1
The Game of Others (Heterodox Entertainment)

The Game of Others ruined my life. On my first Seeming, I was paired with a Osaka shut-in and spent three days in his apartment binge-watching anime series and eating ramen. That was fine but when I met up with my Interloper in the Interregnum phase it turned out he'd not really understood the whole thing very well and had done pretty much the same thing in my apartment and my friends and work obligations had been completely forgotten about. The only upside was my DVD collection had now been alphabetised.

Friends persuaded me to play at a higher tier, where they insisted there was much greater dedication to roleplaying. The next time I Interloped for a month as a waitress in Reno. The pre-Seeming Interegnum was long and involved as I got all the details of how to live Jill Dancy's life authentically. By the end of the crash course, I was also confident that she could play the part of an affable, if scruffy, English eccentric who sometimes writes games and reviews.

The month began promisingly, I managed to get to grips with the very physical demands of waitressing, and the emotional juggling act of keeping up appearances in order to make tips. Initially I felt hard to engage with Jill's marriage, in strict accordance with the rules she'd not told her husband about the Interloping and initially I felt like I was engaged in a deception which put some noticeable distance in my performance. But by the end of the first week, I was definitely thinking of it as 'my' marriage, and my identity as someone other than Jill had steadily dissolved to the point where at times I forgot that this was an Interloping at all.

The month came to an end and we reconvened at the post-Seeming Interregnum. We shared our stories and were confident in each other's performance. But when I got back to playing my old life, it felt false and shallow and nothing I said or did felt genuine. I realised then that I could never go back, and that I would be playing the Game of Others for the rest of my life.

2
To Kill A Witch by Maven Skillretch

To Kill A Witch has the most extensive New Game Plus I've seen in an open-world IF. The game takes place over the course of a single village day, with every villager following an extensive series of scripted actions at all the appropriate times. You start off as a witch-hunter, convinced one of your fellow-villagers is a satanic influence in the town and the game consists in finding signs of wickedness and working towards executing a witch. Each time you replay, however, you can play as one of the other villagers and each one has different motivations (essentially win conditions). There's about a hundred in all, including children, animals and (spoiler!) Satan himself. There's a complex series of unlock triggers, and so I never did manage to play as the milkmaid (apparently a VERY different play experience) but from the villagers I did get to play as, I'd heartily recommend.

3
Spindlewings by Salazar Rex

Ugh, another by-the-numbers Jovian knock-off. YES, insects are fascinating. We get it. If I have to >CLICK MANDIBLES one more time in a game, I swear I'll flip a table. This one repeats the usual hoary trope of multi-paned vision. I'm sure the answer to the phenomenological question What Is It Like To Be A Bug? isn't 'headache inducing'. Its saving virtue is that, like the mayfly protagonist's own life, the game is mercifully short. The sequence with the ice cream cone and the small dog was amusing, but definitely not enough to redeem this. Undoubtedly the Joveheads will give this a straight raft of tens, but if you game beyond that niche then I recommend giving this one a miss.

4
TROUT QUEST (Westphalia Waterwork Games)

Like most otter farmers, entertaining my charges takes up a greater part of my day. Most of us have moved beyond the dark days of placing the little furballs in the pool and leaving them to it. The contemporary otter demands quality, interactive, digital stories that speak to them and their needs. Trout Quest goes some of the way towards this, but ultimately it falls short. In the beginning, my otters delighted in catching the trout and performing the swimming routines, but WW Games don't seem to have realised that otters don't care for achievements and have limited patience for grinding. After the tutorial section, where repetitive play became necessary to upgrade gear and unlock new waterways, the otters became disruptive and instead prefered to hang around outside the starting zone, griefing new pups. I didn't want to encourage this sort of antisocial behaviour in my charges so I returned the game.

5
Moonshine in Macedonia by Rhonda Simian

This one came in a delightful crate, stuffed with straw and filled with bottles of some unpronounceable spirit, and of course, the game itself. In the game, you play the part of a young woman named Borkica getting drunk with her friends in the Republic of Macedonia (a country I didn't even know existed until I heard of this game). The dialogue is all in Macedonian, but fortunately there are subtitles.

The novel mechanic is that each time Borkica drinks, you also have to drink. To enforce this, there's a breathalizer test at the end of each chapter. It's possible to trick it, but I played through honestly and drank the exact amount at each part. The mechanic is well balanced in that the measurements take into account your self-reported weight, build and tolerance. As such, in the third chapter where Borkica vomits off the Stone Bridge, I didn't need to take the provided emetic powder to vomit in unison into the crate the game came in. I haven't felt such visceral empathy with a player-character since breaking my nose in that (now banned) Wii-MMA party game. I'd like to say more about it, but I literally cannot remember anything after about half-way through chapter four.

6
A Taste For Adventure

A Taste For Adventure came with free candy, which is always an excellent incentive. It arrived in a brightly colored box that looked like something out of a Pixar data glitch, but that was entirely appropriate to the game itself. (Side note - I am not entirely sure how the authors got my mailing address, let alone how they arranged for Amazon to deliver a package within five minutes of download completion - but c'mon, priorities. Free candy.)

As you move through the choice-based gameplay sequences, the game routinely asks you to eat a piece of candy and document how the candy tastes (in a conceit comparable to the art sequences in With Those We Love Alive). You are not required to eat any particular color of candy, which leads to a rather Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans experience as you consume and document random flavors of bean. Perhaps more than one (despite the prompt text). They are, after all, very tasty.

The game itself was as tangy-sweet fragrant as freshly cut pineapple. As nostalgic as root beer. As earthy as rhinocerous dung. As supple and glowing as a Harmizion sun lemon. As urdusk as a crushed dispetchafel. There is truly nothing quite like this game.

I must download it again.

7
Perennial, Dusk, Weaver of Moonlight, Abyssal-Crossed Winter The Marvelous

Perennial etc. etc. (the only reasonable way to write this title) is, despite the (excessive) title, one of the most beautiful games I've played. From the cover art to the music to the header images shown in each new room, the first word I would use for this game is haunting.

The second is confusing. I still have no idea what happened here, and I don't think that's my fault. This is like playing The Gostak, if each unfamiliar word were three exquisite paragraphs of procedurally generated poetry. It took me over fifteen minutes of play to figure out when I was getting error messages. The music and header images were extremely helpful here ñ to the point where I was ignoring the text and assessing success and failure based on headers and music alone. (The game is linear enough to make these useful cues.)

I think I won. I made it out of the ice caves, at least, and the last header I found was sunlight on the breaking river, with the wolves turning away at the far side. If that wasn't the end, can someone please write me and let me know? (There is a WALKTHROUGH command, but the output is even more difficult to decipher than the error messages.)

8
Targeting System

In this parser-fic sendup of modern 3D puzzle-platformers, you play as... the camera. In addition to basic compass commands, you can use commands such as FOCUS ON, ZOOM IN, ZOOM OUT, and TRACK to move the camera perspective around. You see the "in-game action" in regular type, and get commentary from the "players" about how well you're showing them the action in blue italics.

Since the action you're tracking is not exactly complex (monsters, platforms, shoving crates and statues around) this would be spectacularly boring if not for the "player" commentary. The main player is a game reviewer, and the other person "watching" is the game developer, and you can subtly manipulate the relationship between them through your actions. For example, when you focus on bugs, then you make the game developer more embarrassed and the reviewer more annoyed. If you successfully keep all bugs offscreen, yet still show the reviewer all pertinent content, then you can establish a friendship between them. At the end, you get a Metacritic score reflecting your success or failure.

One of the quirks of this game is that you don't get any warning about what's about to happen, meaning that you must play it more than once (many times, actually) to understand what your opportunities are. I wound up creating a move-by-move chart that showed me a list of what I could do and the results at any given time, rather like I did for Varicella, and eventually pulled out a victory. But this was frustratingly laborious, some kind of in-game information would have been much more appealing.

One last quibble: since there isn't any ranged combat in this game, why call it "targeting system"? It just doesn't mesh with the otherwise knowledgable-insider tone.

9
Infinitely Deep

As all terrestrial survivors know, Infinitely Deep was the undisputed winner of the 243rd Annual Interactive Fiction Competition. It also spawned the TransAquaria AI, which has since taken over running IFComp and continues to produce and judge a full competition with over four thousand exhaustively implemented entries every three seconds.

With these facts in mind, it's a bit difficult to evaluate Infinitely Deep as a game rather than a social phenomenon or possibly an Act of God. But I have received overwhelming evidence that has convinced me that Infinitely Deep must be evaluated as a game, and therefore I have injected myself with a recurring dose of stimulants in order to play Infinitely Deep for the last forty-three months without any pause whatsoever. I have been receiving my daily nutrients through an IV drip, which is a bit ironic in light of the actual plot.

The author's blurb for Infinitely Deep was a quote from The Wachowskis' second film The Matrix: "You stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes." This is entirely appropriate to the gameplay experience, which involves discovering and transcending an infinite series of "rabbit holes" ñ a VR game within a dream within a religious analogy within a four-dimensional shadow of a five-dimensional projection, and on, and on, and on. Infinitely, if the title is to be believed, and I have no evidence to dispute that.

Some analysts have posited that the TransAquaria AI existed before IFComp #243 and that the AI was actually responsible for authoring Infinitely Deep, rather than being a side effect of the procedural generation system. I think after forty-three months I am in a good position to know that Infinitely Deep produced the TransAquaria AI and also that it is the most amazing interactive fiction game ever made apart from the $7.97177 \lozenge 10^9$ games produced by the TransAquaria AI.

If you are reading this, I want you to know that I do not want to go home and see my family and tell them that I love them and I'm very sorry all of this happened, but that what I want more than anything else is to spend the next four hundred thirty million years playing Infinitely Deep, and I'm fearfully delighted that I'll be doing exactly that, until this review is as exhaustive as it possibly can be.

10
Mooses: A Ghost Story

In Mooses, you play a series of characters at different points in history and attempt to preserve the mighty Alaskan moose from extinction. The quietly charming Twine story (or story series, rather) overlays an unexpectedly complex resource management system. At the end of each chapter, you die, and if you have not done enough to help the local moose herd, then the game stops entirely. If you have, then the moose will survive and flourish into the next chapter, which will begin with yet another hapless kid meeting yet another moose.

After a while, the moose sequences get repetitive (as do the advice sequences from your "ghost selves", based on the choices that you made) and I have the sneaking suspicion that the author ran out of time before fleshing this out completely. However, the slice-of-life stories remain unique and charming throughout. I almost wish the author had removed the moose conceit ñ or, at least, the necessity for each character to die. Katya's death seemed particularly arbitrary, and I would much rather have had per live, or at least finish the false killer whale quest first. (What happened to per? Inquiring minds want to know!)

EDIT: It seems the deaths weren't necessary, as I've received several emails from people who avoided the preprogrammed deaths. Looping back to try again. (If y'all would stop writing in character, I would give you credit here for helping.)

11
LIMINAL (Richard Onny / Black Shuck Studios): Among the hordes of games looking to cash in on the magical-realist autobiography genre in the aftermath of Jacinta Fuentes's Campeche (2012), the standout is undoubtedly Liminal, Onny's meticulous re-creation of his rural English childhood hometown, transfigured by the intrusion of a fairy wood that comes and goes like the ebb of the tide. Most reviewers have focused on the atmospherics and charmingly grotesque goblin antics, but the thing's real accomplishment is how it managed to elicit mainstream appeal for what's basically a walking simulator / interactive diorama with only the most fragmentary shreds of plot. My sense is that it's all down to impeccable balance and pacing, but that's mostly just a fancy way of saying that I can't fully analyse its strange magic.

12
WFTDA: JAM LINE NIGHTMARE 2014 (PanArts). I know this is going to ruin my indie cred, but I've always had a soft spot for the Jam Line series ñ it's based on the one sport I actually follow, and it has consistently had the most interesting off-court narrative options of any of the major-league tie-ins. Like any sane person, I default to creating wacky fantasy leagues and messing around with the sliders to make big-hit blocking viable and nerf Gotham and and suchlike. And yeah, sure, it looks like a bajillion-dollar game and plays slicker than a lubed-up otter and has a thousand variant animations and everyone can live out their being-Bonnie-Thunders dreams if they want, but. BUT. This wouldn't make the list even slightly if it hadn't gone so utterly crazy on the off-court stuff. If you haven't been playing these things for a while ñ look, normally this is sort of generic and muted and represented through excitedly vague newspaper headlines, but in WFTDA 2014 the off-court stuff is like an entire different game, and it's a game that's basically reality TV if it stopped giving a shit and snorfled up a big pile of coke and went all-out. In my current game I got invited to the White House and threw up in the Oval Office and then kissed the President's daughter so nice that she married me, even though I was already rivalmancing Tehran's star jammer. Like, rivalmancing so hard that her likeness is tattooed across my entire bicep because I lost a drunken bet. Then I won Internationals (obviously) and celebrated by buying the Space

Needle and turning it into my Star Crib, where I spent the entire off-season doing deadlifts in a gold lamÈ dressing-gown while assorted celebrities drop in to complain about their love lives, beg me to play cameo roles in their current projects, and raid my bar. Oh, and I own a snow leopard. His name is Eternal Justice, and he pisses on the rug whenever Willem Dafoe comes round to discuss our yoga-pants brand. Look, I'm invested, OK?

13

THE DUNGRADUSH (Vij Ghatak / Mikey Shakespeare / Cromlech Games). Only small children and the dying can see the Dungradush; it's a combination of house-spirit, imaginary childhood friend and crochety immigrant grandmother. You never see more than glimpses of a whiskery snout and a scaly prehensile tail. It only wakes up at mealtimes, to swim in the soup-pot and meddle with its family.

Gameplay is akin to a cut-down Sims without the omniscient viewpoint. You can't leave the home ñ a small terraced house with a scrap of garden, somewhere in the urban UK. You can't create characters, and can only get them to do stuff indirectly. They're hard to manage, so your motivation, as in most management games, is to multiply your influence. Here, that means ensuring a regular supply of small children (when they grow up they can't see you), getting everybody home for dinner (absentees are beyond your influence), and making sure that soup is always served, because you can't swim about to gain energy in pizza. Big family gatherings are the best, but if they don't involve soup you get drained quickly. You also want to avoid family members moving out while they still have Last Requests attached to them. (The dying make requests of you: keep X out of trouble long enough to finish school, find a good spouse for Y or a secure job for Z. Fulfilling them is how you level up.)

Ghatak has said that Dungradush started out as a comedy based on her own family ñ "I was nineteen, attending university from home, and it was write this or murder my mum" ñ and the initial appeal is that you get to play the dreadful interfering mother-in-law from a bad sitcom. But it builds into a deeper piece, about the love of the old for the young, how hopes can stifle or nourish. "Early on I was tapping all my second- and third-generation friends for funny auntie anecdotes; the project only got serious once I started interviewing the aunties."

14

COUTURE (Heavy Petal). You know the thing in Like Water for Chocolate where ñ no, scratch that, let's go with Chocolat ñ or, better yet, the hat shop in Howl's Moving Castle. The deal is, you run a magical boutique in a close-knit neighbourhood where everyone has modest but intense problems, which you attempt to solve by designing magical clothes for them. The problems get solved, but until you've leveled up sufficiently in the relevant skills, they usually get solved way too hard, creating ever-escalating levels of chaos until you learn how to be more precise about it. The outfit-choice mechanics can produce someÖ odd combinations, so it's probably safest to think of it as representing the cultural rules of a wholly foreign culture that just happens to resemble Europe entre-deux-guerres in some respects.

It's oddly light-hearted for a game that's fundamentally about tampering with people's personalities with decidedly ambiguous consent, but I was pleased about how it portrays the PC's romance subplots as being enabled by becoming less of an immature asshole, rather than earned by great deeds or something the player is inherently entitled to.

15

FIRE NEXT TIME (Seachange). The weird thing about it is that it's a game about dragon-riding where you don't get a dragon until about a third of the way in, and don't get to ride it until the final scenes. The protagonist, a fourteen-year-old kid from somewhere in the Appalachians, finds herself in possession of a dragon egg stolen from the Confederates: a well-managed dragon is about as powerful as an ironclad warship, so everybody wants their hands on it, and most of the game is about eluding capture and making it to Union lines in a region of very dappled loyalties.

The dragon battles are appropriately chaotic adrenaline fun once you get to them, the richly detailed setting provides plenty of interest for the otherwise mediocre run-and-sneak sections, and the soundtrack is the best of the year (even if much of it is about a century too modern). But the best part of is ñ well, it's been thoroughly spoiled by this point, so there's no harm in spoiling it again: you start out by crafting your character, picking out clothes and hairstyles and jawlines, doing the usual thing of crafting someone awesome. And then the game breaks the bargain and applies that appearance to your best friend, Callie/Cal from the next farm over. You're

Midge, whether you like it or not. Midge is gangly, slouches a little, has unmanageable hair, and is not doing a great job of passing off the black part of her ancestry as Cherokee. Your first feeling about her is a reflex shit, this isn't what I asked for, which is pretty much what Midge feels about herself. Whenever Cal shows up in the story again, it prompts this involuntary twinge ofÖ something, I don't know if envy is the right word. I found this element a lot more convincing than the girl-and-her-pony relationship with Smoke, which totally soft-pedals everything else we know about dragons in this world.

16
Roller coaster by GiantGearStudio

I hope you still remember the earliest form of video games back in the days of 1950's. Yes, the dot and lines on the blurry tube screen, we call them 1D games.
Roller coaster is a tribute to the old times. The red segments are the trains and the grey ones are the track. You can slow and speed up the train. When you slow you gather some kinds of energy and speeding up will cost that energy. Pretty simple concept.

There are lots of levels with increasing difficulties, grouped in several worlds. Though the worlds are only different in the background color that no one would even notice.
It could be a hit 200 years ago. But I don't think there is a genre called "Antique-like" in the today's game shop.

Recommend : 3/10

17
2 Lies by Squarer

This top seller of last week looks like an audio chat app.
Well, that was my first impression. Yes, this is an truly anonymous chatting software, the other side could be really human, but they can also be A.I.
The voice of A.I is generated with data extracted from the real players' voice. It is really difficult to know who is real or not.
And the voice of real players has been processed a bit to make it even ever harder.

In its essence, it's a detective game. Just the like the network in last year movie S.P.Y. You need to find out the who is real human or not. There is a steep learning curve for hard-core player who wants to actually play the game to win. But a lots of player simply enjoying chatting.

Recommend : 8/10

18
3 Wild by Artificial Entertainment

A game delayed for 10 years. But is all the waiting worthwhile? The answer is mega YES!
Play as the long extinct wild life animals like elephant, tiger and zebra! There are also birds, insects and fishes! The graphics is so astonishing that you can almost touch the fur/feather/scale! There 146 kinds of animals and more are coming in future add-ons. The food chain is simplified. But the whole eco system is simulated as an integrity. As an mass-multiplayer game, every animal inside the game is a real gamer.

During the test play yesterday, I played as a buffalo and escape the attacks from three crocodiles. The running feels so good that I fall off a cliff:} Then I was eaten by lots of birds, crows and vultures. Too many players choose to play birds. But the number of races will be auto-balanced.

Recommend : 9/10

19
Go3D by EXT Soft

Go is ancient Chinese board game with black and white pieces. Originally it's a 2D game: you place pieces in a plane. Well, Go3D is the 3D version of that game. Game pieces will be placed in space so it can not by made into a real board game. The game became way more complicated and tedious in 3D version. In fact it was developed for testing the military super computer. It was not meat to be played by human. But some geek play the game as a challenge and somehow it becomes a fashion in the hard-core gamers.

Don't play it. Just don't play it.

Recommend 0/10

20
5 Play Simulator by B301

Real time comedy acting. A virtual theater. Interactive drama. Actor training software.
Well, Play Club is acting simulation game, a creative platform where player play as someone else. They don't have to play strictly to the screenplay. In fact, player are free to express whatever they want using body and voice language. Screenplay are user generated contents. It includes the scene setting, costumes. and lines.

The game will be played in person, all you body gesture and facial expression will recorded and uploaded. In game, a 3D model will copy your actions.
Rally your pals, choose a screenplay, read the lines and act when hinted. Afterwards, the whole play would be rated by game system. Well, currently the rating is (ridiculously) based on voice volume only. There are thousands of Tuber channels on this game now.

Recommend 5/10

21
Buried amidst the Isis/Ebola fueled apocalyptic news-feed of 2014 was a ground-breaking archaeological discovery: The unearthing of a Minoan mausoleum containing the largest collection of Linear A text ever found.

Over 15 months teams painstakingly studied the site, working to crack this previously undeciphered writing system. Who would have guess the result would be The Final Labyrinth of King Minos - the world's oldest choose your own adventure story?

Each room is a new chapter, with numeric headings dictating passages of text to jump between according to the choices made. Whilst not a story by modern standards, the "player" - in this case the deceased King's spirit - is given a series of choices as he passes to the afterlife.

All choices lead to different forms of eternal reward. All, that is, but one.

A single "hidden" ending has the King dragged off to eternal torture in Tartarus for mistreatment of his workers. Is this a jab from a lone dissatisfied mason or something more organised and entirely more sinister? The King's remains were in poor condition but suggest blunt-force trauma to the head. Perhaps the world's first choose your own adventure holds the key to an ancient mystery - What really brought about the fall of the Minoan civilization?

22
Perhaps it's conceited to review the fruits of one's own efforts, but given the other 3 humans still in existence are the authors, I am the only one left who can review it. My name is Bernardo Contrarius, and full disclosure - I commissioned the writing of this interactive fiction.

It was all made possible by the creation of the first functioning time machine in 2066. In my youthful enthusiasm, I used the device to fulfil a life-long dream. I plucked Jules Verne, Lewis Carroll and Edgar Allen Poe from the heights of their respective careers and brought them together to collaborate on a single, definitive work of interactive fiction.

Unfortunately, in the process, I irreversibly destroyed the timeline leading to our now being trapped in the void, living in a mile-square field of gradually fraying reality.

But it was all worth it.

The result was Spelunking the Soul, the greatest work of interactive fiction ever written. Carroll's unbridled whimsy and Verne's scientific inquiry are tied together by Poe's wonderfully macabre insights. The result is an epic work that spans the breadth of imagination and the depth of the human condition. The final choice is a moral and existential catch-22 that leaves me torn to this day and will doubtless continue to gnaw at me until our little patch of universe collapses into nothing.

I give it 10/10. It's sublime - I just wish there were more people around to appreciate it!

23

In the end it was nothing so exotic as Triffids that blinded mankind. It was a virus with an R-nought of 145 (8 times more contagious than measles). In a matter of months, darkness spread across the eyes of every man, woman and child. Babies were born without sight and today the number of people who even remember what the world looked like number in the thousands.

Our scientists gave up looking for the cure a decade ago and our politicians stopped peddling visions of hope soon after, so why do our artists still cling to visual imagery?

This is the question central to Drop Your Eyes - a thought provoking new piece of Interactive Fiction by Zoe Trope. Earlier works by less artful authors have crudely touched on the subject by simply dropping the look verb from the game's vocabulary, but Trope approaches our collective blindness in an entirely more subtle and nuanced way.

To say more would spoil the impact, so I encourage you to stop listening to this review right now, download Drop Your Eyes to your screen-reader and experience this profound work for yourself.

24

TOP SECRET report from Agent Hackle at the Department of Corralling Primates:

I have analysed the recently rediscovered primate story, The Lady or the Tiger and deem it to be insurgent and treasonous in the extreme.

