THE ARCADE REVIEW

Issue One, January 2014

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

One

Founder's Note

I'm a little flustered that the Arcade Review is something that's become a reality. This exists now. It's real. I'm not sure what to say about that..

I used to only dream about doing a games mag. They came in daydreams between my walks to school and back home, when it took an hour half commute from St-Laurent. I'd imagine dumb interviews with my friends and shiny covers while I banged on Stereolab or Rapsody.

I used to pitch reviews to editors about writings freeware games but I only got rejections and dismissals, mostly because no one ever heard of them. I used to be someone who wanted to work in the big games industry, as everyone does, but like many people I realized that those places didn't support what I was looking for. No one wanted to talk about the games I liked to talk about, or in the way I liked to talk about them. And no one in those places was willing to help me push the values that me and the people close to me had for games.

So The Arcade Review is here and I plan to keep it going as long as I can. It's a magazine about experimental games, about interesting, radical, artistic, and weird games that challenge our understanding about art and how we assess it. It's born out of the communities and friends who inspire and keep the work on here possible, as cousins of Nightmare Mode, the late Bit Creature, Five Out of Ten, Memory Insufficient, Medium Difficulty, ZEAL, First Person Scholar, FreeIndieGames, and Glorious Trainwrecks. It's also a magazine about art, because here our games criticism is an arts criticism in confidence. We're not a magazine about politics, yet I'm hoping that people will find polemic in how we embrace the arts and its discontents, in the political, the ideological, the social, the structural and the historical.

We reject the modes of assessment that are inherently neoliberal: they lie in spheres of techoptimism and capitalist realism that judge and assess the arts under the expectations and the values of capital, and erase and normalize the oppressions and abuses of corporate industry and predatory consumerism. This is insufficient, and these modes can't stand as the root spheres of how we discuss games, how we value games, and how we love games.

There are many, many people for whom without The Arcade Review wouldn't be the way it is. I of course want to thank Alex Pieschel, our senior editor, who this might not have even existed without. I want to thank the loads of arists I contacted who allowed us to use their work, and those who did work for us. Their contributions are in the index. And lastly, I'd like to give a thanks to Lana Polanksky, a fellow games critic and a dear friend of mine. I don't now if I'd be doing this in games without the inspiration and friendship she's given to me.

Thanks everyone, please enjoy

- Zolani Stewart, Founding Editor

Editor's Note

I hated writing videogame reviews. I wrote a handful of them for no pay because I've always been sort of hopelessly interested in games, and at the time I needed something to mute a renewed sense of aimlessness. Writing about games gave my brain something to do besides telling my arms to pull espresso shots and steam milk. I slogged through a bunch of "content" in order to "finish" a game so I could feel like I understood it (and I never did). I did this because these were the parameters within which game reviews, as I understood them, were written. I eventually realized that the way I was writing and thinking about games was formulaic and uninteresting.

I can't blame my experience on the games themselves. I was part of the problem. I made a lot of machine-like assumptions. I understood a lot less about why triple-A is the way it is, and I wasn't approaching it in an interesting way. Before I tried writing about triple-A games, I was very naively hopeful about what glossy machines can achieve. Afterwards, I was naively cynical about what games can achieve. Sites like Play This Thing and Free Indie Games opened up new channels for me. Now, the games I play consistently remind me of how endlessly naive I am, and the renewed awareness of one's own naiveté is how I define critical thinking.

Stephen Murphy (thecatamites) has written that a site like Glorious Trainwrecks provides "a fine storehouse of many idiosyncratic personal interpretations of what a living videogame culture could look like." The Arcade Review hopes to do what it can to participate in the living videogame culture that already exists.

- Alex Pieschel, Senior Editor

The Buenos of Comedies

By Lana Polansky

I recently attended a talk given by *Papo y Yo* designer Vander Caballero at the Montreal International Games Summit.[1] Caballero discussed creating emotionally resonant games that dissect serious issues without being didactic. He critiqued the industry for its fixation on entertainment at the expense of substance, and he said something that resonated as I was thinking about writing this piece:

"We don't use fun as a driver, we use fun as a goal, and I think that's completely wrong."

Major Bueno games often present themselves as these tightly coiled springs of hand-drawn, brightly coloured aesthetics, jubilant, whimsical sounds and light-hearted play. They seem simplistic, but their titles are often earnest and subversive; they glimmer with a sheen of cute, funny entertainment while deftly, slowly revealing a painful humanity. When I say earnest, I mean like how Ian Bogost talks about earnestness:

"Games that aren't just instrumental or opportunistic in their intentions [...] made with the intention of being played, and made such that their playing is principally directed toward the subjects that they seem to illuminate, to engage with seriously." [2]

Major Bueno games are firmly rooted in using a game context to explore a singular idea. They aren't simply concerned with fun, or escapism, and they don't preach. Instead, they use slapstick or comedic hyperbole (in terms of premise, gameplay goals, sound and aesthetics) to lull the player in, make them feel safe, and then subvert their expectations by being unexpectedly heartbreaking, dark, tragic, sublime, or romantic—something that will appeal to their humanity.

This device is known as a "bait and switch," and Major Bueno games are adept at hiding their comedic subversions in cute mechanics and colourful designs. The comedy, the "fun," is a driver to illuminating something much more intimate and vulnerable than typically "opportunistic" or "instrumental" game design.

Shapes 'N' Mates (2013) is a puzzle game where you click and drag shapes into corresponding outlines. Discard useless shapes in a receptacle to the right of the puzzle. It's pretty straightforward, except the shapes are your mates, so they talk and they have distinct personalities. They feel pride when used, and they feel resentment, self-loathing and disappointment when discarded. And they all tell you about it, loudly and ad nauseum. Their faces change, when they're thrown away, from excited smiles to crestfallen frowns. If you do the thing the system is telling you, you risk hurting the feelings of the only objects that you interact with.

The comedy is so simple. These manipulable objects are presented as exceptionally whiny people—it's absurd, it's funny. But it's also upsetting to know that the system makes you manipulate a feeling thing, and that you can only please some of them. Maybe if I didn't discard them? Maybe if I let them enjoy the win by keeping them on the board? Well, okay, but this one's anxious about its body image because it won't fit into any of the holes. Well, what do you want me to do with you, then?

In *No Laughing Matter: Making Humor Work in Games*,[3] Bob Mackey quotes former Telltale Games writer and designer Chuck Jordan, on why the traditional attitude toward comedy in games is that it's damn-near impossible to execute—the problem is timing:

"[The player] can hear your punch line before the set-up. He can skip the set-up of a joke altogether,' Jordan says. 'He can hear 10 jokes over the course of a minute, or he can go off and wander around between each one. And the entire time, he's not just passively waiting to hear the next joke; he's actively looking for the solution to some problem."

Typically, the comedy is sidelined. It's not central to the cerebral act of "looking for a solution to some problem." But what about when comedy becomes a driver and not a goal? What if you're not trying to shoehorn "funny" into a game, but instead make comedy about play?

In *Caesar's Day Off (2013)*, you're a Caesar, it's your day off of your emporal duties, and in a successive string of events, you get to exercise all of the perks of being emperor. Give a thumbs up or thumbs down (mapped to the up and down arrow keys) to decide whether or not to feed your subjects to a lion who seems to just follow you everywhere. You know, just in case the clerk at the grocery checkout rings up a bill you don't feel like paying. You're brought into a world of visual gags, anachronisms, exaggerated send-ups of coliseums and togas and other things coded "Roman" by our historical imagination. Everything is hyperbole, parody and slapstick.

Due to the simple controls (up or down arrow keys) and quick transitions between scenes, it's very easy to react before thinking about the consequences of your decisions. Like in Christine Love's *Even Cowgirls Bleed (2013)*, the controls become slippery so that you can easily be suckered into repeatedly hitting the same button without considering the moral and practical ramifications of feeding, or not feeding, your tailor to the lion.

The game, with its loud colours and upbeat music, seduces you into acting as though choices don't matter, and your holiday as emperor gives you an absolute power. Part of *Caesar's* punchline is that videogames, by design, tend to water down the severity of violent acts. It becomes so easy and thoughtless, at the push of a button. In Caesar, you can kill everybody, or nobody. You can let Brutus be your friend on Facebook, or you can instant message him a good mauling. The ending may change, but Caesar's Day Off never breaks its tone. It's viciously upbeat with a persistence that's actually a little disturbing, because the joke is that while mortal consequences are at your fingertips, the very nature of your power detaches you from feeling any impact. And the more you play, the more endings you get, and the more pernicious the upbeat tone seems, the darker the game's smile becomes. That subversion is present in many Major Bueno games, some of them more explicitly baiting us with the lull of a 2D cartoonishness and the switch of a heretofore concealed appeal to compassion.

It might be tempting to assume that the simple mechanics in Major Bueno games don't matter. But by working within strict limitations, pared-down controls and singular goals, Major Bueno games control the pace of comedic timing. Much of the comedy in these games stems not only from a visual and aural absurdity, but also from the implementation of a discrete, satirical bait-and-switch. And despite the surreality of these

games' premises, the use of humor as a driver rather than a goal not only makes the games funnier, but a lot more resonant because they disempower the player.

Many Major Bueno games are good at fooling the player not just with whimsy and bright colour, but through simple and familiar mechanics. I come to one of their arcade-style games the way I would to Bubble Bobble or Pac Man. All the "gamey" elements are there: an ostensible goal, an obstacle, a point-scoring system and a set of objects and simple controls for me to manipulate. These are things associated with skill, merit, reward and mastery. In other words, the acquisition of power. Major Bueno gives me these things, baits me with these things, and then uses my very conditioning toward them to undermine my expectation of validation or reward. Maybe the punchline is that my point-grinding, or desire to master the system or get the princess or whatever, don't matter nearly as much as the choices I made to do those things. Maybe instead of looking linearly to my goal, I should have been looking laterally, to how my choice to meet that goal was affecting everything else.

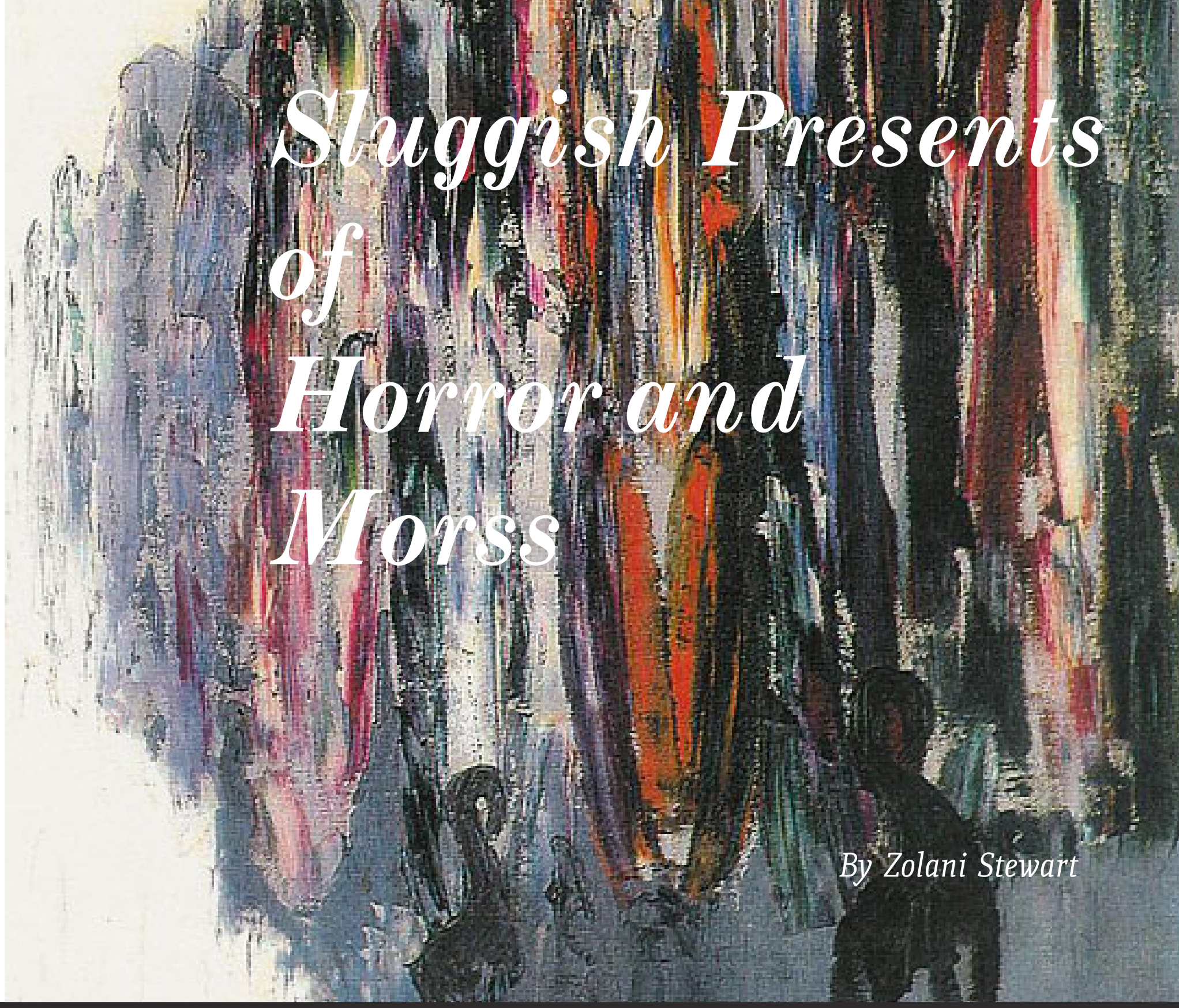
There was another tidbit from Caballero that stuck out to me: he said that in life, we actually solve problems when we're at our most vulnerable. Confronting a serious issue means facing it, not covering ourselves in armour or powerups--that's called escapism. Games that play into power fantasies do so at the expense of genuine, human problem-solving. For this reason, Caballero says he prefers puzzle or platformer mechanics, in which the player can be more thoughtful about spatial and temporal relationships. By working out how places and objects relate to one another, Caballero recites the refrain that says players may think systematically, structurally and empathetically toward their own relationship towards other places, people and things in their lives. They can have a fuller understanding of how they affect others and how others affect them, but critically, only if the games are made such that their playing is principally directed toward that subject matter. Towards things like human intimacy and vulnerability. Major Bueno games are vulnerable, and they make the player vulnerable.

