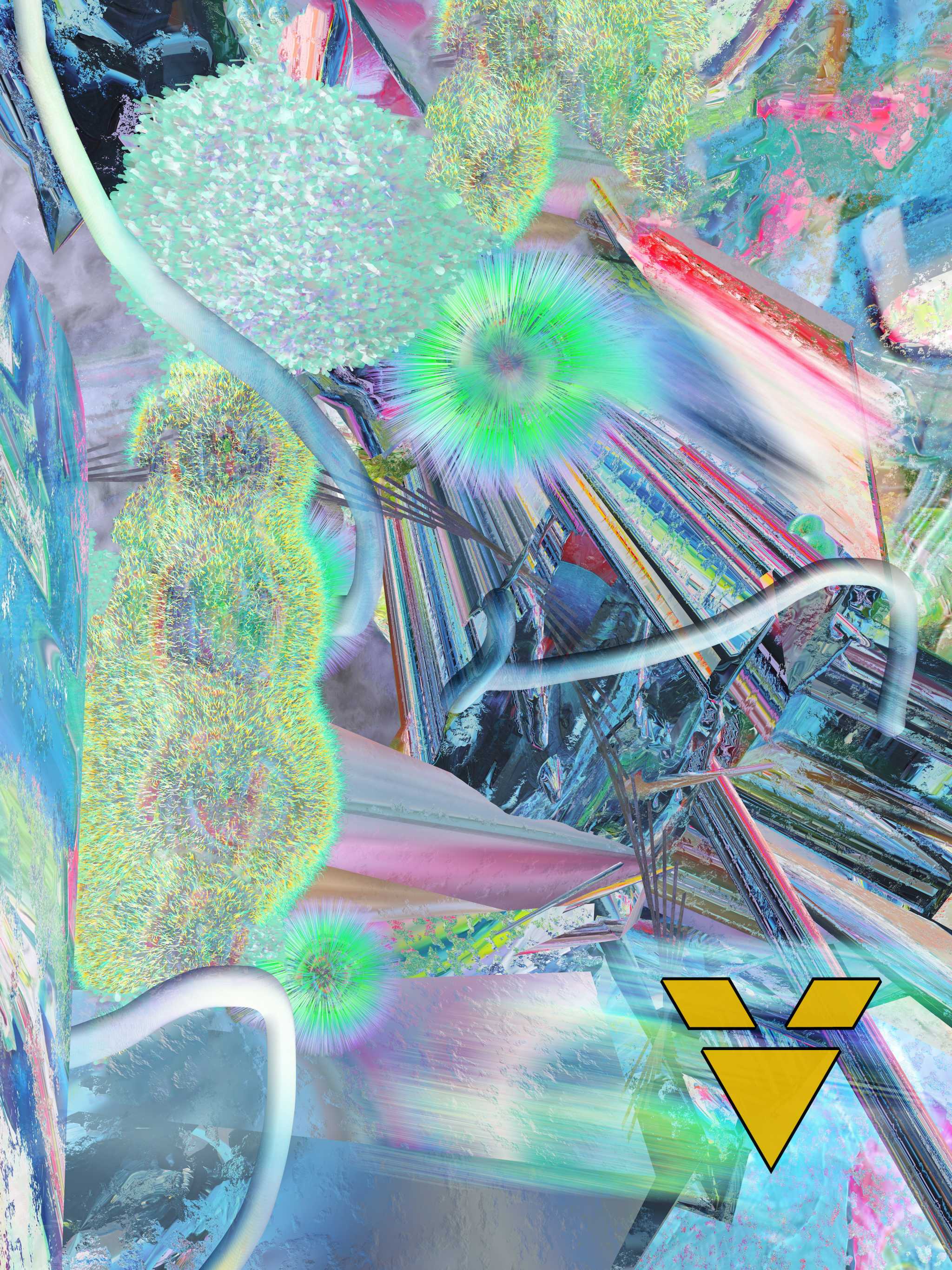


THE ARCADE REVIEW

Issue Two, Spring 2014

Website: arcadereview.net
Twitter: @arcadereview
Email: editors@arcadereview.net

Contents

AN INTRODUCTION

Dear Reader, thank you for purchasing a copy of The Arcade Review. Welcome to our magazine.

I've been thinking deeply about what it means for games criticism to act as an art criticism; how I can shape the writing here into that direction. Art critism is implied to me by a heightened sense, an intricate ability of observation and attention to a work as a work. It's a willlingless to engage with emotional complexity, to deal with difficult questions and concepts, and to reject reclusivenes in favour of attention and appreciation.

What I find so interesting then, is these pieces give new life to old conversations. You will see that these writers are very concerned with content and form, and the relationships within these. But they also leave games themselves, and move into other media: into film, into literature, philosophy and theory. These writers aren't just concerned about games but our understanding of art and its circling ideas. This is the goal, then: as art should bring us *to* the world, to heighten our sense of what lies around us, I hope these pieces do the same for you. To heighten your sense, to excite you, and to inspire you to be attentive

This issue we open with Owen Vince, who explores the surrealist forms and imagerys of John Clower's Middens, engaging the ideas of the surrealists and using the tools of the Russian literary theorists.

We then move to Emilie Reed, who writes of the RPGMaker horror style, the devices and techniques they employ to create a form of horror not found in large commercial titles. She also discusses the commmunity that creates fangames around these works. Personally, I'm hoping this piece will spur more conversation about games that act as reinterpretations.

We hit moyen at John Brindle, who writes a journalistic piece about the Twine tool and the use and evolution of the "macro" script in the indie community. Then, John Kilhefner has a short piece on Sounddodger, providing a much needed complication of immersion, attention, and the physical relationship we have with digital play.

And we then conclude with Brendan Vance, who writes a manifesto-like piece out of his deep concern with the content that is found in our games. Is there really anything lying under the games we play? Is there a core? Or are our experiences hollow? Make sure to hear what he has to say.

For our conversations section, I have a marvelous talk with Amy Dentata, an artist and performer of many trades. It's a long conversation, but rightly so! She has incredible insights to share. We also have our new editor's picks section, which I hope will encourage some of you to go out and play interesting games, and make your own engagements! And if you'd like to play the games we talk about here, we have an index in the back pages.

I of course want to thank the usuals, being Alex Pieschel, our second editor, and our peers and friends who encourage and support the work we do here. I also want to shoutout to the other publications that focus their eye on the small and the unusual, that being the coming Warp Door from Chris Priestman and Tim W, as well as ZEAL, a patreon-funded online zine which you can support here. It's always heartening to see other critics and writers engage with the areas and corners that we miss.

And lastly, I want to thank Lauren Pelc McArthur, Toronto artist and illustrator and our cover artist for this issue. You can find a link to her work in the back pages.

That's it for now. Thank you so much for coming! Welcome to The Arcade Review. Enjoy your journey here.

- Zolani Stewart, Founding Editor

In Strange Lands

Owen Vince

1

There is a moment early in *Middens* – the anarchic, withering role playing shooter game from John Clowder – where you stop being a player, and begin to be *played*. There's an uneasy intimacy to it. Your weapon, found in an unlovely pile of remnants, begins to flirt with to you. It strikes a bargain, licking its lips with a sharp spoke of red tongue, its winking eye. You ask, "is it making fun of me, my character – this stranger in a strange land?" It wants you to be its bearer, and for it to be your guide. There is a pause, its eye revolving slightly.

Guns are one of the most familiar artefacts of video games – ever present, complex, even comforting. As somebody who has only ever fired an air rifle on damp mornings as a child, my father at my shoulder, perhaps I remain overly familiar with guns, despite never having held, or wanting to hold a "real" one. I can watch TV and recognise them by name, their metrical, machine names, even by the kinds of ammunition they carry. For a while, I didn't know where all this extra information was coming from. But then there were video games. I'd grown used to them; it'd happened without me realising it. When you play a game, and you're handed a gun, it isn't something you consciously think about. It's a familiar old presence, wavering in the bottom corner of the screen. It shoots, it kills, and people die. It gets you to the end of the game – good tool, nice tool.

Middens, in its melting and peculiar vision, makes every attempt to erode that confidence, to disrupt that familiarity. It takes what is known, conventional, and familiar and makes it *un*familiar. It makes it strange. You are

asked up-front to murder in order to proceed. You're corralled and pushed, however charmingly, by a sentient object that wants you to kill, not simply so you can "complete" the game, but so that *it* too, can thrill on the experience of premeditated death. It is because of this that *Middens*, as a game, is actually so familiar and at the same time so strange that you're unsure what you should actually be doing with it. It hovers somewhere between normality and the surreal. On the face of it, it is an RPG, a role playing game where you play a "role" , and has fantastical elements and text dialogue. In that regard it is not far from normality. But from the game's first seconds, before thought really even kicks in, it opens up a series of enticing and sickly voids that make you judder and unsettle in your seat.

Take a point about nine minutes in. You've just arrived in the "rift". After examining a pile of debris you pick up Genie, a talking revolver with lips and eyes set into its handle and barrel. It asks you to equip it, offering its "kisses". Around you there's a blasted yellow void, tendrils and pylons rising into the flickering sky, with a creeping and beeping of decaying ambient loops. Press "Z" to fire. Shoot your enemies down. You walk a little further, entering a mass of blinking bubbles. They each have collaged faces and transparent bodies – a classical Grecian bust with tendrils of wires dribbling from its neck wound; a wide mouthed, stub legged creature echoing the monsters which 16th century explorers once thought existed in the far places of the world. This mix of classical proportion, steampunk modernity, and monstrous, degraded nuclear experiment becomes a site in which the proportioned and beautiful is juddered against the corrosive and strange. A menagerie of creatures that appear to have been assembled from detritus, stitched and glued together with clumsy hands. So in confronting these beings, you can either walk past them, or test out your weapon, succumbing to Genie's impatient urges. And then, there are the vague, transparent bubbles with wide, surprised faces. They are invitingly defenceless. It's as if Genie wanted you to burst the little living bubbles, to decimate and destroy. But it's up to you whether you fire – and kill. There is a simplicity of control and progression here: walk left, shoot, talk, use your inventory. And it's familiar, comfortable and comforting, like an old Final Fantasy or a Zelda. But we're not in Kansas anymore. We're *somewhere else*. And so you pop those bubbles. Pop, pop, pop.

The game does its level best to unnerve and bewitch you with how it looks and sounds. When playing *Middens*, I was drawn increasingly to these strategies and aesthetics. I was also drawn to the thinking of one of the 20th century's most eminent literary theorists – Viktor Shklovsky. Writing in the slewed aftermath of the Russian Revolution, he suggested a novel way to look at and understand art (though he was riffing off Aristotle before him):

"Held accountable to nothing, life fades into nothingness. Automization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, at our fear of war [...] and so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art"

For Shklovsky, art was about making sense of the world, but not of feeling familiar and certain about it, but rather the opposite: of unsettling and shocking us into the realisation of how

things are. As he went on to say, "by "estranging" objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and "labourious". In order to make the most of what art can *do*, we have to see it as something that doesn't reassure us, but makes us uncomfortable, to make us see regular things in unusual ways, to "defamiliarise" them and "make them strange".

In one scene in *Middens*, you wander through what seems to be an endless desert of bright sand and warbling, wobbling jelly fish. You don't know, yet, whether it is "right" or appropriate to attack them. They *seem* harmless. Of course, the game is nudging you toward the conclusion that no being is 'appropriate' for a bullet. What is simply a transition between places from one area and the next, becomes a space fraught with the troubled possibilities of violence and the justification for violence. You – or at least I – become obsessed with justifying attacks before I make them. "Did you see the way that jellyfish looked at me? Did you?" And yet, I soon found myself justifying attacks that I didn't make. I was letting dangerous, charming Genie down. In its own way, *Middens* is exactly this – an attempt to use and turn aesthetics and interaction, the experience of play, into something that is challenging and unsettling – that turns you back toward your motivations. The "goal" or "objective" has become itself problematic. To make us feel like we're on familiar territory, while actually undermining the ground beneath our feet. The gun is not something routine and knowable, but something enticing and strange. We are not the player, but the played. *Middens* makes every effort to make you uneasy in its strange convergence of mysticism, chakra points and acoustic guitars, ranged weapons and apocalypse. The world you wander through is filled with sights and encounters that remind you of how peculiar the experience is, not because of its outlandish monsters or unsettling music per se, but because you feel that this world is somehow recognisable. It carries enough of its influences – point and shoot, battle menu systems, etc – to lull you into recognisability. But it certainly doesn't let you remain there. Because Clowder made use of RPG-maker, there is an echo of the familiar elements of "conventional" games – a yearning toward it – in every place and action. The battle menu is a battle menu, albeit differently named ("trigger" instead of attack, "prowess" instead of "special move"). Similarly, even the landing page menu refracts its origins – not "New Game" or "Load" or "Exit", but "X" and "O" - an echo of the menu in 2003's *Space Funeral*. The only option, when confronted with this indecipherable menu, is to simply reach out into the weirdness, to rely on an archaeology of interaction that allows you to gradually make sense of its peculiar world. Of being a stranger, and yet recognising something. Like being in a foreign city without language to rely on, but recognising what must be the word for "station", what must possibly be a bus stop, a chemist, a town hall.

On entering battle, you can draw upon "chakras" to aid and assist you in your fight. These globular, wide-eyed beings and the percussive piano key of your bullet shots turn the event into something deeply unsettling and unfixing. While RPGs are so often about the mindless "grind", where you tap, hit, and kill until the points roll in and dropped items are collected, *Middens* turns the event into a theatre of the absurd, wanting us to feel unclear and uncertain

in the task that we're enacting. Worse still is when you defeat your enemy – whatever gruesome shape they have assumed, where they chuckle rumblingly as their image fades from the screen – or is it Genie laughing, or me? Even the potential relief or glory of your victory is snatched away. Your enemy seemed to enjoy their death, just as Genie, your revolver, enjoyed taking their "life". It is a pitiful and complicit world of violence and entrancing imagination.

But *Middens* doesn't simply show us the implications of our death dealing in this peculiar world, but how these actions have cumbersome consequences. For instance, it contains the concept of "Nothings" - of bad karma acquired in the doing of unpleasant things. As you rack these up – by killing the denizens of the Rift, its harmless bubbles, its monstrous and singing creatures, almost all of whom would equally happily engage you in conversation - the world shifts and changes against you. You become more involved in it, with denizens becoming hostile, or jaded, or wary, or all of those things. Rather than reducing all this down to the simple + / -, metrics of some games, where, calculated on "points" for your deeds you become either a "good" person or an "evil" one (able to shift up and down that scale without suffering the consequences – as if becoming "good" from "evil" is as simple as putting on a new coat), the "Nothings" themselves are attached to no moral compass, to no particular measure or range. They are simply a "fact", something that you have to become accustomed to, that weighs on you. It is devilishly difficult to rid yourself of them. A death is a death. It cannot be "undone". In order to progress, you must do things that are never justified, that are never "good" or "right". The only way to *escape* the cycle is to remove yourself from it. To quit. But you don't do this, at least not permanently.

Visually, it is a troubling experience. But the visuals are also doing something, rather than appealing to our visual sense. If you've ever encountered *DaDa* , you'll know what I mean – an art and literary movement that roughed against the mechanic killing and horrors of the First World War with the unconventional and collaged. It was a tendency of artists and writers who worked through irrationality and intuition, rejecting logic and reason for new forms. These artists celebrated the irrational as the only way to encounter and make sense of the world. Like Shklovsky, they were fascinated by the strange, jarring manifestations of modernity. The game world – with its collage assemblages of landscape and design, its bubbling, looping ambient music, its unrecognisability – deepen this experience, radicalising every space and gesture made within the game. A game where you can kill save points, where your gun entices you to kill, where you whistle and hum chillingly after battle. If *DaDa* chafed and soured against the supposed possibilities and implications of modernism, of what they saw as the alienation of automation and the savagery of modern warfare, then the game's own name implies that same revulsion. *Middens*, a space littered with the remnants and fragments of departed worlds, fallen civilisations. The collapse of modernity. It seems to say that if we really peer beyond the surface of things, of comfortingly "modern" things, then this is what we're left with. *These* are its insides. Just as the DaDaist Hugo Ball said, "art is not an end in itself ... but it is an opportunity for the true perception and criticism of the times we live in". *Middens* extends and sustains that criti-

cism through its garbled, uneasy imagination.