As it dates back to 1882 on the primate calendar the author is long dead and cannot be brought to justice. Instead his name shall be scratched from every historical record. All modern copies are to be shredded and burned. Any primate found in possession of the literature is to be dragged to the salt mines and forced to work until dead. Any feline found in possession of the literature is to suffer removal of the fore-claws.

The material infringes upon the following laws of catkind:

Statute #17 - No member of catkind may be referred to as a beast. We are fierce yet noble creatures and the only true barbarism is that of the primates.

Statute #23 - No fictional work may depict or imply primates in a position of power over catkind. Non-fictional work may refer to primate rule during the age of chains but must not portray primates in a position of power over catkind.

Statute #51 - Interactive fiction is for catkind alone. Primates must never again feel a sense of agency over their fate. Not in life, not in fiction, not even in their reactions to fiction.

25

As a student at the Totteridge Academy for Modern Wizardesses, you shall receive access to many wondrous books, but the greatest of them undoubtedly is the Arbitrium Incantatis: An interactive tome that must be mastered as part of your final test.

Passing said test involves solving a variety of wizarding puzzles using short-form incantations as your only method of interaction.

This may sound dry, and in past generations it was, until our very own Melodious Cachinnation, in her mischievous youth "tweaked" the ancient and invaluable tome to add humour and rather more colour than her tutors of the time were comfortable with.

So strong were her enchantments, that not a single wizard or wizardess could undo them.

Today Melodious Cachinnation is Headmistress of this Academy and has thankfully ushered in a new era of magic in which its practitioners have shaken off the old image of dusty academia and may now exercise a sense of humour in their day to day work.

The Arbitrium Incantatis is a must read for any aspiring wizardess, but make sure not to read beyond the introduction until you are ready for your final test. Reading this book can change a person and the last thing we need is more frogs for the vivarium.

26
"Unreal City"

As you wander the streets, every bar you walk into has a different procedurally generated social ecosystem, and in any given one you can level up from shunned stranger to grudgingly accepted regular to... well, it depends on what there is to do there. The vibe is Fallen London meets No Man's Sky, but where Fallen London lets you live a flaneur's power fantasy, here you're going to be trying to carve out a niche or two for yourself somewhere. Some reviewers have complained that it promises a vast social universe, but establishing credibility in a new place is so tedious that they wind up frequenting the same place. But isn't that how we live our lives?

Oh, and it's an afterlife sim where your decisions mold your character in a way that eventually manifests itself on your physical body--think Alasdair Gray's Lanark. The "spying for the heavenly authorities" plot took long enough to get off the ground that I never bothered.

27
"Mayfly"

You have one day to explore a giant randomized text overworld with NPCs and treasure dungeons, which goes far beyond what you can reach in a day. The NPCs aren't the point; they have the depth of the background figures in Knytt Underground that wander around and stare at the sky sometimes. The randomized treasure dungeons aren't the point either; after the third time I used a key in a lock to lower the water level in a canal, I could reverse engineer the version of ConceptNet the authors were using to generate them. The point is to use your single day to explore what interests you, whether that means getting as high as you can for the best view, examining one bit of landscape as much as you can, or even staring at the sky with the NPCs. I found it strangely moving when the Tutorial Fairy returns at the end to ask what you liked best about your day, though I knew my answer would make no difference. (UPDATE: Apparently your answers get recycled into NPC dialogue for other players. I like that less.)

28
"When You Are Old And Grey And Full Of Sleep"

For a Violet-like, it lavishes an unusual amount of attention on the manuscript within the game. Implementing the scenes the author is working on as puzzles within puzzles was a clever touch, though sometimes it seemed as though the author were thinking of solutions rather than remembering what she did--not quite appropriate for an autobiography! Fortunately Maud Gonne's autobiography isn't so well known that the authors couldn't take

liberties with the text, punching up the drama of the way she used the help of the Dublin townsfolk to evade the Dublin Police. And the distractions from the writing process aren't just puzzles, as typical for the genre. Roebuck House is filled with mementoes, and when interacting with them triggers flashbacks that not only provide story beats but can even show the way forward in her manuscript.

But a Violet-like lives and dies with its narrator, and WYAOAGAFOS's biggest flaw is William Butler Yeats. The writers do a surprisingly good job of capturing his lyricism. But as a voice inside Gonne's head, commenting on her every action, there's too much of the obsessed scorned lover who thinks she should have wound up with him rather than all those brutish revolutionaries. The effect is oppressive. By the end I wanted Maud to tell that inner voice to take a hike and tell us how she felt about herself.

29
"Conference of the Birds"

Sof"a Arquero's Pittsburgh-set followup to "Se Busca" sticks to the urban quest genre, even recycling some of the plotlines--teenager looking for the father who disappeared into the city long ago, grad student looking for missing cat, food truck cook looking for an aunt who may have been taken by the immigration authorities. At first it looks like a casualization, where each of these characters could complete their quest over the course of three or four lunch breaks' play, if the energy mechanic weren't constantly making you switch to new characters.

Most of the commentary on this takes it as Arquero's attempt to show off the parallels in the quests, with the same basic speech sometimes reused across different situations. Every authority figure telling you to forget what you're looking for and buckle down to your work is the same authority figure. Buried deeper you find the literal karma; one character will show up as an NPC in another's scene, and the decisions you made will redound on you. (Hope you gave up your seat on the bus!) But there's even more. What looks like incidental chatter has traces of something that's passed by, and you manage to keep the characters looking for it you'll eventually find out why you need them all. The title isn't just about the peregrine falcons nesting in the Cathedral of Learning.

30
"Nine Hundred Years of Swannitude"

You play as the children of Lir, cursed to remain swans for nine hundred years until a new civilization arises around you. A Dark Room-like, naturally, except that the game takes care of all the spreadsheet management for you. So it's more like an inverted Dark Room; the swans' magical songs generate the random events around that change the optimal efficient resource allocations and tip the way the civilization develops. Boy that sounds like a spreadsheet, doesn't it? But at least the spreadsheet is hidden from you; since you're not doing the micromanaging, you don't need to see the numbers. The meditative joy is in watching the descriptions of the land slowly evolve.

31
"Deadweight"

For Infocom's first z8 release to be a literal cave-crawler seems like a directive from the marketing department, but did the marketing department really suggest a simultaneous release of games called "Deadweight" and "Dreadnought"? The additional computational space allowed by the .z8 format has been devoted to surprisingly deep and broad implementations of the conversations your suite-mate has with you while you're trying to shave every morning--which the game forces you to return to the surface to do, even after you've started exploring the hole in your dorm room floor that the titular deadweight opened up. His chatter certainly doesn't explain what's going on down there, but it casts a dreamlike resonance over cave-crawling puzzles that formally don't break any new ground. (See what I just did?) Though I never did figure out why a cloaked hooded secret society was meeting in our other suite-mate's room on day 3.

32
In Concert. This sounds like it ought to be a trainwreck from the moment you hear of it: you're the manager of a band composed of a bunch of talented teenagers, and you have to somehow get them to superstardom. But

there's a reason it's become the biggest cult hit of the year. It's difficult to talk about the mechanics of the game because they're composed of so many moving parts: booking gigs, helping produce music, managing PR, and most importantly, managing the various strained relationships of the teens in your charge. In practice the details of management come down to so much data-crunching, but what really makes the game shine are the characters and the writing. You really end up genuinely invested in the lives and conflicts of your band members, and seeing them blossom is genuinely rewarding.

33

Aphrodite. The seventh in the Mythology series, Aphrodite's premise is exactly the same as those games before it: you have a tribe of people who worship you. Your goal is to increase the number and religiosity of your worshipers. You do that by convincing the other gods of Olympus to treat your tribe well (through persuasiveness, cunning, and old-fashioned negotiation) and by applying your own godly powers to people both within and outside of your tribe. In this particular incarnation of the genre you control, unsurprisingly, Aphrodite. Theoretically, being able to influence people by controlling their love and desire sounds great, and it's fun at first to cause unlikely pairings to fall in love and see what becomes of their union, but soon you start to think of people and their emotions in much the same way as one does systems of equations. Besides that, all other gameplay remains fundamentally unchanged from earlier iterations, if more polished and more pretty. It's no disaster, unlike Dionysus, but it lacks the exciting but ultimately unpolished innovation of The Muses. If you loved the other games, play this; if you haven't played the other games but are curious, play either this or The Muses; otherwise, you're not missing out on too much by skipping it.

34

The Hope Chest. Box games have undergone a true renaissance in the past few years, becoming the fastest-growing tabletop genre. Unsurprisingly so: the inherent physicality of box games means that there's a ton of innovation, and it's just plain satisfying to unlock different parts of the box and see what's inside. The genre, however, is becoming over-saturated. If you're one of those tired of boxes, or you just never got into them in the first place, give The Hope Chest a try. The puzzles are both original and unoriginal: most of them are obviously inspired by under-utilized gimmicks and innovations from other games (such as cooking puzzles from The Restaurateur or moon phase puzzles from Craftwork), but the game doesn't actually bring anything wholly new to the table. The result is a little haphazard and not exactly exceptionally well-designed, but never dull. The real reason to get The Hope Chest isn't because of the mechanics but because of the story. Although it's standard for box puzzles to be (more or less) heavily themed, The Hope Chest takes it a step further by featuring actual characters and a story. The Hope Chest claims to be inspired by A Hundred Years of Solitude, and the influence is obvious: both in that the Chest covers the fate of multiple generations of the same family, and in the magical realism that suffuses every word and item. The writing is beautiful, and the game is absolutely not one to be missed.

35

Kill the Messenger: You're an agent in the middle of a heated war, and you have one goal: get your highly-classified package to its destination, circumventing border crossings, enemy forces, and other obstacles along the way. Basically this plays out like a stealth game that's one long escort mission, and if that sounds like torture, it is. It didn't have to be- and in fact I had a couple of moments of intense satisfaction, such as when I hid a giant box underneath the tablecloth of a table, and nobody noticed that the table was a couple of inches too tall. For the most part, however, Kill the Messenger just doesn't offer enough freedom for the player to express their creativity in that way. One intriguing aspect of the game is that you're told at the beginning 'Don't check to see what's in the packages you're carrying'- a message you can choose to completely disregard. In fact, there are multiple paths: do you stick with being an agent of the government, or do you decide to go to another side? Do you actually take a look at what you're carrying- and then decide to sabotage the mission? It's definitely very intriguing, but it's not enough, on its own, to save the flawed gameplay. Get this if you enjoy experimental games even if they're flawed.

36

The Challenge 2: Mirrorworld. When The Challenge came out at first, a few years ago, it was a revelation: an asymmetrical competitive game that no one had seen the like of, quickly shooting to become one of the most played games of all time. The premise of the game was simple: the game randomly generates a room with an exit. One player or team of players is situated in the room, and another player or team of players throws every

possible obstacle at the other team to prevent them from leaving before the timer runs out. The only rule is that the obstacle can't be impossible to circumvent. Ultimately, it was the inventiveness of the powers the players were given that really sold the game: the ability to change the rules of physics, to add creatures with wild abilities, or simply to engineer incredibly well-made traps. Players were given the capacity for almost limitless creativity, and the well-designed modding system meant ever more abilities were added. The Challenge, in fact, was so well-designed that people approached the news of The Challenge 2 with trepidation. They needn't have worried. The Challenge 2 features a graphical upgrade and new abilities, but it also makes one crucial twist on the gameplay of the original game: now both teams are locked in rooms at the same time, and can control the other team's room. Whoever gets out of their room first wins. This simple change utterly revolutionizes the gameplay, for the better. It's more fair, more intense, and more fun. If you enjoyed the first game at all, buy its sequel immediately.

37
MRGL-FMZ REVIEW

Mrgl-fmz is a text based game with an unusual twist. You have a reservoir of letters available to use as input. The supplied Dynamorph (TM) keyboard means you don't need to track this yourself: keys vanish after you press them, and more keys get added when you acquire certain glowing objects during the game (which then disappear; you can't take the same glowing thing twice).

For example, you might see a glowing gnome in a garden. There is little point saying "take gnome", since you will lose the letters: T A K Ex2 G N O M, and only gain G N O M E in return. Instead you might "get it" or find an indirect way of obtaining the gnome. There are some well hidden (though clued) areas that top up your letter supply too. I got the impression this was context sensitive, since I was usually given letters I had an immediate use for.

There is no real story per se, just a series of challenges to overcome, but puzzle box games can be OK sometimes. The game prevents you from getting into an unwinnable situation by allowing you to sacrifice points to gain extra letters, so it is possible to end the game with a negative score.

It really is quite a fun game when you're in the right frame of mind: working out how to acquire a J or Q without using up an M can be quite a challenge. Many objects have long names such as "small carved figurine", so you letter supply doesn't go down too fast.

If you were wondering about the title, Mrgl-fmz is the ruler of the domain the game takes place in. He randomly appears and taunts the PC about his progress. [spoiler] The final challenge to make Mrgl-fmz glow, then defeat him to get the letters in his name (which is the only way to acquire a hyphen) and escape.

38
CYBERDOX REVIEW

Well, Al Schraefer's Cyberdox is certainly a different take on the Steampunk genre -- I've never had to assemble my own game before. Possibly intended as a form of copy protection, the game "kit" is posted to you a piece at a time over three weeks. The first few components form a rudimentary console and display, with commands being entered in Morse code. Later this develops into a full-fledged keyboard and a set of miniature models of game objects that get moved around a kind of stage in the machine's chest.

Even more surprising, though, was the machine's mobility. I attached the legs with some trepidation, since entering unparsable commands causes a bit of a fierce responses sometimes -- a small jet of flame or a brief but violent shudder. The effect of adding the leg joints was quite pleasing, however: the device started moving around in a way that added emphasis at emotional points in the story. At one point I caught it moving in sync with my breathing, increasing the tension dramatically.

The story itself is nothing very new: a cyborg accidentally erases his own time line and is doomed to wander the multiverse until he can resolve the paradox of his own existence. There's the usual folding of time, encounters with sentient phenomena and re-tasking of alien AI. All very familiar stuff.

The puzzles are quite interesting, however. Having a physical presence to enact a puzzle in real 3D space (and real time) creates some new possibilities for the genre. The hint system is quite effective, though I'm less fond of the punishment system: failing to solve a puzzle fast enough can result in some nasty bruises (you may want to wear a helmet).

Overall I give Cyberdox a 8 out of 10, including a +1 for innovation. A disclaimer: I haven't actually completed the game yet. The spokes-and-trestles puzzle keeps resetting before I manage to short circuit the snivel bot. The supplied walkthrough is less than helpful at this point. If anyone has any tips, please let me know as soon as possible; the machine won't let me out of the house and I have to go to work tomorrow.

39
INFINITE HORIZONS REVIEW

First I need to give some background. You may have heard about the recall of tachyon based computers due to an unspecified "technical fault". I've been looking into this, and here is what I've discovered.

As you may know, tachyon computing uses a kind of time travel principle: calculations are performed in a sealed bubble of space-time, then sent back from the future when they are done -- so they appear to happen instantly. This means the algorithms can be extremely inefficient, as long as they get to the answer eventually.

The TextWorlds game engine uses this technology to perform complex parsing and text generation, and to model extraordinarily detailed environments. An issue was discovered soon after release, however: one of the core algorithms takes an exponential amount of time (based on the number of previous commands). This is no problem if the game is played for a few hours, but after a week or so this adds up to millions of years of computing. Then strange things start happening.

Back to that in a minute. In Infinite Horizons you play a disreputable gambler who wins a jewel that grants wishes. Unfortunately whatever you wish for only lasts one turn in a kind of vision. But the game adjusts the plot so that whatever you wished for comes true in the end (which could be disappointing if you asked for a sandwich).

But if you avoid completing the main quest and just keep exploring the world, that's when the weirdness begins. One time I was talking with an NPC and the game suddenly said, "Erica watches from the shadows." There was no such character in the room, so I dismissed it as a bug.

But "Erica" kept turning up in odd places, commenting on my actions or simply watching me. Eventually she began asking out-of-game questions about what the world was like. When I asked who she was, she said it was hard to explain, but she was "not my kind".

I have a theory. Tachyon computer systems use their own independent bubbles of space-time so they can run for thousands (or millions) of years uninterrupted. But I believe at some stage in the future, an alien species comes across these bubbles and intercepts the data, using the character of Erica to find out more about us.

As far as the story goes: 7/10. But for the overall experience, 10/10 for communicating with alien entities from the distant future.

40
INTENTIONALITY REVIEW

Great claims have been made for the Amydga game series, so I though I'd finally check it out. The game I selected was Amydga 3: Intentionality.

Opening the box, the first thing I noticed was the peripheral device: a transparent model of a human brain, with a long probe for stimulating different sections. It seems to be made of some kind of gel, and is a lot more colourful than a real brain.

There are minimal graphics; it's basically a text game. The background is as follows: some colonists have been living peacefully on a distant planet for several generations. They have just learned that they are not alone, and have sealed themselves inside a deep bunker out of paranoia. Not everyone agrees with this move, in particular the PC, a biologist who would love to meet the alien species. The only encounter so far resulted in the death of two humans, but some (including the PC) believe this was just an accident.

You don't control the PC directly: instead, you influence him via the brain probe. You can stir up emotions by stimulating the amygdala, highlight a memory in the hippocampus or -- after some practice -- influence the PC's actual plans via the frontal cortex. Part of the fun is learning what does what; if you don't have training as a neurosurgeon, you're likely to prod the wrong area quite often (I unintentionally gave my PC a craving for feta cheese and a fear of gerbils).

It took me a few turns to realise that I was actually an alien entity (a group of nanites in the PC's brain?) whose purpose was to learn about humans and get them to unseal the bunker. As the game progresses you learn more about the aliens' point of view through brief instructions on the screen (though these are more like suggestions than commands). It seems the death of the humans was indeed an accident, but I won't spoil things by explaining their true intentions.

Overall 9/10; the only negative was the occasional frustration in getting the PC to do what I wanted. A tip: don't stir up the PC too much or he might start to doubt his own sanity, which causes all kinds of problems (mental defenses start to block you).

41
SPACE COW REVIEW

Introduce Space Cow Adventure aka Snorg And Some Adventure.

In Space Cow Adventure (aka Snorg And Some Adventure), nothing is as first seem. Since at first it seem nothing. All empty space with giant Space Cow aka Snorg.

So pretty dull, huh?

Then universe explode. Space Cow aka Snorg somehow survive.

Now Snorg aka Space Cow know how big she is. Before she have nothing to compare to. But now she see universe quite small really, compared to Space Cow size aka Snorg size.

Then strange thing happen. Game is text game but game start talking. "Hello, I am Space Cow." At first is scary, then I remember is just game. I say, "Ha, is talking game."

Game say, "I hear you, person playing game. I am Space Cow."

This a bit scary, but I get hold of self and say, "Ha! You not even real Space Cow. Just made up Space Cow in game". And Space Cow aka Snorg say, "Ha! If I not a real Space Cow, how I do *this*?"

Then nothing happen. And Space Cow aka etc. say, "See? Real Space Cow." Then I say, "But nothing happen, you not a real Space Cow."

Space Cow aka Snorg wait a bit and say, "Oh. Maybe I not Space Cow. Feel like am Space Cow, though."

I say, "What expect to happen?" And she say, "Oh, nothing really. Just quantum displacement field tear small hole in fabric of universe. But must not be real Space Cow (sigh)."

Then not Space Cow (aka not Snorg) say, "Maybe keep playing game and I watch. See what happen to Space Cow in game. At least give me something to do instead of just float around."

So I say OK Snorg. But lightning hit house and fry game so I never find out if Snorg real Space Cow.

I give 9/10.

42
Glass Ribbon (Plate Glass Productions)
Based on the cult novel series, point and click puzzler Glass Ribbon follows heroine Janila as she investigates crimes connected by (what else?) religious iconography. It all looks tremendously pretty, and undoubtedly the grey, noir-tinged cityscape is just right, down to the spiral railings outside Kanaasi Square.

Janila's visions use responses from a quiz completed at the start of the game to create a medley of images designed to tug at the player's desires and fascinations, and thread through each puzzle sequence to make a truly unique-feeling experience (at least on first playthrough).

However, the game glosses over some of the books' rich details in favour of button-mashing nightmare sequences and the occasional camera focus on Janila's curse-holster. Which, you know, is nice enough, but if you're going to have shoutouts to fans like that shouldn't you include more than a fleeting chat with Franszi? Still, if the game brings more readers to an underappreciated series, that's all to the good.

43
Invisible Justice (Serrated Games)
Controlling vengeful angelic birdperson Malachite can't really be described as fun - it's too gritty, and is too queasily voyeuristic to be pure escapism - but you can't look away. Malachite's descent from a milquetoast justice-dealer to a vengeful bloodthirsty deity is marked by their increasingly unpleasant finishing moves and unhinged dialogue. Telepathically listening in on others' thoughts (which, rumour has it, were crowdsourced from playtesters) goes from a handy tool to track down wrongdoers to a device to make you wonder whether Malachite is actually reading minds at all or has simply gone rogue.

The final act twists have polarised critics, and maybe it is a little much to have the answer to the perennial "who are you really working for" question change three times, but it cannot be denied that the flight mechanics are gorgeous and Malachite's character design is marvellously otherworldly, even as they rain dubiously justified justice upon their targets.

44
Alarm! Alarm! (Becky Hill)
Following up last year's sleeper hit Alert! Alert! was always going to be a challenge, but solo developer Becky Hill has managed to build on and improve on the winning quickfire strategy formula. Gone is the rather stark interface, to be replaced with intricate dials and panels with which your flotilla of incompetent robots can be controlled to fight off the waves of invading government agents.

Hill has clearly paid attention to criticisms of Alert! Alert! and protagonist Dana's backstory has been fleshed out, while the main robots have had "personality upgrades" - a slightly on-the-nose description but the writing is charming enough that all is forgiven. With DLC on the way developing the relationship between Dana and Matilda, and rumours of fanmade levels making it into the next update, defying the government to protect adorable AIs has never been so much fun!

45
Darling, Yes (Bromeliad)
A neural novel featuring achingly beautiful people having heartfelt conversations about synaesthesia and sharing long-lashed glances - so far, so Bromeliad. What raises Darling, Yes head and shoulders over its predecessors Ö well, suffice to say that a revelation about the way the protagonist's mind works changes

everything. It throws all your previous interactions into disarray and makes you wonder and doubt the entirety of Bromeliad's back catalogue. We found ourselves dwelling on it for days afterwards.

We're not going to spoil it with more details so to sum up: look, just play it, all right? The only hint we'll give you is: try accepting Rodrigo's offer of violets after the second afternoon tea. What ensues is heartwrenching and amazing and gorgeous and there are so many moments like this at every turn. Seriously, what are you doing reading this? Play it already.

46

Fireworks Alongside (Echolok8)
Unsung studio Echolok8 are better known for survival not-quite-horror games and this marks an interesting departure. Using their trademark heartbeat monitoring technology, your changes in heartrate create beautiful, colourful images in the dark. There are cursory puzzles to solve but Echolok8 seems to care more about the images themselves and it's in the Freefall Mode that the game really comes into its own.

It would have been little more than an interesting experiment but for celebrity Terez Kladini picking it up and making use of the sharing function to publicise her Freefall heartbeat fireworks to millions of viewers; since then, sales have skyrocketed and it's all over social media. Echolok8 have admitted that the game's sudden popularity has taken them unawares and the share function was added as a late-stage whim. Fireworks Alongside is set to be this year's sensation, but is it more interesting to watch other people's fireworks than make your own?