Pan Man (2013) is presented as a goofy skill-based arcade game. You play as a man with a pretty useless talent: the ability to toss a pancake in the air and then catch it in his sizzling pan. You rack up points by modulating the pressure on your spacebar to control the pancake's momentum and moving left and right with the arrow keys to catch the thing like a football. You perform this act to the delight of your young family, then for the people at the pub, then the people at the theatre, and so on until your fame grows, and you're finally replaced by a younger, more virile pancake-catcher. And then, you are alone with your points. Or not. At any point after the pub scene and before the "official" ending, you can give it up and return home to your family. There's no reason for you to comply with the system. There's no real reason to try to "win" the game.

Pan Man is a beautiful and tragic and funny and heartwarming bait-and-switch. By using an illusory process of point-scoring, Pan Man subverts the concept of "winning" and chastises the player for single-mindedly chasing a power fantasy. Pan Man doesn't ever really reward the player for playing: get to the end and become spiritually and socially bankrupt, or stay at home and sacrifice a dream. There's no real problem to solve either. The process of playing Pan Man creates more complications than it resolves, since the points are only a reminder of the fact that earning them reflects empty ambition. No matter which path you choose, you're giving up something. The moral weight of the decisions, and I would argue the game's true goal, is to make you decide which sacrifice is more objectionable.

Pan Man makes you laugh an increasingly nervous laugh. Major Bueno games in general aren't really trying to make you chuckle. The humor flows naturally as a consequence of genuine, earnest, parabolic storytelling. Major Bueno has cultivated a voice that's distinguished by simple mechanics and a soulful wit. These games are funny because they use comedy as a driver, not a goal.

Lana Polansky is a Montreal based writer, game critic, crafter and writer, and a professional scowler. She makes delicious granola.



Sluggish Presents of Horror and Morss

By Zolani Stewart

Jake Clover games often carry similar themes: various depictions of war, glorified hyperviolence, street crime within technofuturist settings, oppressive state control in the case of the recent *000000052573743*, and often, depictions of extreme chaos and terror on mass scales. Clover's games reject naïve, optimistic futurism, and they avoid the apathy and cynical disconnect of cyberpunk. These games are fearful; they exist as recurring, paranoid nightmares. They are often loud, chaotic, and unsettling in their depictions of gore and suffering, and the rough, jagged images and animations often grind against a flamboyant, jumpy energy.

Jake Clover's earlier games are slightly more "gamey" in their reliance on traditional metrics (points, high scores), win-lose states and system mastery through play and repetition, but *Nuign Specter* marks a shift in Clover's work to games more focused on graphical effects work, sound work, narrative, and tone. In *Nuign Specter*, you play as a faceless wolf-like figure, who shoots and kills a clerk and a hostile bystander at a corner store, to retrieve food to appease an ominous black monster that waits your kitchen. You start the game in a living room with an unassuming dead body in the corner. There is no sound but low static, and our player-character stands in front of the fireplace, smoking a cigarette in a manner we might interpret as nonchalant if these figures had expressions. When we walk, we walk with a cane in one hand and a silver shotgun in the other, at an aching pace, through many rooms with nothing inside them, and through dark, empty outdoor planes, with a couple of leafless trees and barren soil. These walking sections are long and quiet, and they're well-paced in that they're slightly longer than what would normally be comfortable. Of course then when we reach the

depanneur, and find the clerk with their own shotgun waiting to kill us, we shoot them dead to the wall, and there's a burst of energy! The sound of the shotgun is piercingly loud—the clips are heard hitting the floor. And when we shoot, the screen starts to freak, as if we smacked the top of an old CRT, communicating a sense of malleability and instability to this universe. And yet, the dead staticness still lingers; there is no real change in tone in the game, and no change in music or animation. This gruesome killing is treated as some normal state of occurrence, if only to heighten the unsettling weight of the act. So there's a complex weaving between deadness and a nervous energy, between the quiet buzz of the corner store lights and the shock and disarray felt with the sight of these bloodied corpses. This intense contrast is similar to Swofl's *Rorschach 16* or AngryDome's *Last Words,* other games that use a deadened audio-spacial tone to conceal a deeper, more disturbing subtext.

This contrast is also a way to communicate something important about the characters. The wolf is a creature who is revealed as unfeeling and possibly sociopathic. He is unphased by these acts of brutal violence, and seems uninterested in the world around him. On the backdrop of a certain area in the outdoors environment is a large building that blasts what sounds like party music, another way the game implicates the wolf as isolated, lonely, and probably anti-social. This party building as loneliness device appears again in *Duck Turnip*. And the wolf character makes several appearances in Clover's future games, with radically different interpretations, notably as a brutal dictator-like figure in 000000052573743. *Nuign Specter*, therefore, acts not only as a proto-*Sluggish Morss*, but as a sort of roadmap for how Jake Clover would approach his future games.

Less Raum is similar to Paiva's *Mario Empalado* in that it uses coloured outlines on black ground to create glare that drains the eyes, a feeling similar to staring at a full-brightness monitor at 3am. There exists a sense of haziness and a confused, intoxicated energy. Colours on the screen seem to dance in hypnotic waves while the game plays to wavy, distorted sonar noises, or what Liz Ryerson observed as "guitar feedback with reverb". This aesthetic works well for the game's subject matter. You play as a small alien who is pulled over in a space-car, presumably for possessing drugs, possibly while intoxicated, before getting arrested, breaking out of your cell, and jacking a car at the police station to meet up with a figure who I assume is the alien's superior in a crime ring.

Less Raum uses an untranslated alien typeset not only for its dialogue, but to give you instructions and warnings. Images flash with scales and button prompts with information that seems important. Yet the game doesn't give you useful information. It doesn't explain that you can shoot a ray gun with the 'z' key to bust out of jail, or that 'spacebar' is for entering and exiting cars. While you fly though outer space and through massive metallic tunnels, the game flashes a prompt to press the down key and X, which doesn't do anything in itself, but "X" alone opens your inventory, where you find various items with untranslated descriptions that do nothing when selected. Some of the items look like bottles, which implies an intoxication, but the game doesn't offer explicit answers. My presumption about a drug ring is also only a hypothesis, that stems from my observations of the indistinct items you pick up, and the way the game's endings change. *Less Raum* is obscure, and it pushes you to piece together an understanding from vague clues. The game alienates us with a strange language. It rejects and pushes against the awkward, symbiotic relationship between players and avatars by emphasizing disconnection. *Less Raum*'s evasion of the player's understanding calls into question the various frames of perspective that operate inside and outside the fiction. Who is *Less Raum* really made for? Jake Clover often experiments with complex forms of focalization in exciting ways. He explores the perspectives of characters who are emotionally disconnected from their settings, which leads them to fall into states of disaffection and moral disavowal. In *Less Raum* and *Nuign Specter*, these ideas are shown mimetically through the depiction of crime and sudden hyperviolence. And *Sluggish Morss* uses these ideas as basis for how it approaches the future.

Sluggish Morss' vision of the future is different from many videogames because it isn't realized through a depiction of material objects. In science fiction, we know that a setting is "futuristic" by the presentation of material "technology." We know something is "set in the future" because we see scanners and big neon skyscapers and hovercars or whatever. *Sluggish Morss*, in comparison, carries a futurism of "affect," the feelings that we go through when trying to live an ordinary life.

The future is about what characters are feeling and how they see the world around them, not the technologies that exist, or what hot button topics are referenced. In this respect, *Sluggish Morss* becomes a vivid and deep portrayal of what it means to exist under an unstable late capitalism. It feels current and significant in a way that videogame science fiction usually doesn't.

Sluggish Morss is a game about time and attention. We play as a nameless big-nosed creature, who for the sake of this piece we can call.. "Mary" and gender female. *Sluggish Morss* is about Mary and her struggle against the violence of time, attention and hyperstimulation. Time is something that constantly eludes her; she goes about the world at a pace incompatible with the spheres that she finds herself trying to live inside. It's not necessarily that the world is too fast for her. Rather, the speed of the world around her constantly, yet unpredictably changes, and she can never seem to grasp or adjust to her environment. Her sprite is blurred, as if to imply a lack of focus, and when she walks it shakes violently. When she leaves certain points in a space, you can see blurry "timestamps" of her past positions. And when standing, she smokes a joint in a manner identical to *Nuign Specter*'s Wolf. It's a nonchalant gesture, but here it feels illusory, a veil for what is actually a lack of understanding of the processes and systems that are functioning around her.

We start *Sluggish Morss* viewing a meteor ring, in an outer space setting coloured by flickering blue and orange lights, as if there are cathode ray tubes inside our monitors. The game is actually framed by a very transparent white CRT frame. Occasionally, the whole screen will flicker and buzz. The CRT monitor is a great way of questioning and muddling the layers of perspectives we're seeing. Who is "narrating" or focalizing *Sluggish Morss*? Where and how do we as players really exist? Initially, the game is opened by an odd infant-looking figure presented through a screen. The infant narrates what seems to be a backstory in Mandarin in a typeset similar to that of *Less Raum*. We're told, albeit not very clearly, that we're on a ship called the *Sluggish Morss* and that Mary has somehow found a job doing dull surveillance work. The title card shows in reverse, saying "Welcome to fabulous *Sluggish Morss*, Amongst the stars!"

Far behind this 'frame' is a sequence of cycling, transparent images: a picture of the earth, a photo of jet bombers, a bomb explosion, and a hydrogen cloud. These are just meaningless images in themselves, but together they act as Mary's sub-concious. These representations of war, violence, and suffering are contextless, empty stimulants of nervous energy, cycled endlessly through this character's mind. Occasionally, the front 'frame', layered on top of all the sprites, shows raining paper money, specifically when Mary's authoritarian higher-ups are heckling and scolding her, which implies a constant state of distraction. Mary moves sluggishly, but she is always stimulated. She is depicted as distant yet hyperaware. She experiences several hallucinations that make it difficult to differentiate her reality from her imagination. *Sluggish Morss* presents its protagonist through this mess of focalizations and speeds that are confusing and feel contradictory, and the game becomes a dense flux of directionless hyperenergy that ends up breaking Mary by the game's end.

The ship halls are filled with green creatures who seem to be of the same 'species' as Mary, laying on the floor in a sickly manner. During conversations, they act as 'elephants' in the room, an unsettling subtext to what this place really is and what's really going on. These conversations tend to be with charactrs who are implied as Mary's co-workers: a giant rat, a giant fish, a giant skeletal dinosaur, a giant cat, and a giant ghost-like figure among other big-nosed creatures. They're presented as images with inverted colours that shake and wobble furiously. They look frightening, hyperactive, and paranoid, like the player-character. They speak in all-caps, and they muddle awkward half-cohesive sentences. And they go on and on about the coins. We need the coins! Don't take my coins!

The coins are curious little things. Interestingly enough, they look and move a lot like coins from a Mario game, so they imply not only a certain capitalistic value but also a certain 'affectual' value. Mario Coins are shiny and they feel good to collect, and they make a nice clicking sound when you land on them that also implies a high value. They simulate the kind of exchange form of consumerism that we, who live in a capitalist society, use to make us feel good. It feels good to make exchanges. But in *Sluggish Morss*, coins make an ugly "thump." They carry no exchange value: we can't buy things with them, and they don't affect a larger system in a meaningful way.

Yet coins are highly valued by nearly every character in the world, and Mary is arguably obsessed with them. Most of the game's hallucinatory sections are about collecting coins. But we never see what the coins are supposed to materialize. There's no object that Mary should be fixated on that the coins would allow her to exchange for. We do know that she owes her brother an immense about of money from the scene in which he waves a gun in her face to threaten her, although we're not told what the money was needed for. The voice of her higher ups narrate her inner monologue, telling us that she does in fact love her brother and she is concerned about her inability to pay him, but we're actually encouraged to keep collecting coins. This obsessive process of coin collecting overrides any real feelings or concerns Mary might have.

"We both have lots in common with the coins. Where do you think you would be if you didn't get any of the coins? You would be way behind, we would be waiting here for ages, until its christmas time, and then still, you probably wouldn't even be here."

Coins don't have any real material or exchange value in *Sluggish Morss* because it's never demonstrated. They don't do anything. Instead, collecting coins only necessitates getting more coins. This self-perpetuating process is what Mary is really obsessed with. It's the act itself of collecting that propels her. Mary's fixation is a little odd because coins don't carry the satisfying click of Mario coins or Sonic rings, but maybe the coins are not satisfying to collect at all. Maybe just the fact that it's a process that she can entrench herself in is what keeps her attention. Because in a setting that's so chaotic and unstable, coins act as the only real constant. The process of collecting coins is a short-term action that constantly repeats itself; it's predictable and reliable and that can be comforting. Coin-collecting allows Mary to disconnect in a way that's different from the Wolf or the Alien, to disassociate herself from the pressures and hyperenergies that are slowly killing her. *Sluggish Morss* ends with a sort of out-of-body experience. Time has decomposed, and Mary finds herself floating in infinite space. We see her fetal on the ship floor like a husk, or a body without its soul. She ends up trapped among the others in a hellish infinity.

I enjoyed *Sluggish Morss* quite a bit. I think it's an important metaphor for living under an unstable neoliberal technocapitalism. Here we find similar hyperenergies and anxieties brought about by the speeds of ordinary life, as well as short-term loops that give us comfort. Jake Clover constantly approaches the idea of what it means to disconnect and be connected, to a social sphere, to a mode of living, to other people. In this sense, *Sluggish Morss* is pretty incredible work of science-fiction. For me, the game represents something quite personal. Amid all the chaos and weirdness, I see an internal struggle that reflect real concerns or issues that Clover may have himself. Despite the game's popularity, it's slightly disappointing to see how little its recognition has translated to understanding. A Youtube or Google search will show the game is often characterized as "on drugs" or merely "crazy weird," as if it has no value other than of some sort of 'trippy' entertainment. This makes me sad, not only because I like the game, but because it really feels like something the game was trying to get out that has been falling on deaf ears.