A "blood bath". That is your goal, the thing that Genie pushes you toward. In one of the many "little chats" that Genie has with you, it stresses how in need of a "good clean" the Rift is – the nightmare, uneasy realm in which you wander. "A good scrub" from top to bottom. You come to realise, while you scour and nudge your way through this landscape, of how, despite its seeming arbitrary weirdness – it is still beautiful. Its denizens live their own oddly alluring other lives. There are "viriforms" who feed the rift, slow and ancient like whales, plants with brain-shaped heads which bob on stalks, wide-mouthed shark like creatures that pant in the corners of rooms, threatening with their large teeth but are, despite our assumptions, completely placid. It is an ecosystem that – with its collage of neon frames, saw-tooth glittering fragments, bright tubes and pipes that wind incomprehensibly – we cannot help but feel helpless in. The blobby, whistling crates of one white space, who stand amidst oversized Incan pottery, seem to be engaged in something beyond us, like wandering through a foreign marketplace and not understanding the language, the gestures, the atmosphere.

When you catch glimpses of Genie projected and strobing across this electrical sky, you realise how this, *this*, is your god, the giver of commandments. A gun with a taste for killing. And you are its agent. As you traverse its world – its landscapes of forgotten, broken things – you also come to realise that something else is at work here. An ecosystem, a reality emerging from the sludge. While all the things that have come to the "rift" have come from other (more coherent?) places, you are tempted to think that this is a burial ground, a cairn. It is not. It has life and energy, but tilted and assembled in such a way that it is not at first, or perhaps ever, understandable. As even Genie admits, in borish detail, there is a complex ecosystem to the rift, a community of strangers being together, a complexity of nutrients and growth. There are strange, withering fruit and garbled branches, blank human faces with moustaches and open eyes that strut about silently on stubby legs, neon worms that wiggle around with undecipherable sigils on their bodies. Even, oddly, a "love bus" that runs on jazz and dreams (and love, of course), as your primary mode of transport between the layers of the rift. Because these denizens are so utterly wrapped up in their lives – such as the large, many-doored room filled by cracked shards of glass, buzzing light, and numerous creatures fidgeting around the space on tentacles, stubby legs, floating – you sense the way that you are a foreign object, that you are literally "the other", so that your destruction, therefore, is ignorance in its purest. The one who destroys what they do not understand simply because they do not understand it. But when the denizens do talk to you, such as the chunky green pig-like animal in a low-lit corridor, their messages trouble you in their ambiguous mysticism, their eerie poetry;

the birds are silent in the woods
Just wait: soon enough
You will be quiet too

But in realising this – the odd community that has built up, accreted in this place between worlds – you also realise the horrifying reality of your mission, of Genie's urging. To complete the game, you've got to kill these beings, hostile or not. Death is a figure – a number.

But it doesn't let it just be that. Each "Nothing" is not just a sweet little nothing, but a something – something felt and pondered and realised. "Soon enough", said the green creature, soon enough "you will be quiet too".

By this point, all of our coordinates have gone haywire. You fear moving beyond the edges of the screen precisely because we have no confidence or familiarity in them as edges. Left might as well as be right, up as down. There were a lot of times playing *Middens*, where I simply sat locked in the pause menu thinking about quitting. Nothing (and "Nothings") has made me simply this uneasy. There was a moment when wandering through one of its many broken, glittering landscapes that I came across a shifting, rolling ball of colour. Firing on it initiated a turn-based battle. While my bullets sang punishingly into its body, the only attack it could offer was called "Death Poem" - this foetus-like Unicorn with watery eyes gave me only poems, lyricising that "if I had known I were already dead". A later battle with the half-transparent body of a leopard had a similar taste, where its primary attack was simply "pleading". "Please, I have family" it urged, offering not a lick of damage. Genie, who has a habit of popping up at such heart rending moments, suggested that I "get point blank to finish it". Everything in the world that is strange and unfamiliar has then something at its heart – a right to life, to beauty, to humanity. Genie – to whom you pledge your life and cooperation in the game's opening moments – is the shutting down of that. To complete the game, you must go against this beating, precious thing you have found in the Rift – life. It's only then that I realised how Genie – with its startling white eye and red lips – could in fact lick your fingertips while you hold it, the revolver. This is perhaps the most jarringly unsettling realisation of all.

While *Middens* could lead you into thinking that it is merely "art for art's sake", there's undeniably something more pressing, more compelling going on underneath (and within) its surface. Certainly, it is fine and interesting to look at – but it's also an experience, a reflection. A game that does everything it needs to do as a game (as a formula, through its mechanics) but keeps our minds whirring and whistling beyond that. To shuttle us into the unfamiliar spaces occupied in the reality of the lives of routine things – as Shklovsky would have it. It urges us to realise the complicity and implication of violence, of dealing death. To make us consider the assumptions and faults and peculiarities of the day-to-day, the "normal" games we play – the games where we stop noticing the fact that we kill and ruin whole worlds as if it were nothing, where such acts become simply part of the furniture. *Middens* doesn't let itself become furniture. It bites – no, it *licks* – back.

Written by Owen Vince, and edited by Zolani Stewart.

Emilie Reed

INTO THE DIVE

2

I admit to being a complete, utter scaredy-cat when it comes to horror films. Trying to hide this fact would only lead to eventual humiliation. No matter how much I prepare myself for the inevitable gore, jump-scares, and that uncanny brand of disgust associated with the not-quite-human, I spend most of the film feeling tense and peeking from behind my fingers. Even though I later assure myself that everything I saw was fictional, the situation usually concludes with me in bed a few hours later, trying to sleep with the lights on and jumping at every unusual noise. I always find myself wondering why. The horror genre's effectiveness seems not to lie in consistently shocking and surprising the audience, but playing to their expectations.

The scene from a film that I find most illustrative of this point is the diner scene from David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive (2001)*. It deconstructs the process that ties expectation into horror by having Dan, who has met a friend for breakfast at a diner called 'Winkie's,' tell this friend about a dream he had which took place in the diner.

DAN: Well ... it's the second one I've had, but they were both the same... ...they start out that I'm in here but it's not day or night. It's kinda half night, but it looks just like this except for the light, but I'm scared like I can't tell ya. Of all people you're standing right over there by that counter. You're in both dreams and you're scared. I get even more frightened when I see how afraid you are and then I realize what it is - there's a man...in back of this place. He's the one ... he's the one that's doing it. I can see him through the wall. I can see his face and I hope I never see that face ever outside a dream.

The retelling of the dream in painfully slow detail mir-

rors the deliberate gradual pan of the camera, as Dan and his friend decide to go behind the diner and investigate the area where the frightening man had appeared in Dan's dream.

'*Dan begins to sweat the nearer he gets to the rear corner of the building. Red bricks glide by slowly. [...] the corner is coming closer - the corner is now very close. Suddenly a man - a face ... a face dark and bum-like- moves quickly out from behind the corner and stops - freezes - staring into Dan's eyes. Dan lurches back. All his breath is suddenly gone. He falls back into Herb who tries to catch him as he's falling. Dan hits the ground unable to breathe - his eyes wide with horror. Herb looks up - the man is gone.*

Of course, the terrifying man from the dream is there. He is in the real world now, instead of only existing in Dan's dreams. Dan's dialogue with Herb makes the purpose and the outcome of the scene explicit, and the man does not attack or even react to Dan's terrified response. His expected presence is the entire horror content of the scene.

So why is it scary? Why do I see this strange, muddy man with a crooked nose peeping out from behind a dumpster as one of the most disturbing film scenes, in a world of high-definition gore and sophisticated CG monsters? Why was I so afraid of something I could only expect to happen? It's a question that is also pertinent to a particular genre of freeware games: The RPGMaker horror game.

* * *

RPGMaker is a brand of prefab engines created mainly to provide a visual and accessible way of making traditional, turn-based RPGs. The resources that come with the engine include generic characters (swordsman, healer, rogue, mage, among others), monsters to battle, and chipsets for building the basic environments of a traditional RPG. The intended use of RPGMaker is to allow amateurs and lovers of the RPG genre to make their own game, with type-characters exploring environments and battling monsters amidst the typical backdrops of "castle," "village," "world map," "dungeon," "ice dungeon," "fire dungeon," and so on. The built in assets and the turn based, random encounter system explicitly recall the style of popular 2-D RPGs, such as the early installments of the Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest series from the 1990s. More recent versions of the program, like RPGMaker XP and VXAce, as well as alternative, similar products, such as Wolf RPG Editor have improved resolution, graphics capabilities, and UI elements, but the dominant aesthetic in the RPGMaker community is the 16-bit look and feel that the RPGMaker 2003 version allowed for.

Most large studio, commercial horror games as we know them today, like the Resident Evil, Dead Space, and Silent Hill series, have a distinct focus in their development on creating reactive, realistic 3D environments populated by sophisticated, subtle noises and crusted with convincing grime textures. The enemies, usually monsters, are rendered with care to trigger the same responses to realistic gore and body horror one may experience watching a live-action horror film. The enemies and other dangers encountered are very real threats to the player, leading to an often lovingly rendered, gruesome demise if you're not careful. The technical skill and production budgets required to create these experiences are usually well out of the reach of solitary

indie, freeware and experimental game creators.

Many genres of indie production attempt to emulate the work of big studios as closely as possible, in terms of graphics, environments, and the various tests of mental and motor skill followed by a feeling of accomplishment each genre offers. But a significant subset of horror indies seem to be taking the opposite approach. A 16-bit pixilation and top-down viewpoint creates a different relationship between the player and the action than over-the-shoulder or first-person renderings common in big-budget horror titles. RPGMaker horror games also reject typical challenge structures that often act as opportunities to display skill. Using a prefab engine that's not even intended for the main action elements of most horror games, like real-time combat with monsters, solving puzzles, or chase sequences, creates a different progression of action and a different skillset required to engage with these games.

Many RPGM Horror games do fail to be scary on a basic level, and are panned by fans and LPers who are looking for something thrilling. However, many do succeed, and a lively community making fanart, Let's Plays, and derivative games has grown around them.

These derivative games, also made by individual, amateur designers and often one of the first games they make, do little to change the basic dynamics and even appearance of the original, and yet they are sought out, created, shared, and can become sub-fandoms within the fandom surrounding the original game. There's something deeply appealing about the aesthetic of pixelized horror, and the ease of manipulating and creating one's own take on the source game to these communities. It drives fans and members of the community to seek out and play any game they can get to work on their personal computers, and eventually make and release their own game, with only a few minor tweaks. A look at the wiki for a frequently co-opted game, *Ao Oni*, shows many games considered to be competent titles that stand on their own, and even more that are direct copies, jokes, and the unfortunately glitched. Additionally, many games don't cite themselves as successors to *Yume Nikki* or *Ao Oni*, but show their influence through a similar emphasis on chase and exploration.

* * *

Exploration and chase are two main elements used by many RPGMaker horror games. While many have small puzzles, like finding a code or key to open a locked door, these puzzles are solved by exploring environments, or finding and observing environmental clues, not manipulating the environment itself or completing a series of tasks. Likewise, if combat is an option (and it is in very few of these games), your character's ability to fight is overshadowed by the fact that avoiding or fleeing from enemies is always a better option. Exploration and chase also depend on cleverly stimulating and playing with the player's feelings of anticipation. We are driven to explore Madotsuki's disjointed and macabre dreams in *Yume Nikki* because we anticipate the novelty of new environments, which often appear in the form of sudden, unexplained changes of sound, atmosphere, and color palette. The desire to create a narrative connecting all of these strange and disparate placesleads players to reflect on their experiences in Madostuki's eerie dreamscape long after they

have explored most of the game. Discussion boards attempting to pull together a legible plot from the disturbing and disconnected imagery of the dreamworld create backstories for Madotsuki, often more grotesque than the disembodied heads and limbs her sprite walks by during the game. Along with fan games, this speculation shows the community's drive to get even more chills out of the source material, by creating their own systems of signs and meanings to explore, drawn from the images in the game, which rarely betray specific meaning or intent.

In *Ao Oni*, we anticipate that the monster could appear at any time, and each room the characters move through takes them closer to the next encounter with the Oni, because it appears as part of narrative events, but also at random after a certain amount of time. Even if the player is not directly encountering something on the screen which evokes horror, the interior of these cursed mansions are often unnervingly quaint. The stock RPGMaker tilesets imply environments that are typical and expected, but playing with the knowledge that these settings are part of a horror game gives these typical 16-bit interiors a sinister feel. Despite the peaceful interior, knowing that we are playing an *Ao Oni* game, or even a game like *Paranoiac* or *The Crooked Man*, makes a familiar environment nerve-wracking. The nervous excitement of anticipation, combined with an incongruous presentation and accelerating, creepy music, primes the eventual scare of the monster's appearance to be even more pronounced. Perhaps this explains why playing, creating and sharing these games are such social experiences. Prolific LPers play through an ever-growing library of RPGMaker horror titles, showing no sign of growing bored at the abundance of amateur games made in the style of *Ao Oni* or *Yume Nikki*. Some videos mostly consist of jabs at how unsuccessful a copy the game is, but the most entertaining videos that draw a large amount of comments are ones where the LPer is frequently startled, jumping and screaming, which leads to comments like "11:40 made me jump too". "Scream montages," which cut down several long LP videos to only include the scariest moments, are also popular.

The threads of anticipation and sociality, which intensify the emotional responses the player has to the game, are embedded in the creation of games, how they are disseminated, played and discussed over the internet, and the larger fan culture surrounding RPGMaker horror. The original games are effective horror because they prime the player's sense of anticipation. Further, the games created in response to these originals use the same patterns of exploration, along with unexpected juxtapositions between their innocent settings and terrifying subtext. This utilizes the anticipated setup the players are already familiar with but with the promise of something new. Of course, the standards and expectations for fan games are even higher, because of the implicit promise of something new that builds on the original. The repetition of these familiar structures can be repetitive and predictable, but when they succeed, they can be even more effective in creating a horror experience. Reinterpretations can develop narrative elements, add new characters and permutations of monsters, but when you strip them down to bare mechanics and systems, little changes. Players go in already nervous, expecting the scares from the original game, but the promise of a few twists makes the familiar even more ominous.

The logic of AAA horror seems to be that the more realistic the horror elements are, the more effective the game will be at scaring the player. There are also high stakes for successfully navigating challenges of mental and motor skill that can make players nervous and jumpy. RPGMaker horror games, because to the standard uses and limitations of the engine, will usually allow the player to save anywhere. And aside from a little blood splatter in games like *The Witch's House*, your character's death is usually denoted with a fade-in Game Over screen over any sort of disembowelment. So if the graphics aren't realistic and the stakes aren't that high, why are these games scary enough in the first place that such a large and productive fan community rally around them?

Much of the horror of exploration games like *Yume Nikki* come from the lack of a particular plot, exposition, or even clear relationships between the variety of environments, sounds, and characters. Take what is one of the most well-known scares from the game: Uboa. This creature, whose name only comes from digging into the RTP files and finding the name of its image, has been described as blob, horror mask, decapitated head, and even a silhouetted reputation of the *mons pubis*. Uboa has approximately a 1:64 chance of appearing if Madotsuki turns off the lights in a lonely house on the edge of a swampy pastel world. The sweet music and the plain looking girl in the room are followed by an ominous drone sound and, then, Uboa. The door no longer opens. None of the "effects" you've collected make any sense of the situation. The only way out is to force yourself awake, or to touch Uboa, which causes it to "contort" its "face" (who knows, really) and Madotsuki is transported to an endless, sludgy, opaque white ocean, with a gigantic monster looming stationary in the background. Here, then, the only option is to wake yourself up.

Until you reach the ending, there is no "game over" in *Yume Nikki*. At worst, you will be captured by strange bird-faced girls and put into a strange, dead end room similar to the one triggering Uboa's event, but you can easily wake Madotsuki up and enter the dream again, continuing to explore with no loss of items or progress. The only exception is a scene commonly referred to by fans as "face," which causes Madotsuki to wake immediately after seeing it, as if jolted awake by a truly bad nightmare. That the situation is so closed to interpretation or understanding is often more unsettling than a simple jump scare or a spray of gore. And what is that black and white cluster of pixels called "Uboa" anyway? Like a Rorschach blot, what people see in Uboa might be a hint at what sort of horror story they want from the game.

The titular Oni of the *Ao Oni* games is not quite as abstract in form, and his function is pretty clear. He appears suddenly, chases you, and gradually picks off your friends, either eating them or turning them into Oni versions of themselves, which will also chase you. If an Oni touches you, it's game over, and you reload the last save. The Oni are all light blue, with tiny bodies and a slightly distorted photo of a face for a head, with enlarged eyes and a strange grin, seating them right on the line between ugly-cute and uncanny. While the Oni's actions are fairly simple, no backstory is ever given as to where it came from or why it exists. Fan games have tried to fill the gap, often with scientific or

medical experiments gone awry, but there is little that hints to this interpretation in the game.