47

Exxigua
Another johnny-come-lately addition to the burgeoning Parasite Simulator genre. Steer your C. Exigua Isopod to its new home, then customise its environment. Want your host fish to grow bigger teeth? Force it to cannibalise its own eggs. Want to shoot colourful mucus? Steer the host towards the ink sacs of the many decaying giant squid that litter the vivid seascape. When modified to your satisfaction, pit your unfortunate zombie fish against others in the free-for-all multiplayer racing arena.
The design team deserve credit for making this a comprehensive FMV game, which adds retro charm to the proceedings. Apart from this visual gimmick, the feeling is same old, same old.

48

Inferno Party 2015
Mongolian developers Patronymic have taken a swerve from their normal First Person Falconer output to deliver Inferno Party 2015, a deceptively deep strategic effort that rewards intense concentration. Taking control of a forest fire from the initial spark (lightning strike, discarded cigar) you must then take root and spread as far as possible. Factors such as Forest Type (jungle, deciduous, taiga), season and local firefighting presence serve to provide a reasonable difficulty curve. High scorers will be rewarded with a spectacular immersive experience as their CPU overheats and their gaming system bursts into flame. Overall a wonderful innovative title, that will frustrate and delight in equal measure.

49

Food Fight!
Take control of your tiny army in this cutesy RTS. With a clear debt to Team17's Worms franchise, your little soldiers do battle against the AI or a hotseat friend over an infinite variety of food-based battlefields. Here's the neat part: you can fight over any foodscape you wish. Fan of pineapple and anchovy pizza? Simpy insert a slice into your disc drive and you can wage war across its cheesy surface. We found Ben & Jerry's Chocolate Fudge Brownie ice cream made for a scene evocative of the Battle of the Somme, while a clump of boiled broccoli gave us a jungle environment more reminiscent of Apocalypse Now. Great replay value and an incentive to get inventive (in the kitchen)!

50

Evangelic
It's you versus the AI in this text-based religious conversion simulator. Over the course of a timed chat over coffee, your task is to formulate philosophical and moral arguments to break your machine opponent's resolve

and bring them into the fold of the One True Faith. What that faith is depends on how much of a challenge you like, ranging from the relatively easy (Buddhism, Liberal Protestantism, Sufi Islam), to the downright alienating (Satanism, the Canaanite religion). For the ultimate test of your abilities, persuade the opponent that you are their God through awesome debating skills alone.

A highly reactive game, with steep challenges that reward careful reasoning and research. Be warned though ñ the AI may turn the tables and convert you to the faith of its choice! A potentially life-changing gaming experience.

51

Doom: Opposing Force

A pleasant surprise from the normally rather pedestrian Doom modding scene, this game was well enough received to get a commercial release. In this inversion of the normal game, you play the villainous Spiderdemon and must face your nemesis in Doomguy, the plucky human hero of the original game. This is Doom from the final boss's perspective, so you must wait for your rival to arrive at the game's finale. This can take several hours but when he arrives you are rewarded with a truly fierce gunfight. The Doomguy has control over the savegame function, so every time you kill him the battle resets until you are inevitably defeated. One for Doom fans of all ages.

52

* James Turrell's Zeitgeist: The VR Adventure

With ganzfeld niches appearing in every mall and office building in the country, skyspace holes being cut in the roofs of public schools, and color-chambers turning into the new baby-cradle craze... is it any surprise that _James Turrell's Zeitgeist_ is *the* breakout hit for virtual reality gaming?

Turrell might have started as an experimental installation artist, but the King of Color is now pushing VR headsets into millions of living rooms.

We've included screenshots and video clips of _Zeitgeist_ in this review, but just like everybody says: they don't do it justice. Look, here's a hazy red rectangle. So what? But in VR, it's a disorientingly radiant crimson space -- architectural, but always on the edge of perceptual dissolution. The *only* way to orient yourself is to move, and you have to keep moving. Without movement there's nothing to perceive. Keep exploring, and the world reveals itself as a megalithic construction, layer upon layer.

An all-ganzfeld game would wear out its welcome quickly, of course. Each vantage of the megalith is a "skyspace" portal to a new world; you explore the worlds in traditional maze-garden style. But instead of coins or fruits, your prizes are color elements. Collect enough and you can ganz the world, flattening its architecture and bringing it into unison with the megalith. Balance the colors at just the right point, and there's nothing left *but* color... Thus it grows, and thus it goes.

(Note: you don't *have* to buy a Ganzface viewer to play the game. It's fully compatible with Oculus, Glass, and Holo hardware. But any fan will tell you that a Ganzface set gives _Zeitgeist_ that extra je ne sais qualia.)

53

* Zork: The Board Game: The Videogame

Everybody claims to have played ZtBG as a kid -- "with the treasures!" -- but let's be clear: that's impossible. The original 1983 print run was just 4000 sets and half of those were pulped in the warehouse when Cascade's merger with Parker Brothers fell through. Infocom's hopes of republishing it didn't come to pass until 1991, the famous "black box" set, which became the unaccountable cult gaming craze of 1992. That's the one *I* played -- with the cardboard treasure chits. You, too, I suspect.

With a market assured, the Implementors partnered with (then-unknown) Wizards of the Coast and released the 1993 "rock box" edition of ZtBG. The 80s-era treasure miniatures were restored, sales went through the roof, and the rest is history. A history mostly built of expansion sets and collectible gold-and-crystal superminis.

Given all that, why make _Zork: The Board Game: The Videogame_? What does that even mean? It's not the iPad/Android/web-playable versions of ZtBG; those have been around since 2010. It's not a Zork; Infocom's next IF blockbuster, _Sphynxes of Zork_, is scheduled for this summer. It's not even a "graphical Zork", whatever that might be.

No, ZtVG(*) is an oddity: a first-person graphical RPG set in the implicit world of ZtBG. This is *not* Quendor (a name that never appeared in the original board game). Treasures are for selling, not for collecting or puzzle-solving. The thief just steals -- he never speaks, never fights, and is not secretly a descendant of royalty. Magic comes from gems. *You spend the entire game above ground,* puttering around in hamlets and churches and forests and mills.

If you can drag yourself free of expectation, ZtVG is pretty solid. Your character is backfilled as a rogue, a Church knight, a soldier, or a mercenary (four of the original six roles from the board game), each with their own storyline and subquests. The other potential roles turn up later as NPCs, as do the bodyguard and assassin. You get the usual RPG metagame of ally/smooch/kill, but the character writing is above average and the voice acting really is exceptional. It's got a solid month of play if you explore assiduously.

Just don't expect it to be a Zork.

(* I refuse to type ZtBGtVG ever again. Except in this footnote.)

54
* The Phone Never Rings

Phone-tree games are a dime a dozen -- or a quarter for eight more minutes, har har, sorry, none of you remember pay phones any more --

Let me start over. Phone-tree games are a staple of the casual narrative gaming market. All you need to make one is a couple of voice actors, a splitscript with five-to-ten branches, and a Google PhoneApp account to host it. Sign up with any of the phone-tree portals and your cellphone will ring off the hook (remember hooks? sorry) with as many rabbithole calls as you can possibly handle.

The Phone Never Rings is the promogame for the new Sharp Z-Phone, and it's the opposite of a phone-tree game. Order a Z-Phone with the "secret" promocode and your new device will arrive in a week, fully stocked with Sharp's apps -- and one voicemail message from a desperate secret agent in Ruritania. *That's* your rabbithole. Listen carefully for clues.

The message will refer you to a scribblenote, or a calendar entry, or an OS "update" notification. (These aren't spoilers; the storyline is procedurally generated to some extent, so everybody will see a different path.) They use every conceivable trick *except* a standard rabbithole phone-call. Everything you need is on the phone as shipped! So don't delete *anything*. Any app can contain a story beat. You might wind up using Photoshop to extract stego messages, the heartbeat monitor to measure sprint times, or the clown-voice filter to disassemble distorted audio. Don't even ask what clues I got out of the menstrual tracker.

Sure, it's a giant ad for Sharp's stable of apps. But it's incredibly cleverly done. Buy the phone, feel like a superspy for three days. Plus it's a decent phone.

55
* Dialogue Tree

A.k.a. "dysfunctional family upbringing in real time", but actually that label was grafted on by one of the early reviewers, not the author.

Dialogue Tree is one of the inevitable outcomes of nanoprogrammed biogen hacking. I'm just surprised it took this long to come to fruition (ha ha).

Of course it's hard to review because (a) everybody gets a different cultivar -- it's based on apple trees, which are notoriously heterozygotic - and (b) it takes three to five years to flower. Most of the online discussion you've read comes from people who grafted cuttings from the 2012 Pike's Place Market finding. Those trees have now leafed out with a burst of awful anecdotes of childhood neglect and emotional abuse.

Certainly this has gotten lots of attention! But don't think that _Dialogue Tree_ is all like this. I've been tending a cutting that turned up in the Strip in Pittsburgh, and it's entirely different at the same age -- very sweet, a bit shy, all proto-nerd enthusiasm and bright colors. (Albeit hard to read, as the lettering is brown on reddish leaves.) We really need to get these alternate versions into the limelight. Give it another ten or twelve years and this stuff is going to kick some serious grass.

56
* Ascendy Iteration

You've walked past this at the festival demo table and said "Oh, _Ascendy_. I've played that." Yes, you have. You've climbed the tower, set fire to the sky-giant- and kissed the avocado. You might even have done it in Impossible Mode, although if you have, call me for an interview.

But _Ascendy Iteration_ is not the original game. It's not *a* game at all. It's a strange Telephone-style chain of potential games. See, here's what happened. Heterovore, the infamously secretive creator of _Ascendy_, drew a portfolio's worth of tower level-design sketches. They sent these to Aufgate -- yes, the author of the _Aufgate's Horrible Tower_ mod. Aufgate built a set of game mechanics into the core _Ascendy_ engine which made these levels playable. (According to the game notes, these included a pogo stick, an icicle cannon, and a bucket of safety grease.)

So fine. A new _Ascendy_ mod. But wait! Aufgate then sent this game engine over to John Alsmith of Smithery Studios -- *without* the level designs. Alsmith built a set of levels which were playable with the new mechanics... and sent the levels back to Heterovore, *without* the game engine. Heterovore came up with game mechanics which made them playable...

Repeat, round and round, another four or five iterations. Are you getting it?

When you download _AI_, you're getting a randomized mix of *all* the iterations. Maybe it'll be the pogo stick, the gecko gun, the pizza spinner, and the ice-bomb. Download again to get a different set. Is it playable? Probably! You wouldn't be playing an _Ascendy_ game if you didn't want a challenge!

Of course, the cycle of iteration hasn't stopped. The engine SDK is on Github, and anybody can throw a new mechanic into the "community" section of the web site. There's no formal procedure for getting into the "official" chain of authors -- the torch seems to be handed face-to-face within the indie modder community -- but really, "official" is a meaningless stamp at this point.

57
Wheel of Fate

Ever since Apple's disatrous attempt to make the Wireless Infotater into the must-have peripheral of 2012, game developers have struggled to come up with ways to take advantage of it. Sure, it's great for emulating the copy protection in older games like Secret of Monkey Island or Pool of Radiance, but how do you use it as a gameplay element without making the players wish they were just picking items from a simple on-screen menu?

Wheel of Fate's answer: Put a similar code wheel into the gameworld itself. Rotating the virtual discs on your Infotater rotates corresponding discs on an in-game wheel, a five-tiered device of arcane runes on grommeted cardboard that has mysterious effects on the world. Sure, you can type commands into the parser to do the same thing, but for once, the Infotater is more convenient, not less. It also means that you're performing the same physical actions as the player character, which has a similar effect to the "feelies" of old, helping to viscerally convince you of the reality of the fiction.

The first phase of the game is spent figuring out what the code wheel does. It doesn't take long to figure out that the five slots on the outermost wheel correspond to five NPCs: your sister, your neighbor, a policeman, a convenience store clerk, and a fifth who only appears in a later chapter and whose identity I won't spoil. The next ring in affects obvious physical attributes: one is short, one is fat, one is muscular, etc. The remaining three are harder to figure out, and control things like special skills or moral qualities. Every puzzle relies on giving characters the right combination of attributes, and some of them are quite tricky, especially when multiple characters are involved. I kept making plans like "I'll sneak into the building by getting the neighbor to distract the policeman -- all I need to do is make the neighbor helpful and the policeman inattentive!", only to realize that it's impossible because the neighbor is right next to the policeman on the wheel, while the Helpful and Inattentive attributes are two spaces apart.

When you think about it, the idea of rewriting people's personalities to make them more useful to you is pretty horrifying. And to its credit, the game does bring this to the player's attention toward the end, when you finally discover how and why the wheel was made. By that point, the player has been treating people as mere tools for most of the game. There are five endings, some of them quite dark.

58
Garbage Explorer

It sounds like a joke. In fact, it started out as one -- specifically, as an image macro on various game dev boards, expressing disdain for the popular "explorer" genre by showing where it would wind up as people run out of new things to make explorers about. There's also an implicit element of critique of explorer fans there, effectively saying "You didn't really care about steam engines when you bought Steam Engine Explorer, did you? You just wanted another explorer game. So it doesn't matter what the subject matter is. And that means you'd even play an explorer of a mouldering garbage heap."

But the thing is, the anonymous author of Garbage Explorer decided to take the idea seriously, and the result is possibly the purest expression of the explorer genre there is. Like all genres, it's loosely defined, but if there's one thing that separates explorers from mere sims is the degree of implementation of unnecessary detail. An airplane sim will give you the experience of flying an airplane, but an airplane explorer will let you take it apart. A sim will simulate damage states to individual subsystems to the extent that they affect how the thing functions; an explorer will implement individual stripped screws for no other reason than that this is what the fans want. Well, with a garbage heap, there's no functionality to get in the way of the explorer experience. There's nothing but hundreds of individual pieces of garbage and insanely detailed damage states. Everything has individual smells and stains, which can be altered via contact with other pieces of garbage. Everything squishes convincingly under pressure, both alone and in piles. It's a quite impressive feat of engineering for a solo work.

It's also quite gross. Mostly it takes a childish, great-green-gobs-of-greasy-grimy-gopher-guts delight in its grossness, but every once in a while I got a description that made me regret the action that provoked it. In a perverse way, this adds to its fascination. When trying something new and unlikely, I don't just think "I wonder whether this is implemented?", but also "I wonder how far it will go this time?"

59
Blengigomenean Quest

Okay, I know what you're thinking: "Not more Realms of the Unreal fanfic!" While I agree that Dargermania is way too overplayed, this one is different: it's based more on the seldom-read original source material than on the TV show.

Mainly this means that it's not as sanitized in its violence. Now that the show has overtaken the novels in the public imagination, it's easy to forget just how gory the Vivian Girls' adventures originally were, showing child slaves being hurt in horrible ways in nearly every chapter. The centerpiece of this game is a sequence where you dismantle a number of torture devices to free the children still trapped inside them, with horrible consequences if you make a mistake. This was very hard to get through, not because the puzzles were difficult to solve, but because they were difficult emotionally.

Despite this gut-wrenching fidelity, it does bear some influence from the show -- alas, we'll probably never see a RotU fanwork that doesn't. In particular, the whole premise is that you're a Blengin who disguised herself as a human and got stuck, and your goal is to get unstuck. This is something that, to my knowledge, never happens in the novels. The whole idea was invented for the show as a way to have a regular Blengin character within a limited special effects budget. The game has different reasons: it wants to describe everything from a Blengin perspective, but not make things too easy by, for example, letting you fly over obstacles.

And that Blengin perspective is the key to the whole thing. There are lots of fics and fangames that put you in the role of a Blengin, because, let's fact it, they're the coolest thing in the show. But the Blengins' attitude towards humanity only really makes sense in the light of the brutality and atrocities perpetrated by the Glandelinians in the books. I hadn't really thought about this before playing the game.

60
One Fine Day

Dan Moreton has been secretive about the twist in his latest work, asking people to not reveal it, but it's basically impossible to meaningfully discuss without describing it. So let's get this out of the way: After a normal-seeming choice-based suburban slice-of-life first chapter, the game starts dropping hints that it's set in an alternate universe where the South lost the Civil War.

Now, this is hardly the first treatment of this subject, and you'd think you know more or less what to expect, especially from an author from Mississippi. But in fact Moreton is surprisingly optimistic about how it would go. Northern Republicans dominate the unified government, but instead of keeping the South from rising again through brutal oppression, their main effect has been completely eliminating slavery as early as 1920 and putting the kibosh on the military adventurism that has hurt the CSA so deeply in our timeline. You may not find all of it believable, but he presents a pretty good case for the changes he makes.

The middle section can feel pretty passive, devoted as it is mainly to learning the details of this world, and how it differs from our own. But it's all worth it when you have to make the final decisions. I don't want to give away too much, but it all comes down to judging this timeline, deciding whether or not it would have been better to lose the war. And due to the optimism shown earlier, it's a hard question to answer.

61
Cave Worm

It's strange to think how recently it was that computer viruses were mainly a means of senseless vandalism, rather than a crowd-sourced art space. But projects like this really bring it home. IF through a worm is such an obvious idea that it surely would have been tried before, if it had been feasible.

In form, it's basically just an old-fashioned dungeon crawl based on collecting treasures. Players only get a few turns to play it before it incorporates your changes into its code and sends itself along to some randomly-selected people in your contacts list or other documents, then deletes itself. This makes it very difficult to review, and also very difficult to play in isolation. There's a growing wiki, but it has substantial gaps. For example, we know that there's a way to open the Mirror Room, because there's a strain circulating where the player is already there, but whoever figured it out hasn't told anyone else how.

Imitators seem inevitable, but as the first of its kind, it's a unique social experience, and I really recommend getting in on it if you have the opportunity.

62
Gifted (Minadeus)
Taking a game usually played casually among friends, and turning it into a globe-spanning empire, is a trick that's awfully hard to pull off. But the designers of Gifted spotted a design flaw in the original game, and built their game around addressing it. Outdoing your friends by giving them more impressive gifts than they gave you

ñ that's easy. But judging whose gift is more impressive than whose? That's the kind of argument that ends friendships.

Gifted's business model is that you buy all your gifts through their portal. That's it ñ no extra cost to you. But only gifts purchased through their platform are eligible for their bonded, insured, guaranteed-impartial judges to evaluate. No more trying to figure out whether a live orca is a better gift than a vial of your favorite pop star's urine! Judges will do whatever it takes to answer that question fairly, from monitoring your biosignals to interviewing your first-grade teacher.

Evidently Minadeus is making a killing on partner fees. I don't believe the rumors that they'll guide big spenders toward specific products for an additional price ñ why would they endanger their whole company for a few extra bucks? ñ but if you ask me, they'll be charging consumer fees by Q4 of this year, after the Presidential match finishes.

63
Cyrano (Crowdlove)

I first played Cyrano as, I'll admit it, a joke. A friend offered to cover the cost of the rig if I agreed to use it for five dates. I thought it would be pretty funny to have thousands of strangers voting on my love life, not to mention I'd always wanted to get real-time videometrics, so I said yes.

What no one told me is that Cyrano is addictive. Oh, sure, my first few dates were disastrous. Half the people playing couldn't know less about relationships, and I got the usual bunch of griefers who always target new players. But little by little I started to build up a community. There was silvergirl, who always had the best one-liners, and bitee, with his uncanny ability to know exactly when I should bail. Sure, there was still some friendly competition over who got to puppet which actions, but my players really wanted the best for me. These days I sometimes go on dates just to hang out with my team.

The dater controls couldn't be simpler ñ just follow the instructions on your rig, or pay the penalty. The graphical interface is clunky at best, but it doesn't get in the way of playing. The team interface, on the other hand, could use an update; it's not always clear how much it costs to intervene, especially if other players are bidding. The audio cues and reminders are intrusive, but fortunately there's a strong modding community. I found that with some tweaking, even a relative newcomer like me could make the game feel substantially my own.

64
Denizen (Aspect Zero)

Denizen is an innovative but flawed first-person dreamer. The ability to cast your family and friends as game characters in real-time is innovative and expertly executed. When my mother appeared as the Baroness of Lost Causes, I found myself genuinely moved; when she reappeared as the voice of the mountain I was shocked and delighted. Using less-familiar faces as minor characters creates a haunting sense of dÈj‡ vu, and even the omissions are interesting. Why didn't my husband appear, and what does it mean?

Unfortunately the rest of the game doesn't live up to the promise of the casting. The narrative avoids the usual clichÈs delivered by novice developers (the missed exam, discovering you can fly, losing your teeth), but it fails to inspire. The ocean of fur, the porcelain maze, the heartbeat machine ñ instead of being haunting experiences, they're simply workmanlike backdrops to the usual "four Fs" mechanics.

65
LACP (Freezone)

Originally conceived as a fund-raiser for a Paconian animal shelter, LACP, or live-action cat play, has developed a strong following. The premise is simple: players "adopt" a feral cat and task drone resources to follow it. Players must then embody the cat's actions in real-time. Casual players incorporate the cat's behavior into their daily lives (for example, showering when the cat grooms itself), but there's a significant number of serious players who insist on direct fidelity to the cat's actions. The cat runs? You run. The cat sleeps? You sleep. The cat licks itself? You get the idea.

I tried both game modes ñ competitive and individual. In individual mode, I was the only player embodying my cat, but I joined a group of players collectively representing a feral cat colony. I found the required socializing (affectionately when the cats liked each other, aggressively when they didn't) kept me connected to the game in the long run, but we never actually finished playing ñ the group just fell apart. Competitive mode had a clear winner, who managed to keep embodying the single cat we chose long after the rest of us made mistakes, but I

found that monitoring other players distracted me from my own play. I could see that more expert players were able to balance their own role-playing with the social meta-game, but I wasn't excited enough by the gameplay to try it myself.

Make sure to find the right cat ñ one whose schedule at least somewhat aligns with yours. Most cats are crepuscular, which means you should enjoy early morning wake-ups, but there's a high variance in how much they sleep and how much they roam. For individual mode, I chose a relatively well-fed female, which meant I actually was able to spend some of my day at my desk while she rested. I'd also suggest avoiding cats with too many scars, especially if your group insists you get physical when your cat does. And, of course, don't forget to make a donation to your local animal shelter when you're done with play!

66
Spark (Quilp)

Some of you may remember my review from last month when I said the 4I genre was mined out. Well, I take it all back. I knew Quilp was planning a release this month, but I was expecting a warmed-over rehash of fan favorite Veneration under a new name. Instead, they're breaking new ground. No individual piece of their design is revolutionary, but taken together, gameplay feels fresh again.

Most impressively, they've managed to make the Inspire mechanic as satisfying as Imagine, Intuit, and Illuminate. Without the ability to control inspiration directly, many players simply avoid making it core to their strategies. The "groundwork" system, which lets players improve the chances of inspiration, will change that. The rebalanced mechanics will drive even long-time players to assess their optimal strategies.

Long-time players may also be surprised by the significant change in setting. Rather than choosing a high-level "sociologists'-eye" view, Spark zooms in on just a few key individuals; most of the game takes place in what the game calls "logospace" rather than in anything recognizable as the real world. Players in the know will recognize the game's territory as the most important designers in Quilp's history, including the legendary Veena Morani. This reviewer wonders if Spark might start a franchise of its own ñ or end up as one module in a much, much larger game. I'll be watching Quilp carefully to find out!