Zolani Stewart is a freelance writer, games critic, and founding editor of the AR. His compulsion towards writing is matched only by his stylish lack of punctuality.

Failure in Loops

By Line Hollis

In the film *Groundhog Day (1993)*, Bill Murray plays the meteorologist and insufferable asshole Phil Collins, who gets stuck in the town of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, trapped in a time loop that repeats a single day over and over. He remains stuck in this cycle until he wins the affection of Rita (played by Andie MacDowell), the "good woman" of the film, while reaching some kind of moral enlightenment. A bad guy who decides to become a better guy to win the woman of his dreams is a romantic comedy trope so common as to be industry standard, but few movies show the dirty work of how a person actually becomes better in a detail as exhaustive as *Groundhog Day*.

The most comprehensive fan estimate, backed up by the intuition of director Harold Ramis, puts the duration of Phil's purgatory at roughly forty years. Phil suffers, resigns himself, suffers again, despairs, and finally lets go of returning to his life before he reaches his peace. To me, it implies that people change only after failing at the same thing over and over, and that the only way to escape a pattern you're stuck in is to make the best of life while you're in it.

A variety of games have picked up the Groundhog Day structure and used it for reasons of their own. In movies, the pattern feels unusual, but in games it's more familiar. Players repeat sections of a game all the time, failing and repeating until they get it right. So when games use a time loop structure, it comes across as a metafictional joke, concealing the fact that most game characters live through the same events over and over. When *Groundhog Day* reaches its final scenes and Phil walks through town showered with gratitude by the population of Punxsutawney, he appears as the RPG hero at the end of their side quests.

And like Phil, the videogame hero probably made it there by repeating sections of their life over and over until they knew exactly what to do. In most games, the world's final state represents a heavily edited version of events, repeated until there are no deaths, no unacceptable failures, and no incomplete missions. Often, the only difference between a game that uses a Groundhog Day structure and one that doesn't, is whether the protagonist is aware of what's happening.

The most popular game known to use a time loop structure is *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask (2000)* for the Nintendo 64. In the game, Link goes through three days over and over, and the world resets each time he dies or when he reaches midnight of the third day. Compared to previous Zelda games, it disrupted the typical sense of progression by wiping the player's achievements for each new cycle. If you killed the boss of a dungeon, saved some villager in a side quest, opened up a secret cave, whatever, it was all gone by the next loop. Most Zelda games progressively open up areas of the map, so this was shocking when I played it in college. You could save some of the world for some of the time, but only temporarily. Only Link's new abilities were carried over each time.

I played *Majora's Mask* when I was in college at nineteen, and I got obsessed with it. I was living alone for the first time, after things had gone poorly with two roommates and another had failed to show up at the start of the school year. Left to my own devices, I played videogames late into the night day after day. Once I played for so long I was surprised by the dawn and realized I was late for my morning class. I don't have a lot of clear memories from that time, but my sharpest of them come from *Majora's Mask*: leaping out of the ocean in Zora form for the first time, seeing a wedding interrupted by the end of the world, and hearing the sounds of the morning on the first day; sunrise music, accompanied by the noise of the town creaking to life. Just a few seconds of cutscene to catch my breath, then off like a shot to attack the rigorous schedule I had planned.

A Groundhog Day game gained an unusual hold over me again last year, when I started playing a visual novel called *Shira Oka: Second Chances (2010)*. It's a take on the otome dating sim genre by a group of American developers. As usual, you're a boy in high school trying to romance one of several archetypal young women. The hook is that when you get to the end of high school or fail along the way, your character is sent back in time to start over by an angel named Satsuko. Here, the obvious joke of the time loop is that you're being given an in-story license to chase after every character once so you can see all the endings.

It shares a number of themes directly with the movie *Groundhog Day*. Both are about a shitty guy becoming less shitty by living through the same events over and over (according to Satsuko, her goal is to get you to be a decent person for reasons she doesn't explain until later). They both feature a woman who represents the goal of the hero's spiritual journey, although *Shira Oka* eventually takes this trope in an unexpected direction. The objectifying conflation of a woman with a man's spiritual fulfillment is not a good part of either story, but the shared theme of personal progress as a series of repetitive failures gets to me a lot.

The interactive fiction game *Vicious Cycles 2011* uses the Groundhog Day structure as a driver for a mystery story. The player-character is a time-traveling agent who is caught in a loop while he tries to prevent a bomb from going off on a train. He mostly uses verbs of observation to move forward in the cycle. EXAMINE [object] is a common pattern in interactive fiction that's mostly used to provide color or hints for puzzle solutions, but here it's an active verb that alters the world. If you notice something in one cycle, then new possibilities might be open to you in the next. Repeating the same scenes naturally lends itself to a storytelling device where some extra information or perspective is added each time. Games can use this kind of layering to create dramatic irony or build suspense. Applying it to a detective story is a natural fit.

There's a cool and frantic rhythm to *Vicious Cycles*. The cycle itself is only a few minutes long. At first, you're just stuck on the train, trying to figure out what's going on. But over time, you move faster and more purposefully. The player-character knows what they need to do next, so the available actions are narrowed down to support the current goal. The game carries you through the action. As you build information about the central mystery, the game adds a few pieces of information about the player-character, through old memories that show up between tone jumps. Here,

there's a suggestion about an external mystery and a mystery of the self being uncovered in parallel.

Many of the games that fall into the Groundhog Day pattern take place in a fantasy or science fiction setting to contextualize the time loop. Mattie Brice's *Mainichi (2012)* is an exception. Here you play as a Mattie Brice-like avatar going through an ordinary experience as a trans woman of color. She prepares herself to go out, and walks to a cafe to meet a friend, with the chance of encountering harassment on the way. There's no real endpoint that's defined in the game; its loop is endless. You may have a different experience depending on the actions you take, but nothing explicit carries over from day to day.

The only permanent change is your perspective as a player. The first time I played the game, my instinct when walking outside was to approach the side of the street with more people. More interactive objects mean more game stuff, right? However, this leads to vicious harassment, including one man who follows your character down the street shouting at you. Lesson learned—in subsequent cycles I stuck to the emptier sidewalks.

Technically, any game could be played the way *Mainichi* is played, if the player just commits to restarting every time. However, the decision to force a restart without break communicates a couple of significant points. First, as the title implies, these experiences in the game are everyday occurrences for Brice. Secondly, by giving the player multiple chances at the same day, the game challenges them to try different strategies to avoid harassment, or maybe even attempting a 'perfect' playthrough. Forcing them through the gauntlet over and over teaches them the trade-offs in the system and the impossibility of getting everything 'right' in a world that's already stacked against you. *Mainichi* isn't about a character who changes; it's about building up layers of information over cycles to change the player's perspective.

The PlayStation 2 game *Way of the Samurai (2002)* is an illuminating border case. It's a sword fighting game with a branching storyline that's presented in the style of a 70's samurai movie. Indeed, if you play it all the way to the end, it has a length of about 120min. But it's almost impossible to play it through in one sitting: it's designed to kill you early and often. Each time you die, you start over from the very beginning. The only thing you get to carry with you in each cycle is a limited collection of swords, which can be leveled up and imbued with skills you've learned. This lets your character improve over time, making the early encounters progressively easier and letting you get a little further along every time. Like many Groundhog Day games, the protagonist's knowledge and abilities change while the world around them stays the same.

Presumably, the final playthrough would be a beautifully executed samurai movie where the main character wins every fight and performs the right moves every step of the way. *Way of the Samurai* foregrounds this aspect of the Groundhog Day structure; it doesn't let you pretend you were a perfect hero from the start. A game protagonist like Mass Effect's Shepard, for instance, is canonically perfect in the game's fiction. Every fatal failure and choice you didn't like was easily rectified through a reloaded save. In *Way of the Samurai*, you don't get to patch over momentary mistakes; you do it right or you do it over from the start. The rewind in a Groundhog Day game can be of the most gut-wrenching feelings. I got right to the climax of two *Shira Oka* runs only to pick a wrong dialogue option at the last minute, flinging me back three years. I screamed out loud both times.

* * * * *

What distinguishes Groundhog Day games from each other is the extent to which the protagonist is aware of their condition. This awareness drives most of the comedy and drama in *Groundhog Day* itself. It has the effect of making Phil, the movie character, come across more like a typical game protagonist in a world of non-player characters. The residents of Punxsutawney repeat the same lines of dialogue over and over; they have no awareness of the system they live inside, and they all have problems that only Phil can solve. And once Phil learns the patterns of the town, he's free to ignore, exploit, or become a god to these people depending on his mood. To someone who's played a lot of games, it's pretty familiar.

The hero of *Way of the Samurai* has no apparent awareness, outside of an introduction sequence that's as subtly self-referential as a tutorial level. The protagonist of adventure game I Have 1 Day seems to be selectively

aware of the loop for comedic purposes. The agent in *Vicious Cycles* 2011 is aware of the loop, but is disoriented by it. Brice's avatar in *Mainichi* shows no awareness of being in a loop, but the depiction of ordinary events and their abstract presentation puts her in a more symbolic fictional space than the protagonists of the other games. The protagonists of *Shira Oka* and *Majora's Mask* are the closest to Phil Connor analogues, aware of their situation and open to making the most of them.

When the protagonist has more awareness, there's a distance that's erased between the player and their character. Each time you die and restart in a conventional game, a gap of knowledge opens up between you and the character you're playing. You know what's coming, but they keep reacting the same way, much like an NPC, or the supporting characters in *Groundhog Day*. A character who already knows what's going on seems more intelligent and more sympathetic to the player who's going through the same experiences. One of my favorite running jokes in *Shira Oka* is when the main character impatiently bypasses a conversation he's already had by saying some variation of, "Let me guess, you're going to say..." Thanks man, I wanted to skip that conversation too!

A game that takes a more complex approach to the protagonist's awareness is *RimorD (2013)*, a fast-paced dialogue-driven variation of the theme. The time loop in *RimorD* is the shortest of all the games I mentioned: about ten seconds in both game-time and real-time. The plot is a bit confusing, but the gist is that its ten seconds will loop forever and you, rather than being any one protagonist, are a kind of virus that spreads from person to person trapped within the loop. In each iteration, you have ten seconds to spread to the next character by any means necessary. This results in a lot of death, some of which is cleaned up by the next loop.

Divorced from the experiences of a single character, the loop takes on a different flavor. Some of the characters seem aware of their situation, while others don't. Regardless, the frequent character-switching discourages you from identifying with any one of them. This is no longer about a person learning something through repeated failure. Rather, it's about a group of people doomed to live out a cycle and look like fools in the process. It shifts the attention to those poor NPCs, the residents of Punxsutawney, stuck in limbo to serve the story arc of a force greater than themselves. But *RimorD* doesn't play this off as tragic or anything; its tone sits firmly as a surreal black comedy, like a comic relief scene in a David Lynch film.

A game that does take a tragic turn with respect to the residents of Punxsutawney is *No One Has to Die (2013)*. Initially, it presents itself as a narrative puzzle game that encourages exploration of its branching paths. There are five characters trapped in a burning building, and over the course of several branching events, you have to select which characters survive. Eventually, the group is narrowed down to a single character besides yourself. Only after unlocking all the possible endings do you discover the twist: Troy, one of the characters who is initially presented as a villain claiming to have started the fire, turns out to be a Phil Connor, who has lived through so many loops he just wants to die as fast as possible. Only by saving him and convincing him to help you can you break the cycle and save everyone through time travel shenanigans. Like other Groundhog Day games, the key to ending the cycle is a piece of information instead of an object; in this case, a keycode that makes it possible to close more fire doors and save more people each turn.

No One Has to Die is notable for explicitly including a "Phil" in a suicidal state. *Groundhog Day*'s Phil also goes through a suicidal period, leading to the darkest jokes in a movie that's already a comedy about existential despair. It comes after Phil has repeatedly failed to win over the woman he's fallen in love with, the woman who represents the peace that eludes him. Forced with living through the same failure over and over, Phil starts trying to end the cycle prematurely, both in hopes of breaking the cycle and because he's run out of things to do. Like Phil, Troy in *No One Has to Die* has given up, even on breaking the cycle. It's upsetting, and it takes the emotional reality of the story seriously.

The sequence where Phil tries to get Rita to fall in love with him is an interesting one. He learns her interests and values over the course of several failed seduction loops, and each time he adjusts his behavior to be more appealing to her. It works, initially - each time, she likes him a bit more, and lets the date last a little longer. Up to this point, it plays out exactly like the dating sim threads of *Shira Oka*, apart from the fact that Phil is intended to be a creep. It works

right up until she almost decides to spend the night with him after the most manipulatively romantic date yet, then suddenly gets weirded out, accuses him of stalking her, slaps him, and leaves. In the next loop, he tries to recreate the same sequence of events, only to fail a little earlier... then earlier again, even earlier the next time, and so on until he eventually gives up.

When I watched this as a kid, I was confused that things didn't turn out the same way as before, since Phil was doing the same things as before. I asked my mom about it, and she said it meant that you can't recreate a perfect day. For some reason, I would turn this statement over in my head for years. It made me kind of sad, as if you only had one chance at getting an important moment right, and if you fucked it up, that was it.

Watching the movie as an adult, I read this sequence very differently. Phil didn't fuck up because he tried to recapture something magical, he fucked up because he was creeping on Rita and she realized it. Like Kim Moss's description[2] of a dating sim protagonist—depositing kindness coins in return for love describes him perfectly:

"These men have an insidious strategy for pursuing the women they like. They become friends with them. They listen to their problems and do nice things for them, and they do it all on the selfish assumption that if they do that enough the woman they like will have no choice but to fall for them."

But unlike most dating sim love interests, Rita rightfully found his behaviour disturbing. The better he got to know her, the sooner her alarm bells went off.