Ao Oni also resists any sort of explicit meaning or reasoning within the plot. The reason you and your friends end up in the house are arbitrary, and the Oni is there because there's something to chase and eat, apparently. This neglect of typical narrative approaches to context and resolution creates a feeling of unease that goes beyond the point Madotsuki wakes up from her dream or when Hiroshi escapes from the Oni's mansion. Instead of relief, we are only left with a feeling of dread at the lack of contextualization and resolution. The ending of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*, for example is almost completely inexplicable in the context of what happens during most of the movie. While characters consider the idea of birds seeking revenge for ecological damage or their attacks being a result of divine wrath, the truth is never nailed down. At least in horror movies with serial killers out for revenge or moral punishment, we can see ourselves apart from the victims!

* * *

The culture of evaluation surrounding games is often criticized for being too easily taken with technological developments in graphics quality and system features, rather than being concerned with the judicious and innovative use of the tech. As the technological gap between what is available for home use and for professional use narrows, indie and experimental games risk feeling the pressure to look and run more like their AAA counterparts. Recent horror titles from major publishers clearly skew in favor of prioritizing complex action sequences, realistic gore and monsters, and fast paced, high-stakes action sequences to ramp up tension. RPGMaker horror titles and the productive communities surrounding them represent an important strategy of resistance to this trend.

These games focus on the mechanics of exploration and chase as their primary means. As opposed to combat systems, unpredictable exploration as seen in *Yume Nikki* and random chase events as seen in *Ao Oni* rob the player of agency and power, and put them in a helpless situation where meaning is often unclear or not acknowledged. This creates an anxiety that, while not unique to RPGMaker style horror games, is a forte they represent in spite of the graphical and mechanical limitations of the RPGMaker program. This approach is atypical when compared to a more mainstream approach to horror games, and is a rejection of the expectations of the player's power and the continuous narrative that have become an unquestioned norm in mainstream gaming.

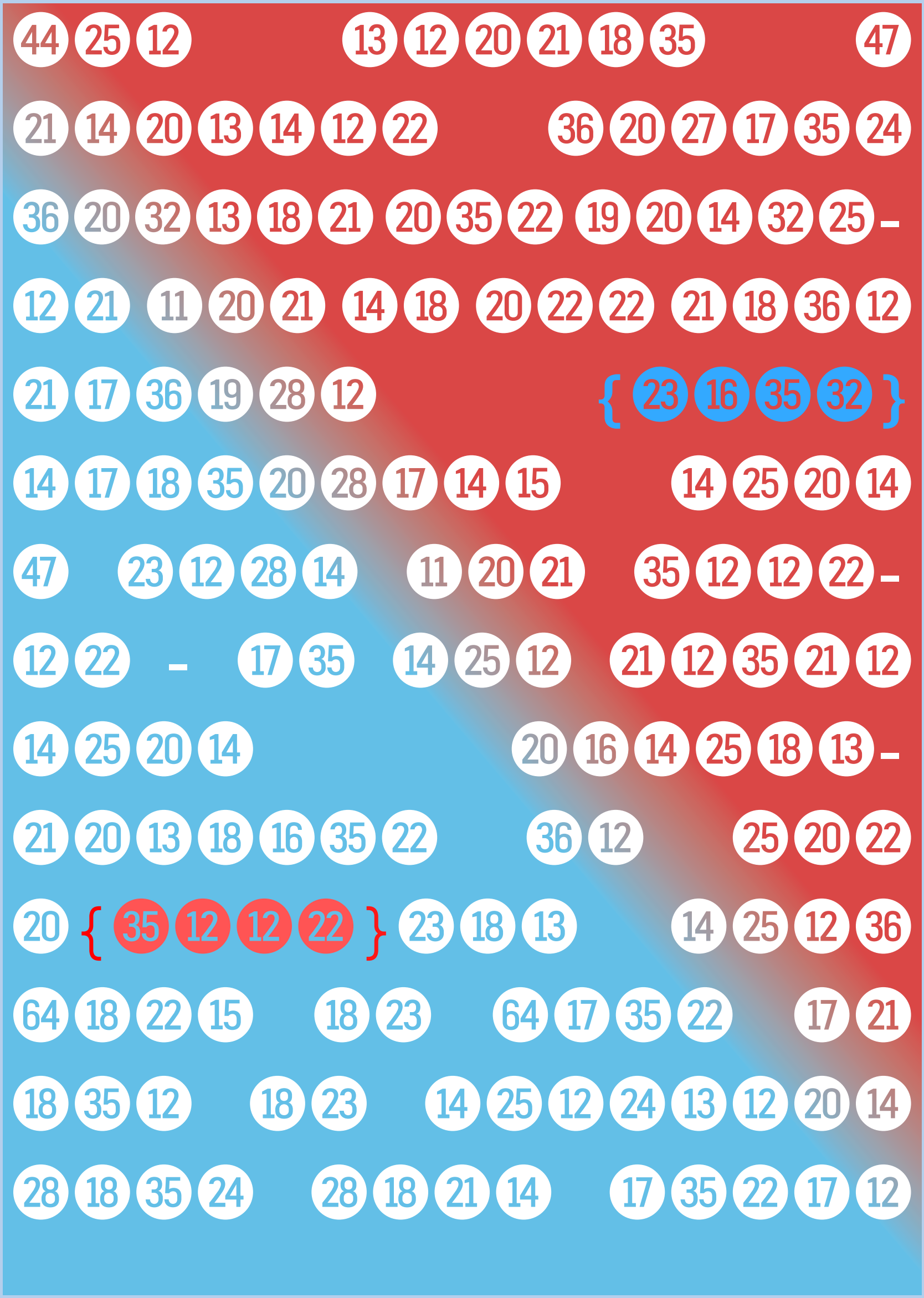
While Uboa is initially a bit of a jump scare, its inexplicability often makes the player uneasy long after its initial sudden appearance, and while the Oni's appearance is equal parts goofy and unsettling, his random functioning and unexplained origin or motivation make him a constant, looming threat. We feel both the anxiety of expectation and anticipation, as well as the unease when, within this anticipated event, we find no meaning.

The fangames surrounding these works can attempt to make sense of the original games, by developing the player's own personal interpretations of the RPGMaker horror game into a story that builds on the established setting.

The anticipation is the main attraction of these games, the fans know what frights are likely lying in wait for them. RPGMaker horror fans are taking the long walk out behind Winkie's, willingly and en masse, in a desire to replicate and elaborate a fear they've already experienced. If their attempts are any good, the fright will be just as good as before, even if the player knows exactly what will happen.

Written by Emilie Reed, and edited by Zolani Stewart.

Inserting the Code



JOHN BRINDLE

3

Body of Bind is one of the great long lost videogames. No copies are available anywhere online. The game itself is un-Googleable; only two people claim to have played it. And the premise is bizarre: a JRPG where the protagonist replaces her limbs with other people's, upgrading her body but suffering social stigma if she does it 'wrong'. Barely remembered from a time when creators were far less able to find an audience, it is a game whose increasingly scrappy design comes by its last maps to resemble a scream of frustration and despair.

These days developers are more connected than ever. We've heard a lot about how tools like Twine and Twitter let them create quickly and share widely. What's less talked about is the culture of mutual aid which sees Twine users emulating the protagonist in *Body of Bind*. From the hidden engineers who forge new tools to the artists who combine each other's work in ways nobody expected, ideas pulse freely through the shared organs of the community, and fingerprints mingle on every mongrel game. This article looks at five incredible Twine games whose authors say they could never have done it alone – not without other people giving their code away for free.

"The girls' options at my school included food technology and graphics," says Mary Hamilton, a journalist for The Guardian in Australia, "and the boys got IT and electronics. I fought like hell to be allowed to cross over curricula, but I lost." Artist Maddox Pratt says they are "very much an outsider" who "didn't even own a computer until high school", while Twine developer Alice Maz tells me: "Javascript syntax is a mystery." Laura Michet, a Bay Area quest writer, "basically can't code"; all the html she knows is from dicking around with Neopets in middle school. Even Merritt Kopas, who made graphical games like *LIM* and *TERF War*,

says she would have been lost without help.

The code they used is mostly the work of one guy: Leon Arnott. Most people don't know him, but he's ubiquitous in the Twine scene. Countless authors acknowledge his help, not just for creating programming shortcuts, but for actively answering questions and solving problems. He is the Hephaestus to Twine makers' Olympians, Q to their James Bond, the Doc Brown to their Marty McFly.

"The reason I started making macros and patches was to add some simple functionality that I felt was needed - in the sense that authors around me had a need for them," says Leon, a C++ and Java veteran for whom Twine's native Javascript is a deeply flawed object of "morbid curiosity." His first proper macro was inspired by Porpentine's *The Sky In The Room* – specifically, this passage, which appears to expand with each click but is actually three separate pages. The idea was simple, but Twine made it complicated, and Leon saw how he could make execution easier for others. "Since then, I've been continuing to create macros that, in my mind, fulfil authors' needs - that allow authors to use what their designs actually call for, without having to approximate or jury-rig."

So what is a macro? Twine originally grew out of a wiki-making app called TiddlyWiki. Users place 'pages' onto an empty space, fill them with text, and link them to each other through clickable words. This makes Twine simple to use, but inflexible. In traditional design terms, it has only one mechanic – moving to another page – and large projects can require dozens of nearly-identical passages. "When I was really young I used to think that games I played stored every possible position and displayed them when they were required," says Whisperbat, a lanky Twine artist and ardent entophiliac whose breakthrough game, *Candy Ant Princess*, made heavy use of Arnott's macros. "Mario jumping here. Mario jumping with a Koopa just there. Without macros, working in Twine on more complex stuff can become quite similar to that."

Macros dodge that problem. They are democratising shortcuts which let you drop someone else's ready-made code into your Twine game and access it through simple tags like <<insert>> or <<replace>>. Some simply add colour, sound, or even video, but others unlock new mechanics– whole new ways of interacting with the text. Where normally clicking a link will whisk you away to another page, macros create links that disappear when clicked or cycle seamlessly between options, that transform into new words or suddenly expand into hidden paragraphs.

Candy Ant Princess is a kind of empire-building children's tale made possible by Arnott's Cycling Link macro. The player is an ant queen who chooses from a range of delicious chocolate pincers and gumdrop eyeballs then strikes out to found a nest of her own. Cycling links allow her to twiddle between reversible choices while staying on the same page, while the writer decides their number and nature and attaches them to back-end values that affect the later game. For example, after landing at your new colony site, your eggs hatch, and your daughters cry "what are we?" With a click, "you are Candy Ants" becomes "you are my minions" or "you are my daughters"; their purpose cycles between "To care for one another", "to cater to my every whim", and "to conquer

and destroy!" For Whisperbat, the cycling link tool was "immensely liberating": it removed the slog from otherwise gruelling projects while "radically expanding" the capacity of the engine.

CAP inspired other writers in turn, and one was Alice Maz. *Breakfast On A Wagon With Your Partner*, the first game she finished after ten years of failed attempts, also relies on cycling links. "A lot of the aesthetic decisions given to the player in *Candy Ant Princess* are the sorts of things that would be relegated to a customization section in a corporate-produced game," says Maz. "But *Cap* uses cycling link to place everything in the same space, obscuring what inputs the game will respond to." This "coyness", she says, means choices the game responds to can surprise you, and choices it doesn't aren't devalued: "I squealed with joy when it told me I had raised my ant children to be 'loving and fearsome'."

Maz's *Breakfast* tells a story of two wanderers in a western-flecked wasteland having a conversation which might define their lives. When your partner 'Sam' proposes, you both settle down in the next village. With conventional dialogue choice, you would see all of the protagonist's possible responses in front of you; instead, you click through, stumbling and searching for the right words. Because each cycle option can set a variable, how you choose to describe the town defines what you and Sam are there to do (the sentence runs: "[Real nice place/Pretty unremarkable/Christ, what a dump]. Just hope [they need supplies/they need doctors/we don't get busted]"). If you refuse to click any of the descriptions, Sam senses that you're going through the motions. Cycling link, says Maz, "let the tools conform to my writing, rather than forcing me to write around the limit of the tools."

These games show how macros can add new rhetorics to the Twine arsenal. In an engine with only one default input but unlimited graphical capability, they thread new modes of tactility through the whole story or shove them right in your face at unexpected moments.

Merrit Kopas' *Conversations With My Mother* combines macros to present an atemporal portrait of a relationship in flux. Each playthrough resembles a letter written to Kopas by her mother with mundane, formulaic sentences like "well, anyway, I'll let you go" cascading down the screen. Every few sentences you can change a word or two, after which the game glides seamlessly on to the next stage. When it's over, your choices solidify into a document, which Twitter citations place on a long timeline between Kopas coming out as trans to her mother and her mother actually accepting her as a woman. To do this the game melds Leon's cycling links with his 'insert' macro, widely used in games like Cara Ellison's *Sacrifice* and Kopas' own *Consensual Torture Simulator* to create long strings of expanding text. While the frictionless ease of cycling links can make each choice seem inconsequential, your clicks reenact the moment where a word struck like a blow or when for the first time it warmed like sunlight.

"I actually started the game right after I got off the phone," says Kopas. "I think I made it all that afternoon. We were having these structurally very similar conversations that nonetheless left me feeling totally different depending on individual word choices. It was important to me to convey the uncertainty or stumbling that can

come with switching these little words when you've been saying different ones your whole life – not to excuse mistakes or difficulties, but just to honestly depict what I saw happening."

That's something macros help with. Twine is an engine lauded, even pigeonholed, for its ability to give flesh to subjective experiences, and one reason for that is how easy it is to pick up. Macros make that easier still, but their added expressive potential also helps out those who don't feel the story they want to tell would work as a CYOA. This was the case for Laura Michet, who used a cousin of the insert macro called 'replace' to create deceptively simple fields of text which expand and unravel with every click. The game, *Swan Hill*, is an unravelling disenchant-em-up about knowledge, its price, and who it serves.

"I grew up in a hyper-conservative environment where even the liberals I knew were 90% well-off land-owning church-going heterosexual white people," says Michet."When I went to college I met a ton of gay and lesbian and trans kids and a lot of non-white kids, and kids who had grown up in poverty or been marginalized on reservations. They changed my outlook on life. I remember going home and feeling this creeping horror that I no longer had anything in common with my family and we were now, like, space aliens to one another."

Swan Hill concerns a magician returning to his rural home after years away. Links are colour-coded with another Arnott macro: Orange links take you forward in the story, but black links, when clicked, disappear, morphing into new thoughts, longer paragraphs, and sometimes revealing new options. Michet had the idea at a loud, disorienting party which she realised she could replicate with the macro. "Replace allowed me to make a passage that reacts confusingly to player interaction, becoming more and more visually overwhelming and syntactically complex," she says.

That moment became a central scene, but Michet found the real use of replace in replicating the protagonist's cynical thought process. Serene simplicities are darkened, complicated, or corrupted if you choose to delve into them, which establishes a mechanical base for the game's themes. . You can always click to learn more, but the decision is irreversible, and you might not like its results.

When these different macros are combined, they can produce beautiful, tactile, versatile experiences. Two such games are Mary Hamilton's Detritus and Maddox Pratt's *Anhedonia*. The former is a kind of macro compendium which uses five different mechanics to take you through a life, defined as the possessions you take with you or leave behind when you move to a new city. The latter, a rich audiovisual poem about the experience of depression, echoes with dripping water and ticking clocks, shot through with non-reversible cycling links which click to their last options and then stick.

Both are personal stories. Pratt says their game was mostly written during an anxiety attack and edited afterwards. "The macros were chosen largely as an attempt to mimic some of my internal thought processes when feeling depressed and anxious," they say. By contrast Hamilton started off wanting to make a game that would teach her how to use Twine, building a five-act structure that could test

each macro in turn. But she says: "I had a very strong goal with *Detritus*, which was about getting people to experience this quite particular and peculiar feeling, to get attached to stuff and then finally at the end have to get rid of it all."

To do that, she used Arnott's timed replace macro, which lets sentences appear or transform on their own when a timer runs down. In one key sequence, the player has to pack up everything she can and move out of her boyfriend's house before he comes back. She's faced with a long list of links and asked to decide between them – but every few seconds, a link fades, the options decreasing by the minute. "I wanted something that took the choices out of the player's hands," says Hamilton about the replace macro. "Suddenly everything you've done up to that point is under threat. It's possible to leave that scene with absolutely nothing, if you want – or if you're not paying attention."

Pratt, meanwhile – an artist who makes books which combine words with visuals – uses timed replaces to control pace, almost like line breaks or punctuation. In *Anhedonia*, Words hang for several seconds before the next ones turn up. Pratt's other game, *Negative Space*, is also obsessed with making the player wait. "This is intentional," Pratt agrees. "I have a bad habit of wanting to click through things as quickly as possible, and I don't let myself linger on a thought the way I do when reading text on a physical page. You could say I turned a personal issue into a design choice." One passage in *Negative Space* lets the word "tick" repeat itself across the screen, once per second, for minutes on end, only the last one clickable. Those ticks, Pratt says, were done with the knowledge that most people would be wishing they could skip them. "I find them really uncomfortable and I had to deal with sitting through them a lot when I was making the piece, but the discomfort, the tension, the denial of the ability to move forward was really important to me."

