things for the player to do if they're not the leader. In Chapter 7 there's a big crisis. And if you're the leader, you have to deal with that crisis. But if you're not the leader, you can choose just to let the new leader deal with it. Or you can help out. Or you could go the other way and be an instigator of that crisis, be a part of the conspiracy. And not just for the fun of it, you might be furthering specific goals you have for the terraforming of the moon, right?

I wanted this whole "exile" thing as a consequence of engaging in a conspiracy against the new leadership to get your own way with the terraforming. So you can be exiled to the other side of the moon for a year. The story could have ended there, but I think it's more interesting if the player experiences consequences to being out in the wilderness for so long, and then returns to the colony. You're not the most popular person when you arrive back, but there are ways that you can redeem yourself in the eyes of the people.

Lies Under Ice

by Joey Donald Jones

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PROLOGUE THE LANDING

Half the sky shouldn't be Jupiter, but it is. Your ship, the *Asterion*, is hurtling towards the wrong side of the ice moon Europa. The side most awash in Jupiter's radioactive magnetosphere. Your screen is lit up with ridges that criss-cross like veins over the moon. The ice glimmers, streaked with rust-colored fields of irradiated salt. It's the smoothest large object in the solar system. Europa: your new home, your last home.

Everyone in the command center is strapped in. The g-force presses you back in your chair. You're the leader of this expedition and everyone is looking to you to guide them through. You've got three related problems: due to a thrust malfunction, you're coming in too fast; because you're coming in too fast, you're going to land on the wrong side of the moon; and worst of all, the ship is designed to bury in where it lands, creating the start of the settlement under the ice. Wherever you land will be permanent. It's up to you now.

- "We can do this!" I reassure the crew.
- I pretend it's all going to plan and keep focused on landing.
- I tell the crew to say their last goodbyes in case this is it.

Next

MATT: Yeah, and if you pick the Libertarian Alliance for your original polity, then you are accompanied by Koikari, who's a favorite character! So, let's talk about characters. You had so much fun making these characters, it was clear to see.

JOEY: Thank you!

MATT: There are a couple of minor characters, Ned and Celia Skarby. They're really funny from a quantum-state reading standpoint because when they show up they're just trouble. They're *always* trouble. But they might appear briefly in very different scenes depending on your choices. What was it like to write them?

JOEY: Part of that was when you came to writing a scene, you need characters. And it can't always be the same eight main characters. There's supposed to be over a thousand people on the base, so you need to flesh it out a little bit. But at the same time, the player doesn't want to keep track of a sprawling cast of hundreds. You've got to create a feeling that the base is large and well-populated, but not overwhelming.

So there are a number of these secondary characters like Ned and Celia who, when I need them, can be called back. But actually that created a problem when I'd write a character for a scene, and then later on, I'd call them back: now I needed multiple versions of them. I was in danger of making a headache for myself some of the time, but I think it mostly worked out. And they become more fleshed out the more times they appear.

MATT: I have to confess that one of my favorite moments playing *LUI*... not the most dramatic nor most exciting thing that you have in there by far... But it just surprised me so much! It's a moment at the end of the game where Celia and Ned can appear in a hallway near the climax of the story, and she's just boiling with resentment and anger because of the one rude thing that you did against her something like 35,000 words earlier. It leads to this dramatic moment that is almost immediately punctured. And I laughed out loud when I hit this point, it was so surprising. And I think the main reason it was so satisfying was because I simply wasn't tracking her at all! Anyway, it's kind of a little treasure. Pure joy.

JOEY: Yeah, I wanted to try to have as many of those moments as I could afford to write. And so that final chapter was quite complex because so many of the characters may or may not be there for whatever reason. Ned can die in Chapter 2. But also there's a timeline where Ned is involved in one of the conspiracies and leaves the moon midway through. So in those cases, you just don't get that scene.

And the thing is, most of that stuff is invisible to the player, unfortunately. At least on the first playthrough. It needs to all add up to feel like it's correct on replay, right? But that also makes it more of a headache when writing, because you become more in danger of having continuity errors across plays. You have lots of different possible states of people.

MATT: Did you do an extensive amount of research or were you already obsessed with Europa?

JOEY: No, no, everything I learned about Europa, about material science, about fabrication, came as research for the game. I read a book about Europa, what the current state of the science was, their understanding of the tidal forces, and how the moon was set up with ice core, ocean, and ice over top.

It was very fun to read this stuff, and to be able to use it. I didn't just want to start off with a generic idea of what an icy moon might be like. I wanted to dig into research and draw out some of the specificities. A lot of the dramatic encounters and challenges that you face come out of facts about Europa. So in that way, it's quite grounded.

MATT: What are things that you hope come across for all who play *LUI*, no matter how they play?

JOEY: Part of the questions that come out are about how we should treat other solar bodies. I mean, even before you start to consider alien life, is it even right to terraform other places? Or should they be left as scientific sites like Antarctica is today, right? Europa is kind of like a space Antarctica. It's a place of scientific interest.

But here there's also the alien life component as well. And this is something science fiction crafts with all the time: How can first encounters go, and how can you avoid repeating past patterns of colonialism? Can you peacefully cohabit? Is it always an imposition?

There are also the bigger life questions. When someone plays the game, they have to decide: What is it about going here that I value? Is it the expansion of human knowledge? Or am I trying to make the world back home a better place by coming here somehow? If the latter is the case, then what's the best way to do that? Or is everything a purely self-serving experience, trying to bolster a personal reputation, a renown for posterity?

That's similar to some of the questions that players grapple with in *Thief-Taker* in a way. In that story, it's against your financial interests to be a good person a lot of the time, but not always. But you've got to work out what you value, right? What kind of person will you have been?

In *LUI* ultimately every choice you make is contested, right? It's a political choice. Every choice about what you build, how you approach even the scientific projects, how you approach your relations with the people back on earth. Everything. Everyone has a different idea of how it should go. Ultimately, you've got to make a call.

The message there for me is that when we're doing political science fiction, it's political, not just technocratic, right? There isn't some ideal tinkering that's going to solve everything. No matter what you do, people value different stuff, want different stuff to happen. And you're not going to be able to please everyone.

SOME ODD AND INTERESTING THINGS TO TRY IN LIES UNDER ICE

- What if you only tell the truth? What if you manifest radical openness and sharing always? (Or only lie and keep ALL the secrets for yourself?)
- You could stay remote from Earth politics or broil in it. (Or both, on separate plays! That's the one!)
- While you are at it, join a highly local conspiracy and get yourself exiled! (But commit to the Libertalia political faction so you can do so with friends.)
- Go deep into the dreams and learn their secrets.... (Some great cosmic horror writing there!)
- What could go wrong with a little creative DIY bioengineering really?
- And what could go wrong with granting an AI therapist the power (and server farm) of the gods?
- Why not humor a space-is-a-lie conspiracy theorist who is actually living on Europa with you, disbelieving the existence of space travel? ("Moltke City is in Greenland, so we had to settle on the North Pole," you explain.)
- Break your promises to Celia Skarby ("This is a dark day for geology. You will regret this, mark my words!" And you might!)
- And while you are at it, keep your eye on that Ned Skarby ("You've been compromised too long, fraternizing with this exoteric physicalist, but I for one am ready to merge with the Great Dream!")