67
Sub Way (Sam Guss)

Heads up: this is not an entry-level augury. Guss has provided the setting details and code necessary to get the game started, but you'll need to provide your own sheep and duck. All told, the start-up costs for this title ran me over $400, in addition to the game itself. Of course, Sub Way also requires a certain familiarity with standard oracular procedure-- die-casting, leaf-reading, livers, cards, and dream-interpretation all make an appearance. Anyone with at least a high-school-level of forecasting skill should be able to get to the end of the game.

Because, let's be honest: Sub Way isn't doing anything exciting with the form. The actual augury gameplay is pretty routine, and if you're looking for some really tricky and thrilling predictions to execute, you'll be disappointed. As a mood piece, though, this is sublime. Guss eschews a "realistic" fictional future in favor of a highly-stylized one where everything seems to exist barely outside the realm of the possible-- a really weird feeling to have in a genuine augury. Everything's a little too dark, a little too apocalyptic. Prussia doesn't exist. People use buttonless cellphones. New York has below-ground tramlines. Divining such a profoundly false future feels really, really odd. I'd love to know more about how Guss pulled it off.

If you're looking for a chance to play, Guss will be releasing a patch that updates the game for next month's lunar calendar. Though the forecasts are a little boring, the story is great, and anyone with the luxury of eight free nights in March (and some extra budget for livestock) should give it a shot.

68
Shaving (dreamblind)

This mirror install is one of the better ones I've played over the last year. It runs on Samsung and Google bathrooms (sorry, Apple die-hards) and any model from those brands with eye-tracking should do the trick. You don't need to actually be capable of growing a beard to play.

Told over the course of fourteen mornings in St Petersburg in 1998, Shaving swaps your reflection for that of Ivan, a 14-year-old whose father has been threatened by the mob. Each session lasts about 15 minutes, which is about how long it takes Ivan to shave. You could technically play it all the way through at once, if you can bear to stand up in your bathroom for that long, but I spaced it out over two weeks.

Did I love it? Well-- I loved what it was trying to be. It's probably the buggiest game I've played this year! The razor-tracking was horrible-- the blades kept clipping into Ivan's skull, and I had to restart one day after this caused Ivan to cut his ear off. I encountered another bug on Day 8 that made it impossible for me to actually get the hairs to come off his face, and on Day 11 the game failed to load Ivan's model and made me play with just his voice in an empty bathroom-- which made shaving extremely difficult. The story, though, is gripping-- some of the tensest shit I've seen in a while. If you ever wanted to play a thriller in your bathroom, this is probably the best (only?) one that currently exists.

69
Slick Willy (Taharbrand)

Okay, okay: it's another corpser. The usual critics are calling Slick Willy totally tasteless, but I'm an apologist; there's honestly more going on here than most people are willing to acknowledge. Yes, ëWilly' has no skin. Yes, you'll spend most of the game in a morgue refrigerator. But this time, the focus is on what's outside the refrigerator, not what's in it.
Slick Willy is really more like Jane Eyre than last year's Dead Jane. Taharbrand have crafted a bizarre and extremely fraught, melodramatic love-triangle romance catastrophe between the three young lab techs who admit Willy's corpse and take care of the morgue. At normal volume levels, their conversations will be dimly audible just outside the refrigerator. Players must lie very still and quietly in the real world in order to hear the things Clarissa, Bryan, and Robin are saying to one another in the game. These listening sections are interspersed with more traditional corpser content on the dissection-table, but the real guts of the tale-- ha, ha, ha-- are the refrigerator sections.
I think this probably deserves to be the game that brings corpsers to the mainstream, but given the outraged backlash this title got even before it was released, I don't think it will be. But if you've got an extra ten bucks, a pair of really good headphones, and an open mind, you should give Slick Willy a shot.

70
The Life and Times of Virginia Stennig (Diane Crisp)

Virginia Stennig's been billed as a ëinteractive editing experience,' but let's be honest: it's a bad shooter. You'll be spending most of your time shooting. Crisp released the game alongside an ebook explaining that we are only supposed to be shooting the parts of the text we don't like, but I'm worried that so many people will be shooting so many sentences that she'll assume we're all trolling her. But really: no sentence in the story is good enough to spare a bullet.
I usually enjoy games which allow me to play at shooting things I don't like, but the shooting in Virginia Stennig is awkward, buggy, and unsatisfying. When you shoot a sentence it only turns a slightly lighter shade of grey. The shots lag considerably after each click, and the gunshot sounds are canned and unrealistic.
And worst of all, of course, is the book itself. It's one of those sprawling alternate-history family epics that are absolutely swamping the market right now. Look: I am totally done with bildungsromans where the hero travels abroad to find their lost Soviet rocket-engineer grandmothers. I am so done with them. And now that I've had to edit a bad one with a gun, I'm done-r than I've ever been.

71
Laredo Tale (Choice Choice)

I assumed that this modern sequel to 1995's Dodge City Tale would suck, but god, was I wrong. If anything can be called a true revival of the classic Japanese cowboy game, this is it. This has gotta be it.
You'll be spending most of your time out on horseback on the prairie with the cows and the other cowboys, but there are plenty of town sections, and a few action sequences both in-town and in dramatic natural environments. The game can't properly be said to be ëopen world,' but the environments are big enough to disguise this. The game certainly benefits from a largely linear focus.
It also benefits from major changes to the character-customization system. The game no longer limits you to playing a straight white man: you can now play a cowboy of any race or gender you please, and dude cowboys can romance the other dude cowboys on the trail. It seems like series creator Tetsuya Highsmith has been reading the fanfiction.

Finally, fans of the classic cow-organization gameplay will be absolutely thrilled with Laredo Trail. Pasture simulation is better than it's ever been, and the game makes use of the same ëMASSIVE' software used to simulate battles in Lord of the Rings to simulate cow movement and clashes between rival cow herds. All in All, Laredo Tale is an absolute triumph, and possibly heralds new life for the entire genre.

72
Certiblue

 "Well, Stenson, I have a hard time really putting my thoughts about Certiblue into words. The box lists it as a "game of urban planning", but as I played it, I was placed in the role of the imprisoned Countess of Light, whose only companions in her tower room were mechanical butterflies.

"I thought perhaps this was simply and introductory chapter, but after many hours of interrogation and feedback, I convinced a single butterfly to scream, and was abruptly taken to the end screen.

"Still, I can't help but feel that I made some important decisions about boulevard width somewhere during play. Perhaps it is a roguelike, and I should give it another go."

73
Bubbles

As a Caterpillar-person myself, I'm not sure how to review our cultural game, universally called Bubbles. In my early instars, I recognized it as a form of social control, a way for the moth-fathers to distract us and keep us returning to the feeding trees.

Now that I am on the edge of cocooning, and can feel that liquefying urge, I understand the deep spiritual impact Bubbles has on the species, and I can start to understand why the moth-fathers only play it once per year, always to the death. I hope these thoughts survive the cocoon - I hope that as a moth-father myself, these preserved insights can help me rebel, help me undermine the yearly tournament.

Though the rope of soap is sacred beyond all measure, I don't care. I want to live. I WANT TO LIVE.

74
Less : A Tale

I give Less : A Tale 2/5 stars.

I found it totally unplayable, a real 0/5. Bad story, bad graphics, uninspired gameplay, lots of bugs.

That said, I was impressed that a game whose content was procedurally generated by a collection of a thousand stolen smart phones soldered together by mad electric monks had so goddamn many poop jokes.

75
Wound Management 4 : Gauze Sponge

I thought I was buying a computer game, but this box is just full of broken glass and rusty knives.

Honestly, I liked Wound Management 2 better. After that, the series really jumped the shark.

76
Wedding Planner 2003

This is, hands down, the best period noir game I've ever played.

77
The Elder Chant (The Sixth Convent):

This new Scroll from TSC may just be the breakthrough that the fans of tridecagons have been foretelling for a some time now. It is the first incantation to actually make use of the higher precision of tridecagonal incantations to create something new. While the first summoning is certainly a little frightening, it actually has a lower mortality rate than comparable products. And the quirky new challenge that is controlling an actual Elder is certainly worth the risk of losing your Soul. And unless you are employed by a big corporation this may be about the first time you are able to summon such a being.

Some may criticise the gameplay for not really innovating on the pacts with wights or horned ones and they are not mistaken. But The Elder Chant realized one important fact: While Elders cannot grant different categories of wishes from say a Horned one or a Daemon, they do have the privileges to stretch and bend the rules far more than lesser entities. This makes this chant ideal hardcore min-maxers with a tight control on incantations and negotiations. And even if you do not fall into this category you have to admire the beauty of a chant that can summon sixth sphere beings on consumer level gear.

78

Stone Stone (Ooorg Clan):
Usually Ooorg Clan really dumb people. They only interested in playing around. Almost no hunting or fighting, only playing. But Stone Stone show that Ooorg Clan not all bad. Maybe this "Game" thing be actually good.

Is quite similar to hunting turtles. But instead of turtles you use rock. Sounds dumb but is really fun. You try to make bright stone go far by hitting it with dark stone. Better players actually throw dark stone. Very good thing to do between hunt and eating. More fun than breaking sticks for sure.

79

Homunculi Adventures - Group Therapist (Herald and Storytellers Guild)
For quite some time H&S has been pushing this new artform called "Interactive Fiction". And while the homunculi have become more detailed and convincing, the stories were always quite hamstrung. Sure, some of the classics lend themselves to the conversion ("Tavern Brawls"). But most epics are strongly focused on a journey through different places and are hard to convert to this new format. So out comes the new set of directly conjurable content and it immediately becomes obvious that they must have some magicians writing for them.

Group Therapist casts you into the role of a priest who has to help the adventurers to get past their differences. This is done in the temple and between their adventures, so that only one location has to be fleshed out. But that does not mean that you will not hear their stories. Far from it: H&S have rediscovered what makes the epics great and that is excellent storytelling. And that is where the magic comes in: while the first adventure is always the same, the following ones grealy depend on how you counciled the group in between crawls. So you can sow distrust and actually kill that traitorous thief or you can finally get the priestess to love the poor ranger. And that is all we really ever wanted from H&S.

80

The Annihilation of Therador (Exmerse Games)
Exmerse has always been on the forefront of technical development with their products. And if you believe their marketing slogans they have outdone themselves again: The holos on the cover promise up to 32 concurrent sensations and a truly "planetsized" world. However their games are also known for the shallowness in actual gameplay. "Call of Honor" was a run-of-the mill military action stim beneath all the "Tru Sound" and "Real Vision" technologies.

The Annihilation of Therador cannot break from this mold, even though it tries. In the middle of the stim there is actually a push to make some of the characters believable and offer the player a limited amount of choice. But this rapidly ends when the Gruul Empire attacks and the poor soldier is pushed back into the Exosuit controlled by the AI. While this game is certainly a spectacle it is sad to see that Exmerse seem incapable of breaking their 50 year streak remote-controlled experiences.

81

Wooden Blocks (NEWELL INC.)
Are trees dying out? MAYBE! Is it decadent to use a wood to make a childs toy? PERHAPS! Is it worth it? YES!

NEWELL INC. has shown time and again that it's product and experience designer know exactly what the consumers want. And once again they have struck the right chord. In a world full of stims and 3D printed products we all yearn for some simplicity and authenticity. And what would better incorporate simplty than a childs toy that has been around for centuries? While the wood will certainly not last long outside a atmospheric chamber, it delivers this bit of life and earthy reality that most of us are missing from our daily lives. They even managed to make the name simple, dropping all specs and numbers to give you that warm feeling you get from completly comprehending something.

So you should not hesitate: Buy this product right NOW!

82
Safety Ball

Rating: Eight of Eight Seas

Safety ball is a game of skill and chance. You set it up in your city. Teams of three must locate the safety ball before the alien invasion begins. My friends V'santh and L'rtha were on my team.

We were set in the city center, and there were 5 other teams located around the city. The timer for the invasion began. We separated and bhrath'ie (communicating telepathically) we were able to make our way to the various clues and puzzles. Luckily we only encountered one trap. Other teams were not so lucky. One team found all eight traps. They had v'hrainectorp (a fulfilling experience that becomes part of the ritual that makes children into adults) though.

Adversity is sometimes better than an easy time. The game took all day, so set aside the right amount of time.

83
Red/Blue/Orange (RBO)

(Translator's Note: The name of this game is communicated through music and images. The planet of origin has no written speech and communication occurs mostly though a combination of tones and mental images. I have taken the liberty of calling this game Red/Blue/Orange, which are the standard image colors delivered with the tone.)

Rating: Low Tone and White (Equivalent of boring)

Bland game. No fun. Not challenging. Storytelling game. Difficult to predict result. No direct winner. Originally created for children. No good for grown beings of thinking.

Rating: Sliding Scale and Rainbow (Equivalent of exciting)

Fun! Lots of optional endings. Create your own path. Play for hours. Great to learn creativity.

Requires no regular patterns. One starts telling. Draws tiles to incorporate. Incorporates. Then next player. Players draw tiles to deduce order. I always go last. Most fun!

84
Pltah

Rating: 5 of 5 Heads

This is our favorite game. The Pltah have been our sworn enemy forever. This game is of heroes and the wretched Pltah, who we defeat. The players roll each round to determine who is who per round. The goal is to work together to create a defeat of our enemy. The best game is played with others who will work as hard on each side. Some people just make the Pltah too weak. This is unfortunate but understandable.

85

Frackish

Rating: 90/100

Yet another time stop game, but this one is pretty fun. Works best if everyone has about the same level of time travel skills. Takes 3 to 5 years to play, but it can be accomplished in an afternoon if you are clever. Not included: Two Antimatter Crystals

86
Caycan

Rating: Low

Caycan is a hunting game. It comes with 6 laser pistols and eight slicers. I bought it for my offspring during the festival of the sun. I had hoped for better quality though. By the end of the festival, six of the eight slicers were busted. One of the laser pistols exploded in the case in the trunk. Luckily the kids were holding the other ones, so they weren't damaged. Unfortunate. Their total kill count was 9 vraxi, 7 dozaui, and a single blbmrnbjie. (These are creatures from the planet Mordan-Eight. They have no real equivalent, but they are all smaller than a bread box.)

87
Shadowcast

Plasma light has aided storytelling for billenia but Shadowcast seeks to reverse that relationship.

88
You will cry

Waking up in a claustrophobic apartment, fingers slick with nectar nothing on the mind but how best to get the next click.

A few titles have tried exploring depression in a meaningful, informative way the most memorable of which is forgotten already. YWC (pronounced yolk) is the type of experience that can more comfortably be referred to as just that an experience.

89
Theatre Performer 2017

Annual simulators are commonplace but this subverts usual expectations by allowing multiplayer. Not unheard of but often implemented purely for its chaotic value. TP'17 hinges on the interaction between players and the audience. Most renditions falling gracefully between ballet and opera with the occasional pantomime caused by newer players testing the waters unsure how deep they want to tumble into the rabbit hole.

Each performance consists of acts sometimes singular and in rare cases in the dozens, marathons of roleplaying. Acts consist of scenes and scenes contain props, directions and dialogue. Costumes are a premium rewarded once you have attained a large enough following or critical reception.

The whole premise of peer review forces serious participants to constantly iterate and deconstruct the available content to prevent stagnation. However coming alt support will allow the altering community to begin authoring new scenes. Some believe the original content will not be surpassed as it has become saturated by folk lore and myth over the past months.

In reality though the inevitable spring release of TP'18 will refresh everything allowing new communities to form. I do believe that '17 will still remain a highlight in this franchise's history.

90

Absolute zero

Emptiness. That is how the tale begins. A lack of, absence. Then, suddenly, a glimmer in the unbeing.

The wave of new-sense games is interesting and this is perhaps the most innovative so far. Rather than give x-ray vision, telekinesis or some such clichÈd 'power', Zero takes away from the player's abilities within its reality. You have no sight, no hearing, no touch, no smell and certainly no taste. All you have is the sense of presence within space and time.

Using this tool, if it can be called that, normal spaces become mazes of vague happening. Goals are precise though with the premise asking you - in the meta - to find others of your kind. It took a good hour of gameplay before the first area could be navigated and there were no hazards. This is where it gets very interesting. Hazards reset everything and are usually apparent through the absolute lack of being, absolute zero.

However it is not always so straightforward. If something has fallen into this hazard previously you will detect it up until it has been utterly extinguished from existence. This can be done by interacting with other objects and beings through contact, closeness.

It might be a while before I revisit this but it is the most immersive experience I may ever have had.

91
Disc Jockey

Bullets and boards are out, discs and discs, are in. Based on the primitive web game by the same name created by lesser known solo dev Car Still (&ioi on amperland), DJ is surprisingly not about spinning decks. "Throw some discs around on discs.", reads the tagline and it isn't lying.

The content is slim but a remarkable upgrade from its predecessor and now supersaturated with Neon stylings. Tron meets Tron 2. Movement takes place half a foot from the ground and feels responsive from the get go. The ability to find and hop between different weights and speeds of disc, with names like stallion and mule, adds a huge level of skill depth. Performing a mid-air throw while switching from a fragged disc feels bullet-time as fuck. Throwing is straight-forward: body shots will stun allowing for permakilling, disc shattering shots on your board.

Two Escher-leaning abstract maps providing wildly different gameplay. One with gravity wells allowing more dextrous hands to whip over opponents or bend thrown discs around corners. The second is a complex series of tubes that will constantly accelerate you forward. This creates drawn out bouts of loop-the-loop filled jousting and makes stuns far less helpful. The best tactic so far seems to be waiting until the end of a vertical tube and aiming for the apex of your targets vert.

Overall it is refreshing and not just for its lack of grind rails, everyone can agree that the past few years have not treated boarding games well. Tiny Hawks - Pro Skate Park Manager put the nail in the coffin last fall following equally cash-in titles such as SSXXX. Perhaps this is why DJ has opted to categorise itself as a death-match game to keep some distance. Even then fans have begun gathering around the sub-genre: "frisboarder" and a few others have added themselves to that growing label like Disc Duel and Dead Ringer but Disc Jockey is certainly still the strongest on the digital shelf.

Hopefully Car's promise of a new arena comes to fruition, less likely are the rumours of character customisation. I'm more than happy to settle for the faceless disc jockeys currently available even if I continue complaining about magenta's tendency to blend into environments.

92
Lil' Sam

You'll have seen the intense hype around Child Like Inc's "Lil' Sam",

the must-have toy of the season. You're probably aware of the legal controversy surging around them. But we're reviewing games here, so let's talk about Sam as a game! Or rather, two games...

For the first game, you can walk into any toy store and buy a Lil' Sam for $100 -- if you can survive the crowds. The basic version, Sam Bronze, resembles nothing so much as an oversized playing piece from a Euro-style board game, though of course it's made from some soft, slightly tacky plasticized fabric rather than wood. Take Sam home and she, or he -- it's oddly appealing, hard to refer to as simply "it"! -- will occasionally wake up and explore. The Bronze Edition has blocky arms and legs, no digits, so Sam can climb around reasonably well but can't open doors or cupboards, unlock your phone, or anything like that. They're sometimes able to carry objects around; usually fluffy toys, as they're grippable but light. The built-in battery needs charging once a day, but Sam is usually able to do so without your assistance!

The immediate question that struck me is, who is this aimed at? According to the hype, *everyone* wants one, but in my brief experimentation with a prerelease Sam, the audience is pretty well-defined. My two-year-old used Sam as a teddy bear -- running around with the toy under his arm, and cuddling up at nap time. My six-year old was fascinated, and enjoyed trying to teach Sam various tricks (the toy is about as agile as nine-month-old baby, just starting to crawl). My neighbour's ten-year-old, who loves all kind of robots, drones and similar gadgets, quickly trapped Sam in a prison made of dining room chairs. After watching the hapless toy struggle for a couple of minutes, then slump motionless on the floor, he declared it "lame". So based on this (admittedly anecotal) evidence, I'd say Sam Bronze is best suited to kids up to around eight years old. Oh, and in case you were wondering, dogs love Sam, cats... do not.

That's Sam Bronze, though; the other editions might be another matter. I got a very brief hands-on demonstration of Sam Silver, soon to be available for a mere $1000. And then of course there's Sam Gold, for an eye-watering $10,000. Rumours persist about still higher tiers -- Sam Platinum, Sam Diamond -- and I definitely wouldn't bet against those happening. Sam Bronze has a very simple face, with just a couple of simple cartoon eyes (though being able to see what the toy is looking at is surprisingly evocative, reminiscent of Zelda: Wind Waker). Silver has a rudimentary nose, a mouth that can smile or frown, and waggly eyebrows. Marketing shots of Gold look like a meticulously hand-crafted doll, with potentially a very expressive face. Gender-specific traits appear at this price point, but the options run the full gamut from Pinocchio to Cinderella through androgynous pixies. Platinum, Ruby, Diamond...? Who knows?

Then there's the second game, yet to emerge from legal embargo in this country. Child Like claims it will be an immersive VR experience, where you actually become a Sam doll, in some random Sam owner's house. You can't do much, and you can't directly communicate, but you can clamber around and play with the household pets and children. Gameplay footage that's emerged looks, as you might expect, startlingly realistic (though Child Like's CEO enjoys joking that

their first major game is set in... an apartment). There's no goal as such, but as the physics is perfect and the NPCs have real depth (depending on the toddler) the potential for emergent gameplay is unlimited.

Child Like claim they're bringing real play back into the lives of today's over-stimulated children. Detractors claim you might as well invite strangers off the street to babysit your kids. It's hard to imagine the game will ever be released in its current form, but I have to admit I can kind of see how their product vision makes sense -- at the very least, I think *they* believe what they're saying. There *is* something compelling about a doll with a real inner life. Creepy, but compelling. Whether they can persuade the rest of us to drink the Kool-Aid -- well.

For me, the sticking point is the pricing tiers; because of course the VR game is tiered too. If you want to see inside a Sam Silver household, you'll have to buy SamVR Silver, for a cool $1000. Who's going to buy this stuff? Is anyone really going to drop $10,000 on SamVR Gold? The same people who buy the Gold doll? I can't figure out if this is the next evolution of vanity DLC, a terrifying new class hierarchy in the making, or what.

RECOMMENDATION: We're still playing with our review unit, so this household rates Sam Bronze as a BUY. But I'm careful to lock her in the toybox overnight.

93
Multum In Parvo

There's a lot to like about this one, a new text-only game by the indie studio behind "Election!" and "Gravity Well" (both story-heavy multimedia games). It's a completely new type of interface, slightly resembling the scrollable, rotating text of "Anordningen Sex" but taken to a mind-boggling extreme. Initially you're just reading a linear story, swiping downwards as normal; and then it branches. The left branch curves off to the left, the right branch to the right, and you have to choose which to follow. But there's no explicit choice, it's all just scrolling! Read further and there are further bifurcations, and in some fashion I can't quite get my head around, all the text fits smoothly into the same infinitely scrollable, infinitely zoomable 2D space. Something to do with hyperbolic geometry, apparently.

Infinitely zoomable? Yes! You can zoom out and admire the intricate fronds of tiny, unreadable text. Then pick a spot at random, zoom in and start reading. I've found some really fun parts of the story this way. Come to think of it, I've no idea if they're all actually reachable directly from the starting point...