None of these works would have been possible without macros. "The two pieces I've made that make heavy use of macros probably would not exist if the macros didn't," says Kopas. Pratt didn't own a computer until they were in high school, has no experience of programming, and is "very much coming to this as an outsider." Alice Maz says: "Javascript syntax is a mystery to me, and I don't understand how to make JS talk to Twine. Even if I'd decided I wanted to learn, I feel like the amount of time and work I'd need to invest before I could actually do what I wanted to do would have led me to quit in frustration." Even Hamilton, who coded for design projects at university and has scripted for data journalism since then, says she'd have no chance. "My skills are such that if something already exists, I can modify it – just about, probably," she says. "Creating something like these from first principles is a long way beyond me."

That's not to say the use of macros is without risks. Kopas especially is wary of the bar being set ever-higher for formal experimentation in Twine. She's spoken to people who feel they have to do some coding to make their games attention-grabbing, and wonders if the accessibility of macros has created the impression that they're obligatory. Whisperbat agrees – she didn't use any macros in her game *My Favourite Island*, which she sees as her best work. Michet had to scale back her game's complexity, saying some passages suffer if the reader is forced to

"check in" too often. "I ended up removing replace from many passages where the events taking place were contemplative or slow," she says.

Still, every developer interviewed said macros are vital to the Twine community. "Twine is a wonderful game engine, but once you start poking around in the guts you realise that a lot of things are wired up oddly to make it as accessible as possible," says Whisperbat. "Without macros many games would simply be impossible to make, and others would require ridiculous amounts of meticulous tree-building and copy-pasting to get to work." For Maz and Hamilton, they're a tool of authorship, bridging the gap between vision and reality – and dodging the whole question of being too broke for the software that you need. "Time is a valuable resource, especially for folks in marginalised groups," says Maz. "It's so empowering that there's this library of commands and features that are not required reading to get started, but they're there, and they're easy to understand." Kopas and Pratt, meanwhile, emphasise the "wider field of possibility" they open up, and the way they inspire people to think of Twine differently. "The creative process for me exists in this place that is largely prior to language," says Pratt. "There are times in which it feels as though the thing that is demanding to be said is felt as a movement, a sound, a groan."

So many of the games in this article sprung directly from someone else's work. Whisperbat was inspired by Porpentine, Maz inspired by Whisperbat, and Kopas inspired by both. Michet built directly on other replace-based works while Kopas helped Pratt with their coding. Hamilton is now building a game called *Horde*, which came from realising what could be done with replace. Almost everyone cited Porpentine as an inspiration, and the feeling is mutual – she rarely makes a game without a list of acknowledgements. For Kopas, this culture of mutual aid is a natural fit for Twine development. "I think it would be hard to disentangle Twine (I'm sorry) from the networks of people using it on Twitter, where knowledge is circulated about the program's quirks," says Kopas. "There certainly doesn't seem to be the same guardedness around Twine development that exists in other areas of games, probably in part because the reigning myths – I am going to make my first game and get rich – aren't in play."

And none of the authors are shy about their debt to Leon Arnott. "Let's not kid ourselves," says Hamilton. "I feel like 75% of the time we say 'third-party macros,' we really mean 'Leon Arnott's macros. I know basically zero things about him, but it's clear his work is a big reason we can do what we do." *Howling Dogs* maker Porpentine, who once referred to him jokingly as 'Leon Arnott Da Vinci', told me: "His work and the work of other macro authors has been invaluable to the Twine movement and to my own success as a hypertext designer." For Kopas and Pratt, his easygoing approachability is as important as his technical skill. Leon, says Kopas, knows how to talk to people who have never coded before. "He has been very patient with me and my mistakes," says Pratt. "This is a great gift to people like myself."

If you're getting to grips with Twine and don't know where to turn, everyone says the same two things. First, go to Porpentine's website and browse her Twine Resources page. Collected there are pages upon pages of macros, guides,

and free source code. Her seminal essay, 'Creation under capitalism and the Twine revolution', is a how-to guide, a history of hypertext and an artistic manifesto all in one. Second, visit Leon's blog on Glorious Trainwrecks and pillage it for anything you can use. If those fail you, everyone I spoke to for this feature said they would be happy to help anyone who got in touch.

As for Leon himself, he is content to keep tinkering. In fact, he's currently working with Twine founder Chris Kilnas on an html5-powered sequel, the portentious-sounding Twine 2. The new engine will incorporate a bunch of Arnott macros, making them accessible by default to anyone who uses them. Some, like Whisperbat, are going beyond macros, delving into Javascript to add their own code. For those who take this path, Leon's advice is encouraging – sort of. He mostly got into the language through JS sage Douglas Crockford, who "fiercely lambasts" it but relates the "good news" that it can still be saved with "rigid discipline."

Leon's response to this is typically dry: "I have no particular opinion on this sentiment," he says, "except to remark that casting Javascript as an underdog strikes me as an excellent way of framing it as palatable to a new learner without having to deny or forgive its flaws." So here's to the underdogs. If you ever need a hand, their doors are open.

Written by John Brindle, and edited by Alex Pieschel.

ORIENTATION AND BALANCE

JOHN KILHEFNER

4

The world of *Soundodger* (2013) -- as described by creator Michael Molinari -- is a fusion of his loves: from shooters and music games to the act of dancing itself. *Soundodger* is violently beautiful: it's the acid trip you've always wanted, orchestrated by Molinari to impart "the sensation of moving through music." The game is simple: you control a small, circular object inside of a larger flat circle. Music plays and tetrahedrons file out in choreographed spurts. The bullet-ish shapes are the visual representations of sounds from the music, which you dodge in subservience to the music, bending between rows of weaponized sounds. The tracks curated for *Soundodger* run concurrent with Molinari's vision, persisting it. The music creates expectation, influencing interaction with the both the real and virtual worlds. Music produces emotion, which acts as a cathartic vessel for the player. The visuals react to the music as representative samples of the dominant motifs. When a low note is played, you can expect a barrage of tetrahedrons, thick like molasses. Or perhaps a cycloid of spheres will infect the screen. Depending on the context, the physical response of the player is altered. It's a lateral-thinking puzzler tasking you with avoidance of the sounds thrown at you.

Soundodger's controls are three fold: keyboard, touchpad or mouse. My play style is informed by music type and the sensation the music imparts. Worlds with sustained notes, for instance, are usually more "flowery" in melody, so I choose the mouse. Worlds with furious, uptempo stylings lend themselves better to the precision of the keypad. Then there's the dubstep. Bass heavy tracks are best experienced with a finger on the pulse of the game -- the touchpad. This is your proprioceptive system at work -- the sensation of stimuli within your body, relat-

ing to your body's position -- both in the physical world and the virtual world of *Soundodger*.

Soundodger sucks you into its world through an intensely sensory experience. The loaded descriptor "immersive" does nothing for what the game actually does to the player, or rather, what the player does to the game. Robert Yang at the Radiator Blog looks to Ian Bogost, who made pointed observations of Molleindustria's need for an artist statement next to its games to avoid misinterpretation. Though, just as Indie Megacast host Christopher Floyd related *Soundodger* to his experience ballroom dancing, *Soundodger* is seen in terms of individual personal experience. Yang replaces "immersion" with the term "focalization," which refers to a point of view, useful for describing films where the narrator is the camera. More importantly, focalization refers to consciousness and how attention is focused.

Growing up, I tried on more than one occasion to experience videogames with just my mind. I would imagine, for instance, the feeling of holding a Game Gear in my hand and the visual stimulus of light from the flashing screen as I played Sonic The Hedgehog (1991). I saw no reason why I couldn't. I knew its levels by heart. I could just as easily recreate the experience in my mind. Brendan Keogh's musings on immersion are decidedly more grounded in reality:

"...we could not feel immersion without those physical, formal elements we try not to think about. Without a controller in our lap or a television screen before us or, perhaps, an Oculus Rift strapped to our face, we could not pretend we are immersed (and make no mistake, to be immersed is to pretend, to make believe). Virtual worlds only exist in the coming together of very non-virtual elements of videogame play."

Keogh says immersion is a myth, that of course these worlds we visit are not real. We want so badly to be immersed that we mentally construct entire walls in our mind to replace those removed from polygonal houses for the sake of player vision. The fallacy of immersion is that the more games box-up immersion by passing off production value as realism, the more our reality breaks the connection with the game. The main story mission of *Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes (2014)*, for example, strays from what made the original *Metal Gear Solid* (1998) great -- the flattening of form and content. *Ground Zeroes* is *Soundodger* gussied up in Ultra Slow Motion with **Immersive!** stamped across shiny new polygons and Keifer Sutherlands. Realism falters, without the tongue-in-cheek commentary of earlier *MGS* games.

"Simple" games like *Soundodger* are devoid of explicit, prosaic narrative and avoid the immersion fallacy. Molinari's use of attention keeps the player present in the virtual world, while the use of orientation and balance affect the player in the real world. Without a plot, the combination of attention, orientation and balance impacts the player's perceptions of what is happening on-screen. The narrative is unique to each player. Narrative dissonance is inconsequential and non-existent. Try convincing yourself, however, you're still the Big Boss of all highly-trained tactical spies in the Metal Gear-verse after getting spotted five times trying to shimmy under a surveillance camera.

Yang's repackaging of immersion as focalization

comes at a price to those who want to believe immersive means realism. He states (drawing from Bogost) that games cannot communicate the complexity of arguments, but rather, rely on personal interpretation projected through play. "Games can't teach us anything beyond hand-eye coordination," he summarizes. "It is later reflection, outside of a game, when we realize what happened and teach ourselves."

Almost a year ago, I was part of a small group of journalists huddled in a cramped dark room for a showing of the Xbox One. A Microsoft tech took to the center of the room for a Kinect demonstration. Bobbing left and right, he dodged incoming missiles. He touched his hand to his head, activating a shield. "Fire missiles," he commanded his on-screen avatar. Like 3D, the need for physical motion to replace the virtual motion within the game is a marketing fallacy. Films are based on the idea of depth: they are not 2D, they are already perceived in three dimensions. Similarly, motion technology wants you to believe there's something missing from the dimension of the gaming experience. Videogames already have the parts needed to relay a sense of motion and to use that motion, not for marketing, but for narrative.

In the essay, "The Vestibular in Film: Orientation and Balance in Gus Van Sant's Cinema of Walking", author Luis Rocha Antunes analyzes how director Van Sant's unusual techniques affect a sense of balance and inform the character's identities. Balance is maintained by three senses: the vestibular system (motion, equilibrium, spatial orientation), sight, and our sense of touch. Sight and touch are familiar senses, but the vestibular acts as an extra sense, influencing the balance of the body, whether the body is physically in motion or stimulated through motion on-screen. Furthermore, a video essay by Ben Abraham, drawing from Richard Lemerchand's 2012 GDC talk, discusses how "overwhelming sensory inundation" can manipulate identity. For this to happen, the boundaries between media experience and "real" experience must be almost non-existent.

What does it mean for a videogame to manipulate identity with an absent narrative? Narrative, traditionally, is defined as having double temporality. This means that the story is told in two separate periods of time: the present time occupied by the narrator and the past time occupied by the story told by the narrator. *Soundodger* isn't of the narratological sense of having double temporality, but rather in the sense of holding a conversation, of a dance you are presently engaged in with the game. A story you tell yourself in the moment. You are threaded into the virtual world through a systemic use of attention: the flamboyant, illusive visuals and spacey sounds affect how we orient ourselves and our identities within the virtual space. Sound waves are somatosensory, meaning they are sensed through the entire body instead of at a localized point. According to Antunes, our bodies are manipulated by sound to the point it can alter our temperature, produce a galvanic response in our skin and aid the perception of spatial information:

"...the vestibular is not a metaphor nor the result of imagination, but part of our physiology – it has physical organs that give it a material existence – and it has the full range of elements associated with a sense, and not only as a neural function – it has receptors (the inner ear, the eyes and the limbs), it

has a nervous pathway that connects the periphery with the central nervous system, and specific brain areas attributed to its processing...we are capable of perceiving textures through sound and image, which also replace touch in the haptic recognition of objects (size and form). This is fundamental to providing a salient experience if we consider that the haptic helps us to map space; biases our memory and emotions; provides sensations of temperature, weight, pain, and body position; and is 'an active modality in which the perceiver seeks information from the world, by exploratory movements.'"

My relation to the world through spatial and visual cues are manifested through the proprioceptive senses. During certain moments of intensity, *Soundodger* feels like a first-person shooter. At other times it felt like I was within a platforming adventure. I danced on the edge of mountains, drifted down winding paths, and witnessed my own pleasure domes of Kubla Khan.

In film, Antunes ascribes the familiarity between the viewer, characters and location to the vestibular. Speaking about Gus Van Sant's Last Days (2005), Antunes states:

"This is when the vestibular becomes more than an experiential element and gains importance in the building of film aesthetics and story. At a purely perceptual level the vestibular is grounded in the plastic nature of our perception, namely our capacity to learn and form new brain connections. This is also the case with Last Days. Throughout the film we learn, together with the character, the right direction to take and how to explore reality – and we acquire empathy/sympathy toward Blake. This empathy does not come from a moral perspective (as frequently explored by cinema) communicated through the plot or from an emotional engagement, but derives from and is conveyed by the physical, vestibular, experience of his character."

In *Soundodger*, you always begin and end in the middle of nowhere. While you can technically "beat" the game by getting to 100 percent completion, the real test of the game is how well you can connect with its world. The path my mind and body travels on weaves in and out, over and through each other. The world of *Soundodger* is a flat world we look down upon. I find myself occupying both the viewer and actor positions; I am looking into a flat circle on a screen, interacting with it, and simultaneously inside of it by proxy. My physical experience is affected by the virtual experience. My body's position altered by vestibular and proprioceptive cues. The circle I control acts as my "weapon." I am the technician, employing the precision and foresight of an otherworldly viewer. While my body is not physically a part of the virtual world, its haptic response to the virtual is facilitated through a physical vestibular sense. The next time I play, I may not be in the middle of a field. I may find myself trapped in a dense rave, people swelling and pouring around me, jumping out of the way as intermittent gaps allow traffic to cut through my path. I'll keep an eye on the circle and center myself, feeling the familiar tug from the thread of *Soundodger*'s world.

Written by John Kilhefner, and edited by Zolani Stewart.

Form and its Discontents

Brendan Vance

5

Lately I've been worried about the content of videogames; more specifically, I've been having a hard time finding it. As a person who makes games in exchange for money content remains a *myst*erious, almost magical commodity in my life. I hear the word whispered around my office; sometimes I hear it sighed. I believe that players want it, but I don't know whether they receive it. I am trying to put it in my videogames, but I don't know whether I am succeeding. I believe I've found a problem with the way we consume videogames that stems from fundamental differences between more traditional forms of media and the procedural forms of videogames. I believe our anticipation of content wreaks havoc on the way we search for meaning in what we play; that, indeed, many of the things we play have no meaning at all.

I've been spending spare moments on my iPad with a pleasant distraction called *The Room 2*. The game consists of many puzzle boxes nested within one another such that solving one leads to a second and solving the second leads to a third. I feel a dull burst of anticipation each time I discover a new compartment hidden in plain sight along one of the box's faces. It's not that I care very much what I might find within: some cog, some gem, some lopsided metal widget meant to unlock yet another secret compartment holding yet another curious bauble. These artifacts evoke nothing, symbolize nothing, reveal no history and foreshadow no future. They might as well be blue key cards. Yet there always seems to be another one to find, and my brain always seems to want it. I press forward even as I chide myself for indulging such a useless impulse.

Soon I will reach the very centre of the very last box, and I am certain I will find nothing there worth having. (Per-

haps, as was the case with the game's predecessor, there will be a cheap placeholder advertisement for *The Room 3*). But then, is this not the case for nearly every videogame we play? It certainly is for the ones I make at my day job. As a developer I build puzzle box after puzzle box, yet I could not tell you what any of them are supposed to store. My employers speak of providing for our players valuable and important 'content', yet all we end up producing is more nested forms: New levels, new achievements, shiny new locks and exciting new flavours of key card. We layer them surreptitiously around a lifeless, empty centre hoping no one will notice. And for the most part, no one does. Videogames like these are forms all the way down, and though there is pleasure to be found in the descent I don't know that there is fulfilment.

This piece seeks to explain why so many of our games find themselves empty in the centre, and though it offers no concrete solutions I hope it will spur a conversation about what we should value in videogames and how we might rethink the way we make and play them in an effort to bring these values forward. We begin (as I feel all videogame conversations should) in early nineteenth century Germany, where the ancient dichotomy between container and content met one of its most brilliant thinkers.