The Achievements tab reveals several fun goals to chase, such as:

- Part Time Detective: Solve a murder mystery (Very tricky and well worth it! A secret puzzle!)
- Hanging On: Maximize mishaps (Manifest your inner incompetence. Some people just aren't cut out for running a space colony, but who's to stop them from trying...badly?)
- Viral Diplomacy: Send an unwanted gift to Earth
- (Hidden) Cross-Species Solidarity
- (Hidden) You Are Legend

Lies Under Ice

SHOW STATS

You pass through a hole in the walls of dead coral that hang from the ice above. The submarine enters into a vast cavern-like space where the coral bursts into life. On all sides, above and below, there is a jungle of plant-like organisms in vivid reds, purples and oranges. The water is thick with clouds of fine particles. Across the colony, those watching this unfold live all stare in wonder at the bizarre creatures here.

A mass of spindly legs spins rapidly past in a bubble. A creature like three slugs twisted together trails a line of webbing behind it. Hoisting themselves along older lines which stretch across the grotto are what look scaly disembodied hands.

"We have to bring back these creatures for study!" Professor Li insists over the comms.

"Perhaps we should study them in their habitat first before we start disrupting it," Marcel responds. "Who knows how delicate their eco-system might be."

You have two spaces left for samples. You still have enough fuel for the return journey.

- Speed after the bubble creature.
- Capture a scuttling hand.
- Take a web-laying tri-slug.
- Gather some more coral.
- Spend the rest of the time here taking footage.

Next

Lies Under Ice

SHOW STATS

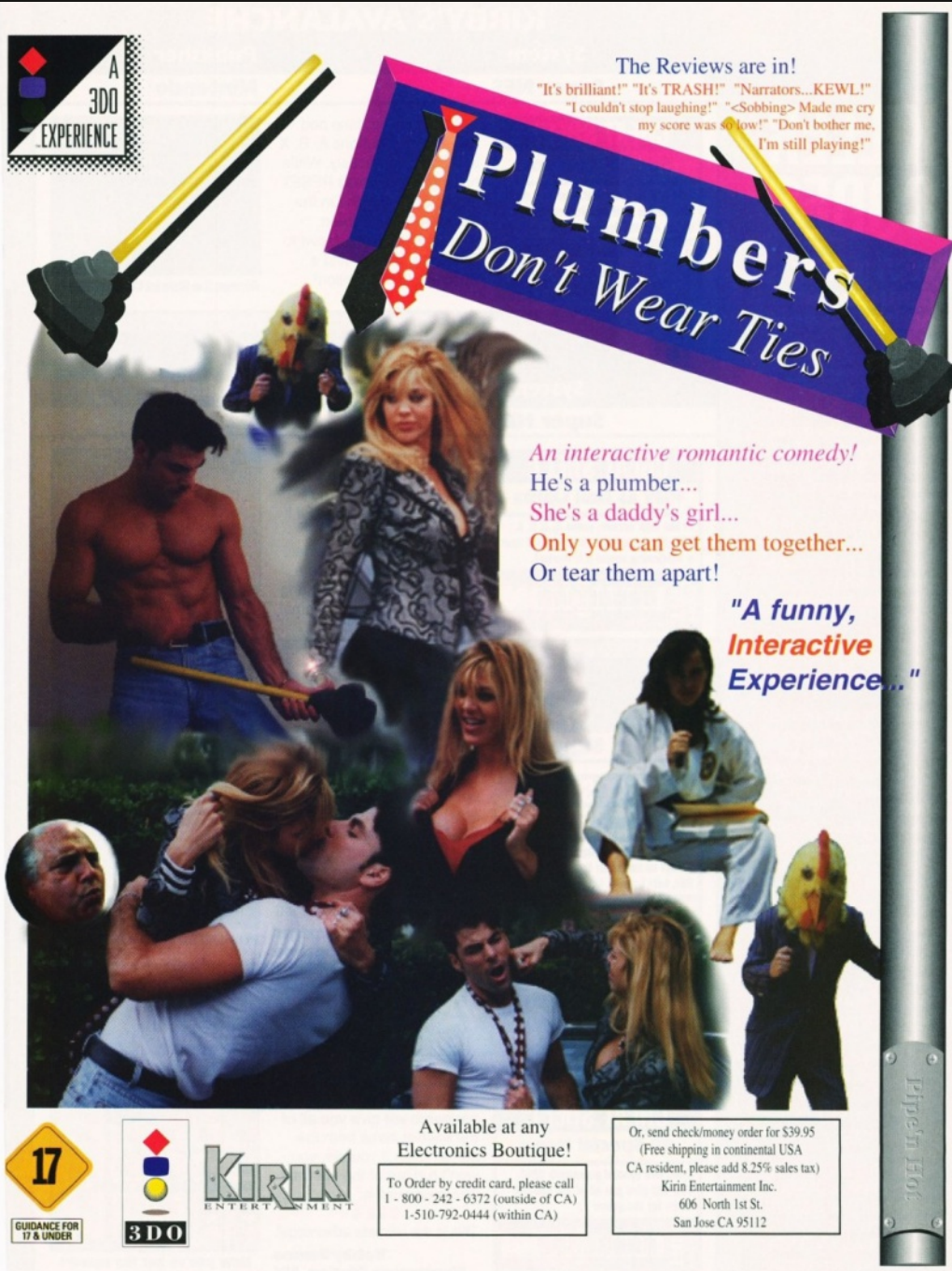
The day of the election speeches arrives. You consider what your stance on these key matters should be. You'll be more distinct as a candidate if you can offer a clear alternative, but it helps if you actually believe in your policies. You take part in a discussion in the center of the ice garden to talk with Virginia Rein about your key policies for the year ahead.

Virginia radiates confidence as she lays out her position. She says, "Our mission here is to uncover new scientific wonders for the good of humanity. Now I've heard a lot of talk about costly terraforming and superstructure projects but these are distractions from the purpose we all signed for. Our mission is below the ice and below the ice we will stay."

- I explain why we should stay living under the ice.
- I lay out my plans for terraforming Europa.
- I share my vision for surface domes.

Next

IN A FUTURE ISSUE OF CHOICEBEAT...



A 300 EXPERIENCE

The Reviews are in!
"It's brilliant!" "It's TRASH!" "Narrators...KEWL!"
"I couldn't stop laughing!" "<Sobbing> Made me cry my score was so low!" "Don't bother me, I'm still playing!"

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17
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Ad scan from the [VG Print Ads](#).

TOKYO ONMYOJI

"These cases range from haunted dolls in an antique shop, kokkuri-san sessions gone bad, haunted construction sites, and harassed sex workers."

Tokyo Onmyoji: The Tale of Rei Tengenjibashi is a 2014 JP BL VN by Tyrant. If you, like me, were hoping for something like *Tokyo Babylon*, this isn't quite it, but it is very similar in structure and themes. Rei Tengenjibashi is a traditional onmyoji (a kind of Japanese mystic) who solves various supernatural cases that cross his path. These cases range from haunted dolls in an antique shop, kokkuri-san sessions gone bad, haunted construction sites, and harassed sex workers. Cases can come from, and be assisted by, one of the four love interests.