There's a slight echo of this in *Shira Oka*. You have a phone in the game which you can use to make dates with people, but only after they've told you their phone number. They'll do this after your affection with them is high enough. Of course, once you've learned their number in one cycle, you know it for all future cycles. So in theory, you can call people and ask them out before they even know you or like you. The characters respond to this powergaming move in different ways. No one likes it if you call them before you've met them, but some are okay with you calling them before they like you. Popularity-obsessed Aya is flattered that you scammed her number out of someone, and sweet Naoko assumes she told you and forgot. Witchy Rena, one of my favorite characters, is charmed by your honest explanation that you're traveling through time, so you can become friends almost immediately in later playthroughs. Most characters' reactions, though, range from annoyed to horrified, understandably enough.

That said, *Shira Oka* behaves like a typical dating sim for the most part, kindness coins and all. Your information advantage over the girls is creepy, but mostly goes uncommented. Not to mention that by the end of the game you're a sixty-year-old soul hitting on high school girls. Nonetheless, *Shira Oka* hit me a lot harder than I expected. This goes back to why I find Groundhog Day games so affecting in the first place.

* * * * *

I mentioned before that I didn't have a lot of clear memories from the time I played *Majora's Mask*. I didn't understand why this was at the time, but I would figure it out a year later. In the next clear memory I have, I'm holding a kitchen knife, I'm looking at my wrist, and I'm realizing that there's still an insurmountable wall of absurdity between me and the thing I'm trying to do. I'm frustrated and disappointed. At some point I go to my work-study job at the university library, and somewhere in there I stop googling commonly available poisons and start googling "how does depression work."

I don't think I'll ever understand what happened in my head that day. For whatever reason, starting that night, I began observing myself obsessively. I read as much as I could about the biology of emotion and started keeping reams of diaries, recording my moods and the factors that might affect them. I tracked the patterns of my behavior. I learned that my depression was on a seasonal cycle, one that reliably strikes me during the summer and winter, and that it would probably never end. I learned that depression interferes with memory formation, which was probably why so many of my memories were a fog. I read that depressive episodes usually get worse every time someone has them, and that odds were against my living to see forty. I went through a period of despair. And I kept going.

Figuring out how this cycle of depression works and how to navigate it has been the animating goal of my life for the past ten years. At first I was in pure survival mode. All I cared about was making it

through the winter alive and keeping people from asking too many questions. Over time, my knowledge of myself built up in layers. I started recognizing familiar thought patterns that were warning signs of something worse. After going through them over and over, I even learned to avoid them sometimes.

But they never entirely stopped, and they never will. I had this idea once that I would eventually hit a turning point, some undefined miracle would happen, and I'd emerge on the other side a fully-fledged normal person like I'd always imagined myself growing up to be. I guess that's how stories taught me change would happen, or maybe it's just how humans expect things to work. Sometimes I even catch myself remembering the past decade as unbroken progress towards being more okay.

That's not how it happened, though. Every time I've gotten a grasp on one problem, it's revealed another problem that was previously hidden. And when I grab that one, I lose my control over the first problem. Learning the patterns doesn't always mean you can take the actions you need to prevent them. Sometimes, such actions don't even exist. Sometimes, all it does is give you a different perspective. This is my life now: just trying to become more like myself when I can, and fucking up in predictable ways the rest of the time. I don't think I'll ever get "better," but these days I do think I'll probably make it to forty.

So I better understand now why the metaphor that drives Groundhog Day stories resonates so much with me. It's a model of change that turns repeated failures into a central element of storytelling. It also contains a core of optimism. All your achievements can be wiped out, you can start over from the beginning, but you can still hold onto what you know and what you've been through. Maybe you'll be stuck in limbo forever, but there's still the possibility of—slowly and unreliably—changing who you are. That's something to hold on to.

Line Hollis is a researcher and writer living in the Boston area. She spends most of her time thinking about people, interfaces, and the weird things that happen in between them.

1: *The painting shown in this piece is called **The Wren's Gate** by Robert Caldwell.*

2: ***You Know What's Gross? We Often Play Nice Guys™ In Games With Romance Options** by Kim Moss; originally published on Nightmare Mode.*

3: *All games mentioned are listed in the index.*

Space Pulp Modernism

By Alex Pieschel

Stephen "thecatamites" Murphy's games make me feel good and bad about all of the time I've spent playing videogames. They embrace the arbitrariness of videogame narrative, not in a way that's dismissive, but in a way that suggests that a disjointed collage-space can be just as affecting as something 'realistic', but for different reasons. His games embody both tension and collaboration between pulp and modernism, and they resist an assumed binary between high and low culture.

Murphy's games almost deflect interpretation. They push against something like realism, or conventional storytelling, which is also what the twentieth century modernists were attempting, but canonical literary modernists were prone to express contempt for the unread, the nongenius, and the uninitiated. I'm thinking of the modernists on the syllabus in a literature survey class, whose heavily footnoted poems or essays imply readers should have read every book in their original classical language while wandering through a broken western "Wasteland" of crumbling art. I recognize that my own resistance to modernist literature was likely influenced by the limited examples I was offered at the time; English departments are right to point out that modernism experiments with form, but modernism is too often rigidly cast as an aesthetic that has to be exclusive and difficult to parse in order to be worthy. This definition also relies on an amputation of form from content, or style from substance, and ignores a great deal of works that are excluded from a narrow literary canon.

Most arguments about WHAT IS GAME are preoccupied with a presumed separation between style and substance. Big budget game design often thinks in terms of a form v. content binary, which is why play-

ing AAA games feels like visiting a ghost town that has really efficient public transit. What do we mean when we refer to a game's "content?" Often the term loosely refers to a theme, or narrative, or the player's experience of a system, or a combination thereof. In an eloquent analysis of Liz Ryerson's *Problem Attic*, Brendan Vance argues that a simultaneous obsession with and neglect of "content" explains the design choices of most modern commercial games. Vance observes that most commercial games are designed to transport players as quickly and efficiently as possible towards a hollow "placeholder" that we call "content." "Mechanics" is another hollow placeholder often used to mean a game's formal structure: what a jump button does, what it feels like to press the button, where the hoops are positioned for you to jump through, etc. Neither term gets us much closer to describing what is interesting about the experience of a game.

In the 1960s, Susan Sontag dismantled the critical separation of style from substance and rejected the splitting off of form from content. She dissected the term "camp" to describe a sensibility that embraces style as a kind of substance. Camp is about performance; it mixes earnest enthusiasm with playful awareness of a formula. Camp is a character who is one very intense trait. Camp is character without development. Camp can also constitute the reinterpretation of an art form along a new ideological spectrum. Sontag describes camp as an exaggerated theatricality, a performed sensibility that challenges a conservative intellectual establishment. She calls the "lens of camp" an "aesthete's vision" that "blocks out content." Sontag argues that camp is "alive to a double sense," but not in the sense of a difference between what is literal and what is symbolic, but in the difference "between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice." Sontag points out, "The whole point of camp is to dethrone the serious," and "the experiences of camp are based on the great discovery that the sensibility of high culture has no monopoly on refinement." Stephen Murphy's games complicate the relationship between meaning and artifice, and between what Sontag calls "pure camp," which is naïve, and "manufactured camp," which is calculated and ironic. These games are both calculated, in the sense that they very deliberately, theatrically reproduce super exaggerated tropes, and earnest in the sense that the tropes serve genuine meaning and emotion. Murphy's games succeed because they look for, as Sontag puts it, "success in certain passionate failures," rather than aspiring to produce High Culture.

Murphy's games use pulp's toolset with camp's enthusiasm. Like Shakespeare, pulp and camp don't care that much about plot or character development, traditional literary signifiers of "content" that still influence Western Culture's decision to deem certain works worthy of prolonged attention. Nor do they care much about presenting meaning in terms of an explicit answer to a question. Like camp, pulp developed into a term that describes an aesthetic reaction to culture, sometimes a reaction to both mass consumer culture and elite intellectual culture. Pulp and camp both suggest a theatrical emphasis on form, an interpretive performance of an established mode, and a playful relationship with meaning. Pulp and camp carry modernist sensibilities, but they evade the unintelligible layers of high modernism through an attention to style and tropes grounded in popular appeal. The word "pulp" comes from the wood-pulp material from which cheap magazines (as opposed to the more expensive "glossy" or "slick" magazines) were made in the 1890s through the 1950s. Though these magazines featured a variety of writing styles, "pulp" eventually morphed into a blanket genre term that describes something formulaic, lurid, sensationalist, sleazy, or any number of other words with similar mass culture connotations.

Many writers who wrote for popular audiences innovated within their respective genres, and canon writers like Ezra Pound published in the pulps. Pulp modernism is a term that describes the 20th century overlap between high culture experimental writing and formulaic mass produced writing. Theoretically, pulp modernism is an artistic ethos that can aspire to the opaque and mysterious, but still manage to avoid pretension through the use of familiar, exaggerated tropes (true crime, romance, detective fiction, slasher horror, etc.). On his older site Mystery Zone, Murphy points out that the old antithesis of pulp and modernism is dubious:

"I would argue that both pulp and modernism need each other to realise their respective projects: for modernism, pulp gives a venue from which to excise the last remaining traces of romanticism. I've mentioned before how mysteries and detective stories found a kind of sympathetic echo in the works of a whole lot of 20th century (post)modernists

who used the template as a vehicle of exploration, but scifi, slapstick comedy and comicbooks fulfilled a similar role. Pulp as an engagement with 'popular' culture as a whole, as a way out from the mandarinesque elitism of an Eliot or Nabokov. And pulp needs modernism to stop itself becoming stagnant, as a way of revitalising the format in a recognisable way. Without the other, both pulp & modernism shade towards irrelevancy and inbreeding."

Murphy often uses the terms "shadow-game" and "lacuna-game" in his writing, and I think these terms also describe the force to which his games aspire, a force that is characterized by absence. The Irish playwright Samuel Beckett wrote that his artistic philosophy was based on subtracting instead of adding. He wrote plays without plots, characters without motives because James Joyce, one of his mentors, had already added everything to literature that there was to add. Like Beckett, Murphy often draws attention to a minimal interactive frame in order to get at what's interesting about a world inhabited by confused, shuffling agents.

* * * * *

"IT'S NOT INCOHERENT CUZ IT'S ART, IT'S INCOHERENT CUZ ITS 1AM AND I HAVE WORK TOMORROW!! Yaahhh!!"
- stephen thecatamites on Twitter, 4 Nov 13

Back to the grind. Work is grind, and grind is work. *Space Mouse* presents the videogame collection quest as a menial day job simulator! Collect cheese as crunchy industrial sounds play, and text instructs you to "work work work all day"! Crawl down a mouse hole and jump around on platforms! Before you know it, your friend will be there to pick you up and remind you that you've been dreaming about work the whole time!

Often, Murphy's games divorce a mundane work scenario from its context. Characters think about work outside of work, or they are exploded out of their habitats even as they are expected to mechanically repeat an action. In *Moppy Returns*, the protagonist attempts to collect keys only to be interrupted by a terrible floating villain before the level can be finished. You aren't capable of doing the thing the game asks you to do, but failing makes the game progress anyway. *Moppy* frames questions about how we justify our work to ourselves, tell ourselves that our labor is meaningful, tell ourselves that our time is well spent, make ourselves feel productive in order to avoid feeling empty. Less frightening and more light-hearted, *Veggie Tales 3D* begins with a guy named Tom Tom who works in a burger kitchen and says things like "Here's your beverage: fuck you!!" to "Oblivious Bourgeois" NPCs. Tom Tom's disdain extends to all walks of life: greasers, cops, punks, hippies, and the rebellious vegetables that eventually escape from their cave. Whereas *Space Mouse* and *Moppy Returns* think of the game system as a sort of workspace routine, *Veggie Tales* creates a setting for diversion from the protagonist's every day routine. The vegetable riot allows the player to distance Tom Tom from his normal routine, which encourages the player to consider the routine's setting, but perhaps more importantly to consider the psychological effects that grinding routines can have on people. As my friend and fellow editor Zolani Stewart put it in an email, "The games don't seem to approach work as a materialist critique of production or the politics of wage labour, but more as psychoanalysis and the discussion of affect (the experiential process of living)."

Some routines involve special ops missions, and the special ops mission gone wrong is a running theme in Murphy's work. The joke in *Operative Assailants* is that the skill sets of the operatives make them uninterested in the jobs they are meant to perform. You play as different characters in a series of vignettes, and sharp transitions between scenes emphasize swift and efficient failure. Brain Lord does a crossword puzzle instead of completing the mission. The commander's favorite operative is Synderrblokk, a cinder block, for its loyalty, obedience, and ability to work undercover at construction sites. *Super Eagle* (a collaboration between Murphy, Kat Chastain and New Vaders) offers a mission in which you play as a commando. Your health is portrayed by a depleting military budget, which diminishes constantly, moreso when you get hit, but replenishes when you kill and shoot. Constantly mow down enemies in order to keep the money flowing. When the budget hits zero, you are immediately transported back to HQ to fill out paperwork. The interface for filling out paperwork is exactly the same as it is for dispensing with Nazis. Oversized grant application forms glide towards you, crowding a narrow corridor, and you pump bullets into them until your money fills up. Once you replenish the budget, you are transported right back to where you were before you had to go fill

out paperwork. When I got to what I assume must be the boss of the game, I kept losing every few seconds, which spawned so much paper that the frame rate collapsed, and the game became pretty much unplayable, which is probably the most appropriate ending for this game. You want to go save the world with your trusty machine gun and giant military industrial complex, but really it's all about the paperwork.

Some of the games imply a connection between spreadsheet office labor and the mundane aspects of RPGs, like collecting items that make numbers go up. In *Space Funeral (2010)*, grinding is minimized, the battles are easy, and the game doesn't seem to care if you engage on any level with the mathematical illusion of progress. *Space funeral* suggests that RPG towns are more interesting than RPG battles because the towns are spaces in which cursory interaction and dialogue create strange juxtapositions and a distorted sense of time. In *Bogey's Report*, the main character delivers a meditation on digital towns as he wanders around inside of one:

"The appeal to me of these closed little top-down JRPG villages lies in their essentially static character. Time is annulled via spatialisation. Elements of a linear narrative are smeared evenly across a flat landscape and the modular GFX aid the impression of an experience that has to be snapped together."