Media theorists have long wrestled with the paradoxical notion that every work they study is simultaneously compositional and monolithic. Films, for example, are composed of both music and moving images; yet each film carries messages that are not reducible to the mere sum of their parts. To make media is to perform alchemy; the reagents, once combined, cannot be separated again. It is from this paradox that the terms 'form' and 'content' emerge. These words have a political history; they have meant different things in different times and places and have served alternately as tools of liberation and oppression. Broadly, however, they seek to resolve the apparent conflict between media as a container of many things and media as a singular artifact. *Form* is usually that which faces outward, like the physical characteristics of a work, while *content* is usually that which faces inward, like themes, concepts or ideals. The definitions I have found most enlightening come from a person named Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, whom I've heard is among the more important philosophers in all of European history. His thinking on the matter is complex and sparsely distributed, spanning numerous books as well as a series of lectures transcribed by one of his students. All of this is in German, and only some has been translated. To summarize, here is what *Encyclopaedia Britannica* has to say:

"Our sensuous appreciation of art concentrates upon the given "appearance"—the "form." It is this that holds our attention and that gives to the work of art its peculiar individuality. Because it addresses itself to our sensory appreciation, the work of art is essentially concrete, to be understood by an act of perception rather than by a process of discursive thought. At the same time, our understanding of the work of art is in part intellectual; we seek in it a conceptual content, which it presents to us in the form of an idea. One purpose of critical interpretation is to expound this idea in discursive form—to give the equivalent of the content of the work of art in another, nonsensuous idiom. But **criticism** *can never succeed in this task, for, by separating the content*

from the particular form, it abolishes its individuality."

If I may bastardize it just a little for the purposes of this piece, the Hegelian understanding goes that form is what a work physically **is** while content is what the work intellectually **means**. Form can be decomposed from film into image into colour into electromagnetic radiation. Content, however, is essentially alchemical. We cannot reverse engineer the process by which some leaden mixture of sound and image transforms into gold; we can only marvel at the result. Even though they address very different spheres of the human experience, Hegel claims that form and content are tightly coupled: A different form cannot possess the same content and the same content cannot reside in different forms. The best works of art, therefore, exhibit a unique and exquisite marriage of form to content, their outward characteristics harmonizing with their inward ones to resonate deep within us in a way we can never fully explain.

The manner in which we consume films tends to fall neatly along Hegelian lines. We judge that we have "seen" a film once we have watched it from beginning to end. We may not have thought very deeply about it; indeed, we may not have understood any of it. Yet so long as we have "sensuously appreciated" all of its images and sounds - so long as we have perceived the entirety of its form, irrespective of its content - we feel we have obtained a complete viewing.

Over the past century or so we have come to ritualize the experience of "seeing" a movie for the first time, in part through the observance of a strict spoiler code. Prior to our viewing, the code states, we may proclaim any detail of a film's form to be 'spoiler territory' and expect our friends to withhold the knowledge of this detail so we might receive it from the work itself. We then participate in the ritual of film watching, perhaps sitting quietly before a massive silver screen in a pitch dark cinema. When the screen goes dark and the speakers silent, having delivered us the form unspoiled, those of us who watched become free to collaborate on an understanding of the film's content (that is, the deeper meanings and ideas within the work) in any way we see fit. We talk with peers. We look up critical interpretations on the internet. We discuss. Whereas our acquisition of the form was personal and ritualistic, our acquisition of content involves a free-form, ever-evolving dialogue that grows wider and wider with each new avenue of critical thought. Have you ever known someone to be upset at you for revealing your theory about the hidden meaning behind *The Shining's* conspicuously-placed Calumet Baking Powder cans before this person had a chance to construct that reading on their own? I haven't. There is no such thing as a 'critical interpretation spoiler' because discussion is at the heart of interpretation. Content, in short, cannot be spoiled.

Spoiler culture serves the medium of film well because it keeps both sides of the form/content binary broadly accessible. By dividing spoiler territory along the fault of form and content we protect the spontaneous emotional responses many people value in their entertainment while maintaining a very low hurdle to clear (looking at a screen for two hours) before viewers can observe or contribute to the various sorts of critical discussion that together unearth a film's true artistic value (in

Hegel's view, the resonance of its marriage of form to content). The result is a vibrant, diverse community of filmgoers and a shared history.

The way we consume videogames does not fall so neatly along Hegelian lines, due in large part to the peculiar nature of their form. Where the form of a movie is singular (a finite, ordered sequence of images and soundwaves that can be witnessed in full over about two hours) the form of a videogame is procedural, which is to say 'defined by a set of rules'. Most videogames include interactive systems that permit an infinite set of possible paths through their structure. Most will proceed indefinitely unless the player, through a very specific sequence of decisions, brings about some ending. Even then videogame 'endings' are nothing more than narrative devices, arbitrary points in the simulation at which the designer proclaims the experience to be complete. (Often such a proclamation never happens; games from the endless runner genre, for example, are by definition 'endless'.) A game never runs out of film reel, leaving the screen dark. It has no natural terminus around which to build players' expectations. The simulation, barring software crashes or hardware failure, will proceed forever. Thus videogames, like fractals, are well-defined by their ruleset yet infinitely detailed.

For these reasons it is (usually) impossible to 'sit through' a videogame. The mere act of playing it, of making decisions in an effort to navigate its form, requires the same arduous discursive techniques (critical thinking, creativity, experimentation, research) that in film tend to be reserved for discussing content after the viewing. Singular forms like movies grant entitlement to the entire form; a consumer can obtain it using only her eyes and ears. The challenging part then involves the thoughtful excavation of content. In procedural forms like videogames the consumer is entitled to nothing. Because the form is infinite, not even the most skillful and patient player in the world can appreciate it in its entirety. Novice players, meanwhile, might find themselves unable to access *any* of it, at least not without referencing some metatextual document like a walkthrough. In videogames, then, form supplants content in terms of the way we traditionally consume it: The intellectual challenge posed by a videogame becomes the act of discovering all the features of its surface (the form) in addition to deciphering what those things mean to us (the content). Often we choose to discard the question of content entirely and focus on obtaining completion as the sole purpose of consuming videogames. When our long-standing culture of consuming singular media (constructed so neatly around the determinate and exposed form of film) encountered the sprawling subterranean form of the videogame it splintered in many directions, leaving players to wrestle with an unsolvable Gordian Knot. The central problem is that 'spoiler territory' now covers the discursive aspects of consuming a work in addition to the sensuous ones: Activities that require huge quantities of time, expertise and perhaps even luck (say, solving a puzzle in *Myst*) must take place during our viewing rather than after it. Our aversion to spoilers discourages us from doing what we would normally do with challenging problems (going and reading about them on the internet) because we fear this would compromise our capacity to appreciate the form. Yet the decision to struggle forwards on our own will never result

in greater appreciation of the form should the game 'stump' us, blocking all forward progress and forcing us to quit. Players must therefore choose between two unsatisfactory compromises. Those who cannot bear getting stumped choose the spoiler-laden compromise, enjoying the medium's proud history of internet walkthroughs, quaint telephone hotlines and breathless playground cabals built to share access to our favourite virtual spaces. Those who cannot bear to be spoiled choose to restrict their tastes, scorning either the videogames foolish enough to stump them or (less commonly) the people foolish enough to become stumped.

I have spent the past few months exploring the misery-inducing friction between these compromises. In an article called "Fashion, Emptiness and *Problem Attic*" I argued that our community has mistaken Liz Ryerson's *Problem Attic* for a bad videogame because it refuses to render itself easy to digest; yet the game could be no other way, as its impeccable marriage of form to content stems from this very refusal. For example, the deceptive relationship between the protagonist and the game's other characters (who must at times be avoided and at times be sought out) proves confusing to the player not due to inept design but because the themes of deception, contradiction and confusion are crucial to the work and resonate better within formal game devices than they would as mere plot points.

Despite its inventiveness and its remarkable thematic harmony, the Gordian Knot of procedural media has prevented *Problem Attic* from finding a sizable audience. Those who wish not to be spoiled grow frustrated by its density; those who wish to sit through it will find no walkthrough to assist them as to my knowledge none have yet been written. The games community is not yet vibrant or diverse enough to receive *Problem Attic* properly; the game will find no place in history should we fail to preserve one for it.

In a follow-up piece entitled *The Cult of the Peacock* I turned my attention in the opposite direction by examining the videogame industry's quasi-religious quest to produce a sort of Anti-*Problem Attic*, something so intuitive that no human could ever become stumped. I discovered that this quest leads into a hornet's nest of vicious cycles, chief among them the tendency for videogames to become so preoccupied with teaching people how to play that they forget to provide anything worth playing in the first place. At great cost it is possible to draw players along a trail of breadcrumbs through the labyrinthine structure of a videogame. Yet what beauty will they find in there with their eyes fixed so firmly upon the ground before them? What will they think of you when they step past the final crumb and look up, at last, to discover nothing but an unskippable twenty minute credits screen?

Today I am convinced that as a culture we are caught in a downward spiral of distrust. Game developers do not trust players to be patient or persistent, so they make their games simpler and easier to learn, which cuts into the amount of meaningful content they can create given the limited resources they have to spend. Players, jaded by the experience of playing games that lack this content, no longer trust that developers will reward their patience and persistence, so their demand for immediate engagement grows ever higher. More and more energy becomes concentrated on the surface of the work,

leaving the centre increasingly hollow; form and content thereby become divorced. Nobody gets to enjoy a brave and challenging gem like *Problem Attic* because its surface is too rugged, nor do they get to enjoy an industry juggernaut like *Assassin's Creed 3* because its surface is overwrought. Everybody loses. If there is to be hope for meaningful content in videogames, we must repair the decaying relationship between the producers and consumers of procedural media. We must find a way to untie the Gordian Knot.

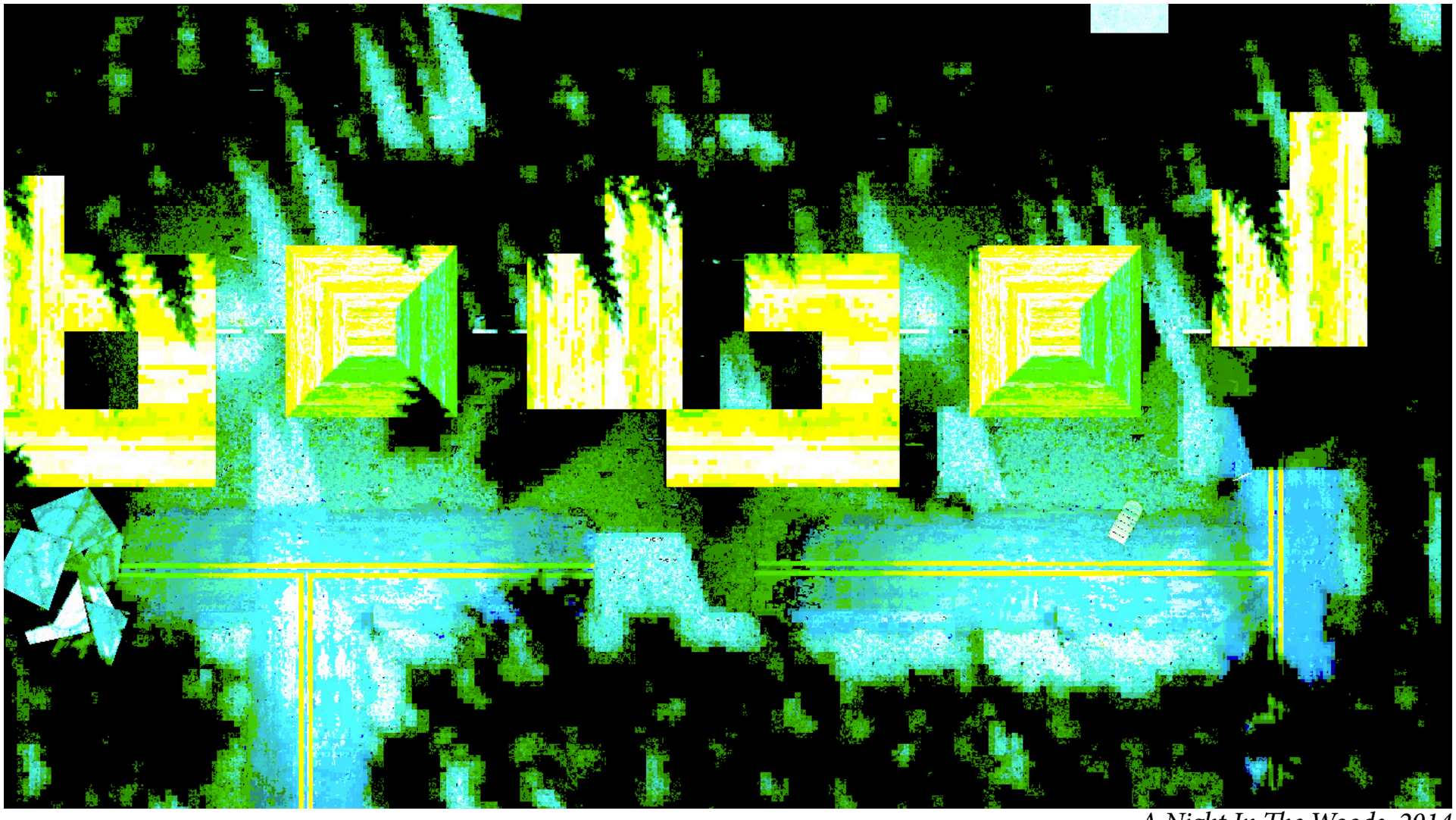
I am no Alexander the Great; the knot is not mine to slice, our history not mine to steer. But I will state my guiding belief that if you love something, it behooves you to help people understand it. Videogame forms, as a consequence of being procedural, are also fundamentally discursive. They are dense; they are difficult. Fortunately a good videogame gets better as we talk, write and learn about it rather than worse. If you love a videogame you should document it. Record a commentary playthrough, or a walkthrough. Write a manual. Build a home for it; do not let it fade into obscurity. Conversely, if you want to love a videogame you should read as much about it as you require. Approaching games with the language of filmgoing, speaking of spoilers and unblemished viewings, asks them to be something they aren't. Videogames are places, not stories; they are explored, not received.

Videogames require us to become lost, but not to remain that way. Use a walkthrough if you need it, for a spoiled ritual annoys us but overlooked content stunts the growth of our medium's shared history. We must move beyond form; beyond spoilers. We must stop fetishizing the smoothness of a game's surface and instead focus on excavating the value that lies in the centre. There are too many things worth expressing, and too many games without a home.

Written by Brendan Vance, and edited by Alex Pieschel.

A CONVERSATION WITH AMY DENTATA

Amy Dentata is an artist, writer, performer and game designer hailing from California‘s Bay Area. Her work includes the VN Your Swimsuit Jumped Its Own Weathercock, You Liar!; A Night in The Woods; and 10 Seconds in Hell, to which I gave the GameCritics’ Game of The Year award. I talked with Amy about her work, her influences in the first-pesron narrative form, and the social crisis within the Bay Area’s technology boom.



A Night In The Woods, 2014

Zolani Stewart: I want to start by talking about first person games. I know you have an interest in the form (I do as well), and I think that shows in your games.

Amy Dentata: I think it started with my experiences as a kid, being really isolated. That's how a lot of these start out, right? I was isolated at school because everyone bizarrely thought I was a boy and that caused a lot of conflict. And my homelife was really abusive, which I've written about so I won't go into too much detail.

Basically, everywhere seemed like a minefield to me, so I spent the majority of my time locked up in my room. Which wasn't really locked up because I never had a working lock on my door, and people would barge in whenever they wanted. I didn't go out to play that much, I was very much an indoor kid. And first-person games were a way for me to be in *a* world in a believable way, without being in *this* one.

ZS: I know what it's like, to have the home be a scary place, your room becomes a sort of safe-zone.

AD: I kinda lived as much as I could in those worlds, pretending as if I was there instead of here. Even then it was limited for me, because like I said, broken lock left that way. So if I wasn't in front of the computer, I had headphones on or a Gameboy was otherwise distracted. I learned the technical details of sprite and polygon trees before I learned what actual trees are like. And my hometown was filled with trees. Even in my imagination the world was based on computer games, not nature. So in a lot of ways, that feels like where I came from. That's home to me.

It's no coincidence I was also completely obsessed with the VR craze that first came about in the 90's.
I'm stoked about the Oculus Rift because it's all the things I dreamed of back then, happening for real now.

ZS: The first word that comes to my mind is “Escapism” but that feels insufficient to describe what you're talking about.