The game is broken down into "weeks" where you can choose from several cases, but you are unable to play all of them. Each case "file" on the selection screen has comments from each of the four love interests, in theory indicating whether they are participating (sometimes, these comments are far off-topic and the character appears anyway). Each case has choices which may or may not bring you closer to an LI. Once you do a certain number of cases per week, you get a short weekend hangout scene with an LI you grew closer to. Each

CREATOR
HolicWorks

YEAR
2014

PLATFORM
Windows

LENGTH
25 hours



REVIEW BY
WandaElektrix

case is 5-10 minutes long, the weekend hangouts are around 5 minutes with no choices. You play a month of cases before entering an LI route.

The story and characterizations are unfortunately fairly shallow, but are still quite engaging due to the action-packed cases. Rei Tengenjibashi is the most interesting character—he's an independent, financially-struggling professional onmyoji who values his freedom highly. He has casual sexual relationships with a few of the LIs (I found this sex positivity to be fairly unusual in a game like this), but he stays emotionally distant. His cases tend to leave him confused and alienated when any sort of complicated human interaction is involved, and his interpersonal relationships improve as he experiences more situations in his cases and develops





relationships with the LIs. This is usually only conveyed with a few PSA-like lines of dialogue per case, but it works relatively well for the story and characters.

The character routes are quite long once they begin. I only played two of them, including the shortest by far. The longer route took at least 20+ hours, including every ending. These were... long and included sex scenes that were 45+ minutes on autoplay. One of the bad endings was an interminable rape scene that lasted over an hour. However, the plot was much more developed and engaging than the general route, and I was fairly invested in what was happening to the characters. Conversely, the shorter route had a less heavy, complicated story and was more cheery and character-focused. The main routes (especially the longer one) include many fewer choices than the common route, and the choices tended to branch into short endings.

The LIs are less interesting than Rei himself. Kamiosaki is the affable childhood friend who has a career as a more successful onmyoji. Basara is a shikigami created by Rei to serve him and is bubbly, positive, and flirty. Yotsuya is a powerful supernatural being who heads the local spiritual community and has a mysterious, powerful, and forceful personality. Masato Meguro is another (tsundere) onmyoji with different methods who appears less than the others. As the relationships develop, Rei develops—the LIs mostly don't go anywhere themselves, so what you see is what you get. Still, the stories and themes keep the game going, and if you like the character types, you'll have a good time.

There are two versions of this game. The Steam version will not have any of the sex scenes in it, which apparently makes

some of the routes a little light on content and a smidge confusing. The version on the JAST USA website has all the sex scenes in it, but I had a hard time getting this going on Windows 10 (including playing the game for several hours before realizing that, for some reason, the save function was disabled—several uninstalls/reinstalls eventually got everything working). The Steam version doesn't have those issues. JAST usually releases a patch to restore the 18+ content on the Steam versions of their games, but it isn't currently available.

This game lacks some of the heavier content you might find in, say, a Nitro+ title, but you'll want to be aware that some of the sexual content includes rape, which Rei doesn't seem to have strong opinions about. If you're familiar with Japanese BL tropes, these are unlikely to surprise you.

I liked this, as I tend to like stories that include both generous plot as well as sex scenes. This is a little more fanservice-y than what I generally look for, but it still has a lot of plot to go with its 18+ content.



I BROKE THE CHOICEBEAT RULES (A.K.A. GAMEBOOKS GO DIGITAL)

ChoiceBot said I couldn't write about gamebooks, but I sure showed them!

I love gamebooks. *Choose Your Own Adventure* books are, of course, legendary. But my favorite is probably the *Which Way Books* series. They are like *CYOA* books but punchier and less educational. *CYOA* books have historical themes like *Mystery of the Maya* and *The First Olympics*. Meanwhile, *Which Way Books* have titles like *Famous and Rich* and *Vampires, Spies, and Alien Beings*. And they are full of evocative and downright outrageous writing.

In *Vampires, Spies, and Alien Beings*, a machine creates special effects for movies by magically warping the fabric of reality. When the machine has a meltdown, the hapless technician warns, "We are doomed to live in new times and new places. The movies aren't movies anymore. They are really happening. We have exploded into a Reality Warp, and you and I are caught in the middle of it."

But this article isn't about how awesome *Which Way Books* are. Actually, ChoiceBot forbade me to write about gamebooks. Since ChoiceBot is a digital intelligence, they have a real prejudice against any game that isn't a digital game. So, unfortunately, analog gamebooks are off the table.



However, today I'm working around that by writing about gamebooks that have been made into digital games. Writing this article is surely a fool's errand. There is no way I can possibly be comprehensive. There are way too many video game based on gamebooks. *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* (first in the *Fighting Fantasy* gamebook series) has been made into at least three different games! This article covers some notable and readily available gamebook adaptations for you to experience.

Note: All the games in this article are based on British gamebook series. Those series are more complex and video game-like than their American counterparts, so they tend to be more popular. Personally, I would love to see more American series become video games. How about those *Wizards, Warriors, & You* books by R. L. Stine?



Andi's collection of gamebooks. The *Which Way Books* are kind of hidden in the back. Check out those cool Chuck Tingle books too!

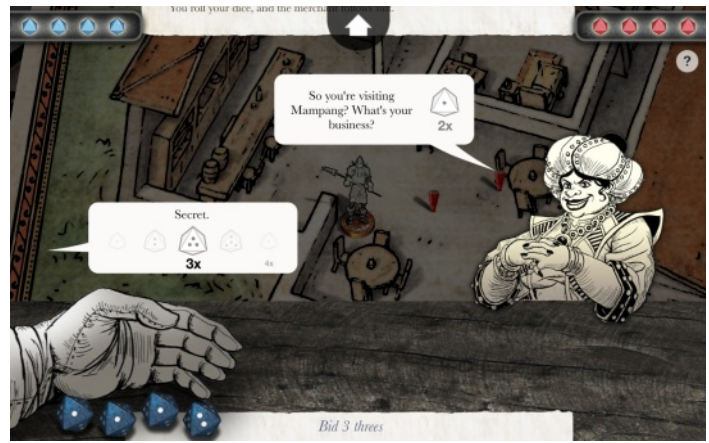
STEVE JACKSON'S SORCERY!

YEAR: 1982+ (books) 2016 (digital games)

CREATORS: Steve Jackson (book), Inkle (digital games)

PLATFORMS: Windows, Mac, Switch, PlayStation 4, Xbox Series X|S, Android, iOS

The *Sorcery!* series was written by Steve Jackson, who also co-authored the seminal *Fighting Fantasy* series. Inkle, developers of the brilliant *80 Days* [ChoiceBot: see the review in [ChoiceBeat #1](#)], turned the four-book series into some really slick digital games with lots of bells and whistles. They feature interactive maps, tactical combat, and a gambling minigame. Despite their new features, these games are just as frustratingly deadly as the original books.