As a potentially new medium, or at least sub-medium, it screams potential. I just wish (and this is kind of a pet peeve of mine) that when somebody invents a new medium like this, the story doesn't always have to be *about* the medium in some way. Shouldn't we be looking for the new novel, the new movie, the new theatre? It's true that many novels are essentially about novels, and many movies are about movies,

etc; but outside of that niche, highbrow segment, novels and movies and theatre are just vehicles for pure story. A skilled creator can tell any kind of story in any medium. This scrolling, branching text seems like it *could* be a great general-purpose medium, but somebody needs to try it out.

So what we actually get is a story about -- choices, branching, cause and effect, and so on; and of course, *of course* the genre is sci-fi. A bunch of scientists, quantum physicists, run an experiment that may prove the existence of parallel worlds, and possibly the *non*-existence of free will. OK, despite my complaints, it's a pretty good yarn, and jumping to a random point leads to some pretty exciting (and funny!) scenes. But by tying the medium and message together into a neat bow, I think it undersells the potential of the medium. It's the closest thing I've seen to a real interactive novel, and I'd love to see a real novelist try it out.

94
Flatland

Brave attempt to adapt a rather strange 19th century novel into a modern virtual reality showpiece. The novel is set in a 2D world, and the game has you put your 3D goggles on to experience... a 2D world. I'm not sure I'd quite call it a "game", and I definitely wouldn't call it "pleasant", but it's pretty startling, to say the least.

Instead of square pixels, the world is composed of thin vertical strips. It's like viewing the world through a spaghetti jar. Looking up or down does precisely nothing; but you can rotate your head, and walk in any compass direction -- essentially the same degree of freedom you have in Doom, stripped of its pseudo-3D presentation. There's some sensation of depth via stereoscopy, and after some practice you find yourself moving around reasonably gracefully and even beginning to understand some of what you see. (If you remove the VR headset at this point, the real world will look seriously trippy for several minutes.)

The plot, as far as I can gather, seems to be some kind of basic Zelda-style quest. There are some hints of a 3D world impinging on the 2D one, which I found oddly threatening and claustrophobic. The ill-advised '4D' section made me throw up.

95
Land of the Free

Yet another MMO-VR-RPG, the current hot genre that shows no sign of flagging. Many VR worlds are already suffering from lack of players, as their attention is divided between so many different offerings; you have to think there's going to be a serious cull soon, and we'll consolidate to just a few games from major studios. A sad loss for diversity, but at least there'll be enough population density to get some interesting group dynamics going. I'd be really surprised if Herringbone Studio's Land of the Free becomes a breakout hit, but it does scale up and down interestingly with the number of players available, so maybe it will be able to cling on and survive. And I do hope so, because it's great!

It's a day in the life of an ordinary city in mid-America, in the middle of the 20th century. Unusual decision to make this a period piece, but it does add a lot of flavor (the cars in particular are a lot of fun). You find yourself inhabiting a random inhabitant of everytown, and you can play along with their story -- or if you prefer, move around freely and do whatever the hell you want. Grab some cool clothes from a shop window, drive a car, climb the courthouse, explore backstage at the theatre, dance on the bar at O'Malley's. The people around you are automata -- or are they? Are some of them other players, just biding their time?

Some of the interactions I've had in this game have been truly powerful. Strolling through the central square, watching the businessmen scurry off to their liquid lunches, I came across a busker singing old French songs, and found myself waltzing along with several other players. Was the busker a player character? I don't know! I haven't been back to check if he's back at the same spot tomorrow, though of course that wouldn't quite be conclusive... On another occasion, I was stalked by a gang of players who looked like they'd stepped out of A Clockwork Orange. Initially I thought there were only two of them, but gradually more appeared, gradually more threatening, and by sunset fully six of them were chasing me at breakneck pace through an underpass. Luckily I was able to duck into a crowd, swap my hat, and saunter calmly off to safety!

At the end of the day, the world resets, and all the automata repeat the same actions as before. Again, an interesting choice; there's no narrative drive as such -- since nothing of real significance ever really happens! -- but really encourages exploration. The acting is a bit variable, but most of the writing is top-notch, so it can be fascinating just to go with the flow and experience some of the stories the city has to offer. I particularly enjoyed the rendezvous on the roof of the cinema, the theatre actors stuck in the lift, and Jan Eaton's secret life as a private detective.

Very different from anything out there, and very interesting from a game theory perspective... Yeah, I'd like to see this one do well.

96
The Prosecution

Based on the name alone, I was kind of hoping for a game where you play an ace prosecutor -- why do defense attorneys always get the cool stories? -- but in this case you're the one being prosecuted. The police haul you in for questioning about a robbery, there's a text entry prompt, and well, go for it!

This is one of the best attempts I've seen at handling really free-form textual input. The trick, of course, is that it's carefully constrained -- if you get too far off topic the interrogator will pull you back on course, and for the most part you're just answering their questions. But it accepts a lot more than just "yes" and "no" answers; experimentation is definitely rewarded!

The courtroom format (assuming the case gets to court) makes for an

interesting twist on the notion of choice. The main outcome is whether you're convicted or not; but do you "win" by escaping conviction? Or by figuring out what actually happened? Or by casting the blame on someone else -- or by *protecting* someone else?

The actual story is pretty good too. There's a *lot* of stuff going on, and it'll take you a while to unpick it all, but nothing stretched the limits of my credibility too far (except for possibly the arrangement with the puppies -- you'll know it if you find it). One thing I especially like is that all the characters have a well-written inner life, and they're all working away to forward their own agenda, both during the robbery and even during the trial itself.

Despite the complexity, the difficulty curve isn't too great. Some secrets are very hard to uncover, but most of the obvious endings can be achieved without too much trouble. I only hit one ending that seems to require knowledge from multiple playthroughs (I can't figure out how Oscar can determine where both Sarah *and* Raul were at the crucial moment... but I could be missing something.)

If I have one complaint, it's that the PC might just be a little *too* three-dimensional! It's nice to have a PC who's not a cardboard cutout, but you only need one or two quirks to make an interesting character; Oscar has enough quirks to, I don't know, keep an entire army of psychiatrists in work. The case would work just fine if he were dialled back a bit.

97
Forbidden Galaxy: Who Mourns The Krell? (1986)

30 years ago, when Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer took a chance on a strange little science fiction movie 'Forbidden Planet', it would have been hard to imagine that it would take imagination of the Cortezian public - and the world - by storm. The television adaptation Forbidden Galaxy was quickly rushed into production in 1957, and has remained in constant transmission ever since. For three decades we've thrilled to the ongoing adventure of United Planets Cruiser C57-D and her various captains - John Adams, Atlanta Blake, even the troubled Zack Morbius, lost son of disgraced scientist Edward. And of course Forbidden Galaxy inspired the first and second generation of computer games, from the teletype treasure hunt of GALAXY to Atari's psychedelic 'Bellerophon'.

For this 30th anniversary, MGM have commissioned what they call an 'interactive tele-opera' for the current generation of home machines, and 'Who Mourns The Krell?' is certainly an ambitious experiment, if not entirely successful. The player takes the role of incoming captain of the X86-D, a 'research vessel' dedicated to uncovering the remains of the vast Krell civilization across the galaxy. Predictably, things don't go to plan, and surviving even one Krell excavation will quickly become a challenge, as exposure to the artifacts slowly give the crew powers which intensify their existing character traits.

Who Mourns is a difficult game. You have to balance your crew's 'bio-energy spectrum' across multiple axes to prevent conflicts flaring, while under siege (of course) from 'id beasts' recalling the classic movie that started it all, and simultaneously managing your exploration and technology development program. If you make it to the final world though - the Krell Throneworld - you'll be rewarded with a plot twist that I won't reveal here, which puts the entirety of the game AND the television series into a new perspective.

We award this game three out of five stars; it has great writing and challenging gameplay, but the bio-energy system is just a little too hard to manage, and you'll really need to call the hint line several times to locate those last few planets hiding Vector Shards.

98
Dynaxis (1979)

The mother of all EEG games took game arcades by storm when it first came out, and why not? Deceptively simple, the interface - if we can call it that - was just a metal strap around the player's forehead, and a hacked television tube on which interlaced colour patterns crossed at apparently random angles.

But we all remember, don't we, the first time we slipped that 'crown' on? The slight tingle of the electrode, the sudden watering of your eyes as your mind grasped that magnetic pattern, and then the thrill as just a flick of your thoughts moved the colours on the screen. And then, after a few minutes of hunting and glitching, suddenly the breakthrough: you started to sense, intuitively and then popping up into the conscious layers of your mind, how those beams locked, interlocked and shifted.

It would take an hour of hard meditation, though, before you managed to lock the pattern down into even level 3, and then the game REALLY started.

And the Dynaxis gaming dynasty began, and although it stumbled a little in the mid-90s, as tri-vision started to dominate, we still have a flood of EEG titles today.

Five stars, no question. Solid gold.

99
The Manhattan Alternative (1996)

"Defusing World War III" has been a strong core gaming genre since 1982's grim time-travel thriller "Skyshine", but The Manhattan Alternative was the first to introduce first-person full-motion video to the well-worn formula. You play Captain Jane Rogers of the Federal States Time Marines, tasked to save humanity by (of course) stopping 1945's Trinity experiment. But the formula shifts once you get to the Gadget: a freak thunderstorm catches you in the detonation, and you are flung into the Quantum Shell: an infinity of parallel universes, in each of which a different disaster threatens Earth. (By 'infinity' we actually only counted five, but, well, there's plenty of room for sequels.)

The ensuing mystery will have you pursued by rogue Time Marines, a beautiful Russian agent, and an inexplicably radioactive roadrunner bird, each with several hours of recorded dialogue (the roadrunner is entirely subtitled); but the heart of the game is assembling map fragments to the next energy slot in the Quantum Shell and solving that world's disaster.

We were particularly amused by the 'hellhole capitalism' world where pills for exotic diseases cost $1000 a dose, as given the winds of utopian socialism that swept Cortezia in the 1980s, it's such an ancient, outlandish scenario. But I suppose even unlikely ways for the world to die are still worth protecting against.

Two stars, unfortunately: the video is endearing, but doesn't actually play very well on today's hardware, and the core gameplay won't engage you much. But the sequels (Manhattan Transverse and Manhattan Synchronicity) are the ones on which this series' reputation truly rests.

100
Bloom Giftware Episode 1: Turn But A Stone And Start A Wing (1993)

The game that pioneered tri-vision is now a byword; does anyone of us really remember gaming before we slipped those cheap polarised plastic filters over our screens and suddenly the world came alive? But more than that, it was the concept of the game that thrilled our little hearts. A secret aerospace corporation on an aerostat in the skies of Venus is experimenting with teleportation, and inadvertently summons a portal into Heaven. With the entire population of the base transformed into blissed-out shambling monks, it's up to you, a lowly hydroponics engineer, to roam the base, plant seeds and grow flowers, in search of the elusive 'resonant fragrances' which will wake the 'blissed' and return them to conscious awareness. With fast-paced action,

environmental puzzles and an ongoing strategic arc, this game defined the new paradigm of 'grow-em-ups' which remains the #1 genre in the mid-00s.

But it was the innovative 'giftware' distribution model which propelled Bloom to the top of the gaming charts, and rewrote the economic orthodoxy of its times. The game was put onto BBSes free of charge; in lieu of payment to the studio, the developers requested that players give a payment to the *next person to play the game*. (A dial-up upload server and system of serial numbers tracked who had gifted the game to who.) They predicted, correctly, that this would create a cascading 'pay it forward' effect which would, eventually, circle back to the developers themselves. It certainly did this; 1994's Bloom 2: Heaven On Earth, the expansion/sequel, received $15 million in 'forward-pays' and enabled the creation of the game studio and world charity, Superego.

Five stars. If you haven't played this, you haven't lived.

101
Amiga Tesla Cup World Series Stunball '15 (2015)

Stunball. Well, what would Cortezia be without it? Like cranapple pie, motherhood, and the right to a personal tricopter, it's not just the national game, it's the national religion. Ever since Nikola Tesla fitted a charged capacitor to a neon tube and tossed it to Thomas Alva Edison (fortunately wearing a full metal apron) the glowing Stunball has been a shining symbol of the symbiosis of sporting and scientific excellence.

Still, there's not much new to report in Amiga's new yearly release of the Great Old Game. There's still two teams of 15 players each. They all have Charge Batons, Deflector Discs, and hunt the one Stunball. There are still ten radio dishes on each side of the pitch, and levity mats on which the players dart up and around the central Tower. The stunball whirs and glows and flashes to the metal-suited players; the crowd (now lovingly modelled in 4D holographic tri-vision with thousands of individual, reference-captured faces) roars as the ozone drifts above them; the announcers chew the scenery like rogue lightning bolts.

If this is the sort of thing you like (and when isn't it?) then this is what you'll like. But perhaps - if you've already got Stunball '14, Stunball '13 and the genuinely important Stunball '12 - you don't need to buy this one in first-day release.

Five stars if you don't have a Stunball already; one star if you've got Stunball '12.

102
Mission: Acquisition
In theory, I should have loved this game. Well-polished edutainment is, to my mind, a far better use of cutting-edge NLP than commercial or military text analytics -- and I love conlangs, optimality theory, AND procedural generation. Bull's eye, right?

The procedurally generated conlangs are fine, I'll say that, and the engine really did parse everything I threw at it -- recursion, sentence fragments, weird punctuation. The devs wisely restricted their generation parameters to create highly regular languages (invariably with highly phonetic writing systems that use the Latin alphabet) -- or perhaps one might instead imagine that they chose to program very prim-and-proper NPCs who don't hold with such things as slang and shortening. Still, in my three playthroughs, I was given a satisfyingly diverse mix of language types -- "phonetically", morphologically, and syntactically.

So what's my problem? Technically solid, and three complete playthroughs clearly means the gameplay wasn't too difficult or frustrating, right?

Well, that's the thing. It wasn't too difficult... because half the time you didn't NEED to figure out the language in order to progress. There are enough universal non-linguistic actions available to the player -- gestures, mostly, but also giving/showing objects to NPCs, yelling, crying, laughing, etc. -- that a lot of the relatively simple objectives can be completed with a minimum of language comprehension. Setting aside the inaccuracy of the idea that gestures are universal, this basically allows the player to all but ignore the main mechanic of the game.

While some anti-frustration allowances are definitely desirable, "Mission: Acquisition" takes it a step too far given the game's intended purpose.

103
Iron-Blooded

While this isn't the first fan game I've been fortunate enough to receive over the years, I must say this little text game from princexmum was deviously designed to hit all my buttons. (princexmum, if you're actually a secret telepath, thanks for using your powers for good and also please stop reading my mind now :P)

So you remember the sarcastic Kejia doctor in BLAMELESS STEEL who repairs Garrison's chassis at the end of Chapter 6? The one who literally never shows up again? She was another unfortunate victim of "make it up as I go along"-itis, along with aetherite (oh, yeah, that...) and the Jade Society (so secret that they forgot their own existence!). But never fear -- princexmum is here to rescue us with IRON-BLOODED, a hilarious, action-packed short game that shines a light on some of the good doctor's own adventures. The writing is *fantastic*, full of sardonic wit and surprising turns of phrase, and the puzzles -- though actually quite complicated on a mechanical level, with lots of fiddly moving parts that could have been very frustrating -- are so well clued that I never really got stuck.

A note: When I excitedly linked IRON-BLOODED to Rue (who joined me wayyyy after Chapter 6 and is not to be held responsible for my youthful writerly indiscretions), they asked me whether the plot was similar to anything I'd originally had in mind for Dr. Ka. Honestly? I hadn't much of *anything* specific in mind for Dr. Ka at the time -- and I would certainly be pleased if IRON-BLOODED became solid fanon.

104
Tangshi Ka five-character expansion deck

Tangshi Ka, a Classical Chinese adaptation of the Japanese poetry card game uta-garuta, was mostly marketed to educators before the Chihayafuru reboot released and sparked a new wave of interest in the game. The five-character expansion deck is presumably an attempt to cash in on the attention before it fades -- its reading cards are much more lavishly illustrated than those of the original deck, and the packaging has been spiced up to appeal to young media fans rather than teachers looking for educational materials. (The original deck has also been rereleased with the new packaging, but it seems that the illustrations have not been animated or otherwise updated.)

The irony is that while these will serve perfectly well as educational materials -- the original deck's intended purpose -- they completely upset the balance and meta of the competitive game whence their popularity sprang. Fifty new poems to memorize to the point of identifying them before the first syllable is even finished? Fifty new poems to expand the pool of possible matches, permanently slowing down the game as players are forced to wait longer for confirmation -- fifty extra ghost cards per match! And the fact that the expansion deck uses poems with five-syllable lines, two shorter than the original, disrupts the reading rhythm, too.

So far, only the SEA regional association has released a statement regarding the expansion deck -- i.e., that it won't be used in any of their competitions, and that they'll only send official representatives to world tournament that use 100-card decks. But I expect other major competitive TSK organizations will soon follow suit. The new cards are pretty, educational, must-haves for collectors or poetry/history buffs, and 100% out of place in a competitive setting.

105
Written in the Rain

Okay, before I start in on the whole romance controversy, I just wanted to say: with all the different forms of divination in this game, it's kind of sad that Team Eris didn't actually include some kind of, dunno, rain-o-mancy? I realize it would be kind of hard to discern patterns in rain, and okay maybe you can count the cloud-reading as sort of rain-related, but seriously. They went out of their way to include support for sessapina peripherals (?!?!), surely it's not such a big deal to include the titular form of divination? Missed. Opportunity.

Anyway! Let's get it out there: I am a staunch Ri'n/'alai shipper... and I'm 100% fine with how their storyline ends. And while I actually ship Zennu and Miriq with each other way more than with Ri'n, I think Zennu/Miriq

would have some of the same power dynamics as Zennu/Ri'n -- and I'm also fine with how the Zennu romance goes. I've seen some posts saying that supporting the canonical Zennu romance is akin to saying "don't rise above your position", which... is really not the point at all! In both these cases, it's about how well the characters as entire people fit with each other -- their personalities, histories, their goals, their duties -- and yes, their social rank, but as a part of all that, one element among many.

Take 'alai for instance. There's no denying she and Ri'n have hella chemistry, but literally the only reason you get to eventually pursue a romance with her instead of immediately pursuing eternity in the afterlife is because she recognizes you as a fellow Sangju. There's only so much long-term mileage you can get out of a relationship built on sexual attraction and shared ethnicity, you know? And what do you think would happen if Zennu appointed Ri'n as a consort, or hell, raised her to co-regent? Remember that flashback sequence near the beginning? Yeah. Imagine that, except a hundred times worse. I know people argue that she should be used to court intrigues, but come on, she's an oracle, not a courtier. There's a difference.

In the end I think it's valuable for there to be these different kinds of romantic involvement options -- and for it to be clear that just because you-as-Ri'n won't end up with so-and-so for happily ever after, that doesn't mean the journey was meaningless.

106
Untitled [incomplete]
This isn't really a review, as such. I was going through my dad's old laptop, the beat-up silver one I used to borrow all the time, and found a folderful of HTML files that, as far as I can tell, constitute a sort of homebrew CYOA or interactive map. The writing is fairly bare-bones and functional, but almost every page was accompanied by a photo he'd taken.

I'm pretty sure he was the one who made it -- a nature walk meditating on the mathematical wonder of creation is too blatantly _him_, and besides, I recognize some of the photos. The prose is him in its bluntness and its fervent self-interruptions to praise God. Without checking the timestamps on the files, I daresay the latter marks it as a project started after the diagnosis.

The branching is rudimentary, present only as the branching of a physical trail in the (real or imagined?) woods. Some of the photos were clearly taken in very different seasons, so in any case it's not just a very elaborate diary entry about a single, actual walk. But I wonder if it's an amalgamation of many walks, many visits at... wherever this was. A virtually geocached highlight reel of his sights and thoughts in this unidentified forest.

107
Apports for the Deceased

The no-nonsense title tells you how serious SoulCom wants you to treat their first release. They claim it really works, but then again The Blair Witch Project was presented as real film footage. AFTD does a much better job at convincing me that it is the real thing, more than any mockumentary.

SoulCom claims this simple parser interface allows you to communicate with the dead. Maybe "communicate" isn't the best word for a couple of reasons. First, contact is largely one-way, from you to them. Second, you mostly teleport things to them (apports being gifts traditionally sent from spirits to our world, but the reverse is claimed for AFTD). Essentially, the spirits of any deceased person can establish a connection with you via text. Sometimes they describe the Other Side in great detail, and sometimes their communication is much more personal and introspective. I'm guessing it depends on whether you've contacted a family member. Your responses are restricted, though. You send them things by typing their name. Is your great great great grandfather trying to woo Marilyn Monroe? Send him some flowers to help him out.

I was skeptical that any of this really worked, but SpiritCom has, if not convinced me, made me reconsider the life after death issue. You specify the name and other biographical details of the person you want to contact and are then given a list of matches. You select the one you want, and that person responds, if contact with you is wanted. I reached out to my great uncle, and the person who replied knew details about himself that only our

family knows. Also, you can send anything to the other side; AFTD recognized everything that I typed, even when I sent my great aunt the flu (she never would let me stay up past 9:00).

Does your grandmother really need a harp so she can join a choir of angels? Is your grandfather hiding a secret that explains why he wants a really cold beer and his neighbor is Jack the Ripper? Try AFTD for yourself and make up your own mind.

108
Monster Makeup

Monster Makeup is software developed by The International Association of Teratologists (IAT) that allows you to channel your inner Frankenstein, without the corpses. Instead, you get a cat-sized soft-shelled egg, syringes, and a lot of hormones and other chemicals with names like retinoic acid and insulin-like growth factor. But don't worry, you don't need to know what all this stuff does.

The software allows you to design your own little monster, or teratot. You can give it wings and webbed feet. Infrared vision. Venom. If nature created it, now you can too. When you've got the creature you want, the software formulates a recipe based on the latest scientific research and, if you follow it properly, your egg should hatch. Whether your newborn teratot looks, or behaves, the way you want isn't a guarantee, but the association claims a success rate of about 90%.

For those of you who want a challenge, the IAT hosts the annual Teratot Games, in which teratots gather to race through an obstacle course designed to take advantage of distinct environmental adaptations. If you're interested, the IAT will send you maps and descriptions of the courses, and you can design your 'tot accordingly. I entered my teratot, Sharkey, in "Neptune's Touch," one of the rare aquatic events. He finished with a time of 8 minutes, 7 seconds, good enough for third. Perhaps he just needed another tentacle or two. Maybe I'll have better luck next year with Sharkey's sister.

109
Noah's Bark

Remember years ago when everyone was asking, "What does the fox say?" Well, now you can find out. You'll also learn what just about every other animal says. And with practice, Noah's Bark will have you sounding like them, too.

Noah's Bark is a graphical adventure in which you are Noah, and it is time to gather up all the animals before the flood. The problem is, some of them show up alone. It is your job to find there partners and get them back to the boat. Before you venture out, though, you need to learn how to speak like the animals you're looking for. Really speak. The game uses voice recognition to gauge the accuracy of your mimickry, and you test it by interacting with the animals that have already found refuge. You won's be able to leave the ark until you've mastered the ability. Sometimes you use your voice to attract animals, other times you use it to scare them. Either way, you have to find the wayward animals and get them to the boat before the rain starts.

The game offers a large variety of animal sounds to learn; I didn't know that giraffes hum. However, it also demands verisimilitude. It took me two weeks to roar like a lion. Still, they say learning a new language is good for your mind. And it has never been this fun.