AD: Yeah. It was survival. It really was survival. I was broken down in extreme ways by what I went through. Computers were the only thing I could trust, and the worlds I experienced through them were my life.

Computers were kind of my parents, friends, lovers, as weird as that may sound. One way I was very privileged despite all that went on, is that I always had access to computers. From day one, because we had money.

And I clung to them. But now I'm an adult and I have a lot of things I've learned since then. I'm no longer a shut-in. First-person games are no longer a safe form of escapism.

Now in my adult life, I'm returning to my old love for those worlds, but with more awareness.

ZS: It's funny when I reflect on my family stuff, you would think a family

that's well off would be stable.

AD: Yeah. And in some ways it *is* more stable, but in other ways it can still be totally broken.

ZS: Sometimes I'd look out at the suburban streets and think: "how can shit be so fucked up in a place like this"

AD: Well, money does more than provide stability. It also provides concealment. And when horrible people can buy concealment, they can get away with really horrendous things. The town I grew up in, we had acre yards, maybe one or two streetlights. Everyone lived quiet, separate lives. You can hide a lot in an environment like that.

ZS: Yup

AD: So now I find myself across the country, in a different suburb, with different problems. Silicon Valley and all that's going on lately.

ZS: I'm sure you're not exempt from the affects gentrified development has been having in the bay area.

AD: I'm not, but I'm also really lucky at the same time. I'm poor, but still white people poor, which means I have access to people with stability. So I have this weird combo of both feeling like the floor is about to fall out from underneath, and people saying they'll be there for me if it does fall out. In a lot of ways I find what's going on in the headlines here reflects what I experienced on an individual level as a kid. Dehumanization, disenfranchisement, exploitation, abuse of power. As a kid it was one-on-one, now here in the valley I'm seeing a spiritual counterpart play out on a systemic level. That's probably a bit of projection of course, but...

As a kid first-person games were a way to escape it all, now I'm using that form to express my feelings about it all. It's simultaneously a fun escape and a hack around my urges to escape.

ZS: And those systems are reflected aesthetically, right? The nature of those geopolitical spaces, the change from small record shops to expensive coffee shops, run down warehouses to tech office buildings. The space must feel different, and first person games are able to reflect what it feels like to exist within a space and the changes that can come from that

I've done let's plays on Perfect Dark, I think you've seen them?

AD: Yeah I have.

ZS: I talked about how like when we're close to a wall in a game we *feel* to a wall, we feel it's "heat" spaces, when they're narrow or wide, circular or squarish make us feel differently walking through them, and that first person games can use this!

AD: Yeah, the architecture of a space especially has an impact in first-person. Level design is architecture and the psychology of geometries.

ZS: So when you talk about these systemic changes, I want to note that these aren't only just conceptual and abstract, right? You feel these.

AD: Yeah, it reshapes things physically.

And the space itself tells a story. We saw that a lot in Gone Home, right? There was story via pieces of paper but also through the house itself. Generally I saw that the negative reviews missed or discounted the meaning in the physical space, and the positive ones talked about how level design was used.

I was just reading a negative review that talked from an interactive fiction standpoint, and they focused on how much better the game would have been if they'd just given you the documents without the house. And that's a typically IF way to think about it, and it misses the point of why the house is represented at all. Especially with the dad's story, the physical presence of the house communicates a lot of the emotion behind what's going on.

I did a bit of that in A Night in the Woods, right? There's this suburb-like area with things about it that are off. It has a couple basic symbols of suburbia, completely engulfed by this dark forest.

ZS: Can we talk a bit about Night in the Woods? I didn't get to finish it but I loved it!

AD: If you got to the bedroll you finished it, by the way. Some people didn't get that!

Like it never says "THE END", and that's kind of on purpose.

ZS: I got a flashlight and went up some stairs. But... when it comes to Night in the Woods, I don't feel like those places were communicating what normally is shown with "Suburbia" the clean, sterile post-war aesthetic isn't there. Rather what I found was decay.

Amy Dentata: Entropy is hell.

I mean really, it's physically depicting what we spiritually know is true: that it's a dead space.

ZS: Yes, and it does that in a way that's more direct, you know it's dead because it *actually is*. And what I find so cool about Night in the Woods is that it's a *futurist game*, but there's no neon lights or flying cars or tech things to tell you that.

Photo by Chris Roberts / The S.F Examiner

AD: I tried to make a futurism based on very recent hyped up technology in the Valley. ANITW is based on a larger concept I've had in my game design notebook for awhile, and it takes a lot of hints from the world building I did for that concept. Except whereas the game in my notebook happens soon after the "crash", ANITW takes place much later.

Everything from the "old" world has settled. The only things that remain are the few bits of sustainable infrastructure that were actually built to last. Namely, the streetlights.

ZS: Whereasgames communicate futurism to us through advancement, ANITW does it through *regression*, we know it's in the future because things have decomposed, not just the material environment but the fabric of our societies.

AD: It's post-apocalyptic for sure, but I didn't want it to shout that. There's been a lot of post-apocalyptic games lately, and while I love that premise, most of the common tropes are misguided.

ZS: how so?

AD: It's almost always a shallow dystopia: The world is violent because people like to shoot things in games. Stuff is dilapidated in really cool looking ways, because games have a history of rust-centric art style.

There's advanced tech, but it's drawn more from science fantasy.

When I sketched out the world that ANITW touches upon, I picked out very specific technological advances that are making headlines, several actual economic trends, and tried to extrapolate them.

And the disaster isn't zombies or nuclear war or aliens or whatever. It's all us. The disaster is all us.

ZS: Yes.

AD: It's not our technology either, the technology is just a way we rationalize the failure.

It's not a Terminator future where technology itself has destroyed us. The technology works exactly how we plan it to.

ZS: Or the way *some* people plan it to, those in power who have huge influence on our aspirations with technology.

AD: And that ties in to those economic systems. Except the way tech is hyped, especially in the valley, everybody ignores the class implications of technological advancement. "Everybody" being the people who are given a voice in this convo.

ZS: Affluent white males usually.

AD: The ones on TED talks and in Forbes articles. And a few token women busy Leaning In™.

Like the bus issue in SF — it makes me shake my head, the way that's going. In the game sketch I have in my notebook, your path is blocked by this constant stream of ritzy auto-drive cars, meanwhile all the public transit shelters have signs that say "DISCONTINUED".

ZS: That's awesome.

AD: I sketched that out a year or so ago, and now it's becoming like a prophecy. And I'm like no, jerks, this is supposed to stay fiction!

ZS: Get back in the cyberpunk movie!

AD: Yeah!

Same thing with a few of the headlines in ANITW. Though I got some of the details wrong.

Part of the story there is about destruction of history, destruction of records. By riots, by the government, and by the player character, in the present tense, finding kindling for a fire.

Maybe a week after I released the game, headlines came out about the Harper government in Canada claiming they made digital archives of scientific journals and then destroyed the physical copies. Except the digitization never happened. They were just book burning.

ZS: A lot of what the CPC does is in conjuction to its oil industry. Cuts to StatsCan and the silencing of climate scientists.

AD: I'm planning on doing a slight update to the game, to fix a few quirks here and there, and I might be in the weird position of replacing fictional headlines with real ones.

ZS: I think that'd be really cool, there's a weird puncturing of fiction and reality there.

AD: There really is. If I had the programming chops I'd come up with a slightly different game where it pulls news headlines off the internet in realtime as you're playing. That's a little beyond my skill at the moment though.

ZS: You do pretty well though! You do more than I can definitely. I like how you were able to like... scan yourself into *Readymade*.

AD: That was less skill on my part and more thanks to Autodesk's 123D web app. I mean, there was a bit of cleanup and technical knowhow involved, but yeah. I have just enough training in 3D modeling, programming, 2D art, music, etc., to do it all.

Making Unity games has really advanced my skill on the programming front, though. Where I started with Readymade and Dirty Dishes versus where I'm at now, it' a world of difference.

ZS: That's great, and I see a lot of really interesting 3D stuff made in Unity through freeware channels.

AD: I'm picking and choosing what I make based on things I want to learn. Each Unity game has added a bit more to my repertoire.

ZS: Do you have any formal training?

AD: Nope, I'm self-taught when it comes to programming, but I went to school for 3D modeling and 2D art.

I started programming in BASIC when I was like 10. I would have done a lot better if I'd had instruction, but I totally flailed back then.

ZS: Let's talk about Your Swimsuit for a sec because it's also kind of a funny little thing

AD: Yeah, it's also goofy-yet-serious.

ZS: Your Swimsuit is probably the only VN I've played to full

AD: That is high praise!

ZS: It's not normally a genre I get into!

AD: I've gotten sucked into a few of them myself. I'm kind of embarrassed to admit it.

But again, like with fine art, what started as a love affair became a moment of, "Wait. Something's not right here."

I'd played a bunch of eroge when I was a teenager. I didn't know it was a genre back then. I just knew there were these games on floppies that had porn if you clicked the right buttons.

None of it was translated, and I didn't have a clue what I was doing. So I would invent stories about what was going on, based on the pictures and the reactions to the choices I made.

ZS: but that's how Your Swimsuit is!

AD: Exactly! And it accidentally became a larger critique. I can't claim authorial intent on this one, it was pure serendipity.

Most VNs operate on a notion that, if you pick the right choices, you get the girl.

ZS: It's so rare that authorial intent matches the works, as a critic I never expect it.

Usually, I find that artists make stuff out of things they feel and shit just happens.
AD: It's true. There's a lot of pressure, I feel at least, to act as though you know what the eff you're doing though.

People don't like summaries that read "Hell if I know!"

ZS: [Laughs]

AD: Maybe it's all in my head. I have a lot of imagined pressures going on.

ZS: I don't think it's imagined, I think it's part of a larger meritocrical illusion. If you succeeded it's *only* because you went for it and intended it, which is not true as we both know.

AD: I fall into "Must do Important Works" and stagnate. Then I get angry and am like "Just go with your feelings!" and amazing things happen. But I never learn from it.

Dating sims become a game of manipulation, really. You're not choosing responses because they feel like the right thing to do. You pick responses because they get the girl naked. Others have articulated it all much better in really long articles. The point is, basically all VNs have Nice Guy syndrome.

And I still love them and I love the stories they tell, but that foundation is broken.

ZS: Kim Moss has written some very important things on that.

AD: Yeah. Yamimash is a pretty popular Let's Player who played Your Swimsuit. I don't know if it was intentional or not, but he very angrily shouted the premise of the game, at the game in frustration.

ZS: wow!

AD: I mean, it was funny anger and all that, but he nailed it, and I don't know if it was intentional.

He shouted, "Somebody said to me, 'If you make the right choices, you get a really good ending.' Well guess what? How are you supposed to make the right choices, when nothing makes sense?!"

And that's dating. Not A, B, A, C, D, A, B, pussy.

What I find so fascinating is that, in every LP I've watched, the players always make a story out of the nonsense. Always.

ZS: yes!

AD: They make stories out of the nonsense dialog, and they try to attach meaning to the nonsensical choices.

Even if they know it's randomized, they still construct a story around it. And that's really what we do all the time. It's something that I've seen play out in other genres, but never in dating sims. And people are so used to dating sims being a certain thing, they're perplexed by it.

ZS: Bioware-likes have largely trained these intuitions I feel.

AD: Somewhat, but Bioware games are still "insert kindness coins, get between the sheets".

Your Swimsuit is closer to a roguelike in its chaos, and I don't know that I've seen that before in a dating sim. After I released it there were several Twitter conversations I remember having about "why aren't there roguelike dating sims".

ZS: well roguelike implies a certain kind of resistance to the kind of min-max manipulation we're so used to doing in games.

AD: You just have to roll with the punches. Though that genre is morphing into something more controllable, too, with the trend of persistence between spawns. Once you add persistence between spawns, it becomes an "accumulation of private property simulator" instead, and totally breaks the feel.

ZS: That feels like a capitalistic function, so perhaps there's a connection between their popularity and that change in structure.

AD: I think so. Persistence makes them less punishing, more marketable.

ZS: Their sort of... absorption into the larger sphere

AD: It leaves players feeling like they've "made a good investment" by advancing their character. Instead of going for an interesting experience. I value the interesting experience over an arbitrary sense of progress or accumulation.

I was actually hesitant to include the key/door gameplay in ANITW, and the kindling collection.

But in the end I decided, if I tweak it enough, I can be ok with it.

ZS: I think it helps it move forward though, there are critics who have defended arbitrary structure in that it helps progress the game.

AD: It does. It can be a useful tool, like how three-act structure can be a useful way to think about a story you're writing. But it can't be the foundation.

ZS: yeah, I see

AD: I first decided that you keep the damn key after you use it, because keys don't disappear after you unlock a door. So it clearly becomes a pacing tool, rather than a puzzle or challenge. As for the kindling collection, that actually worked with the plot nicely.

ZS: And I much prefer that.

AD: So do I.

After I realized the kindling doesn't have to be a generic collectible, but can be the story itself, everything fell into place.

ZS: What it is I think, is this resistance to structures to be gamed. Structures that are designed for us to manipulate make it hard for us to engage with them in a meaningful way.

AD: Yeah. If the only valued goal is "exploit this system", you can't explore any themes other than exploitation. Even if you thematically try to, it falls apart.

ZS: And this hurts first person games a lot when they turn into first person shooters to note.

AD: I look forward to the day FPSes are a subgenre of first person games.

ZS: heheh...

And this is the thing with your swimsuit, it resists the inclination to be "gamed" and by doing that it opens up the ability to engage with it on a different level

AD: It does. If the YouTube videos are any indication, this engagement consists of frustrated screams.

Seriously though, there are two wonderful things that I've seen come from people playing that game. One is that people are constructing their own narratives that give insight not just into the "message of the game", but into the person making up the story. The second is that people are having *so much fun*. People are laughing their asses off, both at the nonsense dialog, and at their own frustrations.
And they're laughing as their expectations regarding the "visual novel" genre bump up violently against what's actually there.

ZS: More fun that they would trying to memorize strats to get a win-state!

Yeah, totally. And like I said, I love the genre. There are VNs that have engaged me on a deeper level and told enriching stories. But it's still within that somewhat problematic framework.

And that framework has rough edges. My biggest complaint about win/lose VNs is, what is the point of including "bad" endings?

ZS: .....not sure actually

AD: The player *will* reload a savegame or try a different path. The "bad" endings are almost always a brisk "ya done fucked up" and then a "GAME OVER" screen. Maybe delayed a few story branches down, but still effectively the same. That's not satisfying, as a game or as a story.

I'm working on a VN—that I swear will get released someday—that doesn't do that. First of all, it's not a dating sim, second of all, there's no good/bad ending dichotomy.
There are just different parts of the story. Which changes it from a challenge to conquer, to a game of exploration. An honest series of "what if" questions, that unfold believably.

ZS: why do you think the VN form would be appropriate for this?

AD: I love the VN format as a storytelling medium. I don't know that I could tell you why. Maybe

because I'm dyslexic and there's less text to read at once than in a book, plus there's pictures.
Not the most flattering answer, but in reality what I'm doing in VN space is realizing another form of first-person experience, minus the polygons.

ZS: If I can, I'd like to move a little bit into these stories when it comes to Your Swimsuit. When it comes to the possibilities that gets opened up.

One of them I feel like, is that it allows the game to become much more intimate.

We talked about how the dialogue means you don't understand what's going on, but at the same time, there's a consistency there, right?

AD: It's true. You're always yammering about Mrs. Joe, and Miko-chan won't shut up about Osaka.

ZS: We know we said something good because she blushes, we move from the school to outside to a room which paints a clear narrative of how these people meet

AD: That's actually not true!
The emotions that Miko-chan displays are randomized as well.

ZS: Noo!

AD: There are only one or two instances where it's hard-coded. So, there are fewer emotes when she takes her clothes off, so the emotional range there is limited.

Also, there's a few places I hard-coded her crying. IIRC there may be a few places I hard-coded a blush, though the type of blush is random, and the places blushes happen don't relate to good/bad choices.

But you really think they do when you're playing!

ZS: So there's *no* consistency at all, because I did get into bed with her, and it was purely by chance?

AD: It was purely by chance that you got in bed with her.

ZS: Oh man, that's incredible
My point was going to be that you have these dialogues that are completely otherworldly in how they're composed, yet they still have an effect on her, and that was interesting to me because it felt like these people are having their own language

AD: An effect you're absolutely certain is visible.

And are maybe right about that 25% of the time.

ZS: Like there was an option that was like "gargle loudly" and I did it and she blushed

AD: There is absolutely no relation to the text and the impact of the choice.
Also, if you backpedal to make another choice, things are re-randomized.

ZS: Maybe not systemically in the game, but thinking about it as its own fiction I feel like it turns it in that direction

AD: Yeah, the fictions that come out of it are surprisingly effectual.