Bogey goes on to compare NPC dialogue to "pop lyrics contrived to fit a beat" and observes that this form of dialogue enjoys "more space for allusive or incoherent answer" than other formal presentations of language. Bogey's observations recall the cadence of dialogue in *Space funeral* and Goblet's Grotto, which aspires to a certain rhythm and humor instead of an illusion of 'useful' instruction or explicit meaning. *Voyages of Mogey* smears text across its landscape, which exaggerates the sensation Bogey describes of a sense of space modeled outside of time. As a practical alternative to scripted cut scenes, you walk up to prose as if you were making it happen. In addition, Mogey parodies the idea of distinct character types within the JRPG town. Mogey travels to a castle where he is welcomed by a king. The king, who is literally a bubble, offers to give Mogey a tour. As he shows Mogey around, the Bubble King offers specific details about each section of the castle (the barracks, the library, etc.), and he makes distinctions between soldiers and scholars and children, all of whom are bubbles. The scene plays out something like this: "Here are the barracks." *bubbles bounce around the room* "Here is the library." *bubbles bounce around the room* "Here is the nursery." Etc. Etc. On one level, this is ridiculous because everyone is a bubble. On another level, most games are like this. Every NPC is just a funny, spooky, hollow collection of sprites with a character limit, which contributes to the "snapped together" role-playing experience Bogey describes. It's fun to share their space, make fun of their cadence, or fill in the blanks by attempting to come up with logical explanations for their robotic allusiveness.

Hazy Hazy Town shares a recurring trope with games like Garlo's Gambit, Cigar Aficionado, and *Lake of Roaches*, in that it allows the player to control two characters at once using the same set of arrow keys. This avatar doubling ensures that one character will get stuck on something like a door, breaking the symmetry of the two characters' movement, so controlling two characters simultaneously heightens the sense of player as puppeteer. It's a distancing device that enhances the effect of looking in through some mysterious frame. Many of Murphy's games use such devices to create a sense of movement between different perspectives, like a videogame version of an epistolary novel. In *Pamela's Adventures in Dreamland*, the narrative is playing out in the dream, but the player controls a spider that skitters across a sleeping Pamela. Player control then quickly switches to Pamela, who is inside of her dream trying to escape the spider. Pamela's unconsciousness in one frame highlights the futility of her movement in the other. *Bubsy the Bobcat* alters the frame of an adventure game by providing a sleep meter that runs out quickly and forces you to start over at Bubsy's bedroom. Bubsy sleeps for years, so the environment changes before the player has a chance to explore or piece the world together into a coherent narrative. Bubsy's strict sleep pattern incorporates failure into an adventure game context. Bubsy's falling asleep eliminates the potential of getting stuck and being forced to click on everything until something happens. In this sense, failure is a relief. Altering Bubsy's sense of time alters the player's perspective on the limitations of an adventure game framework.

Mashkin Sees it Through, Murphy's only Twine game, displays a similar playfulness with form. Reading *Mashkin* is, in the best way, like reading a freshman

composition paper; the words manage to be both ambiguous and redundant. This sensation feels premeditated, as if the character *Mashkin* is appropriating someone's vague idea of what a 'proper' writer is supposed to sound like, and this appropriation creates funny problems with voice and tone, problems that are exaggerated by the player's interaction. *Mashkin* performs 'voice' for an imagined reader that expects something specific but doesn't really exist. This game is entirely about narrative, and more specifically, it's about language as deflective spacial device, like language as controller, in a very formal, hilarious kind of way. *Mashkin* implies an arbitrariness in narrative and presents what using formulaic language on its own terms at the expense of narrative can look like.

Some of the most striking aesthetics combine the dark humor of pulp crime with a sticky yellow-green grim nauseous neon tone. The black and yellow palette in *True Detective Mysteries* makes the wilderness look foreboding, but the dialogue reads like farce. *Crime Zone* has scratchy art and a mix of muted and loud colors. You play as different cops, multiple cops at once, sometimes all the cops; it doesn't matter who you are, just that you're a cop, sniffing out crime. Exploration often dispenses with a logical sense of space: You jump out of a window and end up in a conference hall. There's piss, trash, and animosity everywhere. Everything about the world feels hostile, yet the cops seem to be comforted by the grimness and hostility and darkness. There are hilarious and surreal interludes in which cops methodically wait turns to wrestle each other in alleyways. The narrative dispenses with plot; a loop of interactions is held together by a consistent tone. The cops aren't doing much of anything, but they seem to see themselves as necessary and productive.

Murphy's games are endlessly rewarding in their sense of texture. *Stephenstown* is emblematic of Murphy's use of sharp, two-frame, back-and-forth animations. The town's old people citizens are drawn as white, almost shapeless, almost featureless figures. They have just enough definition to feel harmless, generic, but strangely comforting. Your avatar, in contrast, is a sharply drawn figure of bug-eyed ecstasy. The game makes me think about how hometowns are comforting, yet also weirdly cold and static, filtered through a lens that's somehow different from the one you grew up with. *Work Drinks* conveys a sense of alienation through text that scrolls upward at pace just above reading speed against a drab backdrop that makes it difficult to read. As you try to drink, you pull the beer towards you, which fills up your first-person perspective. Thoughts interfere with drink and drink interferes with thoughts. Other games have shape-shifting avatars, heaving cloud animations, singing cloud unicorns, motorcycle midi rock hamburgers....

floats off into distance sighing wistfully

* * * * *

Ok I'm back. I'm almost done, but I have to talk about *Goblet Grotto*, the second collaboration between Murphy, Kat Chastain, and New Vaders. My first twenty minutes of play were spent outside of the game itself, learning a language. You play as a toad whom I'll refer to as Toad. Toad communicates via a series of glyphs, which are translated in a digital book packaged with the game file. The glyphs potentially represent Toad's communication with other characters in the game world, but they also most likely represent Toad's communication with me, the player. This is interesting because it means I don't control what Toad says directly, but I control what Toad says indirectly through actions (fight wolves, eat meat, find goblets, explore, etc). Toad enacts my instructions, then responds and emotes accordingly through the glyphs. Toad responds to my actions and, in turn, tries to affect the way I think and act. The only punishment for not eating, for example, is that Toad will crawl slowly and not talk about anything except food.

The glyph system is inspired by an old Atari ST game called Captain Blood. The experience of decoding language in a game was unfamiliar to me until I played Dwarf Fortress and had to keep pausing, so I could scroll around and learn what a bunch of different ASCII keyboard characters meant. The meanings of the glyphs in *Goblet Grotto* range from "Hello Friend" to "I am searching for Goblets" to "I am covered in filth." A range of expressions convey misery or exultation or salutation, but most of mine had something to do with misery. In the Grotto, the language of NPCs is easy to decipher and delightful in its own way, but Toad's communication is opaque and nuanced. Glyphs show up that aren't explained in the glyph book, which means that some of Toad's language is left deliber-

ately mysterious. In my experience, said mysterious glyphs were often accompanied with an exclamation from Toad that translates to "I Don't Understand Anything." In these moments, Toad and I shared a state of unknowing. Neither I nor Toad knew what idea, concept, or thing we were supposed to be searching for or how we were supposed to achieve this thing. In this game, intimacy between player and player character is neither assumed nor ignored. Intimacy is available, but it must be excavated by the player. In addition, since certain glyphs remain untranslatable, the idea that language must serve a purpose and fulfill an objective is undermined, just as the "meaning" or "purpose" of collecting shiny physical objects (such as goblets) is undermined by the game's dialogue and tone. The glyph system solves the problem of "getting to know" your avatar by asking you to engage with the avatar on a deeper level than that of the silent vessel.

In my company, Toad is generally fearful, full of despair, demoralized, or starving to death, but this game doesn't feel lonely like many game worlds where you glide around in a dome of HD marionettes, puppeteered by some Oz-like Ken Levine auteur from a throne of bureaucracy and marketing dollars. The heinous honking sound the toad makes is of course a ridiculous thing to put in a game, but it becomes inexplicably inoffensive, even comforting, once you try to listen to what Toad is saying. Such features as a honking sound effect could be considered acts of hostility towards the player, in the same way that making the player look up what glyphs mean could be considered an act of hostility. But this line of thinking suggests our expectations for what a game should provide are too narrow. We need to give games a chance to impress us, or they never will.

In *Goblet Grotto*, there are many characters standing around doing nothing apparently useful, yet they are all completely convinced that what they are doing is useful because they know they will be rewarded with goblets. Some characters farm goblets. Others quest for goblets. Still others murder for goblets, or work in an office in hopes of earning a goblet pay check, or exchange goods for goblets at the goblet market. There's a sense that these characters waste their days pursuing a certain kind of value. But obvious critique of materialism aside, looking for goblets in *Goblet Grotto* is still pretty fun and rewarding, and it gives you and Toad an excuse to appreciate other things about the world.

Murphy's site Harmony Zone lays out a set of characteristics a game must have in order to be a true game:

A game is some combination of the following indivisable elements:

- *skeleton*
- *red key*
- *score thing*
- *magic door*

This definition is clearly facetious, but it's also sort of serious, in the sense that starting with a list of arbitrary boundaries can create space for something more interesting between that which is most apparent. Murphy's games rely to some extent, as every work does, on arbitrary forms like goblet-collecting, in order to create a space in which something more sublime, unpredictable, and inexplicable can be realized. We can't dismiss completely those parts of games that feel arbitrary, like skeletons or score things, because arbitrary rules can help generate those aspects of art that are less tangible and more interesting. In our own lives, we sometimes need to set what can feel like arbitrary objectives in order to be resilient, to push forward and retain some sense of stability and purpose in the face of difficult circumstances. In addition, the desire to eliminate that which is arbitrary or whimsical often stems from a misguided desire to produce serious capital-A Art (i.e. high culture), which can get in the way of simply producing good work. T.S. Eliot had the leisure time to study philosophy and ancient languages at university, a preparation for the high modernist art which he would create at his own pace. Pulp fiction magazines were formulaic, and writers who wrote for them had to churn content out quickly. But this accelerated process allowed writers to write for an audience, innovate, and earn a living. In art and in life, arbitrary objectives or obligatory interactions can give us something to work towards or push against. I'll end all with this quote from Sontag's "On Style":

"Seen from the inside, that is, when one examines an individual work of art and tries to account for its value and effect, every stylistic decision contains an element of arbitrariness, however much it may seem justifiable propter hoc. If art is the supreme game which the will plays with itself, "style" consists of the set of rules by which this game is played. And the rules are always, finally, an artificial and

arbitrary limit, whether they are rules of form (like terza rima or the twelve-tone row or frontality) or the presence of a certain "content." The role of the arbitrary and unjustifiable in art has never been sufficiently acknowledged. Ever since the enterprise of criticism began with Aristotle's Poetics, critics have been beguiled into emphasizing the necessary in art...Usually critics who want to praise a work of art feel compelled to demonstrate that each part is justified, that it could not be other than it is. And every artist, when it comes to his own work, remembering the role of chance, fatigue, external distractions, knows what the critic says to be a lie, knows that it could well have been otherwise. The sense of inevitability that a great work of art projects is not made up of the inevitability or necessity of its parts, but of the whole."

Alex Pieschel lives in Tuscaloosa, Alabama where he teaches freshman comp and thinks about what he's gonna get at the grocery store.

A Note from Alex

Right after I finished this piece, Stephen Murphy released a compiled version ***(you can download it here)*** *of the 50 games composed in 2013 that were originally uploaded for free to Glorious Trainwrecks. He is selling the compilation for four euros. The zip file also contains an HTML file, which includes Murphy's notes on each individual game, as well as a description of the compilation's background, graphics, text, sound, and sensibility.*

A Note from The Editor

The Catamites released a compilation! And just when I was editing this piece. According to Stephen, it contains not only a bunch of his games but notes, drawings, and essays about them. We recommend you take a look at it if you want to inquire more into his games, especially if you enjoyed Alex's extensive essay on his works.

- Zolani Stewart

A Conversation with Titouan Millet

Titouan Millet is an artist, muscician and game designer living in Valenciennes, France. He's currently working on A Cosmic Wander, an expansive sequel to A Cosmic Forest. I talked to Titouan about the game, his game design history, his work with the French collective Klondike, and the nature of aesthetics in games.

Zolani: I'm interested in knowing in how people received A Cosmic Forest when you released it on #7dfps

Titouan: It was strange, because I wasn't thinking so much about the reception from the player. When I was making the game, it was just like, "okay, this seems like something cool with colours and all" but incidentally, I was like the third or fourth most liked game on #7dfps. So it was a surprise, a good surprise. Most players liked the game, but... how do you say this? Initially, I thought players would just think "okay, this is good" and leave it there.

Zolani: Did you expect people to play it a certain way?

Titouan: No. In fact, I was really making an experimentation. I was inspired by Proteus, of course, and the world of Ian Snyder, it was something I saw in Experiment 12. He made level 2 I think, and there was a phase in the game where there were just colours in motion.

Zolani: That was a really good one, I was a huge fan of that chapter.

Titouan: Yes, he's made games about the loss of perception, where you have no sense of perspective, and that was something I tried to recreate in real 3D. Most of my games are about that, I try to make something visual, and this time it worked out very good, in fact! But initially it wasn't about making a First Person Shooter, it was about making a Forest about colours—a path of light and colours in motion. Then I had to add the shooting to make it valid for #7dfps, and this time, I decided to put a goal in the game. I don't know if you finished it or not?

Zolani: I didn't actually! But I watched the walkthrough you posted.

One thing about A Cosmic Forest is that for the first 10 seconds or so, it's difficult to tell that you're in a 3D space. It just feels like are colours moving by across the screen. And it's interesting to play a game that doesn't allow you to have a full understanding of where you are initially. What's so cool is the game is called "A Cosmic Forest," but the game really does feel like a Forest! I really like its use of sound, mostly that it uses 3D sounds, not just mono 2D sounds that will play wherever you are.

Titouan: Do you want to know how I designed the global atmosphere of the game?