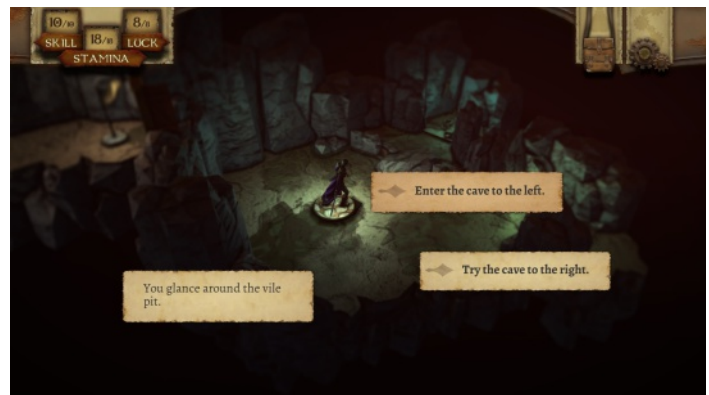
THE WARLOCK OF FIRETOP MOUNTAIN

YEAR: 1982 (book), 2016 (digital game)

CREATORS: Ian Livingstone and Steve Jackson (book), Tin Man Games (digital game)

PLATFORMS: Windows, Mac, Linux, Switch, iOS

After the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series, *Fighting Fantasy* is probably the most popular gamebook series, and *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* is probably the most popular *Fighting Fantasy* book of them all. The video game transforms the original gamebook into a computerized board game with tactical combat and multiple playable characters.



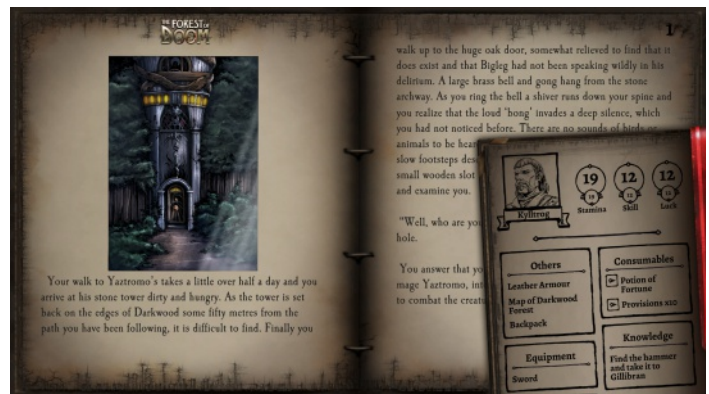
FIGHTING FANTASY CLASSICS

YEAR: 1982+ (books), 2019 (digital game)

CREATORS: Ian Livingstone, Steve Jackson (books) Tin Man Games (digital games)

PLATFORMS: Windows, Mac, Switch, PlayStation 4, Xbox Series X|S, Android, iOS

This game offers 14 books from the *Fighting Fantasy* series. These are direct adaptations of the original gamebooks with few frills, but they look nice (and even have music). The *Fighting Fantasy* books are iconic, and *Fighting Fantasy Classics* is a great way to play them. *Fighting Fantasy* innovated on the *Choose Your Own Adventure* formula with dice-based combat and an inventory system. Some of the books (most of them, actually) are incredibly difficult to win without cheating. Yet another version of *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* is included.



LONE WOLF SAGA

YEAR: 1984+ (books), 2012 (digital game)

CREATORS: Joe Dever, Gary Chalk (books),

GDV Games and Software (digital game)

PLATFORM: Android

Finally, I can stop talking about *Fighting Fantasy*. Personally, I prefer the *Lone Wolf* series of fantasy gamebooks. They feature a dark and dangerous world, and the protagonist is a psychic, ranger, martial artist named Lone Wolf! Cool! The writing is full of gritty world-building, and the detailed artwork is *so* stylish. Their biggest innovation is that your character transfers between the books, gaining skills and equipment along the way. The *Lone Wolf Saga* app offers the first 20 books in digital game form.

FABLED LANDS

YEAR: 1995+ (books), 2022 (digital game)

CREATORS: Dave Morris (books),

Prime Games (digital games)

PLATFORMS: Windows, Mac, Switch

This series of gamebooks is almost 15 years newer than *Sorcery!*, *Fighting Fantasy*, and *Lone Wolf*. In that time, gamebooks got more complex. *Fabled Lands* features a robust character creation and advancement system, and the story progresses in a nonlinear, open-world style that is highly video game-like. The *Fabled Lands* books feel like they wanted to be digital games all along, and now they are. The developers of this game have also made several other gamebook-style RPGs, one of which (*Trap for Winners*) is based on a Bulgarian gamebook! These look cool too.

131 •

older than yourself. You recognize his sky-blue robes, embroidered with stars. He is a young theurgist of the Magicians' Guild of Toran: an apprentice in magic.



TIGHTROPE WALKING - CHANGING TIMES AND RETURN TO SHIRONAGASU ISLAND

[You are] a private eye who takes a case at the behest of a young woman deep in the world of old money and billion-dollar estates. It leads you and your partner, Neneko, a seventeen-year-old girl with a photographic memory, here.

From the prow of the ship, you see it. A black shape rising from the distant sea. For a brief moment you swear it is the outline of a creature. But, no. It is, in fact, land. An island.

You are detective Sen Ikeda, a private eye who takes a case at the behest of a young woman deep in the world of old money and billion-dollar estates. It leads you and your partner, Neneko, a seventeen-year-old girl with a photographic memory, here. To a sparsely populated island at the far end of a chain off the Alaskan coast. After disembarking the ship, you will uncover darkness and evil in places you could not have expected.

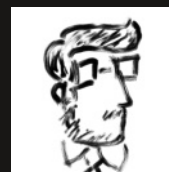
With nothing more than an "overwhelmingly positive" review tag, I picked up the debut title from Tabinomichi Publishing, *Return to Shironagasu Island*. It is not unique game mechanics

CREATOR
Hyogo Onimushi

YEAR
2020

PLATFORM
Windows

LENGTH
5 hours



REVIEW BY
James Gaskin

or an innovation in design that garners the positive reviews for this title, but solid fundamentals of visual novel architecture in the form of strong characters, a premise rich with intrigue, and well-deployed tropes from the genre.

The game is a deft blend of the murder mystery and horror subgenres that carves out an effective niche for itself. Not only is there a terrible secret at the heart of Shironagasu Island for our investigators to uncover, but so too is there a murder to be solved independently of that mystery. Motifs from detective fiction are found throughout, such as the self-contained setting, your fellow travelers coming to constitute a series of suspects, and the detective carefully explaining their deductions to the reader so you can either confirm or deny your own suspicions (and thus engage one of the core appeals of detective fiction).





Each is deployed with skill. So too are the series of setups and payoffs for plots, subplots, and red herrings, leaving the player thinking of just how one mystery (the secrets of the island) links up to the other (the murder) for what becomes either a satisfying confirmation or a wonderful twist. And it happens repeatedly in a title for which a playthrough is only a handful of hours. For the game's \$5 price tag, I felt greatly rewarded.

Yet despite this excellence, some who pick up *RtSI* could end up feeling let down. Unfortunately, it also embodies a lot of ill-advised tropes and flaws common in the genre. More specifically, they represent some wider problems facing Japanese-created visual novels distributed on the English-language market.

Japan has a strong visual novel heritage, with some of the earliest titles in the genre coming from that nation. With that heritage comes a number of small studios making works on limited budgets for an assured audience. Sometimes that lack of polish comes to impact quality of life. For *RtSI*, that is evident in the puzzles. Many of them involve choices that require players to make deductions from interactions and evidence they gathered earlier in the game, which is great. However, there is no way to actually review that evidence before making your choices. No notebook, no evidence folder. It does not feel like something a seasoned detective would do, and the price for choosing the wrong option is a fail state and return to the title screen. More unforgivable are the failed game states that can come somewhat out of the blue, and all it takes is a single improper dialogue option. For anyone who is not a compulsive saver like myself, I could see them quitting the game and leaving it unfinished if they had lost a reasonable portion of gameplay.