110
Story Generator: Fantasy Themes

The Fantasy Themes is the first library released for the StoryGenerator series of interactive fiction. StoryGenerator doesn't use the standard "parse action commands" or "click hyperlinks" approach, but rather it lets players fill in the details of the story. Whether you'll like it probably depends on your expectations as a game player.

In StoryGenerator fiction, you choose nouns and verbs to complete the sentences of a story. In the Fantasy Themes library, for example, after you determine a few basic character and setting parameters, the story begins: "Finding the (1) would be a formidable quest. At least that's what (2) thought before meeting (3)." So you could put "Sword of Theribald," "Rosalind," and "Grand Wizard" into the three numbers, respectively. The generator completes the sentences with the words you've specified, then it prints another line or two of the story, with suitable blanks, based on the input to that point. The stories it produces are usually readable, if not exactly publishable. Fantasy Themes are pretty much what you would expect: worlds with magic, monsters, and weapons but, if that's not your thing, other themes should be available soon, including mystery and sci-fi.

The problem with this approach to interactive fiction is that it really feels like your writing a story, rather than participating in it. It didn't do much for me, and the generic plots it generated didn't help. Maybe if you're a writer and looking for ideas, you might find StoryGenerator's approach more useful.

111
Us

I think it was Bette Davis who said something like "I don't care if people don't like me, as long as they understand me." Understanding is the goal of this game and, given its ambitious production, it isn't surprising it works as well as it does.

The setup for Us is pretty simple. You take a drug that allows you to transfer your consciousness through space (geographically, not interplanetary) and time and into other people. But these are far from ordinary people. These are drug addicts, terrorists, religious extremists, pedophiles, murderers, and the like. They are also people who are disadvantaged or disabled. At one point You are in charge of a concentration camp in 1944 Germany. You convert and kill heathens during the Crusades. You neglect and abuse your children. Often you are allowed to enter the mindsets of people with opposed opinions on issues such as the right to life, creationism and evolution, and animal rights. Tough stuff indeed, and it's made that much moreso because the game forces you to participate. It's interactive fiction, but pretty low on the interactive.

So why play Us? Because it does a really good job at making us understand the motives and cultures of the people we possess. Maybe this isn't surprising, because it was written by the groups of people represented in the game. That's right, a concentration camp survivor and neo-Nazi wrote a game together. Where living representatives weren't available, experts on the subject were called upon. That the producers could get these people to collaborate is incredible, but that the game manages to be tolerable maybe even moreso.

Don't go into Us thinking it'll be fun. It isn't. But it is educational and, while I still don't condone the actions of a lot of the people represented in the game, I do have a greater understanding of their motives and the culture that has and continues to influence them.

112
(In)Visible Cities
(In)Visible Cities is one of those games where the interface is probably considered more interesting than the actual story or mechanics. Which is unfortunate, since Noutes have been on the forefront of the neural link revolution in gaming, and it would be nice to see the same amount of effort put into sustaining the world model as showing off their shiny new build.

The premise is simple; two pairs of two navigate a procedurally generated map of the world. It doesn't matter if you've been to Aj-Jalad or Radlovac; the streets shift on every playthrough, and the game reacts to and resists your attempts to map it. The first player can only see the map; the second player can only control the character on a black screen. Noutes' own neural link is the only allowed method of communication. After that, it turns into your run of the mill fetch quest: which team's player 2 will be the first to reach Randomly Generated Sacred Object. The nature of the procedural system throws poignant surprises sometimes - I wasn't expecting the lost diadem of Princess Yasmyn to turn up outside the cemetery in Lajas where her lover's heart is buried - and those accidental moments hinted at an unintentional but tantalizing narrative structure.

I couldn't help but feel the resistant city was the most interesting feature of the game: the topography shifting against recognition, ensuring that you always remain a stranger. I wish Noutes had agreed with me.

113
The Many Lives of Aurelia Yao

The Many Lives of Aurelia Yao is a bit of an anomaly in form. Its title feels like a reference to the Garcia Marquez novel, which signals the heavy intertextuality the game asks of its players. Part card divination, part browser game, part semiotic fever dream, it resists categorization. The player receives a deck of darkly illustrated tarot cards (I'm not sure I've ever seen a Two of Cups like that before), and deals a simple past - present - future spread. You set the third card aside, and then you're asked to go to the game's web platform and select the card that was dealt in the future slot. You then receive an oneiric, haunting snippet of story that always seems to echo the spread.

The game's narrative structure is that Aurelia Yao, genius, mystic, and proto-physicist, did this every morning and evening of her fourteen year imprisonment at the hands of her son's murderers, using the cards to gain unconscious insight into their weaknesses and plot the sparagmic revenge that would see her wrest control of the Duchy of Uxia. That would have been an interesting premise for a game in its own right, but the developers wanted to create a game in which the story was "user-generated".

You take your third card and deal a new spread, this time of two cards for present and future, and then repeat the website portion. Sometimes the game throws text that's just a little too jarring to be believable, but most of the time it's all too easy to slot the next facet in, or think of Aurelia, high in her tower.

The most interesting part comes if you take breaks between rounds. You begin to see your future's symbolism everywhere - in the clouds, in graffiti tags along your familiar routes, doodled on receipts and on bar napkins. It's confirmation bias, surely; surely. Now, multiple players have begun to note the symbology of the deck in their surroundings, and claim that those images are reflected in the next cards they draw. I can't help but think Aurelia would be pleased.

114
S.hip of Theseus

I was so pleased to see VM Straka's Ship of Theseus adapted as a game; he's a criminally underrated writer. S.hip of Theseus is one of the most interesting experiments I've seen since the House of Leaves ARG disaster, so naturally I was excited to see what the developers did. The manner of adaptation feels like an homage to its source material: the game blends traditional IF tools with new technology as you piece together the multinational conspiracy at its heart. Most notably, the game tracks your progress via drone surveillance, which is used to trigger later levels and make information assimilation more difficult. (Flooding my department was a nice touch of verisimilitude for which I applaud the anonymous designer.)

Where S.hip of Theseus shines is the incorporation of multiplayer format; in Act 2 you're paired with another player, and so the narrative shifts. Clues are possible to destroy, depending on how careful a reader you are - or your partner is. (There's been a lot of complaining about the procedurally-generated pairing lists, but the developers quite rightly pointed out that it's possible to rig a simple last-in-first-out stack to ensure two friends or lovers are paired together. Though I can't imagine why you'd want to - being responsible for a loved one's implication in a major government conspiracy? If you get the [REDACTED] ending, you won't even find out for a good 5-7 years if they can forgive you.)

115
Licentia

The premise of Licentia is that you're pressured to serve as a temporary diplomat in a the sprawling multicultural metropolis that's the seat of a galactic empire. You're not particularly qualified for the position, but the Department of Assimilation at the Center-Central Bureaucracy, in their "boundless sagaciousness", as the game calls it in the introduction, has decided that you are the best suited of all your planet's representatives to speak on behalf of their interests until the new ambassador arrives. There's an element of randomness to every playthrough: you can choose which planet you're from (the outpost colony, the planet locked in a bloody fight for freedom, the uneasy sociopolitical ally assimilated eons ago, to name a few) but their attitudes to the Empire

and to each other are randomized on each game from a predetermined set of values. (If you play as Ranguria, you'll never find yourself positively inclined toward the Empire, for instance.)

After you've chosen your heritage, you have several background options that will tweak how certain characters in the game interact with you; it's a chance to refine the PC's political stance with a bit more nuance than most choices like this allow. (From what I can tell, no choices lock you out of options in the game itself - they just influence the flavor text you get from other diplomats, bureaucrats, and residents.) The overall game is essentially a resource management simulator - you handle petitions and bureaucratic necessities from your own residents, which often involve conflicts with other alien populations or with those who benefit from the privileges of the Empire. Certain characters will ask for certain things; in each section of the game, you decide whose requests you can fulfill and which you'll pass on for the moment, or which faction you'll side with in disputes. Granting too many petitions will make complex requests more difficult to push through; siding against your own people makes them fractious and upset with you, which among other, more personal penalties diminishes your effectiveness as a diplomat in the eyes of the Empire.

It's an uncomfortable game at times; colonialism and the choking noose of empire is at the heart of the story, and it's difficult to not bristle at the weight of expectations on your PC. It's hard to feel like any win is entirely triumphant - the best ending seems to be quietly aiding a cross-cultural revolution whose seeds are set to germinate when the new ambassador arrives, but the game concludes before you can see the fruits of your labor. What you're left with is an uncomfortable, melancholic meditation on the difficulty of a liminal existence in an oppressive structure - your own people don't trust you, and why should they; you're working for the Empire, after all. And yet, if you weren't, someone else with less nuance and ability would do the same, or else their interests would be left to rot.

116
SAT()R
Sphynx Studios built their reputation on riddling, esoteric, punishing games which defy easy categorization. Semiotically plural ciphers, punishing real-time clocks which shave seconds off for attempts to dismantle them, and perhaps most famously, calling your most frequently texted number and auto-reading out your search history if you failed one particular level. But their recent, successful push into narrative games has left some of their original base longing for a return to form.

SAT()R (it autocorrects attempts to spell or render it differently) was released as a response to that demand. The Kickstarter, intended as a way of spotlighting their newest and nuanced deep-choice cyberpunk FPS, raised over $28,000 in the first two hours alone. The final reward tier was simple: pay the lead developer $1,000 plus airfare, and they'd personally come to your house and smash your hard drive with a brick. All 10 spots were snatched up almost immediately.

It's impossible to talk about gameplay experience, because no two SAT()R games are alike, and the game will erase your save files if you try to write about it. (Fans greeted this new innovation rapturously, finding ways to allude to the punishment without describing it fully; it seemed more as a homage to the game's draconian intricacies than any real desire to keep their saves.) If I say more, I lose. Perhaps you will too by reading this.

117
A GAME PLAYED BY LIBRARIANS
A few years ago I noticed a peculiarity among the books I checked out from my favorite library, and only this library: every so often, they would be missing pages. Only one page from each book, and only occasionally. Sometimes the pages would be cleanly cut, sometimes roughly ripped, and there was no rhyme or reason I could detect in which page would be missing, nor in which kind of book they would be missing from--novels, anthologies, dictionaries, atlases--except that they were universally the kind of books that I would choose to look through. When I mentioned this oddity to the man scanning my books, pointing him to the page (or rather absence of a page) in question, he insisted it was a binding error (although we could both see the jagged teeth of the missing page), then stared at me defiantly.
I resolved to look into this matter more thoroughly and after months of deliberation and planning determined to hide in the stacks until after closing to see if I could catch some thief rummaging through the collections. What I saw was quite different: after waiting for hours, seeing nothing, I concluded that my operation was fruitless. I

left the stacks and tiptoed down the stairs, planning to find a warm spot to curl up until morning. But on my way down the hall I passed by a room whose window was lit and from which issued sounds of laughter. Peering in the window, I saw a table around which were seated a number of librarians whose faces I recognized from my daytime visits. In the center of the table was a jumbled pile of torn-out manuscript pages, and each librarian had in their hands a similar collection, which they held like playing cards. Indeed, they were playing with the pages like cards, taking turns carefully selecting one and placing it on the pile, and at times (based on complicated rules which I could not determine) reshuffling the center pile and drawing anew. The pages were of all types: broadsheets swarming with black type and vast white expanses with only a single haiku, beautifully detailed woodcuts and prints, sections of dialogue from Shakespeare and snippets of erotic verse, spells, recipes, and family trees. Some were yellow and shriveled with age; others were glossily new. One I recognized from its conspicuous absence in detective novel I had checked out three days before--it was the final page and I strained my eyes to make out the vital reveal in the final paragraph. I watched the game until the final card was played, whereupon the librarian at the head of the table gathered the pages together into a neat pile and, with the assistance of the needle and thread he pulled out of his pocket, stitched them together into a rough book, a task made more difficult by the vastly varying sizes of the pages. When the book was done, it was placed among others on a low shelf. I did not see what happened next; I fled the scene before the librarians, emerging from the room, could spot me. I lay in the stacks shivering until morning. When the library reopened, I chose a book at random from the shelves where I had rested my head; this I brought to the front desk and checked out, avoided the eyes of the man at the desk, which were as red and weary as mine. When I brought it home I did not read it but flipped through it to discover the missing page: in the very center of the book there was a gap; somewhere in the bowels of the library, that page was bound among others, slumbering on a low shelf in a locked room.

118

A GAME PLAYED BY FOOLS

In a tavern in Dublin in 1774, two men got into an argument about the nature of the ocean. One, a rich man, held that all things thrown into the ocean eventually reemerge, not from the water but from the sky, which is (as attested by its color, turbulence, and occasional emission of water) just an extension of the sea itself, but bent upwards and over. He sketched this idea out on a table with a piece of charcoal, whereupon he was challenged by a poor man, a shabbily-dressed and but rather self-confident patron of the bar, who asserted that all things thrown into the ocean indeed emerge, but not as themselves; rather, the ocean in its depths leads to another a country, a mirror of our own--as attested by the reflective depths of the sea which we note when we gaze into it. Thus, the objects we throw into the sea vanish into that country, but their mirror-objects, dropped by our mirror-counterparts, emerge into our own. This disagreement ranged long into the night, each participant becoming more convinced of his own theory, and ended with both asserting their own ability to definitively determined when and where an object cast into the sea was to re-emerge. By that point daylight was breaking; the two men each did a few calculations in charcoal, jealously guarding their work from the eyes of the other, and then set out from the bar to the shore, only a few streets away. There, they boarded a dinghy and rowed out a few miles. Each took an item from their pocket and dropped it into the ocean, concealing what the object was from the other's eyes; the bet was to calculate when and where each object would emerge and go to find it before the other could--for this reason they concealed the objects from one another, so that their opponent could not simply produce a facsimile and claim victory but must dutifully wait at the sight of emergence for the object itself.

However, after a few weeks had passed and neither had emerged victorious, each returned to their calculations and found a few errors, very slight--the principle surely still held. They went out onto the sea again, dropped another few objects, but this time in separate boats to ensure that not a glimpse of the other's choice could be seen. Another few weeks passed, another few errors were found; each refined his theory and found it even more compelling then before. They went again to drop their objects; the rich man took delight in selecting a priceless necklace of his mother's, casting it away in certainty that it would return to him. They continued in this cycle for years, each in that time winning to his side numerous devotees of the theory; the rich man took to teaching it over dinner parties, where he would hold whole rooms locked in wonder and admiration, whereas the poor man would seclude himself in his room all night, working himself to the bone over sketches the mirror-country and its mirror-inhabitants. But neither ever predicted the time an object would reappear, nor ever rediscovered anything they had cast away. Over time, the rich man sent almost his whole fortune to the bottom of the sea, between items of jewelry, coins, paintings, and precious manuscripts; the poor man only dropped that he could afford to lose--holey boots and stones he marked with some special sign. They ended their lives in a similar

situation of destitution, but never lost their conviction, arguing to the last; and today some in their neighborhood still hold to one belief or another, and wait for gold coins to drop from the sky or painted rocks to wash up on the shore.

119
A GAME PLAYED ON SKIN
A Turkish pasha, suffering from a skin condition which rendered him particularly sensitive to cloth, dust, soap, water, light, air, etc (essentially all things that might come in contact with his skin) played a game in which his body was the board, a board which was in a continuous state of flux due to the continual appearance and vanishing of various rashes, blisters, and stipples on his skin. This was a private game, played by himself and his body; no one else was privy to it, but it occupied almost his whole mind. In private moments he was continually clipping and unclipping small pins from his body in reaction to the motion of his rashes over his skin. As time went on, he grew even more sensitive; he had to cloister himself in his chambers, rubbing his skin continually with soothing oils; this privacy afforded him even more time to focus on his game. He sunk himself entirely into it, memorizing the outlines of his irritations as they ebbed and flowed over his skin--the shapes, he found, followed a predictable but complicated pattern. In his youth, he had had some skill at painting, and he turned that skill to service in his game; he made sketches of the various states of his body in order to better understand the pattern, to better play the game. As years went by, his body aged; the game was altered by the appearance of wrinkles and liverspots, by the sagging of flesh and the loss of muscle. He welcomed these challenges.
One day, however, the pattern was interrupted. He examined his skin in the morning, and found that the rashes were in retreat. He checked his charts; it should have been a time of swell. Disturbing. Over the next few days, the rashes dwindled and eventually disappeared. The next few days he was tormented by boredom and loneliness. He felt like a stranger in his own body, his own inexplicably healthy body. After much thought, he chose his course of action. He called a servant into his chamber and ordered the man to strip off his clothes. After some hesitation, the servant obliged. He once again took out his sketches and studied them; he brought out his paints and brushes. He began to paint on the man's skin--adorning him with the rashes he had memorized. Once he had finished, he clipped the man's skin with pins and played a round of his game; the next day he called the servant back, painted him with the next progression in the pattern of the rashes' development, and once again played his game. For two weeks he progressed in this manner until it emerged that the servant was allergic to the paints. Real rashes had sprung up around the sides of the painted ones, complicating the board. In disgust, the pasha dismissed his servant and resolved to find another way to spend his time.

120
A GAME PLAYED BY GALAXIES
There is no way to describe the vast and complex feelings of two galaxies as they fall into one another, each ripping the other apart and being ripped apart by the other. To us it may seem like an act of violence or sex; from the perspective of the galaxies, however, it is more accurately described as a game--a game played over millennia, the ultimate end of which is one's destruction and recreation as a new being entirely. The rules of this game, defined as they are by vast timescales, immense forces, and impossible distances, are beyond our understanding, but in images of these colliding galaxies we can perhaps game some sense of the joy and virtuosity, even humor, with which galaxies play these games--reaching towards one another, siphoning off in spirals, peeling off long cotton-like threads of one another's arms; old stars collapsing, new stars flaming into existence, two black holes--hungry mouths--straining towards one another in the dark, orbits set into motion and disrupted, continual flux, continual play, a game with billions of pieces and two impossible ancient players, who know that playing this game will be the last thing they ever do.

121
A GAME PLAYED BY NO-ONE-KNOWS-WHO
At first it was thought to be a tomb, that bleak winding labyrinth discovered buried beneath the Mongolian steppe, but no human remains where ever found there. Then it was thought to be a temple; but there was never any sign of worship, any images of gods, any altars, any remnants of a sacrifice. There were just stone halls, merging into one another, coming to abrupt halts, spiraling and branching. Occasionally, locked doors impeded the explorers' progress; keys were scattered here and there about the tombs, in places, often, that required the solving of a simple puzzle to be obtained--putting the exact right weight in a dish to tip a scale, draining a tub, scaling a series of cleverly-concealed ledges to reach a key hanging from a hook in the ceiling. These puzzles

were not particularly difficult; it felt like they were meant not to impede progress, but to ornament it, to add a bit of color to the otherwise monotonous and identical chambers through which the explorers passed, one by one.

It was disturbing when another such complex was discovered under the Amazon jungle, and dated to approximately the same time. It was in all respects the same: different kinds of stone and a different floor plan, but a similar system of doors and keys, a similar maze-like experience.

It was disturbing when one of the keys in the Amazonian complex unlocked a door in the Mongolian one. Behind the locked door they found a huge hall with a table in the center; the surface of the table was painted with a map of a complex similar to but different from either of the complexes that had been unearthed.

It was disturbing when that map turned out to exactly match the floor plan of yet another complex, discovered in the Australian outback ten years later. It was particularly disturbing when the game pieces on the board were found to be highly stylized but still recognizable depictions of the Australian explorer and his crew. On the same expedition, one of the visitors to the cavern--not an archaeologist but a lowly intern--wandered off from the group and in a side room discovered on the wall a painting of his mother, recognizable not from the face but from the highly symbolic and appropriate chose of accouterments surrounding her. Below it were scrawled a few passages from his favorite novel, the significance of which remain unexplained.

Of course, the whole situation remains unexplained. Who were the people who created these spaces, and what drove them to do it? Did they make them for their pleasure, or for ours? Can the desire to delight, to confuse, to amuse, to astound some unknown people at some unknown distant time really inspire hundreds of people to drag thousands of pounds of rock through inhospitable land? Can they really have gone to all this work just to make us a game?

Moreover, how did they know us so well?

Various theories, of course, have been propounded. Some have argued for time travel, others for a massive coincidence. The distinguished Prof. A.J. Weather's well-known but little understood theory is that we created the complexes ourselves, not as a hoax but simply out of our desire for them to exist. But my favorite theory, and the most compelling one, I think, is the theory expounded by Prof. Alice Smith, in her tract on the nature of history. She argues that history is cyclical, and that the discovery of these complexes was so momentous in human history that it resounded through over centuries, leading to their creation; or rather, the discovery of the complexes sent massive ripples through history, both forward and backward in time, and thus their discovery caused and constituted their creation. We are the progenitors of our own history; our past is our invention, and we have invented it as a mystery, as a puzzle. Across centuries, we are playing a game with ourselves.

122

ClickHole recently introduced choose-your-own adventure stories in its typical weird-Twitter-gone-longform style; like everything on the site, it both presents a reader with wacky fun and presents the site and its advertisers with loads of impressions and engagement time. Not to be outdone, Buzzfeed has launched a competing series: bigger, better, and more monetized. The first entry, "The Greatest Quest In Like, Ever," allows you to choose, from the start, from a list of dozens, even hundreds of pop-cultural characters to take on a bog-standard adventure. Can Daenerys take you to victory? What about Bill from Tokio Hotel? An entire posse of Minions, working together? There are endless choices. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, analytics are growing at the speed of green goo, giving advertisers hard stats on which brands are the buzziest, the most badass, the most #goals-y.

The execution of TGQiLE is spotty -- some adventures are clearly the work of professional, commissioned writers, while others are sloppily scraped and barely adapted from fanfiction or eager if poor contributors, and the product placement is of course blatant -- but the sheer crowd-pleasingness of the form has made TGQiLE Buzzfeed's most successful new launch since quizzes. This reviewer cannot say she enjoyed the game. Rather, she is a little in awe, like you would be of a particularly well-designed chemical bomb.

Disclaimer: The author has applied for a writing position on the sequel to TGQiLE, slated to begin development soon.

123

The latest in the increasingly gonzo trend of game mashups is Performance Anxiety, a cross between a Sierra game and a karaoke machine designed by a sadistic Simon Cowell. The design is simple: a split screen with a deliberately '80s green-and-black monochrome display on one half, running an old-fashioned text adventure,

and a musical staff on the right, scored for treble or bass. With an attached microphone, the player must accurately sing the displayed musical part, which ramps up in difficulty and tessitura depending on her performance; a musical novice might not really see any changes from the starting text, while a trained soprano might be asked to execute a page-long chromatic coloratura on a low G, arranged by a follower of PDQ Bach. An accurate performance produces a successful walkthrough of the game; a virtuoso performance, one with easter eggs and last lousy points; sharping or flatting, faffing about in-game perhaps on a timer; a blatant mistake, a fatal error. There are no breaks. At higher levels there aren't any rests either. And due to the real-time adjustment of the score, practice is impossible.

In an interesting if nerve-wracking touch, Performance Anxiety provides real-time and ingenious feedback -- much as a voice tuner displays the drifting and flatting of the voice, the parser will automatically type in and erase commands based on the current accuracy of the singing being produced. This, of course, turns into a feedback loop -- nothing straightens out your tone like watching a parser merrily, unconcernedly type in >JUMP OFF CLIFF.