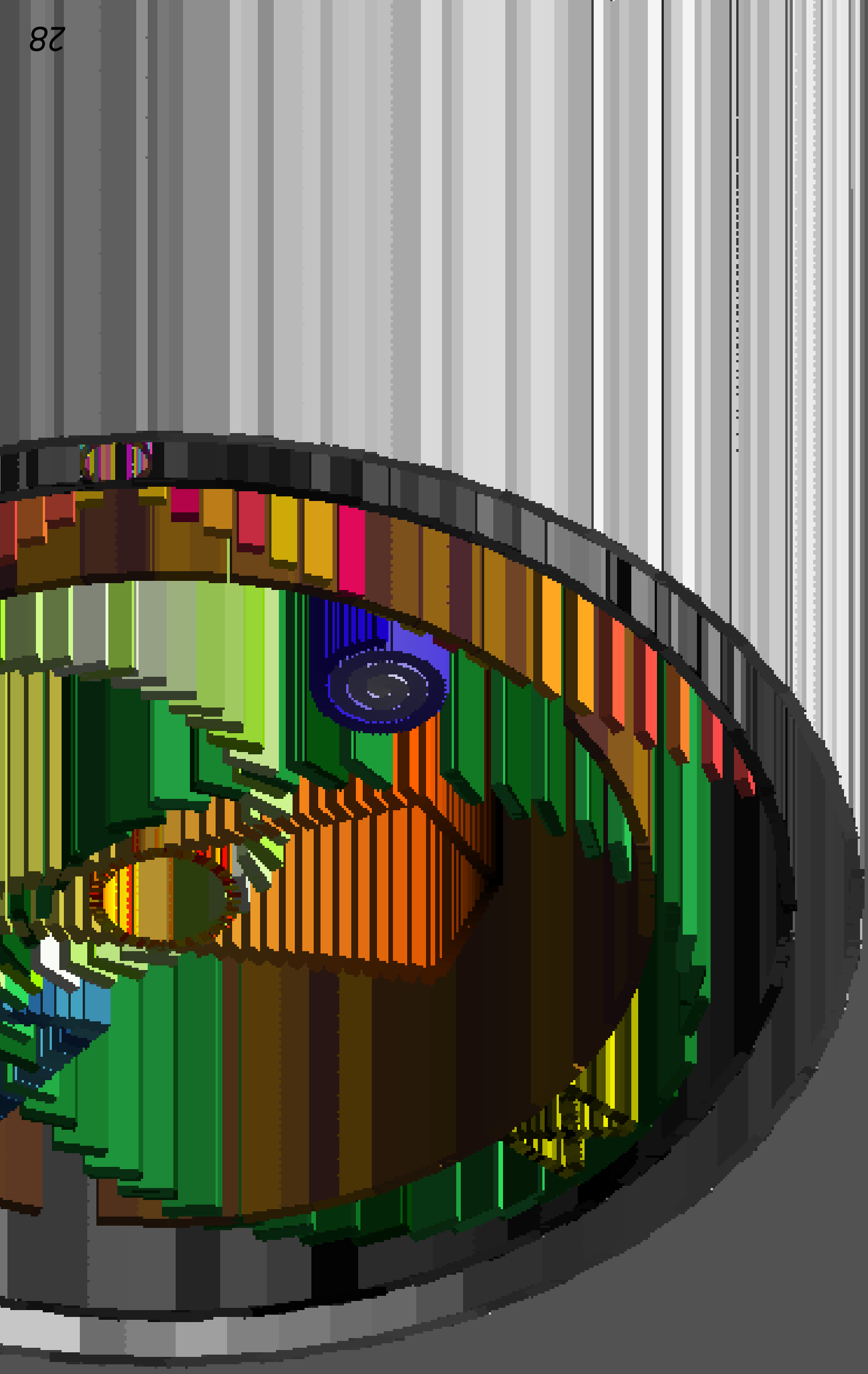
Zolani: Yeah!

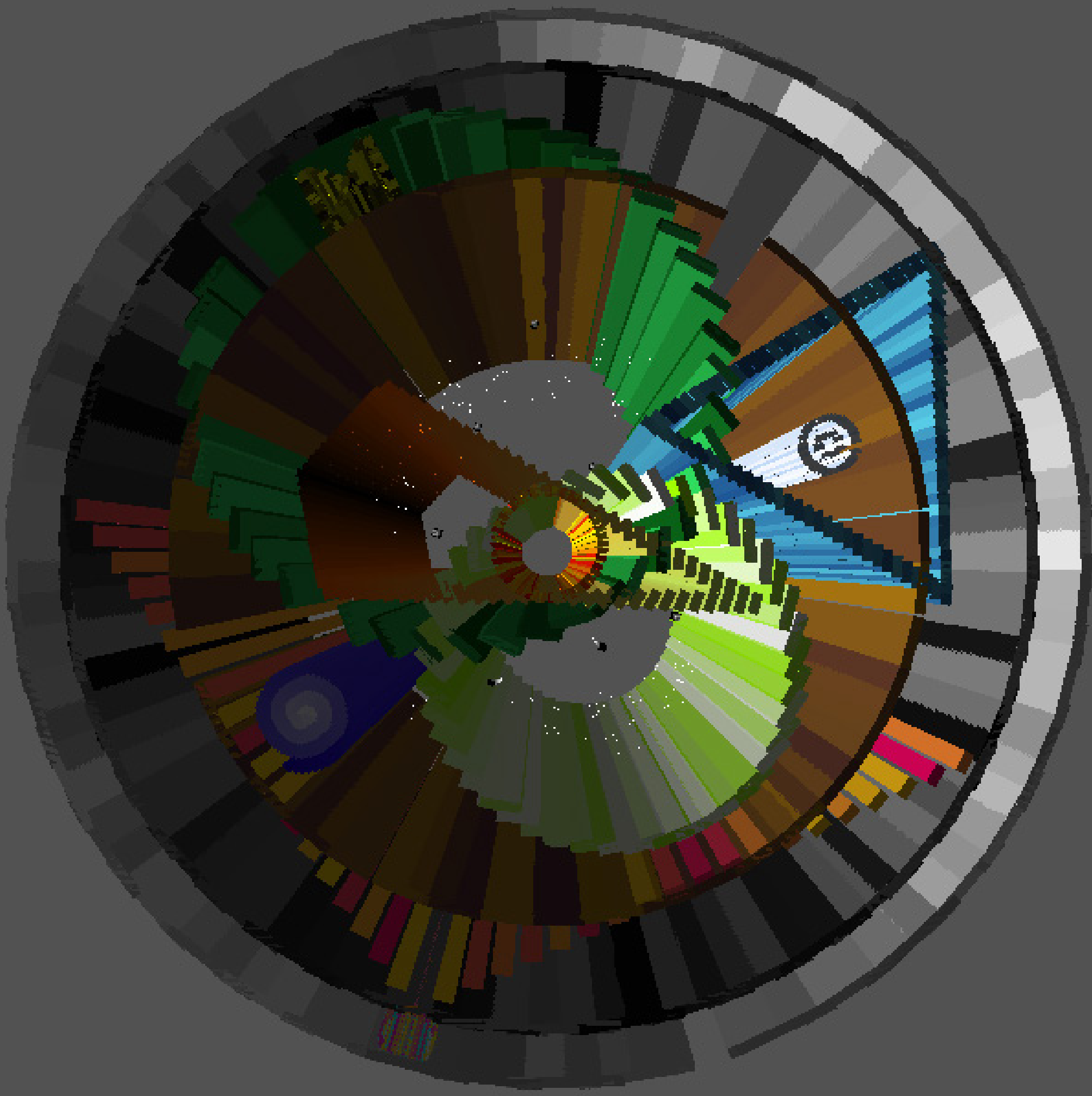
Titouan: It's something interesting. In fact, in Cosmic Forest, there are stripes or trees, in a bed of colour, and I went through them. When the level is generated, a percentage of the trees, let's say 20%, will play one of four sounds with a different pitch. So we can say that the trees are what are making the sounds.

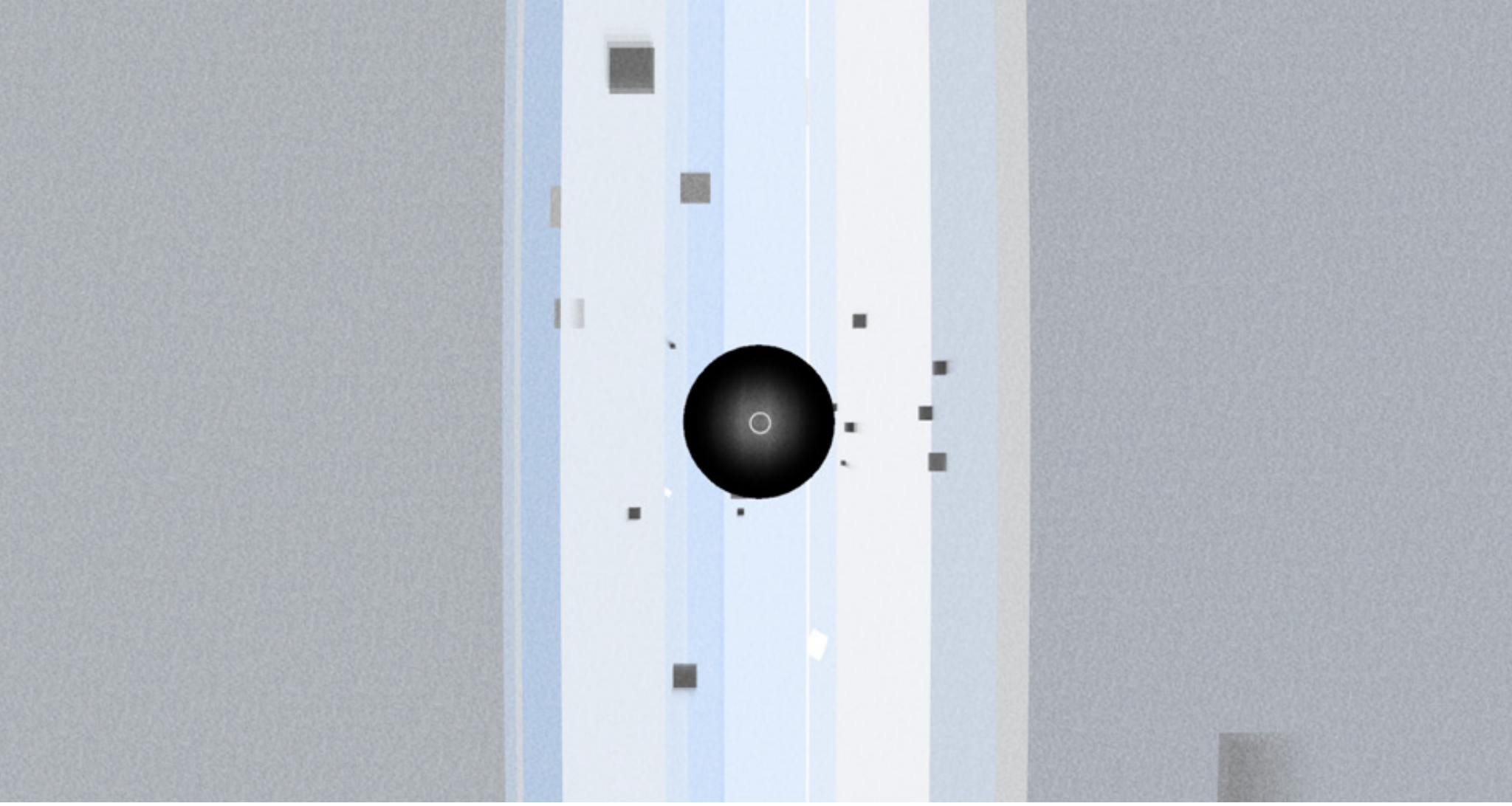
Zolani: So the game isn't just pre-determined, but algorithmic?

Titouan: The level is generated through code, but there is a level design to it. When I write the code I can say that I want a circle or a line, and I can say how many trees I want in the circle or how many colours I want. If you want, I can send you a screenshot of the top view of the scene.

Zolani: Oh I would love that.







Zolani: About Ian Snyder's game... it's sort of like A Cosmic Forest in that it is kind of dreamlike, but there's a positive atmosphere, a sort of idealism to the game. But while I was watching the walkthrough to A Cosmic Forest, it was terrifying! For one, you were moving pretty fast, which isn't normal for a game where you tend to move quite slowly when you're not familiar with the level. But here, you're just going through everything, it was a little jarring. I didn't actually finish the game, but it's one of those games I'm seeing more of, where you don't have to finish it to feel like you got something out of it.

Titouan: That's exactly what I wanted to make. To tell you the truth, most players don't finish the game, they just wander through the colours. Then, if you're curious or have time, you can search for how to actually finish the game. A lot of people make games where you just look around, and it's cool. I wanted to add something more, but it's not like how you kill a boss, or you find an item, and they tell you "here is your score" and you finish. At the end of A Cosmic Forest, you free the black object, and I don't know if it's clear in the walkthrough, but a black ray starts to follow you...

Zolani: It's actually super complicated; I don't know how I would have figured it out. At least, I remember you tweeted a picture that gave a hint at what direction you need to go in, and it was a spiral. So you go in the spiral path, and you get to the orb, and then you lead the black orb out, and then you bring it to the light orb, and then they like, fight, and everything starts to flash [makes hand gestures].

Titouan: It's not very clear. I'm making a bigger version of the game, and there I'll add more generous puzzles for each level. But you're right; you make the black ray enter in contact with the white ray, and when they contact, you have a blackflash-whitelash-blackflash fight, between the two most contrasted, the most opposite colours. And what happens is that one of them, the white ray, wins the battle. And you know in the common sense that black is darkness, in fantasy stories how the white angel fights the dark angel or something. So here, the white "angel" wins, and you think "oh ok, the light won the battle," and then the whole forest becomes white.

This is only my interpretation of the game, but when the light side wins, you think "oh no, the forest lost its colours." Everything is white now, and it's sad. So they fight, and the good one won, but in fact it's not a good thing, because you destroyed the colours, you destroyed the forest by making it all white.