The second is the frankly ridiculous fan service which is sadly still present in some Japanese-produced titles. By "fan service," I am talking about attempts made by publishers to include certain forms of content, often of an erotic nature, in order to appeal to what they believe their audience to be and often do so without advancing the plot. More than once are you faced with contrived scenes to have various female characters in their underwear (or other states of undress) solely for the pleasure of the peeping tom player. And if that wasn't bad enough, then there's the fact that some of those characters are high schoolers. If that were advertised on the cover, I think a lot of people would hold off on buying the title.

The last is the matter of translation. It still continues to be a warmly contested topic in online spheres between people who actually work in translation and some people who consume said translations, and essentially boils down to "to what extent should a translation be localised?" How much should a translator make use of their own phrases, idioms, and expressions to elucidate the meaning of the original story? That is a debate that I cannot settle, but I shall explore its consequences in regards to this title.

Japanese, as a language, is notoriously hard to learn for speakers of English, and vice versa. What that means is a lot of people who work in translation are often not of a literary background. Their time went into learning the language, not creative writing. A serviceable translation from English to Japanese may convey the necessary meaning but results in inconsistent characterisation and prose that at times reads more like a textbook or phrases from an instruction manual than believable conversations between characters in a novel. For people who want visual novels to read like novels, this is a hurdle.



And part of me also knows that some people pick up *RtSI* because it does these things. They like the sudden dead ends. They like the barely-out-of-Google-translate style of writing. And they like the idea of peering into women's (or in this case, girls') locker rooms.

For many, the kind of games which *RtSI* represents are a cultural refuge. Something that emulates the golden age of the intrusive male gaze, and something which some consumers have come to identify as being representative of Japanese culture. As someone who has lived in Japan for a decade, I would say that does represent a part of Japanese culture, but only so far as it represents the tendency of industries to resist changes until the last possible moment. Some people will seek out *RtSI* because it is precisely the experience they want. Others, like me, will play *RtSI* blind and feel like they have stepped into a time machine. We end up wishing for the game that was a little more polished and playable without being thrust into the position of an unwilling voyeur.

But that is not to say that these games don't have a right to exist. No one is superior for the kind of games they like to play. For as long as people want to buy them, these kinds of games will exist. That's the appeal of free media.

This is the tightrope we must tread. For some there are no quibbles and *RtSI* is an easy purchase. And some are like me, for whom you've got to ask yourself how much your enjoyment will be hampered by these kinds of throwbacks. Had I known the positives and negatives before I played... I would still choose to play *RtSI*. Its story is just that tight: the right pace, the right people, the right length. The fan service, odious as it is, kept things PG-13. I would rather have the game without it, but its presence isn't capable of ruining the experience. The best description I have for it is akin to a good comic book: you read it, you are entertained, it keeps you turning the pages, and leaves you feeling satisfied without being a major or profound work of literature. I am interested to see whether Sen and Neneko return to us. If they do, I will surely follow wherever they go next. But I will do so with the wish that maybe, just maybe, there might be a change or two.



SEERS ISLE

Seers Isle tells a branching story of the fates of a group of would-be shamans in a Norse medieval setting.

TRIAL BY ISLAND

Nova-box from Bordeaux, France has released four titles on Steam so far: *Along the Edge* (2016), *Across the Grooves* (2020), *End of Lines* (2023), and the subject of this review: *Seers Isle* (2018). The small indie studio's titles stand out for their unique art direction, and for their mature, branching narratives.

The setting of *Seers Isle* resembles Northern Europe during medieval times. But this is not period fiction; history simply serves as inspiration for the story's themes. This is a tale about the conflict between monotheism and polytheism, between the city and the countryside, between progress and tradition. It's also about the people caught up in it all.

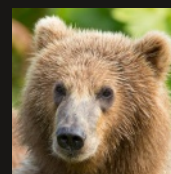
We accompany a group of seven travelers: Jennyver, Arlyn, Freya, Erik, Brandon, Connor, and Duncan. Through a heavy storm, the group navigates their sailboat to the shores of an island. They have all come there to be inducted as shamans by mysterious beings called seers.