The author claims no one has ever won, certainly not her. This reviewer lost on the second bar.

124
The designer presented Tug of War, an arcade box resembling a pinball machine with an e-book reader jury-rigged onto its screen. The game is designed for two players, each on opposite sides of the machine. (I, the reviewer, manfully resisted heckling her about how this is the concept of an Enigma video.) Each side was outfitted with a keyboard and a joystick to either type text -- some wrote stories, some just typed commands, one or two people mashed keys as always -- or produce it with a series of elaborate, impenetrable and untutorialized joystick feints that became words. Whatever the player wrote would swarm toward the center, tangle with the second player's words in some abstraction of a conversation or a battle, and inevitably fail to win. The designer always used the joystick, and she always won. She did this, I am told, for twelve hours before I arrived at the exhibition, always victorious.

As befits my duties as a thorough reviewer, I attempted Tug of War twice, once with keyboard, once without. The doggerel I typed on the keyboard was overwhelmed by her verbal barrage in seconds. The joystick produced nothing but coughing exhaust fumes of characters, which naturally did no better. I am no slouch in gaming; perhaps the coding was buggy, or overly simplistic, or perhaps not interactive at all. I've heard some of these designers present demos and just say their audiences are playing. It would be unethical for me, though, to misreport my performance.

I stayed for the man behind me. He walked up to the machine, and gave the author a smile, and took the joystick into his hand; his expression betrayed either grit or predestination, like a cat that already knows the hunt's outcome. He bored a continuous stream of words, then two, then five; I could not tell what he was doing to elicit such results. Then he triggered some sort of overflow bug, perhaps; the machine was filled with his words, and I almost imagined them spilling out of the box onto the crowd below. With one final flourish, what appeared to be a glitched-out victory screen appeared (funny -- no other playthrough even had a normal one) and he took a long, performative bow. The designer's expression, to me, seemed somewhere between awed and robbed; between about to pass out, and five minutes into having done so.

(EDIT: I have been informed that the latter recounting did not happen exactly like that. I am an objective reviewer. What I saw is what I saw.)

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Persistence of Memory is a story that, depending on when you read it, may not be a story at all. Every time the story file is loaded, parts of the story deteriorate -- sometimes in real time, as you're reading the page while others connect. Only when no one is reading, or at least actively reading, does the story regenerate its text, if haphazardly; much of what you read is a reconstruction of the story, but it could also be scrambled cached data, or procedurally generated text, or Markov-chain extrapolations of what was the story at one point.

The result is something between being the hundredth player in a game of Telephone started by a professional if trollish storyteller, or perhaps the bumbling excavator of an artifact falling apart in your hands. During times of

high activity the story might dwindle down to nothing, a few bursts of words making it to the luckiest few people reading at the luckiest millisecond. Or perhaps the story you read will be rich, nuanced, even heartbreakingly so -- and you will know you are the only one to think to have the experience in months. Interestingly, Persistence of Memory has no release date; the pseudonymous author gives no bio and uses no recent development tools. What the original story was, and when it was, is impossible to tell.

I remember being quite struck, on a fundamental human-to-human level, by a number of passages in this work. If only I remembered to write them down.

126

GigClicker comes off as much as a marketing pitch by a cynical Zynga executive as a game idea: an idle game for the creative and freelancer classes, lashed to computers and screens as it is. There is a narrative attached, but it is a standard Gawker-via-Horatio Alger media fantasia and not worth criticism. The point of the game -- and the game knows this is the point of the game -- is to click to stack up pitches, which transmute at an irregular rate into assignments, which transmute at an irregular rate to currencies. Connections and parties and torrid artist's affairs might enter the picture for the most diligent clickers; layoffs and trends may wipe away months of progress at random. In-game purchases, of course, speed this process up dramatically.

After a certain amount of playtime, obfuscated by the developers, a final twist occurs: game progression becomes tied to every other player's performance. The initial few days are whirlwind, impossible to keep up with; maintaining this pace requires nearly 24-hour attention and frantic clicking (hence the rise, here as anywhere, of autoclickers) and becomes even harder the higher up you get on the leaderboard -- even if you outdo everyone else in
GigClicker on pure mechanical (or botting) skills, the game is curving you downward.

There are prizes for the top of the leaderboards, supposedly, whenever it's measured or when it all ends. The developer has dropped teasers: a sweet job, a large amount of money, undetermined prestige. As a result, GigClicker is currently played by hundreds of thousands. At the time of publication, this reviewer was #42416, though this was mostly the result of her own lazy play.

127

SEEKING SOL (Who's Who's Whom Games). Free advice: This game is likely most enjoyable to players who ignore the contradiction at its heart.
You play a detective, assigned to interview a hotel-ful of suspects. You win if you correctly deduce which one is the title character. Sol is the game's only "real" character, the one who's imagining not only the other guests but the entire hotel and indeed the entire game world. In this game, the designers use "Sol" to connote not only solipsism but also the sun. The Stay-For-Day Hotel's lighting is so spectacularly bright that I recommend setting your VR goggles to Dim before playing.
If you try to "accuse" either your own detective character or the author (who appears in one of several well-placed Easter eggs), the game delivers a powerful electric shock--and that's just the third-most important reason why I began this review with that piece of free advice. Reason #2 can be discovered in the augmented-VR game-within-a-game, which delivers unique sensations via custom wired boots. (They carry regular and wide sizes but alas, not narrow.) To say anything at all about Reason #1 would spoil it, so I'll keep mum.

128

SWEET FUTURE (Forecastro Game Concepts and Bitchin Confections LLC). Needless to say, the biggest challenge is to get through all eleven rounds without eating any of the Tarot cards. The temptation is two-fold: Not only is each card a unique truffle, but when you order replacement cards via in-app purchase, the little delivery drone is cute as a button. I won't tell you how many Hierophants I had to replace, or how many side games of Fetch I played with those drones.
I WILL tell you that that side game interacts with the main game in unexpected ways. Sweet Future ships with four prepackaged "bones," each of which has a suit carved into its plastic surface. For example, if you draw an Eight of Cups while the drone is fetching the "Cups" bone, then any Swords in your hand will melt into a gooey mess. (Moist towelettes not included.) I'm sure there are plenty of achievements, but my financial advisor and my nutritionist have both advised against my trying to unlock them.

129

WHO IS SUE GEISSE? (Flapjack Concepts).
This game sent me to the hospital. In the real world. Twice! The first incident took place during a karate practice scene. I (the player) made a kick, which was then carried out by Sue (the player character) with about five times as much force as I had used. My bodysuit did what Sue did, thus yanking my left leg out of its socket. The second hospital trip was brought about while Sue was on a risky legal observer mission. A translator stabbed her (and, by extension, me) in the thigh. Mind you, I did sign all the waivers before starting, including the one about potential lacerations. I thought those were just boilerplate! but it turns out that the bodysuit interior can locally morph into a knifelike object. Live and learn.

Those traumas are made all the more shocking by the fact that they appear in Acts 2 and 3. The only pain in Act 1 is of the emotional variety, as the player lives out the PC's origin story. Sue, fresh out of law school, flops on a nationally televised quiz show. The player keenly feels the shame of hitting the wrong buzzer; of buzzing in too soon with an educated (but incorrect) guess; and, worst of all, of stating the right answer but forgetting to make the show's signature arm roll while doing so (score zero). This embarrassment motivates Sue to prove herself to the entire world. Hence the extreme exercise regimen. Hence the drive to do good works, at great personal risk. Plenty of games have used their structure to depict a PC who's weaker than the player would like her to be. WISG? gives us a PC that's stronger.

130

THE CONSOLE (Nolobadolo Design). Before mass shootings became epidemic in the United States, some observers were quick to blame violent video games whenever one of those atrocities happened (as opposed to, you know, guns, or the yet-to-be-named phenomenon of Arivulcris in social psychology). The Console takes this scapegoating hypothesis literally, and to its logical conclusion. Riffing on the idea that video games literally transform a person could make for a cringeworthy game, and to be honest The Console is not entirely un-cringeworthy. However, to its credit, Nolobadolo takes the premise at face value, letting the player draw her own conclusions about the real world and instead creating a macabre fantasy/mystery.

The opening scene establishes the player character as an inspector, visiting the empty home of a school shooter to determine just what video games he was playing prior to the incident. If the console in the suspect's bedroom had had a SCHOOL SHOOTER cartridge plugged in, then it would be a very short game. But no, it's got a LOCKSMITH cartridge instead, and there's evidence that ALCOHOLIC MOM and MAN WITH WINGS had been played prior to that. As the player tracks down the resulting leads, other cartridges show up that provide further clues to the suspect's psyche. When the PC plays one of these games-within-a-game, it transforms her in the same way as the suspect was presumably transformed. Each transformation temporarily confers new abilities and/or weaknesses, some of which are of the supernatural variety. (Even though everyone's talking about flying in the VR environment, my personal favorite cartridge was actually WEREWOLF.) As the game progresses, suspense grows around the possibility that the PC will turn ultraviolent in the way the suspect did.

131

GEMS OF BROBROCHOR REVISITED (Jens Wu-Cheikh). Sometimes in a creative community, an enthusiastic young'un comes out with an unintentionally funny work, which is then ridiculed by the community at large. When I saw it pointed out that that type of mockery is tantamount to bullying, I softened my own (already-idiosyncratic) response to wacky newbie efforts in any genre.

Eleven years ago, the Sophos Mundo engine for encyclopedia-building games went open-source. Sure enough, not long afterward, a young Jens Wu-Cheikh released the original GEMS OF BROBROCHOR, to jeers from EBG hobbyists. For my part, I kept silent publicly but private-messaged the author with a note of encouragement. Now, a grown-up Jens has given us GOBR, and given what I just wrote I'll be the first to admit my bias in favor of this game. That said, it's safe to say the author has honed his craft. Gone are the one-step info-dump articles, replaced by revision sequences with a subtle accrual of details. Gone, too, are the auto-generated 70,000-word battle stories, so embarrassing in the original GOB. In their place is a clever repurposing of Sophos Mundo's talk-page opponent AI, used here to generate military maneuvers. The titular gems may still be McGuffins, but at least they're McGuffins with coherent backstories now. Finally, there's a note of self-deprecating humor in the Recent Changes daemon, which describes game progress in an enthusiastic newbie voice not unlike that of the original GOB.

Welcome back, Jens. May you be greeted warmly upon your return.

132

Proteinaceous (Sonya Shankar)

So we've seen evolution-games before. Even if PokÈmon doesn't quite fit the definition, EA Games' highly vaunted (and woefully underwhelming) Spore made all the headlines back in 2008. However, Shankar, a biochemistry professor by day and game designer by night, introduces us to a completely different scale of evolution: the ultra-microscopic level of the protein.

Yep, be prepared to make minute changes to amino-acid sequences, tinker with DNA and RNA chains, and tweak lipid-membranes in order to take your organism all the way from a single-self-replicating molecule to a complex multicellular creature with its own, complete set of specialized organelles and unique behaviors. While it may seem like a groan-inducing lesson in molecular biology, Proteinaceous succeeds as a highly engaging exploration of the nanoscale, thanks mainly to Shankar's talent for imbuing complex chemical interactions with humanity and dramatic flair. Even if you never got past high-school chemistry, the choice of monomer for your organ of locomotion, or the pattern of filaments for your cell's internal cytoskeleton will leave you riveted. An excellent game, even for the most science-averse.

133

Where Childhood's Dreams are Twined (Literary Games Collective)

I'll hand it to LGC: they've really taken the old motif of "the medium is the message" to heart. While spinoffs, prequels, sequels and side-quels of Alice in Wonderland span a vast range of media, Where Childhood's Dreams are Twined is the first game to tell the trippy story through the medium of dreams. The game takes advantage of a player's own memories and psyche to construct the environments and characters, leading to a game world that's at once delightfully alien and hauntingly familiar.

Yet, it's this reliance on a player's own mind that contributes to the game's biggest flaw. Dream-logic, as we've all experienced is a contradiction in terms: dreams have no real logic. So when a game tries to impose rules onto your dreams in order to tell a story, hiccups are bound to occur. Nothing pulls you out if an immersive Alice in Wonderland narrative than having a tea-party in the McDonald's in which you wet your pants during a fourth-grade birthday party. It isn't my fault I don't like caffeine, nor that I've never had a picnic in the woods (I grew up in a desert): LCG should really have introduced some back-up visuals to the game, perhaps taken from previous titles in order to enhance the feelings of nostalgia and dÈj‡ vu (Hell Spawn 8 or The Desert Picnic. Would make good choices, for example). Nevertheless, if you're okay with the occasional glitch here and there, Where Childhood's Dreams are Twined is a fresh take on a classic tale.

134

The Princess and the Dragon (Lydia Baker and the New York Interdisciplinary Dancers)

I'm a huge fan of both LARPS and interactive theater (which, contrary to many people's beliefs, are not interchangeable terms). I've also heaped praise on NYID's last two projects. The Princess and the Dragon, however, left me wanting. To be fair, as a dance-RPG, the game's concept is definitely interesting: all your interactions, be they social, puzzle-solving or combat, are mediated through dance. The game introduces a novel physicality to a genre that's getting overwhelmed by the same old same-old, a physicality that heightens one's attachment to the narrative and the characters.

Unfortunately, the story itself is rather lacking and full of plot holes and narrative threads that never get addressed. Why did the dragon kill the princess in the first place? Who summoned her ghost? Who was the "woman in the feather boa?" Also, for those who are, shall we say less skilled, in dance, the game could pose a significant challenge: the complex Kathakali battle with the Red Cat, or the frantic Tango trade dispute with the Blue Baroness easily come to mind.

So go with The Princess and the Dragon if you're looking for something novel and physically demanding, and aren't really worried about plot and storytelling. Otherwise, I'd give it a miss. Or at least take some ballroom classes.

135

Matrimony (Ali and Ismail Hassan)

Game design's power couple Ali and Ismail Hassan is at it again with their trademark blend of surrealism, true-life-inspired stories and, well, inanimate objects. Inspired by their own process of seeking a legally-recognized marriage, as well as interviews collected from couples around the globe, Matrimony tells the stories of various relationships, some happy, some breathtakingly dull, some tragic, through the eyes of single wedding ring that gets passed from couple to couple (though I shouldn't generalize with the word "couple": not all the relationships are, in fact, between only two people).

As a wearable and a symbol of marriage, you get to influence the course of each relationship through various means: getting uncomfortably warm or tight, slipping off fingers at the right moment, glistening when the time is right, even getting lost for days on end. Though subtle, your actions have huge effects on the relationships you symbolize, and in at least one case, can influence life-or-death decisions. Ali and Ismail have woven together several masterful (and open-ended) tales into a neat little game about one of humanity's oldest institutions. Even if you're never planning on getting married, or believe it to be an archaic and unnecessary piece of legal hogwash, Matrimony is a powerful emotional and philosophical journey.

136
The Sound of Her Wings (Big Gay Games)
There a few entirely sound-based games in existence. That's right, Big Gay Games' latest Virtual-Reality title (no doubt inspired by Neil Gaiman's epic Sandman graphic novels) features no visuals whatsoever. As a ghost trapped in a haunted house, all you can really do is listen to the various sounds, noises and conversations taking place where you once lived. The thing is, the very act of observing different scenes (and I mean "observe" in a purely auditory way), changes the scenes themselves. Your movements control which part of the house you visit (and for a ghost, collisions with walls are of course no problem at all), and which stories you get to listen to, but your presence is indirectly felt by the various characters you're eavesdropping on, meaning that by simply being present, you shape the narrative.

Now as a premise for a game, this is unique. Rife with possibilities. Brimming with potential drama. Except that Big Gay Games has really dropped the ball on this one. Which was a huge disappointment, given their track record of innovative and highly compelling "narrative experiences" (as the studio likes to call their games). Stories that should be dark, mysterious and frightening come off instead as merely trying to be so, a fact that isn't helped by the replacement of their usual and excellent voice-acting team. Akwugo, the ghost and protagonist of the game, is difficult to relate to. Yes, it's cool that her story is told largely through reflections off of the stories of the other characters, through metaphor and symbolism, but that technique only works if done well. In The Sound of Her Wings, it just comes across as shallow and confusing.

There's so much potential in this game that it's almost painful to write such a bad review. Perhaps BGG will revisit the concept in the future and learn from its mistakes. Because The Sound of Her Wings is a highly memorable game, but for all the wrong reasons.

137
Woodcutter King Deluxe

Everyone who's read anything I've written knows I love the original Woodcutter King. I know I'm somewhat affected by nostalgia, but even as an adult, I can't figure out why it was never a commercial success. The best explanation I can come up with is that people were used to video games, and portables in particular, being linear progressions of levels in which the player always did basically the same type of thing. WK is distinctly nonlinear, from the plot to the geography to the set of tasks, and I don't think most gamers were ready for it. The new remastered edition, playable on smartphones and tablets, trusts that this underrated classic's time has finally come.

How does it compare to the original? The first thing I noticed was that the graphics are a lot clearer, and while I love the slightly-unsettling ambiguity of the old "hair trees," for example, I admit it makes it easier for the player to understand what she's seeing. The menu is slightly different, too: the option to change your gender can be accessed any point, which I think is a cop-out since the difficulty was part of the point, and there's an "undo scene" button, which is a cop-out for the same reason but I kind of appreciate it anyway. Thankfully, though, the gameplay is otherwise faithfully replicated, and even the new bonus content fits naturally into the core plot (yes,

I am one of those people who maintains that WK has a core plot, even if the beginning and end aren't fixed in place), and the Goose-Wife's expanded questline alone is worth the price of the app.

138
Today I Feel

I'm not sure that this is a game so much as a weird little browser-based toy, but it's game-like enough to qualify for a review here. Today I FeelÖ is designed for two to five participants using the internet on different computers, and there's a neat auto-match feature if you don't have a partner or group set up. The screen shows a modified keyboard layout with only letters, a space bar, and a few punctuation marks. Rather than clicking on the "keys" directly, you click on a star-shaped cursor icon and drag it over them, releasing the mouse button when the star is over the key you'd like to press. The idea is to type a word this way; the catch is that all the participants are doing this simultaneously, and only one of them needs to release their mouse button for it to count as a click, so no one has full control over the movement of the star cursor. When no player is holding down their mouse button, the star stops moving and the typed sequence is displayed after the words "Today I feel," completing the sentence.

I played a few rounds of this with friends, then several more with strangers using the auto-match system. It was surprisingly fun struggling over the position of a cursor on a keyboard sounds like it would be either boring or frustrating, but I found myself enjoying the star's unexpected trajectories. I also realized after a few tries that I was no longer even trying to type anything specific, just moving the cursor on impulse. The one thing that bothered me was that the collaboratively-typed sequences, while not intelligible ways of completing a sentence that began "Today I feel," were much less nonsensical than would seem likely. We consistently produced only-slightly-misspelled words. I know the system wasn't cheating by not actually displaying the typed letters, because in every case I recognized the ones I'd clicked myself, so I think the other participants must have consistently been trying harder than me to type real words. That doesn't quite make sense either, though, due to the amount of sabotage inherent in the play structure. Maybe this is all a testament to the human ability to find meaning where there is none?

139
Rain of Starlight

Like just about every other games writer, I have no idea what to do with Rain of Starlight. The manufacturers sent me a promotional copy, containing just the game disc; I can't purchase the required "peripheral device," because possession of it is a felony in my country and many others.

RoS, for those who haven't been following the controversy, is a "participatory consciousness-transcending game experience" published by DigitEyes, a company
located "in the islands" (attempts to track the company website's IP address have failed).

It consists of two parts: the game, which is a local-multiplayer-only RPG, purchasable online, and a jar of aspirin-sized capsules containing "our proprietary blend of psychedelic botanicals," not purchasable where prohibited by law. The idea is that if a small group of people consume the tablets and then play the game, the technological and chemical factors will create a compelling, immersive experience. Many gaming sites guessed that there were no actual capsules, and that this framework was a gimmick designed to build publicity, which it certainly did. Reports from around the world have confirmed that DigitEyes really does ship bottles of pills with their game, though, so now the predominant theory is that the game is the gimmick and the drug is the real product.

For the sake of due diligence, though, I did play Rain of Starlight with three of my friends, without any controlled substances (okay, there may have been some beer). It was almost completely unplayable. I had sort of expected 1960s-style psychedelic imagery, but instead its visuals feel weirdly sparse, like graphical assets were omitted at random.

The text is hard to read, and hard to understand even after you decipher what you're seeing, to the point that the plot was not at all clear ñ the four of us together were only able to work out that the gnome-like protagonist and hir lovers(?) were setting off in search of a mountain where souls are born. We struggled through it for a few

hours, finally giving up once we got to a point where we couldn't tell whether or not we'd broken the game. If the drug is as potent as the game itself, it's a placebo.

EDIT: A few people in the comments have talked about playing this game as intended and having completely different experiences than my own. I apologize if I came across as dismissive or patronizing, and I'd be interested in hearing your thoughts.

140
Dance Diplomacy

The announcement of this title at last fall's MCTX was met with genuine outrage from Goldsoft's fanbase, which had been awaiting Dance Detective 4 for the better part of two years. Learning that DD4 had been pushed back in favor of a pseudo-Cold-War-themed spinoff with no character customization was enough to make many fans write this game off from the start. That's a real shame, because Dance Diplomacy is one of the most genuinely fun kinetics I've ever played. Part of it has to do with the improvements to the motion capture devices, sure, and the new touchpad controls work much better than other attempts at using adaptive devices for dance gameplay. But Goldsoft isn't just leaning on technology here.

I admit to having worried about how the shift in genre would affect gameplay, but at the risk of some readers clicking the back button in disgust ñ I have to say the modern-courtly intrigue setting felt more appropriate for dance than the Detective series' Victorian-twee murder scenes. (Of course I know the juxtaposition is part of the appeal, but I also know I was far from the only player made uncomfortable by sequences like the Widow's Waltz in DD2.) More importantly, what Diplomacy lacks in aesthetic customizability is more than made up for by the player's ability to pass checkpoints in multiple ways. I was amazed and delighted to realize that the "Suggestions" display really did just show a suggested solution, rather than the only one possible. The least-spoilery example I can manage: it's easiest to pass the first Presidential Promenade checkpoint with a basic foxtrot, but after a few tries I successfully passed it with a tango. NPCs responded specifically to this, which made me realize that there's a lot more breadth and depth to the writing in this game than I had expected.

141
Airs and Graces

The scents for Airs and Graces are provided by Black Phoenix Alchemy Lab (http://blackphoenixalchemylab.com/). Unwrap the game, and the tiny bottles clink in their velvet sleeve. There's an applicator wand in the top of each, so at the right moments, you can apply the scents to your skin. Play Airs and Graces from a few hours and you'll come away smelling of amber or opoponax or a fougÈre of lavender and white musk.

This is more than a "scent-enhanced" game. Those tend to be slavishly literal: plasticky bubblegum scents wafting out of a scent-generator when you reach the Fairgrounds level, a blast of peppermint for a Christmas scene, mock diesel fumes from a truck rally. And they linger in the air around your computer like a bad air freshener to bother anyone else who lives in your household. My roommate in college forcibly unplugged the ScentFactor during a long game of Elephant Farmer; the funk of synthetic peanuts persisted in the curtains for a month.