ZS: And while playing, it showed me about how the weird ways that we communicate intimacy to each other, if we imagine this as this own separated world with its way of speaking and communicating

AD: Do you mean, the coded language we send? And assume others are sending?

ZS: Yeah, it sort of reveals the language we use as sort of... arbitrary, it only contains meaning because we inject it.

AD: And a lot of that meaning is inferred. At least, among neurotypical people.

I'm a bit weird in the head in my own ways, but I definitely pick up on implied language. I have friends who don't, though, and it's been a learning experience.

ZS: That's odd though, because there's idea of language as empirically deduced but that's only to certain people.

AD: Most neurotypical communication is non-literal and indirect.

ZS: ah

AD: And, in my opinion, complete nonsense. I've converted over to the literal side, at least when interacting with people in person.

ZS: what does that imply? Saying things instead of using body language?

AD: It's also what you say. Most people are so used to implied speech we don't even know we're doing it.

People will say, "The TV is awfully loud," instead of saying, "Could you please turn that down?"

If you say the former to someone with pragmatic language impairment (one word for it), you're just stating a fact. There's no implied request. And let me tell you, after living in a messed up household with terrible boundaries, I've grown to love the absence of implied requests.

ZS: It gets very weird, and that's found

when it comes to "romance" as well, right? It becomes a means of trying to analyze codes quickly and act on them "Is she into me?" "okay she hugged me on this date that must mean it went well"

AD: The "romance" script everyone learns is a game where people pretend they can read minds. It's ridiculous.

ZS: "okay she's looking away so maybe she's not interested in this conversation I should switch topics"

AD: Instead of communicating clearly, we pass Rorschach tests back and forth.

That might be why some people are drawn to dating sims. They present a solvable Rorschach.
When instead, we could just state things clearly.

ZS: There's an attraction to that, dating is weird and the constant "failure" can dishearten people who want to create romantic relationships
(oh god I'm just talking about myself now)

AD: A lot of the reason we speak implied language is to deflect consequences.

ZS: you think so?

AD: The example my friend gives is the "would you like a cup of coffee?" question.

The real question is "do you want to have sex?" But if either says no, both can pretend the question was really about coffee, so nobody feels rejected.

I personally would rather ask for coffee when I want coffee, and ask for sex when I'm interested in sex. Of course, asking for sex outright is really hard, but for me that am fine, because I take my time with relationships. So for me, if I can't ask that question, it means I'm not ready. Not that I need to find a sneakier way to ask.

ZS: I guess it's that if you ask for sex and someone says no then it's implied her not wanting to have sex is a personal failure on your part, you're not ____ enough, this is an insecurity though.

AD: Yeah it totally is.
But again, all of that is implied meaning.

ZS: There a couple more things i'd like to ask you about.

AD: Go right ahead, I'm enjoying myself.

ZS: Yes!! I do interviews okay!

So, you do a lot of work outside games, right? You do non-games writing, you also have *Bite* which I assume is a compilation of writing.

And you do shows too if I'm correct. Or at least I remember watching a video of you doing comedy on stage.

AD: It's true. I haven't done performing in way too long though, I've been stuck in the South Bay. Itching to get on stage again.

ZS: Not much going on in the South Bay I guess?

AD: Not as far as queer open mics, AFAIK.

Granted, I'm not really queer-identified anymore, which is weird, but those are still the most welcoming venues.

ZS: I'm interested in whether this informs your work in games at all? All the outer games things you work on.

AD: I don't really separate this stuff.

I draw, I write poetry, short stories, blog posts, I compose songs, I make videogames, I perform, I do comedy. They're all connected. I'll spend more time doing one thing or the other for awhile, depending on what's available to me, but, to me it's all creation. I hope this doesn't sound hopelessly pretentious, but I really care about the craft of things. Like, I loved learning the 180 rule in cinematography, types of framing. I loved learning all the different bits and bobs of color theory (even though I still suck at it), using color themes to tell story. I loved learning about ease-in ease-out in animation, secondary motion, squash-and-stretch. Using different shapes and contrasts of shapes to evoke emotions in architecture.

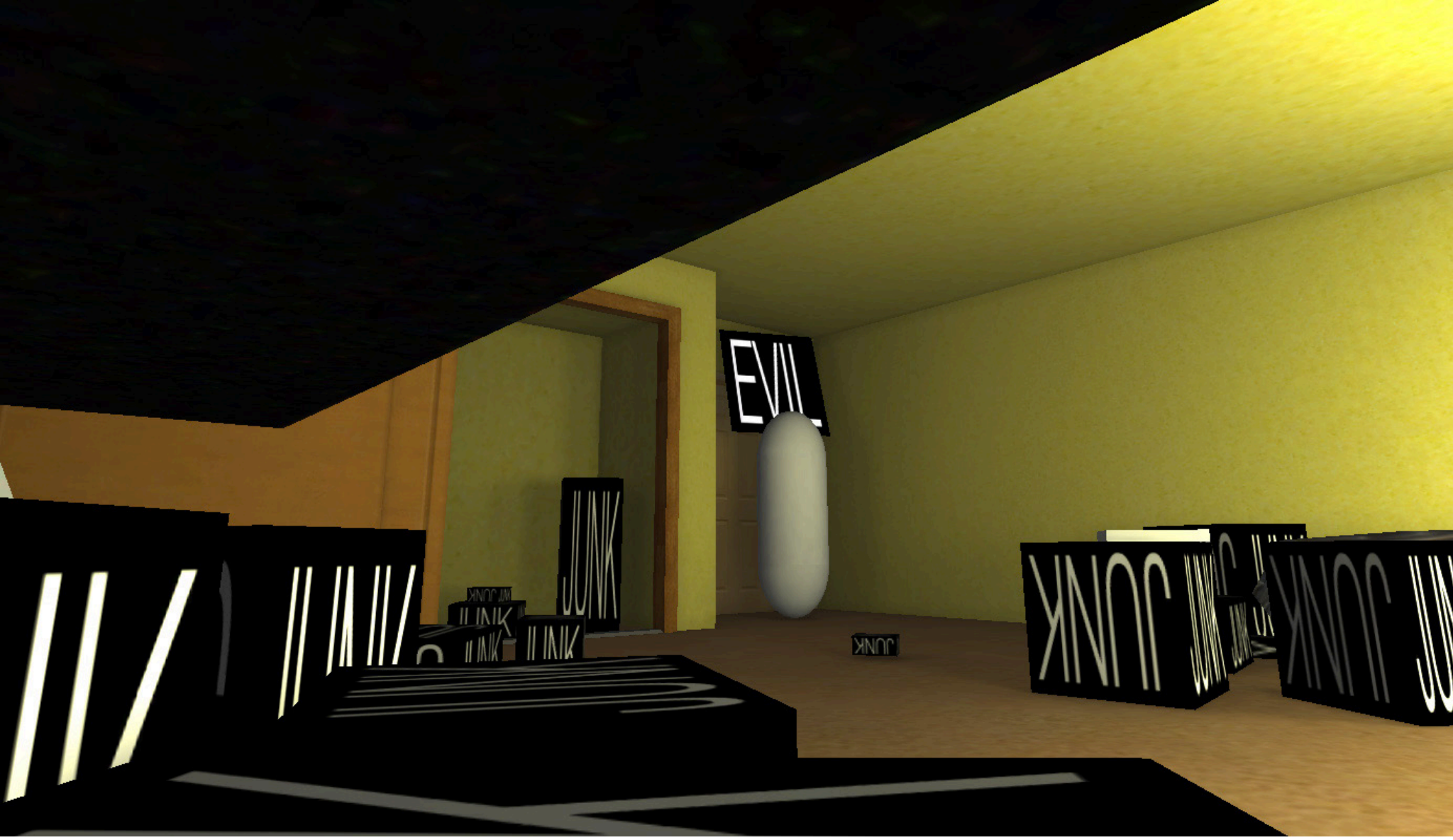
It's those tiny little pieces that I find enjoyable, and I create just to find excuses to enact them.

When I made 10 Seconds in Hell, I was like "ooh I get to do rigidbody dragging like in the Elder Scrolls, and I get to find out how to make a crosshair and object ID text, and I get to make an event scripter that plays this scene out..."

And when I modeled the environment I was excited because I got to use lighting to direct the player's attention, and use cramped, crowded spaces like the closet to evoke claustrophobic panic.

ZS: So there's a want to communicate ideas, but there's also this innocent fascination.

AD: Really, yeah. I've always intuitively picked up on these things, and it's a blast to take the things I picked up on in professional work and do my own with it.



Like, when I took animation classes in college, I was astounded to realize I was just learning formally things I had picked up watching animation when I was a kid. I didn't feel like I was learning anything new. It felt like a refresher. And this time I got to do all the cool things I'd seen in movies before!

I present this know-it-all exterior to people, and I've done it for a lot of this interview, but it's a defense. I'm really just a kid playing with toys and finally getting to have fun. I never really got to have fun back then. My "fun" was really "survival". I always got picked on because I didn't know how to play.

Now I get to play, and it's amazing.

ZS: That's legit.

ZS: The last thing I'd like to ask you, just a simple thing, if there's been anything interested you've played recently

AD: Oh, so much. I've almost completely quit playing commercial games and have been enjoying the hunt for good free indies.

ZS: I know that you've punctured the well that is freeware games recently!

AD: Yes!

ZS: Any good ones you want to mention?

AD: Don't Escape is a really cool point-and-click adventure where you try to lock yourself in a room so that your werewolf form won't break free and kill people. It's like "room escape" in reverse. I like that it's about avoiding wanton destruction instead of causing it.

ZS: And it also seems to subvert antagonisms, now you're the enemy! And not only that, you don't have the means to destroy it, you can only prevent it

AD: You're an enemy to yourself as well, because if you successfully slaughter townspeople, they hunt you down and kill you. The better you do, the less damage gets done to you in return. Not that there's any persistence; you always restart from scratch. But it was a nice touch.

Gods Will Be Watching is a wonderfully frustrating survival game where you try to get off the surface of an ice planet with a paralyzing disease.

ZS: Yes!! I've played that

AD: Ok, mind if I tell you a story about that one?

ZS: totally

AD: None of my strategies worked. No matter how I tried to balance rations and meds and therapy, I always got a tantrum spiral. I was about to give up. Then I decided, fuck it, let's go extreme.

I killed off the dog, the psychologist, and the engineer on day one. The sudden boost to my rations gave me a lot of breathing room the next several days.

ZS: Did you keep the soldier though?

AD: I kept the soldier, the doctor, and the robot.

I made the doctor immediately gather meds, and got the robot to repairing the radio. Halfway through the game I got the radio repaired. Then the doctor went mad and ran away, but I already had a stash of meds. After an attack on the camp, sadly, I had to destroy the robot to get energy for laser rounds.

But the soldier and I persevered, with just enough rations to get by as we waited for the ship to come.
Then, on the 40th day, I simultaneously won and lost.

I got a message that said "Sgt. Burden and crew were rescued!" And behind that, the message that Sgt. Burden failed his crew and committed suicide. So I guess it's one of those indie movie open-endings, accidentally. I tend to break everything I play. QA is in my blood.

ZS: So.. would it be wrong if I said that 10 Seconds is probably the most popular game you've made?

AD: It might be a toss-up between that and Rock Bottom, actually, though they draw different crowds.
They're the two that are most legible as "traditional" games.

ZS: Are they? I found 10 Seconds to be a pretty big jump

AD: There's a clear challenge and there is, superficially at least, a win/lose state.

Surprisingly a lot of people have enjoyed it as "just a videogame" without getting deeper into the implications of it, which I'm a little torn about.

ZS: That's interesting... there are always different levels of engagement, I guess.

AD: Yeah. Some people are like, "Cool concept, creepy atmosphere, the good end was really satisfying". Others are like, "This really speaks to me as a survivor"

Some of the comments from people who "get it" were actually a bit scary.
I had more than one message saying, "This game triggered me almost to the point of suicide, thank you for making it." Like, wow, right?

ZS: fuck

AD: How do you parse that?

ZS: Well, one of the things that interests me about 10 Seconds, is how it much it disconnects from a realist aesthetic, yet it feels so.. real!

AD: To be honest it scares the shit out of me even. And I made the thing.

ZS: Stretched textures, cylinder FP controllers and a monotone voicing, and yet..that's what gets to me, this is how 10 Seconds informs me as a critic about how abstraction and focalization works. There's something of a connection between the lack of detail, the choppyness of its production values with how intense it feels. It's abstract, yet that somehow allows it to feel more "real".

AD: It seems to give just the right details, and leave just the right vagueness, which people can project their own skeletons onto it.

ZS: And when it comes to the formal understanding of abstract theory, it totally matches what's been understood.

I really love the objects and their textures, BOOKS, JUNK, JUNK, stretched and ugly.
It's so ugly and *cold*.

AD: JUNK, PORN, BASEBALL BAT

ZS: I remember when I played it first and I asked if you wanted a hug haha

AD: Ha, yes, and the answer after making it was "YES PLEASE." I didn't realize until after I was done that it took emotional investment to make that game.

ZS: I can imagine.

AD: While I was making it I was caught in the nuts and bolts of the craft to ignore it, but I knew I was hitting something.

ZS: I've never played a game that felt so hopeless, it was when I died and the person said "the fall hadn't killed me, I wish it had", I was speechless.

And the thing is, before you jump, there's this optimism, not exactly that you'll get out of whatever horrible situation is, run for the woods or something, but just some kind of catharsis, *anything* at all, something to just end the suffering.

It's such a powerful cathartic moment to get up on the window ledge, like, "I'm totally doing this" and for the person later to say something like "it didn't kill me I wish it had," it's crushing.

AD: Yeah. And she's imagining other ways it could have played out. We'll never know how it actually played out, and if that resolution was better or worse.

For her to imagine alternatives suggests what actually happened was not that good.

ZS: Fuck, yeah. When you jump and you look out at the skybox, and it's like

this last image before black,
a nice sky before black

AD: Yeah. And when you're up high, the ground makes sense, but as you fall to the bottom, the panorama image gets distorted and looks fake.

ZS: Everything feels so off. Like that a cylinder mesh can feel so intimidating!!

AD: That panorama was taken from a real place I spend lots of time. During production I decided to flip the image horizontally, and I'm glad I did, because it means I never draw a connection between the game and the real balcony. The guy with "EVIL" above his head. At first, I thought, "I'll do this as a placeholder, it'll be funny." But after I actually put it in place, I was like, "Oh shit."

"That is so staying."

It's kinda comical, but again it's so blunt, that with everything else... Almost like the universe itself is signaling to you "BEWARE".
ZS: Yup exactly, at first it's hard to understand why it's there, I think it speaks more to this character than it does to players.

AD: More than a grizzled motion-captured face could.

ZS: "EVIL" feels like something a character is thinking to herself, not as a note to players.

AD: Yeah, almost like the world has sticky note reminders from her brain. Kinda Memento-esque when I put it like that. That movie was really formative for me, though. So in the end it reinforces the notion that this is all inside her head. We're walking through her brain.

ZS: I was going to note that too, they feel like recollections, which makes sense of why things aren't distinct, she just knows what they are but can't get exact images she notes "junk" because it wasn't important in a moment of adrenaline.

AD: It's all probably very specific things, but she doesn't remember any of it. It's filler.

A lot of games don't understand the importance of communicating filler to the player.
Especially a lot of modern FPS games. They're so tied up in modeling a pseudo-photorealistic environment. There's tons of stuff everywhere, none of it is useful, and the game doesn't really let you know this. You have to learn to filter it all out yourself.

ZS: There's a lack of focus there.

AD: When I remember any Call of Duty game, I remember basically a few gorgeous scenes filled with JUNK. And the JUNK is really distracting and you look at it instead of where you're supposed to go. The Resistance series is really guilty of that too, IIRC.

And Rage, oh god Rage. The game filled with pretty, pointless environments.

ZS: Pretty but *pointless*

AD: Rage should've been a Myst clone. Then they would've put id Tech 5 to good use.

There is one cool thing about Tech 5: Since every inch of map can have unique detail, you don't need an automap anymore. You can navigate a Tech 5 map like you would the real world, because there's no longer that problem where cloned objects disorient you.

But, wasted opportunity. Because guns and vehicles.

ZS: Would it even be a game otherwise??

AD: Ha!

ZS: I'm actually a fan of repeated textures, there's something compelling about them. But there's an important note there, like, I'm usually someone who likes to deprioritize technology, but they can allow tons of possibility! It's just never used.

AD: That's almost all high-budget games, too. I think people believe the indie mindset is all, "HD is shallow, we care about gameplay!" In reality, my criticism is more, "This technology is very impressive, how about we use it in a way that's actually meaningful?"