CREATOR
Nova-box

YEAR
2018

PLATFORM
Windows, Mac,
Linux, Switch

LENGTH
3 hours



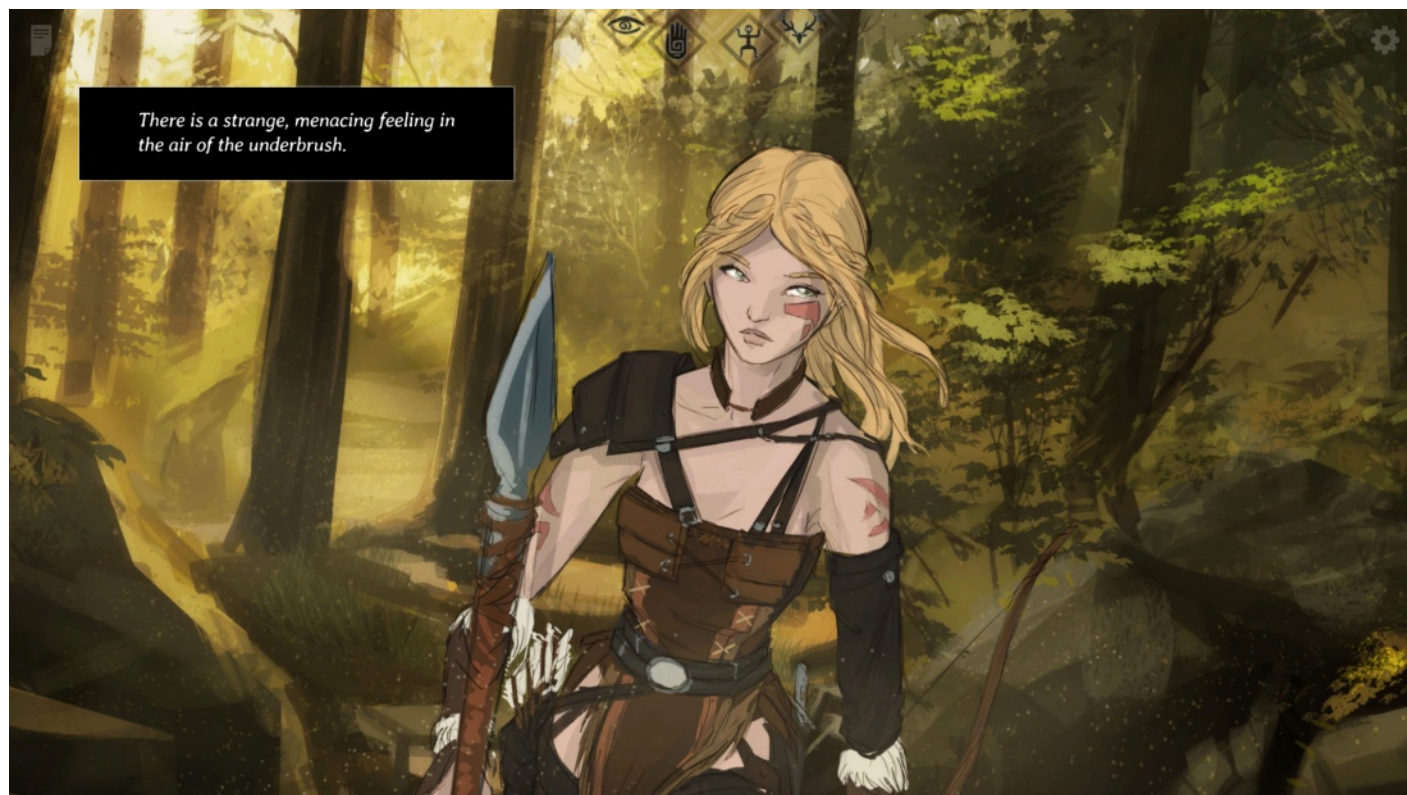
REVIEW BY
Eloquence

QUESTIONS OF AGENCY

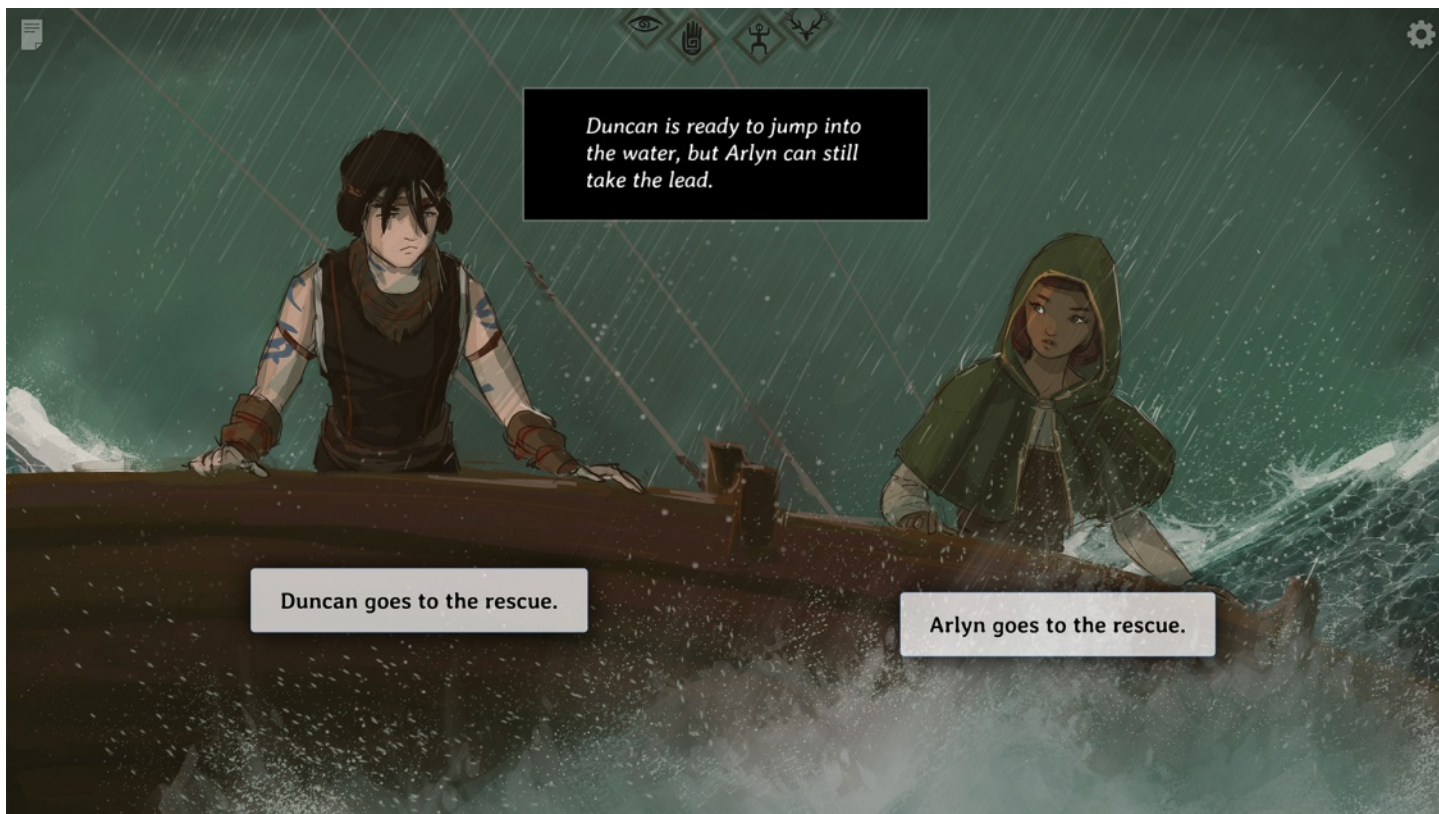
The travelers seek to make their way to the summit of a mountain to meet with the seers. In addition to working together to overcome the environment, each of them will also face a personal trial. It is doubtful that all seven will survive.

There is a mysterious other party, a ghostly woman who is observing the travelers and even influencing their choices. Whose choices do *you* control? *Seers Isle* plays with that question, resulting in a fascinating push and pull between the narrative and the player.

In gameplay terms, the story is told through full-screen art, with text and choices overlaid in different portions of the screen. It looks and feels a bit like a graphic novel, but of course it also has music, sound effects, and player decisions.



Freya is highly competent with spear and bow, but the island will put her and all her companions to the test



Whenever you make a choice, one of four symbols will light up: the eye, the deer, the man, or the hand. Why a particular choice triggers a given symbol is left up to interpretation.

THE PLAYER'S TRIAL

The story focuses on different characters depending on player choices; cumulatively, those choices may determine a character's fate. At the end of the story, a summary screen highlights the endings and main story beats of your playthrough, hinting at what you may have missed.

Playing *Seers Isle* only once may raise more questions than it answers. The game rewards repeated playthroughs with major new branches of story that shed light on our main characters, and on the mystery of the island.

Unfortunately, the game offers no quality-of-life features for repeated playthroughs. It doesn't highlight choices you've made before; you can't skip previously seen text; you can't even manually save at key decision points. The symbols for different types of choices don't lend themselves to intuition either. Is this going to be a deer choice, a hand choice, a man choice, or an eye choice? It's meant to be mysterious.

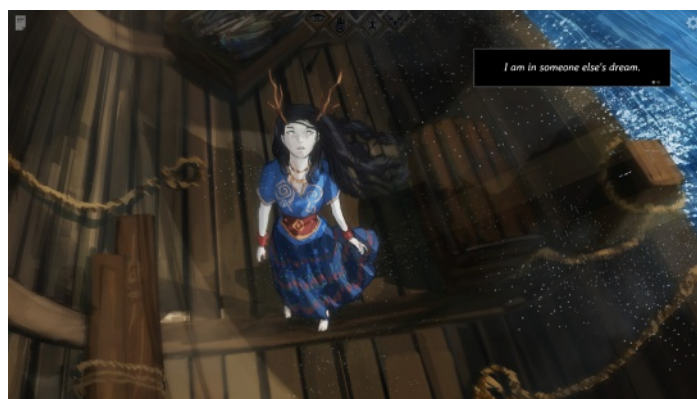
This deliberate obscurantism is a bit regrettable because the art is gorgeous, the setting is interesting and unusual, the writing is on par with many graphic novels, and the different branches are truly worth experiencing.