Zolani: What I saw in that was a dualism. These two opposite forces that actually sustain the space and keep a 'balance.' And this balance is destroyed for the cause of this meaningless symbolism that's just arbitrary, right? I'm pretty sure it's just Christian symbolism..

Titouan: [snickers]

Zolani: But we have these perceptions of different forms of power. In North America, you get these strong heroist ideologies, where the good

guy who wears the superhero suit beats up the bad guys. It's simplistic and it's problematic, and we see in the game how those ideas cause the space to dilute.

Titouan: You think you won the fight, but it's actually a defeat. It's a failure. If you finish the game, you lose. That's pessimistic, maybe.

Zolani: No I think that's a really interesting subversion. Because if you do what I did, which was basically just wander through the game looking at all the cool stuff and then turn it off, technically you win the game. You win the game by choosing not to go through these rigorous progression structures.

Titouan: It's not a game to win, in fact. It's a game about wonder, really. I'm making a bigger version with different levels, where the player can wander through every level like A Cosmic Forest without having to... do anything. Just wandering.

Zolani: We have a lot of these expectations around games where, for a game to be "good" or legitimate, it has to conform to these traditional structures. A Cosmic Forest is pretty big game for me, it heavily informs my understanding of how first person games work. One of the things it tells me is that games don't necessarily need detailed plots, or rigid narrative structures to create interesting experiences. You really can just make an interesting space that focuses onto aesthetics: sounds and visuals, without any boss fights or win-states or whatever. Just having a player walk through a thing is super effective! And that's really nice.

Titouan: Some kinds of games need to create these very mathematical systems to work, but it's good to see the emergence of these new kinds of games, even though they've existed for a long time I think. Yes, we can call them "art games," even if I think, you know.. ugh

Zolani: hahahahah

Titouan: But let's say art game, where you have no concrete systems about scores or fights, you know, it's called #7dfps but the game is basically 7d-exporation game... I don't know if you found this, but each time you shoot, the bullets each make a note, and it makes a little melody.

Zolani: I noticed that! I thought that was really neat. I was actually wondering why the shooting option was there at all. I know that you use the shooting to trigger the black orb, but otherwise it's just kind of this neat thing that sort of exists. It's hard to call it shooting because I don't think it's there to make you shoot down things, it's just sort of there to interact with everything.

Titouan: Yeah, shooting was really for the FPS side of the game, you can shoot critters in the world, but they never die, so it's cool. It just makes sounds, and the little worms that wander through will jump and make a little cry, particles and all.

In fact, shooting is just throwing something. So it's not really used in A Cosmic Forest, even for the orb you only have to shoot once. But there are so many ways to use the shooting side of the game to create a mechanism other than killing things. That's why we can call it just throwing objects, instead of shooting. I was going to do this initially but it didn't work.. but each time you would throw a square through a tree, it would make a sound, a xylophone or something. In many kinds of games, you shoot to kill. But I want to try to use it in another way. You can shoot to make something move, or activate something, or.. make a noise or... just something more interesting, a new way to interpret it.

Zolani: Yeah because with shooting, objects are usually contextualized as people, who need to be eliminated for you to achieve a win-state. But when you break down shooting, you're really just projecting objects at things, and there are a lot of ways to interpret and portray that.

There are points where A Cosmic Forest comes off as horror. It reminds me a little bit of Antichamber actually. It was a decent puzzle game, but it had these sections that were pretty frightening, but in a way that's deeper than games usually are. Nothing was jumping out at me, but there's something about an unfamiliar space, a weird space that can be interpreted as horror. And it's a really good contrast with Ian Snyder's game, which was more dreamlike, but A Cosmic Forest comes off as nightmarish.

Titouan: The sounds make a lot of the game, in every game, in fact! But even more in the contemplative art game stuff, and once I added the colours and all, I said "okay, let's make some sounds" and I have a particular sensibility to sounds, I am a musician myself, so I like sounds and all. And I was asking myself, am I going to make some funny sounds, cute sounds? And then I tried some other sounds, darker sounds, like a strange alarm or a whistle, and I found some very strange sounds and I put them in the game. And I like the effect that it generates, it's a good atmosphere for me.

And then, I asked some friends of mine and people I knew to play the game, and a lot of them said it scares them. It's not something that I was thinking about, the scarier side of

the game. One of my friends played it in front of me, and he wasn't able to move forward to the area, because the sounds scared him. It was a very impressive effect, and it was a success for me. Because you can't lose the game. You can't die, you can't even lose life or anything, but if you're afraid, the fear can prevent you from even moving. In fact, I want to make a level about scaring the player with only sounds and squares and all. Because many horror games use monsters, where things pop up on the screen and make you scream and all, but I want to make something that scares the player with just geometric forms, colours, and sounds. That wasn't initally what I wanted to do, but it's what happened in A Cosmic Forest. People are afraid, just with sounds.

When you go too far from the area, everything is black and white...

Zolani: Yeah, I know that place.

Titouan: And there's a big noise on the screen, an alarm that scares the player. Some players are all "ah I don't want to continue" because they don't know how to interpret the perspective and the position in space, so they say "how do I exit this area?" and they panic.

When my friend tested the game, I asked him how the game was, and he said "I found some stuff, but I still can't find the telephone." There's no telephone in the game, but he was on this quest for the telephone, for the source of this sound. That's something very interesting. They don't know what to do, so they go looking for things that don't exist.

Zolani: But that's the thing, right? You have these sounds that are familiar, like, we know what a telephone sounds like and what an alarm sounds like, but now it's contextualized differently, within a space that we aren't familiar with it being used in. We're in this "forest" with these huge streams of colour everywhere, and suddenly a telephone is ringing? It's freaky because it's confusing and feels directionless.

A Cosmic Forest is that is pretty different than a lot of your other games. It's a lot different than 12$, and it's not like the vomiting cat game either.

Titouan: Yes! 12$ a game I made with some friends of mine. I made most of the music and sounds, and developed part of the concept, but A Cosmic Forest is really something I experimented by myself, it has my sensitivity to colours, shapes and motion, which is really the goal, the center of my mind in the game.

Zolani: So A Cosmic Forest is more personal.

Titouan: Yes, I think it's more personal. With other games I've made, there's a concept and design procedure... they're not the kind of game that I like, the "pure fun" games. A Cosmic Forest, maybe it's fun, but it's not the same kind of fun.

Zolani: Yeah, I know what you mean.

Titouan: You know? There are games that are fun because you play it with your friends and you beat each other and all, and it's fun because the concept is fun, and you try to have the best score possible and such, but A Cosmic Forest is different.

I've made different flash games before, I come from Flash. I made my first game with flash. A game that's an older form of A Cosmic Forest is High Snake, which is also something about experimentation, about colours, shape and motion. But I think the 3 Dimensional effect adds a lot to A Cosmic Forest and the immersive side of the game. And the concept of A Cosmic Forest works better, maybe.

Zolani: $12 does seem like a game made by a bunch of people each doing a little part. It lies more in the proceduralism of game development where you have the programming guy, the audio guy, the art guy, and they all just kind of do their process. But you do see a little bit of A Cosmic Forest in High Snake, some of those ideas are still there.

Titouan: I'm repeating myself again, but, it's... colours, shapes, and motion.

Zolani: Colours, shapes, and motion!

Titouan: Because that's what makes visual stuff work. The colours, the shape of the colours, and motion where all the stuff is moving. These are the three points I try to experiment with. And then comes the sounds, and trying to make an emotion or something. But the three principle points are colour, shape and motion. I think that's why you find the same thing in High Snake and A Cosmic Forest.

Zolani: I think those points are taken to an extreme, and are a lot better realized in A Cosmic Forest. And 3D really helps that.

* * * * *

Zolani: I'm interested in knowing about the path that got you into making games.

Titouan: Well I consider myself to be a creative guy. I like to draw and create music, sometimes I write..

Zolani: I actually have read some of your stories.

Titouan: [Laughs] Oh god

But that's something I find in videogames, they act as all the artistic areas: the visuals, the sounds and the stories, and even more with interaction and immersion. I think that's why I come to videogames, they have all the kinds of, yes, let's say "arts," and even more! Plus, you're the one who plays makes the decisions.

But initally I wasn't thinking about that, I began because I'm in a french school of game design and game arts, and I was like "I want to join Blizzard, the big game industry," and have my name in the big games like Warcraft or.. I don't know. Initially, I used to mock those indie areas, like "what is indie even?" but eventually I became a guy who loved them. And that's exactly what I want to be later, an indie game developer and all. Because that's what I love to make, and I know how to make it, and because it's personal! You create stuff. You don't... well, you need money of course, but the first goal of making games, making art, isn't to receive money. The big goal is to succeed, to make a living out of your passion, meaning to receive money by making what you love.

Zolani: So there's more creative freedom and there's more priority towards making something that interests you, in *some* indie spaces. There are a few indie spaces are problematic, but there are others that help develop these really creative games.

I've made a few videogames myself, and I do know that there was a time where I also wanted to work in the big AAA spaces. But as time goes on you realize that's not what you want to do, maybe those spaces won't really support the kind of work that someone wants to do when they want creative freedom, or when they want to make something personal that expresses what they like. AAA spaces don't really support that. They tend to be very closed off, strict areas that arguably have problematic production processes, where there are lots of layoffs and lots of overtime, like, it's not a really nice place to be. It's hard for me to think of a lot of people who still aspire to be in those kinds of spaces, because it's probably not very fun, to be honest.

Can you tell me a little bit about SupInfoGame?

Titouan: SupInfoGame is a school in Northern France, with different sections: game deisgn, game arts, and programmation. I think it's like most schools in France or maybe in the world. If you just use what they teach you, it's not sufficient. Because it's really just the basics. At first I was dissapointed, because I was hoping that they would make me the great guy who makes videogames and all. So I stated to learn programming myself, and I made some little flash games, just three years ago! So I've gained more skills in programming, in music and graphics. I think it's more about what we're doing outside of

school, by yourself. I like what the school gives me in terms of contacts and relationships, and even the basics, but it doesn't suffice. SupInfoGame is still one of the first good schools about games in france. But I still don't think that a school about videogames, or even art schools, are necessarily a good idea.

Zolani: You're certainly not alone in that. There are an increasing number of game schools, schools that are designed to teach you the all-arounds of game development, and I think there are a lot of people who feel that those programs aren't sufficient, in that they don't provide what's needed for someone to be able to make games. In fact, you can argue that a lot of places are there so you can get a job, which is what a lot of these tech schools are, right? They're there to give you a sort of job training, they're not there to teach you how to make art.

Titouan: Thanks to the school we're going to be receiving a diploma. It works maybe here, but if you show up in another country with a dimploma from a random game design school in France? Like..

Some of my freinds are very skilled in their specific domain; they're technically better than me in one of these areas. I'm far from the best artist in the school; I draw for my pleasure. And I'm not the cleanest programmer, if you saw my code you would know. But it's because I learn by myself. I'm not a guy who's the most skilled in a given area, but I try to make everything: the visuals, the prgramming, the sound, and the concept. Because that's what I want to make, something that's my own personal thing. My games are me! I think in every artistic area, what the artist makes is about them. There are a lot of creative areas, so I need to be versitile to make the things I want.

To tell you the truth, it was pretty difficult at first. I felt like everyone was better than me, but I'm really proud of what I've made, and that's what I want to continue to do. I recently joined the Klondike collective, just at the moment it was created, and it's exactly what I want to be doing there. I'm happy right now.

Zolani: That's really cool, man. I will say that I like A Cosmic Forest a lot more than 12$ or even some of your older titles because it does feel a little more personal! I was wondering what Klondike was, when you turn on the game and it goes "Fuck You!"

Titouan: [Laughs]

Zolani: I didn't know anything about these scenes in Northern France.

Titouan: Yup, we participate in different festivals and game jams. It's really cool to be in this kind of Family. A group of people with the same passion, to make games! Just making games. I don't know how else to tell you that I'm happy to be in this Family, because it's really great. I've been searching for this for a long time. It's something that's been lacking for a long time in my life, and I missed it.

Some of us from the collective went to Art Game weekend, a festival in France, we met some contacts like Sos Sosowski, there was Thorsten Storno, he's the organizer of the A MAZE festival, it's a festival in Berlin. We meet people, we make games, and yes, we're moving forward. I think we can make it. You know, there are a lot of people who say, "oh, I would love to make games, maybe one day," but no, we are creating right now. Simply like I said, we are making games, and we are working forward.

Zolani: Are there any cool games you've been playing recently?

Titouan: Recently, the last game I've played is Risk of Rain. You can tell it's not some kind of contemplatvie art game, it's just a roguelike.

Zolani: I have a lot of friends who've been playing Risk of Rain right now, actually.

Titouan: I like games that hurt me. Roguelikes hurt people. If you die, you have to start from the beginning of course. Oh! I also played *Starseed Pilgrim*.

Zolani: Yes!

Titouan: I loved it. It's something I absolutely love, because you don't have any idea of what you're doing. You don't have a tutorial about "you have to use this to.. you have to have three keys for.." no, you have to learn by yourself, with colours and all. And I'm sure some great person said this in a book or something, but playing a game is about learning. You learn a

system or you learn about a universe, you learn what happens, you learn what you're doing, and by learning you have fun. Voila.

Zolani: I wanted to tell you about this thing that happened recently. I live in Montréal, and went to the Montréal Museum of Fine Arts here, and I saw a painting, that was just these vertical stripes of colours.. and I thought "It's a Cosmic Forest!". I tweeted it out (link), I'll send you the picture.

Titouan: On TIG Source, someone said he wanted to paint his house with the colours in A Cosmic Forest, I was like "ok sure whatever, send me a photo."