But AAA is unreachable. They're in ivory towers, they have marketing departments, and they don't care.
And they're so tightly focused on pleasing shareholders that they have an extremely wide turning radius. The industry navigates like a cruise liner. For all the talk of agile development, the design end is going nowhere.

ZS: Well I think that cruise track is mostly in the direction that capital goes into, and when I mention capital I don't just mean money but the complication processes around accumulation of monetary value.

AD: It's true, it's all the influence of money, and where the money is coming from. The roots of capital are in not-so-great places.

ZS: It's not just games either, but the discourse around them, the critical and casual discourse

I'm sure you know I gave 10 Seconds a GOTY award, did any other critics talk about it?

AD: Yes, I saw that. I also got a nod for Your Swimsuit, in one of the funniest writeups of the game I've ever read.

ZS: The one from Mattie Brice?

AD: Yeah that was Mattie. She had me thinking about things I'd never even considered before, like how this girl has her own apartment.

10 Seconds also got a brief mention by Merritt Kopas on the Critical Gaming Project.

ZS: Nice

* Breathes * that covers a lot, huh?

AD: Yup. You good?

ZS: I'm doing well, yeah!

AD: Told ya I ramble.

ZS: You totally do! It's pretty great, you say a lot of insightful things

AD: Thank you.

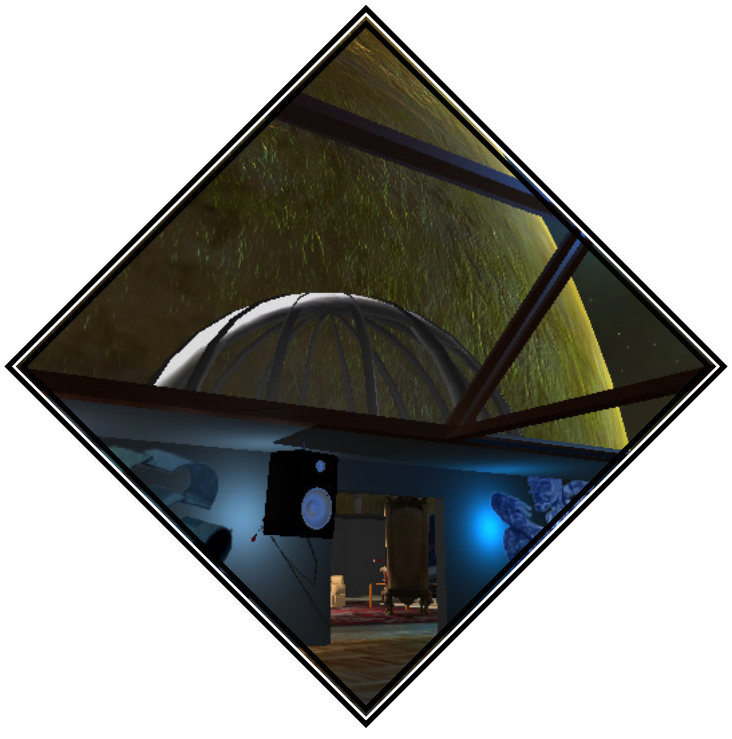
ZS: I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with me, Amy.

AD: Thank you. It was really great to talk in-depth like this.

This interview was conducted on February 12, 2014, by Zolani Stewart.

Editor's Picks

Winter/Spring 2014



Saturn V

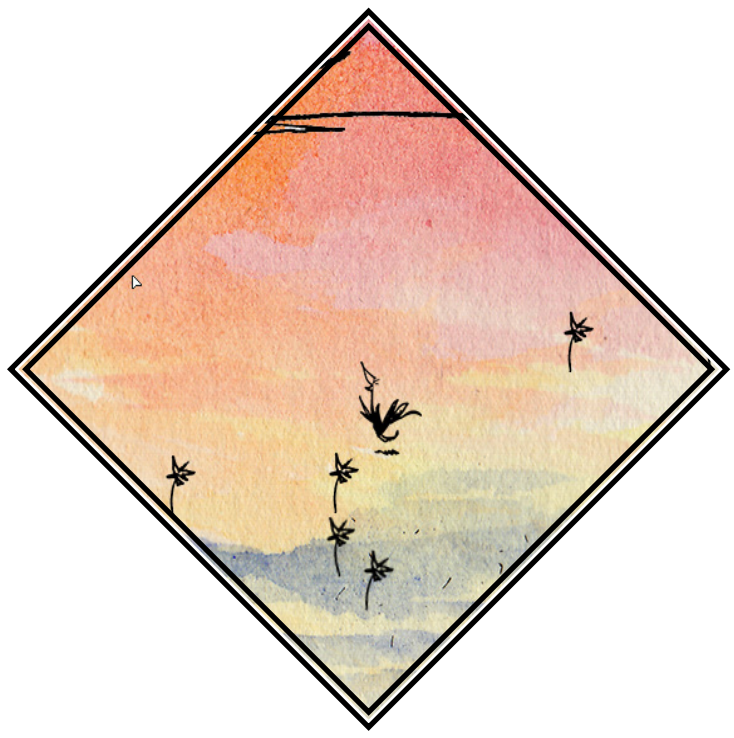
Cosmo D

Env

Adrianis

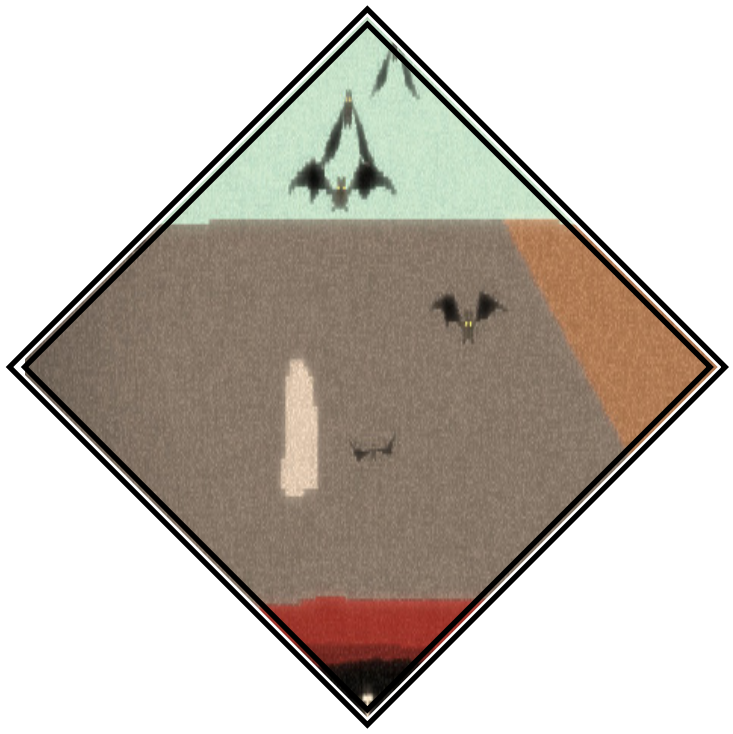
Electric Turtoise

Dillon Rodgers

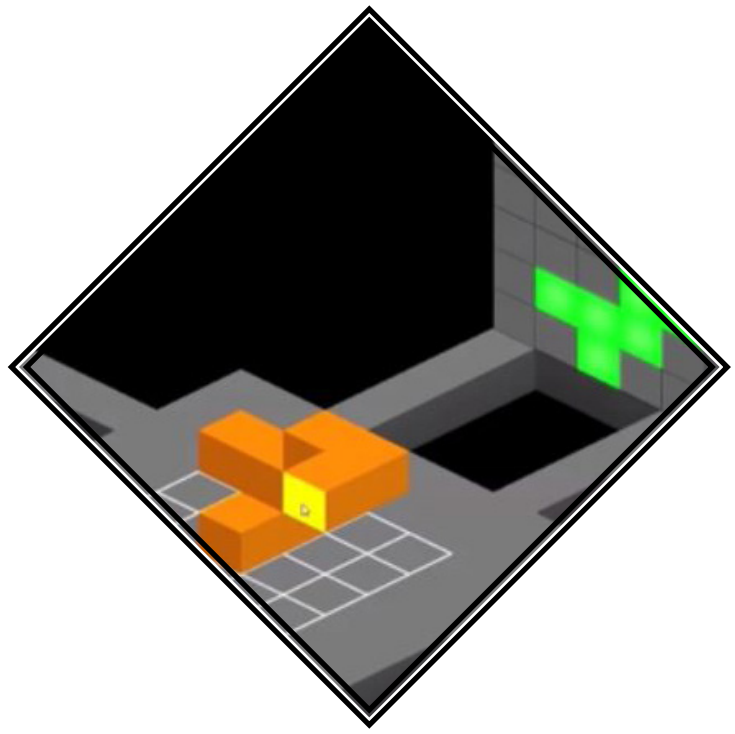


Pachafalaka

daryl

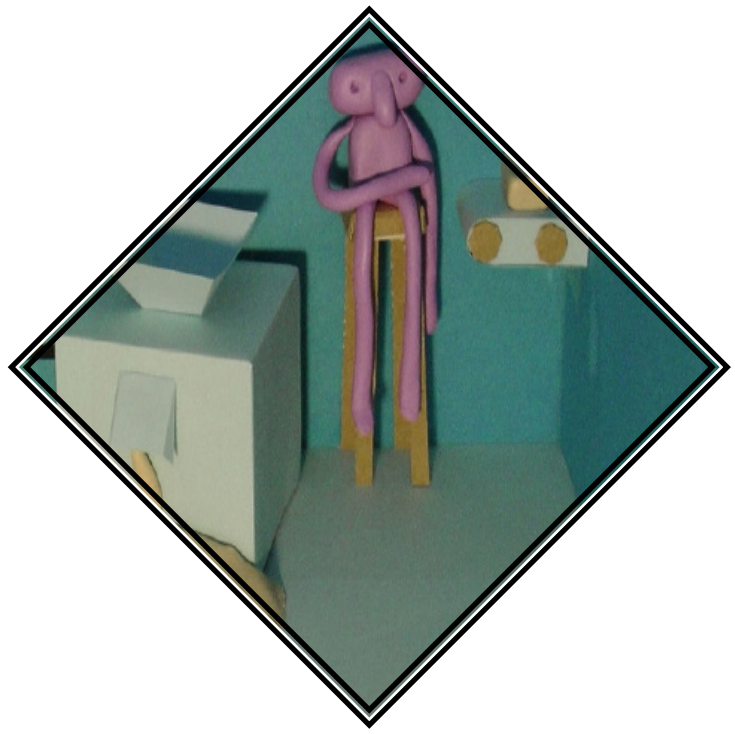


The Sun Does Not Exist
Da Neel



Umbragram
Stephen Altamirano

Cypersplunk
snowhydra



Olson's Journey 3
Wertpol

The Tube Adventure
Shmorks

Thanks for Playing!

Index

In Strange Lands By Owen Vince

Readings

1. Hugo Ball, *Dada Manifesto (read at the first public Dada soirée, July 14th 1916)* **[Link]**
2. Viktor Shklovsky. *Theory of Prose (1925 [1991, translation])*; Dalkey Archive Press

Games

1. John Clowder, *Middens*, 2012, **[Link]**
2. Stephen Murphy, *Space Funeral*, 2010, **[Link]**

Into the Dive By Emilie Reed

Games

1. @noprops, *Ao Oni,* (2008 [2011 Version 6.23]), **[Link]**
2. Kikiyama, *Yume Nikki,* 2004, **[English Download] - [Official Site]**
   TW: Depictions of Suicide
3. Fummy, *The Witch's House***,** (2002 [2012 Version 1.00]), **[English Download] - [Official Site]**
4. Uri, *Paranoiac*, **[English Download]** *TW: Depictions of Suicide*
5. Uri, *The Crooked Man,* **[English Download]** *TW: Depictions of Suicide*

Readings

1. David Lynch, *Mullholland Drive*, 2001 **[Read the Script]**

Inserting The Code *By John Brindle*

Games

1. Merrit Kopas, *Lim; Terf War*; 2012 (PC) **[Play Them Here]**
2. Whisperbat, *Candy Ant Princess; (PC)* **[Play it Here]**
3. Alice Maz, *Breakfast on a Wagon With Your Partner;* **[Play it Here]**
4. Maddox Pratt, *Anhedonia; Negative Space;* **[Play them Here]**

Readings

1. Porpentine, *Creation under capitalism and the Twine revolution;* 2013 **[Read it Here]**
2. Porpentine, *Twine Resources*; **[Read it Here]**
3. Leon Arnott, *(Blog: Glorious Trainwrecks)*; **[Read it Here]**

Orientation and Balance *By John Kilhefner*

Games

1. Michael Molinari, *Soundodger+*; 2013 (PC) **[Buy it Here]**
2. Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, *Metal Gear Solid;* 1998 (PSX) **[Wiki]**
3. Kojima Productions, *Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes;* 2014 (PS3, PS4, X360, Xbox One) **[Wiki]**
4. Sonic Team, *Sonic The Hedgehog*, 1991 (Genesis) **[Pirate it Here]**

Readings

1. Robert Yang, *On Focalization, and Against Convenient Understandings of Immersion/Flow;* 2013 [Read it Here]
2. Ben Abraham, *Attention and Immersion;* 2012 **[Read it Here]**
3. Luis Rocha Antunes, *The Vestibular in Film: Orientation and Balance in Gus Van Sant's Cinema of Walking;* 2012 **[Read it Here]**

4. Brendan Keogh, *This is Not Your World: An Essay in Two Parts;* 2013 **[Read it Here]**
5. Max Mallory, *Audio Input – 'Soundodger' Puts Twist On Classic Rhythm Genre;* 2013 **[Read it Here]**

Form and Its Discontents *By Brendan Vance*

Games

Fireproof Games, *The Room Two,* 2014, iOS **[Official Website]**
Liz Ryerson, *Problem Attic,* 2013, PC **[Play it Here]**

Readings

1. Brendan Vance, *Cult of The Peacock*; 2014 **[Read it Here]**
2. Georg Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on Aesthetics,* 1832 **[Read it Here]**

Our Cover

This issue's cover is done by Lauren Pelc-McArthur, a Toronto artist and Illustrator. You find find her work at laurenpelcmcarthur.com.

SUBMISSIONS

After publishing an issue, The Arcade Review makes a call for submissions to our digital mag. We publish criticism on experimental games, and writing on craft, aesthetic, structure and narrative.

What qualifies as an experimental game?

If you think it's an experimental game, then it's probably an experimental game. We're particularly interested in freeware games, cheaper indie games (less than $20.00CAD or so) and stable emulatable titles. It's important the game you want to write about is easily accessible to the low budget. We also lean towards games infrequently written on.

Things we are looking for:

- Criticism on experimental games
- Explorations of topics related to experimental games
- Ideas! Ideas! Ideas about theories about games!

Things we are **not** looking for:

- Game reviews (yet)
- Art/Illustrations
- Fiction
- Poetry
- Previously published work

How do I send the pitch?

Generally we're looking for an email that tells us, ideally in about a paragraph, what you're interested in writing about and how you would like to go about it. We're interested not only in your topic but where exactly you're trying to take it, the idea you're trying to communicate as your goal. Note that if you would like to write about one game and merely go through it, that's also acceptable.

Along with your pitch, you need to include two to three pieces of your recent writing. Your writing clips **do not have to be about videogames**. We accept writers from vari

ous backgrounds in the arts and humanities (including fine arts, theatre, literature, philosophy, history, fashion? etc).

We always try to be flexible, so if you aren't sure if your submission is right for us, send it anyways and we'll do our best to let you know.

How does Compensation work?

We commission a set of writers for an issue and send out pay every month after that issue is released. A writer's pay for the month consists of 60% of their respective issue's revenue, split equally between each writer commissioned for that issue. We generally make our pay through PayPal, so make sure you have an account where we can send money to.

Please Note: **We reserve the right to refuse your submission, or cancel your submission acceptance for any reason**, although the latter is unlikely to happen.

If you're interested, make sure to send an email to *submissions@arcadereview.net* detailing your topic suggestion, with the format "[name] - [subject]" in your subject line. We only read submissions after the deadline we set. If you don't receive a reply about two weeks after the submission deadline, you can assume we're not interested in your topic. We're sorry! We try to reply to submissions but we can't guarantee it.

The Submissions Deadline for Issue 3 is May 20. We look forward to hearing from you!

The Arcade Review is...

Zolani Stewart - A freelance writer, critic, and managing person at the AR. He is obsessed with typography, which is why he designs the layouts. You can reach him at *zstewart@arcadereview.net*.

Alex Pieschel - Alex Pieschel is a senior editor at the AR. He lives in Tuscaloosa, Alabama where he teaches freshman comp and thinks about what he’s gonna get at the grocery store. You can reach him at *apieschel@arcadereview.net*.

Thanks for Reading!

arcadereview.net
@arcadereview