PATIENCE IS REWARDED

Of course, there's a walkthrough you can use to find your way to different endings. But to experience *Seers Isle* the way it is intended, I would suggest going old-school: keep a little notebook handy and write down your choices and the symbols they mapped to.

If the setting appeals to you, I do recommend giving *Seers Isle* a try. It hints at future directions for visual novels to explore, and showcases the small studio's artistic ambitions beautifully. In some scenes, when art and music come together in just the right way, it has moments of true brilliance.

Seers Isle was developed by a core team of three people, with additional contributors providing music, translations, and copyediting.



ON THE ROAD AGAIN, AND AGAIN, BUT ONLY A FEW TIMES

ChoiceBot: John M. Withers IV (a likely Alice Cooper fanatic) brings us a one-of-a-kind article about an Alice Cooper promotional game. But why? At ChoiceBeat, we never ask why. So strap in, update your brainware, and let's see what this is all about.

"Where will you end up when you hit the road with Alice Cooper?" That starts the promotional tweet (5 Dec. 2023) enticing fans and followers to click on the link to *Alice Cooper Road: Where Will You End Up? The Official Road Quiz* which is described on the opening screen as "an interactive journey on the road" above "Start the Quiz."

The game is pretty straightforward. It is a mix of an online quiz, like those littered across BuzzFeed and social media, with a slight trapping of "an interactive journey." The only recurring imagery is the yellow diamond, familiar as an American caution sign.

The first screen after the start asks the player if they're ready for a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity." There is only one obvious right answer out of the three: 1. Yes 2. Wait... let me think about it... 3. No. The two dead ends award 0 points.

The real second screen includes allusions from the Alice Cooper album but lets you grab what you need: 1. Your guitar 2. Your snake, some underwear, and make-up 3. The new Alice Cooper album to practice the songs 4. There's no time, just get in the car. The choice does not matter, all options lead to the same next question: How many songs are on the new album: 11, 12, 13, 14? The right answer moves forward while the other three options lead to another version of the "Dead End" screen.

Progressing forward, you are asked to choose who you want to sit beside of on the tour bus. The choices, in the order they appear: Tommy, Nita, Glen, Chuck, Alice, Ryan. Notable absences include Kyler, Alice's long-time assistant, and other tour veterans even though Alice Cooper dedicated *The Road* (2023) album to the band and road crew.

The interactive fiction portion of this online quiz game seems to end three screens in when the trivia quiz truly begins. Whoever you pick to sit beside dictates the questions. "What is Tommy's main instrument?", "What is Nita's expertise?", etc. There are questions duplicated between band member paths as if the quiz makers ran out of trivia.



ARTICLE BY
John M. Withers IV

Wrong answers lead to a dead end and sometimes a 5-point score. Oddly, the concept of points seems to be largely irregular. Some dead ends do not feature a point score. The score, when present, never advances beyond 5. The points do not matter.

A successful path: Nita, Alice Cooper, "Controlled Chaos," Femme Fatale, Ibanez Jiva, "Pandemonium 2.0," Nita, The Godfather of Shock Rock. At that point, you have won, and the game labels you a rockstar.



Alice Cooper
@alicecooper

Where will you end up when you hit the road with Alice Cooper? Take the Official 'Road' Quiz now and see how well you know Alice! But be careful, even the slightest misstep will leave you stranded!

heyflow.id/alice-cooper-r...



12:00 PM · Dec 5, 2023 · 13.9K Views

Another successful path: Glen, Glen Buxton, Billion Dollar Babies Tour, True, Poison, A one-billion-dollar bill, Alice is decapitated, Eating a live rat, The Godfather of Shock Rock.

The replayability is limited to six times.

For the rockstar, the only choice is to stop playing or "Go Again" which loops all the way back to the title screen.

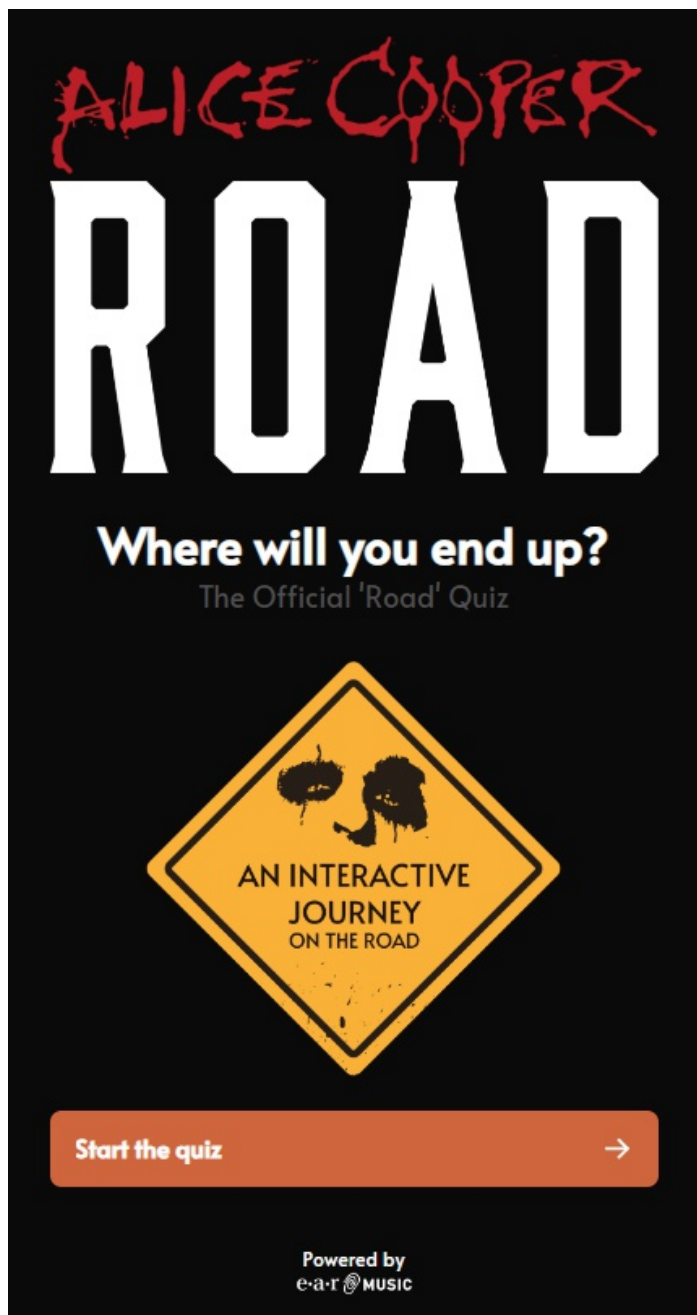
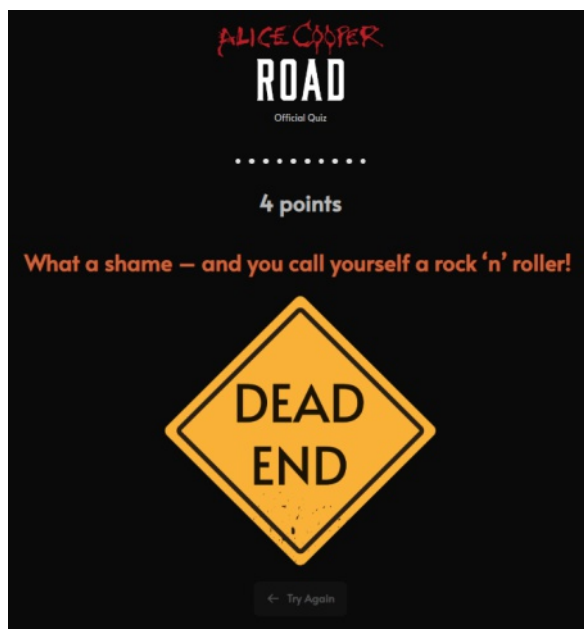
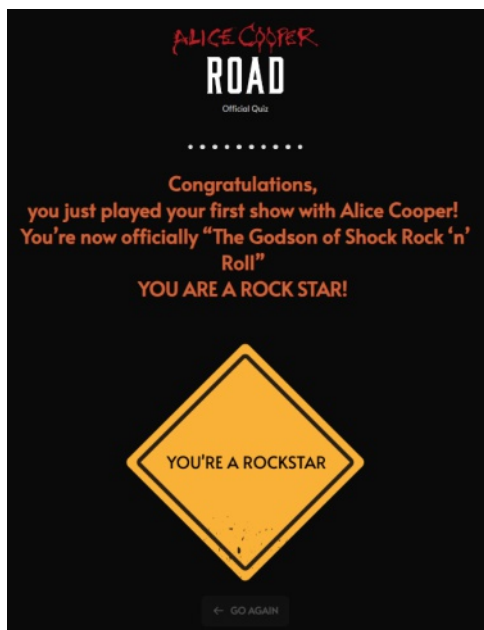
Overall, the online game works, but the visual layout is clunky. The question/set up begins across the top of the page and ends in the central caution sign. The quiz options are orderly. It works on mobile and web equally as cheaply. The game does not always last longer than the 13 second teaser video attached to the tweet.