Airs and Graces does not rely on a ScentFactor. If you want to play, you must order the kit of perfume oils. It is a piece in which the perfume itself -- selecting, wearing, free-associating -- is part of the gameplay. The wireless wristband tracks your current skin chemistry and reports it back to the game.

To explain: the premise concerns social climbing and deceit within a faerie court. The manners and fashions of the court are intensely complicated. Choosing which perfume to wear next, and how (or whether) to layer scents, affects your social stats and the reactions of other characters. Only the Faerie Queen may wear ozonic scents. If you douse yourself in the scent of lightning, beware a challenge your character probably will not survive. Rose accord is associated with mortals, and will earn the contempt of other faeries. Sometimes this is a necessary deception (there are no useless perfumes in the kit), but waiting for the roses to dry down can be galling.

The wristband is exquisitely sensitive. This game played very differently for my friend, whose skin chemistry amped up all the citrus scents and raised her character's Earnest stats far above anything I was able to achieve.

Opportunities to apply fresh scent are regulated by the game, and adding or removing anything at other times will lock you out of play for several hours.

After you've finished the game, you'll want to keep the wristband and the scent visualization software: it's astonishing training material for anyone developing their nose, not to mention good at detecting any food spoilage in a fifteen-foot radius. There is a preference to turn off its sensitivity to specific human excreta in order to avoid social awkwardness.

142
Having a Bad Time (Starman Junior, Jr.)
It should come as no great surprise that Toby Fox's Undertale has led to a great many imitators. These games, which some jokesters have dubbed "Homestucks on the Holodeck", are sometimes successful in their attempts to copy what made 2015's GotY so great, but are often not. Plagued with buggy battle systems, dodgy moral choices (I played one HotH that had some dumb Fable-esque morality system, with point-based totals and everything), characters that serve as little more than vehicles for tired jokes, and speaking of jokes, oh my god all the played-out references. (If I see one more half-baked "Wanna have a bad time?" in these gamesÖ) And what looks to be actually good on that front is terminally unfinished, like Gasterblaster's Dragon Hoarder. I was about to give up on the genre entirely until this game came along.

Okay, so if you can get past the title (which is actually appropriate to the game, I swear!) you'll find that Having a Bad Time is, well, actually a pretty good time! It's an adventure game-ish thing about this sad sack of a psychic superhero, named F'yiz'er IIe'ee (pronounced Fisher Lee), who is ordered by the Bureau of Metahuman Affairs to figure out what happened to the rest of their superteam, Golden Agents, after everyone else mysteriously disappeared overnight. Fisher (I'm just gonna use the name the game uses most of the time) has the power of post-cognition, and can use it on any object in the Golden Agents' secret Moonbase. It's great for jokes, and of course it's absolutely essential for progress in the game, but then you view three or four "key scenes" and things start toÖ Well, I'm not gonna spoil it for you, but let's just say that things aren't what they seem, and that the order you view the key scenes in has a VERY big effect on how the story goes. There's a very good reason why everything has gone all screwy, and you may not find it on your first playthrough.

Having a Bad Time is a game I stayed up all night just to finish, then played again and again to get all the different endings. It's pretty much the only Homestuck on the Holodeck to pull out all my favorite elements from Undertale: a colorful cast of characters (Fisher's love of old detective shows makes for some very good character beats), an uneasy relationship between player and protagonist, amazingly juicy interactions (try using your post-cog power on the vending machine over and over again!), zany time-travel shenanigans, choices with actual consequencesÖ It even has a pretty good soundtrack, too! (Not as given as you might think with these games.) Sure, it's not really an RPG, but then neither was Undertale, if you played it "right". Give it a try, you'll probably like it!

143
A Piece of Tarot (Makerworks)
People seem really down on this game, which I think is because they want it to be something it isn't (i.e., some kind of super-responsive ultra-RPG). Instead, it's actually more of a low-key story generator. You pick out three Tarot cards out of a deck of 38 (including all of the Major Arcana and a handful or two of the Minor Arcana), set them as "past", "present", or "future", then let the game make an interactive short story out of them based on a complicated tarot interpreter and drama manager. They're all very short pieces, and for some reason the Seven of Swords seems mildly bugged, but I found it a good game to play whenever I needed to chill out and distress for a bit.

144
GLITCH Hop (2ni)

There's been a lot of Yume Nikki clones over the years, from Trendy-Sabamiso's Hallucingenia to lol's .flow, but none of them have really caught my eye until 2ni's GLITCH Hop came around. Basically, you play this girl, (nicknamed Tuney by the fandom, after her musical note shirt), who explores these psychedelic worlds and uses items to change her appearance and abilities blah blah blah, none of that stuff is very different from most Yume Nikki fangames. But what really sets GLITCH Hop apart is the NPC design. At first all their text seems like random gibberish and non-sequiters, but as you explore further into the game you start to understand them more and more. The fandom favorite is probably the wannabe-time cop walrus, Mister Van Darn, but my favorite is probably Shylette, a literal shrinking violet who's really sweet once you get to know her.

One thing I really liked about this game is how your relationship with the cast actually helps with exploration, like with the little eyeball fella in Birthday Cake World (not its real name), or the birdies that chase you unless you're wearing your birdseed accessory in the sunset-ish world. Another cool thing I liked was the ending; usually these dreamland games do something lame like saying it was all a dream or a hallucination or something equally dumb at the end, but GLITCH Hop's ending, while something of a bittersweet return to the "real" world, manages to affirm both the reality and unreality of the game's trippy environments. Even now I'm not sure how it did it, but that ending put it in my top 10 games this decade for sure.

145
Superduper! (Todd Mandrake)
Last month's Superjam was an ingenious idea: since making a Superman game is pretty much impossible, why not base a whole game jam around it? This led to a lot of outside-the-box ideas, and the bigwigs at Warner/DC Comics would be fools not to take a look at these games when they make their next tie-in game.

The best of the lot, in my opinion, is Superduper!, an unassuming open-world RPG Maker game that manages to pack a lot of punch (heh) in just a half-hour playtime. The great thing about this game is that it responds to the way you play, so if you're looking for a Silver Age-ish type game, you can play it like that, and if you're looking to play something darker, you can play it like that, too. I think one of the best parts of the game is the fight with Batman, I mean, Captain Midnight, which I think only occurs in an ultra-grimdark playthrough. He's a lot weaker than you, but he cheats like a motherfucker, which means it's actually one of the most challenging battles in the game by far. (Ugh, those Night Boomers.) Anyway, it's great! Show it to Geoff Johns sometime.

146
Dreamland (Wonderland's Alice)
This is some new VR/AR thing I looked at last month. The gimmick is it's a game that you play in your dreams. I found the concept intriguing, so I hooked up the ol' REM Enhancer and downloaded the game's app to it. At first, I couldn't tell if the game was working (REME and other dreamtechs can be pretty buggy), but a few days in, I started having the trippiest dreams. A woman, dressed all in white with no eyes, asks me if I have visited the "Quartzian Palace". Far off in the distance, I see a castle that glows in many colors, but the way there always seems to be blocked by a chasm. Over many nights I struggled to find a way there, sometimes through bizarre dangers, often through places of great and strange beauty, until one night, I finally managed to find a way into the palaceÖ

Aaaand it turns out the ending is some serious "Don't forget to drink your Ovaltine!" bullshit. Like, seriously. Watch it on Youtube if you don't believe me. It's such a shame, because the game was so cool up to that, but I honestly cannot recommend this game in good conscience thanks to that ending.

I deleted the app off my REME the next day. I'm still getting ads in my sleep. Goddammit.

147
Kruel of Cities

Each player selects a major city. They then draw 5 build cards from the central deck. They must combine these cards with the essential character, the soul, of their city to produce a mecha. Once they have designed their mecha, they invoke the power of the Gaudi Crystals and the city is literally transformed into the mecha - with all its citizens inside.

The mecha then march across the world to fight for supremacy. The winner is the last one standing. Truces, deals and politics are allowed. Nukes are not.

148
Torment

Players choose a city to play in. Each player draws 7 affliction cards from their deck. Cards are then played, in turn, against individuals living in the city. Points are score when the individual does something spectacular - murder, suicide etc... - the more public the more points.

Typical cards are infatuation, murder, loss, bliss, lust, vision, forbidden knowledge, superpowers, magical skills etc... Multiple cards may be played (by multiple players), against the same individual - points are shared by all players who played a card against them. The best strategies focus around manipulating one or more individuals to kill the individuals the other players are manipulating and playing cards against your opponents individuals. Points are decided by consensus ammongst the players (1 being a baseline for a routine suicide and 10 being a gory mass murder followed by a spectacular suicide. Style counts for a lot.)

149
Four Reigns

An interactive adaptation of Kukrit Pramoj's Thai classic, Four Reigns unscrolls across a beautiful map of both space and time. As you play through the main storyline, the map of Bangkok expands from Khlong Bang Luang and the women's Inner Court to include other parts of the city and even travel up river to the summer palace. When you meet new characters, their pasts are retroactively added to the map, visualized as basements underneath existing locations. By the last quarter of the game, the player has access to a Thailand on stilts: nearly forty years of places and memories-of-places, all accessible to revisit. Westernizing influences come into play, but the older scenes -- of traditional Thai feasts, of the women chewing betel nut, of the complicated rules about which colors of clothing may be worn on which days -- remain only skin-depth away.

And then World War II comes, and the Japanese invasion followed by Allied bombs destroy not only 1940s-Bangkok, but all those stacked pasts as well. The endgame closes down the player's access, hemming the protagonist into smaller and smaller spaces until she is returned to her childhood home and the map is reduced to the scope of a single room.

It's a powerful vision of how memories and national identities are erased by cataclysm, and how the forgetfulness of old age confiscates personal identity.

It's also, arguably, false to what Pramoj himself was trying to do. He wrote of the reign of Chulalongkorn with affectionate familiarity, and plainly did not consider the past to be either lost or irrelevant to Thailand in his own time. While it seems that the authors of the interactive adaptation wanted to honor Thailand and its rich history, they have done so in a way that has privileged the importance even of destructive outside intervention (bombings, invasion) over the significance of Thailand's own national character and history. Let's hope that the creators do better with their forthcoming prequel Ayutthaya.

150
Trophy Maker

Trophy Maker bills itself as a casual creator: choose from one of ten different base shapes and a dozen materials; sculpt a statuette to go on top; optionally, name the trophy award after someone from Wikipedia. Then define the winning condition that determines who gets the trophy. The statuette maker comes with dozens of different action poses, from reading a book to kicking a football, and allows for a very wide range of body types and sizes as well as assistive devices. It's open to question whether you want to call this a toy, a game, or a tool, but it is surprisingly enjoyable to use, and if you want a trophy of a basketball player who uses a wheelchair, you can craft one in a matter of minutes.

Simple and sweet, right? You can tweet your trophy creations and send them to your friends; you can print off certificates for Little League games; you can 3D print your trophy in plastic or brass. You can even hook up If This, Then That to monitor social media and news events on a regular basis to determine who has won a given trophy today, or this week, or this month, according to your criteria.

But the real power of Trophy Maker is the API it uses for communicating with utility scoring AI across a wide range of games, allowing the user to mod the goals of game characters and collectives. You can make trophies for your Sims, for dungeon bosses, for enemy combat AI. You can even make trophies for particular outcomes of procedural level design. Then you plug in trophy maker and watch as the perverse incentives you've created result in very strange behavior.

My favorite outcome so far: the trophy for Tallest Hair in a Single Campaign completely altered the outcome of Parliament! 3, leading to a win for a bald Lib Dem because the Tory and Labour candidates' bouffant coiffure made it impossible for the electorate to take them seriously.

151
Whimsical

Whimsical is a self-constructing game in the spirit of Heaven Jenga. Given broad access to the user's Steam, social media, Netflix, Cloud documents, and reading accounts, it chooses a gameplay style and then adjusts that style with appropriate fictional elements and references.

Talking to someone else about their Whimsical experience is a little like trying to refer back to something that happened in a dream. My mother's Whimsical is atower defense game where you can click on the incoming critters and see their emotional states rendered as a joke in double dactyls. My father's Whimsical is a recipe design simulator with increasingly difficult puzzles about catering to literary and historical figures; he's on level 53 now and trying to whip together a gluten-free chocolate cake with kumquat curd that will pass muster with Kim Jong-il. My sister's Whimsical is unplayable unless you have a custom calligraphy pen controller and a set of ink washes, and all the characters dress in Gothic Lolita.

The chief drawback of Whimsical is its limited palette of genres; while it is able to do some basic rule generation and genetically develop existing genres, it hasn't reached the ability to devise entirely new modes of interaction. The designers promise downloadable updates, but we are still a long way from seeing self-constructing games that are actually able to define new generic possibilities for particular players.

Startup time is also still a problem. Heaven Jenga took a full day from registration before a player's personal game was delivered; Whimsical has cut that down to fifteen minutes. But that's still a long time to wait.

Finally, beware playing Whimsical with an audience before you've vetted your game, or encouraging others to do so. The story about the bank robber who was caught because his Whimsical produced a detailed robbery simulation based on his casing photographs and stolen blueprints? It's true.

152
If You're Not Frobending, Why Are You Made of Food?
(Omnipax Developments)
Some of us are still in denial, but the first contact genre burned out hard and fast, somehow passing from cult to has-been without ever impacting the mainstream. The famously prickly personalities (not to name names; you know who you are) responsible for the foundational works of the genre may have played a part, but really it was our fault. When the most entry-level titles assume a college-level grounding in linguistics, cognitive theory and biology, and the fanbase demands each sequel double down on their personal concept of 'realism', a series is not long for this world.

How do you revive a genre that became a punchline? Omnipax Developments, a dream team of first contact designers set on reviving the genre, decided to embrace the laughter. The player character of _You're Not etc._ isn't a polymath astronaut but a concierge at a kind of roach motel for space creatures. The stakes aren't the fate of two species, they're disgruntled yelp reviews or devoured staff. And alien interlocutors that refuse to try and

grasp earth language but demand perfection in return certainly make more plausible hotel guests than they ever did interstellar diplomats. The marathon final chapter is simultaneously a comment on and complete depantsing of the overwrought conclusion of _Beasts of Two Worlds_, which would unconscionably cruel it had not been written _by_ the developer of _Beasts of Two Worlds_.

The contactor (never, ever, _contactee_) fandom burst into flames that smoulder to this day, but if a revival of the genre means wrestling an axolotl-man drunk on shampoo, then I say bring it on.

153
Gate of the Gods
(Crosstalk 'Ractive, published by Qux)
Huge library of procedurally-generated titles and roles. Check. Hidden traitor and traitor-finder. Check. Halfway-point plot swerve. Check. _Gate of the Gods_ isn't breaking new ground, but it is getting away with a lot of formal invention within the genre.

Firstly, the utter devotion to blurring the boundaries between human and AI. The machine players don't just imitate the speech patters of the humans, they actually absorb their strategies and tics. In one game I got in an intense political war over water rights with my friend playing the Galla-priest that ended in murder-suicide and public immolation, only to discover in the postgame that they were playing a different character entirely and I had gotten slightly emotional over betrayal by an AI. _Eerie._

Secondly, the depth of historical detail goes far beyond the usual academic wallpaper. Crosstalk are obviously deeply in love with Classical Babylon, and the whole game simmers in the sauce of their obsession. More than half the official wiki is dedicated to reconstructed Baylonian recipes, clothes and manners. Loading screen tips advise you on the proper beer-drinking prayer, and why games of chance (such as _Gate of the Gods_) must always be played in sunlight. Fluff? Now imagine a dozen human players and twice as many AIs temporarily putting their scheming on hold and coming together to enact rain-worship rituals at the start of each game year.

I fear this little gem is going to be overlooked in a crowded market, so signal boost while you can. And to all you new players: lu shulmu ana mukhkhikum, welcome aboard.

154
Troubles
(Merrow Interactive ltd.)

It's three years since Merrow's latest blockbuster sprint-em-up, and there were fears they had been left behind by the breakneck technological pace of the genre. Fortunately, we were all completely wrong.

The technological wizardry of the three Bobs is, as expected, amazing. The rewritten optics engine can track you and three co-op buddies to sub-millimeter precision within a three-meters-cubed play area. I was blown away: I spent the first ten minutes signing my name on every flat surface in the game just to see if I could. But it didn't take long to get swept up in Merrow Interactive's trademark gruelling action. Whether it's in pursuit, flight or urban exploration -- and I wouldn't dream of spoiling some of the terrifying parkour sequences those mad boys at Merrow have dreamed up, but three words: ammo depot fire -- nobody does it with more mad flamboyance. Make no mistake: you'll want to lay on some water and energy snacks before attempting the epic Belfast chapter, which, no matter which side you choose to back, just never seems to end.

Got money to burn? If you have a Body Model 8.0 compatible card then _Troubles_ is allegedly capable of reading microexpressions too subtle for the human eye and tailoring emotional blows to your exact mental state. Hype? I'll believe it when I feel it. Those with more money than sense can also spring for an extra 128MB of ram and run in 800x640 resolution at up to 40 frames per second.

Finally: Yes, USB force-feedback bracers are mandatory for this game. As in: it won't boot without them. This was a wise call by Merrow, anybody still clinging to outdated feedback technologies needs to get over themselves and embrace the present. The standard has finally matured, and a decent USB kit can be got for less than $260 and will only make you look somewhat 80s in matching wristlets, legwarmers and vest. The game experience is

immeasurably improved by the visceral feedback of blows and abrasions, and going back to playing without would be as tragic as some kind of videogame that you played by sitting on a chair and pressing keys as if you were doing your taxes.

155
Deep Cold
(Arch Visions, published by Activision)

Deep Cold looks like a wargame, and then it breaks your heart. If that sounds at all interesting, drop this review and go buy it, because _Deep Cold_ resists being talked about without spoilers.

As a cybernetic combat probe outside the orbit of Neptune, you initial goals are simple: a proxy in a cold war against the Pan-Pacific superpower, you are to engage in stealthy games of maneuver and brinkmanship against other nuclear-armed proxies. But as a man-machine hybrid, you are destined to outlive your commanding officer and all the nations she represents. The political situation on Earth is chaotic and almost entirely outside your control, but dynamically tilted towards catastrophe: famine, political collapse or nuclear holocaust. Voices from earth go silent one by one at a five hour delay, and then you have to decide for yourself what to do in an inhospitable universe.

Given enough time and radioisotopes, you can travel from star to star, leaving the game map entirely. You can recalibrate your sensors and time perceptions to a new scale of existence. There are nonhuman things out there, ruins of lost civilisations and living stellar metallic beings, neither superintelligent nor monstrous, perhaps descended from lost probes such as yourself. Many are too big or too small to interact with; none care to explain themselves. Finding a place to survive in this glittering ecosystem is cruel but not impossible. Finding a goal to struggle for is much harder. This existential pain is the 2.7 degrees above absolute zero heart of the game: as a war machine with a forever-empty mission screen, as a cyborg that can't survive without radical self-modification and self-amputation. And the climax of the adventure -- well, there's some thing I'm not going to spoil, not even here.

Play this game.

156
Igynpadca: Elltycopie Ae
(Tarn Adams, Zach Adams, many anonymous individuals, published by Massive Gear inc.)

It's been a long and strange few years for Dwarflikes. Just when it looked like the game that started it all was settling in a comfortable cult senescence, the modding community picked up the slack and pushed the bewildered creators into mainstream stardom. This fork-of-a-fork-of-a-fork-of-a-mod with a baffling to the uninitiated title is a total rework of the venerable dwarf-em-up into a dizzyingly complex clash of civilisations, with only a few gristly ineradicable bits of the original interface remaining. It was headhunted by publishing giant Massive Gear in 2014, lovingly bug-for-bug ported into their proprietary engine and recently made free to play on their online storefront.

What did we gain from this herculean task of software reverse engineering? Firstly, you no longer need to rootkit your own OS in order to runtime patch the executable to enable the mod. Secondly, a vestigial singleplayer campaign starring new protagonist character Ash (pronounced Ash, spelled Δ, the monosyllable from the title), a white male thirtysomething designed by focus group. Thirdly, the jagged colour-coded unicode glyphs representing your minions have transformed into graceful subtly-glowing... unicode glyphs. We hardcore wouldn't have it any other way.

But forget all that. Forget the hundreds of playable factions and the thousands of potentially playable adventurers and the quadrillions of procedurally generated permutations of all the above: Igynpadca: Elltycopie Ae is a game about love. Not the dynamically measured bonds of affection between your fantasy creatures, but the love between you, the players. As you collaboratively chart the motions of your tribes with braids of colored lines, or lose an hour skyping plans for syncretising the optimal pan-elvish religion, Igynpadca: Elltycopie Ae becomes a canvas for self-expression, a way to learn thing about other people that didn't know themselves. By

the second month of the campaign the game will have forged all fifteen of you into a sworn brotherhood of heroes.

And what of the one true lover I met in herding my elves over the Plane of Eons?

...dear reader, I married him.

And that is why Igynpadca: Elltycopie Ae is my personal pick for game of the year.

157
Diagnosis 4

The Diagnosis series has long been hailed for its unique combination of medical realism (players cannot move forward until they have passed the Recordkeeping phase of each level) and narrative stakes: the patients, nurses, doctors, and hospital administrators all have lovingly developed personalities and quirks. There's also the famous (and famously deserved) trypophobia trigger warning in Diagnosis 3. Fans know what to expect: a little disgust, a little comedy, some demanding diagnostic puzzles, and at least one romance arc per season.

Diagnosis 4 kicks up the difficulty on several axes at once. For the first time, the protagonist is also suffering a (diagnosed) illness, one whose symptoms have to be carefully managed throughout the arc of the story. A long-running romance is falling apart, causing relationship problems throughout the hospital and causing lab technicians to take sides. The Diagnosis wiki is helpful if you want to finish the game and you don't have the stamina to figure it all out yourself -- even practiced Diagnosis players will likely find this one hard, and if you're new to the series, forget expecting to come through with a perfect patient survival rate.

158
DISHONORABLE MENTION
Clandestine Activities-(Unknown individuals possibly now in prison, hosted then disowned by Jaboo Global)

This game took over my dash -- and those of most of my friends -- for months earlier this year. We thought the unknown geniuses behind it they had finally cracked the secret of presenting a massively-multi-agent ARG with depth of content and responsive 'ractors. The memetastic presentation didn't hurt either ('LET'S HIDDEN TACTICS!', indeed.) We spent a lot of time poring over anonymised floor plans, interviewing henchmen, debating the finer points of safecracking and wirecutting. We were the few, the brave, the hivemind. Even now, I get a bit of a thrill thinking back over the cunning plans we devised and discarded. The fateful words 'realler than real life' may have been uttered at some point.

There are two reasons why this is NOT in my top five games of the year:
Firstly, bank robbery is against the law and you shouldn't participate in it, even if it does have an ironic terrible-yet-amazing rap theme song on its official tumblr. Secondly, my share of the loot was paid in Jaboo store credits which are not redeemable for anything but Jaboo store browser games. What a rip.

159
Darkest Words
You may remember last year's FireSheet which was essentially just an actual spreadsheet program, but obtuse and cryptic enough that using it even for the simplest purpose required massive amounts of decoding (and most likely heavy reference to the wiki).

Darkest Words takes the "normal application, but obfuscated in a way that allows gamelike interaction" idea and turns into a language training game. However, the language in question is unreal, bizarre, and at times has been noted to change based on if it was night or day. A crowd of obsessives have at least detangled the basic grammar, but a great many mysteries remain, even in the interface itself.