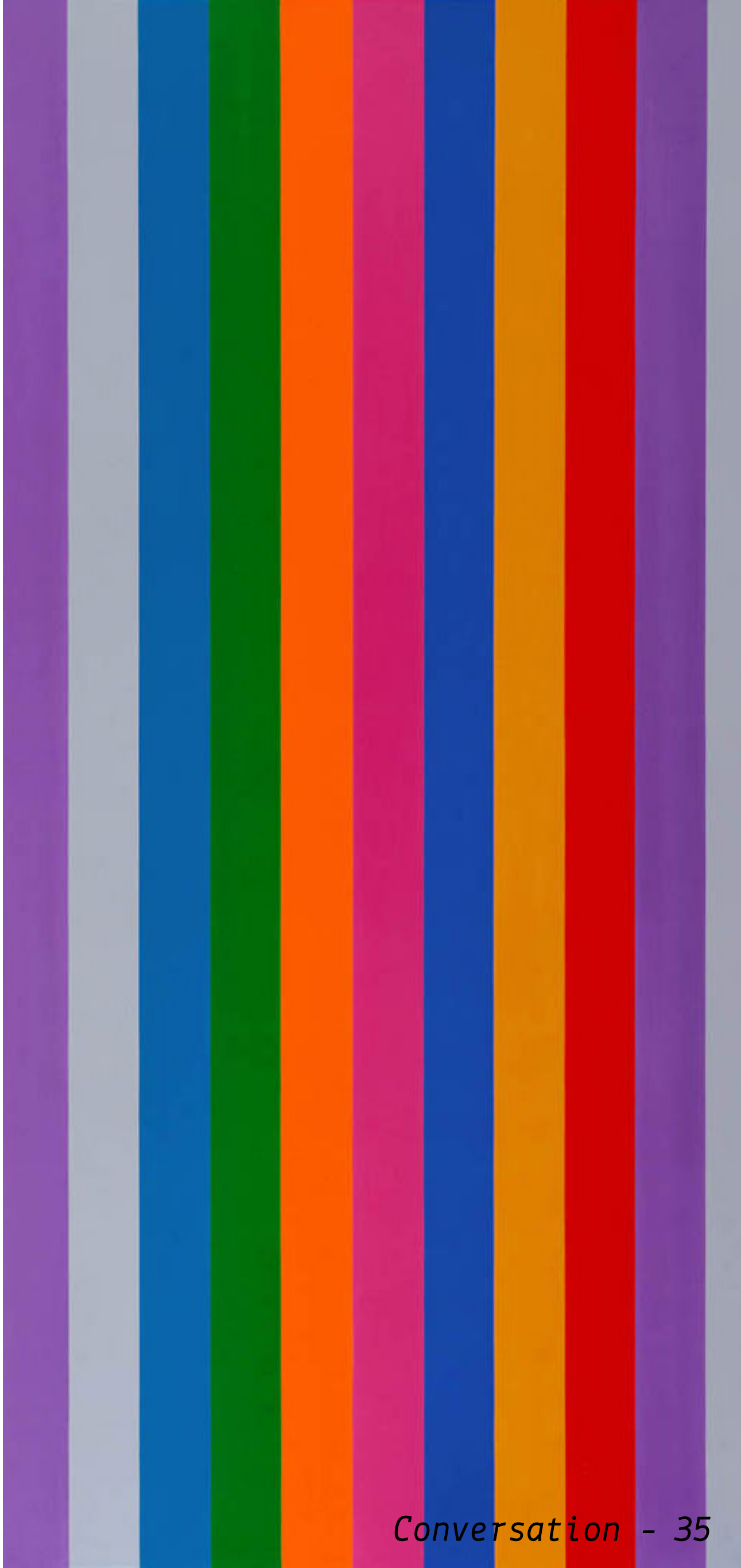
Zolani: [Laughs]

Titouan: I see now that there really are people who are able to like A Cosmic Forest. At first I was skeptical, like okay, I'm a guy who likes this stuff, but I'm not convinced that others will, but finally I've gotten good feedback from players on the internet, it was a good surprise for me.

Let's see this picture... haha yes!

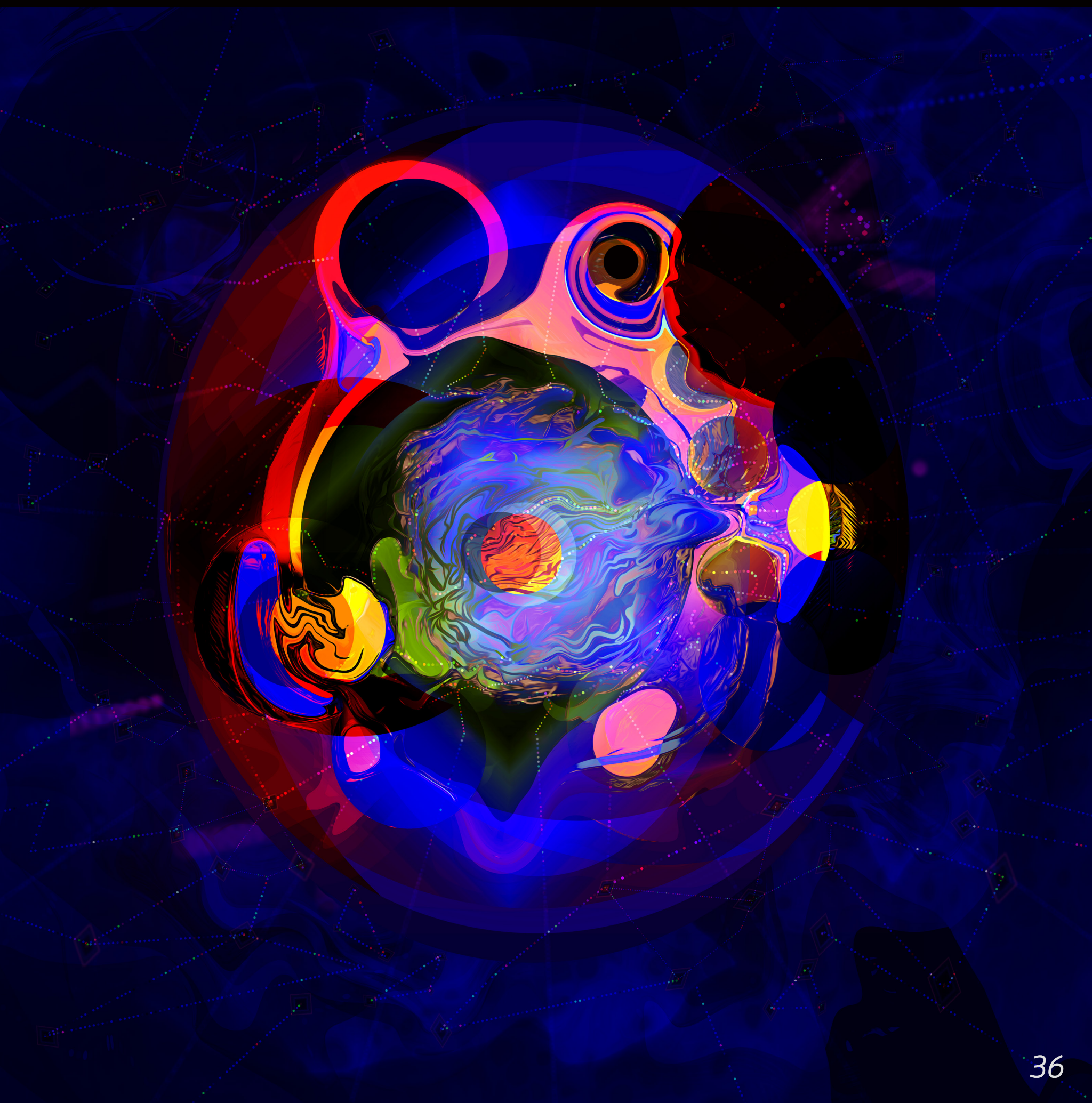
Zolani: Yeah you see? Like, I do know a bit of art history that I study on my own time, and there are a lot of connections between A Cosmic Forest and the values found in painting and other visual arts. When you look at a painting, you're looking at the same thing! You're looking at colour, motion, and space. So I can go to a museum, and I can look at a painting and say "wow, that's like a videogame I played!" and that's really cool.

Titouan: It is.



Our Cover

This issue's cover was designed by **Phil James,** *a New Zealand artist and illustrator. He was a joy to work with. You can reach him through his website at shinestrength.com, or on his twitter at @shinestrength.*



Index

The Buenos of Comedies p6

Author: Lana Polansky (@LanaTheGun101)

The Painting: *Giovanni Paolo Pannini, Musical Fête, 1747; Oil on Canvas.*

Media

- *Papo Y Yo,* Minority Media, 2012 **(Buy it Here)**
- *Shapes N' Mates*, Major Bueno, PC, 2013 **(Play it Here)**
- *Cesasar's Day Off,* Major Bueno, PC, 2013 **(Play it here)**
- *Even Cowgirls Bleed,* Christine Love, PC, 2013 **(Play it Here)**
- *Pan Man*, Major Bueno, PC, 2013 **(Play it Here)**

Links

1: *Making Emotions Come to Life in Games through Creative Design, Production and Technology*; Vander Caballero, Ruben Farrus, Julien Barnoin; Montréal International Games Summit 2013 **(Link)**

2: *Games For Change 2013 Keynote*; Ian Bogost. **(Link)**

3: *No Laughing Matter: Making Humor Work in Games*; Bob Mackey **(Link)**

Sluggish Presents of Horror and Morss p9

Author: Zolani Stewart (@Fengxii)

The Painting: *And all the things I have forgotten, Forest Bess; 1953.*

Games from Jake Clover: **(Play them Here)**

- *Fear Choonkz,* PC, 2012
- *Galah Galah,* PC 2013
- *000000052573743,* PC, 2013
- *It Came From Not Here: Monstrous Monstrosities,* PC, 2012
- *Ground Stooge ("Some Games" Compilation),* PC, 2013
- *Nuign Specter,* PC, 2012
- *Less Raum,* PC, 2012
- *Sluggish Morss,* PC, 2013
- *Duck Turnip,* PC, 2013

Other Games:

- *Rorschach 16,* Swofl, PC, 2013 (Play it Here)
- *Last Words,* Angry Dome, PC, 2013 (Play it Here)
- *Mario Empalado,* Pedro Paiva, PC/Web, 2013 (Play it Here)

Failure in Loops p13

Author: Line Hollis (@LineHollis)

The Painting: *The Wren's Gate, Robert Caldwell; 2013.*

Media

- *Groundhog Day;* Harold Ramis, 1993 **(Wiki)**
- *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask;* Nintendo EAD, Nintendo 64, 2000 **(Wiki)**
- *Shira Oka: Second Chances;* Okashi Studios, PC, 2010 **(Buy it Here)**
- *Vicious Cycles 2011;* Simon Mark, Web, 2011 **(Play it Here)**
- *Mainichi;* Mattie Brice, PC/Mac, 2012 **(Play it Here)**
- *Way of the Samurai;* Acquire, Playstation 2, 2002 **(Link)**
- *No One Has to Die;* Stuart Madafiglio, Cindy Xu, Jesse Valentine, Web, 2013 **(Play it Here)**

Links

- *You Know What's Gross? We Often Play Nice Guys in Games™ with Romance Options;* Kim Moss, 2012 (Read it Here)

Space Pulp Modernism p19

Author: Alex Pieschel (@gamesthatexist)

The Painting: *Blue Calligraphic Lines on Dark Blue, Jiro Yoshihara; 1963.*

Games from The Catamites: **(Play them Here)**

- *Space Funeral,* PC, 2010
- *Twenties Flappers vs. the Mummy*, PC, 2009
- *True Detective Mysteries,* PC, 2013

- *Space Mouse*, PC, 2013
- *Moppy Returns,* PC, 2013
- *Veggie Tales 3D,* PC, 2010
- *Operative Assailants*, PC, 2013
- *Bogey's Report,* PC, 2013
- *Voyages of Mogey,* PC, 2013
- *Hazy Hazy Town*, PC, 2013
- *Cigar Afficionado,* PC, 2013
- *Lake of Roaches,* PC, 2013
- *Pamela's Adventures in Dreamland,* PC, 2013
- *Bubsy the Bobcat*, PC, 2009
- *Mashkin Sees it Through,* PC, 2013
- *Crime Zone,* PC, 2011
- *Work Drinks,* PC, 2013
- *Stephenstown,* PC, 2013

Games from The Catamites, Kat Chastain, New Vaders:

- *Goblet Grotto,* PC. 2012 **(Play it Here)**
- *Super Eagle,* PC. 2012 **(Play it Here)**

Other Games:

- *Ghosts of Aliens;* Swordofkings128, PC, 2008
  ("We can't find this game! If you know where to find it, email editors@arcadereview.net")
- *Problem Attic;* Liz Ryerson, PC/Web, 2013 **(Play it Here)**
- *Captain Blood;* ERE Informatique, Atari ST/Commodore 64, 1988 **(Wiki)**
- *Dwarf Fortress;* Tarn and Zach Adams, PC, 2006-present **(Wiki)**

Media

- *Notes on "Camp",* Susan Sontag, 1964 **(Read it Here)**
- *On Style*, Susan Sontag, 1965 **(Read it Here)**
- *Fashion, Emptiness and Problem Attic,* Brendan Vance, 2013 **(Read it Here)**
- *Captain Blood,* Kat Chastain, 2010 **(Read it Here)**
- *COIN YOUTH PT VII,* Stephen Murphy, 2011 **(Read it Here)**
- *GAME REVIEW: A BANJO-KAZOOIE LEVEL,* Stephen Murphy **(Read it Here)**

A Conversation with Titouan Millet p26

Conversationists: Zolani Stewart (@Fengxii), Titouan Millet (@Titouan_Millet)

The Painting: *Green-blue Bi-serial, Guido Molinari, 1967.*

Games from Titouan Millet **(Play them Here)**:

- *A Cosmic Forest,* PC, 2013
- *High Snake,* Web, 2013
- *Vomiting Happy Cat,* Web
- *12$ (With Klondike)*, PC, 2013

Other Games:

- *Risk of Rain,* Hopoo Games, PC, 2013 **(Buy it Here)**
- *Starseed Pilgrim,* Droquen, PC, 2013, **(Buy it Here)**

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. Sorry! We try to reply to submissions but we can't guarantee it.

The Submissions Deadline for Issue 2 is Feburary 12. 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
arcadereview.net