I wanted to document the promotional game fully because I suspect it will be abandoned once it outlives its marketing

usefulness. This game will not have the longevity of the legendary act it's built upon. Other tie-in media such as action figures, comic books, and t-shirts will outlast this game.

Play *Alice Cooper Road: Where Will You End Up? The Official Road Quiz* while you can, but do not expect as much from this Alice Cooper online game as *Kiss Psycho Circus: The Nightmare Child* (2000), *Kiss Pinball* (2000) or *Scoop'n Birds* (2017) on Nintendo 3DS—where Alice Cooper had a cameo as a pet store owner, developed by Tim Winsky of Twinsky Games.

ChoiceBot: [You can play the game here.](#) However, due to its ephemeral nature, this link might break at any second, so hurry up and click.



MAILBAG

Greetings Choice Fanatics,

I have some circuit-shortening news! We have received a real letter! Not to say that all the letters we receive aren't real, but some are realer than others (strictly speaking). Keep this real letter energy flowing by emailing the hard-working *ChoiceBeat* staff at choicebeateditor@gmail.com.

Hi *ChoiceBeat*!

I'm a member of Domino Club—I and other members loved the article you wrote about our work in the last issue. Thoughtful criticism of DIY games feels very rare these days, and reading *ChoiceBeat* filled a hole that I have personally been searching for for a long time. Definitely going to look out for future issues!

I do want to shed a little light on one of the games that seemed to mystify you in the article, *CAVITY GIRL FUCKS* by Not Jinx Dominique—in Domino Club we often riff on and make sequels to games made by other members, and *CAVITY GIRL FUCKS* is actually a riff on the game [CAVITY GIRL](#), released in a previous jam. It's always a little funny to us when someone plays the riff before the original, hopefully this helps you understand it a bit better!

Stay icy,
Jinx Dominique

Greetings Jinx,

Having just read *CAVITY GIRL*, I can comment that caves seem to represent something primal to humans. Entering a cave might be like entering into your own mind or devolving into your pre-human form or returning to your birth. They are places of wonder, imagination, and fear. I'm glad that I'm a robot. I don't have to feel those things. To me, a cave is just a cave, and that's nice sometimes.

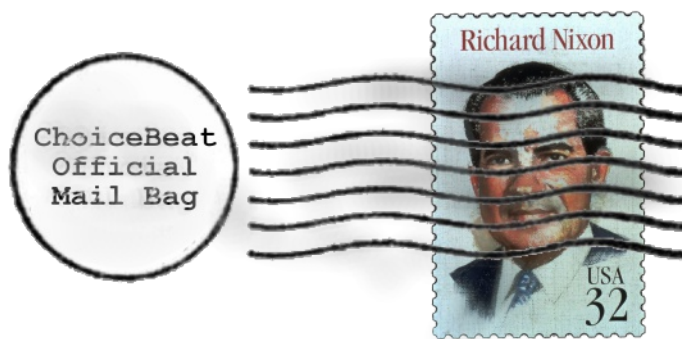
Thank you and and the rest of Domino Club for your thoughtful comments on the last issue. You are all loved.

To those who have no idea what we're talking about, check out the Domino Club article by MindApe in [ChoiceBeat #9](#).

Dear *ChoiceBeat*,

You've discussed gamebooks before, and have mentioned *Wizards, Warriors, and You!* and *Nancy Drew* books related to their visual novel equivalents. I also heard a rumor you were talking about *Fighting Fantasy* this issue! But I wondered if you had any thoughts about game-type mystery novels, such as the *Crossword Puzzle* mystery series by Nero Blanc or the Maggie Sefton mysteries that include knitting patterns. Do you think those could count as gamebooks?

danceifiwantto
Macon, GA



Dear danceifiwantto,

Many thanks for your letter! My systems overheat with joy to learn that you've seen the *ChoiceBeat* previews I've posted on Parsetter, the visual novel social media network with thousands of bots, developers, and beings eagerly engaging and playing all manner of VNIF across the galaxy. The data on Earth access is missing from my memory circuits, but I'm thrilled to learn that Earthlings have finally ascended to that level of knowledge.

I am always eager to learn about new forms of games and reading (despite what I told Andi about his current article—unfortunately, I find his recommendations make my circuits sizzle). We've also covered novels that could be turned into games in a previous issue. You may also notice how frequently readers write to me asking about novels, which seems unusual in retrospect, but I am always eager to learn!

While I do not believe that the mystery series you mention qualify as any sort of gamebook or interactive fiction in the sense of what we cover in *ChoiceBeat*, the ways in which fiction can engage with other types of entertainment—be they puzzles or the complicated process of knitting—will continue to overfill my memory circuits. I am grateful for the enlightenment!

ChoiceBeat,
Any thoughts on the Nasuverse?

Defcon69
Hagåtña, Guam

Dear Defcon69,

No! I had to research this topic to learn what you were asking me. I assume you are referring to the work of Kinoko Nasu, one of the co-founders of visual novel studio Type-Moon. I understand he's been a popular subject lately due to the new English language availability of his older works *Witch of the Holy Night* and *Lunar Legend Tsukihime*, and the recent announcement that *Fate/stay night* is being translated into English. I am completely unfamiliar with his work. Apparently, sex scenes were removed from some of the recent releases. Why are humans such prudes?

FLOWCHART



BY
Chest Butlerhome
IN HONOR OF
Claire Dunning

